ASHFORD
BOROUGH
LOCAL PLAN

Conservation Area Assessment

Wittersham

Conservation Areas are defined as "areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance."

Designation introduces a general control over the demolition of unlisted buildings and provides the basis for policies designed to preserve all aspects of character or appearance that define an area's special interest.

There are 43 Conservation Areas in Ashford Borough.

WITTERSHAM CONSERVATION AREA ASSESSMENT

AREA APPRAISAL [Brief, objective description of Conservation Area - scale, location, other special characteristics]

Wittersham Conservation Area is one of the larger Conservation Areas in the designated High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Conservation Area also falls within the designated Special Landscape Area (Kent Countryside Plan and Kent Structure Plan).

The Conservation Area is based on the original nucleus of the village situated around the visually prominent village Church and also extends up to the crossroads of The Street and Poplar Road close to the Ewe and Lamb Public House. Most probably, the crossroads area was previously physically divorced from the heart of the village around the Church though 20th Century infill development has linked the two. Listed buildings, their settings and footpaths are shown on "Plan 1" attached with the appraisal.

The Conservation Area, save for the inter-war row of Council dwellings known as Addison Cottages, is devoid of 20th Century "volume build" estates. These are scattered to the north and north-east of the Conservation Area and help create a much larger settlement (See "Plan 2").

The Conservation Area has a large number of listed buildings and several sub-areas all of which have individual and distinctive character. Together these combine to make a varied and visually interesting Conservation Area in which a large variety of vernacular building types, materials and building forms are represented.

ASPECT UNDER CONSIDERATION	COMMENT
topography/physical structure and its relationship to the sites topography	The Conservation Area is not uniform in terms of topography etc. Around the crossroads area, there is a noticeable drop in levels over a short distance heading in a westerly direction. This produces some odd road cambers at the junction which adds to the Conservation Area's character. In general terms there is an appreciable dip of the whole settlement away from the aforementioned crossroads in a southerly direction. This fall can be clearly seen when looking north along The Street from the churchyard area. Buildings in the Conservation Area exhibit a strongly linear form running along both sides of the two main roads These are Poplar Road (strong east/west direction) and The Street (north/south direction). These are intersected at intervals by a large number of public footpaths which overall have a predominantly east/west orientation.
archaeological significance and potential of the area	St John the Baptist Church is understood to be of early 14 Century origin. Development in its immediate environs may have archaeological implications.

AREA APPRAISAL	COMMENT
the character and hierarchy of spaces, and townscape quality.	Many of the spaces within the Conservation Area are "private", with the degree of privacy determined by the proximity of development to the highway and the nature of boundary demarkation (e.g fence, high hedge, etc.) The spacious setting of Wittersham House is visible from The Street and together with many mature trees gives the churchyard environment close by a leafy and tranquil air. The other important spaces are at the crossroads near the Ewe and Lamb Public House. The War Memorial is a formal space with views out to the opposite side of the road and in a north-westerly direction towards the Old Forge. There are distinct patterns of development which are identified on "Plan 3" attached and which will be used elsewhere in this appraisal. These are as follows:- <u>Group A</u> A large collection of listed buildings centred around the village Church. The grouping is intimate, though two large manor houses (Wittersham House and Wittersham Court) have walled gardens, entrances and curtilage sizes as befits their historic and "social" status. See photographs on "Plan 4" <u>Group B</u> This area to the north-east of Group A is characterised by smaller dwellings which are relatively tightly clustered with only small physical setbacks from the highway. All of the dwellings on the south-west side of The Street are of 20th Century origin and the conclusion therefore must be that in the 19th Century the area most probably formed an orchard or was used for other agricultural purposes. Buildings on the opposite side of The Street are largely 18th/19th Century in origins. Nevertheless, the different eras of building combine to produce an intimate built environment. In social terms, this part of the village represents the area colonised by artisans and peasants close to the original nucleus of the village around the Church. See photographs on "Plan 5" <u>Group C</u> To the north-east of Group B, an essentially a "leafy" area of low density residential development. At one time, the two listed buildings in this Group were most probably isolated from Group B though subsequent 20th Century infilling development has effectively stitched the two areas together. Dwellings are low key and inoffensive post-war styles with a few bungalows.

AREA APPRAISAL	COMMENT
(continued)	Several post-war houses are served by tracks leading from The Street and this is the only part of the Conservation Area which has a more random character at odds with the linear style exhibited elsewhere. Perhaps the key point is that character is retained through the abundance of boundary and other mature vegetation which shields the majority of houses from view; only glimpses of roofscape can be seen. In "villagescape" terms, this grouping represents a transitional area between the crossroads and the older part of the village characterised by Groups A and B. The slight bend in The Street also occurs within this area and gives the pedestrian and motorist moving south along The Street the first available views towards the prominent church tower. See photographs on "Plan 6". <u>Group D</u> The crossroads at the junction of Poplar Road and The Street represents a natural point for development in times past. The crossroads has a distinctive character in so far as the northern side of Poplar Road is developed with 18th and 19th Century vernacular buildings while the southern side is "open" with the Memorial Gardens allowing the buildings on the northern side of the road to have open and imposing settings. The southern side of Poplar Road to the west of The Street dips towards The Old Forge and a terrace of listed cottages which are visually prominent. Opposite the village forge, a row of 20th Century houses help provide characterful roofscape and help frame the views towards the Memorial at the crossroads. See photographs on "Plan 7".
the use of distinctive and traditional building materials	The whole gamut of styles and sizes from the Georgian splendour of Wittersham House and Wittersham Court with facing brick façades and uniform sash windows to more traditional Kentish cottages can be found within the designated Conservation Area. Overall, a significant number of cottages have slate roofs, more so than in many other of the villages within the Borough. Traditional part brick, part tile hung façades (with a strong red/brown or mottled colouration) can be found together with a large number of cottages with white painted weatherboarding and either clay or peg tiles. External rendering of walls is not common, except for the inter-war local authority development named Addison Cottages. A noticeable feature is that for the smaller cottages, the roofs are steeply pitched, emphasising the traditional plan form used for the main element of the house rather than the 20th Century trend for a larger plan area spanned by a single low pitch roof. Roof design is of critical importance in any new development within or adjoining the Conservation Area and the issue generally has been taken up by the Countryside Commission via their publication in Spring 1995 of a booklet entitled "Local Attraction".

AREA APPRAISAL	COMMENT
(continued)	Most windows are painted white and aside from the Georgian sash windows that appear, most cottage windows are of the simple casement variety with larger panes of glass divided by transoms and mullions into smaller characterful panes. A few buildings have window reveals painted black which emphasises the windows in the façade, particularly where the elevation is clad in white painted weatherboarding. Boundary treatments to domestic dwellings change from each of the sub-groups within the Conservation Area. Wittersham House and Wittersham Court have imposing high red brick walls and gated entrances though elsewhere, there are relatively few brick wall boundary treatments. Any that exist tend to be less than 50 cm high. In Group B, boundaries to dwellings are demarked by a variety of treatments ranging from picket fencing (1m in height), occasional use of close boarded fencing with shrub planting as well as hedging to the rear of the footway (Addison Cottages). The dwellings in Group C have predominantly "green" boundaries with only occasional picket or other vernacular style fencing. Lastly, Group D around the crossroads is characterised by 1m high picket fencing to the rear of the footway. Overall, some picket fencing within the Conservation Area is left natural though the majority tends to be painted white.
the contribution made by green spaces, trees, hedges, or other organic elements to the character of the area	Please refer to the plan marked "Plan 8" accompanying this appraisal. For convenience, the same groupings A - D are used:- <u>Group A</u> Much of the character of this area stems from the mature trees in the orchard forming part of the overall grounds to Wittersham House which provides the greenery which adds greatly to the rural setting and village character of the churchyard group of buildings. Buildings on both sides of the road have mature trees on property boundaries separating the village from the surrounding agricultural land. <u>Group B</u> Much greenery is provided by hedging and trees at Addison Cottages, with the older buildings on the north-west side of the road not having as much vegetation. There is a potential opportunity to encourage more boundary planting between No. 24 and No. 16 The Street which would only enhance the street scene. One elderly long-standing local resident commented to Mr Mills that there used to be more boundary hedging along The Street in times past.

AREA APPRAISAL	COMMENT
(continued)	Group C This area is characterised not by the quality of its buildings but rather by the abundance of mature vegetation and hedges to the road. The vegetation masks the majority of 20th Century development in this area. Group D Hedges and mature trees on both sides of the road near The Old Forge help "frame" the view up to the crossroads and War Memorial and these need to be retained as enhancing features when entering the Conservation Area from the west. The houses on the north-eastern side of Poplar Road represent inoffensive 20th Century development and the boundary vegetation helps provide a degree of seclusion. The boundary hedging on the western side of the crossroads on the southern side of Poplar Road significantly emphasises the "rural" nature of the area Along with the mature trees in the field and sheep grazing right up to the hedge boundary with the road, this space reinforces the village's long-standing relationship with agriculture and this area must be protected and retained free from development. The formal "green" near the Memorial is a characterful amenity space which should also be retained free from development and contributes to the open setting of the listed buildings on the northern side of the crossroads such as the Ewe and Lamb Public House.
the prevailing or former uses of buildings in the area, and the influence of this on plan form and building types	The Conservation Area is approximately 95% residential. The Wine Shop at No. 4A The Street has closed down and has planning permission to revert to residential use. The other 5% of the area is made up of the following:- • Doctors' Surgery - adjacent to Wittersham C of E School (and most probably the original Schoomaster's house judging from its similar design). • The School itself. • Court Lodge Farm agricultural buildings. • The Village Hall. • The Hairdressers at No. 3 The Street. • The Ewe and Lamb Public House. • The Antique Shop close to the Ewe and Lamb Public House. • The Post Office/Store on Poplar Road near the crossroads.

AREA APPRAISAL	COMMENT
(continued)	There is only one oast house conversion located within the Conservation Area (close to the Ewe and Lamb Public House). All other residential dwellings appear to originally have been erected for such residential purposes. One former "chapel" has been converted to residential use approximately halfway along The Street. Leaving aside the "showpiece" buildings at Wittersham House and Wittersham Court, the majority of dwellings therefore have simple plan forms with steeply pitched Kent Peg tiled or slightly lower pitched slate roofs. This basic structural unit is then used as the starting point in terms of any extensions or additions to the building. Large plan form dwellings with single low pitch wide spanning roofs are rare and any new development should be in keeping with the predominant roofscape of the Conservation Area.
historical evolution	As identified above, the patterns and grouping of buildings suggest a growth of this part of the village over the last three Centuries. The starting point would have been the grouping of buildings around the Church area with such buildings having the highest social status. Further along The Street in a north-easterly direction, artisans and peasants' cottages most probably only lined the northern side of The Street with the opposite side being agricultural until 20th Century infill development enclosed The Street on both sides. Moving towards the crossroads, the area previously identified as Group C has also been the subject of 20th Century infilling development linking the main historic heart of the village with the group of buildings located on the crossroads area of The Street/Poplar Road. Wittersham as a whole has experienced substantial 20th Century growth though within the Conservation Area this is largely limited to infilling and the inter-war local authority dwellings at Addison Cottages. Outside the Conservation Area, infilling development has occurred along Swan Street and four large residential estates have been created at the margins of the settlement (Lloyds Green, Forge Meads and Forge Fields and Swan Cottages all local authority developments) and Coombelands.
the relationship of the built environment to landscape or open countryside.	The Conservation Area is largely "enclosed" by buildings along Poplar Road and The Street. There are comparatively few places within the Conservation Area within which the pedestrian/motorist has clear and unobstructed views to the surrounding countryside and topography of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

AREA APPRAISAL	COMMENT
the extent of loss, intrusion, or damage sustained by an area	The modern dwellings located within the walled garden to Wittersham Court represent inoffensive but damaging 20th Century infill development, spoiling the visual relationship that previously would have existed across The Street between Wittersham Court and Wittersham House. However, this cannot now be remedied by the Borough Council. The new house granted planning permission and erected close to the former Wine Shop on the border between Group B/C is unfortunate in terms of visually intrusive use of hardwood joinery which is at odds with the rest of the buildings in the Conservation Area.
identification of features that detract from the special character of the area and that may provide sites where change could be encouraged	None, except for opportunities to encourage more boundary planting in Group B on the northern side of The Street between No. 16 and No. 24. This would only enhance the attractive "green" vista along The Street.
the existence of any neutral areas - those that neither enhance nor detract from the character of the conservation area	The built development contained within Group C is effectively "neutral". The group of buildings is included as the transitional phase between the original heart of Wittersham Village and the grouping of buildings located around the crossroads area. The enhancement provided by this area is chiefly in terms of the abundance of mature and leafy vegetation.
the existence of any threats to the area	Potential further alterations to external doors and windows of buildings which, although unlisted, contribute enormously to village character and what is in many ways an "unspoilt" rural village. DIY or PVCU replacement joinery must be a concern where cottages are close to the footway and are therefore visually prominent in the street scene i.e those dwellings located with Groups B and D. Car parking facilities are a potential threat in Group B. The lack of domestic hardstandings for the occupiers of Addison Cottages leads to on-street parking on one side of the road in what appears to be the most constricted point along The Street. Such pressures could lead to applications for curtilage parking within the front gardens of Addison Cottages which would result in a loss of greenery. However, as The Street is a classified road, such proposals will need a planning application to the Council and could feasibly be resisted in terms of Conservation Area character. However, at the present time, the Council does not have powers to protect hedges via planning control. Alternatively, a case does exist that the cars parked in The Street at least signals a lively residential village!

OUTCOMES

Area boundary	Please refer to the plan marked "Plan 9" which shows boundary changes and need for site specific policies. In respect of demolition controls, there is need to ensure that the Conservation Area boundaries are logical in respect of identified planning units. It is essential to ensure that a residential curtilage of normal size is not bisected by an arbitrarily drawn Conservation Area boundary line. At the south-west end of the Conservation Area, boundary changes are required on the south-eastern side of The Street to incorporate the modern dwelling at No. 55, its curtilage, adjacent buildings' curtilages as well as the inclusion of the playing field of the Primary School which runs adjacent to the churchyard. The boundary to Wittersham House needs amendment as the line at present is rather bizarrely drawn and bisects the formal residential garden to the house. The line suggested on Plan 9 would overcome the worst of the inherent problems in drawing a line through this large site. Immediately adjacent to Wittersham Manor, several small cottages have the bottom halves of their gardens bisected by the present boundary line and this should be rectified as shown on Plan 9. To the south-east of the Village Hall and the old and new Rectories, the Conservation Area boundary should follow the natural boundary which exists and which provides the definitive visual marker between the village itself and the surrounding agricultural fields. The proposal is shown on Plan 9. In the crossroads area, the property known as Tyle House unfortunately has its garden excluded from the Conservation Area. This is another anomaly which should be rectified as shown on the plan.
Potential Article 4 Directions	1. Removal of Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 Article 3 Schedule 2 Part 1 Class A rights in terms of alterations and improvements to domestic dwellings via the new "local" Article 4 Direction procedure. 2. Removal of Schedule 2, Class 31 Paragraph B rights within the same Order for the demolition of boundary walls/means of enclosure via the making of a similar "local" Article 4 Direction.

Site Policies (proposals and protection)	1. The southern side of Poplar Road between the listed building on The Street and the old village forge should be retained free from residential development given the enhancement provided by vegetation and the agricultural use of land extending into the Conservation Area! See Plan 9 and site marked "A". 2. A policy seeking to protect the public open space near the Ewe and Lamb crossroads in terms of its amenity value and the enhancement it provides to the settings of the listed and vernacular buildings on the northern side of the road. See Plan 9 and site marked "B".
Potential improvement schemes	None really come to mind, though encouragement of boundary planting between No. 16 and No. 24 The Street would add to the long "green" vista which is available when looking up The Street.

Officer: Roland Mills Bsc (Hons) DipTp, MRTPI, Planning Assistant

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