

Technical note:

Historic Environment Summary for Land to the North of Stevenage

1. Introduction

The landowner has submitted a site known as Land North of Stevenage for residential use. The site lies partially within the St Nicholas/ Rectory Lane Conservation Area. There are two key listed buildings within this conservation area, both of which are grade I listed:

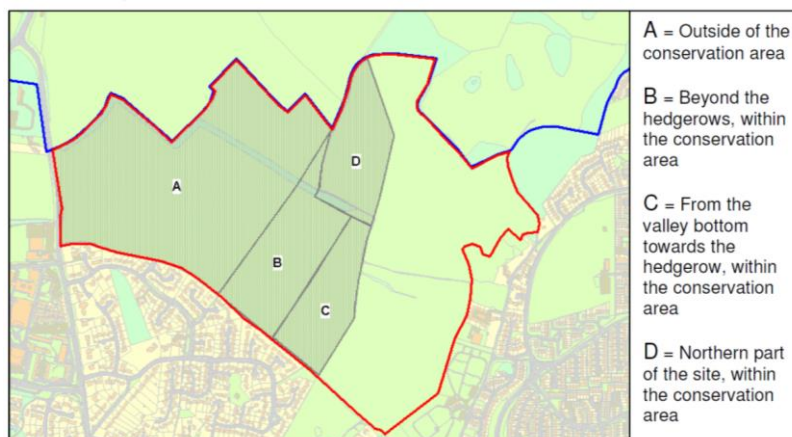
- ▶ Church of Saint Nicholas (list entry 1176923)
- ▶ Rooks Nest House Howards (list entry 1176972)

There are a number of other listed buildings within the conservation area, however, discussion at the Inquiry has focused upon the Church and Rooks Nest House.

The following documents provide an extensive background to the significance of heritage assets around the proposal site.

- ▶ A Review of Stevenage Conservation Areas (November 2005) BEAMS;
- ▶ St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area Appraisal (2009) BEAMS;
- ▶ St. Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area Management Plan Supplementary Planning Document (adopted 19 July 2012); and
- ▶ Heritage Impact Assessment: Land to the North of Stevenage (November 2015).

Map 8 of the Heritage Impact Assessment (November 2015) divides the area into four parcels of land. The assessment concludes that development could occur in two areas – Parcel A, which is outside the conservation area and Parcel B which is within the conservation area, as below:



2. The Heritage Impact Assessment

Stevenage Council produced a Heritage Impact Assessment: Land to the North of Stevenage dated November 2015. This document followed a methodology detailed in a consultation draft (dated June 2015) of Historic England Advice Note 3 'The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans' (dated October 2015).

This document recommends a stepped approach to site selection in the methodology detailed on page five. The steps are:

- ▶ Identify which heritage assets are affected by the potential site allocation;
- ▶ Understand what contribution the site (in its current form) makes to the significance of the heritage asset(s);
- ▶ Identify what impact the allocation might have on that significance;
- ▶ Consider maximising enhancements and avoiding harm; and
- ▶ Determine whether the proposed site allocation is appropriate in light of the NPPF's tests of soundness.

The method detailed in the published advice note is that followed by the council in their heritage assessment. The assessment properly considers the heritage assets near to the proposal site and examines the development of the conservation area and the decision to expand the boundary of the area in 2007. Documents examined for the Heritage Assessment in this section include the November 2005 'A Review of Stevenage Conservation Areas' undertaken by BEAMS Ltd, the trading company of the Hertfordshire Building Preservation Trust. This review led to the changes to the boundary of the conservation area and its present form.

This document, together with the 2009 Conservation Area Appraisal (BEAMS 2009) and the Conservation Area Management Plan Supplementary Planning Document (BEAMS 2012) inform much of this section of the Heritage Assessment, together with an examination of the National Heritage List for England, now maintained by Historic England.

Step two of the Heritage Assessment identified the contribution of the site to the significance of the heritage assets. This section employed the documents published by the council that include consideration of the setting of heritage assets and their relationship to the conservation area and its boundary. To only focus upon the Heritage Assessment devalues the extensive research undertaken to inform the conservation area appraisal and management plan.

As stated in the Heritage Assessment the landscape contributes to the setting of the listed buildings, but the setting of many of the buildings is quite nuanced, for example St Nicholas Church stands within a heavily wooded, extensive churchyard. Your experience of the church, when walking around the grade I building, is one of enclosure within the well planted churchyard that has retained many, if not all, of its monuments. There are screened glimpses of the fields to the north of the church through the trees, but in terms of views of the wider landscape these are only achieved by leaving the churchyard. This point is made by Historic England in paragraph 6.5 of their response to Matter 12. Obviously the visibility of the church, within the landscape, and the appreciation of its contained, heavily wooded churchyard are reflective of its central role within the parish, but the setting of the building that people will experience is that of a confined, wooded churchyard, with glimpsed views to land outside the churchyard. Whilst the wider landscape is within the setting of the church due to the nature of the churchyard, the site area in question contributes little to its significance, compared to the land immediately north of the churchyard.

The setting of Rooks Nest House Howards is examined in the Heritage Assessment with reference to the conservation area documentation. The 2009 Conservation Area Appraisal mentions the landscape setting of the conservation area and views to the fields north of the church and Bury and West of Rooks Nest Farm. Curiously Rooks Nest House Howards is not listed as a landmark building within the conservation area despite its prominent location, presumably due to the extensive planting around the house that significantly reduces its presence in views. The land west of Rooks Nest House Howards and Rooks Nest Farm provides a direct connection between these two buildings and the agricultural landscape, however, this is a modern agricultural landscape of open prairie fields; much of the historic character of these fields have been lost,

with the removal of field boundaries and hedges. The surroundings of these buildings and their rural character is reinforced by their relationship to and the character of Weston Road as a country lane, lacking footpaths and strictly defined kerb lines with vegetation meeting the roadway and high hedges. Rooks Nest House (Howards) has a landscape context, and agricultural setting provided by its relationship to Rooks Nest Farm; the primary façade of Rooks Nest House (Howards) faces south to the farm with a field and garden between the two assets providing a rural context. The agricultural buildings at Rooks Nest Farm, despite their evident conversion retain their agricultural character. Rooks Nest House Howards has open farmland and trees to the north of the building. The proposal for a country park to the west, will leave a considerable rural context around Rooks Nest House Howards.

The proposed housing allocation contributes only to distant views of the heritage assets, and into the conservation area, as detailed in the 2005 conservation area review. Views from Weston Road are indicative of what would be seen from Rooks Nest House (Howards). Whilst there is a foreground in the views of an agricultural landscape there are also views of the existing urban edge of Stevenage, two ranges of pylons and the tower of Lister Hospital.

The conservation area review leaves some questions unanswered. For example, paragraph 4.31 states the revised conservation area boundary '...should therefore take in the fields towards the line of pylons using a long established hedgeline / woodland edge as the boundary'. However, much of the recommended boundary does not follow a hedgeline but follows a footpath, to the west of the hedgeline

The Heritage Assessment examines the impact of the proposal upon the significance of all the heritage assets. The document divides the land up to enable an assessment to be made of the different parcels and potential impacts upon the setting of listed buildings and the character of the conservation area. Map 7 within this document shows the topography of the proposal area and Map 8 shows the boundaries, and their relationship to the conservation area. It can be seen that the west boundary of parcel B described as 'beyond the hedgerows, within the conservation area' is located on the ridgeline with the east boundary of this parcel broadly located on the ridge and partially below the ridge.

The assessment rapidly discounts parcels C and D in examining their presence within views from the churchyard corner, in Image 1. Other images in this document confirm this conclusion. Proposals for the mitigation of the development also follow standard recommendations.

It should be noted, as section 7 of the 2012 management plan makes clear, development within the conservation area is expected.

3. Historic England Response

Historic England's response to Matter 12 does not include an assessment of how the proposal site, in the form suggested in the Heritage Assessment impacts upon the setting of listed buildings. Effectively the response examines three heritage assets:

- ▶ Rooks Nest House (Howards)
- ▶ St Nicholas Church
- ▶ St Nicholas/ Rectory Lane Conservation Area.

Historic England provide their detailed response to the site allocation in paragraph 6.6 and 6.7 of their Matter 12 document. Section 6.6 examines the impact of Parcel B, the land within the conservation area upon the conservation area and four listed buildings:

- ▶ Rooks Nest House Howards;
- ▶ St Nicholas Church;
- ▶ The Old Bury; and
- ▶ Rooks Nest Farm.

. Parcel B does not contribute to the setting of St Nicholas Church due to the size of the churchyard, its screening and trees. Views of the open fields to the north of the church are filtered through vegetation until

you reach the edge of the churchyard. As Historic England describe in paragraph 6.5 of their Matter 12 response, the site is not in view in relation to the church until you leave the churchyard. Buildings, planting and the landscape form intervene between the church and Parcel B.

Historic England do not assess the contribution of Parcel B, in the form detailed in the Heritage Assessment and their guidance note, to the setting of Rooks Nest House Howards or how this contributes to the significance of the grade I listed building to justify their answer to Inspector's Question 1. In paragraph 6.6 it is simply assumed there will be an impact without any assessment. The detailed Heritage Assessment undertaken by Stevenage Council demonstrates compliance with the statutory tests of soundness and has regard to S66(1) and S72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

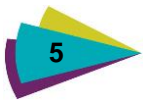
The conservation area documentation is very clear where the significances within the designated area are located. The core of the area, as described in the 2005 review, lies around 'St Nicholas Church where it forms a group with The Bury, the 15th Century Old Bury (with associated farm buildings and pair of cottages to the East), and the 18th century Moonhill and Dominic Cottage'. This assessment of the more significant areas of the conservation area is followed in the appraisal and management plan. Historic England have provided no assessment of the significance of the land within the conservation area to the character and appearance of the conservation area as a whole. It should be noted that an impact in one area of a conservation area can be balanced against benefits in other areas thereby meeting the statutory test of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the area. The proposal for the land west of Rooks Nest Farm and north of the church offers a significant benefit. Removing this land from arable agriculture, restoring lost planting and field boundaries offers a significant enhancement to the conservation area. Historic England's guidance.

Paragraph 6.7 of Historic England's Matter 12 statement considers the impact of Parcel A, the land outside the conservation area and claims that this has a considerable impact '...on the significance of the setting of both the conservation area and the listed buildings.' There is some confusion in this statement as obviously setting can make a contribution to significance, it does not have a significance of its own. There is no distinction in this section over which listed buildings Parcel A is considered to impact. The Old Bury is separated from Parcel A by a modern housing development to its north west, tree planting, hedgerows and topography. St Nicolas Church stands within a heavily screened churchyard and, as Historic England state that it is necessary to leave the churchyard to obtain views of Parcel B, let alone Parcel A. Parcel A is therefore only likely to be present in long views from Rooks Nest House Howards or Rooks Nest Farm. It is very difficult to see how this is a considerable impact upon the setting of listed buildings as claimed by Historic England. There is a considerable volume of development already to the boundaries of the conservation area. The adopted management plan (2012) in section 9.28 details suitable boundary treatments recommending the use of hedges. It is evident from examining historic maps that the boundary to the conservation area, now following a footpath, represents the line of a lost, hedged field boundary. Historic England make no consideration of the potential for mitigation measures to reduce the impacts they claim Parcel A will bring.

4. Conclusions

The Heritage Assessment has been completed according to Historic England's advice documentation. Due to the extensive research undertaken for the St Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area this document should be read with the 2005 study, the 2009 appraisal and 2012 management plan. The Heritage Assessment makes continued references to these documents. The 2005 study does raise some questions concerning the intended location of the west boundary of the conservation area, where it is described as following long established hedgelines, however the designated area includes more arable agricultural land and goes beyond the hedgeline to the east of Parcel B.

It is questionable whether the site, made up of Parcels A and B, makes a contribution to the setting of the church. The area of land defined within the Heritage Assessment is distant from Rooks Nest House Howards and the proposals accompanying the development would offer a significant landscape benefit to the area in removing land within the vicinity of Rooks Nest House and Farm from arable use and restoring lost boundaries thereby making a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area and significantly benefiting the setting of listed buildings.



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