

WORFIELD CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

Worfield is a relatively small village in rolling open countryside approximately three miles north east of Bridgnorth. The Worfield Conservation Area was designated on 5th February 1981, its boundaries having been drawn to reflect the pre-20th century extent of the village, its response to the main topographic features of hill and river floodplain, and the relationship with the historic parkland estate of Davenport House.



History

Lying within a wide bend of the small river making its way westwards to the River Severn this is a village of considerable antiquity, the placename Worfield originating in the Anglo-Saxon era meaning '*open land by the River Worfe*', where worfe (from the Anglo-Saxon verb *hweorfan* 'to turn') indicates a winding or wandering stream. The soil in this area is a rich loamy ryeland and consequently has experienced human occupation over an extremely long period – scrapers and other tools have been found in the locality dating back to the Mesolithic period, ie to around 4000BC.

By the Saxon period it was a well-established settlement, and prior to the Norman Invasion the village and manor were held by Earl Algar of Mercia. In 1086 it is recorded in the Domesday Book under Staffordshire as a great manor of 30 hides, with sufficient arable land to employ 34 ox teams. At that point the manor was held by Hugh de Montgomery and worth £18.00 annually, consisting of three mills, sixteen acres of meadow and woodland three leagues long by a league wide.

In the intervening centuries, this small village has evolved to serve an extensive rural parish, as evidenced by the relatively large church and complex of school buildings. The proximity of the market town of Bridgnorth would have always restricted the potential for the effective commercial growth of the village. Consequently there has never been a market or fair in the settlement, restricting most of the locally available labour to agricultural and related sectors. Many of the inhabitants also no doubt had some connection with the nearby Davenport House: an extensive estate and important contributor to the local economy.

Landscape

With the nearby hamlet of Wyken historically serving travellers on the Wolverhampton to Bridgnorth road (now the A454), the oldest and greater part of Worfield lies some 700 metres to the north on slightly higher ground across the wide flat meadows of the river's floodplain. The main part of the village is located on the eastern slope of a sandstone ridge running north south above this broad valley through which the River Worfe meanders.

These significant topographic features of hillside and river valley dominate the Conservation Area, the gradients directly influencing the distribution and orientation of buildings within it. Trees are an inherent and characteristic part of the Conservation

Area, with large mature examples, whether individual specimens or in groups, having a presence from every viewpoint.

To the west the settlement is bounded by the formal parkland setting of Davenport House, a mansion positioned in such a way as to take advantage of its hilltop location and to impress travellers on the road from Wolverhampton.

The surrounding open rolling landscape is predominantly agricultural, with small hamlets, isolated groups of farm buildings and scattered belts of woodland. Hedges and tree belts of native species bound fields to the north, south and east, with most of the local lanes defined by hedged banks or iron estate railings. There is a considerable amount of tree cover on the high ground above the village's main street. This prominent tree cover is one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Conservation Area, and is particularly striking in distant views when approaching from the south.



When viewed from the A454, the intervening ground falls slightly to form the broad flat-bottomed valley of the Worfe, rising up again to the settlement huddled below the ridge; the effect is of the Church spire and tree-cloaked hill clearly silhouetted against the skyline. From the southeast, this view is dominated in the foreground by a small 20th century housing development. Post-war housing also impinges on the view from the west.

From the north, the fall of the land, the hedges and the tree belts obscure views of the settlement, its existence only hinted at by the presence of some isolated houses, eventually grouping at the junction of the lanes to form Hallon, the name for that part of the village located on the higher ground.

Pattern of Settlement

As the focus of this small village is on the single ancient main street, the widely drawn boundaries of the Conservation Area take in relatively large areas of open land. As a consequence, it can be divided into several distinct parts.

In the eastern section the medieval parish church and its graveyard are prominently sited on the slope of the hill at the north end of the main street, with a line of listed buildings tightly arranged to the immediate south and east of the church, constrained as they are by the flood plain of the river and the steepness of the hillside. To the north west of the historic core, both along the river's edge (Hallonsford) and westwards up a steep winding lane, is an area formed by a much looser scattering of detached dwellings from various periods. These are irregularly dispersed in response to the local topography.

Due to the relatively tight concentration of dwellings within the historic core area of the village until the 20th century, there has been limited subsequent opportunity for infill development (with some notable exceptions) that could have otherwise diluted the overall special architectural and historic interest of the Conservation Area. To the south and west of the historic buildings on Main Street however, there has been some development of greater visual impact, principally post-war Local Authority housing.

These neat dwellings on Chestnut Drive are distinctly suburban in nature and layout and are in sharp contrast to the rural character of the more ancient village development. It is on the north and east that the traditional relationship between village and countryside is still clearly evident and worthy of retention as the setting of the Conservation Area.



With its more formal planted landscape, the western section of the Conservation Area comprises the open parkland of Davenport House. The northern part of this section is occupied by the cricket ground, its pavilion and tennis courts. The southeast corner of the Conservation Area encompasses a small isolated group of dwellings adjacent to the river bridge, in the open countryside mid way between Wyken and Worfield.

Buildings

Many of the dwellings in the village are essentially unassuming structures largely undistinguished by obvious architectural merit. However, it is in this modesty and honesty that lies much of the character and interest of the Conservation Area – the simple forms and use of materials in very basic ways display a richness in all the main features of the local vernacular traditions. The colour contrast of brown brick, the black and white timber framing, and the red and buff stone is the dominant impression.



By far the most significant building in the village itself, both from an architectural and historic point of view, has to be the Grade II* listed parish church of St. Peter. Although there was a church here at the time of Domesday, this is a fine, principally 14th century building in the Decorated style with evident traces of an earlier structure. Possessing a soaring and elegant spire of grey stone, it was restored (*'disappointingly'* says Pevsner) by F & H Francis in 1861-2. Outside Shrewsbury's notable examples, stone spires are extremely rare in this county. For what was such a small settlement (the 1801 Census indicated a population of 1,354), the parish church is a relatively large and grandiose structure, its sense of presence accentuated by the elevated location on the hillside above the village. Its size is no doubt due to the patronage of local landed gentry and a reflection of the extensive parish and the numerous townships and hamlets it was meant to serve.

To the south of the churchyard is a historically significant group of buildings, both individually and collectively, which forms the main street of the village. The first of these is what was probably the original Church House, a 16th century timber framed building, located partly in the street and partly in the churchyard. The close row of dwellings south of this point is in a variety of forms and materials, mostly in the vernacular style and erected over a period of



several hundred years, contrasting with the spacious grounds of the 17th century Lower House on the eastern side of the street. It is this variety and contrast in densities along the narrow street that gives the core of the Conservation Area its unique character.



One of the largest buildings in the village is the Church of England Primary School and masters' houses; a Victorian complex of 1846 origin built of rock-faced deep red sandstone in the gothic style. Extended in 1874 and then again in the late 20th century, the school buildings, playground and car park dominate the southern entrance to the village.

Beyond the village just to the west stands one of the most important properties in the District. Davenport House (built 1726 by Smith of Warwick) is a grade I mansion in red brick with stone plinth, window surrounds and quoins. An impressively symmetrical design consisting of a rectangular centre block with four detached pavilion wings connected by curving screen brick walls. This arrangement is based on Palladio's unexecuted design for the Villa Mocenigo. The two northern pavilions were stables, the southwest one a laundry and that to the southeast accommodated the kitchen and servants' rooms.



The grounds to Davenport House were formed by an extensive (around 67 hectares) mid-18th century landscaped park, listed as grade II* on the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens. The parkland at Davenport lies all around the House, which stands on a slight eminence, part of a ridge running north-south through the middle of the estate, before falling gently away southwards to the curve of the River Worfe skirting the estate. The Registered parkland occupies more than a third of the village's Conservation Area.

On the boundaries of the estate are areas of woodland and belts or screens of trees, with some fine mature trees scattered across the parkland. The current appearance of the garden and parkland at Davenport House probably dates from the succession of Sharington Davenport in 1731, when a framework of formal avenues of trees was created. One of these avenues was aligned on the spire of Worfield Church, but composed of elms it has now disappeared.

Also prominent in the parkland is the Pigeon House, a large round 18th century brick building distinguished by its battlemented parapet, probably designed as an 'eye catcher' or a folly to ornament the park.

Building Materials

Traditional use of local building materials is a vital component of the Conservation Area's special character, reflecting the age and style of the buildings. The principal materials are timber framing, sandstone or brick with clay tile roofs, although most of



the traditional building materials and finishes are in evidence, often in combination on the same building. The vast majority of the dwellings are rather humble structures in the vernacular style, so the building materials tend to be used in a rather straightforward, utilitarian way. In this context, therefore, the decorative use of detailing or materials is all the more noticeable.

Sandstone in a variety of finishes and dressings appears throughout the Conservation Area, from the neatly-worked rock-faced finish to the Primary School, to the more rough squared coursing of Lower House's boundary wall to Main Street. The church is of weathered ashlar and squared coursed stone in a variety of shades of sandstone, with dressings, tracery and mouldings in more finely worked stone throughout. The boundary and retaining walls to the churchyard are of rather more randomly shaped and coursed stone with rounded copings (and listed in itself Grade II). At No.9, although a rather humble and simple structure, sandstone in a coursed rubble form has been utilised. Next to the river at the northern end of the Conservation Area, the local sandstone has been used in a more rudimentary manner, where in the past caves have been hollowed out of the cliff face, presumably for storage purposes.

Lower House is the most elaborately timber framed house in the village; a high status building set behind its heavy sandstone wall. Other, more modest dwellings also display timber frames of varying degrees of decoration, such as Nos. 7 and 10 Main Street.

Stone and brick are also used together, the brick being utilised for later extensions to the original property (such as at No.9), or to repair failing stonework. No's 11 and 12 are neat cottages in painted brick and typical of the modest rural vernacular dwellings that predominate in this village. No.8 Crow Cottage, strikes a more formal note with its spare 18th century symmetrical architecture in a local redbrick. Up on the hill, in Hallon, a redbrick 19th century gable has been ornamented through the use of yellow headers to create a distinctive chequerboard effect.



Architectural Details

The traditional but subtly varied detailing of buildings is an important element of



Worfield's visual and historic interest. Decoration is limited or sparingly used, almost to the point of austerity. Not surprisingly the most elaborate detailing is to be found on the church, with its dominant motif of quatrefoils placed diagonally, spikes coming out between the lobes. It has the stone traceried windows in chamfered reveals with hood moulds and a moulded sill course, chamfered plinth, ornamented buttresses and moulded eaves characteristic of the Decorated style.



Some features are common to the majority of buildings. Roofs are rarely gabled, mostly with plain verges, roof pitches of over 40 degrees and of moderate height and bulk, most of one and a half storeys with small dormer windows; there are few deep-plan buildings. Chimneys, whether ridge or end, plain or ornamented, are an important feature of the roofscape and all made of brick. The most elaborate chimneys are displayed on the Old Vicarage, a late Victorian house in the style of

Norman Shaw. Lower House also has a set of impressively tall and ornamented chimneys. Some elaborately carved fretwork bargeboards from the Victorian era appear on various houses throughout the village.

Openings are generally vertically proportioned; either sash or casement windows with a variety of glazing bar patterns are used: the latter are more prevalent. A few buildings still retain their old metal casement windows. Those windows that do survive are of various types, generally of painted timber. Some houses have 20th century replacement windows, often a close approximation of the original pattern, but usually the heavier details make them obviously modern. Plastic windows are still a rarity in this Conservation Area.



Doors and windows are mostly recessed within the openings, with only the occasional porch or door hood. Original doors are of several types: boarded Gothic designs, of exposed timber or painted. Some buildings have inappropriate 20th century replacement doors.

The Character of the Conservation Area

In spite of the proximity of the small but prominently sited 20th century housing estates, Worfield still has a strong and, from certain approaches, largely unspoilt historic rural character. The part within the Conservation Area has the appearance of a compact hamlet rather than a village. The Conservation Area is mainly residential, but does possess two major institutional uses (church and school) that have a considerable impact on the streetscape.



Its character and appearance are shaped by its location on a sloping site in rolling countryside; extensive tree cover, hedges and garden planting; an informal network of narrow lanes and tracks, frequently lacking in pavements and kerbing; and a variety of historic building forms in various materials. It is small scale and intimate in feeling, attended throughout by the dominating presence of the church.

From the south eastern approach across the valley the road is lined with hedging; openings into fields allowing occasional glimpses of the village, most prominently the houses of Chestnut Drive, the church spire and the parked cars at the Primary School. At the triangle the road splits with Davenport Lodge at the fork overlooking this small grassed area focussed on a modest but well kept War Memorial. The Lodge strikes an ornate note at the entrance to the village with elaborate framing and imposing chimneys.

As the right hand road leads into the village's main street, the left hand road climbs steeply up the hill: high banks, trees and sandstone outcrops heavily enclosing this narrow lane. At the top of the hill the woods give way on the left (west) side to the more formal planting of specimen trees in Davenport House's parkland. Partly visible through the trees is the north elevation of the mansion. By contrast, the west side is thickly hedged, behind which the roofs of village houses of various ages are apparent against the backdrop of trees.



Beyond this group is a much larger house, the redbrick and hanging tile gabled mass of the Old Vicarage, set well back from the road. Opposite on the corner is a group of farm buildings. Northwards as the hedge lined road proceeds into open countryside and the ground descends off the hilltop, distant views are visible between individual cottages and extension to the village graveyard on the outskirts of the village.

A narrow lane to the right descends steeply down the hillside through trees almost to the river's edge, where again scattered cottages appear between the trees, bushes and hedging at the side of the lane. Trees and scrub occupy the boggy ground of the riverbanks on the roadside.

On the west side of the road, still evident in the cliff face are a series of caves with roughly hewn door and window openings. Some parts have been repaired with brickwork. This part of the Conservation Area, with its narrow winding lane and extensive planted landscape, is much more arcadian in atmosphere than the more urban streetscape to the south of the church.

As the lane curves its way round the eastern boundary of the churchyard to the main gateway, a small group of detached houses lines the roadside. Beyond the church gate is a small open space, informally defined by the street doglegging around the churchyard. Here starts the most urban part of the village, a row of historic buildings in a variety of forms, but generally conforming to a common building line behind a vestigial planted area. The densely treed hillside rears up steeply behind the rooftops. There are no pavements or kerbing along this confined part of Main Street: even a few parked cars are visually intrusive, detracting noticeably from the modest charm of the village street scene.

Although not a wide street, the generally low eaves of the houses are not visually overbearing, but do create a feeling of intimacy within a lively and visually active streetscape. The blankness of the sandstone garden wall on the east side tends to give

a sense of enclosure and focus most attention on the houses opposite. From here can be seen a short terrace of painted brick buildings containing the village shop. Set back from the historic building line on either side of the street are two small instances of reasonably well-integrated 20th century housing. Further on the Dog Inn and a brick stable block set at right angles restore the road's narrowness and mark the historic limit of Main Street.



The junction of Main Street with Mill Lane is so tight that it is all but invisible until the last moment. No.3, an early 17th century single storey and attic timber framed house defines the corner very effectively. Beyond, the space opens out to reveal the extensive gothic mass of the Primary School standing in its tarmac playground, followed by the suburban atmosphere of the staggered line of well-designed bungalows of Mill Close. From here the road declines into a winding dirt-track as it crosses the river over a very utilitarian bridge to connect with a straggle of houses and the listed building group of Sonde Farm defining the start of the open fields surrounding the village.



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