

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 Mapledurham 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.

MAPLEDURHAM

1) The History of the Area

While there is some evidence for prehistoric, Romano-British and Anglo-Saxon settlement in the Mapledurham area, including rectangular and ring-ditch enclosures by the River Thames, the prime importance of the village, and indeed the parish as a whole with its scattered farmsteads and cottages, is as an almost perfect example of a small medieval community with great house and church situated together by the Thames with the Chiltern scarp behind.

Although archaeological and documentary evidence is comparatively slim, it is likely that the original nucleus of the village is the existing one with the outlying scattered settlement (most of it on the upland) representing “assarting” (clearance) from the waste in the early Middle Ages.

Two manors are referred to in the Domesday Survey of 1086, one belonging to William de Warene (Mapledurham Gurney), the other to Milo de Crispin (Mapledurham Chazey). It is the former which forms the basis of today’s village and in fact it was not until 1582 that the two manors were combined under the ownership of the present family, the Blounts.

It is this family which began the construction of Mapledurham House to replace the timber-framed old manor house (c.1450), itself the result of a remarkable programme of rebuilding, which began with the addition of the Bardolf aisle to the parish church in 1381 and culminated in the construction of a number of cruck-built peasant houses in the outlying parts of the estate. These include Mill Farm, Pithouse Farm and Three Chimneys, which have been dated, through dendrochronology, to 1335, 1455 and 1458 respectively, the former recently having been described as ‘probably the oldest complete medieval peasant’s house (surviving) in Britain’ – **New Scientist**, 11 September 1993, 10.

That none of these medieval peasants’ houses survives within the village itself is probably not so much a reflection of a situation that none was built but rather one of continuing prosperity well into the 17th century. Buildings of this period include the almshouses (founded in 1623 from the proceeds of a bequest from Charles Lyster, a relative of the Blounts), The Forge, a fine flint built lobby-entry house with the date 1691 picked out in brick, (showing it to be one of the earliest examples of flint construction at a vernacular level in the region) and Mill House, a prominent five-bay brick and flint house with surviving cross-windows, which may in fact be a refronting of an earlier building.

Later buildings are chiefly significant for the evidence they provide for a now-vanished social structure. These include the mill, which although it probably stands on the site of one mentioned in Domesday and contains 15th to 17th century fabric, was remodelled and extended in 1777, the forge (the former blacksmith’s attached to the house of that name), the 18th century White House (once an inn), The Old Vicarage and the mid 19th century Lodge once used as the Post Office.

The house itself is important architecturally, not only as an Elizabethan H-plan house but for its comprehensive remodelling in the same style between 1828 and 1835. The family remains Roman Catholic

and the house is a notable centre for recusant studies: to the rear is the private chapel, added in c.1789, while the Bardolf Aisle of the parish church is retained by the Estate as the family's historic mortuary chapel. The remainder of the church is typical of many in the Thames Valley, ranging in date from the 13th to the 19th century, including a restoration by Butterfield in the 1860s.

What is most remarkable, however, about the village is the way in which it remains dominated by the great house and church with no later competing structures to disrupt this long-established relationship. Unlike most villages in affluent southern England (South Oxfordshire is no exception) Mapledurham has experienced none of the modern infill and alteration or extension of ancillary buildings common in rural settlements. This lack of development, which is due in large measure to the great majority of the village remaining in estate ownership, means that the traditional spaces between the buildings have been retained and lend a charming and unusually tranquil atmosphere to the scene.

There are a number of reasons for the preservation of this unspoilt character. First, the relative poverty of the Estate (itself largely the result of the penal fines levied on Roman Catholics until the Act of Emancipation in 1829) meant that there were no major rebuilding programmes in the 18th or 19th century. Second, the Estate's continuing resistance to selling its properties means that they have largely avoided the pressures to which many historic buildings are now subjected. Lastly, the village's remote location at the end of a tortuous and narrow no-through road has protected it from large-scale development proposals, although the suburbs of Reading easily visible across the river provide an ever-present reminder of what could so easily have happened if circumstances had been different. Following recommendations by Elizabeth Chesterton in 1973, the Mapledurham Conservation Area was designated on 12 March 1974. Its exceptional nature is recognised by the former but now obsolete classification of "outstanding" awarded to it by the Secretary of the State for the Environment, a distinction not given to any of the other 65 odd rural conservation areas in South Oxfordshire.

There is currently a pressing need to resolve the inevitably conflicting requirements to improve visitor facilities (themselves important as a means of funding repairs to the Estate's many historic buildings) and to maintain the very special and timeless qualities those visitors have come to see and enjoy in the first place.

2) The Established Character

a) Introduction

The special charm and quality of Mapledurham owe much to natural and man-made topography. The village itself is situated on the meadowland of the Thames and is approached by a sinuous lane leading through Chiltern beechwoods. When in the village it is the river itself and the scarp behind, much of it chalk downland grazed by sheep in much the same way that it has been since the late Middle Ages, that are the dominant elements.

b) The Village

The built environment of the village consists primarily of a single gently winding street leading to house and church. With the exception of the almshouses and their cobbled street frontage, all of the village buildings are set back from the road so that the continuity of their boundary walls, although of attractively varying heights and materials, forms the essence of the village's character. The dominance of these walls, which is happily emphasised by the lack of vehicular accesses constructed to modern highway standards, gives Mapledurham a virtually timeless atmosphere, almost secretive behind its walls.

Another important feature of this unspoilt quality is the large number of outbuildings and other small-scale structures in the village, complementing the mainly intimate scale of its domestic buildings. While of little intrinsic merit in themselves, these outbuildings are an integral part of the settlement's character and an important reminder of its former social structure.

The predominant building materials in the village are the characteristic local red brick and flint. The latter is mainly confined to boundary walls, where it is combined with brick dressings, although it is also used to good effect in The Forge and The Mill House. The former is used more extensively, sometimes in conjunction with a dark vitrified brick, or it can be rendered as at The Gardens, or painted as at St Margaret's (adjoining The Old Vicarage) and The White House. Timber frame also occurs, weatherboarded in the mill or with red brick infill as in the Estate Yard building. The use of stone other than flintwork and the occasional piece of clunch (both of which appear in the church) is more limited, featuring only in the door and window surrounds of the almshouses and the much later Lodge. Roofs are predominantly clay tile (both hand- and machine-made) with a little slate (The Old Vicarage/St Margaret's and Vicarage Cottage). Unusually for South Oxfordshire, there is no thatch.

Windows and doors are of traditional type, UPVC making an appearance only in part of the modern extension to the almshouses. Leaded lights were once widespread, there being evidence for this form of glazing in the existing windows of The Bothy and Park Farm Cottage, but they are now confined to the mullioned windows of the almshouses, The Lodge and, Mill House with its original cross-windows. Elsewhere, painted timber predominates, either for simple casements (The Forge, The White House etc) or in sash windows at the "polite" end of the spectrum (The Old Vicarage/St Margaret's).

Chimneys are an important element of the village buildings, whether as Victorian diagonal shafts grouped together at The Lodge, tall integral end stacks on Mill House, astride the ridge at The Forge (although sadly rebuilt in simplified form) and The Bothy/Park Farm Cottage or with elaborate capping at the almshouses. Several of the buildings retain secondary chimneys, many of which add to the character and appearance of the conservation area.

Apart from buildings, a number of other elements contribute significantly to the attractiveness of the village. The cobbled surfaces outside the almshouses and The Old Vicarage/St Margaret's add to the character of the conservation area, as do the grass verges lower down the street. Granite setts bound the road by the entrances to the churchyard and the path to the mill. A large scale map of the conservation area identifying the location of these features has been produced and is available for inspection at the District Council offices by appointment.

Several groups of trees are important, ranging from those along the river which help to screen the settlement from Reading, relatively dense belts to the west of the almshouses, pollarded specimens in the garden of Mill House and along the roadside immediately to the south-west of the almshouses to individual trees, such as those in the churchyard or behind the roadside wall in the garden of The Old Vicarage. Outside the conservation area the views towards the mixed plantation of Park Wood on the lower part of the scarp closest to the village are particularly attractive and add to the sense of containment.

Other important views in and around the conservation area include those along the Thames, towards the scarp to the north-west, a distant glimpse of Hardwick House, the views from the road to the south of White House into the village, up and down the village street itself and from the island by the mill towards the impressively powerful weir.

Equally crucial to the special character of Mapledurham are the significant open spaces within the conservation area. Most obvious are the open areas on the approach to the village and by the river to the north-west (the country park) but just as important are the generous gardens of houses like The Old Vicarage/St Margaret's, Vicarage Cottage and Mill House and the spacious gaps between other buildings on the south-eastern side of the village street. While many of these spaces cannot be fully appreciated or even (in some cases) seen from the road, it is the **feeling** of space behind the boundary walls which can be just as important as the spaces themselves.

Finally, although the house, mill (the last working watermill on the Thames) and country park are all open to the public the complete absence of advertisements or overt commercialisation in the village scene must be remarked on. It is this, just as much as the quality of the individual buildings or the spaces between them, which makes up the special character of Mapledurham.

c) **The House and Gardens**

The house dominates the village, although it is only the bulk and comparative asymmetry of its rear elevation (itself fully visible only from the churchyard) which can be seen from within it, the more formal entrance

front being merely glimpsed across former parkland from the farm track running south-eastwards from the village towards Park Farm.

The church and churchyard mark the gateway from the semi-public world of the village to the private life of the great house beyond. Even here, however, the formality is not overwhelming and the presence of the modest stableblock and the medieval manor house directly alongside the house lend an intimacy and domesticity to the scene.

There are several impressive views of the house, from the churchyard, from the river and from the lawned area directly to the south-east, as well as the more distant if romantic view through the former gate-way to the north. As in the village and outlying parts of the conservation area, trees add to the attractiveness of the scene, either in groups (along the river), as individual specimens (the Cedar of Lebanon is particularly fine even if crowded by additional planting) or in dense plantations, such as to the north-west where the trees form an effective screen to the farm track referred to above.

The gardens immediately around the house are lawned and informal and contain a number of individually listed structures: these are the former gate-way, the fern house (now ruinous) and two statues. There is also a partially collapsed ha-ha wall and a flight of stone steps leading down to the river. The large walled garden to the north-east is currently uncultivated and its glass-houses derelict. At the time of writing (December 1997) a large storage building constructed to a high specification and of good quality materials (red brick with stone dressings under a plain clay tile roof) is nearing completion and when finished will complement a similar but slightly smaller recently built garage on the other side of the area between house and church. It is intended that these two buildings, the first significant structures to be built in Mapledurham this century, combined with the recent repair of the stretch of wall between churchyard and house will form a private courtyard with occasional public access to the chapel.

3) Possible Areas for Enhancement

Clearly, there are no significant areas requiring major schemes of enhancement or environmental improvement in Mapledurham and the aim of “preserving or enhancing” the character of the conservation area is best achieved simply by retaining the **status quo**.

Unlike many conservation areas, there are no “opportunity sites” where development could enhance the character and appearance of the area and any such development proposals would be resisted by the local planning authority. There are, however, a number of minor areas where small improvements could be made such as removing the double yellow lines from the village street and replacing them with an appropriate “No Parking” sign at the entrance to the village reinforced, if necessary, by discreet plates sensitively located at various points on the roadside boundary walls. Indeed, the whole question of parking for casual visitors needs to be addressed. A possible solution would be the provision of a discreetly located and screened small car park (for instance at the entrance to the country park), which could help to alleviate parking problems in the village itself.

Irrespective of this, the entrance to the country park and the shabby appearance of the area containing the kiosk, public lavatories and boat storage in the country park itself could all be improved. Similarly, the relatively few intrusive overhead cables at the northern end of the village could more satisfactorily be laid underground and, subject to highway considerations, the hedges which formerly bounded the road to the south of White House could be re-planted to reinforce the sense of enclosure and anticipation at the approach to the village. In the village itself the neglected cobbled surfaces outside the almshouses and the Old Vicarage/St Margaret’s could be repaired/reinstated. An agreed programme of new planting, selective felling and replanting of trees should be extended to ensure that this important element of the conservation area continues to thrive.

Most improvement to the character and appearance of the conservation area and the physical fabric of its historic buildings could, however, be brought about by a judicious and prioritised programme of repair works. This should involve not only the principal buildings in need of repair, such as the house, mill and almshouses, but other structures like the many boundary walls, garden structures (including the fern-house and the former gate-way) and outbuildings which do so much to contribute to the essential character of Mapledurham. In a few cases, an argument might be made for reinstatement of missing features such as the leaded windows at The Bothy/Park Farm Cottage.

In all cases, however, great care is needed to ensure that the necessary repairs would not destroy the special character and qualities of the village, much of which derive from what the artist John Piper termed “pleasing decay”. While there may be elements of the illusory and ultimately self-defeating in such a concept, there can be no denying that much of the charm of Mapledurham lies in its air of timelessness and slightly decayed grandeur: a delicate balance must be struck between this, the requirement for improved visitor facilities and the undoubted need for repairs to be carried out to many of the buildings. On a more prosaic level, any programme of repairs must be accompanied by proper schemes of maintenance if the decay put right by the repairs is not to recur. It is only in this way that the special qualities of Mapledurham can be conserved for this and future generations.

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.