

*Ellesmere Port & Neston Borough Council  
Planning Services*

# **Neston Conservation Area Character Appraisal**

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## **Preface**

The Planning Committee of Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Council approved this document for publication, on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2001. Its publication followed an extensive public consultation exercise carried out in September and October 2001.

Letters were sent out to all Neston Councillors, including the County Councillor, Neston Chamber of Trade, Neston Civic Society, Burton and Neston Local History Society, The County Planning Officer, both the County and the District Estates Departments and the 14 planning agents responsible for submitting over 25% of the planning applications in the Borough. A press release was also issued and newspaper articles appeared in the Chester Chronicle and the Daily Post. Copies of the draft appraisal were available from the Planning Department Reception, Neston Library and Neston Town Hall and over 200 copies of the draft appraisals were distributed.

The Authority received eight responses to the consultation exercise and the draft was amended in the light of those comments. No negative comments were received and all respondents supported the aims of the appraisal.

## **Introduction**

- 1.1 This document aims to provide an assessment of the special architectural and historic interest of Neston Conservation Area. It forms supplementary planning guidance providing more detail and guidance to the Ellesmere Port and Neston Borough Local Plan and Policy ENV14 in particular. It will help to guide decisions on planning applications in the Conservation Area, and assist applicants in drawing up schemes. It will also be used to formulate proposals for the preservation and enhancement of the Conservation Area. The Local Plan has been prepared having regard to the County Structure Plan Policy R1, National planning Guidance such as that issued by English Heritage.
- 1.2 The appraisal is not intended to be a comprehensive plot by plot survey and omission of any particular building, feature or space should not be taken to imply that it is of no interest.
- 1.3 This document will hopefully raise awareness of the special qualities of the Conservation Area, so that as Neston continues to evolve, it does so in a sympathetic way and the pleasing character of the area is maintained for future generations.

## **2 Physical Setting**

- 2.1 Neston lies close to the south-western shore of the Wirral Peninsular on the old western route up the Wirral. Originally the River Dee was closer to Neston, however silting of the river has since created a large area of marshland.
- 2.2 Two considerations appear to have influenced early settlers. First, Neston was a place where the underlying Triassic sandstone was exposed, providing a solid foundation for building. The principal road in the town, runs north-south along the top of a shallow sandstone ridge. The second was the existence of a small stream that runs underneath Bridge Street to the south of the town centre.

## **3 Settlement Development**

- 3.1 The first documentary evidence of Neston was contained in the Domesday Book. Medieval Neston was essentially a small agricultural settlement with some port activities. The settlement was packed into what is now the town centre with farms located on the outskirts. Villagers would have farmed communal fields split into strips. A 17<sup>th</sup> Century barn can still be found at the Brewers Arms, possibly built on the site of an earlier barn.
- 3.2 It was the construction of the 'New Quay' in the mid-sixteenth century that provided the wealth for the growth and rebuilding of the town. From that period until the early nineteenth century Neston was the largest settlement on Wirral. The town acted as a transshipment port for Chester, goods being put onto smaller vessels while passengers were transferred to a coach service. The resulting trade, the travellers to Ireland and the growth of supporting services turned Elizabethan Neston from a village to a bustling town. In addition to the Irish trade was a significant trade with the Baltic States, importing timber, pitch and fish, and with the wine exporting nations of France and Spain. Exports included tanned calf-skins and salt.
- 3.3 By the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, shipping had moved to nearby Parkgate, due to silting of the river. Neston remained a busy town, supporting an early tourist, public house and brewing trade. The majority of the historic buildings in the Conservation Area date from this time and later.
- 3.4 The coming of the railway, in 1866, determined the present residential character of the town. Nineteenth century redevelopment was undertaken in the town centre and the peripheries, especially to the north and west. Residential development during the twentieth century continued to expand the town in all directions.
- 3.5 In the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century the largest employer in the area was the Denna (Denhall) Colliery. Commercial coal mining began in 1757 near Ness and Little Neston and continued intermittently until 1927. Other trades undertaken in 1834 included bakers, blacksmiths, shoemakers, butchers and maltsters. In 1850 the retail shops within Neston included grocers, bakers and tailors all of

whom were located on or around the High Street. Neston residents could also shop at the market. A market has existed since the town gained an official charter in 1728

- 3.6 The Conservation Area occupies the area that has become Neston Town Centre as well as its immediate surroundings. As well as being a commercial and shopping centre, with a bustling Friday Market, the Conservation Area has a significant residential population in houses and flats.

#### **4 Townscape**

- 4.1 The Conservation Area has two distinct characters, defined by the historic street pattern.
- 4.2 The core area of the town centre, from Mill Street and Church Street in the west to the car parks in the east, was the location of the earliest medieval settlement. Although this area has been rebuilt many times, the original street pattern and outline of medieval tenements still exist. Now Georgian, Victorian and some modern properties jostle for space along crowded roads and in hidden courts. Along the High Street and around The Cross can be found a mix of shops, homes, pubs and public buildings largely dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries.
- 4.3 The hub of the town is The Cross a triangular shaped junction that was formerly the location of the market. This area is tightly packed with individually designed buildings displaying a jumble of roof shapes. Full of quirky details such as The Tower and the Bushell Fountain. The Cross bisects the High Street, the principal road in the town, that straddles the sandstone ridge. High Street is generally tightly packed with two and three storey buildings although properties on the western side south of the Parish Church are detached and set back amongst landscaping. It is thought that this part of the High Street was first built upon after the rest of the medieval core, a result of encroachment on Comrades Field, and this accounts for its lower density. Parkgate Road leaves The Cross to the west and is also tightly packed with two storey properties until it reaches the lower density development west of Mill Street (see below).
- 4.4 The early medieval settlement stretched to the railway line in the east and included the back-land area east of the High Street (The railway line is further east than the current boundary of the conservation area). As a result this area is thought likely to contain archaeological remains. In modern times this area has a symbiotic relationship with the High Street accommodating shops, the market and car parks. The character of the High Street area is, in part, dependent upon what happens in this part of the town.
- 4.5 To the north of the Conservation Area, Park Street contains two 18<sup>th</sup> Century terraces of housing. The terraces are vernacular rather than fashionable but, never the less, are of an imposing scale and retain pleasing period details such as doors, windows and elegant porches. To the east of Park Street, on

- Liverpool Road, can be found a small area of small “pre byelaw” houses built to accommodate Neston’s nineteenth century working classes.
- 4.6 In the 18th Century the town outgrew its medieval boundaries, particularly to the west of Mill Street. This is the secondary residential area beyond the central core. The dominant properties, in this area, tend to be substantial and set within their own grounds with mature planting and substantial sandstone boundary walls, creating an arcadian feel quite different to the densely packed town centre. The lanes in this part of town are semi rural in character, narrow, curving with sandstone walls overhung by trees and vegetation.
  - 4.7 The intensity of human activity is still determined by the historical layout of the town. Retailing and commercial activity are concentrated in the core of the former medieval settlement. Traffic both vehicular and pedestrian is channelled through the High Street and Parkgate Road and these areas are a hive of activity during retail opening hours.
  - 4.8 The buildings along the main roads in the core of the town are very closely packed together concentrating traffic, noise and activity to the main roads. It is noticeable that immediately behind the main roads the town takes on a different quality, quiet, residential and pedestrian friendly. The pace of life slows down considerably away from the main roads
  - 4.9 The organic growth of the town has created a spiders web of roads leading out from the centre. Even the busiest roads are narrow and some of the smaller roads little more than footpaths. The informal road network, the intimate layout of historic buildings and their often lenticular building line has created a series of distinct enclosures. Buildings, such as the Parish Church, and Wayside Cottage, on Parkgate Road, can be found projecting into the road while in other areas, vistas have been closed by strategically placed buildings, such as the Methodist Church. The resulting character of the town is intimate, as views within the town are generally short although this is contrasted with the occasional very long views to the west of the town across the estuary to the Welsh Hills.
  - 4.10 Despite the bustle on the main routes in the Conservation Area many of the roads in Neston are quite narrow, crooked and without footpaths. Traffic speeds are slowed down by this, to such an extent that many routes are spaces to enjoy and contemplate rather than unsightly and hazardous barriers to pedestrians that engineered roads can easily become.
  - 4.11 It is also noticeable how a network of pedestrian links (weints) provides well-used shortcuts, quiet and withdrawn from the bustle of the main roads. These weints are generally narrow (2m’s) but widen out were they meet former courts, such as Golden Lion Yard or other small areas of open space, such as the gardens at Hargreave House.
  - 4.12 Throughout the town the architecture is generally small scale, simple and vernacular, rather than polite, with a strong vertical emphasis. A number of architectural styles can be found in the conservation area although by far the largest single group are vernacular or vernacular revival buildings. Buildings

tend to be two or three storeys high, although public buildings and buildings in back-land locations are sometimes single storey. The roofscape is very important and very complicated, often a jumble of chimneys, gables and dormers, short roof slopes in a variety of planes.

- 4.13 Architectural details such as windows tend to be small scale often with Georgian panes. There are a number of well detailed and attractive Victorian shop-fronts remaining. Most shop-fronts tend to be narrow, reflecting the legacy of narrow medieval plots and Victorian tastes. There can also be found quirky features such as sundials, date-stones, and even an Imperial German emblem mounted as decoration on buildings.
- 4.14 Even the public buildings in the town are of a modest scale. The Town Hall (by David Walker architect) and the Library (HF Russell, Civil Engineer) are small and simple, when compare to their big city rivals, but this is entirely appropriate in a small market town. The Parish Church although large, is low profile, and its tower is positioned away from the High Street and softened by trees. On The Cross, the tallest building and focal point is The Tower, a tall narrow Victorian shop and tower built from pressed red brick.
- 4.15 Neston buildings tend to be constructed of local red Triassic sandstone, local dark red brick, pressed red brick, lime render or pebbledash and Welsh slate. Other, imported, materials have been used in the conservation area with various degrees of success, however these materials do not contribute to the character of the area.
- 4.16 Some 20<sup>th</sup> century developments have been built, such as the housing development at Churchill Way which have cut across the historic grain of the town and been built from alien materials. These developments do not generally contribute to the character of the area although their impact has sometimes been minimised by their back-land location and Churchill Way itself is a quiet area away from the busyness of the High Street.

## **5 Landscape**

- 5.1 There is little planned open space within the Conservation Area. The only substantial area contains the churchyard and the adjacent field known as Comrades Field, currently used as a paddock and occasionally for the Village Fair. Comrade's Field, although close to the town centre, has a sense of rural tranquillity and gently undulating openness, confined by trees, hedgerows and sandstone retaining walls. Smaller pocket parks can be found adjacent to the Library, between Denhall and Hargreave Houses and behind the Town Hall. Modern landscaping can be found at the junction of Mill Street and Park Street, on the site of a former sandstone quarry.
- 5.2 The former medieval core of the Conservation Area is very densely built up with little soft landscaping. However within a short distance to the south west of the town centre can be found open fields, running down to the estuary. This area appears to have been preserved due to its being isolated by the railway line and, more recently, the existence of the Greenbelt. From the busy High

Street it is possible to walk through the graveyard and past Comrades Field to open countryside within 2 minutes. The proximity of the town centre to open countryside, of high visual quality, is remarkable. It provides an important green lung for the densely developed town centre. This link, and the spectacular long views over the estuary towards Wales, give the town a spacious, breezy feel despite the dense development in the centre.

- 5.3 The west of the Conservation Area was initially developed after the medieval period and the resulting density of development is much lower. This area is characterised by substantial 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century dwellings set in large, private gardens with mature landscaping. In this part of the conservation area, trees overhanging sandstone and brick walls are an important characteristic.

## **6 Historic Interest**

- 6.1 Neston was first recorded in the Domesday Book and the core of the town still retains its medieval layout although few above ground structures can be found. The tower of the Parish Church is the only medieval structure remaining. Until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century Neston was a small agricultural settlement. From the 16<sup>th</sup> Century onwards Port activities became increasingly important and the town grew and was repeatedly rebuilt from this time. With the exception of the church tower the oldest buildings date from around 1700 when the town enjoyed the boom associated with the successful harbour suburb of Parkgate. Throughout its history the town acted as a market place for the surrounding townships, a role it still enjoys today. Neston's place in history is generally a modest one. The buildings are generally small in scale and vernacular in style. Events of national importance occurred elsewhere and Neston residents were rarely anything other than of local significance. Neston's interest is as a record of ordinary uneventful lives that nevertheless managed to create an attractive and intriguing historic town

### **Sources**

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