



Listening Learning Leading

Overy 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 Overy 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. Overy - the History of the Area

The small hamlet of Overy, within the parish of Dorchester, has a long history inextricably bound up with its larger neighbour and yet it remains a place apart, with its own distinctive character.



Overy from Dorchester Bridge

The present buildings of Overy were mostly constructed in the 18th century, but the hamlet probably laid down its roots some 700 years earlier. During the latter part of the 11th century two mills were granted to the Dorchester Abbey estate by Bishop Remigius, one on the Thames, the other on the Thame 'beyond the bridge'.¹ Both were known as Overy Mill, but it was the latter, "to the east over the bridge on the Thame"² which was the forerunner of the present weatherboarded building presiding over the mill pond and still in operation as a water mill in the early 20th century.

Overy, although small, was no poor relation. Before the middle of the 12th century, the hamlet was tithed



Overy Mill

separately from Dorchester and had its own rectory, indicating a degree of wealth. It may even have had its own church, perhaps one of the three around Dorchester that impressed Leland in the sixteenth century.³

¹ Lobel, M.D., ed., *Victoria County History, Oxfordshire*, Vol. VII, 'Dorchester and Thame Hundreds', p. 46.

² *Ibid.* p.45.

³ Quoted in Cook, C & Rowley, T. (ed), *Dorchester Through The Ages* (Oxford 1985), p.48.

⁴ *Op. cit.* (1962) p.48.

⁵ *Ibid.* p.50.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.50.

The grant of the mills came with good farm land: fields, meadows and pastures bringing income to the two manors of Dorchester - that of the Bishop of Lincoln and of the Abbey. After the Dissolution, the wealth from Overy's fields and stands of timber was collected by a succession of private landlords.

However, contrary to the increasing trend for enclosing land over the centuries, some of the Overy fields remained as unenclosed common well into the nineteenth century: it was only after 1861 that all the land was privately owned.

It seems that the farmers of Overy always had a "[R]eadiness to experiment with new agricultural methods'.⁴ And foremost among them were the Daveys who, by 1757 appear to have been farming most of Overy. Their innovative methods of using a four-course rotation, including beans to enrich the soil and root crops to "clean the ground" ⁵, caught the attention of King George III - Farmer George - who is said to have driven over from Nuneham to see William Davey's model farm.

Two generations later, another William Davey founded the Oxford Agricultural Society and was acknowledged to be "one of the most intelligent farmers" and "one of the best" in Oxfordshire, keeping South Down sheep but mainly concentrating on arable and continuing to experiment with new methods of husbandry. His son George continued the long tradition, farming over 300 acres at Overy and becoming a successful exhibitor at Smithfield.

Apart from the Cherrills in the sixteenth century, the Earls of Abingdon appear to have been the only other substantial landowning family in Overy. But by the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the Abingdon lands were sold off and the Daveys' star was waning too, their farm being bought in 1874 by St John's College, Oxford, to add to the College's 1,000 acre estate in the area. Arable farming and sheep breeding was to continue in the fields of Overy into the 20th century but perhaps without the same intensity of purpose.

The Daveys repaid any debt they may have owed to the area by giving generously to both Dorchester and Overy through their building projects. Although Roman Catholics, it seems that the family had long-standing responsibilities for repairing the chancel of the Abbey church, a duty they continued to perform as late as 1860.⁶ In 1712 the William Davey of the time rebuilt Overy Manor House, proudly recording the completion of this quietly classical red and silver grey brick house in a stone panel set into the front elevation. This house was extended, in the late 18th century and again in the 19th century, presumably by subsequent generations of Daveys,.



Overy Manor

It seems likely that the Daveys were also responsible for re-building Overy Farmhouse (originally their home when they were yeoman farmers), Overy Farm Cottage next door, the present Mill, and the Mill House.



Overy Farm House



The Mill House

All these buildings appear to have been constructed during the 18th century and share a similarity in style, possibly stemming from the use of the same limited palette of materials: brick (red and silver grey), some coursed clunch rubble, timber weatherboarding for barns and outbuildings, and plain clay roof tiles.

The barn, to the north east of Overy Manor, may be the only survivor from the 17th century in Overy, although it contains 18th and 19th century brickwork and was radically altered in the late 20th century when converted to domestic use.

It seems that the Daveys brought not only sophisticated farming methods

and fashionable building styles to Overy but also other links to the wider world through the succession of visiting priests who lodged with them, their hospitality extending to a French priest fleeing from the Revolution during the 1790s who is now buried in the Abbey.

In the mid-19th century, George Davey made Overy House a meeting place for Roman Catholics and his brother, John, built the chapel of St Birinus on land by Dorchester Bridge, next door to his home at Bridge House. Their nephew, Robert was the last of the Daveys to live at Overy, dying childless in 1901 - the same year that brought Queen Victoria's long reign to an end.

Bibliography

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2. The Established Character

Overy is a small, self-contained hamlet lying along a narrow lane, sheltered by trees from the surrounding water meadows and open fields. Only the constant noise from the Oxford-Henley road disturbs the rural isolation which must have remained largely unchanged since William Davey built his quietly elegant manor house in 1712.



Overy

The rural character of Overy is evident immediately on turning into the lane, bordered on either side by hedges and grass verges. Where the fields on the western side end, the few buildings that make up the hamlet begin.



Lane to Overy

The first two buildings, Overy Farm House and Overy Farm Cottage, both face out across the lane and the overgrown dry ditch to the wide open fields beyond. Built of brick and coursed clunch rubble in the 18th century, they have the composed look of buildings with proportions rooted in a classical style, but they are undeniably vernacular in character. Each is set back from the road behind a grass verge, Overy Farm House behind understated wrought iron railings, Overy Farm Cottage behind a low brick wall interrupted by a graceful wrought iron gate.



Overy Farm Cottage

The only sizeable unlisted buildings in Overy, the 19th century barns at Overy Farm, are set well back from the road behind a brick wall which curves into one of the two courtyards around which they are set. Single storey red brick buildings, they were adapted to business use in the late 20th century, both facts indicated by understated areas of modern glazing.



Overy Farm Barns

One range of these barns backs on to a side lane leading to the entrance to Overy Manor, forming a hard edge, softened at ground level by a grass verge. On the opposite side is another hard edge formed by the stone wall around the garden of the Manor. Underscored by a timber farm gate at the end of this short lane is a fine view of Dorchester Abbey church across flat fields and watermeadows. In the opposite direction is an equally spectacular but distant view of the northern sweep of the Chilterns.



View of the Abbey

The fine stone wall of Overy Manor curves round to join the main part of the lane, being interrupted by an unexpected two-storey bay window on the side elevation of the house, before continuing around another corner to form a hard edge to the drive of the Mill House. This is also the public footpath to the mill pool and to Dorchester beyond. Again, grass verges soften the edge between road and wall.



Isolated barn

At the junction between the private drive and the lane is an isolated weatherboarded barn, linked to the settlement by the remains of a buttressed stone wall and together forming an important marker at the edge of open farmland. The view back down the lane from the barn emphasises the visual importance of the walls on the right hand side, the grass verges, the open land to the left and the pleasing leisurely curves in the road. Framed at the end of the lane is a distant view of Wittenham Clumps.



View of Wittenham Clumps

Unusually for a South Oxfordshire village, cars do not dominate the scene. The lane is too narrow for two cars to pass one another and does not invite strangers. Only near the junction with Henley Road does the wider grass verge suggest a parking place.

Trees play an important role in the character of the conservation area. The largest, most striking group are those in the grounds of Overy Manor. Elsewhere, other less formal, trees follow ditches and water courses, grouping around the mill pond and the mill stream, creating important contrasts in the flat expanse of Hurst Meadow which lies between Overy Mill and Dorchester.



The Mill Pond

The future of Hurst Water Meadow, historically attached to Overy Mill and an open space of vital importance to the area, was secured in 1996 when it was purchased by the residents and Parish Council of Dorchester to save it from unsuitable development and to provide a place for recreation.



The Hurst

The Hurst Water Meadow Trust now manages the area and has already implemented measures to conserve and enhance natural habitats, improving grazing, planting trees, and stabilizing river banks.

The future of Overy hamlet itself could be less secure. Despite the quiet sophistication of the houses, the legacy of the 18th century Daveys, Overy is deeply rural in character and therefore particularly vulnerable to unsympathetic change - even on a small scale - in a modern, generally non-agrarian culture.

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