

MORVILLE CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

This statement was approved by Bridgnorth District Council's Planning Committee on 21st November 1994.

The Morville Conservation Area was designated on 26th October 1994. Morville is a small village approximately three miles west of Bridgnorth in the parish of Morville. The Conservation Area comprises the parish church; Morville Hall, its associated buildings and grounds; the fields to east and west bounded by the Mor Brook; part of Haughton Lane including The Courtyard, the Old Granary and Morville Farm; the A458 Shrewsbury Road and properties on both sides from No.25 to Nos.31 and 32; and Ludlow Road up to and including the pond.

Landscape

Morville lies in a shallow depression in the rolling countryside west of Bridgnorth. A prominent ridge running roughly east-west with pasture on its lower slopes and woodlands along the crest is the dominant feature of southerly views from most points, especially across the parkland around the church and from the grounds of Morville Hall. The roads from Much Wenlock, Craven Arms and Bridgnorth all descend into the village, providing excellent and varied views across the Conservation Area and the countryside beyond its boundaries.



Water, trees and hedges are vital elements of the landscape. The meandering Mor Brook forms the western and southern boundaries of the Conservation Area, while a smaller stream forms part of the eastern boundary before merging with the Brook. For most of its length Mor Brook is bordered by a dense line of trees tightly enclosing the Conservation Area. The line is broken to the south of Morville Hall, providing fine views out to the ridge across a long rectangular pool which forms a significant historic and visual feature of the gardens. An irregular pond with a small island and alders and willows on its banks provides interest adjacent to Ludlow Road and forms an important part of the setting of the former farm buildings to the Hall. Other ponds to the rear of the Hall may have historic links with the monastic foundation on the site, but are now silted up.

Trees and hedges are essential components of the setting of the church and Hall. The churchyard, set in the middle of parkland west of the Hall, is hedged on three sides and has a mature horse chestnut, sycamore and copper beech trees beside the lychgate which are particularly prominent in views of the church from many directions. The northern edge of the parkland along the main road is lined with a hedge and individual trees, and there are fine specimen trees in the grounds of the Hall close to the junction of Ludlow Road and the road to Much Wenlock. Within the grounds lines of old



yews define the main garden to the south, and a line of mature trees at the top of the bank behind the hall mark the boundary to the west; beyond them is the remains of an orchard enclosed by a hedge on two sides.

History

The name Morville has Saxon origins, and probably refers to the Mor Brook and the field where the church now stands. In the late 11th century Roger Montgomery, Earl of Shrewsbury, gave Morville to Shrewsbury Abbey. A small Benedictine priory was established and the church was rebuilt. Pools in the grounds of Morville Hall formed from monastic fish ponds are the only remaining visible traces of this priory.

Following the Dissolution of the Monasteries Morville was sold in 1545 to Roger Smythe, later M.P. for Bridgnorth. It was probably his son George Smythe who built Morville Hall after he inherited the estate in 1557. In about 1748 the owner Arthur Weaver remodelled and enlarged the house, giving it much of its present Georgian appearance. About 1770-1780 the top floor, north wing and porch were added. In 1814 the Hall and estate were sold to Sir Frederick Acton of nearby Aldenham Park, and the Hall was let.



In 1930 Morville Hall was sold, and a rear wing was subsequently demolished. In 1965 Miss A.P. Bythell gave the house and 140 acres of surrounding land to the National Trust. Her niece now lives in the Hall, and in recent years the house and gardens have been carefully restored.

Until the 20th century Morville comprised the Hall and its buildings, the church, Morville Farm and a small number of houses and cottages along the Shrewsbury Road. Mid 20th century council housing development north of the school and along the Ludlow Road has enlarged the village, but Morville's historic buildings and landscape survive. The Conservation Area includes the majority of these buildings and landscape.

Pattern of Development

The Conservation Area is focused on the church of St. Gregory and Morville Hall which together form an outstandingly attractive complex. The church stands alone in its churchyard, surrounded by parkland. To the north west, on or close to the monastic site, is the Hall with its detached pavilion blocks linked by curving walls. To the north of the Hall are outbuildings and its associated farm buildings.

The village of Morville has developed along the roads on the northern edge of the parkland and grounds of the Hall. It has remained a scattered, largely linear, small settlement without a defined centre. The historic buildings are sited close to the roads but separated from each other. Some 20th century housing has been built outside the Conservation area and farm buildings have been converted to dwellings, but Morville remains a small village.

Buildings

Most of the buildings which form a vital element of the Conservation Area's character are of architectural or historic interest. The parish church and Morville Hall are the predominant buildings, both in terms of their contribution to the Conservation Area and their individual importance. The church of St. Gregory is mostly Norman, with an early 12th century chancel, nave and tower, and late 12th century aisles, and Victorian restoration and alteration. It is listed Grade B. The churchyard has a simple but attractive Gothic revival lychgate.



Morville Hall is a 16th century house extensively remodelled and enlarged by William Baker in 1748-9 when the curved screen walls and separate blocks which form such an important part of the imposing composition were created. The second storey was added in the late 18th century. The house and buildings are listed Grade I as buildings of national importance, and the gate piers and walls to the west and along the drive are listed Grade II in their own right.

The Hall is the focus of an intact and particularly attractive country house complex of buildings, many of them of considerable architectural and historic interest and importance in their own right. It comprises outbuildings including an 18th century coach house; a fine large 18th century brick farm building range now converted to a house (Top Pool Barn), another 19th century brick range and a 17th/18th century stone barn alongside the road; the Garden Cottage, a tall thin building which appears to be 18th or early 19th century but may be of earlier origin; and other features including garden walls, steps and a haha (sunken wall and ditch).



A number of buildings in the village are also listed. No.30, formerly two cottages, now converted to one building, is a late 16th century stone house with a massive external chimney breast. Ercall House is a restored timber-framed building. No.25 is also timber-framed but looks early Victorian: it is dated 1846 but may be of earlier origin.

Unlisted buildings are just as important to Morville's character. The school and schoolhouse is an excellent mid-Victorian Gothic Revival building with an interesting composition and fine details, though unfortunately damaged by a few unsympathetic alterations. The Acton Arms, although altered, is still recognisably an 18th century building of some interest. Nos.31 and 32 and Morville Farmhouse are largely unaltered 19th century buildings. The former farm buildings, now houses (The Courtyard), are an interesting complex of varying heights, massing and roofscape which look particularly effective from the main road. No.27-28, although partly hidden from casual view below road level, has some attractive 19th century details.

Materials

The predominant building material is the local limestone, used for a wide range of buildings of many different periods from the Hall and church to farm buildings and boundary and retaining walls. It is not generally suitable for fine quality ashlar work and carving, and is normally used roughly squared and coursed, as in No.30. Morville Hall has coursed stone to the ground and first floors and noticeably more regular coursing to the later second floor, with dressings and decorative details such as columns, cornices and copings of finer quality limestone. The church has irregular and coursed limestone with some contrasting sandstone and sandstone ashlar dressings, windows tracery etc. The School has a similar use of contrasting stones as a deliberate architectural effect.



Local red brick laid with lime mortar is also widespread throughout the Conservation Area, either used alone or with other materials. No.30 has a large external stone chimneystack with brick shafts. The Hall has large, prominent brick chimneys, and some of the boundary walls are partly or wholly of brick: the curved walls between the main house and the detached buildings are stone to the front and brick behind. The range of farm buildings to the north as well as smaller outbuildings are wholly of brick. Morville Farmhouse and some of its former farm buildings are also prominent brick buildings. No.25 has a prominent brick central chimney and painted brick infill to its timber framing. Ercall House is also timber framed but with painted plastered infill. The rendered frontage of the Acton Arms is not typical of Morville's historic character.

The characteristic roof material is clay plain tiles and ridge tiles, some hand-made. They are used on the vast majority of the buildings, generally on gabled roofs. The church has tile roofs, but unfortunately these are very obviously machine-made, rather detracting from the building's historic character. On the School alternating bands of plain and shaped tiles are used for decorative effect. The Hall is a notable exception: the roofs are of graduated slates, hipped with lead rolls, and mostly behind parapets. The detached buildings have open cupolas of painted timber with ribbed lead domes. Wrought and cast iron are used for decorative weathervanes and railings.



Architectural Details

There is a clear distinction between the composition, form and detailing of the buildings which reflect national architectural styles, and others in the local vernacular manner such as farm buildings. The church is very largely in the Norman style, with some Victorian Gothic Revival details. Morville Hall has the classical detail typical of many 18th century architect-designed country houses: Tuscan Doric columns and half columns, moulded cornices, parapets and ball finials, rusticated piers and door surrounds, panelled doors and sash windows with glazing bars. The School has good quality Gothic Revival detailing, with a variety of moulded gable parapets, arches, tracery etc.

In contrast other buildings have rather simpler detailing. Top Pool Barn, Garden Cottage, No.30 and the Acton Arms all have gable parapets to the roofs. The majority have plain vertically proportioned openings with segmental arches, but Top Pool Barn has cambered arches, and Morville Farmhouse has some stone lintels and sills to its sash windows. Most original windows are timber casements with glazing bars, but No's. 25 and 30 have iron opening lights, while Garden Cottage has some leaded lights. No.30 has simple timber window hoods and a plain tiled hood over the door, while No.25 has dentil cornices to its windows. Doors range from the simple unpainted plank doors of farm buildings to the painted moulded panels of No.25.



The Character of the Conservation Area

Morville presents an unmistakably English picture of country house, church and small village with historic buildings built of traditional local materials. The principal elements of its strong rural character are the church and Morville Hall set in parkland with the backdrop of the wooded ridge rising behind. They dominate most views of the Conservation Area, and make a particularly powerful impression when first glimpsed descending the hill into the village from the south east. Views from the road westwards towards the church tower and Hall open up from just outside the conservation area but are then closed off abruptly by buildings and trees as the road begins to descend into the village.

From the corner of Haughton Lane the red brick Top Pool Barn rising above the grey stone of the wall along the drive to the Hall is clearly visible ahead. There are attractive roofscape views across Ercall House and No.27 at a lower level, and beyond trees in the middle ground, rising up the slope, the Acton Arms, No.29, the school and Nos.32 and 34, with another significant group of trees around the drive to the hall. The intrusive crash barriers, large street lights along the busy road and concrete and tubular steel railings introduce an unsympathetic urban note.



Towards the bottom of the hill the church and Hall come into sight again with quite dramatic effect. From here almost to the junction there are constantly changing views of them. Along the northern side of the road the variety of historic buildings and the wide spaces between them, gardens and meadow, low stone walls, hedges, shrubs and trees are vital elements of Morville's rural character. Unfortunately this is rather marred by the paving and large car park around the Acton Arms which have an inappropriate hard urban quality.



The junction with Ludlow Road is dominated by the gate piers, walls and trees at the entrance to Morville Hall. Ahead views along the Shrewsbury road are closed by the garden fence and side elevation of No.31, as the road veers northwards out of the village. From the Shrewsbury road there are views

south into the Conservation Area, with glimpses through trees of a cupola at the Hall, the church tower etc.

Ludlow Road is tightly enclosed on its southern side by the stone boundary wall of the hall and the barn beyond, giving it a harder edge than the main road through the village. Between the wall and barn there are intriguing glimpses down the back drive to the outbuildings, the rear of the Hall, and the ridge beyond. The pond with willows and alders on its banks adjacent to the road is a particularly attractive and important landscape feature. Further west along the road there are southerly views of the hedge and wall around the former orchard behind the Hall, the large meadow enclosed by trees along the Mor Brook and the tall slender gable end of Garden Cottage standing isolated among them. These form major elements of the Conservation Area's character.

To the east of Morville Hall the large field around the church has a strong parkland quality which is vital to the house's setting and to the character of the conservation area as a whole. An 18th century haha divides it from the formal forecourt of the house created as part of the Georgian remodelling. To the south the gardens immediately around the house are largely 20th century, with major restoration and development since the late 1980s, but the lines of yews which enclose them and the formal canal at a lower level (possibly formed from mediaeval fishponds) are important survivors of the 18th century layout.

Within the gardens there are varied and attractive views, especially of the wooded ridge forming a backdrop. To the west on rising ground runs an 18th century garden wall. North of this is a large former orchard with remains of two ponds which may also be of mediaeval origin. The area around the Hall is this an important historic landscape which forms the major part of the Conservation Area.

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