

WIGSTON SPA LANE CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The Wigston Spa Lane Conservation Area was first designated in 1989. This document aims to fulfill Oadby and Wigston Borough Council's duty to 'draw up and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement' of the area as required by the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. It should be read in conjunction with the 'Development Control Guidance for the Wigston Spa Lane Conservation Area' which has been produced to accompany this appraisal.

1.2 This section to describe the public consultation which has been carried out.

2.0 What are Conservation Areas?

2.1 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'.

2.2 When a Conservation Area has been designated, it increases the Council's controls, with planning applications judged by their impact on the character and appearance of the area. Greater controls over the demolition of buildings and structures are imposed whilst the rights which owners have to do works to their properties without planning permission (known as 'permitted development rights') are reduced or can be taken away. Stricter controls are also exercised over the design of new buildings, and owners must give the Council six weeks' notice of their intention to carry out works to trees. Planning applications affecting a Conservation Area must be advertised on site and in the local press to give people the opportunity to comment.

3.0 Overview of the Area

3.1 This area of Wigston is part of the original northern core of Wigston Magna village. Only St Wistan's Church, albeit rebuilt, remains from the village's origins, but the area still contains a mixture of residential and industrial uses reflecting a later period of the village's development and is a valuable record of Wigston's working past.

3.2 The area is separated from the centre of the modern borough by Bull Head Street, a dual carriageway 'A'-road. This wide expanse of fast-moving traffic is a major physical barrier and has had a detrimental effect on the setting of the few remaining traditional buildings along the street by sweeping away their original village context.

3.3 There are a number of vacant and / or unsightly areas within the Conservation Area which currently detract from the character of the area. However, they offer scope for appropriate and well-designed development in the future.

4.0 Brief History / Archaeology

4.1 According to legend, the name Wigston originated from Crown Prince Wigstan, heir to the Kingdom of Mercia who was murdered in 849AD by Berhtwulf, the Regent King. Shortly after his death, he was declared a saint and a church has been dedicated to St Wistan or (Wystan) ever since.

4.2 Some relics from Roman times have been discovered within the modern Borough of Oadby and Wigston and evidence of an Iron Age farmstead has been found approximately 5 miles from Wigston at Enderby. Evidence of mankind's habitation of the local area from further back in time has also been found, however, the village of Wigston appears to be Anglo-Saxon in origin. Archaeological finds dated to c550AD trace mankind's habitation of the Wigston area to at least the C6. These discoveries of Anglo-Saxon invaders include human bones, smashed skulls, a broken sword, pieces of armour and jewellery.

4.3 At the centre of modern Wigston are 'The Lanes' which may well have been the site of the original Anglo-Saxon settlement until it was abandoned when the Vikings invaded towards the end of the C9. Two settlements became established with two churches - eventually becoming known as the Wigston Magna District of Two Steeples in 1529.

4.4 The Anglo-Saxon community was centred around St Wistan's Church and the Viking community centred around All Saints' Church. The Anglo-Saxon settlement grew along Bull Head Street. Eventually the two settlements amalgamated forming the rectangular village centre bounded by Moat Street, Bull Head Street, Bell Street and Long Street.

4.5 Between 1100 and 1570 especially, a significant source of income for Wigstonians, was the cult which arose from the legend of St Wistan. The cult's followers visited the village and St Wistan's would have been a centre point of the cult's affairs. This continued until King Henry VIII made certain types of homage to saints illegal and brought about the end of St Wistan's cult, 700 years after it began.

4.6 Because of the suppression of shrines in the C16, after 1547 divine services were not conducted in a regular manner at St Wistan's Church which fell into disrepair and was partially demolished. Religious services did not resume fully until 1877 when the church became known as St Wolstan's. During this time it was used as a school and was also rented out to non-conformist Congregationalists. It was rededicated to St Wistan in 1960.

4.7 The Spa Lane area was originally populated by a farming community, however, as the population increased, communications and markets increased too. In the C19 canal and railway developments brought other people to live in what had been a predominately agricultural society. Roads were improved and as they developed, farming practices changed. The open communal field methods of subsistence farming were brought to an end by The Wigston Enclosure Act which was passed in 1764 and field enclosures were completed in 1766.

4.8 With enclosure, smallholders could not afford to buy land and these part-time subsistence farmers became almost non-existent. Peasant farmers became full-time framework knitters and altered their homes accordingly by inserting the long windows needed to allow as much light in as possible. However, with increased mechanisation

and the establishment of the many hosiery factories that characterised Wigston throughout the C19 and early C20, the framework knitting society eventually perished too.

4.9 Although the industrialisation of the C19 saw dramatic changes to the former 'village' that had formed around the Church of St Wistan, the 'progress' of the C20 has been the cause of the greatest changes to the area. Road widening schemes and the development of commercial garages have swept away many historic properties and altered the street pattern of the area.

5.0 Setting

5.1 Wigston lies approximately 4 miles south southeast of Leicester whose southeast edge, it adjoins. It is almost indistinct as a settlement in its own right and only small areas of open land, mostly parks, remain to separate it from Leicester to the north.

5.2 To the south and west, Wigston's outer limits are defined by the railway line, whilst the eastern side is mostly made up of more recent housing developments. The modern centre of Wigston is focussed around The Lanes - a remnant of the old Medieval field system.

5.3 Approaching Wigston from the east, the open fields with their scattered farms provide an indication of the how Wigston would have appeared before it became a suburb of Leicester. The C20 Meadows Estate, however, now shrouds the northern core of the village.

5.4 Mowsley End once defined the end of the inhabited village and a track would have led across marshy pasture towards Great Glen. A bridle track and footpath would also have led north from St Wistan's Church towards the village of Oadby across open uninhabited countryside. The sloping ground near St Wistan's Church was known as The Bank and was the central meeting point of the three Medieval field boundaries.

6.0 Townscape Analysis

Glebe Close

6.1 Glebe Close is currently outside the Conservation Area, but is a reminder of the former village. It gains its name from Glebe land which was land within Medieval open fields that was gifted to the church. Today Glebe Close contains an assortment of houses including Nos. 14-18, a terrace of C19 2 storey houses which sit at an angle to the street along the original street alignment. No.18 is built on a larger scale than the others, but all were presumably red brick built with slate roofs, although three have been rendered and two have replacement concrete tile roofs.

Bull Head Street (east side)

6.2 Bull Head Street was once a village street, one of the four that formed the rectangular village centre. It is now a dual carriageway and a major 'A' road linking Leicester to Wigston. Looking south along the street, the fire station aerial is very

prominent and forms more of a landmark than the original focal point of this part of the village - St Wistan's Church.

6.3 The present appearance of the Church of St Wistan owes much to its C19 restoration, but its stone construction dates back to the late C13 and beginning of the C14. It is almost entirely obscured from view behind the dense group of trees growing in its overgrown churchyard, with only its steeple announcing the building's location. The churchyard is bounded by a low stone wall and is accessed through a gateway off Church Nook. It is also currently outside the Conservation Area, but is integral to the history and development of Wigston.

6.4 St Wolstan's House on the other side of the Church Nook junction is the former vicarage of St Wistan's Church. Its name comes from when regular services resumed at the church in 1877 and it became known as the Church of St Wolstan. The vicarage is a substantial mid-C19 2 storey house of red brick with stone detailing and a slate roof. It is a Significant Local Building and sits within its grounds bounded by a red brick wall behind which are a scattering of trees. Its large chimney stacks are a decorative skyline feature, but it is also outside the Conservation Area.

6.5 No. 2 is a 2-storey, much altered, C20 building which is adjacent to the site of the now sadly demolished Queens Head Public House, to the south. It was demolished after a fire which at least partially gutted the building. An establishment bearing The Queens Head name had been operating from this location since at least 1846.

6.6 Crossing over the narrow footpath access to the housing estate behind Bull Head Street, is a small open green space adjacent to Nos. 20-22 Bull Head Street. These appear to have formerly been three properties, two of which have now been combined. They are the first properties within the existing boundary of the Conservation Area and are of 3 storeys with a slate roof and three chimney-stacks. They are probably of brick construction, but have been rendered with a banding detail and are Significant Local Buildings.

6.7 There is then an unattractive vacant garage site which is temporarily fenced off with utilitarian wire and steel fencing. No. 36, Spowtewell Cottage, is a Significant Local Building of 2 storeys with rendered walls and a slate roof. It has replacement casement windows and decorative shutters and sits on the back of the footpath. The cottage's name is a reference to when Bull Head Street was Spowtewell Street. It is reputedly the oldest existing house in Wigston, dating back to 1580.

6.8 Immediately adjacent to No. 36 is the large industrial scale single storey Kwik-Fit garage / workshop and its tarmac parking area. The building has banded brickwork and a pyramidal roof and presents a blank façade to the street.

6.9 The Kings Centre is the former Victorian / 1920s Ladies Pride (hosiery) Factory which was converted into a community centre in 2001 and is a Significant Local Building. It is a large brick built complex of buildings which occupies a site bounded by Bull Head Street, Mowsley End and Spa Lane. It has an art-deco tiled feature entrance on its main Bull Head Street elevation which enlivens the streetscape.

6.10 On the southern side of the junction with Spa Lane is the Ford dealership garage site. The tarmac forecourt is necessarily packed with cars and the proliferation of signage that is part and parcel of such franchises. It forms an unfortunate contrast with the attractive buildings to the south, Nos. 72-76 Bull Head Street.

6.11 Nos. 72-76 form a short C19 terrace of red brick with a slate roof. All three properties have replacement windows and doors and the chimneystack to No. 76 has been truncated. However, they are an important remnant of the village's former character.

6.12 No. 78 is an early-mid C20 detached 2 storey dwelling which sits back from the street behind a small garden. No.80, The Elms is dated 1905 by a plaque on its front elevation. It is a red brick built 2 storey double-fronted house with a tiled roof and two gable stacks. It too sits back from the street behind a small garden.

Spa Lane (north side)

6.13 Beginning at the junction with Bull Head Street, Nos. 2-4 are a row of framework knitting workshops. Nos. 2 & 2A date from the mid-C19 and have rendered ground floors with brick at first floor. No. 4, Guthspa Works, is a Significant Local Building and dates from the late C18 / early C19. It was a knitting shop and still retains the long windows at first floor level that indicate its origins although the roof and ground floor windows at least have been modified.

6.14 Stepped back from Nos. 2-4 are the rear units of the Kings Centre which are all of red brick of varying heights between 1 and 2 storeys. A curved wall then leads the eye towards the other leg of this side of Spa Lane, to No. 6 Spa Lane, another Significant Local Building.

6.15 No. 6 is a mid C19 knitting works which although much altered, still retains its characteristic long windows at both ground and first floor level. It is rendered with a concrete tiled roof. Adjacent to the east is No. 6A, a much altered 2 storey double-fronted C19 house of red brick and concrete tiled roof. Both properties sit hard on the back of the footway.

6.16 Continuing east, adjacent to No. 6A are two vacant sites, the western one bounded by a low brick wall, the eastern one by a steel and wire fence. These open sites contribute nothing to the streetscape and allow views of the unattractive light industrial buildings to the rear of Nos. 6 & 6A.

6.17 No. 20 is a 2 storey C19 house which looks to be of two main build periods. This Significant Local Building sits gable end on to the street behind a garden fronted by a low hedge. The part which faces the street is rendered with a concrete tiled roof whilst the rear part is of brick with a slate roof. It forms an attractive group with the other surviving traditional properties across the other side of the road.

Spa Lane (south side)

6.18 Looking west down the street, the view is blocked by the rear units of The Kings Centre and the curved wall at the junction of Mowsley End and Spa Lane. The large

trees in Peace Memorial Park can just be seen above the good roofscape of The Kings Centre buildings.

6.19 No. 19, Kimberley House, is a C19 2 storey house of red brick with a slate roof. It retains its western boundary wall, but has an open area of tarmac to the front. Mature trees in the rear garden are visible behind the house and these together with the tree on the corner of Shearsby Close and those in the garden of No. 9 Spa Lane create a green enclave in this predominately industrial setting.

6.20 Crossing over the junction with Shearsby Close and moving past the aforementioned tree which stands in a small grassed area, the boundary of Nos. 7-9 Spa Lane is reached. The Grade II Listed building was divided into two dwellings in 1941, but is probably very early C18 in origin with the eastern wing added c1740. The 2 storey east part stands gable end onto the street with its garden to the east, whilst the main house, which has been remodelled, sits parallel to and slightly back from the street. The 2.5 storey main house is of red brick with a rendered eastern elevation and a Welsh slate roof and was once occupied as a farmhouse.

6.21 Adjacent to this attractive building is the Ford dealership garage site. The unattractive forecourt and access to the workshops form a stark contrast with the almost rural feel imparted by the traditional group of buildings and trees further east along the street. The workshop building is a large shed-type structure and is extremely utilitarian in appearance.

Mowsley End (north side)

6.22 This side of the road contains the car parking area for the Kwik Fit garage and an open gravelled area in front of a mineral sheet roofed store. None of these buildings or spaces make a particularly positive contribution to the character of the area.

Mowsley End (south side)

6.23 The Kings Centre takes up the entire length of this side of Mowsley End. The building's northern elevation comprises the flank wall of the front (street) range and then a long single storey range with large windows. It sits tight on the back of the footpath.

7.0 Key Characteristics

7.1 *Scale* - Most domestic properties are of a modest 2 storeys, except the 3 storey Nos. 20-22 Bull Head Street and grander properties such as St Wolstan's House, which although only of 2 storeys, has the scale of 3. The industrial buildings are generally of 2 storeys, but appear larger because of their greater floor to ceiling heights.

7.2 *Materials* - Generally a local red brick is used for both industrial and domestic buildings; this has in some cases, been rendered over at a later date. Roofs were probably originally all of Swithland or Welsh slate, but some have now been replaced with concrete tiles.

7.3 *Detailing* - The industrial buildings are characterised by their large windows with the long windows denoting framework knitting, a particular feature of the earliest

'industrial' buildings which are usually adapted residential properties. Chimneys add interest to the roofscape of the residential properties most of which have unfortunately lost their original windows, although the window heads often remain.

7.4 *Trees and open space* - The key tree group is around St Wistan's Church, although actually slightly overgrown. Outside the Conservation Area, but important to views from within, are the row of trees at the rear of The Queens' Head PH site. The garden of Nos. 7&9 Spa Lane adds welcome greenery to the streetscene.

7.5 *Boundaries* - There is no distinct style of boundary treatment, and more often than not, the buildings sit on the back of the footpath. Only the Church and St Wolstan's House have significant boundary walls.

7.6 *Views* within the Conservation Area are short due to the small area within its boundary and the relatively confined character of the streets. The key long view is over the rooftops of the Kings Centre and towards the trees of Peace Memorial Park in the centre of Wigston.

7.7 *Character* - The area's prevailing character is light industrial. However, its character has developed and changed significantly over the years. Spa Lane retains elements of the 'village street' it once was with the sole remaining farmhouse in the area. The C19 framework knitting industry introduced the dominant light-industrial buildings into the street scene, but later C20 industrial and commercial development has eroded this mixed character and left unsightly vacant areas within the Conservation Area.

8.0 Proposed Changes to the Conservation Area Boundary

Additions

8.1 The stretch of Bull Head Street north of No.20 Bull Head Street up to and including the beginning of Glebe Close (Nos. 14-18) encompasses a number of interesting buildings which arguably are as valuable a record of Wigston's past as the designated Conservation Area and it is proposed to include these within the Conservation Area boundary.

8.2 St Wolstan's House is the former vicarage to St Wistan's Church and its name is a reminder of the church's history. St Wistan's Church itself is fundamental to the origins of Wigston, and the C19 terrace in Glebe Close is another remnant of the 'village' of Wigston.

Removals

8.3 It is proposed to remove No.2 Shearsby Close, a chalet style bungalow, as it lacks the character of the traditional properties in the area and contributes little to the setting of the Conservation Area. The boundary can be modified to exclude it without compromising any other parts of the Conservation Area.

9.0 Enhancement Opportunities

9.1 The vacant land along Spa Lane and Bull Head Street forms unsightly areas which detract from the Conservation Area's appearance. It is important that any proposed development of these vacant areas should be of a high quality both in terms of design and materials in order to ensure that the Conservation Area is visually enhanced by the scheme. For further details please refer to the 'Wigston Spa Lane: Development Control Guidance'.

9.2 The unattractive car parking area in front of the Kwik Fit garage and the adjacent open gravelled space erode the character of the Conservation Area. Appropriate screening or better landscaping of these areas would improve the setting of the Conservation Area.

9.3 Similarly the Ford dealership garage on Spa Lane has a negative visual impact upon the Conservation Area. Relocation to a more appropriate location would, aesthetically be the most satisfactory solution, but probably most unlikely in the short term. However, a good landscaping scheme may be able to 'soften' the impact of all the vehicles, the utilitarian buildings and the proliferation of signage.

9.4 The churchyard of St Wistan's Church is very overgrown, almost obscuring the church from view. The churchyard should be reclaimed, with much of the vegetation cleared away, leaving key shrubs and trees. This would enable the churchyard to be appropriately used and would create a green space in this urban industrial area.

9.5 The Borough Council may seek to make 'Article 4 Directions' to retain traditional detailing on the exterior of non-listed buildings within the Conservation Area, where such details have not already been lost.

9.6 'Shire Historic Buildings Grants' and specialist technical advice are available from Leicestershire County Council for essential repairs or the restoration of original architectural features to certain historic buildings and structures. Applications are currently assessed against the following criteria:

- ownership and property type
- status of building
- types of repairs
- community benefit

Contact: The Conservation Officer, Heritage Resources Team,
Tel: 0116 2657082, www.leics.gov.uk/shire

10. References

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Garner J.T. 'Prince Wigstan's Legacy', Two-Steeple Press: Wigston, 2004

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