

Ravenstone Conservation Area Review

March 2024
Conservation & Archaeology

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



Front Cover: All Saints Church, Ravenstone.

Historical Development

The neighbourhood plan for Ravenstone tells us that 'it is assumed that the name of the village derives from the raven, image of the Danes' and fell under Danelaw by the late C9th, the boundary with land south of the Ouse held by King Alfred.

The manor and mill are mentioned in the Domesday book, subsequently passing between different family ownerships until it was conveyed to King Henry III, who instructed that a priory be built. An Augustinian community was duly founded in 1254.

Almost 300 years later, on dissolution, the manor and priory initially fell into the hands of Cardinal Wolsey before confiscation and acquisition by the king. From the 1530's the priory fell into abandonment. Whilst only a few earthworks are now discernible, the influence it had on the modern pattern of settlement remain testament to its existence.

By the C16th, the manor, and much reduced site of the priory, came under the ownership of the Finch family, subsequently ennobled to be the Earls of Nottingham. The Finch crest of 3 black griffins and black chevron remains the emblem of the village in acknowledgement of the long relationship of the family (now the Finch Hattons) and the locality.

Heneage Finch, the first Earl of Nottingham, who's tomb is in the church, had the nearby almshouses built for six men and six women, although subsequently altered to two rows of three cottages. The Finch Almshouses face inward, but the undemonstrative C17th frontages are visible in oblique views from the gate between the churchyard and the houses. Their arrangement around a rectangular green, and consistency of appearance, sets them apart from other village dwellings just as much now as it would have done at the time of their construction.

The use of brick in contrasting black and red 'diaper' work also reinforce the sense that the dwellings were considered to be of fashionable design, consistent with a discerning and knowledgeable patron.



The Finch Almshouses

For the most part, however, it seems that village life was uneventful and peaceful, perhaps in part due to the relative remoteness of its location. The notably confrontational process of enclosure of open tilled strip field systems for pasture does not seem to have drawn particular dissent as it did elsewhere and may have proceeded gradually over decades during the C17th and C18th by agreement.

The village has undergone a fundamental change in the last 70 years since the end of the Second World War. The widespread use of cars, development of mechanised farming and the designation of Milton Keynes New Town, now a city that has exceeded expectations of growth, have each brought changes to the village.

The village is very quiet despite the recent trend of homeworking. There is now no school, shop or public house, although two village-based farms continue at the north and south ends of the village. Other village farms have ceased operations and their land combined into larger farms. This quietness and apparent inactivity is misleading, however, as it belies the increased wealth and wellbeing that has come to the area in relatively recent times.



Ravenstone is a peaceful village

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/mapviewers/geology-of-britain-viewer/>) confirms that Ravenstone sits on a fold in the land where a narrow, shallow valley drops through and exposes layers of Blisworth Limestone sitting above the river silts and below the mudstone of the Oxford clay formation. The village location is consistent with the general rule that settlements north of the River Great Ouse are of Northamptonshire limestone and to its south of timber box frame or brick. Despite quarrying taking place as late as 1862 (<https://www.britishhistory.ac.uk/vch/bucks/vol4/pp439-445>), evidence of quarrying activity is absent on 1st Edition Ordnance Survey maps of the area, suggesting low demand for stone or mortar and in turn a static level of growth in the village population or, possibly, shrinkage. It may also be that some stone from the redundant priory was removed for building new property.

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. 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 Ravenstone surviving stone boundary walls tend to be randomly coursed.

It is very 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 Mannings Farmhouse on Common Street. Amongst a number of notable features of this house is the use of randomly coursed rubblestone completely free of any carved ornamentation.



Mannings Farmhouse, coursed rubble stone walls with thatched roof

Brickwork appears sporadically in Ravenstone, but with no evidence of a village-based brick yard it might be assumed that the brick was imported from the works at Stoke Goldington. 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 the Almshouses diaper work.

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 can be temperamental to use and inconsistent in inexperienced 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 few 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, hovels and implement stores.

Weatherboarding seems to have almost disappeared from Ravenstone, although some additional 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 tiles and metal casement windows at the Old School House, Common Street

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.

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 distinctive 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. 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 frames subdivided by wooden glazing bars. Cills tended to be absent, and the windows placed almost flush with the external stonework. During the 18th century vertically hung 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.

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 sometimes accompanied by an ornamental door surround.



Ravenstone House relies only on symmetry and dimension to make an eloquent architectural statement. Note the brick edgings to the window, the central panel door and the hipped and shallow pitches of the Welsh slate roof

Street Furniture / Views

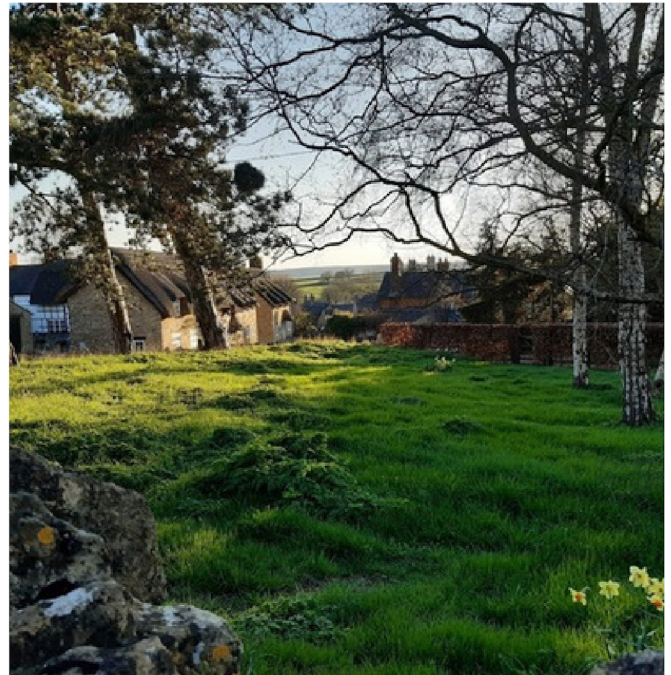
Original or historically interesting street furniture is absent from the Ravenstone Conservation Area. An intentionally eye-catching exception are the signposts that stand at the junction of the back lane to Stoke Goldington with Common Street, and also on the small triangular green at the junction with Northend. Although both are probably mid C20th in origin, they appear to predate the standardisation of road signs. There is a certain low-key charm to their appearance that allows them to sit easily in the village environment and to contribute positively to its individual character.



The non-standard signpost is sympathetic to the village's individual character

The quality of views over, through and into or of open spaces and features is a particularly notable feature of the Ravenstone Conservation Area. Wherever one finds oneself in the village there seem to be distinctive views forward and back of a road lined by rugged stone houses and quaint thatched cottages, sometimes tightly gathered and sometimes more loosely gathered but always interspersed by mature trees as a backdrop. There are views to be had over open paddocks, close

at hand, or of larger fields into the middle distance and sometimes, from the churchyard and the higher part of Northend, over the wider surrounding countryside. Unusually too, are the views over rooftops from the raised church yard which is rare if not unique in North Buckinghamshire.



View from the churchyard of the village and fields beyond

Individualistic alteration 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.

Statement of Special Interest

Ravenstone is a rural settlement characterised by the modestly scaled, predominantly stone dwellings, that lie alongside the gently curved southern end of Common Street, creating a linear pattern of settlement. Progressing northward, the road rises out of a shallow valley turning eastward where a tighter knit, nucleated grouping develops around the green. At the top stands the church, Finch Almshouses and the vacant open field to the northwest, where the abbey buildings once stood. From elevated vantage points in the churchyard are picturesque views across to the characterful collection of cottages placed slightly down the incline of Common Street. The presence of views over rooftops and chimney pots from higher land within a settlement is rare in the local area. From the churchyard, too, the importance of trees, hedges and pastoral fields, to the creation of an encompassing rural backdrop is clearly discernible.

Central to establishing and maintaining the village's character is the comprehensive use of a pale yellow to grey Blisworth limestone, laid as coursed rubblestone and free of embellishment. The picturesque quality of the village is further enhanced by the regular appearance of thatch, which is an eye-catching presence or focal point in many of the often long, inter-related, oblique views along the line of Common Street. Welsh slate adds further soft grey complementary blocks of colour into the cumulative positive visual experiences encountered along the route. Although subordinate, the locally made orange brick is characterful and adds pleasing dots and splashes of brighter colour to the buildings, as a more amenable material than stone for use in forming door and window edgings and occasional panels of masonry in two or three cottages here and there. Many of the village chimneys are in brick surmounted by terracotta pots. Some walls are of brick or are stone with ornamental brick copings.

At times, along the west side of Common Street, the grassed pastoral fields wash up to domestic gardens, or even to the grass verges, that line much of road. This gives a strong impression that the farmland reaches directly into the heart of the village and is only bounded from it by one or more of either hedge, stream or stone wall.

On the east side, the valley side starts to rise, gently at first, but becoming more pronounced as one heads north. The line of cottages and farm outbuildings is reasonably continuous, with only the occasional break, and, by the time the village hall (formerly the school) is reached, there is a pronounced difference in levels so that buildings and houses on the east side sit appreciably higher than those on the west. The brook that has accompanied the road finds a less pronounced incline and moves behind the houses across the old yard of Home Farm, under Bay Lane, then runs adjacent to the earthworks denoting the old Abbey fishpond which it once fed.

By the time The Green is reached, parity of building level is restored and then is reversed as the buildings now on the north side look out over those on the south. These subtle but important gradient differences add a degree of complexity, variation, and interest to views within the village.

The area around the green is populated by trees placed on broad green verges. There are tall pines too, a yew tree and some young horse chestnuts on the triangular green itself. The contribution of trees in the church yard is reinforced by ornamental varieties of cherry, apple, and beech in nearby, neatly, kept gardens. Throughout the rest of the conservation area too, trees and hedges combine to create a strong verdant rural village character. This informal rurality is enhanced by the lack of kerbing through certain sections of the village's verges. Another key element of character are the linear stone walls, and some brick ones too, that define plots and bind the village together.

Ravenstone is located on a loop off the road from the B526 Newport Road to Weston Underwood meaning there has to be a reason to visit. This leads to a general absence of traffic and general quietude during the day. However, the plan of the village is a little more complicated, as two field accesses lead out into the fields at the north end. Bay Lane provides good views back into the village as it rises out of the valley. North Road leads to an isolated cluster of picturesque dwellings and farm buildings set in a hollow, with attractive rural views amongst trees and hedges, over low walls, both forward and back. As Northend Lane commences there are important views west of the Old Vicarage, All Saints Church and The Almshouses which form an important group. The workaday buildings of Horseshoe Farm on the east side are softened by the presence of Horseshoe Farmhouse (originally a simple mid C18th thatched cottage but now extended and changed in scale) and partly hidden by a high hedge.

Of the several working farms that once operated in the village, only Mannings Farm remains in operation. Mannings Farmhouse is one of the better-preserved dwellings in the village and a thatched barn still stands amongst the old farm buildings that form the yards. There are important southward views across rising open pasture from the back road to Stoke Goldington, up to the Mannings farm buildings. The view and location are enhanced by the presence of clay tile and thatch roof cottages on Common Street and Yew Tree Farmhouse, also thatched. Finally, a ruggedly attractive, open sided C19th implement store, that overlooks the route out of the village is also present.



Wall detail showing coping detail to the top of the wall and the un-pointed stonework



Thatched barn in Manning Farmyard

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 Ravenstone 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, brick walls or stone walls. The use of timber fencing will normally be resisted.

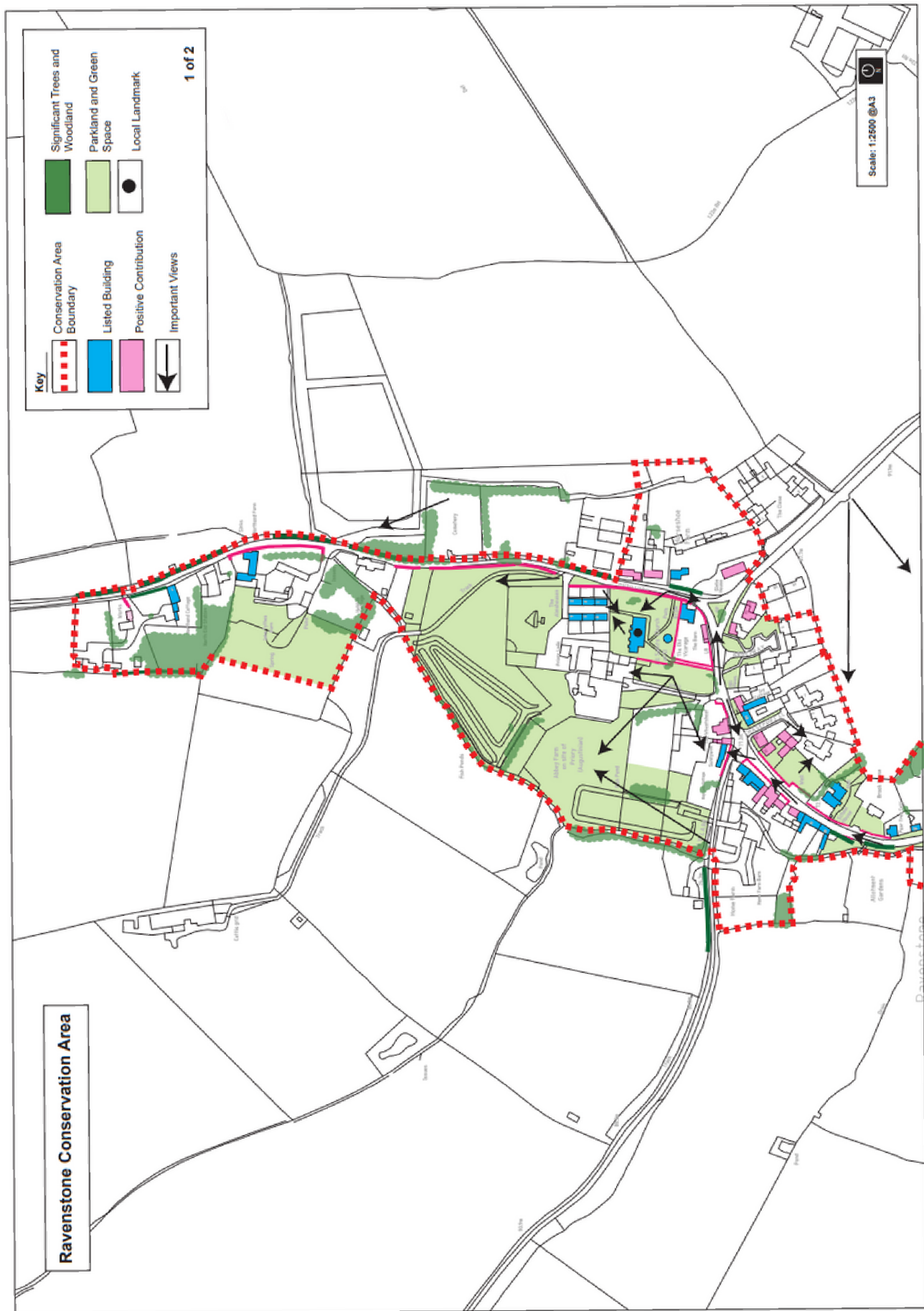
In line with the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 six weeks' notice must be given to the Local Planning Authority before undertaking works to trees.

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

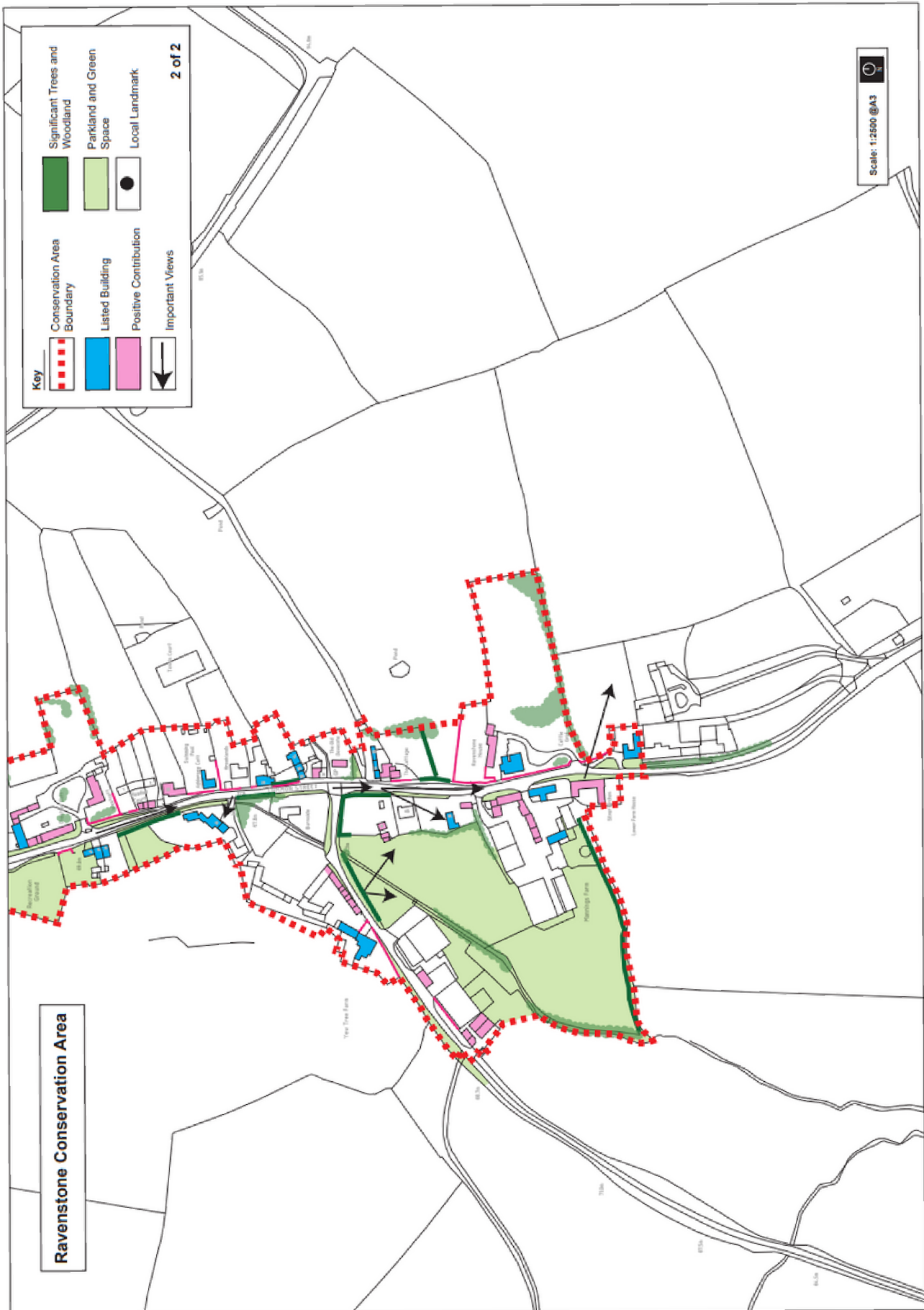
The Council shall continue to offer pre-application advice to occupiers of unlisted property in the conservation area in order to avoid unsympathetic, ad hoc choices for replacement or repair of properties and features such as windows or boundary walls.

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. Grass verges in the conservation area should remain unkerbed. Where a persuasive case is made to edge verges careful consideration should be given to the kerb design and appearance. 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.

Ravenstone Conservation Area - Principal Features (Part 1)



Ravenstone Conservation Area - Principal Features (Part 2)



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