



**Benson Parish Council**  
Serving Our Community

# **Benson Neighbourhood Plan Plan Revision 2022-2035**

**Submission Version - Sept 2022**

## **Appendix E**

Appendix E is expanded for this Revised Plan and divided into four parts:

Part 1: Settlements - retains the Settlement Character Assessments unchanged from the Original Plan adopted in August 2018

Part 2: Landscape - adds new Landscape Character Assessments

Part 3: Views - revises the previous section on Views to include a greater number of viewpoints, with some new and some updated photographs

Part 4: Distinctiveness of Settlements - adds assessment of the gaps between settlements to support Policy NP27



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# APPENDIX E: Character Assessment

## Contents

### PART 1: SETTLEMENTS

Introduction .....	2
Note on settlement pattern of Benson village.....	2
Key Map to Character Areas .....	5
Character Areas.....	6
1.    HIGH STREET AND VILLAGE CENTRE .....	6
2.    CASTLE SQUARE, OXFORD ROAD, CHURCH ROAD .....	10
3.    LITTLEWORTH .....	14
4.    BROOK STREET .....	17
5.    SUNNYSIDE, HALE AND PORT HILL ROADS .....	21
6.    NORTH EAST BENSON.....	24
7.    ST HELENS AVENUE.....	27
8.    THE RIVERSIDE/WATERFRONT .....	31
9.    PRESTON CROWMARSH.....	34

### PART 2: LANDSCAPE

Character Areas:

Key Map to Character Areas.....	
1. River Thames Corridor: Flat floodplain pasture.....	
2. River Thames Corridor: Flat semi-enclosed farmland.....	
3. River Thames Corridor: Flat open farmland.....	
4. Undulating open vale.....	
5. Airfield.....	
6. Open rolling downs	
7. Semi-enclosed rolling downs	

### PART 3: VIEWS

### PART 4: DISTINCTIVENESS OF SETTLEMENTS

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# Part 1: SETTLEMENTS

## Introduction

This part of Appendix E looks at the characters of Benson and Preston Crowmarsh, as assessed in the summer of 2016 and reviewed prior to issue of the Plan in 2017. The assessments have been used as a basis from which to highlight main characteristics and issues in the Design Statement and so draw out the design principles set out in that Statement. It is hoped that this process will help to ensure that the layout and appearance of future development complements the distinctive characters of Benson and Preston Crowmarsh, and contributes to their strong sense of identity. It is also hoped that future design will look to avoid, and where relevant alleviate, some of the problems that have arisen from past design, or lack of it.

The assessment was made by members of the Design Team walking round the village and hamlet and making detailed observations in line with guidance available at: <http://www.ourneighbourhoodplanning.org.uk>

Notes were made under headings including: topography, land use, layout, roads, spaces, buildings, landmarks, green and natural features, streetscape and views. The accounts of the different character areas were then shaped according to predominant characteristics and in the light of the known history of the settlements. Understanding of the history and heritage has been particularly important for the assessment of Preston Crowmarsh, given the lack of any past appraisal for the Conservation Area there. The assessments of those areas that make up the early village core of Benson take account of the SODC study made when the Conservation Area was designated in 1999, but also of local research that has taken place since then. It is hoped that the assessments will supplement existing and future appraisals made by SODC, and it is not intended that the assessments should supplant such appraisals.

Each character area is presented with a map that shows the Conservation Areas, listed buildings, and buildings of local heritage note, along with the approximate location of the main sites where there is known archaeological interest. The maps also show areas to be designated as Local Green Space, and other areas where green space is considered to be of some value. Grey arrows indicate views into the area, or out to the surrounding landscape or significant tree clusters.

### **Note on settlement pattern of Benson village:**

Archaeological evidence of early settlement on the river gravels and of Neolithic enclosures in the area of the airfield are alluded to in the Appendix D on Heritage, and in the Design Statement. It is usually assumed that the location of the church reflects the early base near the river, and that settlement then spread broadly along the water supply provided by the Benson Brook in the medieval period. Some of the listed buildings retain timber-framed construction from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, and 1 Brook Street has an end cruck that possibly dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Settlement was linear, with shallow historic plots much as shown on the c.1900 map illustrated below, and still discernible from modern-day maps. It was characterised by small farmsteads and cottages located within the village but reliant on use of the open fields around, with access to meadow by the river and woodland on the Chiltern scarp.

During the later 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries the formative influence was the coaching trade. The course of the Oxford to Henley/London road was diverted from Coach Way/Mill Lane to run into the High Street at The Crown, and Benson became an important staging post. The coaching inns became important focal points, and there were clusters of blacksmiths, wheelwrights, coach-makers and farriers in the areas around Castle and Crown Squares. A likely squatter settlement along the waste at Littleworth provided housing for those servicing the trade and for agricultural workers, while formal shop frontages in High Street and Castle Square point to the general prosperity of the period. This was also marked by the re-fronting of earlier buildings in the local chalkstone rubble, with brick dressings and occasional flint bands.

The map below illustrates the extent of the village in 1897-1900:



Reproduced with permission of the National Library of Scotland

This remained the essential form of the village until Bullingdon District Council built housing first at Hale Road and Port Hill Road in the 1920s, and then around the new playing field/community space at Sunnyside in the 1940s, thereby extending the village to the north. This period also saw new housing, predominantly bungalows, along the north side of Brook Street and the east side of what is now the Old London Road, and the construction of a by-pass that now serves as St Helen's Avenue. The arrival of the RAF Benson in the late 1930s completely truncated both this by-pass and the Old London Road and set a new boundary against expansion of the village to the south east.

The rate of growth accelerated from the late 1950s into the 1960s and 70s, with infill of the plots to the north of the High Street, at Blacklands and Westfield Roads to the north-east, and in the triangle of land to the south between St Helen's Avenue and the Old London Road. This major period of expansion saw the provision of: an infant school as part of the Westfield Road area (now re-located to the Church of England School site); a new shopping parade to replace farm buildings in the centre of the village at College Farm; a library at Castle Square and play areas at St Helen's Avenue and Green Close. It also saw completion of the A4074 as a by-pass to take north-south traffic between Oxford and Reading/Henley.

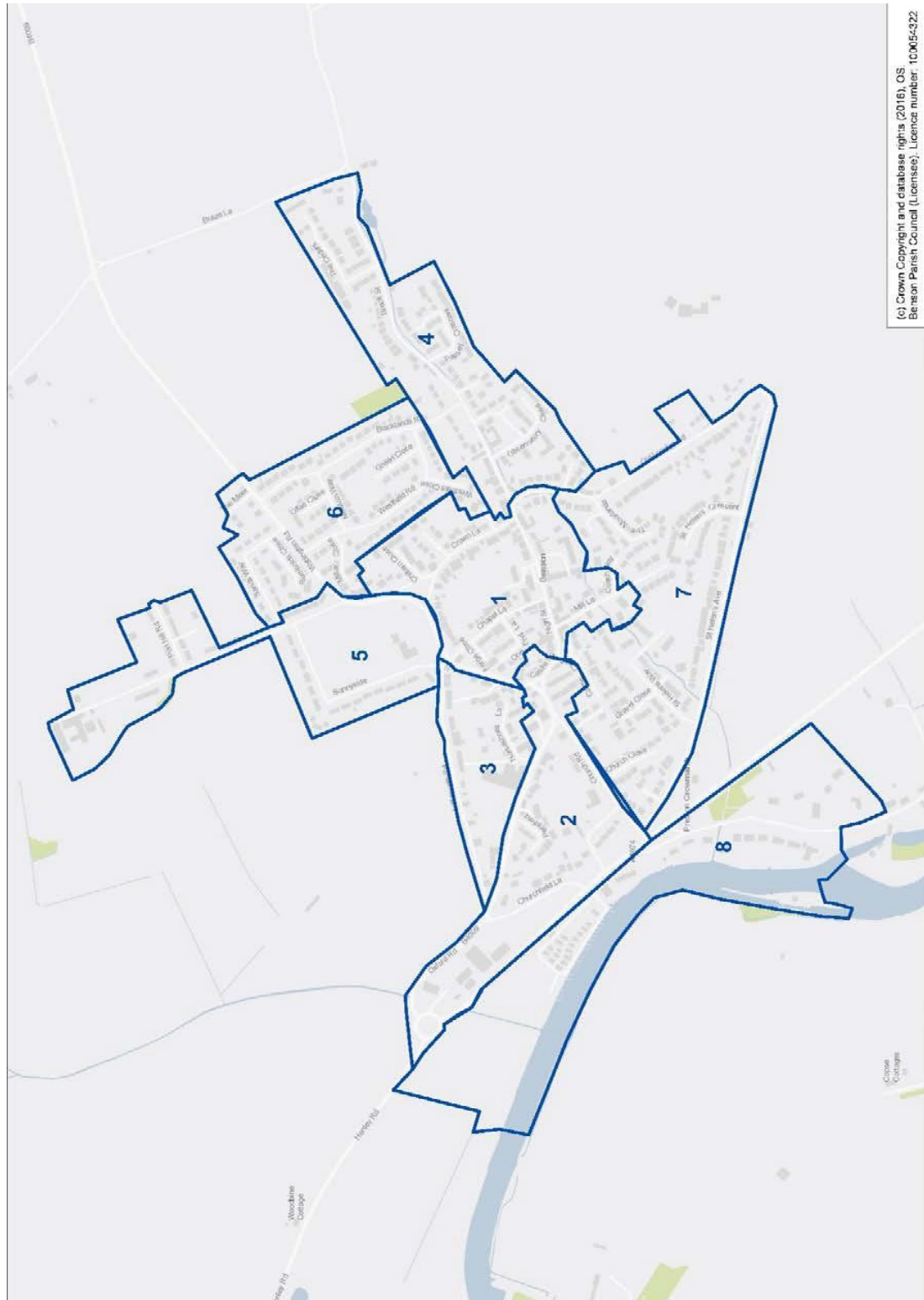
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During the recent period from the 1980s onwards growth has been more incidental in filling in the expanded outline, with a more notable multiple-unit site at Passey Cescent off Brook Street.

The result is a more rounded settlement, and one that is contained within the main road system bar the development to the north of the Watlington Road. The increase in north-east-south-west traffic along this road, turning off the A4074 to link with the M40, is turning it into an ever more divisive barrier that runs through the settlement and is crossed only with difficulty and some danger.

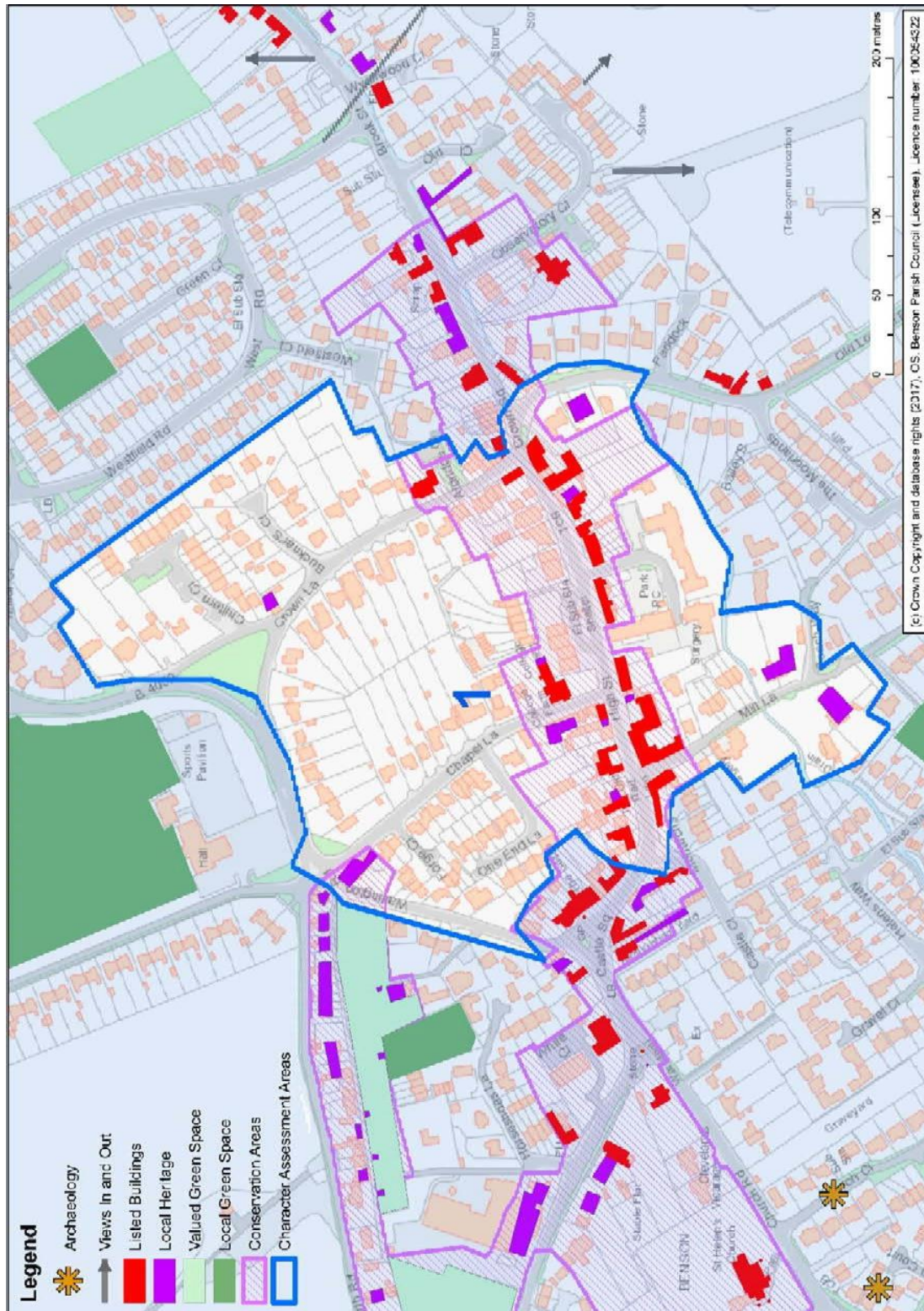
It should be noted that Preston Crowmarsh has always been, and still is, a distinct hamlet, more closely associated with the river, mill and ferry crossing, and is separated from the main village by the fields between.

# Key Map to Character Areas



# Character Areas

## 1. HIGH STREET AND VILLAGE CENTRE



The High Street is now the centre of the village and its commercial heart, with bus stops, formal car parking, shops, inn, garage, dentist and access to the doctors' surgery and Millstream Day Centre. The commercial role was formalised in the 1960s, when barns at College Farm were removed to make way for a parade of shops, and in the early 2000s, when a paving scheme enhanced the parade area as a "square" with seating, planters and village notice boards at "Bob's Corner".



### Bob's Corner

The paving scheme reflects the red and blue bricks found throughout the village, and retains some of the brick and chalkstone rubble walls of College Farm. The scheme attempts to maximise efficient parking, but parking does not meet demand at peak times, despite the provision of spaces to the front of the College Farm houses, and more discreet parking to the rear of the High Street frontages in Millstream.

The parade units, the shops and restaurant to the east, and the Co-op all have modern frontages but are consistent with the village scale. The greater size of the Co-op is well disguised behind a low narrow frontage.



### The Co-op

Signage is mostly simple, with modest fascias and limited colour schemes, and is not internally illuminated. The Co-op has the only security grills, and these are placed inside of the doors out of obvious public view.

The historic character of the street is otherwise still prevalent, with many buildings listed or of local note. The Benson Village Butcher occupies historic premises with a 19th century shopfront, and is wholly traditional in character, while shops at Derry's Den and nearby in Chapel Lane occupy old buildings with modern traditional-style shop windows.



### Benson Village Butcher





### Derry's Den

These buildings are consistent with the scale and character of the cottages and houses that hug the south side and either end of the High Street. Most of these buildings are set on or close to the pavement and have roofs parallel with the street. Some retain original plots stretching back to the brook, but most have rear infill development, including a further car park and the Millstream Day Centre. Derry's Den and neighbouring Number 2? retain 16th century timber framing and chimneys, but the majority have 17th-19th century walls of chalkstone rubble and/or brick, in some cases rendered over to protect the soft stone. Old clay tile roofs predominate. Height and window style reflect a variety of circumstance and status, including historic upgrading, and range from low-eave cottages of vernacular appearance to houses with parapets and patterned brickwork.



### High Street south side, looking towards The Crown Inn

Of particular note are 16th century College Farmhouse, distinctively set back behind a front garden that adds a welcome patch of green, and the early 19th century 3-storey villa at Kingsford House, also set back behind a forecourt. Kingsford House is a fine example of the distinctive local use of blue/grey header brick set off by red dressings, in this case with tuck pointing. It was the home of a local coachmaker, and helps to demonstrate the prosperity of the coaching era for Benson.



### Monarch's Court (Former Red Lion Inn)

The Crown Inn at the east end of High Street and the former Red Lion Inn buildings (now Monarch's Court) at the western corner with Mill Lane are of particular importance in defining the length of the High Street and the village debt to the coaching trade. The Red Lion building returns down Mill Lane and marks the earliest route of the coaching road out towards London via Coach Way, while the Crown marks a late 17th century detour to skirt the boggy area around the Benson Brook. In many cases buildings around the inns provided workshops or cottages for workers servicing the coaching trade.

The tall gable end of the former Free Church (now Church House) serves as a visual and social foil, reminding of the strong strain of nonconformity in the village past.

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At the east end the High Street follows through into greener views down Brook Street. At the west end, High Street views are closed by the row of traditional buildings that follow the curve into Castle Square, the containment helping to give definition to the village centre.

#### Opening off the High Street are:

**Mill Lane** – a narrow lane with tarmac only to the initial stretch. It leads down to pass a cluster of old buildings grouped around the Benson Brook and the site of the former mill, and on past 20th century infill development to the footpath to Preston Crowmarsh.

**Chapel Lane** – linking with Watlington Road, Littleworth and the Parish Hall and sporting facilities at Sunnyside. Small-scale historic buildings, including former chapel, former Sun Public House and various small-scale 20th century housing on west side; 1950s bungalows on very deep plots to east.

**Crown Lane** – connects with the Watlington Road and Sunnyside, with footpath connections through to Westfield Road. Historic buildings at the High Street/Crown Square end, and an outlying historic cottage at the far north-east end. Crown Garage reminds of the historic industries servicing the coaching trade. Otherwise 20th century infill of low density character, with bungalows predominating. Modified bungalows with upper storeys are variously admired and deplored as disruptive to the local character. Large triangle at junction with Watlington Road is important as a green space, relieving the built-up area and softening the visual impact of the highway.

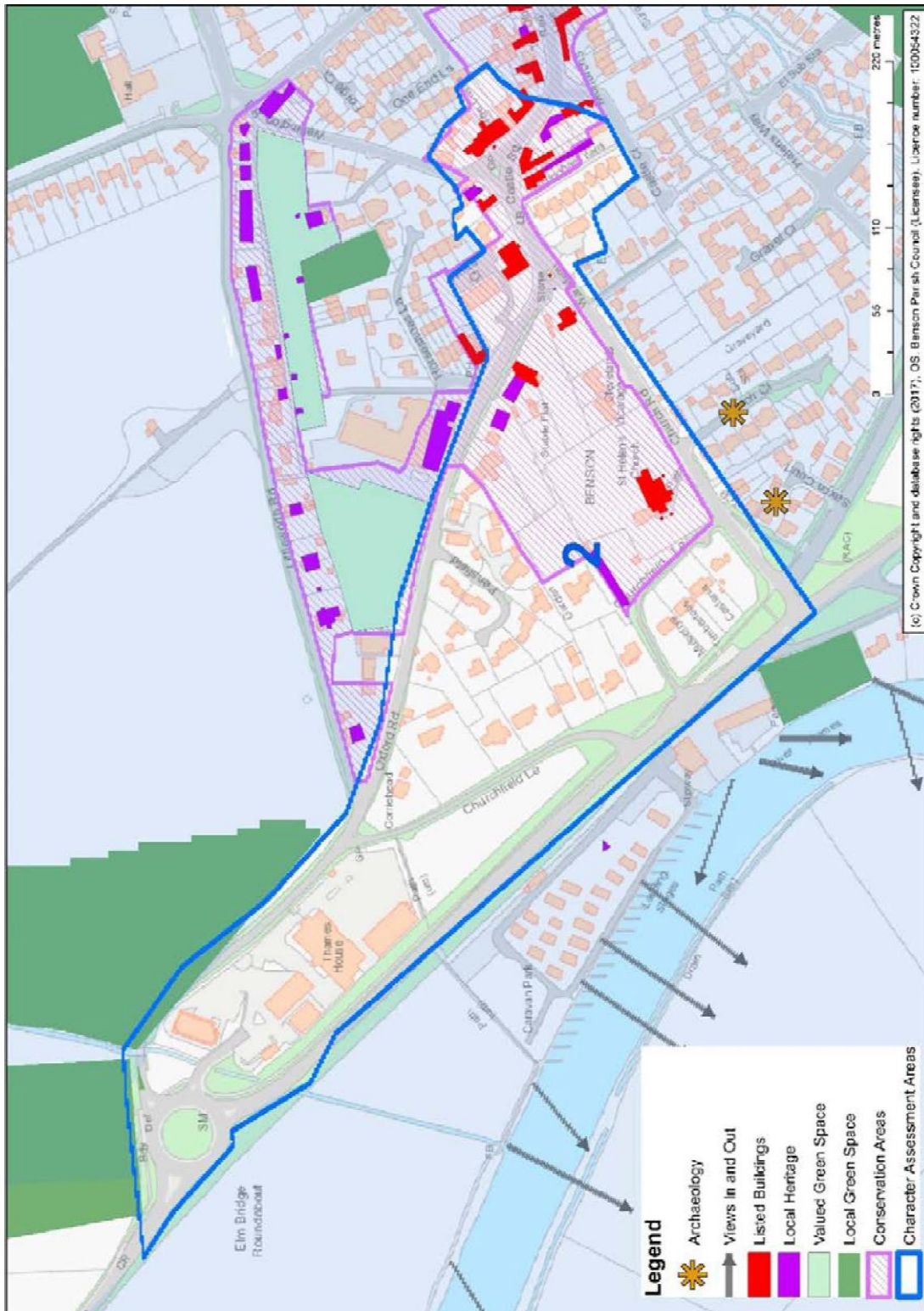
**Old London Road** – the main route towards London since the later 17th century, but truncated by the construction of the airfield in the late

1930s and now very quiet. Small historic buildings include a cluster opposite The Moorlands and a flint cottage close to the angle bend with St Helen's Avenue. Many bungalows from the mid-20th century on sizeable plots. Green verges and trees important to rural character.

#### Wish list:

- Maintain and enhance viability of the commercial heart of the village; Foster character as a meeting place and social centre for the village;
- Maximise opportunities for efficient parking for those living outside the village;
- Maintain traditional village character and appearance;
- Encourage continuing use of planters to soften appearance of built environment;
- Encourage a more consistent design approach to loft conversion/roof replacement for bungalows in Crown and Chapel Lanes, to enable a developing sense of local character.

## 2. CASTLE SQUARE, OXFORD ROAD, CHURCH ROAD



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Castle Square is a significant focal space within the historic village layout. Its curving roads and off-set junctions are dominated by the former Castle and White Hart inns and by the Old Vicarage and war memorial. The church is a short way beyond, and there is also a library. 25 Castle Square retains its 19th century shopfront.



**Castle Square with former White Hart and Castle Inns and war memorial.**

#### Buildings:

Most are historic, listed and attractive. They are set close to the roadways, either fronting directly onto the pavement or with railings or low brick and flint walls bounding shallow front gardens. The building line around the north-east side of the square and along the approach to High Street is near continuous. Small-scale buildings reflect early origins (Castle Farmhouse has timber framing and panels of 1696) or cottage status, while larger buildings reflect the prosperity of the coaching era in the 18th and 19th centuries. The latter are of more formal architectural design, with regular sash windows, doorcases, band courses and cornicing/parapets. Local chalkstone, red and blue/grey brick, render, clay tiles and natural slates are variously used to fine effect, while The Old Vicarage has distinctive gabled elevations of flint and brick.



#### The Old Vicarage

The three-storey inns are particularly imposing, the former Castle Inn with a bow-fronted end tower that commands the view up and down Church Road.



#### Former Castle Inn

The library and the modern houses at 7 and 11A Castle Square are set well back and appear discreet in the historic context. The chalet bungalow at 2 Castle Close is more prominent.

#### Roadways and traffic:

The road layout follows an S-bend in the historic coaching route, with branches off to the church and towards Watlington. The curves help to define the elongated space of the “square” but limit sight lines for the traffic junction and make pedestrian crossing difficult and dangerous. There is a significant traffic pinch point at the entry into Watlington Road, while flow into and from Church Road and Oxford Road can be restricted by parking for the church and school.

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Traffic stops only for Remembrance Day ceremonies and is heavy in the context of the historic character. Parking at the north-east end of the Square is intensive, given the lack of historic provision.

#### Planting:

Planting in gardens and on the road triangles softens the appearance of the buildings and the tarmac surfacing of roads and pavements, while mature tall trees around the White Hart and library are important to the village character. The group of horse chestnuts running around the corner by the White Hart is particularly majestic, complete with rookery, and further large trees down Oxford and Church Roads give green views out towards the countryside setting of the village.



#### View into Oxford Road



#### View up Church Road towards Castle Square

#### Opening off Castle Square are:

**Birmingham Yard** – the coach-making workshops and smithy here are long gone, but a row of 19th century cottages survives along the north-east side. The very small scale and simple detail of these cottages, and their intimate relationship with the pathway, are highly distinctive and evocative of the historic character. Recent extension of the row harmonises well. The c.1970 chalet bungalows opposite contrast in style but reflect similar small scale.



#### Birmingham Yard with new matching houses to right

Church Road - significant as a link to the church, the ancient core settlement and the river. Development to the south east is modern, but with a traditional-style lych-gate into the new churchyard, and green front gardens with trees. To the north-west there is historic flint and brick walling and greenery almost continuous past the Old Vicarage and the Grade II\* listed church, with views into the green space and yew trees of the churchyard. Dense boundary planting conceals the 20th century houses beyond the churchyard, leaving the church with pride of place in a green setting.



### St Helen's Church

Oxford Road – follows the coaching route north east towards Oxford. Historic development clustered around the corner with Castle Square, and comprises the Three Horseshoes PH, a large brick house historically associated with a coach works, and a few cottages. The Tudorbethan-style school dates from 1851 (see Littleworth), with the school field providing a valuable green space. Modern development along the immediate south west side of the road has respected the small scale and typical alignment of the historic cottages and does not disrupt views out along the street, or the sense that the historic settlement is petering out. Development to the rear of this, however, is of a size and density that is inconsistent with the village margins.

Running to the west of this development is Churchfield Lane, a country lane significant for its narrow width and rural character. Kerbless green verges and hedging contribute to this, as does the survival of a paddock with post and rail fencing and hedging to the far side. The approved 2.5 storey care home on the paddock will prejudice the rural character.



### Churchfield Lane

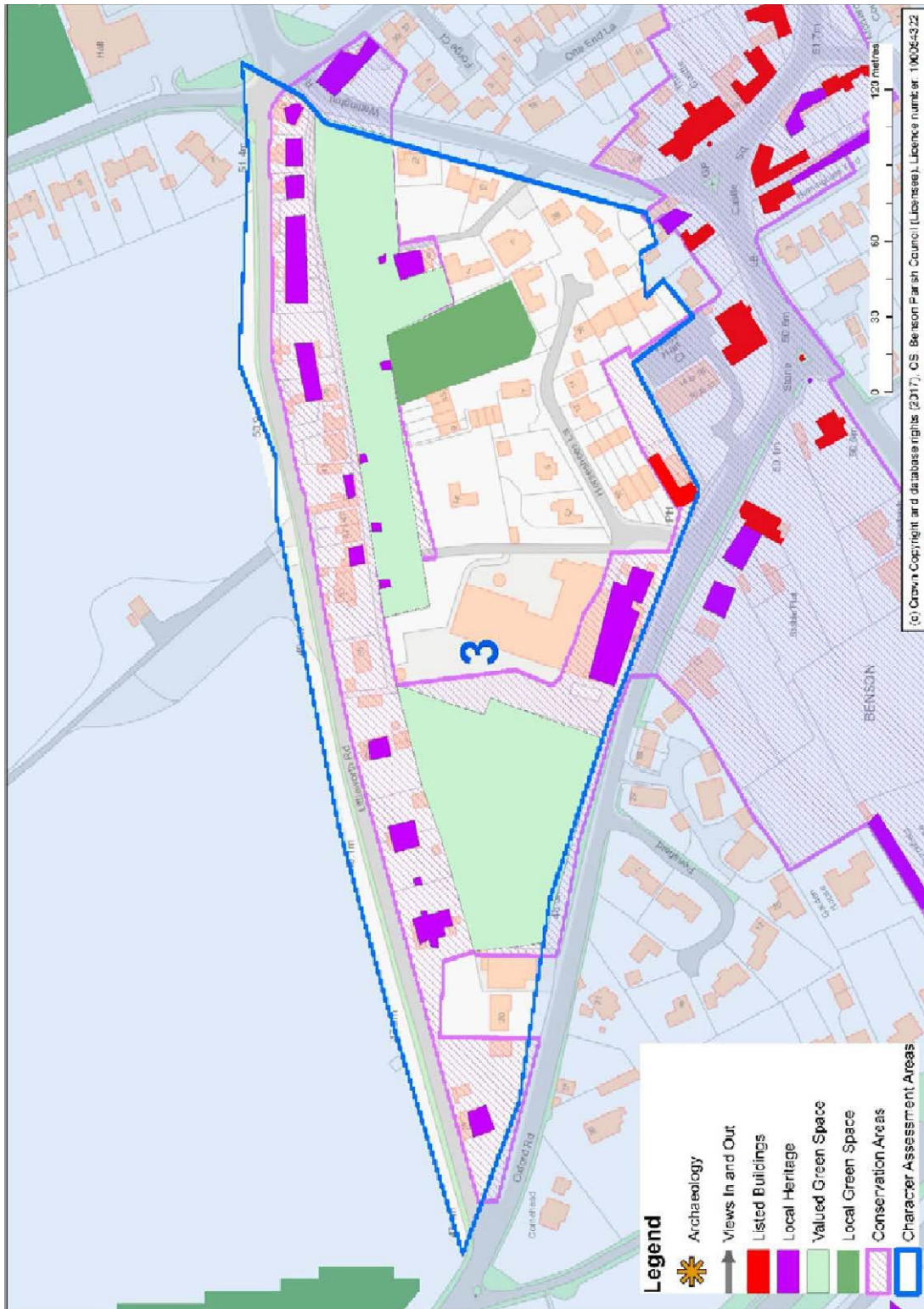
A detached gravelled section of Churchfield Lane runs through beside the churchyard, leading to Churchfield House. This house blocks views of the development behind, and contributes to the setting of the church and churchyard with its historic character, as do the walls and 19th century cast iron panel railings along the lane.

The petrol filling station and MacDonald's restaurant at the western tip of this assessment area relate to the A4047 and the roundabout rather than the village.

#### Wish list:

- A reduced traffic flow improving safety for pedestrians and road users;
- Conservation and enhancement of the historic environment;
- Maintenance of the green setting and views;
- Development consistent with the small scale of the village margins;
- Provision of parking for any new build, adequate to avoid further street parking.

### 3. LITTLEWORTH



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A highly distinctive historic settlement designated as part of the Benson Conservation Area, with many buildings of local heritage value. Noted as an attractive outlier to the main village<sup>1</sup>. Likely to have originated in the early 18th century as a squatter settlement, with cottages tightly packed along the edge of Littleworth waste<sup>2</sup>.

#### Spaces and layout:

- Highly distinctive layout - older cottages to east are tightly packed into narrow margin between path and lane, facing onto path with gardens beyond. Outbuildings and gravelled parking bays towards lane behind.
- Paths are charming – low or green boundaries allow intimate relationship with cottages and green spaces of gardens to both sides. Paths are well used by community and as a route to school.



- Green space and mature trees of gardens, school grounds and Bertie West Field to the south of the path are important in capturing part of the original rural setting.



#### Buildings:

- Distinctively small in scale, with cottage rows or pairs, and 2 detached houses at west end.
- One and a half or two storeys; low roof lines; small dormers.
- Older cottages are strongly vernacular and simple in character - local chalky rubble stone with orange/red brick, some protective rendering. Steep old tile roofs, thatch or natural slate.



- Set of 1860s brick and slate cottages designed in pairs with formal rendered gables to path. 2 similar houses, Blenheim House with late C19 cast iron railings to Oxford Road and replacement period glasshouse.
- British School of 1851 along side path - converted to flats.

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<sup>1</sup> SODC Benson Conservation Area Study 1999

<sup>2</sup> See maps in Appendix B of "The Ditmas History of Benson", Bensington Society 2009



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- C of E County Primary School – Tudorbethan build of 1851; extensions 1901, 1960s and 2005.



- Youth Hall of mid C20 utilitarian build – detracts from historic character.
- Scout Hut – a 1920s corrugated iron hut with plank-lined interior and ready access to wild play area in Bertie West Field.

#### Setting:

The historic rural setting of the settlement as an outlier projecting into the fields is being compromised. Past infill development between Watlington Road and the school connects Littleworth with the main village, but the green space of the gardens and the Bertie West Field continue to provide an important buffer. The immediate association with the open countryside beyond Littleworth Road is now being destroyed by the approved development at Hopefield Grange, with associated works to widen the country lane and remove the field hedging. It will be important to limit further damage and to retain and enhance the surviving rural elements of the setting if the distinctive character of Littleworth is to survive.

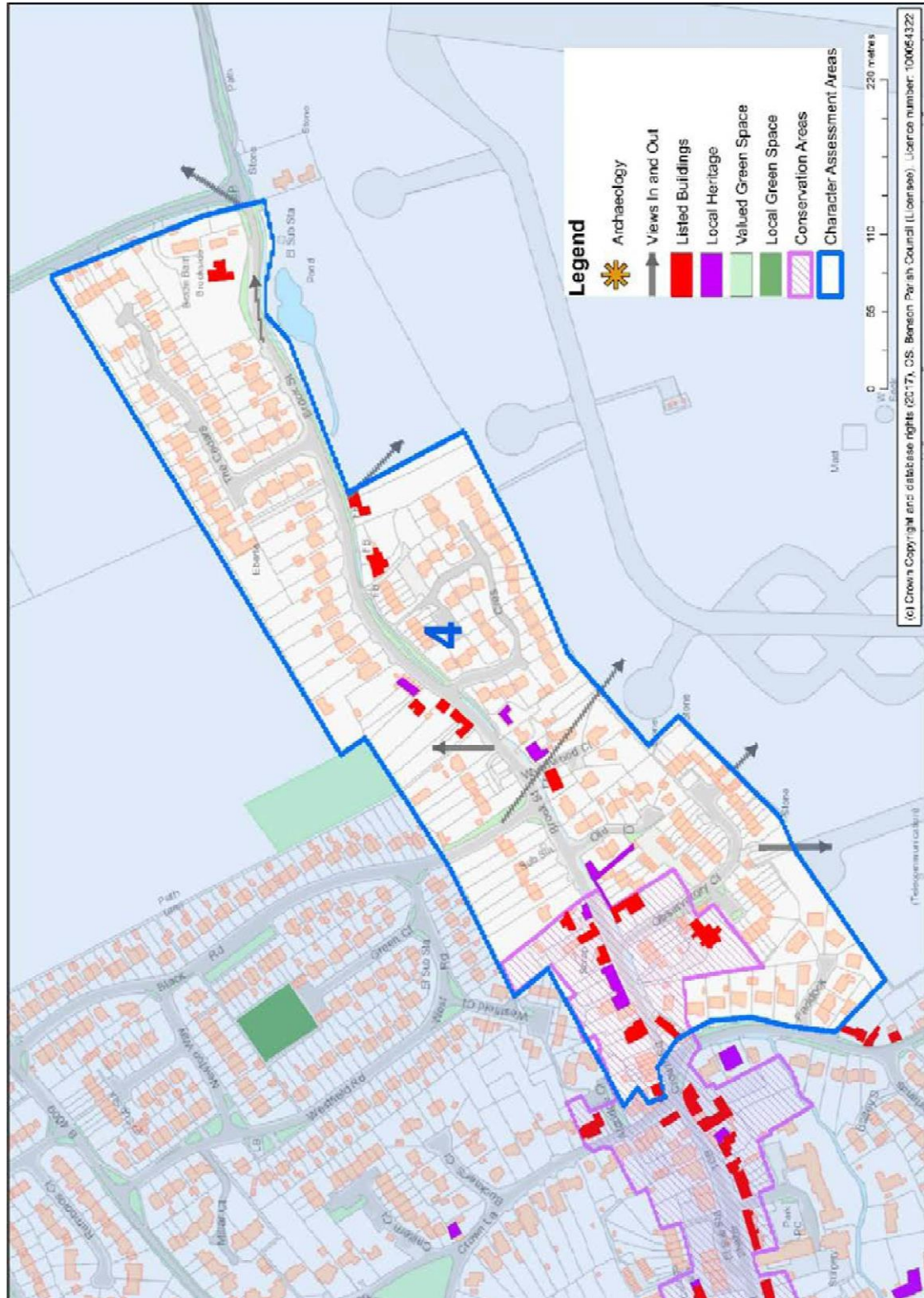
#### Wish list:

- Conservation and enhancement of the historic environment;
- Retention and maintenance of important green spaces and trees, to

the extent compatible with continued viability of the school;

- Retention of low or green planted boundaries along Littleworth path;
- Enhanced opportunities for the use of Bertie West Field;
- Improvement/replacement of the Youth Hall;
- Any new development to be compatible with the layout, small scale and distinctive character of this historic area.

## 4. BROOK STREET



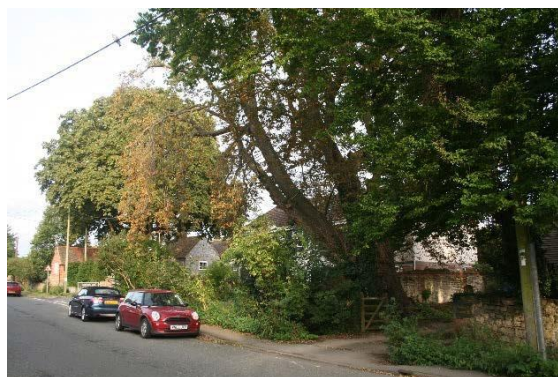
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Brook Street continues the line of High Street eastwards but departs from the historic coaching route at Crown Square to follow the gently curving course of the Benson Brook. The clear water of the chalk stream would have been the original attraction for the settlement here, and the brook remains important to the character of the street. It runs along the south side, initially constrained between the pavement and historic boundary walls, but then more openly. Historic houses and cottages at Numbers 34 and 38-40 have a particularly close relationship with the brook, and this has been emulated to good effect by the 1990s terraced housing at Numbers 46-64.



#### **Modern terraces at 46 – 54 Brook Street**

The orderly green verges here then give way to a more natural character at the east end of the street, where the brook is backed by the wilder hedging and scrub bordering the field strip behind. This field has ponds that are not visible from the street but potentially add to the biodiversity value. Green verges and mature trees at Brookside make this end of the street noticeably verdant. Elsewhere a natural, green character is maintained by gardens fronting modern development, by green verges and trees at the east end, and by the survival of large specimen trees at intervals along the south side of the street.



#### **Specimen trees at The Paddock and Brook Cottage**

A view north eastwards between 61 and 65-69 Brook Street takes in tall trees in the corner of the field to the rear and is helpful in registering the rural setting of the settlement.

The conservation area takes in the western end of the street as part of the historic core of the village. Historic cottages are tightly clustered immediately along or very close to the pavement here, particularly along the north side, and demonstrate a consistently smaller, humbler scale than in the High Street. 1 Brook Street is notable as retaining a 15th-16th century cruck structure in the end gable, but Brook Cottage (35-36 Observatory Close) is similarly ancient. Early timber framing is also evident at No. 17 and the former Farmer's Man, but is in the main concealed by 17th century and later walls of chalkstone rubble or brick, often rendered or lime-washed/painted for protection. The variety is highly attractive.



**Historic cottages at 19 – 27 Brook Street**



**2-4 Brook Street (The Plough)**

An exception to the small scale is No. 8 The Paddock, which was extended in the early 19th century to provide an imposing 3-storey villa. As with Kingsford House in the High Street it is of value in demonstrating the prosperity of Benson at this period. Similar large houses have been demolished to make way for Observatory Close and The Cedars.

To the east, historic cottages and houses are grouped more sporadically. They are clearly distinguishable by their position close to the street or the brook. The larger examples were farmhouses but now retain only remnants of farm buildings, if any. Farm buildings that survive, even if altered, are of historic value as evidence of the former agricultural economy. These eastern buildings lie outside the conservation area but are important to understanding of the rural character and history of the village core.

The gaps between the historic buildings were filled from the mid-20th century to give continuous housing along the north side of the street, and a series of closes behind much of the south side. This modern development has maintained the sense of simple layout along the street, and there is clear distinction between the old and the new:

- semi-detached 2-storey houses around the junction with Blacklands Road are set well back from the street, in contrast with the historic arrangement, behind long front gardens that maintain the gap as green space in views along the street.
- development to the eastern half of the street, along the north side, comprises only bungalows. These read more strongly as part of the street scene because closer to it. The low height and bungalow format, however, is consistent with the location at the end of the village, where it peters out into the open landscape.
- housing to the south is denser but also set back and small-scale, the larger individual units at Passey Crescent concealed behind the modest terracing illustrated above. Apart from the southern sector of Observatory Close, development has been contained within the historic rear line of the settlement by the airfield behind.

Brook Street is a minor traffic route but important in connecting with RAF Benson and Ewelme. Traffic is slowed by parking in front of Passey Crescent and by the narrow neck into Crown Square. It is not, however, a safe route for pedestrians because there is no consistent pavement. A flush pavement at Crown Square is a last resort solution that visually narrows the road available to traffic and offers pedestrians priority, but does not convince as wholly safe.

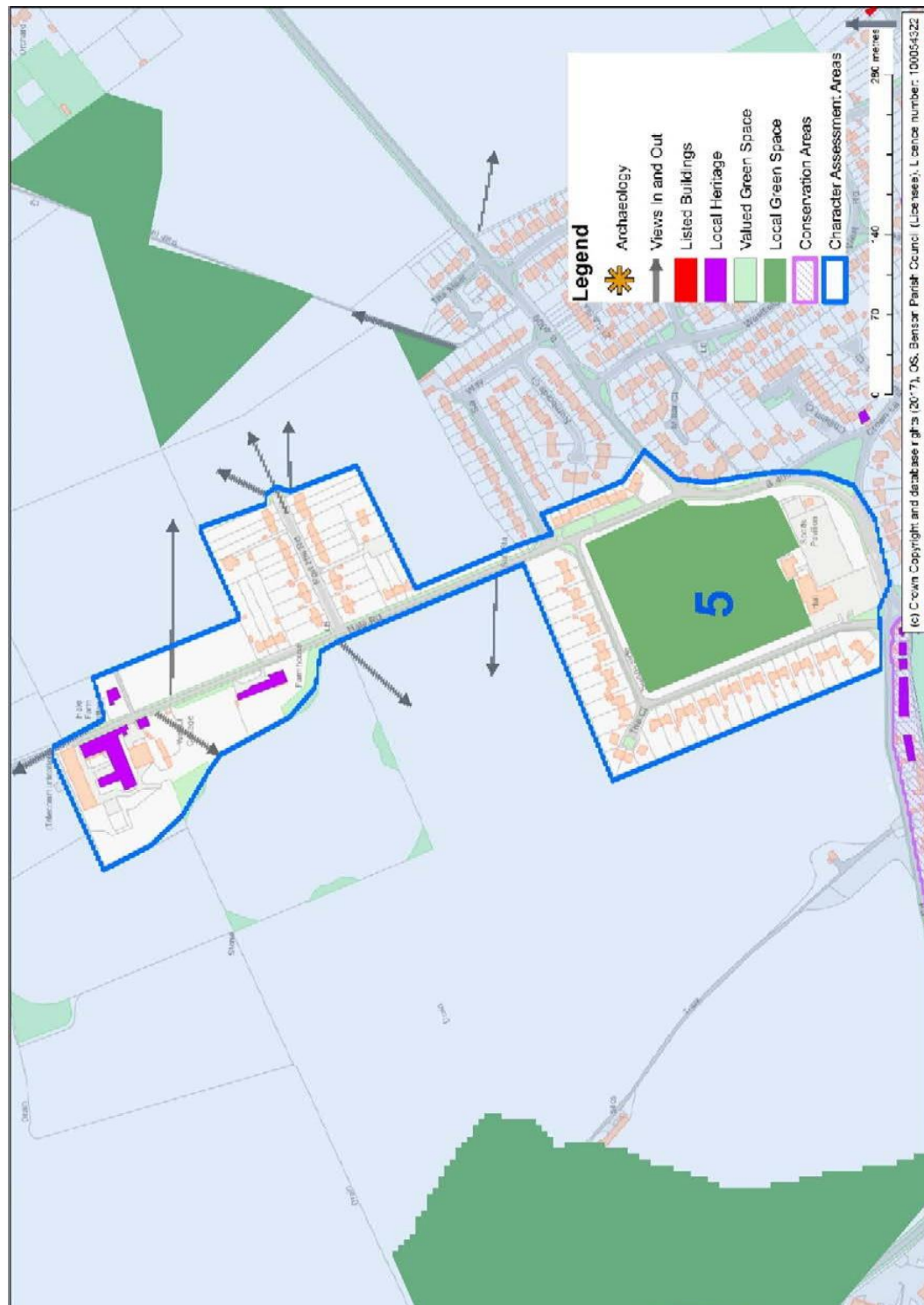


### Flush pavement at Crown Square

#### Wish list:

- Maintain the brook as a distinctive feature of the street scene and seek to enhance its biodiversity potential;
- Respect the green character of the street as presented by the planting and the natural boundaries at the east end;
- Respect the linear character of the street, avoiding encroachment beyond the historic plot line;
- Maintain the distinction between historic and more recent development;
- Respect the small scale and modest character of the built environment;
- Improve the provision of safe footways.

## 5. SUNNYSIDE, HALE AND PORT HILL ROADS



Bullington Rural District Council built the houses at Port Hill Road in the 1920s in a rural location associated with the mid-19th century farmhouse, cottages and farm buildings at Hale Farm. Residents at Port Hill Road still consider themselves to be “out in the country” and separate from the main village. Sunnyside was also a local authority development, planned in 1946 around a new recreation area, with the parish hall relocated here in 1988.

#### Characteristics:

- Low density housing in open rural setting, with views through to agricultural landscape.
- Generous plots with front and rear gardens and visual gaps between.
- 2-storey semi-detached and short terrace family housing with end bungalows at Sunnyside and c.1960s retirement bungalows at 2-20 Hale Road.
- Traditional style with steep tiled roofs, catclides and chimneys. Plainer brick elevations at Sunnyside. Variety of half-timbered and rendered gables at Port Hill Road. Plain modern glazing.



#### Sunnyside



#### Port Hill Road

- Off-street parking to side at Sunnyside. Parking courts little used at Port Hill – road verges eroded for parking.
- Overhead cables – intrusive at Port Hill; along rear boundaries at Sunnyside.
- Layout at Port Hill is unremarkable and does not relate to rural setting. No landscaping.



#### Port Hill Road

- Layout of Sunnyside celebrates association with communal open green space of recreation area/village green: low front boundaries; houses enclose and overlook playing field giving sense of security.



### Sunnyside

▪ Sunnyside space is a multi-purpose communal amenity, with playing field, tennis courts, play area, pavilions, parish hall and parking. Used for village events.



▪ Green character and planting are important at Sunnyside, including trees along north edge, informal tree belt and hedging along Watlington Road, and grass-crete over-flow parking.

▪ Field hedges alongside Hale Road are important to rural character and approach to outlying Hale Farm.



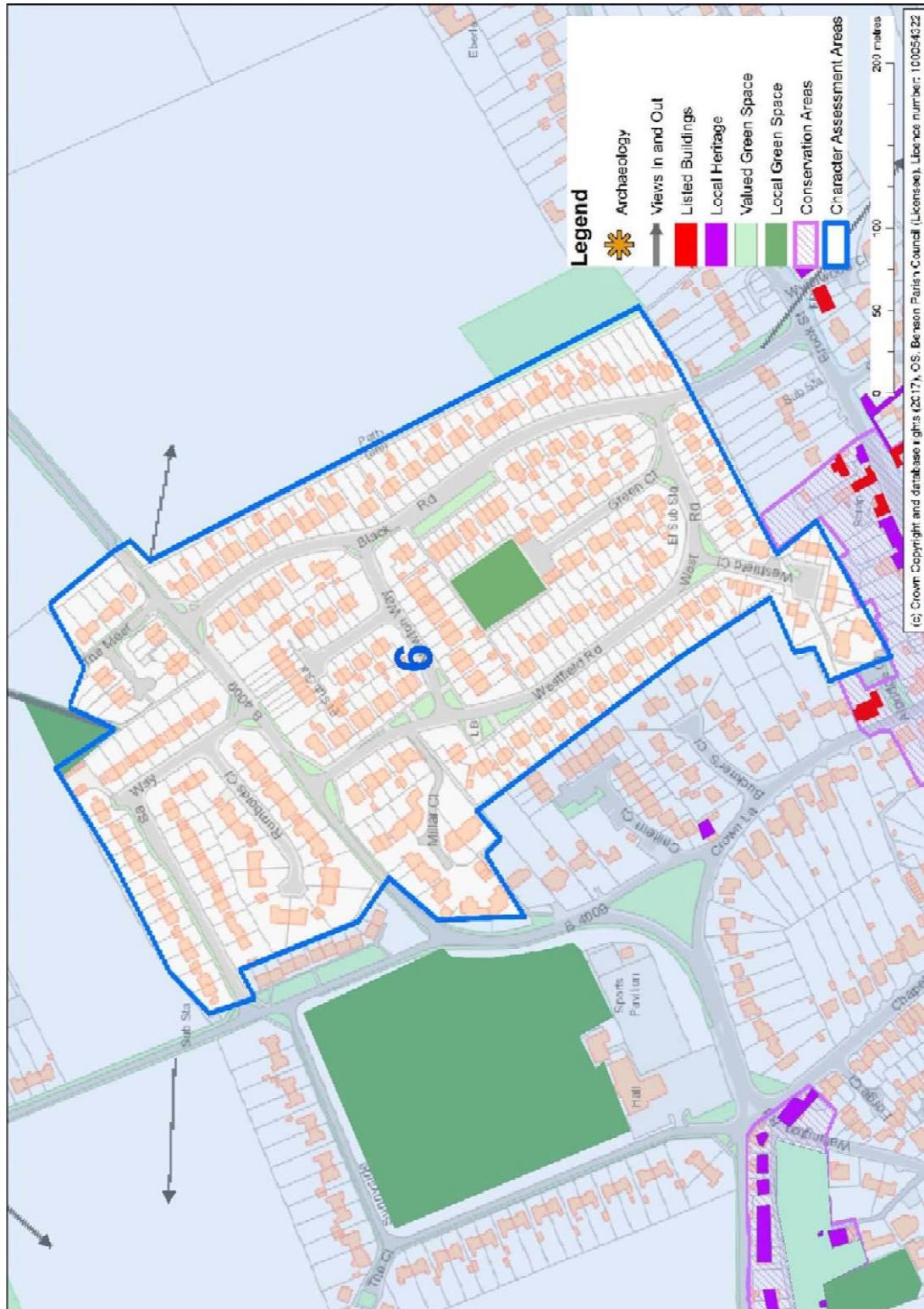
### Hale Road and bridleway to Warborough

#### Wish list:

- Retention and enhancement of Sunnyside amenity space as a multifunctional green space, with appropriate planting;
- Any development at Sunnyside and Port Hill Road to respect the existing character;
- Respect for the green margins and rural character of Hale Road as connecting with Hale Farm and the open countryside;



## 6. NORTH EAST BENSON



An area of 1960s housing on very gently rising ground, with more recent development at Millar Close and SOHA houses at The Meer.

#### Characteristics of the 1960s housing:

- A mix of bungalows and 2-storey family houses, mostly semi-detached but with occasional terraces. One small 2-storey block of flats.
- About 30 houses per hectare;
- Informal layout with gently curving roads and varying set-backs;
- Deep verges and front gardens with low boundaries give sense of spaciousness;



#### Westfield Road

- Shallow roof pitches and low ridges;
- Plain, orderly 1960s architecture respected by regular pattern of extension;
- Non-local brick with range of render, tile-hung or boarded panels; cement tiles;
- Garages and parking spaces now too small for modern cars. Erosion of front gardens and verges with paving and crossovers is detracting from intended appearance;
- Good connectivity with village centre;
- Play area and cut-through pathways hemmed in by tall fencing;



#### Green Close Play Area

Bungalows at Blacklands Road give low NE edge to field. Outer edge with landscape otherwise abrupt, with 1.8 m fencing.



#### Blacklands Road – bungalows on east side

- Recent housing is more traditional in character with red brick, tiles and slates and steeper roof pitches. It is more attractive, but taller, and reads more strongly in landscape views. The layout of Millar Close around a snaking street with small green and retained willow tree is particularly attractive.



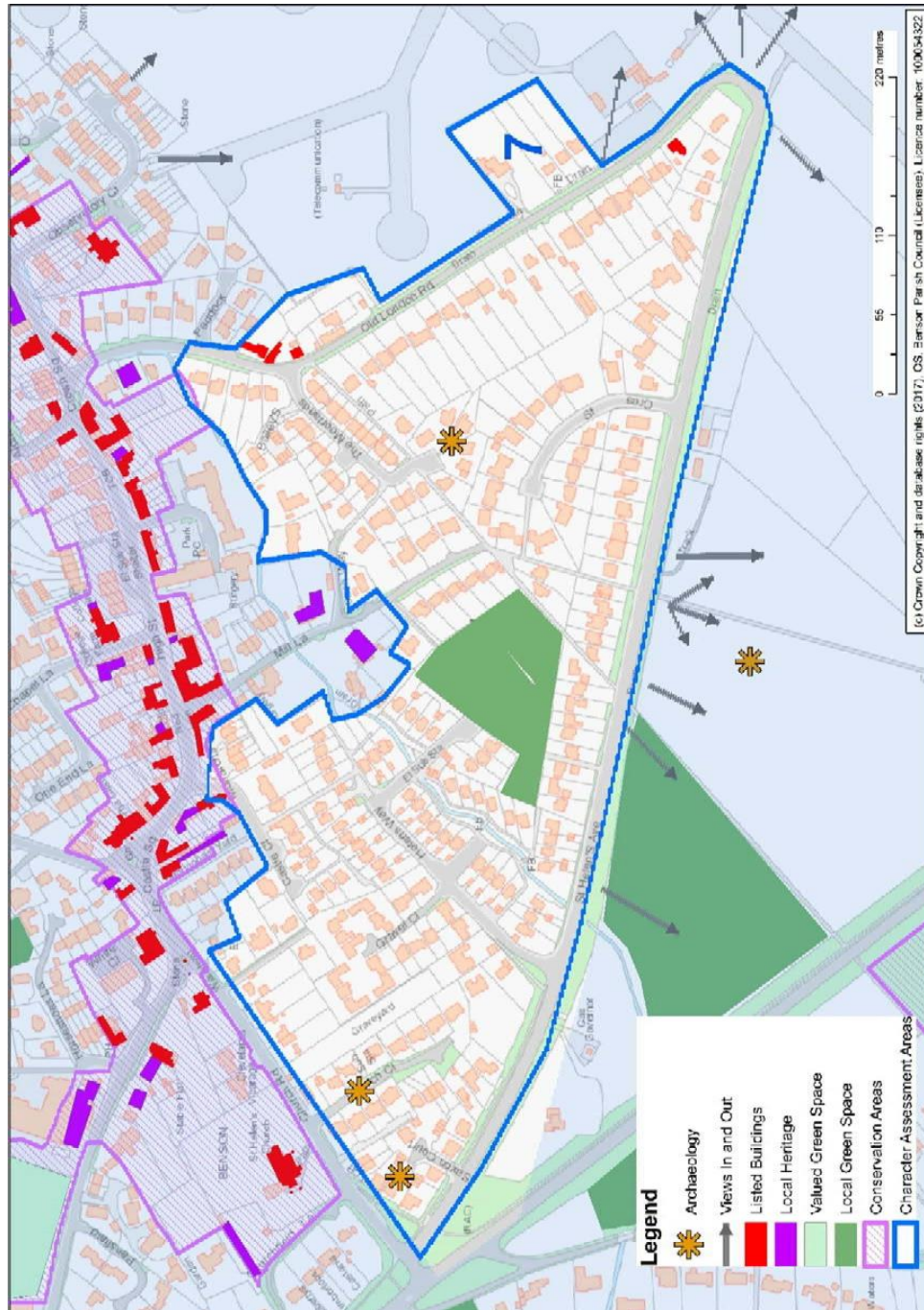


### **Millar Close**

#### **Wish list:**

- Future extensions to maintain orderly character
- Maintain low front boundaries
- Trees and more natural green space for play area
- Run cables underground

## 7. ST HELENS AVENUE



This is an area of modern infill between the historic village core and St Helen's Avenue, an intended by-pass cut short by the airfield and now superseded by the A4074. This road currently forms the southern limit of the village, with dense field hedging and trees along the south side providing a strong rural edge. Gates and footpaths give views through to the allotments and paddocks beyond. At the east end, where the avenue meets the similarly truncated Old London Road there are views through security gates into the airfield.



### St Helen's Avenue

The south-western tip of this area is very close to the River Thames and was the site of prehistoric and early settlement. Excavations at Saxon Court revealed archaeological evidence of Neolithic and late Bronze Age – early Iron Age settlement, and sunken buildings from the Saxon period, including a possible great hall of the 6th-7th century. Excavations at Church Close and at Jubilee Villa revealed evidence of Roman settlement/land use. It is highly likely that there is more to find given the proximity to a Neolithic ritual site under the airfield, and the recent discovery of prehistoric enclosures and Saxon burials in the field to the south.

Historic settlement is concentrated outside the area to the north of the Benson Brook, with a few outlying houses along Mill Lane and The Old London Road. The brook historically served as a greater barrier than at

present, with head ponds for the former mill. The reduced course of the brook now runs mostly through private grounds, but emerges to flow more openly between houses off St Helen's Way.

**Layout:** The area is segmented by Mill Lane, the remnant of Coach Way (the early route out of the village towards London), and footpaths towards Preston Crowmarsh. The modern cul-de-sacs of Castle Close, St Helen's Way, St Helen's Crescent and The Moorlands are set out between, and there are no through vehicle routes. A seeming warren of further paths, alongside the brook, through the allotments and through the new houses, provide important links to the village centre.

These paths vary in character. The pre-established rights of way are straight and channelled between fencing, and can appear intimidating. The paths through the allotments and alongside the brook are more open and much more inviting.



**Brook, path and chalet frontages at St Helen's Way**

Paths are a particular feature of the chalet development around St Helen's Way and Castle Close. Chalets here are laid out to address the brook, and to face paths that run through shared green space or between unbounded/low-walled front gardens. This layout maximises the impression of spaciousness and greenery, despite the dense clustering of the chalets, and provides a sense of intimacy, safety, and traffic-free quiet. The front aspect is highly attractive and provides a strong sense of place.



The consequence of this layout, however, is the need for more private garden areas towards the roads, where high blind fences, parking bays and functional courts with flat-roofed garages make for a hard-featured street scene. This is not improved by the high level of street parking that stems from the inadequate size of the 1960s garages, and the lack of any private parking for the historic settlement adjoining Castle Close.



**The "rear" aspect of chalets at St Helen Way**

**Buildings:** The chalets date from the late 1950s and 60s but remain remarkably intact as a development, with changes to cladding but not to size or roof format. Respect for the regularity, small scale and front layout, as well as for neighbourliness, will be important if the distinctive character is to survive future change to individual buildings.

As low-rise buildings the chalets take their lead from the preference for bungalows, such as those built on large plots along the Old London Road in the 1930s. Housing for the elderly at The Moorlands, and the earlier houses along St Helen's Avenue were also single-storey, and the character of the area remains predominantly low-rise. Later two-storey houses along St Helen's Avenue and at Church Close have shallow roof pitches and low ridges, and modifications to individual bungalows are increasing the bulk but not necessarily the ridge height.



**Bungalow modification underway at St Helen's Crescent**

Buildings materials are of the period, with a variety of cladding materials, rather than distinctive of the locality.

More recent houses at Gravel Close and Saxon Court present a departure from the above norm in seeking a more traditional 2-storey appearance, using red and darker brick with brick feature details, render, and tiles or slates. At Gravel Close the use of steep roofs over

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deep spans accentuates the height, and the detail is more marked. Houses here are generally admired as more distinctive and attractive, but are more prominent than their neighbours.



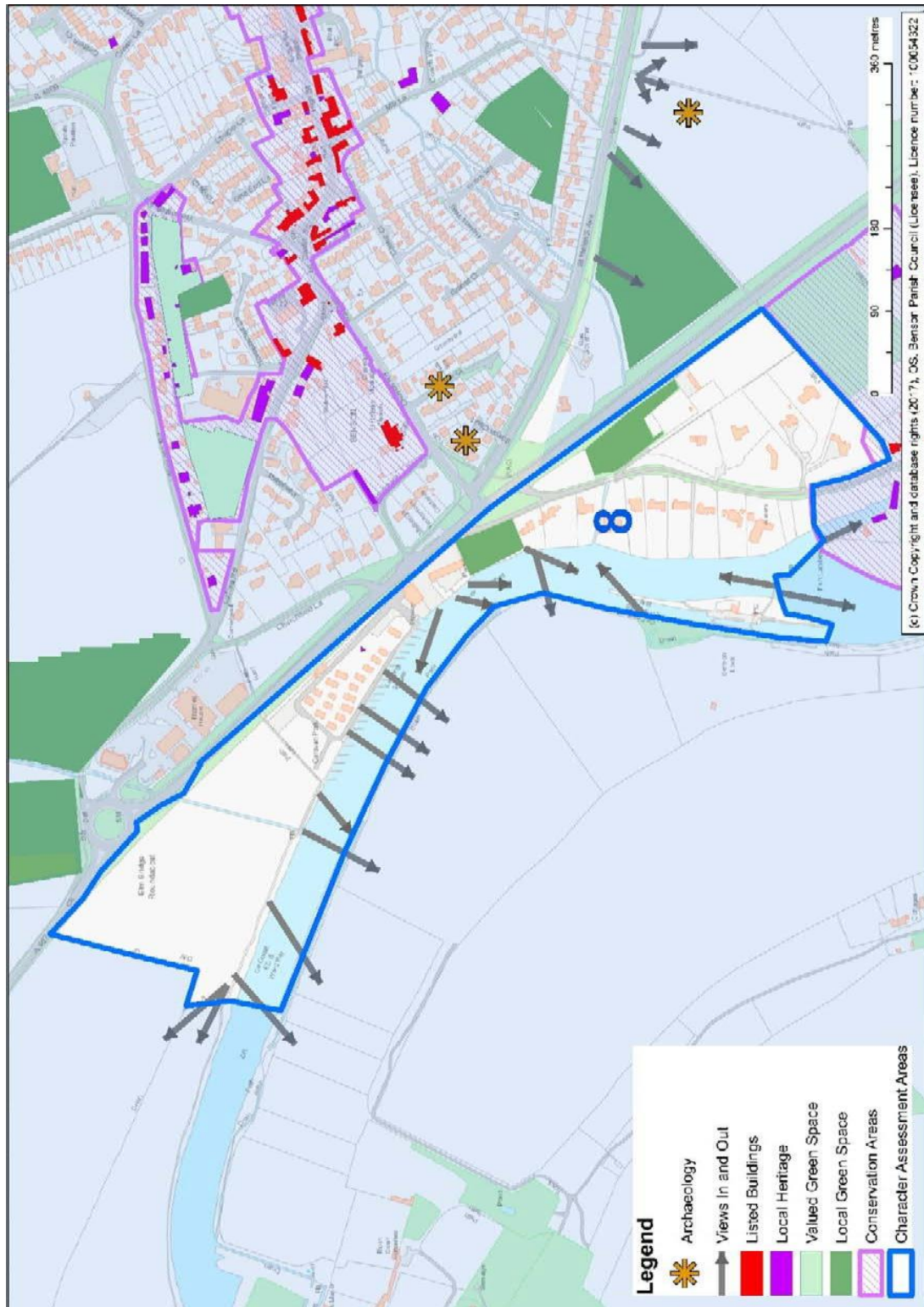
### Gravel Close

Community facilities within this area include a burial ground off Church Road, and allotments and a children's play area behind the St Helen's Avenue houses. Together, the allotments and play area provide a valuable green space of considerable size, with a few retained trees providing a semi-natural feel. The space is, however, an almost secret asset as it does not connect directly with any road or invite views in or through. The play space is functional, but would benefit from more seats, some trees for shade and some natural interest.

### Wish list:

- Maintain low-rise character and those aspects of the chalet development that are positively distinctive;
- Maintain and enhance the network of paths;
- Look for opportunities to improve connectivity, including with the allotments and play area;
- Enhancements for play area;
- Maintain and enhance green spaces and occasional planting, including field hedge to south;
- Provide for parking/garaging that does not disfigure the street scene.

## 8. THE RIVERSIDE/WATERFRONT





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While this riverside strip is small in area it is large in character, given the stature of the river, the long views out across flood meadows and fields to the west and south, and the access to the Thames Path national trail. It is distinct in character, and separated from Benson village by traffic on the A4074, but has deep historic associations with the settlement and is highly valued for its access to nature, leisure opportunities and health benefits. It is a fundamental part of the rural setting of the village, and makes a major contribution to its character and economy.

#### Distinctive natural characteristics:

- The river bends, giving attractive views up and downstream both from the banks and the footbridge over the weir. The lock and the weir add to the interest, inviting river traffic to pause at the marina/cafe, and provide a crossing point for the Thames Path.



#### View from the weir towards Rivermead and the marina

- Two small fields of flood meadow at the northern end of the strip are precious as parts of a wide landscape that is open to views outward along and across the bank, giving a strong sense of open countryside and space. Flood meadows give way to gently rising fields with hedgerows. The Thames Path gives access to this landscape.

- The flood meadows do flood. The sight of flooded land and of tree trunks caught in the weir are powerful reminders of the forces of nature.

- Flood meadows cannot be intensively cultivated and are used as grazing meadow or managed as scrubland for wildlife. Trees are predominantly willows and alders. This area is valued for its distinctive appearance and biodiversity.



#### Millbrook Mead Nature Reserve

- Millbrook Mead nature reserve looks to foster biodiversity alongside the Benson Brook, and provides a range of natural habitats including a marsh area, a hazel coppice and a wildflower meadow.

- The lure of the water for boating and kayacking, and of the footpaths for walking, running and enjoying the natural landscape, is important to local residents. It also attracts visitors and holidaymakers who go into the village to explore and shop.

- Rivermead is valued as a public riverside amenity space, intended primarily for local residents, but open to all. It is located at the river's closest point to the village, and is equipped with seats, a store for kayaks and equipment, and a paddling pool for young children.



### Rivermead

Facilities at Benson Waterfront are commercial. The Waterfront Café, with its extensive decking and open-air seating, is an extremely popular venue for local residents and visitors in the summer months. Car spaces are not adequate at peak times, and visitor parking can clutter the verges of the A4074, the lane to Preston Crowmarsh and St Helen's Avenue. The marina services both holiday hire and privately-owned boats, and the bank is lined with jetties. The majority of the campsite/caravan park is now developed with lodges for holiday hire or part-year residency. There is also a shop for anglers. Buildings here address the river rather than the road, and are designed to suit their specialist functions rather than any distinctive local character. They are all single-storey low buildings incidental to the busy scene. The lodges are particularly small-scale and low, and appear temporary, but are potentially permanent in intent and densely grouped.

Land to the south of Rivermead, serviced by the lane through Preston Crowmarsh, was subject to residential development in the mid and later 20th century. Houses on the west side are mostly bungalows, individually designed to enjoy the riverside situation. They are mostly set well back from the river's edge, beyond deep gardens, and do not dominate

views of and from the river. Extension closer to the river or at greater height, could, however, result in a more assertive, busy appearance as part of these views. Houses to the east of the lane are two-storey, but widely spaced and mostly concealed by tall hedging and trees.

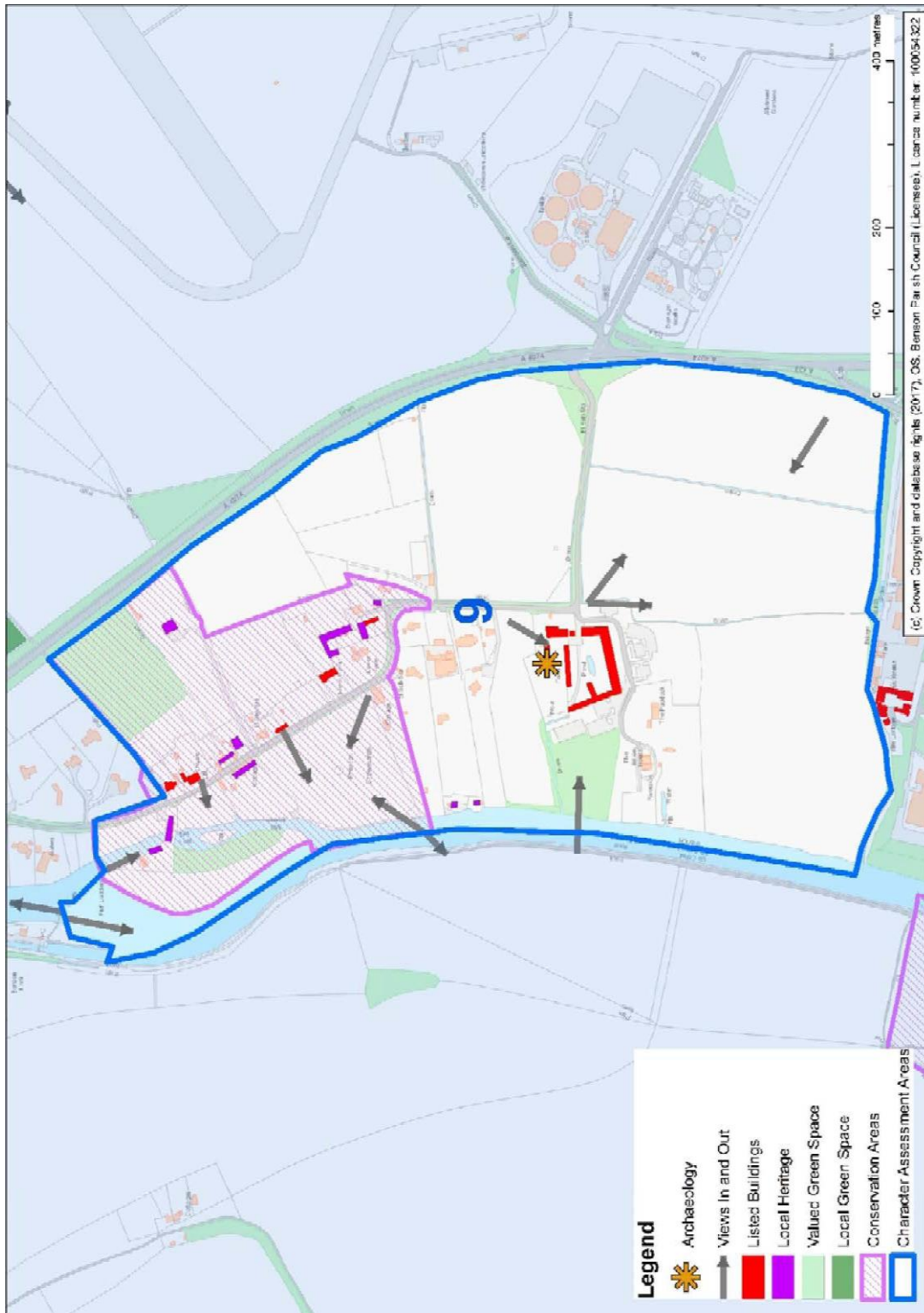
### Connection with Benson Village

Traffic on the A4074 is increasingly a barrier between the village and the river. This is contrary to the strong historic associations between the two and the desire of local residents to enjoy the amenities of the riverside. Past campaigns for a crossing achieved a traffic island close to the junction with Church Road. This is a help, but is limited in terms of safety. Some residents resort to a permitted path alongside the Benson Brook, but this has a very narrow footway underneath the road bridge, with need to duck under a large pipe at head height.

### Wish list:

- Preservation of the surviving flood meadow areas as undeveloped natural spaces;
- Continued access to the Thames Path and weir crossing;
- A safer means of access to the river area from the village;
- A parking strategy with identified sites to handle overflow;
- Development adequate to sustain the vitality and amenity of the riverside, without prejudice to its natural attractions and low-key built character.

## 9. PRESTON CROWMARSH



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Preston Crowmarsh associates closely with Benson and shares its facilities, but is a distinct historic hamlet, separated from the main village by fields and the A4074, and connects strongly with the riverside and rural setting. The attractions of the river, the quiet countryside feel, and the picturesque historic buildings make it an attractive place in which to live, visit and work.

The conservation area designation covers the historic core of the settlement but does not take account of the historical and ongoing visual associations with Crowmarsh Battle Farm as the prime historic farmstead, slightly separate at the south end.

### Landscape setting

The hamlet is a linear settlement, thinly strung out along a narrow lane that runs near-parallel with the Thames. It is raised on a gravel bank only just above Flood Zone 3, with greatest potential for flooding where settlement was close to the mill race. Rises in water level are clearly visible in public views over the open ground in front of The Old Mill House, and have been known to reach as far as the lane.



### Low-lying grounds in front of the Old Mill House

Houses at the southern end are placed more safely at slightly greater distance,

with long garden areas leading down to the river, and with significant open areas of paddock/ field opposite Numbers 49-51 and to the north of Crowmarsh Battle Farm. These areas read attractively as green in views from the lane and from the opposite bank along the Thames Path, with willows and other tall trees distinctive along the river edge.



### View from the Thames Path towards Ferry Cottage

Views westwards, across the paddocks allow glimpses of the meadow and open fields on the far bank, and are important to perception of Preston Crowmarsh as part of the wider river valley.

To the south and east the land is low-lying agricultural land, with a plantation to the rear of The Old Mill House. This land is bounded by native-species field hedges and trees, with willows along the ditches. Hedging along the A4074 cuts off views of the level fields and airfield beyond. Land bordering the southern return of the lane is more open and affords some view of the Chiltern Hills in the distance. Development at Howbery Park is concealed by hedging along the southern boundary. The prime impression is therefore of rural countryside setting.



**View into fields to the south**

### Archaeology

Scattered prehistoric and Roman finds in this area may indicate settlement associated with more significant nearby evidence identified within the airfield and at Saxon Court to the north east. Of more certain significance is the earthwork evidence for use of the Crowmarsh Battle Farm site as a medieval grange for Battle Abbey in Sussex, with the possibility that the present farmhouse may contain elements of medieval construction. A pillbox and gun emplacement base on the river bank nearby are of interest as part of a line of WW2 land defences, designed in fear that Hitler's troops would invade from the south west and advance to London, crossing the Thames in the Benson area.

### Historic settlement

This comprised a mill (Crowmarsh Mill - now reduced in height and length, and converted to a house), a mill house, two large farmsteads at Lower Farm and Crowmarsh Battle, and small cottages that in the 1840s housed agricultural workers, a basket maker and a ferry keeper. The Old Swan served as a public house. The mix of buildings is highly attractive.

While there is a small cluster of buildings closely fronting the lane around The Old

Mill House and Ferry Cottage, the farmsteads are more widely spaced to the south, and are set further back in their own grounds.

Landholdings and buildings varied according to function and still reflect differences in historic status, the Old Mill House and the farmhouses having a more imposing character with architectural refinement and greater height.



**The Old Mill House**

The farm buildings also have an impressive scale, reflecting agricultural prosperity in the c.1800 period. Those at Lower Farm were built of local chalkstone, brick and flint, and have been converted to dwellings. The listed farm buildings at Crowmarsh Battle include an octagonal brick dovecote and vast timber barns that have been converted to office units. The retained rural character of these buildings is important to understanding of the historic agricultural economy of the area.



**Crowmarsh Battle Barns**

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The older cottages are much humbler and simpler in character, either with two low storeys or with the upper storey partly in the roof space, and are distinctive as traditional buildings of local chalkstone and brick, sometimes rendered, with thatch or clay tile roofs. Extensions have in the main respected the original small scale and style. Mill Cottages and Preston House at the centre of the hamlet were built in the early 1900s as cottages and bailiff's house for the Howbery estate. While they present a more formal and stylised version of the chalkstone vernacular, they blend well with the earlier buildings.



#### **Mill Cottages, 35-41 Preston Crowmarsh**

Grade II listings include: Number 25 (The Old Swan); The Old Mill House; Numbers 49-51 and 71; Lower Farm House; and the farmhouse, dovecote, stables and barns at Crowmarsh Battle Farm. The former farm buildings at Lower Farm have been regarded as part of the historic curtilage. As part of this Plan it is suggested that further buildings should be regarded as being of local heritage note. (See Appendix A)

#### **Modern development**

There is a cluster of infill on the west side of the lane between Lower Farm and Crowmarsh Battle. The field/paddock next to Crowmarsh Battle Farmhouse is of value as a buffer between this and the historic site.

Houses here have brick and/or render elevations in varied styles but do not exceed two-storey height and, in the main, have tiled roofs that harmonise with the historic buildings. They are well set back from the lane and do not figure prominently in views along the lane. In two of the longer plots, and to the south west of Crowmarsh Battle, there are further houses to the rear, but these avoid any close proximity to the river and the flood plain. As seen from the far bank of the Thames they present no interruption to the riverside scene other than landing stages and a pool cover.

A recent new house at Number 47, within the historic cluster, demonstrates the importance of appropriate scale and siting within the historic context. Houses replacing a former works building near the main bend are uncharacteristically dense.

#### **Connectivity and internal views**

Preston Crowmarsh connects with Benson Village via the lane and Church Road, with junctions crossing the A4074. It will be important that these junctions remain passable in the context of increasing traffic along this road.

Two footpaths also offer connection with the village but without safe provision for crossing the A4074. It is more practical at busy traffic times for pedestrians to use the lane and cross via the traffic island at the junctions. As discussed in Character Area 8, this is not as safe as desirable, and improvement would be welcome. Use of the permissive path under the A4074 at Millbrook Mead is compromised by the pipe at head height.

The hamlet connects with the river, the far bank and Wallingford via the Thames Path and the crossing over the weir and lock. Views of the hamlet add to the enjoyment of the path by local residents

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and visitors, with views down the lane inviting exploration of the hamlet and its picturesque cottages.



**View southwards down the lane past The Old Mill House**

The narrow width of the lane limits traffic and parking, and is important to the rural character of the hamlet. It has a tarmac surface, but no kerbs, and reads as a country lane with green verges, hedges and mature trees predominant. Long views down the lane are punctuated by gaps with field fencing or railings, and views out into the countryside paddocks and open spaces. The environment is peaceful. The lane is therefore seen as an amenity, and provides a popular walking route for Benson residents, particularly when winter floods inhibit use of the river paths.



**View northwards towards Ferry Cottage**

The distinctive bend in the lane helps to close views and stage progress down the lane, with historic cottages around Lower Farm providing a focal point. It also highlights the distinction of Crowmarsh Battle Farm as even more rural and

somewhat special at the far end of the historic settlement. A tall specimen chestnut tree provides a focal stop point at the turn of the lane back towards the A4074.

#### **The office use at Crowmarsh Battle Farm**

The office use is not immediately compatible with the rural and historic character of Preston Crowmarsh but has been highly beneficial in keeping the listed former farm buildings in use and in good order. The use allows continued experience of the impressive timber-framed interiors, and continued views of the barns across the fields as plain rural buildings with massive unbroken roofs. Parking is well screened by planting, and there is direct access to the A4074 without need to pass through the rest of the settlement. In these circumstances the use is beneficial to the viability of the listed buildings and benign to the character of the settlement. It is noted that any alternative residential use entailing greater subdivision of the buildings and domestication of the land around them could be of greater harm to the character of the historic farmstead.

