

DITTON PRIORS CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

Ditton Priors is a relatively isolated village in a remote open upland area of the District approximately seven miles west of Bridgnorth. The Ditton Priors Conservation Area was designated on 5th April 1982, its boundaries having been drawn to reflect the pre-20th century extent of the village, its relationship with the main local topographic features of hillside and the shallow valley of a small stream.

History

Lying on the northern slopes of Brown Clee Hill, this is a village of considerable antiquity, the place name Ditton possibly originating in the Anglo-Saxon era to mean '*settlement by the hill*'. In 1175 the manor and village came into the ownership of Wenlock Priory, hence the 'Priors' part of the name. Well into the 19th century, most maps identified the village as Priors Ditton.

By the Saxon period it was a well-established settlement, and prior to the Norman Invasion the village and manor were held by Earl Edwin of Mercia (died 1071). By 1086 it was in the ownership of Roger de Montgomery and worth £11 annually, with a recorded population of 38. Much of the surrounding land to the west and south of this isolated village was open field land less formally regulated than was usual in medieval England; the remainder comprised woods and extensive tracts of common waste (ie previously farmed land). Brown Clee Hill's slopes were mainly used for grazing.

Nearby Abdon Burf was the site of one of the most impressive Iron Age hill forts in Shropshire until destroyed by quarrying, apparently noted for its stone-faced ramparts



enclosing a 7 hectare site. Here there was a considerable amount of stone extraction, to the extent that a light railway line was constructed (1907-08) to carry away the material to Cleobury Mortimer. At Ditton, some 200 men were employed cutting and crushing the dhu stone (dolerite) for use as building stone and railway ballast. By the early 19th century there was a brickworks in the area, but obviously the ease of acquiring stone locally made the latter the preferred building material.

In 1939 an extensive Royal Naval Armaments Depot was established just outside the village (operating 1939-65), but by 1971 part of the site was given over to industrial use, mainly light engineering.

Over the centuries, this small village slowly evolved to serve an extensive though sparsely settled rural area, and consequently is the largest settlement for several miles around, although it has never reached a sufficient size to provide the range of services, trades or professions usually expected of a larger village or town. In the 18th century, most of the properties in the village consisted of cottages and farmhouses serving the manorial estate. Alone amongst the settlements in the parish, Ditton experienced growth in the 20th century. Between the wars, 16 dwellings were built for quarrymen

near Hall Farm, and five using locally cast concrete for county council smallholdings. By the late 1980's the number of residences was increasing through refurbishments and barn conversions: Ditton Farm and its outbuildings, for instance, were converted to 14 dwellings. The result of this steady growth is a settlement with a wide variety of building styles in its housing stock.

Landscape

The countryside in this area is distinguished by rolling broadbacked hills and deep folds through which streams drain off Brown Clee Hill: thick hedging quarters the fields into the small parcels upon which sheep mostly graze. The road system in such a remote location is confined to little more than a network of narrow winding lanes (typically lined with hedges atop earthen banks) working their way across the impressively undulating landscape.

It is within this context that the main part of the village is positioned on the southern slope of a broad ridge narrowing and dropping to the east, separating the valleys of two brooks that further east combine with others to become Rea Brook. The southern half of the village Conservation Area is on rising ground across the brook.



South west of Ditton the ground continues to rise steeply to Abdon Burf, the northernmost of the two peaks of Brown Clee Hill, and at 545 metres the highest point in Shropshire.

These significant topographic features of hillside and stream valleys dominate the setting of the Conservation Area, the gradients directly influencing the distribution and orientation of buildings within it. Trees and hedges are also inherent and characteristic features of the Conservation Area and its wider setting, with large mature examples of the former having a presence from every viewpoint, the latter densely lining the winding lanes and frequently restricting longer views.



To the west and south west the settlement is bounded by the ground rising noticeably to form the mass of Brown Clee Hill, which overshadows the whole village. On these slopes, individual and small groups of dwellings are scattered to take advantage of the views across Ditton Priors and the countryside beyond. To the south and east lie the industrial estate and the former Royal Naval Armaments Depot. North of the Conservation Area boundary there is 20th century housing development, which then gives way to open countryside.

Pattern of Settlement

Although the traditional focus of this village is on the ancient parish church, the more widely-drawn boundaries of the Conservation Area take in a relatively large area. As a consequence it can be divided into two distinct parts separated by the brook running east-west through the middle of the Conservation Area.

In the northern section the medieval parish church and its graveyard are prominently sited at the crest of the shallow valley slope, with an informal line of stone buildings



loosely arranged to form an arc to the immediate south and east of the churchyard. The most prominent of this group facing the church is the public house known as The Howard Arms Hotel, an 18th century grade II listed building. It is here in these surroundings, where the buildings create a definite sense of enclosure around the churchyard, that there is the strongest impression of a historically coherent village setting. To the north side of the churchyard is the group of traditional farm buildings known as

Church Farm, recently converted to residential development.

Due to the very loose disposition of dwellings within the historic core area of the village until the 20th century, there has been significant subsequent opportunity for infill development that has to some extent diluted the overall special architectural and historic interest of what is now the Conservation Area. Such modern developments have varying visual impact, as several are distinctly suburban in nature and layout and are frequently in sharp contrast to the rural character of the more ancient village development. Furthermore, the northern half of the Conservation Area is also surrounded by properties constructed in the 20th century, their suburban character and appearance blurring the boundary between historic village and open countryside.

South of the brook the settlement character is distinctly different, this southern section of the Conservation Area comprising a large open field and surrounding the field a wider scattering of dwellings off a network of lanes. The dispersed nature of the housing allows for no sense of enclosure, but more a sense of individual properties in a wider landscape. It is in this southern half of the Conservation Area, where the opportunity for infill development has not apparently occurred to the same extent as north



of the brook, that the traditional relationship between village and countryside is still clearly evident and worthy of retention as the setting of the Conservation Area.

Buildings

Many of the dwellings in the village, including those converted from agricultural uses, are essentially unassuming structures largely undistinguished by any obvious architectural merit. However, in this modesty and honesty lies much of the character and interest of the Conservation Area. It is notable that there is little difference between

the architectural treatment of domestic buildings and agricultural buildings – the simple forms and use of locally-won materials in very basic utilitarian ways to display a straightforwardness in the local vernacular tradition. The dull colouring of brown and grey dhu stone under the dark brown of clay tiling is the dominant impression for all buildings and walling.

By far the most significant building in the village itself, both from an architectural and historic point of view, has to be the Grade B listed parish church of St. John the Baptist. A mainly 13th century rubblestone built structure, it is a rather modest and not unattractive building of steep low-eaved roofs, one over aisle and nave and another over the chancel, with a weatherboarded broach spire typical of this part of southern Shropshire. The few lancet windows and overall simplicity of form and mass render this into a decidedly austere building, with little display of ornamentation or ostentation to enliven the structure. The church in the centre of its stonewalled churchyard is the focus of the northern part of the conservation area.



The Howard Arms Hotel is the highest status secular building in the Conservation Area.



An L-shaped house from the 18th century with a long low range to the north side and taller gabled wing facing the road from behind a hedge and iron fencing. Even this building has no real architectural pretensions.

Church Farm House is another of the notable buildings in this group; a 17th century building in a style typical of this era, the massive stone chimneystack is the defining feature.

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. Stone in a strictly limited variety of finishes and dressings appears commonly throughout the Conservation Area. Not surprisingly in an area where stone quarrying used to be a major industry, the principal building material for the older properties would only be stone, although most of the traditional building materials and finishes are in evidence, often in combination on the same building.

The difficulty of working the local dhu stone, a hard volcanic rock in shades of grey, black, brown and speckled with green lichen, means it can only be laid in rough rubble courses of small blocks and slabs. The result is that even the larger dwellings, such as The Orchards or The Hollies, have all the appearances and architectural character of the more humble cottages. The vast majority of the dwellings are rather simple structures in a vernacular style, so the building materials tend to be used in a rather straightforward, utilitarian way, even for more high status dwellings. In this context, therefore, the decorative use of detailing or materials is as noticeable as it is rare.

The boundary and retaining walls to the churchyard and elsewhere are more of the same randomly shaped and coursed stone with copings of jagged slabs on end.

Stone and brick are also used together, the brick in various hues being utilised for later extensions or repairs to the original property. A common local feature is using redbrick around the doors and windows as contrasting detailing. Most chimneys are typically expressed as small brick stacks on the ridgeline. Stone-built stacks tend to the massive on gable ends.

Roofing materials are generally confined to the use of dark brown clay tiling, with plain ridges, eaves and verges.

Architectural Details

The traditional but subtly varied detailing of buildings is an important element of Ditton Priors' visual and historic interest. Decoration is limited or sparingly used, almost to the point of austerity. Even the church, normally the most decorated of ancient buildings, is all but devoid of decoration.



Some features are common to the majority of buildings. Roofs are almost always end gabled with the ridgeline parallel to the road, mostly with plain verges, roof pitches of over 40 degrees and of moderate height and bulk, most of one and a half storeys with very small dormer windows; there are few deep-plan buildings. Dormers can be high in the roof slope, or break through the eaves line. Chimneys, whether ridge or end, plain or ornamented, are an important feature of the roofscape and are almost all made of brick. The

most noticeable chimney in the locality is evident on the Church Farm House, a massive stone asymmetric structure topped with a redbrick shaft on the roadside gable end.

Openings are generally small and vertically proportioned and either sash or casement windows with a variety of glazing bar patterns are used: the latter are more prevalent. Those windows that do survive are of various types, generally of painted timber, though the use of brown stained timber is an extremely common, if non-traditional treatment. A few buildings still retain their old metal casement windows. 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 relative 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 with no glazing, of

varnished timber or painted finish. Some buildings have inappropriate 20th century replacement doors.

The Character of the Conservation Area

In spite of the prevalence of the 20th century housing throughout the village, Ditton Priors still has a strong and, from certain approaches, almost unspoilt historic rural character. The part within the Conservation Area (particularly the southern half) has the appearance of a dispersed upland hamlet of scattered buildings rather than anything as substantial or coherent as a village.

Its character and appearance are shaped by its location on a sloping site in rolling upland 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 a limited range of materials. The climate has a direct influence on the local architecture: buildings have small windows and appear to turn their backs against the prevailing winds. It is small scale and intimate in feeling, attended throughout



by the dominating presence of Brown Clee Hill. Tall and substantial hedging defines many boundaries, acting as windbreaks in the bleakness of upland winters.

From the eastern approach along Station Road the ground rises from the brook valley up to the ridge, the road lined with banked hedging then giving way to a string of houses; some 19th century cottages of brown stone with red brick detailing, interspersed with late 20th century brick built and early examples of concrete panelled



white painted properties from 1919. The view at the T-junction is closed by an oblique view of the parish church and trees between two gable ends. To the right Derrington Road passes to the front of a short terrace of cottages in stone, timber framing and brick infill, before heading off into open countryside beyond a group of 20th century bungalows and houses. The Church Farm development adjacent to the churchyard on the corner of Vicarage Road is a reminder of the original agricultural

functions of the village, although in the conversion works the buildings have acquired some distracting domestic touches. Vicarage Road is a narrow winding lane that passes between high dense hedges, gaps in which offer glimpses of the church spire surrounded by trees.

St. John's Court forms part of the line of buildings around the church, the sense of enclosure created focussing on the church giving the impression almost of a cathedral close. These stone built small groups of houses vary in their building line; some straight

onto the road's edge, some set behind a small grass verge as they follow the curve of the lane around the churchyard. Leaving the lych gate to the graveyard isolated by the roadside, the late 20th century vicarage on the right set back in its own grounds breaks the sense of enclosure, which the three modern houses to the north of the church cannot restore before reaching the T-junction with Vicarage Road, the line of which forms the northern boundary of the Conservation Area. Vicarage Road is a fairly narrow lane that winds between the locally typical high hedges. Gaps created in the hedging to access the surrounding fields offer glimpses of the church spire amid the trees.



Back by the church, the road (South Road) leads southwards past The Howard Arms and the ground falls away towards the brook. Here the lane is lined by a scattering of cottages, before curving around a bend and then climbing again out of the village as it skirts around the mass of Brown Clee Hill following the contour lines of the slope.



Beyond the brook the dwellings are characterised by appearing at the side of the road as small groups of buildings set in a wider, more open landscape. The space gives prominence to the rather grand village tap on the roadside. Dated 184?, it is a gothic arch of sandstone ashlar construction built by the Boyne family, who donated it to the village. It is arguably the most architecturally sophisticated structure in Ditton Priors.

The south western limit of the Conservation Area is defined by Chapel Cottage and the now converted Chapel, both built of rubblestone and separated from the main part of Ditton Priors. Looking back from the higher ground are views northwards down across the bulk of the village: the rooftops of the houses are visually isolated by the tree groups and lines of hedging, with the open rolling countryside forming the backdrop.

Shropshire Council
Historic Environment Team
Shirehall
Abbey Foregate
Shrewsbury
Shropshire
SY2 6ND

01743 252586

historic.environment@shropshire.gov.uk