

Stewkley Village Neighbourhood Plan Conservation and Heritage Working Group Report

Introduction

The Conservation and Heritage Working Group comprises Mr John Sheldon (chair) and Mrs Juliet Murray, who share 85 years of Stewkley residency between them. They are both amateur local historians and have published books related to Stewkley village history. They have both been members of Stewkley Parochial Church Council and occupied the offices of Churchwarden and PCC Secretary, and remain active in many village organisations. They have active membership between them of the following heritage organisations:

National Trust

NADFAS

Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings

Bucks Archaeological Society

English Heritage

Stewkley Local History Group

Buckinghamshire Military Museum Trust.

Topics

The Group considered the following topics of interest (see appendices):

Stewkley Conservation Area

RCHM Designated Listed Buildings

Other Important Village Buildings of Historic Interest.

Heritage Sites

Streetscape

Non-recreational Green Spaces

Village Vistas.

These topics were approached with the aim of addressing the following two main objectives:

1. Sites, features and areas of historic and cultural heritage importance are to be protected, enhanced and managed.
2. The character and appearance of townscape and landscape be protected, enhanced and managed to maintain their distinctiveness and special qualities.

History of Stewkley

Stewkley is thought to be a Saxon village and is referred to in the Domesday Book as *Steuclai*, possibly derived from the Anglo-Saxon for “stiff clay”, this being the local subsoil, with limestone the underlying geological strata, or alternatively a “clearing with stumps.”

Stewkley is a two-mile long High Street village with no significant depth of development to either side, which has grown up along a ridge of high ground forming the watershed between the Ouse and the Thames river systems. It lies about 500 feet above sea level and the parish occupies 3,982 acres. There is speculation that two Roman roads from Alconbury to Dorchester-on-Thames and Leckhampstead to Tring traversed the parish and intersected in the vicinity of the Norman parish church.

Three medieval Manors developed along the High Street, perhaps explaining the linear village form. The land was farmed on the open field system with the ridge and furrow landscape still visible today. Parliamentary Enclosure was concluded relatively late in Stewkley in 1814. An ancient drovers’ way, part of a livestock track from Wales to London via Banbury market, passes through Stewkley from west to east and along Ivy Lane in the centre, although its exit from the High Street to the west has sadly been recently closed off by residential building.

The late Norman church of St Michael and All Angels was built in the mid 12thC and today it remains at the heart of the village, little altered, as a remarkable and nationally renowned example of

Romanesque ecclesiastical architecture. Sir Nicholas Pevsner (1994) *The Buildings of England: Buckinghamshire*, described it as “....possibly the finest example of original Norman ecclesiastical architecture in England.”

An Anglican chapel-of-ease, now a private home, was created in Dunton Road in the 19thC, to save the legs of South End worshippers the long walk to St Michael’s.

Non-Conformism played a leading role in village religious life. There were early Methodist chapels at the present 57 High Street North and in Orchard Lane. More spacious Primitive and Wesleyan Methodist chapels later replaced them on High Street South and in Chapel Square, the latter closing in 1987 and being demolished, although its contemporary chapel school room opposite, survives as a private home.

Employment in Stewkley has traditionally been mainly agricultural. Local brickworks, redundant since the 1940s, fed on the underlying clay, and supplied the distinctive red/orange bricks and tiles from which many older village buildings are constructed. Lacemaking and straw plaiting were popular domestic industries in the 19thC. At the turn of the 20thC there were still ten public houses in Stewkley, with only one remaining in business in 2017.

Anti Airport Campaign

In the 1960s, Government transport planners appointed the Roskill Commission to search for the location of a third London airport. By 1970 the area around Cublington had been identified as the preferred choice. Stewkley found itself in the middle of the chosen site and the entire village would have been razed to the ground, but for the ferocious efforts of the entire community headed by WARA (the Wing Airport Resistance Association.) An unswerving two year battle commenced for the survival of homes, livelihoods and St Michael’s Church, the threat to which became the central theme to the campaign. Eventually on 26 April 1971, success was won when the Government announced that the new airport would be built instead at Foulness on the Essex coast. Stewkley was saved....the third London airport remains unbuilt even today.

Listed Buildings

The Royal Commission for Historic Monuments’ designated List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest was compiled for Stewkley in the early 1980s, and records one Grade I and thirty-three Grade II Listed Buildings in the parish, twenty-eight of which lie in the Conservation Area itself. Today, all but six of the Listed Buildings are residential homes (see appendix.) The objective of Listed Buildings is to ensure their protection and the local authority has a special statutory duty regarding the desirability of preserving any listed building or its setting.

All of Stewkley’s thirty-four listed buildings make an important contribution to the special interest of the village, but none more so than the Grade I Listed parish church of St Michael and All Angels whose unique building and the peaceful, open, green space of its churchyard together form the most important heritage asset at the centre of both the Conservation Area and the community. St Michael’s Church, its churchyard and the adjoining Village War Memorial constitute one of twelve “Identity Areas” of special interest and townscape character which were identified in the Stewkley Conservation Area document.

Other Important Village Buildings and Heritage Sites

Forty-six further buildings have been identified (see appendix) which by virtue of their age, scale, former function or architecture, contribute significantly to the character of the area. Additionally, eight important Heritage Sites have been identified as Heritage Assets (see appendix) for example the site of Littlecote Medieval Village and the Moated Earthworks at Tythe House. We believe these all to be worthy of conservation and recognition.

Buildings and Features of Historic Social or Commercial Interest

In addition to listed and other important heritage buildings, there are many others which possess architectural features that indicate a different former use, such as public houses, bakeries, shop premises, barns and smithies which should be recognised and appreciated because they are important to the social history of Stewkley. For example, one larger ground floor window in a row of six cottages indicates that the cottage with the larger window was a village shop, the goods on sale being displayed in that window. A large, elaborate bracket projecting from a house and from which an electric lantern now hangs, indicates that the building was formerly an inn or public house. The painted sign of the inn's name or emblem would previously have hung from the bracket. Historically, a common feature of the village, often tucked away in backyards, are wells and pumps, the only source of water before mains water was supplied to Stewkley in 1941. Two of the parish pumps still exist. Reflecting the agricultural roots of the parish, a number of former barns have been converted to other uses, some still retaining architectural features indicating their earlier use. These differing features, some small and seemingly insignificant, all add interest to Stewkley's streetscape, as well as the buildings themselves. Their retention should be encouraged as part of the village heritage.

Stewkley Conservation Area

Stewkley Conservation Area was designated by Aylesbury Vale District Council on 24 January 2001 after consultation with a small number of villagers and county authorities. It describes and illustrates the features and characteristics of the village's historic core which justify its designation as a Conservation Area by identifying twelve contiguous "identity areas" or nodes of development along Stewkley's linear street pattern. Collectively they form the cohesive townscape identity special to Stewkley. Thus it is the special architectural and historic interest of the whole area, rather than the merits of individual buildings, which are important in defining the Conservation Area. The aim of the Plan is to statutorily protect the village's historic core.

The Conservation Area highlights vistas and views through the village, and from the village to open countryside, which merit protection, (see appendix for examples), although some have been lost to inappropriate development since 2001. A number of particular arrangements of buildings, together with brick walls and railings throughout the village, form strong building lines and boundaries, which add character and reinforce the streetscape in what remains a predominately rural environment. We believe that the special character of Stewkley lies in the current density and layout of buildings, and the relationship between the High Street and the buildings and streetscape through which it passes. Good design and landscaping in any new development is key to preserving and enhancing the built environment. We believe that any new development in Stewkley must be controlled within the Conservation Area, and beyond its limits where it is likely to affect its setting, so that the existing density and character of the built environment is protected and maintained.

Implications of Vale of Aylesbury Draft Local Plan, Summer 2016

The draft Aylesbury Vale Local Plan makes particular reference to Heritage Assets, Conservation Areas, areas of historic and archaeological interest and the design of new development (pages 153-158) and makes specific policy recommendations on Heritage Assets (BE1, page 155), and Design of New Development (BE2, page 157.) The C&H Group endorses all of these. Most specifically, *The historic environment is an asset of great cultural, social, economic and environmental value. It contributes significantly to our quality of life and to the character of the district, representing a non-renewable resource that once lost is gone forever.*

and

Good design and landscaping as part of a new development is a key priority in preserving and enhancing the quality of the built environment in Aylesbury Vale. A design-led approach is required

that respects the vernacular character of towns and villages...and the existing character and visual amenity of rural landscapes and buildings.

Six sites for housing development in Stewkley are mentioned in the draft plan. Four of these: land at 3 Wing Road, Sycamore Close, Bowls Farm (High Street North) and Griffin Field are all considered unsuitable for development in the draft plan. Two are considered suitable in the draft plan: land at Cricketers' Meadow (High Street North), recently granted permission for 14 houses on planning appeal, and land off Soulbury Road (planning permission recently granted for 67 houses.)

Consultation, and Conservation and Heritage Policies.

Three consultations took place with villagers: at a Village Hall public consultation on 16 May 2016, at the Recreation Ground village barbecue on 23 July 2016, and at a public consultation in St Michael's School on 11 March 2017. An extraordinary meeting of Stewkley Local History Group took place on 25 April 2016 to discuss and agree the conservation and heritage approach. The Group team has met and carried out on-site surveys in the village, to gather information and formulate views on a number of occasions in 2016 and 2017.

During the public meeting on 16 May 2016, 23 written comments were left, and the following is a summary of those written comments:

- 10 respondents expressed the need to protect the Conservation Area and control future development within both the CA and its adjoining borders.
- 8 respondents highlighted the protection of views of countryside visible from within the village, maintaining the peace of the predominantly rural environment, and enhancing key heritage areas.
- 5 people highlighted historic assets and important buildings not to be damaged by inappropriate building or alterations, and wrote objections with regard to proposed building of St Michael's Chapter House next to the most precious heritage asset in the village.
- Countryside is as important as the buildings and should be protected.
- Protect present density and character of built environment.

Following the St Michael's School public consultation on 11 March 2017, there were 39 written respondents to the Conservation and Heritage draft policies from Stewkley villagers.

	In Favour	Against
Policy 1	30	8
Policy 2	18	1
Policy 3	15	-
Policy 4	16	-
Policy 5	17	-

In total 37 comment forms were returned from villagers. 2 separate forms incorporated the names of 2 people with the same comments living at the same addresses and have therefore been included as 4 respondents, making a total of 39 respondents.

4 comment forms, agreeing with the Conservation and Heritage draft policies did not enter specific policy numbers, and so it has been assumed they agreed with all 5 policies.

There was a large majority of respondents in favour of the Conservation and Heritage Policies, most particularly Policy 1, in favour of maintaining key open spaces.

16 respondents who supported Policy 1 highlighted the value of the key open space around St Michael's Church and its consequent loss should the proposed Chapter House be built. On the other hand, 6 of the respondents who opposed Policy 1, limited their comments to supporting their proposed Chapter House without putting the project into the wider and pertinent context of the village's key open spaces.

1 respondent opposed the proposed Chapter House building whilst also voting against Policy 1, whilst 1 potential building site landowner opposed Policy 1.

There were some useful and constructive responses. Amongst them, respondents drew attention to green open spaces having been eroded and lost over the years since the Conservation Area was designated in 2001, and the loss of precious open spaces and views, fundamental to keeping Stewkley as an enjoyable country community for the benefit of future generations. Respondents drew attention to threatened building in St Michael's churchyard, and the detrimental effect this would have on the unspoilt north elevation of the church. A respondent also commented on open spaces promoting general well-being and quality of life, and helping define the structure, form and character of the village. A respondent drew explicit attention to RCD.16 in the Conservation Area document: "A site should not be developed if it would result in the loss of an open area across which uninterrupted views into or out of the Conservation Area are available, or which contributes significantly to the setting of individual or groups of buildings."

Some respondents drew attention to the unavailability at the time of the Key Open Spaces Map and also the Village Design Statement. The former has now been provided to the Parish Council and the latter has been included in the wording of Policy Statement 3.

Some respondents made suggestions to improve the draft policy wording of Policy 1, including questioning the use of the word "integrity"; by this we mean the wholeness, soundness and virtue of key open spaces. Consultation with AVDC suggested other changes to strengthen the policies, which have now been agreed as follows

Policy Statement 1 – Maintaining Key Open Spaces

Proposals within key open spaces listed on the Key Open Spaces Map will not be supported.

Proposals adjacent to these key open spaces must demonstrate how their proposal has been integrated into the open space and has included measures for enhancement of the open space.

Policy Statement 2: Maintain the connection between the village and its surrounding countryside.

Proposals to provide and improve access to existing public open space through a well maintained network of footpaths, cycle paths and bridleways and the improvement and enhancement of public rights of way will be supported.

Any proposals will only be permitted provided it does not negatively impact on the distinctive views of the surrounding countryside from public vantage points. Those important distinctive views have been defined on the Important Views and Footpaths Map

Policy Statement 3: The Character of Housing (previously Policy Statements 3 and 4)

All new development proposals and modifications to existing buildings will be expected to comply with the design principles as set out in the AVDC Design Advice and Guidance (including Building Materials, Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, Local Distinctiveness, New Buildings in the

Countryside, New Houses in Towns and Villages, and Residential Extensions).

Specifically, in the Stewkley Parish, the following stipulations should be incorporated into the design of any new dwelling, or extension:

- ***Roof – Real slate tiles or real clay plain red tiles;***
- ***Walls – ‘Stewkley red’ brick or equivalent or render (sand and lime or similar);***
- ***Height – Any new building built within the Parish should be no more than 2 storeys;***
- ***Street frontages – Street frontages should be ‘in keeping’ with adjacent properties;***
- ***New development should seek to preserve the architectural features of non-listed heritage buildings, such as those set out in Appendix 2, which are important to the environmental and social history of Stewkley. These may include historic features such as original wooden doors, windows, and commercial signs, which may indicate a former use.***
- ***Sustainable Homes – development should meet the technical requirements of the [Code for Sustainable Homes](#) Level 5.***

Policy Statement 4: Protecting Stewkley’s Heritage Assets. (previously Policy Statement 5)

Stewkley’s Designated and Non-Designated Heritage Assets (as set out in the Asset List Appendix) are vital to the character and appearance of the village, its community and culture. It is therefore essential that these assets are protected.

All development proposals which affect Designated or Non-Designated Heritage Assets must be accompanied by a proportionate Heritage Impact Assessment, which considers the significance of the asset and the impact of the proposed development.

Under the policy terms of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), any residential, commercial and non-residential development proposal which results in the loss of significance of a heritage asset, for example the Stewkley Conservation Area, must have that harm weighed in planning balance against any community benefits of the proposal in reaching a decision, If there is no apparent community benefit, then the proposal should be refused.

In summary, the responses to the latest consultation exercise on 11 March 2017 endorse the Conservation and Heritage working group’s draft policies, as amended in this document, that aim to protect and enhance the designated Stewkley Conservation Area and other features of historical and cultural value, including key open spaces, for the benefit of future generations.

Relevant Planning Policies

- National Planning Policy Framework (Section 12: *Conserving and enhancing the historic environment.*)
- Historic England: *Conservation Principles-Policies and Guidance for the Sustainable Management of the Historic Environment.*
- Buckinghamshire County Council: *Historic Environment Record.*
- Aylesbury Vale District Council: *Stewkley Conservation Area, 24 January 2001.*
- Aylesbury Vale District Council: *Conservation Areas Supplementary Planning Document, March 2011.*
- Aylesbury Vale District Council: *District Wide Strategy Conservation Area Management Plan, May 2009.*
- Aylesbury Vale District Council: *Planning Policies: GP 24,35,38,39,40,51,53,59 and 60.*

These policies support the issues and recommendations in this report.

Recommendations, Issues and Management Conclusions

Issues:

- It appears difficult to enforce planning law and special measures for the Conservation Area. e.g. preventing the location of satellite dishes on buildings facing a road, and unauthorised treework.
- Overhead wires and cables create a sense of clutter and detract from the visual quality of the Conservation Area and elsewhere in the village.
- Lack of integration of signage and street furniture.
- Erosion of grass verges and open spaces by vehicle parking.

Recommendations:

- Maintain the integrity of key open spaces within the village, in particular St Michael's Churchyard and Chapel Square/ Fishweir. The setting of St Michael's Church is fundamental to the identity and character of the village as a whole.
- Maintain the connection between the village and its surrounding countryside gained through vistas and views within the village out into the surrounding landscape and also from outside the village looking in.
- Efforts could be made to see if overhead cables, especially in Chapel Square and the frontage of St Michael's Church, could be buried underground and the poles removed.
- A street furniture audit could be undertaken with a view to redesigning or colouring lighting and other columns and signs to reflect and visually integrate the historic environment.
- Deter parking on verges and green spaces by use of discrete low bollards.
- Reinstate and repair boundaries such as railings and brick walls which are an important feature of Stewkley's townscape.
- Encourage the retention of historic features (especially windows and doors) where they survive on buildings, especially important unlisted ones which are unprotected.
- Encourage the restriction of extensions to smaller properties within the Conservation Area to maintain and protect the traditional integrity of the historic built environment.
- For appropriate new development, use materials, with particular emphasis on brick, of appropriate colour and texture to visually integrate with the existing traditional Stewkley brick, seen in local buildings and village walls.
- Ensure that acceptable new development respects and reflects the key characteristics of the historic built environment of Stewkley in its form, layout, massing, materials and design.

Conclusions:

The Stewkley Conservation Area, the CA, (referred to previously) is characterised by its linear nature such that the majority of historic or traditionally-built properties are situated at the front of their plots and have a strong relationship with their road frontages. Relatively speaking, there is very little development in depth, and where it does occur, as at Tythe Gardens, it is of 20thC date. It is thus important that any proposed development within or adjacent to the CA, does not extend beyond the existing line of development associated with the area.

We believe that the key heritage considerations in deciding any development proposals within and adjacent to the Stewkley Conservation Area are:

- The impact of the proposal on the setting of heritage assets in the vicinity, including listed buildings, heritage sites and the Conservation Area itself.

- That such development, inside, immediately adjacent to, or within the setting of the CA, can greatly influence the character and appearance of the area, for example by intruding into open countryside, despoiling important vistas in and out of the village, or creating an irregular development pattern harmful to the linear nature of the village (than already exists.)
- Development that does not reflect the traditional form, layout and scale of buildings within the CA must be resisted.
- In the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) , any development proposal which results in a loss of significance of the heritage asset, i.e. the Stewkley Conservation Area, must have that harm weighed in planning balance against any **community** benefits of the proposal in reaching a decision. If there is no obvious and proven **community** benefit, then it should be refused.
- Measured in the guidelines of Policy GP53 (Development in Conservation Areas) , which besides design requirements (see also GP35), reflects duties on the local authority imposed by section 72(1) of the 1990 Act, it is a requirement that special attention must be paid to the desirability of preserving and enhancing the character of a conservation area. The Parish Council and District Council must observe that development proposals must not be permitted where they cause harm to the character of the Stewkley Conservation Area and its constituent parts.

The Conservation and Heritage Team recommends that the Conservation and Heritage Working Group Report dated 11/05/2017 (updated 22/01/2019 is adopted as part of the Stewkley Village Neighbourhood Plan.

John Sheldon and Juliet Murray
Conservation and Heritage Team
22/01/2019