

MEARS ASHBY CONSERVATION AREA

CHARACTER APPRAISAL

1. INTRODUCTION

Mears Ashby Conservation Area was designated in January 1977, but no associated character appraisal was produced at the time as relevant government guidance did not require it. However, all conservation areas now need such appraisal documents in order to properly identify the particular characteristics that it is desired to preserve and enhance in accordance with the provisions of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

2. ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT

- 2.1 Mears Ashby is a village located approximately 5 miles to the west of the town of Wellingborough, lying in the centre of its parish where four main roads converge: that from Northampton enters the south side and a road crossing the parish from east to west connects the village with Wilby and Sywell.
- 2.2 Higher parish land in the north and east is covered in boulder clay and rises to a height of 122 metres above sea level. A band of lower estuarine sands and clays separates this from the slightly lower areas of Northampton sand. The latter predominates in the west and south and is cut by the steep-sided valleys of south south east-flowing streams where the upper lias clay is exposed down to a height of 76 metre above sea level.
- 2.3 The creation of one such stream by this local geology, the Swanspool Brook (known locally as Bell's Brook), flowing through the village centre, coupled with the availability of a series of adjacent springs and a plentiful supply of well water, appears to be a key factor in the settlement's siting in this particular location.
- 2.4 Prior to the Norman Conquest, Mears Ashby was part of a Saxon Estate owned by the theyn¹ Bondi. The place-name "Ash-by" or "Ash-tree by" relates to a "farm by the trees" and its early purpose was to supply timber for Bondi's wider estate.^{2 3}
- 2.5 At the time of the Domesday Book (1086) the village is recorded as comprising 20 households and a manor. The total population was, therefore, perhaps 100, growing crops in the arable land and grazing animals beside the streams. The

¹ A knight's attendant or follower

² The suffix "by" means a farmstead, indicating a Danish presence.

³ W G Callis *Mears Ashby: From Ice Age to Space Age*, 1991 (unpublished).

farmland would have been on the lighter soils to the south while the area to the north was still extensively forested. There would have been sufficient space for that population on the east side of the village brook.

- 2.6 In the first centuries after the Conquest, the village grew to its present shape of many lanes and small paddocks. Perhaps the earliest development was a lane linking two Roman sites (to north and south) making today's Wellingborough Road. This had a string of crofts along its east side like any village street.
- 2.7 Two separate manors were formed in this period. Whilst it is not clear from records which came first, an Elizabethan survey⁴ refers, firstly, to the "Church Close" (land north of the churchyard, which was much smaller then) "whereon stood the north manor of the lord." The site of the church may have been chosen for its defensive position relative to the bank of the stream and perhaps the first lord after the Conquest settled there and put up a small wooden church beside his home, later building a bigger manor house a little to the north. Church Street from that point to North Street is well-sunken, showing great age. It would lead from the north manor house to the farm complex (Manor Farm) of that owner.⁵
- 2.8 A royal commission survey⁶ refers to a small rectangular pond in the valley bottom "much altered by recent landscaping, bounded by a massive earthen dam 2 metres high on its downstream side which is thought to be medieval in origin." The pond, still in existence today in the grounds of the present Manor House (on Manor Road), lies approximately 50 metres west of Church Close and may have been associated with the original North Manor House.
- 2.9 With regard to the South Manor House the royal commission survey refers to "Home Close", west of Dale Farm/Dale Close and opposite the Griffin's Head public house, and a large square enclosure in the centre bounded by scarpes and banks up to 1.5 metres high. The Vaux survey (of which the royal commission appears to have been unaware), however, reveals this as the site of the South Manor House comprising a hall and parlour of 5.5 bays, milk house, kitchen, gelding house, store house, stable all of 6 bays, plus another stable, rye/hay barns of 7 bays, etc. in an estimated 3.5 acre site. William Callis feels that this site is "likely to be of great antiquity" and, as the location of the homestead of the very first head of the community, was in fact the earlier of the two manorial sites.
- 2.10 The village appears to have gradually developed in a westward direction. Several embanked and scarped closes project beyond the existing house plots

⁴ Survey of the Manor of Ashbie Maris, 1577 for the Rt Hon Wm Vaux of Harrowden. Fenland Field Officer, Cambridgeshire Archaeological Committee: 1577 Manorial Survey. At that time William Vaux held the lordship of Mears Ashby.

⁵ W G Callis op cit

⁶ Royal Commission for the Historic Monuments of England, Vol 2, p109. 1979.

along the steep valley side immediately west of the church, presumably former closes now abandoned.⁷ Later, as the population grew, the stream was crossed and another street, today's Manor Road, was added running north-south.⁸

2.11 The village's place-name is thought to have evolved from the early Asbi (Domesday, 1086), through Essebi (1166), Aisbei (1176), Northesseby (1220, probably intended to distinguish it from Castle Ashby to the south), Esseby Mares (1281, marking the addition of the personal surname of Robert de Mares whom king Henry III granted/gave ownership of the Ashby Manor (north half) in 1242), Mares Assheby (1297), Ass Meeres Asshebye (1578), Maires Ashby (1659), and Ashby Mares (1791).⁹ Its anatomy, therefore, comprises the original Saxon "farm by the trees" with the addition of the surname of a subsequent lord of the manor.

2.12 The estimated population at Domesday of 100 had doubled by the time of the Vaux survey of 1577 to approximately 200, based on the record of "47 houses, plus one decayed and one now a stable". Bridges records "90 families" in 1722 amounting to perhaps 400-450 people, and records for later in that century of 12 full-time farmers and 18 tradesmen, including 3 carpenters, 2 bakers, 2 blacksmiths, 2 tailors, a weaver, a butcher, a mason, a barber, a shoemaker and 2 publicans, paint a picture of a healthy and growing community with a strong socio-economic base.¹⁰

2.13 Official population figures compiled in the subsequent centuries show numbers steadily growing from this level, but suffering a set-back around the turn of and in the first half of the 20th century from which it is only gradually recovering, viz:

1821	442
1861	525
1901	367
1951	333
1981	416
2011	473

2.14 A high level of building took place in the mid and late 19th century following the Enclosure, reflecting a long period of overall agricultural prosperity for the bigger farmers, the landowners and the clergy, whose income came from farms and glebe rents. Nevertheless, the sharp drop in numbers noted at the

⁷ RCHME op cit

⁸ W G Callis

⁹ from *Place Names of Northamptonshire*, Gover, Mawer and Stenton, 1933.

¹⁰ Bridges ii 137 1722

beginning of the 20th century was due to the nationwide agricultural depression, with the offer of higher wages in factories and towns, together with homeworking in domestic workshops (e.g. boot and shoe) giving over to full factory production.

3. KEY ELEMENTS OF STRUCTURE

- 3.1 The primary component of the village's structure is the natural valley running north-south through its centre with Bell's Brook flowing at the bottom. The street pattern which developed around this feature is roughly square in shape, described by Manor Road, North Street, Wellingborough Road and Wilby Road, with the intervening Church Street/Lady's Lane respecting the alignment of the brook. The settlement's form is, therefore, described as clustered or "agglomerated" with the various zones or elements linked together, rather like a jigsaw puzzle, and morphologically interconnected by the striking central natural valley.
- 3.2 This valley area is described in the Vaux survey of 1577 as including 19 small enclosures called variously "close", "field", "croft", "spinney" or "pingel/pyghtle", indicating that historically the village had a significant proportion of open land within its urban structure. The modern village is characterized by the memory of this generous medieval open land in the various paddocks, fields and treed areas on either side of the brook and also on the east side of Lady's Lane, the site of the south manor.
- 3.3 The existence of a small village green immediately west of the church (later absorbed into the garden of Church House in the 19th century)^{11 12} suggests that the area around the northern manor house and the church emerged as the settlement's social nucleus. Certainly today, viewed from the vantage point of the churchyard, there is a clear sense of being at the heart of the settlement.

4. ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORIC QUALITY OF BUILDINGS

Listed Buildings' Overview

- 4.1 Listed buildings in the conservation area (see purple, orange and yellow colouration on the appraisal map), commonly feature:
 - Squared or regular coursed lias¹³ with either ironstone or limestone;
 - Ashlar gable parapets and kneelers; occasional gabled roof dormers (see Church House and 14 North Street);
 - Chimney stacks generally in brick and stone together, but also seen exclusively in either brick or stone, located variously at ridge or gable end.

¹¹ W G Callis

¹² The village pump stood there and its well is now under the roadway.

¹³ Generic geological term covering types of ironstone, oxidised sandstone and Mears Ashby "Pendle" stone.

- Occasional ashlar stacks with moulded stone cornice (see 31 Lady's Lane);
 - Wooden casement windows with wood lintels; stone mullion windows, occasionally including transoms (see The Vicarage). Occasional cast-iron glazing bars (see Griffin's Head);
 - Roofs mainly slate or plain tile; pantile; thatch at 25 Lady's Lane, 5 Duchess End, 16 North Street and 1 Duchess End; Collyweston slate at Mears Ashby Hall and dovecote; and corrugated metal (see barn at 30 Wilby Road).
- 4.2 Apart from the Grade II* listed parish church dating from the 12th century¹⁴ the listed buildings are fairly evenly spread out within the conservation area, with identifiable clustering perhaps in the Wilby Road between the Hall and Duchess End, and, again, properties east and south of the church. They mainly comprise Grade II post-medieval domestic examples either of 2 or 2.5 storeys (the majority) or of 1.5 storeys (the remainder). Many (68%) of the Grade II listed buildings date from the period 1685-1750 and this is likely in part to reflect the relative political and economic stability at that time which gave people the confidence to invest in land and property, but may equally be related to developments in building construction techniques and the survivability of more robust solid stone buildings.
- 4.3 In many cases primary listed buildings will have adjuncts within their historic or present freeholds including outbuildings, barns and boundary walling. These are termed "curtilage-listed" buildings and the fabric enjoys equivalent statutory protection to that afforded to the primary or "nominal" listed building. These are shown in yellow colouration on the Appraisal Map.

Other Buildings of Note

- 4.4 Over 40 additional buildings have been identified as "of note" as shown in blue colouration on the appraisal map. These buildings are mainly 18th and 19th century in date, of local stone or brick and with slate roof covering. Whilst not at present capable of being considered for statutory listing, they are recognized as examples of good quality vernacular architecture. Taken together with the various listed and curtilage-listed buildings, they help to create a strong sense of place, making a positive contribution to the listed buildings' settings and to the character and appearance of the conservation area as a whole.

¹⁴ Note: all dating refers to buildings' first construction phase.

5. SPACES:TOWNSCAPE ENCLOSURE AND GREEN SPACE

- 5.1 As alluded to above, Mears Ashby is particularly well-served with green space in the central valley and land east of Lady's Lane. Although the various tracts of land (shown as "Important Open Space" in green dot colouration on the appraisal Map) are not accessible by the public, they constitute a unique visual amenity as a dramatic verdant backdrop to the built environment in the remainder of the conservation area.
- 5.2 Many of the important trees in the conservation area are located in this central open area, and these are shown indicatively on the appraisal map as either deciduous or coniferous specimens. The contiguous churchyard, which constitutes quasi-public space, contributes positively to local character and is duly recognized on the map under the "Area Identity" notation for its role as both a vantage point for enjoying the valley landscape as well as a place of quiet contemplation.
- 5.3 Townscape enclosure, indicated on the appraisal map by the "Building Line" (thick black line) notation along property frontages, occurs only infrequently in the settlement and is limited to modest stretches at the north end of Manor Road, the east end of Vicarage Lane and the north end of Lady's Lane. Perusal of the earliest available Ordnance Survey map of 1888 shows that Mears Ashby appears never to have had a tradition of continuous built-up frontages like, for example, Ecton or Earls Barton. This seems to have been dictated by the former's agglomerated structure, as opposed to the linear or centrally-focussed forms, respectively, of the latter villages.

6. BUILDING MATERIALS

- 6.1 Common materials and features of special architectural or historic interest visible from the street include the following, with some typical examples given in brackets:-

- **Walling**

Squared or regular coursed lias, often featuring Mears Ashby "Pendle" stone; ironstone; limestone; stone with brick dressings on corners and window/door surrounds (28 North Street); red stock brick; white, cream or grey-painted render to front or gable stonework or brickwork.

- **Miscellaneous Features**

Ashlar gable parapets and kneelers; decorative brick detail at eaves (double row of stretchers) and verge (15 Church Street); plain verge; exposed rafters on eaves; decorative verge weather-boarding in matt black (16 Manor Road), or plain boarding in white; chamfered engineering brick string course at 1st floor level; timber gabled porch

canopy; hipped open double porch; chimney stacks in brick or stone or combinations thereof; occasional ashlar stacks with moulded cornice; 2-stage chimneys with single or double decorative cornice (Sunnyside, Vicarage Lane); clay/vitreous chimney pots; pyramidal hipped roof (20 Manor Road); flat-roofed or gabled dormers at eaves (wall-plate) or on purlin.

- **Free-Standing Walling**

Stone with engineering brick or flat stone capping; occasional brick.

“Important walls” are shown in a black dotted notation on the Appraisal Map, and walls which are themselves listed are indicated accordingly.

- **Roofing**

Predominantly slate and plain tile; clay pantile; thatch; Collyweston slate; corrugated metal; triple-Roman clay tile (outbuildings at 11 North Street).

- **Windows and Doors**

Ledged and braced tongue-and-groove timber door, white painted; plank door in white; yellow-painted timber doors; cast iron windows (5/7 Paddocks Lane); timber casement windows with glazing bars or “diamond” leading; stone mullioned windows, occasionally with transoms (31 Lady’s Lane and The Vicarage).

Note on Stone

- 6.2 Mears Ashby Stone is part of the Northampton Sand (Duston Member) geological formation known as “Pendle”, and is a limestone which forms good freestone. It is pale yellow in colour and best seen in Mears Ashby Hall where it was used in large ashlar blocks and is relatively intricately carved in the porch. The stone was also used for the Vicarage and the Callis’ farmhouse at 30 Wilby Road.
- 6.3 However, many of the historic buildings in Mears Ashby consist of rubble-stones that are represented by a mixture of ironstones, limonitic (oxidized) sandstone and Mears Ashby Stone, hence the use of the generic term “lias” in the various listing citations. 31 Lady’s Lane is constructed mainly of local Mears Ashby Stone ashlar and rubble-stone.¹⁵

¹⁵ Strategic Stone Study: A Building Stone Atlas of Northamptonshire English Heritage (Historic England) 2011.

7. EXTENT OF INTRUSION OR DAMAGE TO BUILT ENVIRONMENT

- 7.1 Historic map coverage of the village shows that it changed very little between the years 1888 and 1952,¹⁶ and that the visually important central valley area had remained undeveloped right up to the middle of the 20th century. The built fabric was laid out at a relatively low density and was characterized by vernacular narrow-depth cottages and barns, the architectural style and layout of which is felt to be locally distinctive.
- 7.2 However, a process of infilling and peripheral village expansion began in the latter half of the 20th century with the 1978 map showing, in particular, encroachment of residential development onto the central valley area south of North Street, east of Manor Road and west of Church Street. Current coverage shows that the loss of open valley land has continued, with additional residential plot development on Church Street and Manor Road and the north side of North Street. This loss is considered to be intrusive and damaging to the character of the natural valley in this part of the conservation area.
- 7.3 Moreover, a significant proportion of the dwelling-houses built in the conservation area over the last 60 years or so have been constructed of mass-produced brick and concrete roofing tiles and with a general absence of craftsman-like architectural detailing. Built development of this type is not locally distinctive and, as such, is damaging to the character and appearance of the conservation area.

8. MANAGEMENT PLAN

- 8.1 Designation of a conservation area also necessitates the drawing up of a management plan intended to improve the appearance of the area.
- 8.2 As a result of the appraisal survey, and following consultation with Mears Ashby Parish Council, it is proposed that the Mears Ashby Conservation Area Management Plan should comprise the following:
- 8.3 Working with the relevant stakeholders to investigate and seek appropriate funding for a programme of road/highway improvement works to include the following:
- Wilby Road/Wellingborough Road/Duchess End junction. Provision of clearer road-signage and road markings to assist with traffic control at this junction by make priorities clearer. The road sign nearest to Dale Close to be upgraded as this does not make clear that the traffic priority is to the left and not straight over the junction.

¹⁶ The village extent at 1952 roughly coincides with the present conservation area.

- Wilby Road. Move the 30 mph sign westward to just past the bend where Harrison's barn conversion has just been completed.
 - Outside 2 North Street. Clearer white lining/possible parking bay with a view to making the left turn into Highfield Road safer.
 - A scheme for a general village 20 mph speed restriction.
- 8.4 To assess the viability and justification of an Article 4 Direction allowing control over demolition of, or inappropriate alterations to, dwelling-houses and other buildings.

9. CHARACTER SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Central Valley Area and Vistas

- 9.1 Mears Ashby is unique in the Borough of Wellingborough, if not the entire county, in having such extensive tracts of unspoilt open land contained within its urban form. This central valley, together with the open space east of Lady's Lane, plays a fundamental part in defining the character and appearance of the conservation area. Albeit comprising private land, it can be viewed and enjoyed from various surrounding vantage points, a selection of which are shown on the Appraisal Plan with the "Vista" eye symbol. As suggested above, it is regrettable that the valley area has been to some extent compromised by arbitrary residential development since the 1960s, and any further proposals of this nature ought therefore to be looked at critically in the interests of maintaining the valley's strong sense of place.
- 9.2 The eye symbol also records various points within the conservation area from which the church tower can be readily viewed. It is suggested that these viewing points should be taken account of in the consideration of planning applications for new development in the village.

Historic Built Form

- 9.3 The other key component of the conservation area's character is the form and appearance of its constituent historic buildings. The 1952 Ordnance Survey map records the position before the later 20th and 21st century expansion. It shows an irregular, informal, organic built form characterized by vernacular narrow-depth cottages and barns, typically gable-on to the road either at rear-edge-of-highway or slightly set back, or eaves-on to the road at rear-edge-of-highway. The majority of the cottages, whether listed or otherwise, are 2-storey in height with a lesser proportion at 2.5 or 1.5 storeys. Detached properties set back within their own grounds also occasionally occur, such as at 18 North Street, 30 Wilby Road, the Manor House and the Vicarage, and there is a particular contrast with the two examples of polite architecture in the form of Mears Ashby Hall and the parish church.

- 9.4 Narrowing in the street scene occurs in Manor Road, Vicarage Lane and Bakehouse Lane, creating a pleasing sense of enclosure (see “Pinch Point” symbols). Also, “Important Corners” (see notation symbol), which assist with legibility of the urban form, are noted at Wilby Road/Wellingborough Road, Wellingborough Road/Vicarage Lane and Church Street/Bakehouse Lane.
- 9.5 Sections 4 and 6, above, cover the historic buildings’ distinctive architectural features, bringing out, for example, the preponderance of local Mears Ashby Stone and natural roof covering in the form of slate and clay tiles. For a village the size of Mears Ashby the survival of thatch in the case of four cottages is particularly notable. Free-standing walling along back-edge-of-highway is another important element of the conserved environment. Mainly in local stone, these help to visually link the historic buildings in the street scene and their preservation should therefore be treated as no less important.

Future Development

- 9.6 Statutory law requires the character or appearance of conservation areas to be either preserved or enhanced by new development. It is suggested in section 7, above, that in several cases since the inception of the conservation area in 1977 this has not been the case. New development in the village should respond to the authentic vernacular characteristics detailed above, both in terms of the irregularity of layout/plan form and in the incorporation of traditional materials and architectural embellishment. This is not to say, however, that all new (or replacement) development should necessarily be historicist in style, and contemporary design solutions in particular situations should not be ruled out.

Mears Ashby Conservation Area Appraisal Map

