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Dorchester Conservation Area Character Appraisal

May 2005

Dorchester and Overy Conservation Area Character Appraisal

The Council first published the Dorchester and Overy Conservation Area Character Appraisal in draft form in July 2004. Following a period of public consultation, including a public meeting held on 26th July 2004, the Council approved the Character Appraisal on 2nd September 2004.

Introduction

The 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act places a duty on every local planning authority to determine which parts of their area are areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance. The Act also states that the local planning authority should, from time to time, formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of these Conservation Areas.

This document is an appraisal of the Dorchester Conservation Area to give an overview of the established character to be preserved and to identify possible areas for future enhancement. It is intended to assist in defining what is of special architectural or historic importance, what should be protected and to give guidance as to the form, style and location of future change and development.

The appraisal also includes a review of the boundaries of the conservation area and possible extensions are identified. Any extension to the conservation area will be subject to a separate consultation exercise.

The document is divided into various sections as follows:

1. The History of the Area

This covers the period from prehistory to the present day. It includes significant architectural history, important dates and references to people and events that have helped to shape the area we see today.

2. The Established Character

This is an assessment of the existing character, including the topography of

the area, the vernacular style, predominant building materials and natural or man-made features of local interest.

1. Dorchester - the History of the Area

The area around Dorchester has been settled since pre-historic times and is rich in archaeology. Crop marks found during aerial reconnaissance in 1927 were evidence of an important Neolithic ceremonial complex to the north east, now largely destroyed by gravel extraction and road building. An Iron Age hill fort was constructed on Castle Hill (which forms part of Wittenham Clumps) to the south of the Thames - a high point commanding views across the Ridgeway, the rivers and the surrounding area. A later, extensive, Iron Age settlement to the south was defined by the construction of a defensive double bank and ditch - now known as Dyke Hills - overlooking the confluence of the rivers Thame and Thames.

The settlement at Dyke Hills was not only well fortified, it was also strategically placed as a hub of communications, becoming an important administrative and political tribal centre, a focus for manufacture and trade.

The invading Romans also recognised the strategic importance of the area and built a fort slightly to the north of Dyke Hills, on the banks of the Thame, one of a network of forts supporting the successful Roman military occupation of Britain. The fort appears to have been abandoned by AD78 but at the end of the second century, earth defences were constructed - built to protect a settlement of growing importance. Remains of the earthworks can still be seen on the west, north-west and south sides of the village. In AD 276-290 stone walls were built in front of the earth defences and later, in the 4th century AD, ditches were added to the fortifications.



Wittenham Clumps and remains of Iron Age fortifications

Despite the image this conjures up of a tightly enclosed and protected settlement, evidence has been found of human occupation - arable farming and pottery manufacture - well beyond the walls. Within the walls, archaeological finds suggest that Roman Dorchester was a place of some wealth and sophistication.

The town was well placed for road and river transport. It was close to the main Roman route north with a link to Watling Street; and to the southern route to Silchester and Winchester. No evidence has been found of a direct river crossing although there may have been a fording place towards Shillingford, itself a crossing place. There may also have been a link to the Icknield Way and thus to the north east and the west of the country.

Archaeological finds provide the only clues to life in Dorchester as the influence of the Roman Empire in Britain diminished and Saxon incomers gradually changed the character of the Romano-British settlement. By the early 7th century, Dorchester had become part of the Kingdom of Wessex, a wealthy and influential town in a populous area, important enough, according to Bede, to be the place of baptism in AD 635 of Cynegils, King of

¹ Quoted in Sherwood, J., & Pevsner, N., 'Oxfordshire', *Pevsner Architectural Guides*, (Yale 1974), p.584.

² Quoted in Cook, C. & Rowley, T. (ed.), *Dorchester Through The Ages* (Oxford 1985), p.48.

the West Saxons by Birinus, a missionary sent by Pope Honorius I to convert the pagan Anglo Saxons.

Birinus was rewarded by the grant of lands in Dorchester for the establishment of his episcopal see and cathedral church, becoming the first Bishop of the West Saxons. No evidence has been found of the first Dorchester Cathedral but it may have been built on the site of the present Abbey, outside the Roman walls.

The extent and influence of the see of Dorchester waxed and waned over the succeeding five hundred years or so according to the changing political scene. The Episcopal see moved to Winchester in the 660s, only to be refounded in Dorchester in 869 and by the turn of the 11th century its influence extended from the Thames as far north as the Humber. But less than a hundred years later, following the Norman Conquest, the bishop's seat had transferred from Dorchester to Lincoln and the town's period of episcopal power was over.

The Church, however, continued to have a role in the fortunes of Dorchester and in 1140, the Bishop of Lincoln founded the Augustinian Abbey and construction of the Abbey church was started. Evidence of an earlier Saxon church having existed on the same site has been found in the stonework of the nave and choir aisles of the present church, itself possibly the second cathedral.



Guest House

The secular importance of Dorchester during this period had not matched its religious importance: the lack of a ford across the Thames seems to have been a critical factor in Dorchester losing out to Wallingford and Oxford as a centre of trade and commerce. Around 1125 William of Malmesbury noted that Dorchester was 'a small and unfrequented town' but, by contrast found, 'the beauty and state of its churches very remarkable.' ¹ Some 400 years later, John Leland saw evidence of the town's former ecclesiastical vigour, observing that 'of old tyme it was much larger in building than it is now toward the south and the Tamise side. There was a parochie church a little by south from the abbay church. And another paroch church more south above it. There was the 3 paroch church by south weste.' ²

No evidence of these churches remains, nor indeed of the Bishop's Palace or of Bishop's Court Farm, the manorial farm: they had disappeared even by Leland's day, possibly because the building stone, locally scarce, was recycled by the inhabitants of Dorchester.

The extent of lands and estates of the Abbey and the Bishop of Lincoln had grown over the centuries and the suppression of the Abbey in 1536 must have affected the pattern of life and employment in the area profoundly. The Abbey church itself survived through the beneficence of Sir Richard Beauforest, a wealthy local farmer, who bought the chancel at this time and gifted it to the parish. The monastic buildings were less fortunate and only parts of the Guest House survive having been incorporated into what was to become, in 1652 the Grammar School, and is now the Museum. The building also houses a large meeting room.

Bishop's Court was rebuilt in 1552. Part of the stone walls of the great monastic barns survive at the base of the garden walls on Manor Farm Road.



Remains of old barn walls

The Beauforests were one of a few substantial families in the area who were able to take advantage of the changes in land ownership in the sixteenth century, buying up and enclosing land - although not unchallenged by those fearing loss of common land.

Agriculture remained the mainstay of Dorchester. However, any wealth to be had seems to have been spread thinly and by the middle of the nineteenth century, most of the land, apart from the remaining commons, was owned by only four families. Some, notably the Davey family in the neighbouring hamlet of Overy, used their wealth to concentrate on innovatory methods of farming, giving Dorchester a reputation in the wider world for 'intelligent farming'.

Dorchester's strategic location had brought the village fluctuating degrees of importance and prosperity since pre-Roman times. However, by the eighteenth century, although its population was numerically larger than

the average village of the period, Dorchester was described by one observer in 1728 as being 'a poor town without any manner of trade nor likely much to improve.'³

The Thames was navigable up to Oxford and should have been a good channel for commerce, but the conflicting interests of mills, fisheries and river traffic made it unreliable for transport and communication, despite various attempts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to regulate and improve the navigation.

It was the roads, formed in Roman times, that continued to be Dorchester's strongest links to the outside world, although much depended on the efficiency or otherwise of river crossings.

Leland noted in the sixteenth century that 'There was a ferrey at highe waters over the Thames'⁴ and there are references to other ferries between Dorchester and Little Wittenham in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. But ferries were no match for the increasing volume of wheeled traffic making its way through Dorchester.



View of the Abbey across fields

³ Quoted in Airs, M., 'Domestic Buildings in the Village', *ibid* p.58.

⁴ Quoted in Bond, J., 'Dorchester and the Outside World', *ibid* p.54.

⁵ *ibid* p.54.

The Thames, the narrower of the two rivers, was the more easily bridged. Evidence remains of the medieval bridge, originally built around 1142 and described by Leland in the mid-sixteenth century as 'a very faire bridge of stone a little witoute the toun. The brig is of a good lengthh: and a great stone causey is made to cum welle onto it. There be 5 principle arches in the bridge, and in the causey joining to the south ende of it.' ⁵



Site of the old bridge

But the heavy costs for repair of both bridge and roads were clearly a constant burden on the parish until the road from Henley through Dorchester to Gloucester and South Wales was turnpiked in 1736 and tolls could be levied for their upkeep. However, despite this extra revenue for repairs, and works to widen the narrow bridge in 1781, the mediaeval structure could not cope with the traffic and it was demolished in 1816, the year after its successor had been built some 100 yards up river.

Dorchester Bridge



A toll house, built in the year of Waterloo, still stands on the approach road to the new bridge, to the south of the Abbey church.



Toll House and Abbey

The turnpike road heralded another era of prosperity for Dorchester which was to last for a century, a prosperity founded on the passing trade of stage coaches and the daily London-Oxford mail coach. The glum view of Dorchester's prospects noted in 1728 seems to have been ill-founded, judging by the number of fine brick buildings along the High Street built, or fashionably re-faced, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

It was a time when the village could boast at least ten coaching inns and, although the main inns in Dorchester predate the turnpike - the George, for example, existed in the late fifteenth century and must have served pilgrims

to the shrine of St Birinus and other travellers over the preceding two hundred years or so - they must have enjoyed a revival with the increased traffic.



The George Inn yard

A number of these inns survive today, still in commercial use: not only the galleried 'George' but also the 'White Hart' (dated 1691 but the three narrow gables and timber framing on the front suggesting a much earlier construction); 'The Bull' (also galleried) and 'The Crown' survive but have been converted into private houses.

During the second half of the 19th century, no doubt because of its proximity to Oxford, Dorchester did not escape the renewed scholarly and architectural interest in the gothic style sparked by Pugin and Ruskin. Not only did the Abbey undergo extensive repair and restoration under the auspices of the Oxford Architectural & Historical Society and two distinguished architects of the day, William Butterfield and George Gilbert Scott, but Dorchester also acquired a number of significant public and institutional buildings in romantically gothic style. This flurry of activity was thanks to the dedication and philanthropic generosity

of the Reverend William Macfarlane, curate of Dorchester Abbey Church from 1856 until his death in 1885. It was he who commissioned David Brandon to build the new vicarage (1857) and Sir George Gilbert Scott the Girls' and Infants' schools in Queen Street (1872).



Lych-gate

School (now the Village Hall)



⁶ Op.cit. (Yale 1974), p.584.

In 1878, again under the auspices of Macfarlane, Scott went on to adapt and extend the 18th century house on the east side of the High Street (now occupied by Hallidays) to form a missionary training college and to build Church House, possibly one of his last commissions, its flamboyant roofscape providing a striking landmark at the corner of Queen Street and the High Street.



Church House

The advent of the railway, which never came nearer to Dorchester than Culham, signalled another decline in the regional importance of the village. However, in more recent times the Henley-Oxford road, the main artery of the village for so long, was re-routed - much to the relief of the village, described in 1974 as being 'battered by heavy traffic'. ⁶

The contribution of the 20th century to the buildings of Dorchester has, with one or two exceptions, such as the glazed timber pentice on the north side of the Abbey, not been kind. The introduction of materials, plan forms, scale, proportion, and details with no reference to local tradition and practice

has brought anonymity to parts of the village, undermining its particular character.

Perhaps new buildings of the 21st century will be more sensitive. Through high-quality design, the use of traditional materials and a thorough understanding of the scale, proportions and details of the local historic built forms, they may reflect their own time and place, making a positive contribution to the rich history of Dorchester.

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2. The Established Character

The character of Dorchester has been shaped by the imperatives of history, the natural topography and geography, the availability of building materials, and the fluctuations of fortune, evident in the street patterns and in the buildings.

It could be said that there are two characters to Dorchester, one urban, the other rural; but there is also a unifying thread embedded in the style and scale of the buildings, and in the use of traditional building materials which have formed these structures.

Seen from a distance across a flat, open landscape, Dorchester appears as a closely-grouped settlement, dominated by the Abbey. The approach to the village from the south is protracted, winding and curving with fields and hedges on either side and a sense of gradual retreat from the busy Henley - Oxford road.

The curved stone bridge gives a formal sense of arrival into Dorchester, reinforced by the Toll House and the immediacy of the Abbey Church of St. Peter and St. Paul, now seen to be sited on slightly elevated ground by the river.

As a village, Dorchester has no centre - there is no village green, no market square. The High Street, an historic route between one place and another, remains the main spine of the village, creating a strong linear pull through the village.

In the central section, where listed buildings line the road on both sides, there is a distinctly urban feel to the area and Dorchester here becomes a town.

The sense of progression through the town continues along the High Street. Views are truncated by the gently winding street, and the close-knit development along its edges produces a strong sense of enclosure.

At intervals along the High Street this sense of enclosure is broken: at the wide coach entrances of former - or existing - inns with a glimpse to the yards and gardens beyond, and at the lanes leading off the main thoroughfare: Rotten Row, Malthouse Lane, Martin's Lane, and Watling Lane at the War Memorial. Here the other side of Dorchester's character is revealed, less formal, more loose knit and rural.



Martin's Lane



High Street

The historic buildings on the High Street are predominantly on a domestic scale, generally fronting directly on to the street, and broadly typified by simplicity: rectangular, relatively narrow plan forms, window openings above one another, with upper windows being set high in the walls

usually with their heads just under the eaves, and steeply-pitched roofs, varied ridge heights and chimneys creating a lively roofscape.



37-39 High Street

The ingenious use of a limited range of traditional materials has informed the structure and appearance of these buildings, their original form often being concealed under generations of adaptation and change, perhaps paradoxically giving the street an air of settled survival.

The Abbey is one of the few buildings constructed in stone, indicative of its earlier wealth and status since good building stone was not locally available.

The earliest surviving domestic buildings in the village are timber-framed. Nos. 13 - 19 for example, form a terrace of mediaeval cruck-framed thatched cottages, and Nos. 37 - 39 have an early timber box-framed structure concealed beneath their rendered surface. Tudor Cottage, at the north end of the High Street is a cruck-framed hall house and, earliest of all, is 13 Rotten Row, its timber frame thoroughly concealed behind a nineteenth century brick front.



13-19 High Street

Although there are no significant stands of timber around Dorchester today, there is documentary evidence that there were managed woodlands in the area during the 16th century, providing a good supply of this most versatile and sustainable of building materials. Oak was used for the prestigious buildings but elm is found in some of the more humble cottages.



Abbey Cottage

Wealth, fashion and ideas of status did all they could to disguise what came to be seen as the humble timber frame - although the carved timbers of No.55 High Street were an exception, prestigious in their own right and designed to be seen.



Nos. 55-59 High Street, formerly the Bull Inn

Lime render was used as a quick method of covering up the true nature of the structure but others were enlarged and cunningly fronted more fashionably: the late Georgian stuccoed front of Willoughby House, modelled to look like ashlar blocks, conceals a timber-framed hall house.

During the 18th century there was sufficient wealth in Dorchester for new houses to be built of brick. The subtle red and orange hues of the brickwork were



Willoughby House

often crisply decorated with the distinctive silver-grey vitrified headers, common in South Oxfordshire, or sported contrasting flat arches in rubbed bricks over window openings - Hallidays Antiques is a fine example. Sadly some of these lively brick facades are now concealed under the flat uniformity of paint.



Hallidays

Handmade clay tiles are the predominant roofing material in Dorchester, contributing to the character and interest of the roofscape. Slate is also to be found, usually on more shallow pitched roofs.

Lych Gate Cottage is an example of the use of chalk as a building material. It may have been locally available from the Sinodun Hills (Wittenham Clumps) but its uncertain and friable nature did not give it widespread popularity.

Flint walling with brick dressings, common in South Oxfordshire, proved to be a more robust construction - No.12 Bridge End, for example; and Mollymops Cottage in Samian Way where the flints and bricks are arranged in bold patterns.



12 Bridge End

There are some surviving examples in Dorchester of another traditional form of construction using cob. The former non-conformist chapel at Bridge End is an example, although now heavily disguised under modern alterations.



Former chapel at Bridge End



Clunch and brick at Lych Gate Cottage

Cob is a mixture of earth and straw built up in layers, seen as a humble and utilitarian material but currently enjoying a modest and limited come-back in Britain (although not yet in Dorchester). Unless it is given "a good hat and a good pair of shoes" (i.e. an overhanging roof and a sound brick or masonry base), cob will disintegrate in damp conditions.

Cob houses were traditionally thatched, thatch being a cheap and readily available material which provided a good overhang to direct water away from the wall beneath. Long straw is the traditional thatching material in South Oxfordshire with simple flush ridges rather than the more elaborate and distinctive cut ridges found in other areas.

Beyond Willoughby House an important stretch of grass verge curves along the road, signifying a change from the enclosed urban character of the High Street into rural Dorchester as the buildings become more widely spaced and planting more plentiful. The open fields and avenue of trees at Bishop's Court are a potent and valuable reminder of Dorchester's agricultural past.



Farmland at Bishop's Court

This rural side to Dorchester's character is also found along Watling Lane.



Watling Lane

The grass verges and the trees and hedges forming the border on both sides all make valuable contributions to this character. Equally valuable are the open spaces: the large gardens, the glimpses of open country out to the west and, perhaps most valuable of all, the orchard to the north of Port House and the paddock to the south.



Orchard



Rural views

The working farm, complete with animals, is an extraordinary survival in view of widespread pressures to urbanise since the mid-twentieth century: its contribution

to the rural character of Watling Lane cannot be over-estimated.



Farm signboard

The Allotments, set in the curve of Watling Lane, also have their own distinctive and important character: semi-rural, semi-urban, open and bounded by footpaths.



Allotments

This area possesses another layer of significance as it covers a substantial area of the Roman town -and the occasional Roman coin still comes to light when the soil is turned. The allotments were purchased by the Parish Council in the early 1950s, ensuring their protection in perpetuity - although the increasing presence of cars parked on the land or making their way around the edge threatens this protection.

There is a fragility to the character of Watling Lane, something that could so easily be lost through further development; even neglected hedgerows are a threat.

Bridge End, too, has a fragile quality. It is a place set apart from the rest of Dorchester, inward looking, slightly marooned since the mediaeval bridge was

removed - although the wall of the Roman Catholic church, built in 1849 and dedicated to St Birinus, creates some sense of a link between the new bridge and the Bridge End settlement.



Wall of St. Birinus' Church

The distinctive tear-shaped green emphasises the narrow entry to the settlement before it broadens out to meet the river and the fringes of the low open land beyond.

The group of cottages clustered near the site of the mediaeval bridge were originally constructed in the early 19th century to provide basic accommodation for the poorest inhabitants of the village; the utilitarian nature of these buildings and the rough quality of the materials - all part of their character - are perhaps particularly vulnerable to insensitive alteration.

Cottages at Bridge End



In marked contrast to these modest dwellings are the substantial 18th century houses, Bridge House and 24 Bridge End, with their fine boundary walls and spacious plots.

village, vertical sliding sash and case windows of classical proportions sit comfortably with small vernacular horizontal sliding sash windows and opening casements. The unifying elements are the use of timber, the painted finish and the proportion of the window openings.

The duality of Dorchester, urban and rural, is threaded through by the extraordinarily narrow footpaths burrowing between buildings and leading from tightly packed built-up street to open space.

The contribution to the dual character of Dorchester made by planting in private gardens, particularly hedges and trees, should not be underestimated.

The urban and rural characteristics of Dorchester are in a delicate balance, all too easily upset by inappropriate development or insensitive alteration.



Bridge House



24 Bridge End

They are also a reminder that part of the character of Dorchester is to be found in the symmetry, proportions and details of classical architecture. Throughout the

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