

# Emberton Conservation Area Review

**March 2024**  
Conservation & Archaeology

This document is to be read in conjunction with  
the General Information Document



**Front Cover: The Clock Tower, Emberton.**

# Historical Development

The Neighbourhood Plan for Emberton commences with a succinct comment on Emberton's historical context that effectively conveys the village's long history.

Emberton's name derives from Old English, meaning Eanbeorht's Farm. The village was referred to as Ambretone in the Domesday Book of 1086. By 1227, it was called Emberdestone in manorial records, and by the fourteenth century it was Embirtone.

The parish was formed of three villages, or hamlets, annexed together in 1650 for ecclesiastical purposes. The other two settlements were Petsoe and Ekeney, to the east of the parish, but these have declined to a scattering of dwellings, together with the archaeological remains of Petsoe Manor House and the Ancient Monument site of St Martin's Chapel, Ekeney. The existing hamlet of Petsoe End, containing an ancient spring, a heritage asset known as Mary's Well, originally formed part of Emberton.

The parish of Emberton is bounded to the west by the River Great Ouse, and crossed to the north by the ancient monument, Grade II listed, 18th Century Olney Bridge.

Manorial ownership passed between families associated with the manors of Newport and Tyringham, with Enclosure Awards being made in the late C18th leading to the creation of the hedge bound field patterns that surround the village, although principally lie to the east. The field pattern created by the subsequent division of ridge and furrow farmland and common land into hedge bound enclosed land, is still detectable today, although somewhat diminished as a result of mechanised arable farming practices of the late C20th which are more efficient when small fields are combined into much larger ones.

The All Saints Church Emberton is C13th in origin and is described by Nikolaus Pevsner, in the Buckinghamshire Volume of Buildings of England, as 'excellent', having windows of 'flowing tracery' and that the east window 'of five lights is one of the best in that style in Buckinghamshire'.

Before all this however, there is evidence of very early inhabitation in the area by Roman farmers. However, their time on the land hereabouts was predated by Neolithic riverside settlement as early as 2000BCE.

Of the earliest times little, if anything, survives that has an impact on the historic or architectural character of Emberton. The church, the farms, and the rectory, are all likely to occupy historic land allocations and indeed are identifiable on maps dating from the mid C15th.

Apart from these longstanding buildings, and associated land, an important aspect of the historic character of the village is derived from the presence of the road and its dogleg alignment. Where the farms and their loosely gathered buildings are peripheral and lead outward to the surrounding fields, the sharp change in direction of the old road, from north-south to east-west and back again, through this first settlement south of Olney, seems to have encouraged property to gather tightly, creating and overlooking a small but definite central space at the core of the village, leaving no room for a village green.

It is here, or close by, that several shops, a smithy and an inn were located. These may have served the daily needs of local residents, or could possibly be located here to supply and lodge longer distance travellers on higher land, where journeys to Olney were disrupted by flooding.

There was no abbey, priory or grange at Emberton and hence no draw to the village in this regard. Similarly, there was no impact on the village when changes in economic circumstance in the C16th led to the formal dissolution and demise of these establishments.

The economic opportunity that may have been afforded the village from its position overlooking a crossing point of the Great Ouse may have acted to its detriment in the mid C17th.

Lying close to a river crossing between Northampton and Newport Pagnell, it may be assumed that Emberton could have been a settlement under considerable duress as ad hoc clashes and requisitioning occurred in the preamble to the Civil War Battle of Olney Bridge in 1643, where Parliamentary troops successfully resisted an attempted Royalist advance.

Mostly, however, Emberton seems to have been a peaceful village making the most of the opportunities of passing trade and good farmland. Even enclosure, which met with concerted resistance in other parts of the country, seems to have been quietly adopted despite being a fundamental change of circumstances for rural populations. A reason for this at Emberton may have been the variety of alternative commercial or light industrial opportunities available including the local lacemaking tradition.

The Kettering to Newport Pagnell Turnpike trust was established in 1747, with the toll road passing through Emberton and Olney. Accordingly, in the C18th Emberton is likely to have profited from passing stagecoaches and other travellers using the turnpike road. In 1865, construction began on a railway line intended to link Newport Pagnell to Northampton, via Olney. However, approximately a decade later this scheme was abandoned, leaving vestigial embankments and shallow cuttings in the fields to the west. The last piece of railway earthworks on the way to Olney can be found in Emberton Park. Up to a dozen feet high, it is now part of a children's play area with a long slide down its steep bank.

Recent times have also had a considerable impact on the historic character and appearance of the village. In January 1967, the Milton Keynes New Town Designation Order established what has now become the most successful new city in the country, creating growth beyond expectation. In 1979, in response to increased car use, the Newport Pagnell bypass, which would remove through traffic from Sherington and Emberton, began construction.

The new city, and supporting infrastructure, amount to a fundamental historic event for all the old settlements in the locality, the impact of which is still playing out. Local employment is still present, but home working, and the draw of the new city, means that the village is peaceful during the day, with no shops or commercial services regularly operating. However, there is a strong village community, and frequent sports and social events which bring the village together. The Bell and Bear Public House and All Saints Church act as social hubs for Emberton.

Land and property values have increased greatly, encouraging investment in property and a tendency to intensify land use by developing garden plots or converting existing agricultural buildings into homes. Farming activity is much reduced in the village, with modernisation of farming practices resulting in a reduction of employees working in the sector. Allotments, and some hobbyist activity, do remain. The former village school is now a day nursery and pre-school.

Adaptations to existing buildings or the division of existing plots, often for more housing, business needs, or individual reasons, has led to some quite pronounced variations in the village's appearance. This is exacerbated by modern fixes to older houses and buildings. New and adaptive work, although often of high quality, tend to use generic designs and materials, which, if not managed, risks intruding upon and weakening the distinctive local character.



Emberton is peaceful during the day...

# Dominant building styles, materials and details

Frequently, long standing local materials and methods have become unorthodox and rarely used, but an appreciation and understanding of them is required if the authentic historic character of the conservation area, and its individual buildings, is to be appreciated and maintained.

The principal construction materials used for a settlement's older buildings are often indicative of the underlying local geology and can vary a great deal from one place to another. Underlining this importance of locality to appearance, the British Geological Survey's online 'Geology of Britain Viewer' (<https://www.bgs.ac.uk/map-viewers/geology-of-britain-viewer/>), confirms that Emberton sits on a shallow valley side where the gentle incline drops through and exposes a band of Blisworth Limestone, sitting above the river silts and below the mudstone of the Oxford clay formation.

Evidence of quarrying may be found on 1st Edition Ordnance Survey maps of the area, in particular Stonepit Farm, now Rectory Farm, lying to the east of the village on the Newton Road. A delve to the northeast is already identified as the 'old quarry' on the 1880 map. Accordingly, many of Emberton's older buildings are built of stone.



Stone is the dominant building material in Emberton.

Although stone dominates, there is also some locally made brick and later standardised imperial brick from further afield which is likely to post-date the arrival of the railway in Olney. Roofs tend to be of Welsh slate or machine-made clay tile. Some older tiles, distinguished by their unevenness, remain, but most surviving tile roofing is late C19th or C20th. The lack of early roof material types suggests a wholesale reroofing from the C19th onward and thatch, which is likely to have been present, completely disappearing from the village. Latter-day roof refurbishments have tended to use mass-produced, functional concrete tile.

Blisworth limestone is durable and shelly and is a pale honey-yellow in colour with a slight mottling. Unlike the purer, less shelly, and easier worked 'freestones' of Northamptonshire, Blisworth stone lends itself less readily to ornate carving, and so buildings of all status and function tend to have an undemonstrative, unassuming appearance. On close examination the stonemasonry in the walls of all the buildings surviving from the 16th and 17th century tends to be rubble stone laid to courses of randomly varying width and frequently breaking down into random coursing. In Emberton, surviving stone boundary walls tend to be randomly coursed.

Although only one disused, local quarry is identified on the early Ordnance Survey, it is likely that building stone came from the immediate locality, perhaps from intermittent working at farm based delves around the settlement. Until the invention of motor transport, stone was unlikely to be carted further than could be reasonably achieved by horse and wagon in a day.

There are numerous examples of stone-built cottages and farmhouses in the village, one of the better-preserved stands at 19 High Street (Grade II listed). Amongst several notable features of this late 18th century farmhouse is the use of randomly coursed rubblestone completely free of any carved ornamentation.



19 High Street

Brickwork appears sporadically in Emberton, but with no evidence of a village-based brick yard it might be assumed that there was a brickmaker in Olney, except here too evidence of pre-mechanised brick making is rare. It is also possible there were local makers to the south where the clay raw material is more prevalent. Courses of brick were traditionally laid to form regular patterns, or bonds. Headers and stretchers used alternately created Flemish bond which can be seen at 'Church Rise' at the entrance to Church Lane.



Church Rise, Flemish bond brickwork at the entrance to Church Lane.

The traditional mortar for brick and stonework is white with small pebbles and/or black hearth grit evident. The whiteness comes from the slaked quicklime into which, coarse and smooth sand, and material considered to aid consistent curing of the mortar, was added. Lime mortar, in particular, requires specialist skills and experienced hands so, as a result, its use in general building has declined. The porosity of the material and its suitability for use in softer handmade brick and porous limestones means that air curing lime mortar is more widely available for use again.

Although no specific examples of timber weather boarding were noted during the review survey, this material was once in regular use in North Buckinghamshire for mid-sized barns, shelters or hovels and implement stores. If it existed, it seems to have almost disappeared from Emberton, although some examples may still survive to the rear of roadside buildings.

Early roofing materials would have been long straw thatch or locally made plain clay peg tiles. Long-stemmed straw, for thatch, was once available easily from the surrounding fields, but the change to shorter stemmed wheat varieties, and mechanised harvesting, led to its replacement with reed thatch in the latter part of the 20th century. Reed thatching has a much sharper clipped appearance compared to the shaggier, and softer looking, long straw variety, traditional to the area.

Old clay tiles, often with a plain shallow curve that imparts a pleasing slightly jumbled look, and the use of thatch on new buildings began to decline with the arrival of materials from further afield, brought to the locality by rail. From the mid-19th century onwards, Welsh slate began to provide an alternative, hard wearing, flat, grey material that could be used on shallower pitches, whilst later in the C19th, mass-produced machine tiles, which lie much flatter and are more uniform in colour than the handmade kind, entered general use and were popular throughout the 20th century.



Clay tiles on West Lane.

Welsh slate and mass-produced clay tiles displaced plain, clay peg tile and thatch on many older buildings. From the last quarter of the C20th, new concrete tiles and other roofing materials requiring intensive manufacture, became more widespread, sometimes sourced from abroad. Whereas Welsh slate develops a distinctive weathered patina over time and is a valued material, other materials have proved less sympathetic and visibly altered the historic appearance of some buildings, with implications for the distinctiveness of the local character.

Timber, glass and lead, and occasionally metal, would have once been commonplace materials for details such as doors and windows, each tending to be made bespoke rather than to standard 'off-the-peg' sizes.

Early windows tend to be timber, side hung, flush fitting, casement variety, but few genuine examples now survive and none were noted in Emberton. At first, they combined small pieces of glass held in place by lead 'comes', but evolved to have larger panes of glass fixed by putty into timber frames subdivided by wooden glazing bars. Cills tended to be absent, with the windows placed almost flush with the external stonework. During the 18th century, vertically hung timber sliding sash windows became prevalent. At first, these too were flush with external masonry, but late 18th century laws, aimed at reducing the risk of fire spreading, pushed the windows into their openings by four inches.

The shadow lines this creates adds expression to later Georgian and Victorian windows. Whilst modern windows might seek to replicate the configuration of casement and sash windows, few truly replicate the characteristics of the early joinery. The imperfections of the cylinder glass used in Victorian windows also creates a sparkle that is absent in modern windows. Where modern windows predominate, the variations in appearance are normally quite evident, and often profoundly weaken the appearance of historic buildings and their contribution to local character.



Window and door at 3 High Street.

External doors come in a variety of designs, from basic plank doors, to ornate Victorian and Edwardian designs. Some Victorian or Edwardian era panel doors still survive. They typically comprise vertical stiles and horizontal rail frames, further divided vertically by muntins, into which wood panels, or glazing, is placed. Fanlights, where present, are invariably placed above doors and never incorporated into them. Polished brass knobs, rather than lever handles, were used to open doors.

The doors are always painted smooth, and woodgrain finish is absent. Georgian and Victorian doors, particularly on higher status buildings, often have a door hood supported by brackets. These can be very plain to highly decorated and are sometimes accompanied by an ornamental door surround.



Victorian lamp post

The footpath around the central space comprises of a distinctive, diamond patterned, dark blue, courtyard brick and some stone cobbles set into a cementitious binder. Their presence is an important distinguishing feature of the village centre, helping to underline its historic rural credentials. The ornamental iron boot scrape attached to No. 1 High Street also bears testimony to different times.

The two gates at the northwest corner of the churchyard are worth reflection. The functional, modern, metal gate, leading to the footpath, is likely to be the more robust, but the timber gate to the left is the more characterful, if not so durable.



Gate on West Lane

Individualistic alterations and repairs to buildings with non-original materials within the village has cumulatively caused harm to characterful buildings. However, the variety of visually pleasing styles and quality of materials means that significant numbers of original features still survive, nonetheless.

Whilst not every building is of sufficient merit to warrant statutory listing, there are still those of local interest which either individually, or cumulatively, contribute to the character or appearance of the conservation area. Failure to mention a specific building, structure or open space in the review does not necessarily mean that it has no part in reinforcing local identity. Where historic materials survive, they usually impart a strong sense of character and individuality to the buildings and areas in which they are located.

Throughout the conservation area there are strong views across, or into, open land, or of characterful houses and buildings, such as the clock tower. A few of the more important views are identified on the principal features map, but there are numerous others that add positively to the character of the village. Development should avoid obscuring views, placing unsympathetic features into views, or placing new features where there is a risk it could form a discordant focal point in a view. It is important to view potential development sites from several vantage points, some of which may be quite distant, when designing and placing new features into the conservation area.



# Statement of Special Interest

**The character and appearance of Emberton Conservation Area is defined by vernacular buildings, built of local Blisworth limestone rubble and red brick, with slate and tile roofs, ranging in period from between the 18th to 20th centuries.**

**Emberton is a nucleated settlement arranged around a sharp bend in the road at the village centre. Here, set around the mid-C19th clock tower, is a small central space bordered by a triangular arrangement of stone-built dwellings that has no equivalent in the local area. Consistent with the settlement's position on the south side of the shallow Great Ouse valley, the southern edge of the triangle of buildings is raised so that the pathway is on an eminence overlooking Olney Road as it curves northward and gently downward towards the River Great Ouse. The consistency of the pale limestone, coupled with the high, blank, stone boundary walls to the yards and gardens in this central area contribute to a strong sense of enclosure from where the High Street, West Lane, Church Lane and Olney Road lead out. Each route provides attractive, enclosed, cottage lined forward views often with mature trees as a backdrop but sometimes in the foreground too. Here, and throughout Emberton, the sense of quiet rurality has been helped considerably by re-routing traffic out of the village and onto the A509 bypass to the east.**

Entering Emberton from the A509, onto the High Street, the village begins with a row of dwellings on the south side, set back behind a grass verge (and with only a grass verge backed by hedges on the north side), which is notably more spacious than the centre of the village. Although modest in scale, two or three dwellings along this stretch of road are lent a degree of visual refinement from some considered, if low key, detailing including symmetrical or near symmetrical frontages, string coursing or a porch or porch hoods over panelled front doors.

Continuing along the High Street, passing the village pub on the right, into the distinctive central space, and around the corner into Church Lane, the enclosed layout of the village becomes clear and is reinforced by Church Lane's narrowness. On the west side of the lane is a short row of seemingly late C19th brick-built terraced houses, but at least one is stone refronted in brick and therefore likely to be of an earlier date. Church Lane terminates at the access drive leading up to the imposing Church Farmhouse and the gates to the churchyard. The onward path to All Saints' Church Emberton is lined by stout yew trees. This corner of the conservation area also benefits from characterful views back down Church Lane with the Old Rectory for backdrop.

Leading out, again, from the village centre, this time down West Lane, the area opens out past the listed ornamented Lychgate and across the grassy if sombre graveyard, with All Saints' Church Emberton set amongst trees, occasionally visible. The feel of the conservation area (CA) changes again, reflecting Emberton's rurality, as the stone-walled graveyard gives way into a wire fence that borders an open field. As the open field is again met by buildings, in the form of old stone barns and a row of terraced cottages, there is an important view across the open field back towards the church. The listed Stonepits House, with its M-shaped double gable roof (covered by both tile and slate) and the same coursed rubblestone as is present in the centre of the village, marks the edge of the CA along West Lane. The cul-de-sac of the adjacent West Farm Lane marks the edge of the CA around West Farm House.

Heading down Olney Road, the primary school (now a pre-school) comes into view on the east side. It is another brick built, late C19th structure, an exemplar of quality Victorian constructional polychromy, where different coloured bricks are arranged to form patterns.

Behind the high stone garden wall, that runs along the west side of the road, lies the Old Rectory. While not easily seen behind its garden wall and mature trees, one is aware of its looming presence and the contrast in scale to the smaller traditional cottages that line the southern end of Olney Road and the square.



The School and School House are notable for the use of 'polychrome' brickwork.

Continuing down Olney Road: grass verges, a variety of trees and variation in the elevations of the land (sloping upwards towards dwellings) all adds height and intrigue to this area of the CA. While modest stone and brick dwellings extend to this area of the CA, and are a defining feature that unites the different areas of the village within the CA, the presence of Victorian villas and old barns in this area help to draw you along the snaking road towards the neighbouring town of Olney.



A view of All Saints from West Lane

# Management Plan

Proposals for new development should be particularly mindful of the provisions of national and local policies set out in the General Information Document. The appearance and character of the conservation area, as it is set out in this review, should be demonstrably understood in proposals for new development. Milton Keynes City Council (the Council) will expect applications to demonstrate how proposals will sensitively respond to and reinforce local character and distinctiveness.

The Council will normally refuse applications for development that are deemed to be inconsistent with national and local plan policies intended to protect designated conservation areas from insensitive change.

New or replacement buildings, and extensions, should remain complementary or subordinate in scale (height and massing) to other existing street frontage properties or preserve a sense of hierarchy within an existing plot.

New development within the conservation area should consider the extent of spacing and rhythm between buildings and placement within the plot. Parking spaces should be provided in a way which minimises impacts to landscaping to the front of houses or the loss of verges beside the road.

New development will be expected to employ good quality materials that are consistent with the historic materials used in the conservation area.

Planning applications will be required for material alterations to the exteriors of buildings in non-domestic use in the conservation area. For example, changes to windows, doors, roofing material will normally be held to be a material change to buildings in non-domestic use that would require planning permission.

There is no Article 4 direction withdrawing permitted development rights in the Emberton Conservation Area preventing the loss of original features on unlisted buildings in domestic use and there are no proposals to alter the existing levels

of control. However, where deemed appropriate to do so, the Local Planning Authority may withdraw permitted development rights as part of granting planning permissions for proposals to develop within the conservation area.

Proposals for development should seek to avoid disruption or loss of historic boundaries unless there are clear and convincing reasons for so doing.

Boundaries within the conservation area are generally formed by hedges, or brick or stone walls. The use of timber fencing will normally be resisted.

In line with the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 six weeks' notice must be given to the Local Planning Authority before undertaking works to trees.

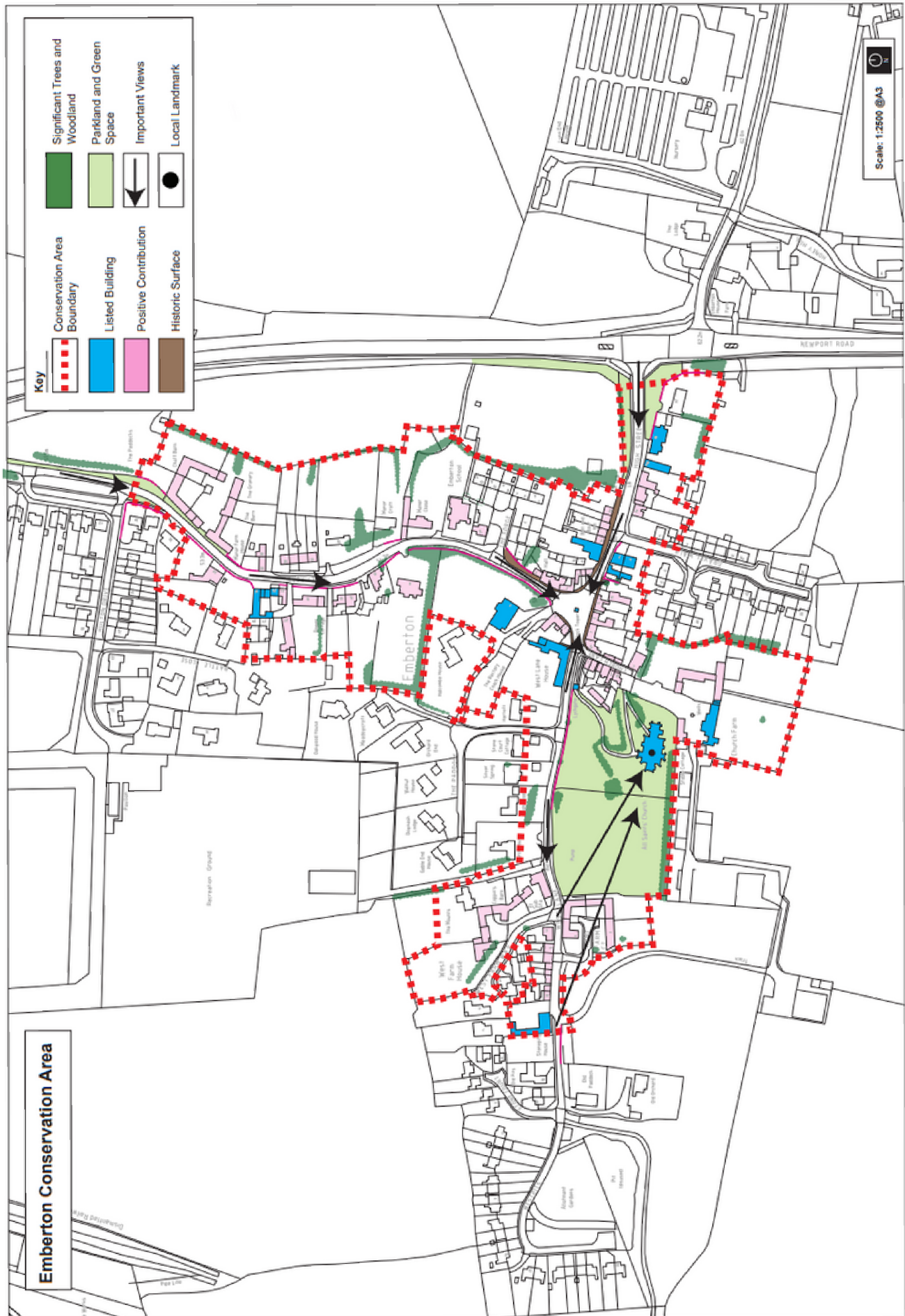
The Council shall give careful consideration to the positive contribution made by the open spaces and important open views, in the conservation area when considering proposals for development within, or adjacent to them.

The Council shall continue to offer pre-application advice to occupiers of unlisted property in the conservation area in order to avoid unsympathetic, ad hoc choices for replacement or repair of properties and features such as windows or boundary walls.

Accumulations of street furniture or visually intrusive individual items of street furniture will be discouraged. Traffic orders should take account of the sensitive historic environment and use muted colours and minimise applied road surface lines and signing.

The Council will seek to encourage utility companies to co-ordinate works and reinstate disturbed road and pavement surfaces sympathetically. Road improvements should avoid 'urbanising' the rural character of the conservation area.

# Emberton Conservation Area - Principal Features



[www.miltonkeynes.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/conservationandarchaeology](http://www.miltonkeynes.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/conservationandarchaeology)

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