

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 Watlington 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 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.

3) Possible Areas for Enhancement

These can range from major areas for environmental improvement, to very minor works of repair and redecoration.

4) Existing Conservation Policies

This is an extract from the South Oxfordshire Local Plan identifying policies relating to listed buildings and conservation areas.

5) Plan of the Conservation Area

This is a scale plan of the area which aims to identify the elements which contribute to the character. The plan includes the conservation area boundary, listed buildings (buildings identified by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport as being of special architectural or historic interest), former Grade III listed buildings (a now obsolete category but where the buildings may still be of architectural or historic interest) and other buildings of local note. This latter group consists of buildings that play a part in establishing the character of the street scene but have not yet been considered to be of sufficient importance to meet the current criteria for listing. Recent government guidance contained in PPG.15-**Planning and the Historic Environment** indicates, however, that there is a presumption against the demolition of such buildings.

Important trees are also identified. These are usually highly visible from public places and/or they contribute to the setting of a listed building. Important open spaces are identified as these are a vital element in the character of an area. Character is defined not just by buildings, walls and trees, but also by the spaces between them. These contribute to the setting of buildings. They allow views around the area and they are often an important element in the historical development of a settlement.

Important unlisted walls are identified. These are usually built of local materials and help to define spaces and frame views. Lastly, important views into, out of and around the conservation area are identified. It should be appreciated that a conservation area's character does not end with a line drawn on a map. Often the character is closely associated with attractive views out to surrounding countryside, sometimes via gaps between buildings. Views within an area such as that to a church or particularly attractive group of buildings are also important.

6) Archaeological Constraint Plan

The character and history of an area are closely linked to its archaeological remains. This plan identifies the location of ancient monuments, earthworks and known cropmarks, find spots, archaeological sites and linear works. If nothing has yet been identified within an area then this map will be blank, but this does not mean that the area is necessarily archaeologically sterile.

WATLINGTON

1) The History of the Area

The Watlington area is likely to have been settled at an early date, the evidence for this being a Bronze Age axe and Roman coins which have been found nearby. Settlement is likely to have been encouraged by the proximity of the Icknield Way, an ancient and important cross country track which runs along the dry, high ground to the east. The place name means 'settlement of Walcel's people' and this indicates occupation from around the 6th century. A 9th century charter mentions eight 'manses' or major dwellings in Watlington and the Domesday survey of 1086 identifies the area as being an agricultural community valued at £10.

A church was probably built in Watlington during the Anglo-Saxon period, although one is not specifically mentioned before 1129. It is likely that early medieval settlement was concentrated around the church and as recently as 1819 it was noted that the older buildings, reputedly built entirely of wattle and daub, lay on the north side of the town. These have subsequently been demolished. The manor house, which lay to the east of the church, is first mentioned in 1250. It was owned at this time by Richard, Earl of Cornwall, as part of the honour of Wallingford, but was demolished in the early 17th century, although part of its moat is still visible. In 1252 Richard obtained a grant of market for Watlington and in 1302 a fair and second market were instituted.

Although there is no documentary evidence to show that Watlington was granted a charter or was regarded as a borough in the Middle Ages, there seems to have been some attempt to lay out a planned street system, which suggests that the present settlement may have been one of the many 'planted' towns created in the 12th or 13th centuries. Certainly, the town seems to have grown away from the original settlement, leaving the church in isolation. The centre of the town is now well to the east of the church, around the fine town hall, which was built in 1665 at the expense of Thomas Stonor. This provided cover for the market and rooms above for a grammar school.

Watlington has never been a wealthy town, although it had some connections with the wool trade. Historically there were no industries, apart from those supporting the local farming community, and in the 17th century the market, which was never large, lost most of its trade to High Wycombe and Henley. Trading links with the capital diminished when merchants favoured the Stokenchurch - High Wycombe route to London, instead of through Henley.

Watlington was involved in the Civil War (1642-49) and was in the middle of the fighting for many years. Royalist forces were quartered here and several skirmishes took place in and around the town. In 1644 Royalist troops began fortifying the town but the king decided to move his garrison to Oxford instead, thereby preventing possible siege damage.

Watlington continued to grow very slowly and this has protected the historic core from redevelopment. Many medieval buildings were refronted in the 18th and early 19th centuries, often in brick or a combination of brick and flint. Watlington never benefited from the canal trade as the nearest river is six miles away. In

1822 this was described as ‘a circumstance totally adverse to the prosperity of the place’ and after 1852 a market ceased to be held in the town at all.

A branch railway line was built in 1859 by the Watlington and Princes Risborough Railway Company. However, this came too late to save the fortunes of the town. The fact that the line terminated at Shirburn and not Watlington may also account for the lack of prosperity brought by the railway. The line was run by the company until it was taken over by the Great Western Railway in 1884. The line was closed following the Beeching Report in 1963.

The 20th century has seen the inevitable growth on the periphery of the town, particularly to the north, east and west. Heavy traffic flows through the town towards the nearby M40 motorway and this causes problems in the narrow streets. However, the proximity to the motorway is likely to have been a factor in the late 20th century growth of the town. Watlington was first designated as a conservation area on 20 July 1976 with minor additions being made to the designated area on 19 October 1993.

2) The Established Character

Watlington is a very attractive settlement with a compact, urban-like centre, particularly along High Street, Shirburn Street and Couching Street. The urban feeling is created by the number of buildings which front directly onto the street with few gaps between or spaces in front. Development becomes less intense and looser along Brook Street, Gorwell and Church Street, and there is a lower density still on the edge of the town, particularly to the south. Here buildings have a more random grouping with more open space between them. Some buildings in this part of the town were, or still are, in agricultural use. There are several modern housing developments on the edge of the town, particularly to the north, east and west, but these are mostly outside the conservation area. As a result of an unfortunate appeal decision in 1993, planning permission was granted for 19 houses on the former allotments sited to the south-west of Spring Lane. The materials used in the construction are, however, of good quality and attempt to reflect the vernacular character of the town.

There are many historic buildings in Watlington, particularly around the core of the town, which is centred on the 17th century town hall, and in the area near St. Leonard's Church. Several date from the 17th century or earlier but are concealed behind later refronting carried out in the 18th and 19th centuries. There is a wide variety of building types, ranging from small cottages to large Georgian town houses, with some former farmhouses further away from the centre. Many historic buildings, particularly the larger ones, have associated outbuildings in brick and/or weatherboarding. Often the historic buildings present a simple and dignified facade to the street, with a symmetrical arrangement of windows and doors under a steeply pitched clay tile roof. The larger houses sometimes have elements of decoration, such as a string course and dentilled brickwork under the eaves. Windows are predominantly either side-hung wooden casements with a single horizontal glazing bar, often under brick arches, or sashes divided into four, nine or twelve panes. There is a strong tradition in Watlington for the painting of window frames. Most commonly the subframe is painted black and the window frame and glazing bars are painted white.

Historic buildings of particular note in Watlington include St. Leonard's Church, which dates in part to the 12th century, the 17th century town hall, which is a Grade II* listed building, and the predominantly 18th century former Hare and Hounds Hotel. No. 7 High Street and No. 46 Shirburn Street are both grand Georgian houses and No's 15 and 17 High Street, No. 39 Brook Street and No. 42 Chapel Street are all late medieval in origin. Many of the larger historic buildings on the edge of the town are detached and set in spacious grounds, such as No. 27 Church Street, No. 40 Brook Street, East End House and Watcombe Manor.

There are many vernacular building materials used in the town. Red brick is widespread, often in association with flared headers. These can be used randomly or in a decorative pattern. Red brick is also used as decoration under the eaves or around windows, the best example being at the town hall. Render is common, often across the whole facade of a building, but there are also examples of exposed timber framing with brick or rendered panels between. Flint is used in combination with brick and there is some weatherboarding, particularly on outbuildings. There are also isolated examples of the local soft clunch or chalk stone, often in association with brick dressings. Roofs are usually covered in handmade red clay tiles, although there is also

some thatch, particularly along Church Street and Chapel Street. Later buildings sometimes have a slate roof. Walls are predominantly brick or flint with brick dressings.

Road materials play an important part in the character of the town. There are granite kerbs in many areas such as Couching Street, and there is an attractive cobbled pavement at the junction of Church Street and Gorwell. The cobbles continue down Church Street along the gutter and they may still exist under the tarmac here and elsewhere. Some cobbles still remain in Letts Alley. Narrow, vehicular-free lanes and footpaths, such as Letts Alley and Davenport Place are an attractive and important feature of Watlington.

There are many important mature and semi-mature trees which contribute to the character of the town and to the setting of historic buildings. The most significant groups are found to the north-west around St. Leonard's Church and the site of the medieval manor house. There are individually important trees along Ingham Lane, Howe Road, Hill Road and Shirburn Street.

Although Watlington has an intensely built-up core, there is still important open space within the conservation area, both within the historic core and on the periphery. The large areas of open space around St. Leonard's church and the adjoining woodland are particularly important as are the areas to the south of Brook Street. Within the town, the school playing fields between Gorwell and Davenport Place, which represent an open space of medieval origin, provide a very important 'green lung' for the town, as do the tennis courts and bowling green behind Shirburn Street.

There are many attractive views in Watlington, particularly to and from the town hall along Couching Street, Shirburn Street and High Street. These are created by the picturesque mix of vernacular building materials and historic buildings. There is very little inappropriate modern development to spoil these views. Views out of the town to the attractive countryside beyond, including Watlington Hill which is in the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty can be gained from the Carriers Arms public house, the land to the south of Spring Lane and from the meadow to the south of Barnacre. Watlington itself is very prominent when viewed from Watlington Hill to the south-east.

There are several important lengths of wall in the town which contribute to the local character. These include walls along Shirburn Street, Brook Street, behind Couching Street and around Watcombe Manor.

There are many buildings of local interest in Watlington which have not been judged to be of sufficient special architectural or historic interest to merit listing, but which nevertheless contribute a great deal to the attractive quality of the street scene. These include the primary school, Watcombe Manor and its range of outbuildings, and many buildings along Church Street and Cuxham Road.

3) Possible Areas for Enhancement

Watlington is a picturesque and tidy town and it is clear that considerable attention is paid to its appearance. However, there are a number of locations where the opportunity exists to enhance the existing character.

There are many ugly overhead wires which disrupt attractive views. These are particularly intrusive in Shirburn Street, Gorwell, Church Road and Cuxham Road. The statutory undertakers responsible for these wires are urged to lay them underground. Both High Street and Couching Street show how attractive an historic street can look when the wires are removed.

The many narrow lanes, such as Davenport Place, are an important element in the character of the town. The opportunity could be taken to replace some of the tarmac with a better quality natural material.

Town centre garages are, by their nature, often ugly and intrusive in an historic street scene. However, attempts could be made to improve the appearance of the forecourt of Watlington Garage in Couching Street through measures such as decorative planting. Scotts Garage in Cuxham Road has now closed. If the site is redeveloped then any development should reflect the existing vernacular character of the town, both in terms of design and materials.

Several buildings suffer from insensitive modern shopfronts which do not relate either to the building in which they are set or to the street-scene. Particularly noticeable examples include the Spar (18, High Street) and the Post Office (8, High Street). When the opportunity arises, these should be redesigned in a more traditional and sensitive manner. Further advice on shopfront design can be found in the District Council's *Traditional Shopfront Design Guide*.

The town hall is the finest building in Watlington and it has a long and interesting history. A tourist information board could be sited here for visitors to the town. A development of the existing subtle floodlighting scheme would also enhance this important building at night and could serve to provide an attractive image of the town for the many drivers passing through.

The large car park in Hill Road, bounded by its attractive and traditionally laid hedge, could be enhanced by more planting. The small environmental improvement scheme around the war memorial in the High Street could be further improved if the tarmac ground surface were replaced with a more traditional material. There are many different types of bollard in use throughout the town. These may be necessary in some locations, but a considerable improvement could be achieved if a single traditional design were adopted and used where appropriate. Where the opportunity arises, modern concrete kerbing should be replaced with traditional stone kerb, which is an important element in the town's streetscape. Efforts should continue to be made to solve the long standing problem of the heavy traffic flow through the town, which is a particular problem in the narrow streets, especially at the junction of High Street, Couching Street and Shirburn Street.

The conversion of redundant agricultural buildings at Watcombe Manor to light industrial/workshop use is an attractive and sensitive scheme which indicates how appropriate uses can be found for such buildings

while still retaining their simple character. However, the opportunity could be taken to improve the appearance of the large concrete-covered car park by using better quality surface materials.

Certain sites can be identified as areas where the opportunity could be taken to enhance the character through general works of tidying up, repair, redecoration or even rebuilding and redevelopment as and when circumstances allow. These include land to the rear of The Lilacs, Brook Street and to the rear of 28, Brook Street.

The use of traditional materials and detailing can have considerable positive effect in enhancing the character of a conservation area. The owners of historic and prominent properties are encouraged to remove unsympathetic modern materials, such as concrete tiles, U.P.V.C. windows and plastic rainwater goods, and to reinstate traditional materials such as red clay tiles, red bricks, sometimes with flared headers, softwood windows and cast iron guttering. The owners of thatched buildings are also encouraged to retain or reinstate plain, flush ridges, which are part of the traditional thatching style of South Oxfordshire.

Small amounts of financial assistance may be available in some instances from the Council for the repair and renovation of historic buildings within the conservation area and the reinstatement of lost original details and materials. Grants may also be available for appropriate schemes of environmental improvement.

4) South Oxfordshire Local Plan adopted by Council, April 1997

LISTED BUILDINGS

POLICY CON 1

Proposals for the demolition of any building included on the list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest will not be permitted except in most exceptional circumstances.

POLICY CON 2

The council will make full use of its powers to serve repairs notices to prevent the wilful neglect of listed buildings.

ALTERATIONS TO LISTED BUILDINGS

POLICY CON 3

The use of modern materials such as aluminium and upvc will not normally be permitted for the doors or windows of listed buildings. Sealed double-glazed timber windows will not normally be permitted unless their mouldings precisely match those of traditional windows. The use of secondary glazing will normally be acceptable.

POLICY CON 4

Listed building consent will not normally be granted for proposals which involve the use of cement-rich mortars, abrasive cleaning methods and chemically-based sealants, nor for the painting of unpainted brickwork and stone or the use of unsuitable colour schemes on listed buildings.

POLICY CON 5

The alteration or removal of historic internal features in buildings included on the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest will only be permitted in exceptional circumstances.

CHANGES OF USE AND EXTENSIONS TO LISTED BUILDINGS

POLICY CON 6

Any change of use of a listed building must be appropriate to its character, and any extension must be sympathetic to the original structure in design, scale and materials and must not dominate or overwhelm it.

THE SETTING OF LISTED BUILDINGS

POLICY CON 7

Proposals for development which would adversely affect the setting of a listed building will normally be refused.

CONSERVATION AREAS

POLICY CON 8

The council will use all its powers under the relevant acts to ensure that the character of individual conservation areas is preserved or enhanced.

POLICY CON 9

Consent to demolish a building in a conservation area will normally only be granted if the loss of the building would not adversely affect the character of the area, and if there are detailed and acceptable plans for the redevelopment of the site.

POLICY CON 10

When considering proposals for development in conservation areas, the council will require:-

- (i) the design and scale of new work to be in sympathy with the established character of the area;
- (ii) the use of traditional materials, whenever this is appropriate to the character of the area;
- (iii) the retention of existing walls, hedges, or any other features which contribute to the character of the area.

THATCHING STYLE

POLICY CON 11

In order to protect the traditional thatching style of South Oxfordshire the District Council will generally promote the use of long straw and resist the introduction of patterned block-cut ridges on thatched buildings.

ADVERTISEMENTS IN CONSERVATION AREAS AND ON LISTED BUILDINGS

POLICY CON 12

The council will not normally permit the display of signs on a listed building or in a conservation area which are in any way harmful to the character and appearance of the building or area. Where it is accepted that a sign is needed, its design and materials should reflect the best traditional practice.

POLICY CON 13

The installation of blinds or canopies of untraditional form or materials on buildings within conservation areas will not normally be permitted.

BURGAGE PLOTS

POLICY CON 14

In the historic towns of Henley, Thame and Wallingford the burgage plots to the rear of the principal streets will generally be protected from amalgamation and from development which would diminish their historic interest and value.

PRESERVATION AND ENHANCEMENT OF CONSERVATION AREAS

POLICY CON 15

In conservation areas, the council will take all available steps to ensure:

- (i) that the introduction or intensification of uses which conflict with the special character of the area is resisted;
- (ii) that existing walls, buildings, trees, hedges, open spaces and important views are retained, where they contribute to the character of the area;
- (iii) that whenever the opportunity arises, unsightly overhead wires and unnecessary signs are removed. The statutory undertakers will be urged to site their services underground;
- (iv) that where necessary, improvements are made to the visual quality of the floorspace, street furniture, lighting and signs; and
- (v) that development outside a conservation area would not have a detrimental effect on the conservation area.

ARCHAEOLOGY

POLICY CON 16

The council will not normally permit development which would adversely affect the sites or settings of nationally-important archaeological remains, whether scheduled or not, or those of monuments of special local importance.

POLICY CON 17

Before the determination of an application for development which may affect a site of archaeological interest or potentially of archaeological importance, prospective developers will be required, where necessary, to make provision for an archaeological field evaluation, in order to enable an informed and reasoned planning decision to be made.

POLICY CON 18

Wherever practicable and desirable, developments affecting sites of archaeological interest should be designed to achieve physical preservation in situ of archaeological deposits. Where this is not practicable or desirable, the district planning authority will impose conditions on planning permissions, or seek legal obligations, which will require the developer to provide an appropriate programme of archaeological investigation, recording and publication by a professionally qualified body acceptable to the district planning authority.

PARKS AND GARDENS OF SPECIAL HISTORIC INTEREST**POLICY CON 19**

Proposals which would damage the character, setting or amenities of a park or garden of special historic interest, especially those contained in the English Heritage Register, will not normally be permitted.

COMMON LAND**POLICY CON 20**

Proposals for development on or affecting common land, village greens and other important spaces within settlements will not normally be permitted.