

Weston Underwood Conservation Area Review

March 2024
Conservation & Archaeology

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



Front Cover: Houses on High Street, Weston Underwood

Historical Development

By 2000BC the Upper Ouse Valley was well populated, and settled habitation established at, or near to, the present village. By Roman times the area around the Ouse Valley had flourished and become part of an established economy with a dispersed settlement pattern. From a time before the conquest, in the C11th, a complex history of manorial sale, disposal and acquisition developed, to a point in 1088, when the manor of Weston Underwood was divided between the Pevers family and the Nowers family. It is from this point that historical events shaped and influenced the historic layout and character of the present village began.

Firstly, the moat and fishponds (now a scheduled ancient monument), some 200m to the south and east of the church, mark the site of the manor house, owned by the Pevers Family. The earthworks are believed to date from 1315, and the old lane leading to the moat from the main street is still called Pevers Lane. The row of cottages, formed in a single C17th century house off Pevers Lane, are still called Mansion Houses, which is perhaps a reference to the last phase of the Pevers Manor.

The other portion of the former Weston Manor was held by the Nowers family. This ownership came to be held by the Throckmortons through the 1446 marriage of Thomas Throckmorton to Margaret, the daughter of Robert Olney. The Throckmortons acquired Pevers Manor sometime between 1501 and 1518, and the Weston Underwood Estate was held by them until 1898. This single and sustained ownership had a significant influence on the development of the village. In the C19th the family declined both in numbers, and in wealth, so that the expansive developments of the C17th and C18th were followed by retrenchment and eventual sale.

The Throckmorton's influence was, and still is, most perceivable at the village's eastern end with remnant buildings and landscape features, including the pineapple topped 'Knobs', two

imposing stone piers which denote a historic and once closable gateway into the village, a now converted stable block renamed 'Clock House', and a surviving fragment of Weston House that escaped the c.1827 demolitions and incorporates a small chapel created for the family's use.



The Knobs

Weston House was the focal point of the gardens and the construction of a park commenced during the C18th, although it is uncertain precisely when. According to research by the Bucks Historic Garden Trust, a contract of 1742 confirms the construction of walls to enclose a kitchen garden for the Throckmortons.

The Gardens Trust research also confirms that Sir John Courtenay Throckmorton (1754-1819) was friends of William Cowper who, in his written works (specifically in the poem 'The Task' of 1784) features the Alcove, the Colonnade / Chestnut Avenue, the Rustic Bridge, the Lime Avenue and the Wilderness. By the Late C18th the formal style of the early to mid C18th had already become old fashioned, and in 1826, with the house also in a declining condition, the family moved the library, and other valuable items, from Weston House to Coughton Court. Shortly after Weston House was substantially demolished. The park and gardens remained intact, but in 1898 the Throckmorton

lands, amounting to some 1500 acres, were bought by Lt Col Bowyer, who appears to have made alterations to the gardens and houses that abut the east side of Cross Lane, including Manor Cottage. Through the mid and late C20th the estate became fragmented as it passed from one owner to another.

The walls that enclose the garden, and various statuary and structures that stand in the formal wilderness adjacent, were added to the statutory list in the mid 1960's. In 1978 the conservation area was drawn to include these features and the built remnants of the hall. In the early years of the C21st however, permission was granted for a large but architecturally unremarkable house in the middle of the walled garden, effectively bringing any hope of reinstatement of its intended historic use to an end.

Moving south-westward, further into the village, the unconventional draws to a close and a more regular, cumulative mix of stone built cottages, walls, barns and assorted farm buildings, sporadically populated by mature trees, gardens and hedges, takes over. Varying the relative consistency of the mix is the Cowper's Oak public house, probably originally built with stone and refronted in brick as an early form of fashionable gentrification. There are also, on the north-western side of the road, some grander houses, Stoneways and Cowper's Lodge which survive to denote the presence of local society figures and friends of the Throckmortons in the village.



Cowper's Lodge

There are too, interspersed with modest terrace houses on High Street, larger houses that served farms in the village. The process of enclosure, where shared farmland was divided up into centrally managed farmsteads, appears to have been undertaken relatively peacefully during the C17th and C18th, in piecemeal fashion. This may indicate a reasonable standard of living was not disrupted in the change from small to larger scale farming, or that the population was too dependent on local patronage to resist the reallocation of common land.

Based on the descriptions of buildings included in the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest, the older stone-built houses and cottages, that stand within the conservation area, date from between the mid to late C17th to the mid C19th. New building, and renewal of old plots, then seems to cease, perhaps coinciding with a depopulation of rural areas due to an increasingly heavy industry led economy. Some buildings may occupy earlier plots or have older fabric embedded within them.

In his series 'The Buildings of England: Buckinghamshire, Pevsner tells us that St Laurence Church was established in the C12th, with the aisles added in the C13th, but served, at first, only as a chapel of ease to Olney. Following a petition, St Laurence became a parish church in 1375. The perpendicular windows may date from this time. Other distinctive features include the unusual Knobs at the north-eastern end of the village, which once supported gates, that could be used to close the village to through traffic at night and a good-sized walled garden. Both were erected or established by the Throckmorton's and both, no doubt, for practical use and for underlining their social position.

There are however no almshouses, vicarage, rectory, parsonage or charitable school, which is a little unusual for a North Buckinghamshire village where a rectory often sits no more than a short walk from the church and a school, be it charitable

or a late C19th Board School (Weston Underwoods seemingly the latter). However, Weston Underwood has always been a joint benefice with Ravenstone, with the vicar historically living in Ravenstone. At various times there has been a curate living in Weston Underwood and the house provided for the curate was always Peartree House. The house got its name because the rent paid to the Throckmorton estate by the curate was by way of a basket of pears every year. The most famous curate to live there was Thomas Scott who wrote a commentary on the bible (1770s).

Another absent purpose-built structure is a dovecote and, despite its elevated position, there is no known site of a windmill close to the village, or a mill on the river. However, on Ravenstone Road, a field known as “Little Windmill” sits on the ridge of land before the ground starts to fall towards Ravenstone. This may be the site of a former windmill, although there is no evidence of it now. This lack of a typical selection of features may also be explained by the village’s proximity to Olney.

Latterly, the growth of Milton Keynes, the most successful of the post war new settlements, has had its impact on the character of the village. Few people are around during the day despite the current trend for homeworking. Apart from one, the farms have fallen quiet, their buildings taken for domestic use and their yards built over, as new housing investment changes the authentic rural historic character in a new process of gentrification that pervades the village.

The growth in the use of motor cars also means that not only is one side of the street or the other lined by vehicles, the road through the village is used as a back road to connecting Olney with Newport Pagnell. This means that moving traffic seems to be a constant presence and intrudes on the general quietude that might otherwise settle on the village.



The main road through Weston Underwood during the day. Note the mix of roofing materials which includes thatch, clay tiles and slates.

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 Weston Underwood sits on gently sloping land where the shallow Ouse 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 north of the River Ouse settlements are of Northamptonshire limestone and to its south of timber box frame or brick. Despite quarrying taking place as late as 1862 in neighbouring Ravenstone parish (<https://www.british-history.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 demolished Weston House 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, thatch, 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 17th and 18th century, tend to be rubble stone laid to courses of randomly varying width, and frequently breaking down into random coursing. In Weston Underwood surviving stone boundary walls tend to be randomly coursed.

It is highly 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 is the Grade II listed Grange Farmhouse on High Street. Amongst a number of notable features of this house is the use of randomly coursed rubblestone, which, apart from the flat head window arches, is completely free of any carved ornamentation but is instead an attempt at fashionable symmetry using sash windows, suggesting a refacing of an earlier asymmetric house in Georgian times.



Grange Farmhouse, High Street

Brickwork appears sporadically in Weston Underwood, but with no evidence of a village-based brick yard it might be assumed that pre-railway era, 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 Cowper's Oak, High Street.

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, is 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 weatherboarding 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, on The Granary for example, seems to have almost disappeared from Weston Underwood, although some additional examples may still survive to the rear of roadside buildings.



The Granary at Church Farm uses plank board as an external walling material.

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.



Old clay tiles

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 has developed a dark 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 'cames', but evolved to have larger panes of glass fixed by putty into wooden frames subdivided by slender wooden glazing bars. Cills tended to be absent, and 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, particularly those made from plastic, the variations in appearance are normally quite evident, and often profoundly weaken the appearance of historic buildings and their contribution to local character.



Different types of casement windows at Church Farm. Attics tended to be lit by gable windows and expensive dormer windows reserved for grander properties of the C18th.

External doors come in a variety of designs from basic plank doors to ornate Georgian, Victorian or 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.



Door at The Manor House, High Street. The house has origins in the C17th; this is a 6-panel door divided by a horizontal frieze rail and a locking rail and then divided vertically by central 'muntin' boards. There is a shouldered stone door surround, itself contained within shallow pilasters, topped by fluted, consoled brackets, supporting a broken segmental pediment above. The ornate glazed fan, or transom light, is above the door. The door itself is only occupies a relatively modest proportion of this grand composition.

Street Furniture / Views

Historic street furniture is largely absent from the Weston Underwood Conservation Area. There is a 'K6' telephone box (not listed) still present outside the old post office and a red post box by the west bound bus stop but little else was noted. The stone cobbling that is used for pavement surfacing in significant amounts, particularly on the north side pavements, may have early origins and may relate to Throckmorton influence over the village. Its use in Weston Underwood reinforces the rugged rural character of the village and helps differentiate it from other settlements in the area.

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, in particular the distinctive Knobs gateway to the northeast and the church with its tower topped by a graceful cupola to the southwest. Occasionally there are attractive rural views out of the village southward over the shallow Ouse Valley where in the distance the church at Emberton may be picked out.



Glimpsed outward views, as here to Emberton church in the distance, lend unexpected interest to the village environment. Notice how the high stone walls and hedge direct the forward view.

Two additional views, which are worthy of a mention, include from the High Street, looking into Cowpers Orchard and down to Park Farm which gives a particularly nice view of Emberton church on the South bank of the Ouse Valley, and, from the High Street, looking across the field towards The Mansions. This view gives an idea of the location of the original Pevers Manor in relation to the medieval fishponds, motte and the church.

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.



A view from near the Knobs, westward, into the village. Notice the distinctive stone cobble pavement.

Statement of Special Interest

Weston Underwood has a broadly linear arrangement either side of a near level, and almost straight road, that runs from the northeast to the southwest, along the side of a shallow incline that rises up from the broad and meandering line of the River Great Ouse.

The sloping position has some direct impacts on the character of the village. The northward side sits slightly higher, and thus buildings appear more imposing, than those on the southward side, which tend to have expansive rural views. The rising land on the north is used to good effect by Stoneways and Cowper's Lodge in particular. Although they are stylistically different both are lent greater presence by sitting slightly above the road and, in combination, greatly enhance the character of the village.

It also seems likely that the Throckmorton family, long associated with Weston Underwood, carefully chose a site at the north-eastern end of the village for their house and walled garden, the former benefiting from an open rural vista, whilst the latter, as is usual with walled gardens, had the benefit of a gently falling south facing slope to aid gardening within. The Knobs and the adjacent surviving high walls of the old working garden form a distinctive and memorable point of arrival into or departure from the village.

There is a general uniformity of materials that is only broken here and there with brick, most notably the Cowper's Arms, an earlier building which has been refronted. There is more variety in roofing materials, with thatch and handmade tile, but also now with a strong presence of Welsh slate and modern machine tile. Lengths of pavement are laid down in an unusual stone cobbling and is an important feature in defining the particular rural character of the conservation area.

There are picturesque forward views whichever way one travels through the village, enhanced by the occasionally glimpsed southward views over open countryside, and by numerous mature trees in and around the village. The sense of pervading greenery is reinforced by an abundance of very neatly kept gardens and lawns with shrubs and occasional boundary hedges.

The village's stone walls play a subtle but important role, dividing domestic garden plots from the public roadside environment, whilst simultaneously linking and unifying the constituent properties within the village. At the eastern end, in combination with edge of pavement house positions and tall walls, the feeling is more strongly of being enclosed, but this eases towards the village centre and feels most open at the green, an open piece of land on the south side of High Street, opposite Stoneways. At the south-western end, commencing with the garden wall of the well placed and handsome Pear Tree House, the churchyard wall, and the fine, mature trees within, combine with the row of stone houses and cottages opposite to re-establish a sense of enclosure at the southerly end of the village, framing the north-eastern views back to the village centre.

Adding depth to the linear plan are the four short, closed lanes that lead south off High Street. Peaceful from lack of through traffic, these access roads served Grange and Park Farms, or the one-time land holding of the Pevers Family. Around them have grown a series of subordinate stone cottages and small houses, again with neat gardens and stone boundary walls. Grange Farm no longer works, its old barns and yards perfunctorily converted or built over for an indifferent housing scheme, albeit using sympathetic stone. A similarly routine housing development stands at Cowper's Orchard but there is also an engaging forward view into the buildings of Park Farm. Here is a last, and

valuable, glimpse of the village-based farming that was once of central importance to sustaining the village. The pleasantly ramshackle appearance of the farm has a refreshing rural authenticity absent from the rest of the village.



Park Farm. Once a focal point of village life, village based working farms are now rare in North Buckinghamshire.

The public realm is pleasingly free of benches, bollards and bins and the general ephemera associated with traffic management which cumulatively can intrude upon and erode the character of historic settlements. Instead grass verges and stone cobble pavement dominate with some bound gravel surfacing here and there. Overhead cables are absent and lamp posts are of a low-key Victorian style. There is some roadside edge ironware in the form of the occasional boot scrape or metal gate, but these enhance rather than erode village character.

On the whole village character survives well, despite the demise of traditional village based commercial activity. The component elements identified in this statement contribute to the character or appearance that the Local Planning Authority should seek to protect.

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 Weston Underwood 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 or stone walls, some with brick coping work. 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.

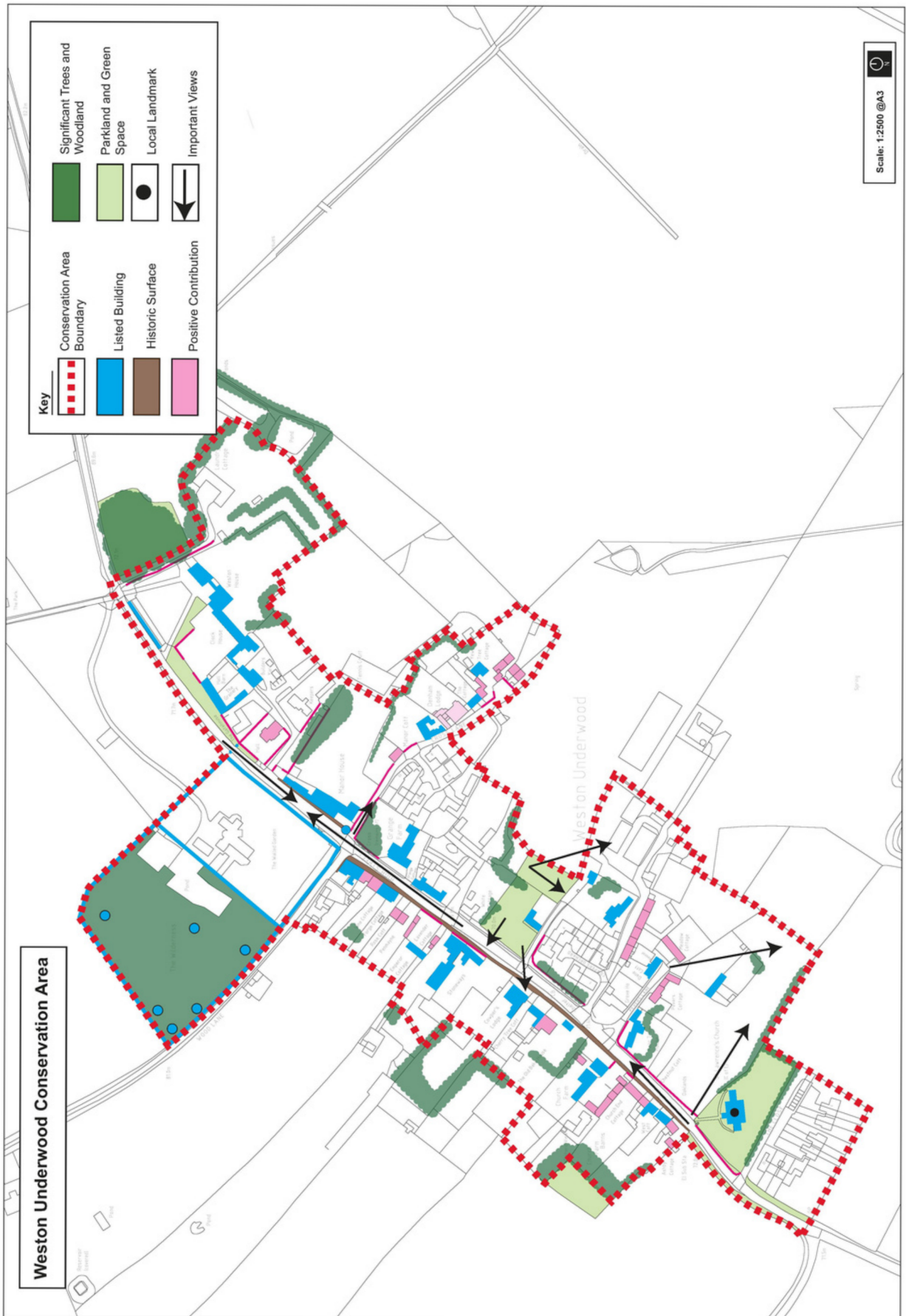
The Council shall give careful consideration to the positive contribution made by the open spaces in the conservation area when considering proposals for development within or adjacent to them.

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.

Weston Underwood Conservation Area - Principal Features



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