

Wem Conservation Area Appraisal

Report PS 51/03
Annex A (2) Draft

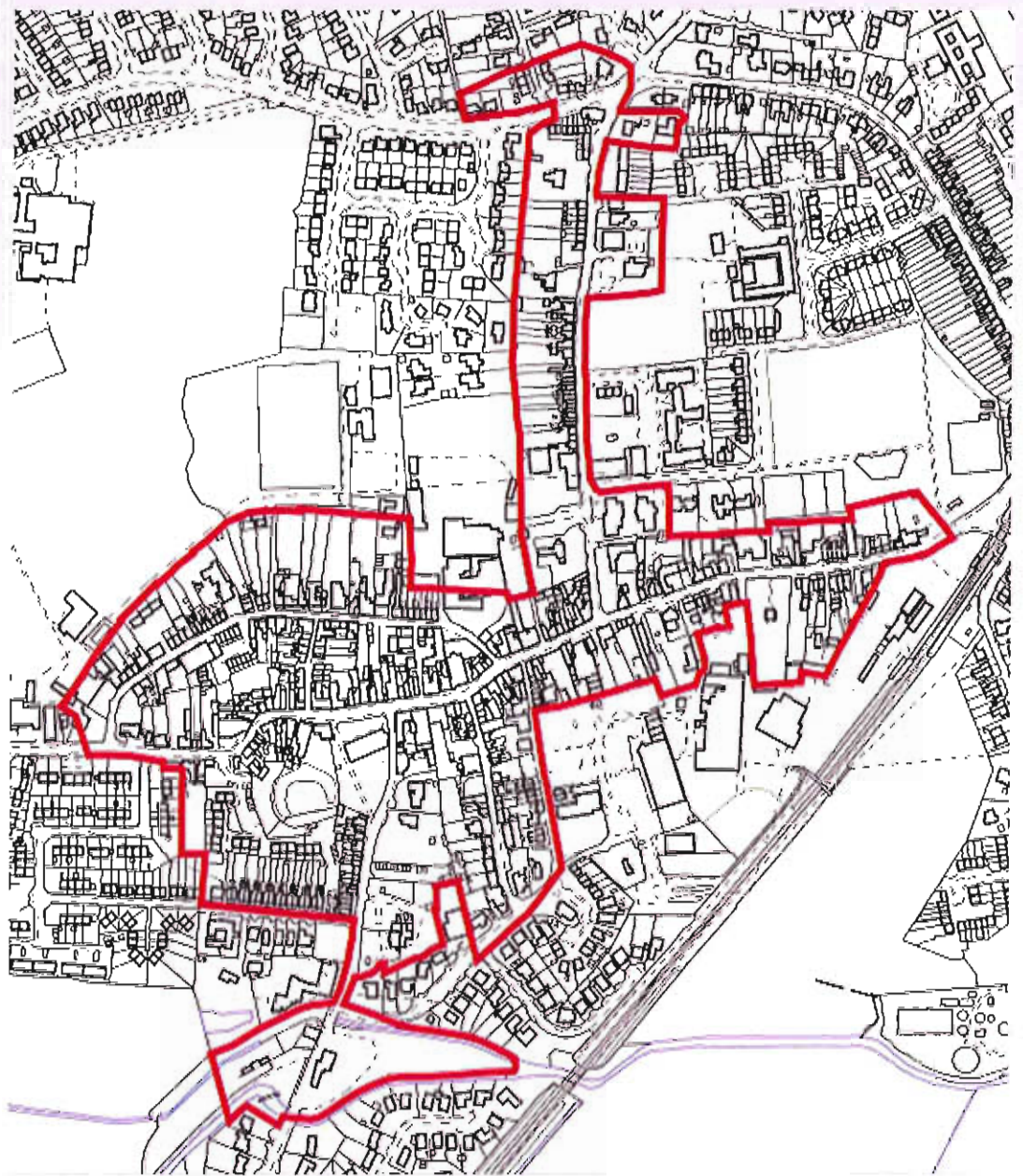


This appraisal is essential reading for developers, architects and builders wishing to build in Wem. It covers:

- Location
- Development
- Land Use
- Archaeology
- Contribution of Buildings
- Key Unlisted Buildings
- Spaces
- Building Materials
- Local Distinctiveness
- Green spaces
- Setting in the Landscape
- Loss, Intrusion or Damage
- Neutral Areas



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The red line is the boundary of the Conservation Area. It is based on the mediaeval town boundaries and takes in most of the historical core of the town. Nevertheless, areas outside the boundary can still be historically significant, and any proposals should be drawn up with reference to this appraisal.

Introduction to the appraisal

The Wem Conservation Area was designated in January 1990. It is one of over 9,000 Conservation Areas in the country. Conservation Areas are 'areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance' (Section 69 (1) (a) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

Historic areas are recognised for the contribution they make to our cultural inheritance and economic well-being and are designated by the Local Planning Authority.

This is intended to be a factual and objective view of the Conservation Area which should help developers and individuals take a more informed approach to development in and around the area.

1) Location and Population

Wem is in the centre of the North Shropshire Plain. The district is formed on sandstone covered with mosses and meres, river gravel and sands. There are very few outcrops of stone in the district and few hills. The main natural drainage consists of three tributaries of the River Severn, the Rivers Perry, Roden and Tern which run north-south across the plain. This gives the area a distinctive, flat, character.

In 1997 Wem Urban parish had a population of 5,140.

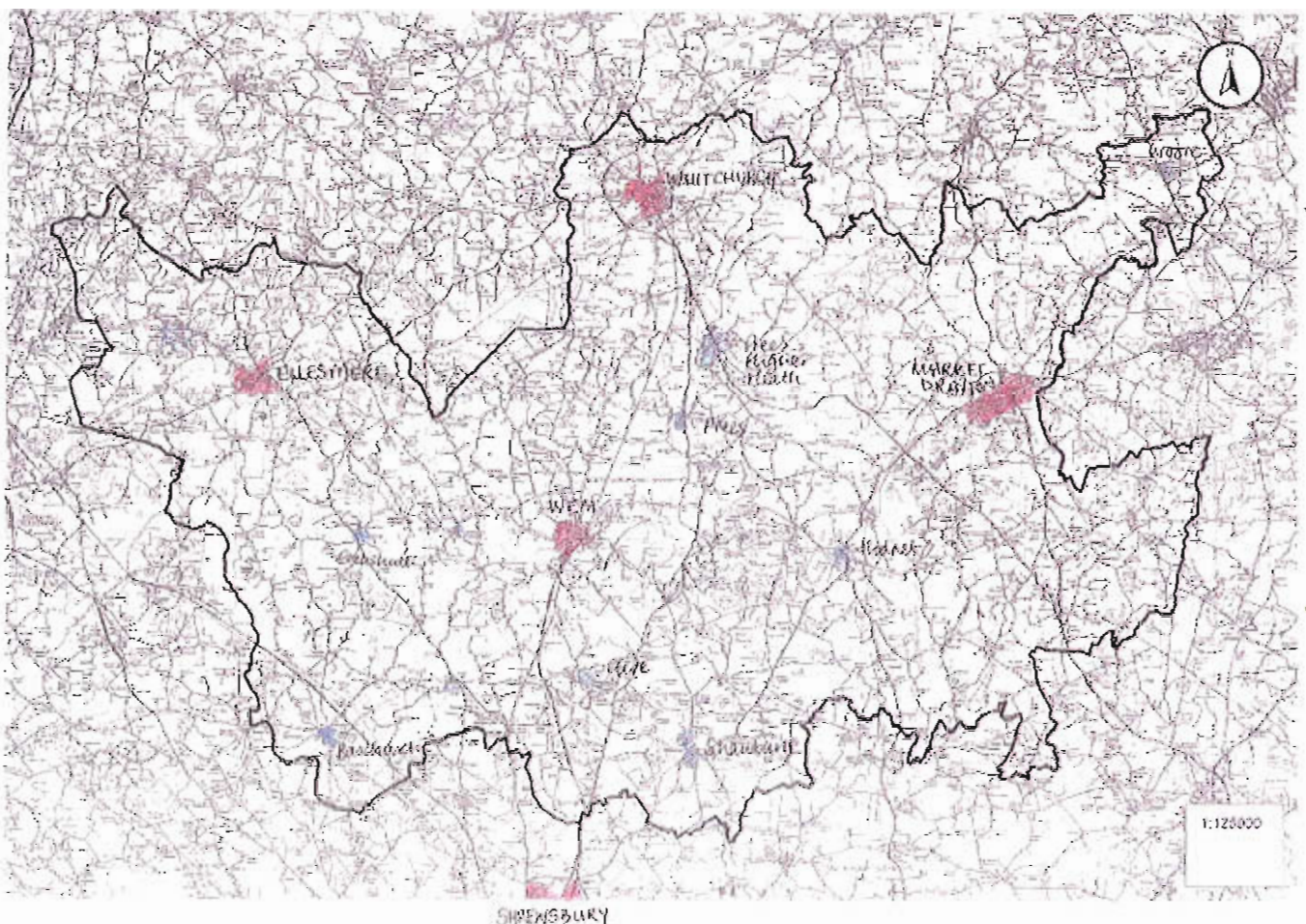


2) Wem's development

Wem is one of four market towns on the North Shropshire Plain which are equidistant from each other and serve mixed agricultural communities in the surrounding hinterland. Each town is about 11 miles from the next, which allowed people to walk to and from the market in one day. Modern administration boundaries slice through a wider network of similarly spaced towns. This pattern of towns pre-dates any formal planning of layouts.

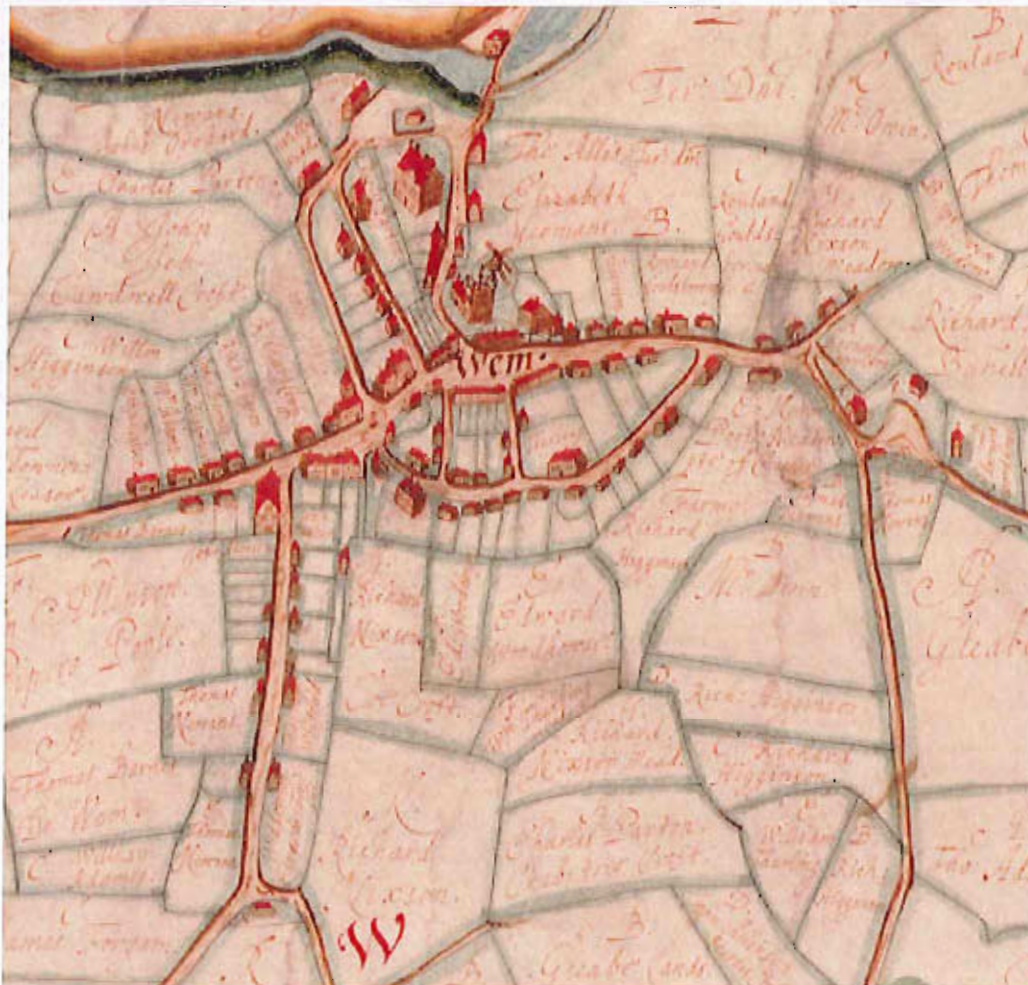
'Wem' is derived from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'marsh or stain' from the word 'Wamm'. This indicates that the original settlement dates from this period.

The flat nature of the district has led to the development of equally spaced settlements.



The foundation of Wem

In 1086 *Domesday Book* recorded that Wem was held as four manors. By 1252, Ralph and Maud le Botiller had a fortalice (small fort) in Wem. The settlement developed along the east-west axis of the main street, known today as High Street and Aston Street. At the centre was the market, castle and church. The market was granted its charter in 1205 and occupied the area in front of the church where the street widened to accommodate it. Burgage plots stretched back from the narrow street frontages. The physical presence of the castle mound dictated the morphology of the west end of the street. It was serviced by a semi-circular back lane to the north, now known as Noble Street. Small lanes linked these routes. The late medieval period saw the extension of the mediaeval plan with a new road stretching north in a straight line, still referred to as 'New Street'.



This early map of the town was commissioned by the Earl of Arundell in 1631. (Right) The market place is clearly shown where the word 'Wem' is written. The map marks field boundaries, burgage plots and land ownerships. Some of the names appearing on the map still survive today as local family names. Buildings around the market have had their plots divided into smaller strips, showing that the market area was the most important area of the settlement. By this time there was a large mill on the River Roden.

The eighteenth century

Building evidence suggests that there was some redevelopment in the town centre. A number of large houses were built away from the centre in substantial grounds including Park House (grade II*) which is one of the finest houses in Wem.

By this time Wem was being served by the Shropshire Union Canal which terminated at Edstaston, 4 miles to the north. Wem became a base for the transfer of agricultural goods and produce.



*Park House (left) and
Sambrook House (below)
are both fine 18th century
brick houses)*





The 1634 map overlaid on the 1888 plan of Wem which reveals that the shape of the town did not change significantly over the 250 years between the maps.



The nineteenth century

The town continued to slowly develop from the plan shown on the 1631 map. (see above). The 1888 plan reveals that the town was spreading away from the centre along the main roads. Development of ancillary buildings along the burgage plots is also evident.

The Shrewsbury to Chester railway came to Wem in 1850, slicing across the southwest section of the town. A large timber yard developed next to it. Building was limited to the enlargement and rebuilding of the churches and schools, and to development on the landed estates in the town which were breaking up. Station Road, a terrace of workers' houses was built in 1891 and 1895. The terraced houses on Mill Street and Barnard Street were built on the former Walford Estate from 1878.



Wem today

The 20th century

The early 20th century saw the development of new housing on Mill Street and along Summerfield Road. These are large houses set in spacious gardens, quite unlike earlier houses of similar status. There was some new building including the Town Hall (1905), the Morgan Library (1905), (opposite) and the Post Office (1908). Local Authority housing was provided in the grounds of large estates. These new buildings used a distinctive plan, with inward looking cul-de-sacs off main roads.

Private sector housing developed on the north and south boundaries of the town in the last quarter of the 20th century.

3) Prevailing and former uses.

The Conservation Area now consists of a mix of residential and commercial buildings along the High Street and Aston Street and mainly residential occupation on the other streets. Streets are punctuated by former industrial buildings and church buildings. These provide a height and form different from the vernacular houses and shops of the side streets and the grand houses of the main streets which were converted into shops.

Mix of industrial and domestic uses

Wem had a successful market, a number of breweries and malthouses, a tannery, a flour mill, and later a timber yard, all of which developed to serve the agricultural hinterland.

Economic decline from the late 19th century until well into the 20th century damaged, and eventually led to the demise of Wem's traditional industries. Of the list above only a small weekly market remains. However, the industries have left a legacy in the form of specialised buildings which are a significant component of Wem's unique character. Some retain their light industrial uses although the type of industry is different.



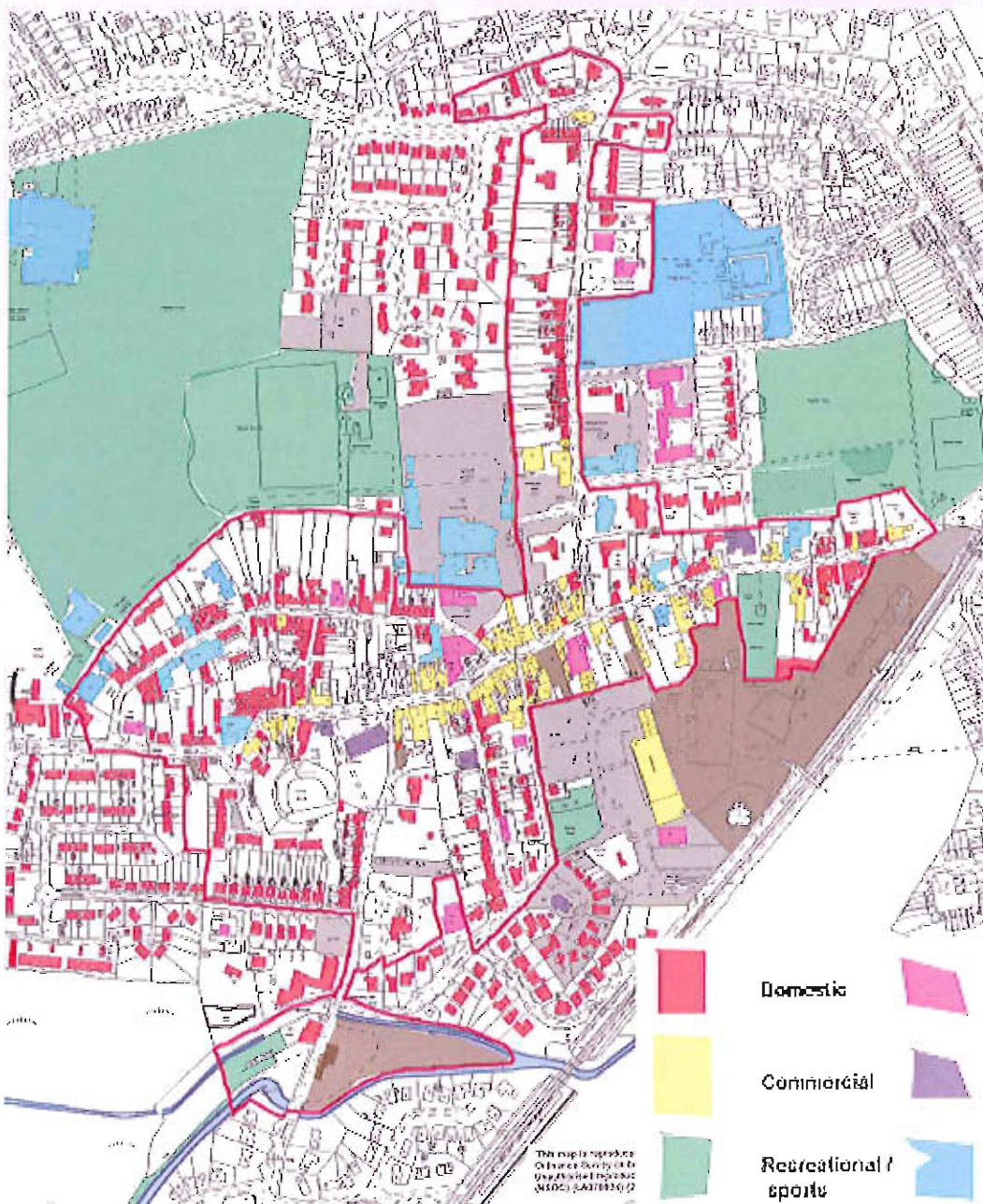
Churches

The Church of St Peter and St Paul, set above the High Street on the junction with Mill Street is a focal point for Wem. The Dissenting Chapel in Noble Street was mentioned in 1750. This building has suffered a number of changes and is now used as a store. A new Congregational Chapel was built in Chapel Street in 1775 and rebuilt in 1844 to include a lecture room. It is now used as a Baptist church. The Baptist chapel on the corner of Market Street and Noble Street was rebuilt in a gothic style in 1870 and is now in residential use. The Ruabon brick Methodist Church on Aston Street punctuates the street with its distinctive shingle steeple. Wem's Churches form important focal points in the street scene.





One of the former sites of Wem Smithfield is still marked with an impressive gateway between the Castle Inn and the former Brewery site.



Land usage in Wem.

Domestic

Commercial

Recreational /
sports

Light industrial,
including garages

Parking / lanes areas

Public - clubs, police station,
fire station, council offices etc

Ecclesiastical

Educational

Vacant

4) Archaeology

Limited archaeological work has been undertaken in Wem, because the pressure for development has been low. The Castle is the only scheduled ancient monument, and is Shropshire monument number 262. (opposite). The map opposite shows the sites of the civil war ramparts which have led to various archaeological investigations in Wem.

There are records of three archaeological digs in the town. One was on the presumed site of the Civil War defences at 'Ellesmere Gate' in 1989 (Watson, SA6294) where no artefacts were found.

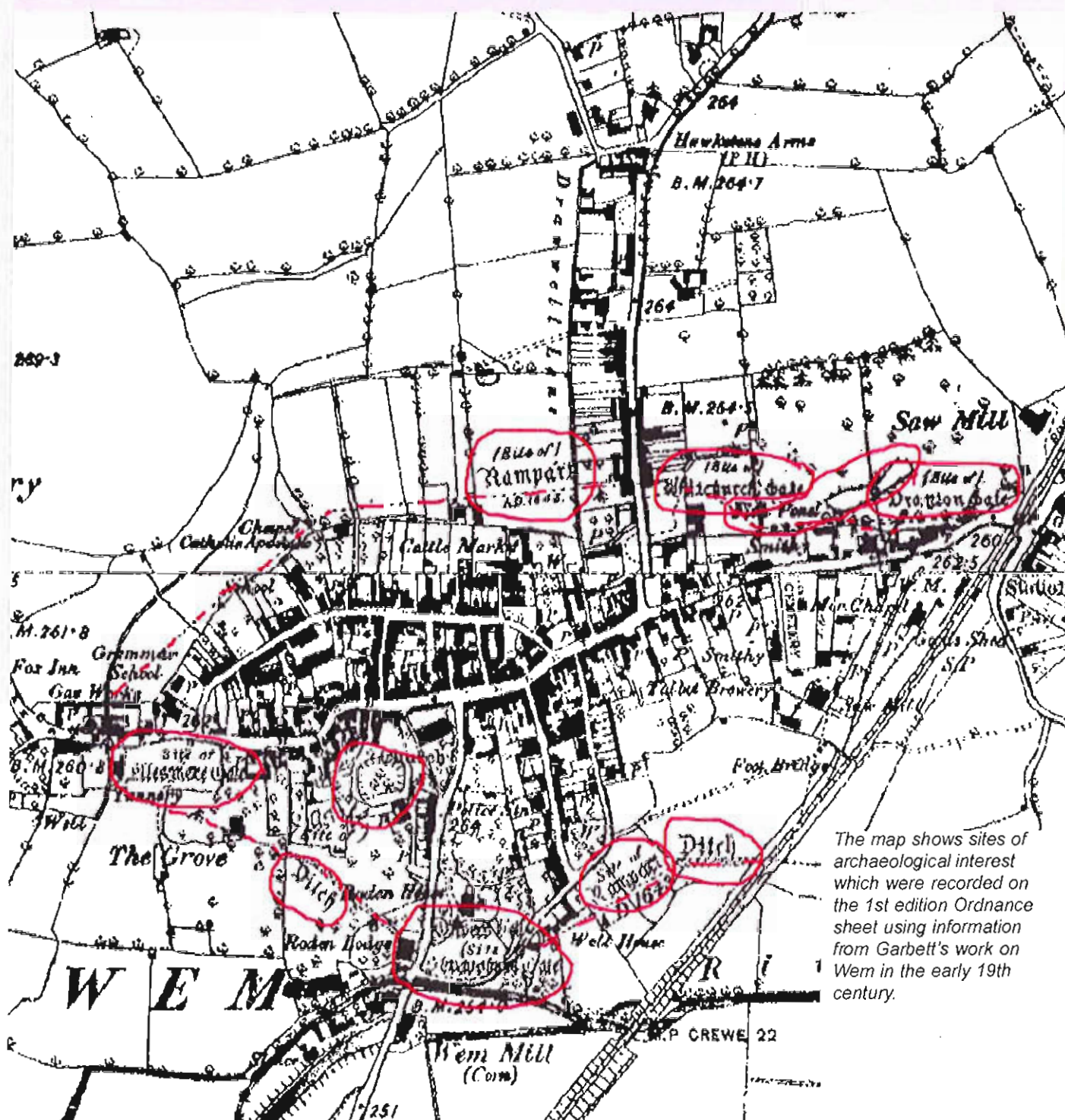
The second was in 1992 as part of the creation of the Wem Business Park (right) on the former brewery site (Gifford and Partners, 1992 SA6295) where some post-medieval artefacts were found.



Finally, evidence suggests that a mediaeval pottery of 'regional importance' fronted onto the market place in the site now known as 62 High Street. (right and below).

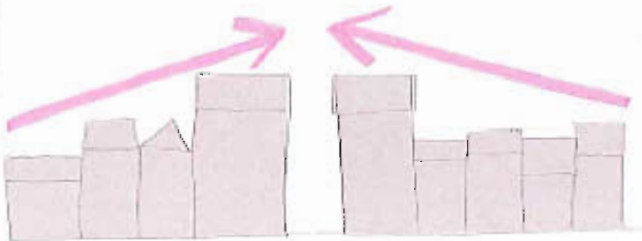


Some environmental evidence has been retrieved from Wem Moss (Slater, 1972) and Whixall Moss (Turner 1964) which may provide information on the surrounding landscape and agricultural activities, however, the findings have not been published yet.



5) The contribution of the buildings to the special interest of the area.

The High Street consists of an eclectic mix of two and three storey buildings which are built straight onto the pavement, giving the main street an enclosed, almost canyon like feel. The density and height of buildings increases towards the High Street, from mainly two storey buildings backing onto long burgage plots to three storey buildings filling thier burgage plots.



Building heights increase towards the High Street

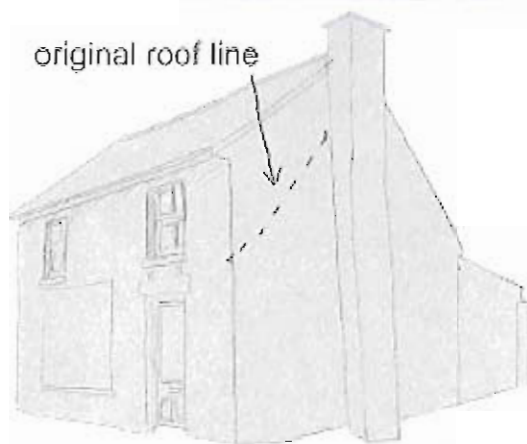
At first glance, Wem High Street is predominantly red brick Georgian and Victorian townhouses converted into shops, with red brick domestic accommodation surrounding the High Street. However many of the uses hide an earlier timber-framed core adapted and extended to bring the buildings up to date with eighteenth and nineteenth century fashions.



Wem's coaching inns are reminiscent of the town's heyday when it served the canal. Its status as a market town and collection centre for the area increased with the turnpike system on the roads from the 1780s. In 1807 the Union coach started a service from Shrewsbury through Wem, to Ellesmere, Wrexham and Chester.



The inns have elaborate and conspicuous detailing.



The steep pitch at the rear of the building was originally reflected at the front of this cottage on Aston Street. This form of adaptation is relatively common in Wem.

Earlier buildings often have a shallow pitch at the front behind a parapet, and a long pitch at the back because the front has been 'modernised' and the back has not. The steep pitch usually suggests a different covering of thatch or shingle which has been replaced.



General views along streets in the Conservation Area, showing a variety of styles and materials.

6) Key unlisted buildings

Surprisingly few of Wem's buildings are listed, considering their age. Unfortunately, the re-survey, conducted in 1987, referred to most of the buildings as 18th century when they are often much older, as explained above. Thus it is important to show which buildings make a positive impact on the conservation area. As the map shows, it is a significant proportion.

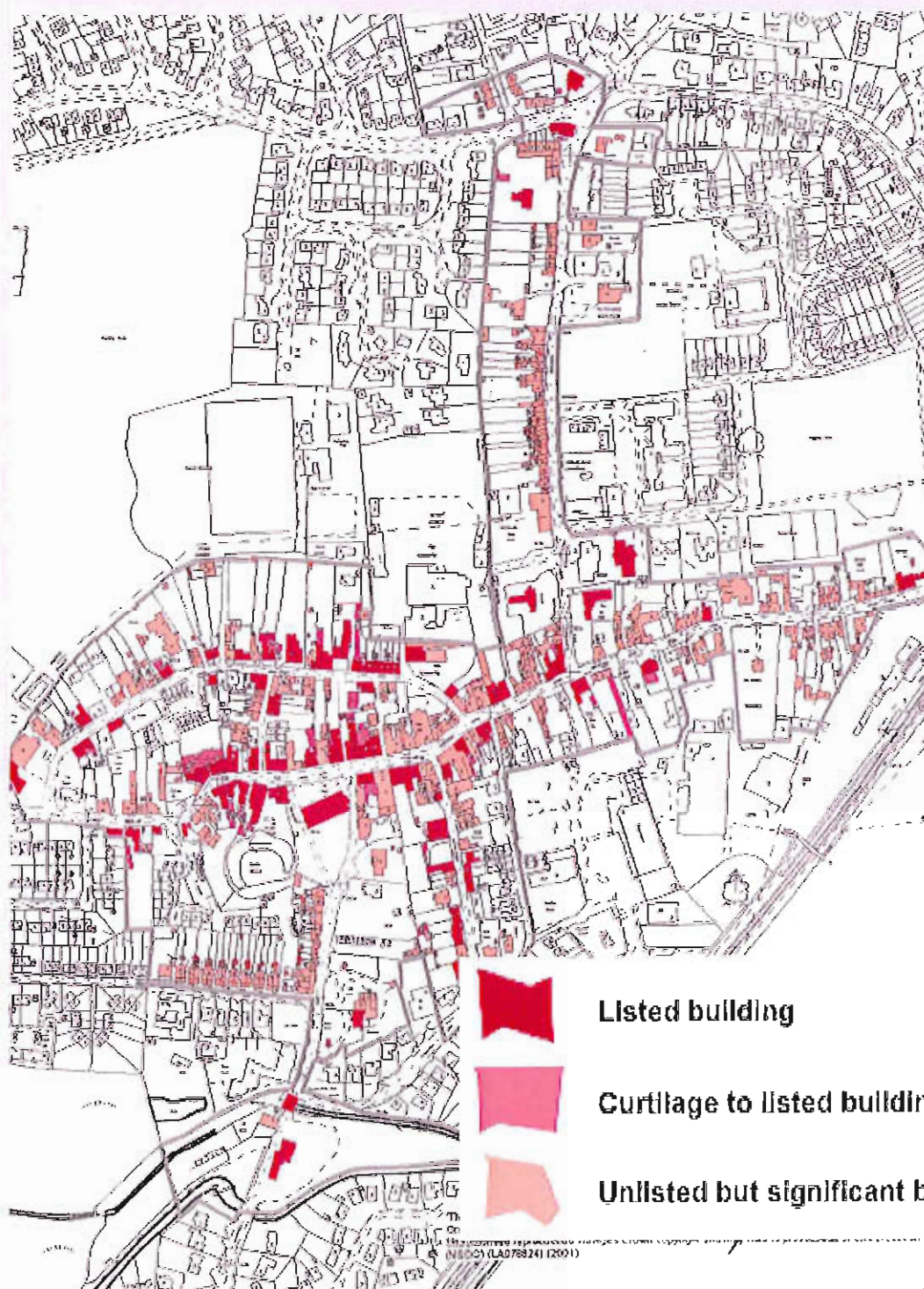
New Street is terraced along its west side with two storey workers' cottages which lead out of town towards a higher status crescent of three storey Victorian semi-detached houses with elegant cast iron detailing. These houses are not listed but provide an interesting streetscape.



Likewise, Leek Street, Chapel Street, Aston Street and Noble Street, all have of cottages built as, or formed into, terraces with small access routes to the side of some of the buildings leading to the land behind. Whilst these are not all listed, they provide interest for the area and should be preserved in their traditional forms.



Examples of good traditional buildings in the Conservation Area



Surprisingly few of Wem's buildings are listed, considering their age. However, there are many fine unlisted buildings which make a significant positive impact on the area. Thus it is important to show which buildings make a positive impact on the conservation area. As the map shows, it is a significant proportion.

7) The character and relationship of spaces in the area

Wem's conservation area is densely occupied. However, there are some important spaces which have positive influences on the town. These vary from the public spaces such as the Millenium Green on Aston Street to the very private burgage plots stretching between the High Street and Noble Street. Equally important are the network of walkways and passages such as Drawwell Lane which runs parallel with New Street and appears again by the Mill as Drawwell Walk.



The Churchyard

The primary space in the centre of the town is the churchyard which is set back from the street behind a wide pavement and is built up above street level, with large Grinshill sandstone blocks in the retaining wall. This height removes the visitor from the activity of the busy street and provides tranquillity and safety from the narrow junction of Mill Street with High Street. The path across the western side of the churchyard takes the walker accross a well cared for area which is planted to provide displays of spring flowers, and is regularly mown. The War Memorial, also built of Grinshill stone, has recently been cleaned, showing further pride in the area.



The former Mortuary Chapel and surrounding burial ground (in use from 1852 to 1892) on Aston Street were restored in 2000. It now provides a green space surrounded by a main road, houses and the disused former timber yard. It provides a peaceful oasis in the town.



Burgage plots

The south east end of Noble Street is characterised by the rear of High Street burgage plots running from Hazlitt's chapel to 23 Noble Street. Here, the streetscape is visibly less dense and much more private than the High Street with one and two storey outbuildings stretching back along the plots of the High Street into high walled, long, thin garden plots. This provides a sense of space in Noble Street although many sites are hidden from view behind unattractive modern gates and walls. However, they still allow interesting views of the rear of the High Street buildings and skylines and must not be redeveloped. This space should be enhanced to respect the historic evidence and suit modern day aesthetic requirements.

Drawwell Lane, once the service lane for the houses on the west side of New Street, is a 'dynamic space'. It is enclosed on either side by very tall brick walls, capped with stone and narrows the further away from town it goes. Access to the gardens is still available and it is used as a link route for the modern estates to the town centre.



8) Prevalent and traditional building materials, textures and colours.

Wem was predominately timber framed in the mediaeval period because there were no other building materials freely available.

Today, the town is mostly brick although this often hides an earlier timber framed core. The brick gives Wem a warm red colouring which is combined with dark red clay tiles and blue Welsh slates.

Render is not used extensively in Wem, and stone is even rarer although some buildings have stone facades.



Timber framing – Buildings were originally constructed using cruck framing, and later with box framing. There are no cruck frame buildings left in Wem although they survive locally, but until the end of the 17th century, box framing was the main technique for building in Wem and some still survives. This method of framing, common in the West Midlands region, allows for vertical and horizontal development of the building. The more important and wealthy someone was, the more panels between the sole plate and wallplate there were. Additions to the buildings such as the three storey porch on the Old Hall in New Street (below) also signified wealth. It is huge compared to the rest of the house and was the 'poor man's' gate house. These all help to tell the story of the house. Timber framing is much more expressive than brick. A gradual process of attrition including the fire of 1677, continual rebuilding and poor initial construction has meant that there is a very limited survival of medieval timber framed buildings in Wem.



Stone - There is some use of stone on buildings, although this is generally limited to high status buildings because of its cost. The local quarry is Grinshill and it makes use of a rare outcrop in the North Shropshire Plain. The church is predominately built in Grinshill stone. A fine example of a stone house is grade II Castle Mound House, 67 High Street (left) which has a buff Grinshill ashlar façade. Generally, stone is only used for decoration although some buildings are built on roughly carved stone plinths.





Bricks - Brick chimneys were often added to open halls from the 16th and 17th centuries and the oldest buildings have massive, decorative brick stacks. However, it was not until the 18th century that it began to be used for whole buildings. Soultton Hall, north of Wem is probably the earliest brick house near the town. Brick was highly fashionable by this time. Timber framed buildings were raised to two or three storeys and faced in brick to make them look more fashionable. Detailing on these buildings is very simple. Hand made, and then machine made red bricks were used, often with Grinshill stone detailing.



By the end of the 19th century, hard, red, Ruabon bricks and some polychromatic bricks were being used on modern buildings and new façades. These buildings were more decorative than their predecessors, often using Arts and Crafts ideas. The most impressive example of this is the Morgan Library, Aston Street (1905).



Common roofing materials

Thatch and shingles have been predominately replaced with the new materials brought by the canal, and later the railway, so that from the 18th century buildings were roofed in Welsh slate and blue or red clay tiles. (see right). The steep roof pitches on early buildings reveal that they were thatched.



Changes in the 20th century

As the century progressed, the visual and physical qualities of the building materials moved away from the fine vernacular traditions. Whilst most modern buildings in the town are of red brick, it is usually uniform and machine made and often a poor match for the traditional red. Likewise, brown 'pan tile' concrete tiles are the common roofing material, a completely alien material and design for the area. Sadly, some historic buildings have also had 20th century 'improvements' in the form of concrete tiles, and modern bricks.



9) Local Distinctiveness

Wem is distinctive in retaining a mix of domestic, commercial and light industrial uses in its centre. It is mainly brick and timber frame and these materials are used in decorative ways from highly detailed cornices to tall thin chimneys.

Blue brick paving was introduced in the late 19th century to Wem. The paving below is original. The central areas in Wem have had blue brick paving reinstated.



Brick detailing is common in Wem. Corbelling is often highly detailed and two identical details are rare.



Some houses have highly detailed verges and chimneys like the one on the left. Every design is unique.

Chimneys in Wem commonly straddle the ridge and are consequently long and thin. This allowed them to serve four hearths. The detailing above is a common sight in Wem and one which enhances the skyline of the conservation area and gives balance to the buildings they serve.



Street corners are turned with some brick buildings in the town like this example which accommodates a house and a shop with offices over whilst forming a distinctive corner treatment.



There are many traditional shopfronts remaining in Wem. The rounded glass above is a typical detail. The former drapers shop (left) retains its large display windows and tiled entranceways



Wem has a high survival of traditional joinery which make a significant contribution to the appearance of the conservation area.

Doors vary from early boarded doors shown far left to more scholarly classical doors on the right. Fan lights are common in Wem and are often highly detailed.



There are some good early window survivals on high and low status buildings. Horizontally sliding sashes (far right) are commonly used.



The high survival of metalwork contributes to the appearance of the buildings it protects and to the definition of the street.

10) The contribution of green spaces, trees, hedges, and other natural or cultivated elements to the character of the area.

Part of the close knit character of Wem is formed by trees and hedges which create the feeling of enclosure without buildings. There are also areas of the town which remain as large green areas some of which are for public use.

The horse chestnut tree on Noble Street (1) is a focal point which provides a natural boundary to the edge of the Street.



The trees in the churchyard (2) draw the eye from the busy and crowded street and gives the area a more open feel to it, whilst retaining the street line.



On Leek Street, (3) the young trees hide some of the mass of the huge surface car park. It is hoped that will create a feeling of enclosure as they become more established. A sensitive scheme involving more landscaping, or possibly buildings could also help to reflect the close-knit streetscape of other parts of the towncentre.



The houses on the east side of Mill Street (4) are set back in large grounds. The boundary is reinforced by trees and a red sandstone wall which runs intermittently from Sunningdale to the Mill.

The land adjacent to the mill and the river Roden (5) is an attractive area which could be better used and maintained to make an attractive public space and enhance the gateway to Wem.



Many houses on Aston Street (6) and Noble Street (7) have small front gardens which opens the streets up and makes them feel wider than the High Street although it is wide enough to accommodate two rows of traffic, a parking bay and a wide pavement in the former market area.



The recreational ground off Park Road (8) is a large square area of grass bordered by a children's playground, tennis courts and a bowling green. It is surrounded on two sides by early twentieth century council housing and meets the gardens of the Victorian Station Road and Aston Street. This land originally formed the gardens of Park House. Whilst it is not in the conservation area, it has a positive influence on its setting.



Wem is divided by the railway line running across the south east part of the town. There is a large meadow before housing starts again. Above is the view of the town from the Aston Road area of Wem.

11) The setting of the conservation area and its relationship with the landscape.

Wem is in a flat area and therefore appears quite suddenly on the winding roads leading from Ellesmere, Market Drayton, Whitchurch and Shrewsbury. Wem is surrounded by trees, with the tall, square corn mill chimney and the church tower forming focal points on the horizon.



The road from Shawbury probably provides the best views of the settlement (see below).



The approaches from Shrewsbury and Shawbury join just before they enter Wem under a railway bridge, which provides a gateway to the 19th and 20th century suburbs lining the road past the mill to the High Street.

At the other end of town which leads towards Market Drayton, the railway again forms a physical boundary across the road, this time in the form of a level crossing. The Albion public house forms the gateway to the town here.





Wem cannot be seen from the approach from Whitchurch until the traveller suddenly finds themselves entering the built up area. The gateway to this part of the conservation area is formed by the Hawkestone Arms on the left and the road progresses into New Street with terraced housing on the right leading back into long hidden gardens and large 'villas' set back in their own grounds behind trees and low walls on the left hand side.



The view from the Ellesmere road is aided by the higher ground at Belle Vue. Wem can just be seen in the middle distance.



The conservation area is approached along a winding road with houses set back from it and the streetscene quite suddenly becomes more dense, with the gable ends of the houses clearly evident.

12) The extent of loss, intrusion or damage – the negative factors

A number of traditional buildings were replaced in the 20th century. These often combined burgage plots and developed along their full length and width with no architectural reference to individual burgage plots. Buildings which have a negative impact on the conservation area are typically theated with a horizontal emphasis rather than the traditional vertical emphasis.



Modern intervention has essentially been due to society's changing requirements, especially providing for the motor car. This includes road widening (the Union Buildings in front of the church were demolished in the 1920s), and car parking.

Garages were also required, with 2 petrol vendors in the town as well as car sales lots, body repair and maintenance garages. The picture on the right exemplifies this, Grade II listed Park House is hidden from view by a fuel garage and car dealer.*



Wem's supermarket was originally situated in a purpose built shop on the High Street in the 1960s. There appears to have been no attempt to fit it into the street scene with brown fish tail tiles cladding the first floor and modern windows lighting the building. The form looks uncomfortable amongst its more traditional neighbours not least because of its horizontal emphasis away from the High Street.



The 'Rafers' development in Leek Street (above) is an attempt at traditional shops with a restaurant over, which fails to reflect the historic character of Wem in its materials, site position and design. It is neighboured by the Youth Club, (left) an introverted building with no redeeming design features.



The fire station, built of pale, buff bricks with a flat roof on a distinctly horizontal plane, on the corner of the High Street and Noble Street is equally insensitive to its surroundings.



13) The existence of any neutral areas

Every town and Conservation Area has areas which neither enhance nor greatly damage them. The examples in this section come from in and around the Conservation Area which was designated around the densely occupied historic core leaving out areas which were either undeveloped or which had been developed unsympathetically.

The burgage plots of the High Street properties which back onto Noble Street could be tidied up, even with good traditional gates and walls to consolidate the area and make it more presentable, more of a place, not just the back of somewhere.



The garaging off Mill Street which is shabby, poorly lit and accessed is currently a poor use of space, but could be useful to local residents if the garaging was improved and would provide a secure storage area. However, there are security implications as this area is not visible from public areas.

