

Willaston Conservation Area

Character Appraisal

1 Introduction

This document aims to provide an assessment of the special architectural and historic interest of Willaston Conservation Area. It forms supplementary planning guidance to the adopted 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 and Regional Planning Guidance.

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.

This document will hopefully raise awareness of the special qualities of the Conservation Area, so that as Willaston continues to evolve, it does so in a sympathetic way and the pleasing character of the conservation area is maintained for future generations.

2 Physical Setting

Willaston lies in the centre of the Wirral peninsular 13km to the north of Chester. The settlement is located on undulating ground falling gently from west to east. The centre of the village is 45m above sea level. The underlying rock is red Triassic (Bunter) sandstone.

3 Settlement Development

Willaston was almost certainly founded in Anglo Saxon times. The origin of the name is generally accepted to have derived from Wiglaf's tun which means farm or enclosure of a man called Wiglaf. Reference was made to the Hundred of Willaston in the Domesday Book.

In 1120 the whole of Wirral was made into a forest – an area set aside for hunting by the nobility, and subject to the Forest Law. It was

disafforested in 1376, partly in response to a petition by the citizens of Chester, complaining at the activities of the criminals who had taken refuge in the forest. During this period and beyond, Willaston passed from the de Orreby family into the hands of the Ardernes, Mainwarings and Trussells, under the overlordship of the Stanleys, before the Trussell heiress married John de Vere, later the 15th Earl of Oxford, in 1507. Seventy-three years later, when his grandson, Edward, the 17th earl, was forced by his spendthrift lifestyle to sell much of his property, Willaston was bought by Sir Christopher Hatton, one of Elizabeth I's favourites and soon to be Lord Chancellor of England. In due course, in 1616–19, Hatton's heir sold Willaston to a number of the freeholders. These men and their successors, who numbered between eighteen and thirty-three at any one time, then exercised the lordship of the manor in rotation – a most unusual arrangement – until 1907, when the manor court, by then an anachronism, lapsed. One of the most prominent freeholders was Hugh Bennet, whose family built The Old Hall.

While the character and extent of medieval Willaston is unknown, the pattern of development in the 17th and early 18th centuries may still be seen in the remaining buildings of the period. They are The Old Hall (date stone 1558 but unlikely to be earlier than C17th), Ashtree Farmhouse (early C17th with cross wing dated 1697), The Farm (1616), The Old Red Lion (1631), Corner House Farm (1637), White House Farm (early C18th), The Nags Head (1735 but much altered in the early C20th), Cherry Brow Farm (1739) and Smithy Farm (C18th).

More than half the buildings mentioned above are farmhouses situated, in typical medieval fashion, within the village core. The farmland would have been dispersed in small strips in communal fields, in the surrounding countryside. The enclosing of the communal fields, from the 16th Century onwards, gathered farmland together into self contained farm units. Despite enclosure of the fields physical evidence shows that the farmhouses and barns often remained in the village. Agricultural associations continued well beyond the end of the 19th century. Increasing prosperity was shown by the building, in 1901, of the Village Institute incorporating a reading room and library.

Willaston remained largely a quiet agricultural settlement until the early C20th. Possibly because the village was situated between Wirral's main routes, it grew only slowly in spite of the arrival of the railway in 1866 and the continuing expansion of Merseyside. During the early 20th Century the village absorbed considerable residential development.

4 Townscape

The conservation area can be split into 5 townscape character zones (See attached map).

Zone A The Green

The focal point of the village is The Green, with its large beech tree planted to celebrate the silver jubilee of King George V. Two sides of The Green are enclosed by former farmhouses, tightly packed onto the road frontage, with barns immediately behind. The buildings are a mix of one, two and two and a half storey high, generally set back behind sandstone garden walls. Of the buildings around The Green, The Old Hall still dominates, built of warm coloured sandstone. The half-timbered "Old Red Lion" stands out boldly as does the Willaston Memorial Hall, Edwardian but built in vernacular revival style and utilising local sandstone and black and white timber framing. The brick building occupied by the HSBC Bank is also very attractive and a number of other 17th and 18th century buildings can still be found facing The Green. Modern buildings now occupy the south and east sides of The Green.

Zone B South West of The Green

To the south west of the Green is an area of tightly built up yet informally placed cottages that front directly onto small lanes and paths. The cottages range in age from the C17th, C18th, C19th as well as modern buildings. The buildings in this area are generally two storey and vernacular in style separated by sandstone walls and unruly hedgerows.

The lanes and paths between the buildings are narrow and junctions tight, as a result, while cars are not banned from the area, the speed of traffic is much reduced and pedestrians can move freely in this area without pavements. The informal layout of the houses has resulted in the creation of a series of spaces enclosed by projecting buildings and walls, which contributes to an atmosphere of intimate informality.

Zone C Hadlow Road

The principal roads leading out of Willaston have long been the location for low density ribbon development. Some of the properties along Hadlow Road are of considerable age with Ashtree Farm dating from the C17th. There are also a number of C18th and C19th century buildings, including farmhouses, rows of terraces and the Victorian, former railway station which has been preserved in its mid C20th condition. There has also been a considerable amount of modern infill. This has been a process that has been ongoing for a considerable time.

Hadlow Road is generally straight but is diverted around minor kinks in the road. Projecting buildings, such as Ashtree Farm, make distant views along the road impossible. The buildings are generally set back behind sandstone walls (some of which are dry stone) which protect

small gardens. There is considerable amount of greenery along the road with mature trees and hedges.

Zone D Neston Road including the Shopping Area

While individual shops can be found in dispersed locations around the village, the majority of shops are concentrated along Neston Road, opposite the parish church and close to The Green. There is a bustling atmosphere in what has become an important meeting point for the village. The shop fronts are generally modern although there are some period style details. Opposite to the shops can be found the parish church, the many trees in the graveyard helping to maintain the rural openness of the village. To the west of the shops, Neston Road becomes relatively densely packed, occupied by C19th terraces the Church Hall, the red bricked Methodist church and the former Church Farm with associated modern housing. This tight canyon of buildings quickly gives way to a more generous layout to the west.

Zone E Neston Road' west of Elm Road

This part of the road is very similar to Hadlow Road in that it contains a number of period properties of various ages that were once widely dispersed along the road but have since become infilled by modern development, designed with little regard to the character of the area. The older properties include Broadlake Lodge (late C18th), The Old Tap house (mid C19th or earlier) The White Cottage and Rose Cottage (early C18th) and the early C19th farmhouse known as Mill Cottage.

General

Building materials

Willaston buildings tend to be constructed of local red Triassic sandstone, red-brown bricks, Welsh slate, and render or pebble dash generally painted off white. There are also a small number of timber framed buildings within the conservation area. Other imported materials have been used in the conservation area, with various degrees of success. However these materials do not generally contribute to the character of the conservation area which is largely brick, sandstone, timber framing and Welsh slate.

Style

Most buildings in the village are vernacular, which is to say of the local style, evolved over time and best suited to local conditions and materials.

Willaston has a distinct architectural character deriving from the strong simple shapes and mellow materials of the old farmhouses and their outbuildings.

The farm buildings still form the most important visual element in the village scene.

Density

In the area surrounding The Green, the village has been very densely developed with farmhouses fronting directly onto The Green and barns located immediately behind. Away from The Green there has been ribbon development, over a long period of time, particularly along Hadlow Road and Neston Road. Period buildings were built at very low densities allowing a considerable amount of infill, which has diluted the historic character of the conservation area.

Building Heights

Building heights tend to be quite low, the majority of buildings being only two storey in height and the tallest only being 2.5 storeys. Even the parish church is a low building, simply a nave and chancel, with no tower or steeple but merely a small bellcote.

Urban Spaces

Willaston is unusual amongst Cheshire villages not only in having a village green, but in having one which was, until recently, rectangular in shape. The Green, or some rectangular feature, existed from at least the 17th and early 18th centuries, because many of the buildings around its four sides date from that period.

Trees do much to enhance the village and create a sense of enclosure.

Views into and out of the area

As a result of the gently undulating, generally flat landscape, thick hedgerows and the low profile of buildings within the village, there are limited views either into or out of the village.

5 Landscape

The surrounding landscape is gently undulating, It supports mixed but predominantly dairy farmland within mature hedgerows.

6 Historic Interest

The principal historic interest in Willaston lies in its collection of period buildings and its pre Inclosure layout.

Several famous persons are connected with Willaston. It was in the hands of the Crown, for various reasons, in the reigns of Richard III, Henry VII, Elizabeth I and James. Sir William Stanley of Holt, who is reputed to have recovered Richard III's crown for Henry of Richmond at the battle of Bosworth, and became one of the richest men in England before his execution in 1495, possessed Willaston 'in reversion'. In 1580 Sir Christopher Hatton deliberately bought Willaston and owned it until his death in 1591. He was Captain of the Queen's Bodyguard, Vice-Chamberlain, member of the Privy Council, Knight of the Garter, Chancellor of Oxford University and Lord Chancellor of England. It was in Hatton's honour that Drake renamed his famous ship the *Golden Hind*, after the crest in his coat of arms.

7 The Local Economy

Willaston is now principally a commuter village although some employment remains in the local shops and pubs which serve the village.

8 Proposed Extension to the Conservation Area

When surveying the conservation area it became apparent that there are a number of period buildings lying outside the conservation area on Neston Road. The buildings are of mixed quality and the spaces between infilled with modern development of modern character. While the area is considered to be of modest value it is equivalent in value to roads already within the conservation area such as Hadlow Road.

Sources

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3. EC Bryan, *Willaston's Heritage* (second edition, David Morris), Willaston Residents' and Countryside Society, 1997'
4. Gordon Cullin *The Concise Townscape* 1971
5. Revised List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest, Urban district of Neston: department of Culture Media and Sport 1999
6. David Morris, 'Willaston – New Light on an Old Wirral Village', in *Cheshire History*, Vol. 5, Spring 1980, quoting original sources

