RICKMANSWORTH CONSERVATION AREA

APPRAISAL AND CHARACTER ASSESSMENT
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Hertfordshire Building Preservation Trust on behalf of Three Rivers District Council have prepared an appraisal and character statement for Rickmansworth Conservation Area.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>Conservation Area Appraisal Map</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>Study Areas</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>First Edition O.S.Map 1870-1871</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>1839 Tithe Map</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>Second Edition O.S.Map 1898</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Plate</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Plate I</td>
<td>Junction of High Street East, Talbot Road and Wharf Lane requires attention</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate II</td>
<td>Norfolk Road - suffers from inappropriate alterations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate III</td>
<td>View along Central High Street</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate IV</td>
<td>Central High Street - example of a poor shopfront</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate V</td>
<td>Soloman's Hill - potential for enhancement</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate VI</td>
<td>Bury Lane - potential for enhancement</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate VII</td>
<td>Station Road - poor shopfronts detract from the attractive Victorian buildings</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate VIII</td>
<td>Central High Street the quieter side of Town</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate IX</td>
<td>Church Street winds into Town</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate X</td>
<td>Church Street looking towards Church of St Mary</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate XI</td>
<td>Bury Lane - room for improvement</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plate XII</td>
<td>Festival of Britain style railings requiring attention</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RICKMANSWORTH CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL AND CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

INTRODUCTION

Rickmansworth was designated a Conservation Area in 1974 and extended in 1980 to include the Victorian development of the town. Three Rivers District Council aim to "preserve and enhance" the Conservation Area in accordance with the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act of 1990. As part of this policy, it is important to compile a character appraisal to aid Development Control. Figures 1 and 2 help to illustrate points made in the text.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

The earliest settlers left fragments of worked flint and bone to mark their existence, between the Ice Ages. There has been a settlement at Rickmansworth, since at least 796, when King Ecgfrith, co-King of Mercia granted the lands of Pynesfeld, in the Parish of Prichmareworth/Richmereresworth to the Benedictine Abbey at St Albans.

The village of Rychemarewarde is later mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1086. During the reign of King Henry III, Rickmansworth became a town by Royal Charter and was allowed to hold a market every Wednesday which later moved to Saturdays.

The town's development was influenced by the proximity of two of the three rivers which water the area. This can be seen on the 1st Edition O.S.map of 1870 (figure 3). The River Chess and the River
Colne provided an important power supply for the cloth and print industries which grew up around the town and surrounding area. It has a history of water cress growing, as the springs from the rivers on chalk beds provided the perfect conditions. Rickmansworth, however had a very localised industry, although surrounded by rivers, none were navigable. The early 19th century saw the construction of the Grand Union Canal (some of which was the River Colne) and with it an increase in industry and hence work for the town. The Metropolitan line arrived in 1887, providing a line into London and as such making the town ideal for commuting. By the late twenties Rickmansworth was subsumed into Metro-Land with Cedar's Estate providing housing for commuters, only five minutes from the station.

VISUAL ANALYSIS

The Setting

Rickmansworth sits at the centre of a network of communication routes. The rivers Colne, Chess and Gade have watered the area and the landscape is therefore dominated by water and the nucleus of the town is enclosed by the Grand Union Canal to the south and the Metropolitan line to the north.

Due to these physical constraints the town still retains its medieval core based on the High Street and Church Street, although modern road schemes and their associated signage markings and street furniture have had a major and disruptive impact on the area.
The Historic Centre

The High Street and Church Street form the historic core of the town. A comparison between the 1839 Tithe Map (figure 4) and the Conservation Area Map (figure 1), illustrates High Streets dominance over the town plan. This has sadly been destroyed by the addition of Northway breaking up the original long winding nature of the street. Church Street curves around the present Church which sits on the original site of the Parish Church and the route is lined with 16th and 17th century timber framed buildings. Behind lies the Bury, the old Manor House of Rickmansworth.

TYPICAL FEATURES OF THE AREA

1. Presence of water - Canal, rivers, town ditch and watermeadows.
2. Presence of the Metropolitan line for commuters.
3. Mixture of building styles and dates along the High Street and Church Street so typical of urban Victorian development.
5. Brick walling to Church and houses.
6. Use of yellow stock brick and slates and render on terraced housing.

TOWNSCAPE AREAS

High Street East - Northway

Entrance into the Conservation Area is defined by the railway bridge which provides a useful boundary although its appearance is marred by security fencing. The St Joan of Arc School, originally 18th
Figure 5  Second Edition O.S. Map 1898
century, provides an important focal point as does the 1930s Garage. Both illustrate the historical development of the High Street. The scale of a modest residential area is provided by the remaining Victorian and earlier houses which survive. Unfortunately the appearance has been blighted by poor modern light industrial and commercial development on an inappropriate scale, mostly along the southside of the Street, which does not sit well next to the historical smallscale buildings.

This area has always been a mixed community of industry and housing. The Second Edition O.S. Map (figure 5) shows a Brewery and Malthouse, a Smithy and a Nursery sitting side by side with houses and Methodist and Baptist Chapels. The interest and activity generated by this has unfortunately been lost and replaced by unsympathetic modern development. The junction between Talbot Road and Wharf Lane is an eyesore and requires attention, as can be seen in Plate I. The original row of Victorian buildings has been demolished to provide a car park, resulting in the loss of enclosure along High Street. The car park itself is an eyesore, without any landscaping to reduce its impact on the streetscene. Arrival at the commercial main High Street is heralded by a parade of shops at the crossroads, with Church Street and Northway.
Plate I  Junction of High Street East, Talbot Road and Wharf Lane requires attention

Plate II Norfolk Road - suffers from inappropriate alterations
Talbot Road, Wharf Lane and Norfolk Road

An area of workers' terraced housing in yellow stock brick with red brick dressings and slate roofs provide a strong building line, even though the individual units have suffered from inappropriate alterations, such as plastic windows, "Kentucky" style doors and concrete roof tiles (see plate II). The building line is interrupted by poor modern infill or gaps/car parking. Although Wharf Lane is, in the main, outside the Conservation Area, it is still important to ensure new development takes place in character with the best of the Conservation Area.

Talbot Road is predominantly residential and partially light-industrial or commercial in use, where it adjoins Town Wharf, recognising the previous historical development. Poor modern buildings have intruded somewhat as regards to bulk and lack of sympathetic detail. Car parking dominates the western end. The lack of any attempt to provide boundary walling or landscaping gives the area an air of desolation.

The Town Ditch, used as a sanitary channel in earlier times, diverted from the Chesham Stream/River Colne, has been partially retained but is in need of clearing out and maintenance.

Norfolk Road has an area of late Victorian terraced housing associated strongly with the Canal, hence the name Riverside Terraces. Various unsympathetic home improvements detract from the unity of the streetscene.
Plate III View along Central High Street, note the street markings, signage, floorscape, lampposts and on street parking.

Plate IV Central High Street, example of a poor shopfront.
Central High Street

The main High Street shows the typical development of a small market town, with a range of building styles and materials, which help to create an intimate scale. Although only a small number of buildings are listed for their special architectural or historic interest, there are a great many attractive buildings such as the Banks, the Victoria Pharmacy and W.H.Smiths. The High Street therefore has a great deal of potential. Poor modern development detracts from the more pleasing and acceptable 17th century to 19th century elements. Poor traffic markings, excessive on-street parking, unsympathetic mix of concrete and metal lampposts and bollards and other street furniture do not help (plate III). The proliferation of television aerials detract from the roofscape. Poor shopfronts, as can be seen in Plate IV are a further problem. The introduction of plastic laminates and garish signage should be prevented and particular attention made to ensure that historic shopfronts, where they exist are respected. Policies on this and projecting signs should be considered.

The basic line of the High Street has remained with Soloman's Hill and Bury Lane still being evident, albeit providing pedestrianised access only. Soloman's Hill has been cut to provide car parking facilities and servicing to shops. Both provide spaces within the High Street which could be enhanced, see plates V and VI.

The main busy commercial heart of the High Street is contained by Northway and Station Road. Station Road is lined, at least on the
Plate V Solomon's Hill - potential for enhancement

Plate VI Bury Lane - potential for enhancement
western side by what would once have been smart late Victorian
buildings (plate VII). Poor shopfronts to some again destroy the
ground floors, whilst inappropriate modern details detract from the
upper floors.

The Conservation Area boundary ends at the railway bridge which is a
very poor focal point, festooned with cables. The railway station is
excluded from the Conservation Area even though it is historically
important to the development of Rickmansworth as a dormitory town,
in Metro-Land.

Due to the road system the remainder of the commercial section of
the High Street is slightly quieter and appears to be less used and
as such more run down (plate VIII). However there are still
important building lines which need to be maintained. Similar issues
arise as above with poor traffic signage and street markings and
poor use of concrete for street furniture.

The west end of the High Street is residential and makes a
noticeable contrast to the busy east end High Street. The houses are
pleasant, mid-Victorian to early 20th century and later. The subway
entrance is very intrusive. Parsonage road is also residential in
nature and has a pleasant group of Victorian houses, to the west.
Plate VII Station Road - poor shopfronts detract from the attractive Victorian buildings

Plate VIII High Street the quieter side of Town
Church Street

The entrance into Rickmansworth via Church Street is intimate and its scale contrasts with that of the bypass. Its visual importance lies in the retention of the medieval street pattern. The twist in the road around the Churchyard (plate IX) has been retained which, with its brick walling, helps to maintain the entranceway and provides a feeling of enclosure. The attractiveness of the entrance would be further enhanced by brick walling and/or landscaping to the frontages of St Mary's Court and by development at the Batchworth Arms which would respect the character of this entranceway. There is a wealth of 16th and 17th century timber framed houses which remain, albeit covered up by Georgian and Victorian brick facades (plate X). Talbot House, stands out as one of the few good examples of modern design. The Street still also has its granite kerbs which should be retained.

A turning off leads to Bury Lane which continues the scale of Church Street with modest Victorian terraced housing, which again has suffered in visual terms from poor modern improvements. Where the lane turns northwards the character of the area breaks down completely. There is a lack of cohesion which is desirable in the town centre (plate XI) due to the unattractive forecourt to the works and the neglect of spaces between buildings. The Gables, however, should be retained as an example of a twenties structure. The Almshouses are also worthy of retention. The town ditch at this point is unkempt and untidy. The border rails in Festival of Britain style to the road crossing are in need of repair but should be maintained (plate XII). The ditch could be enclosed with similar rails to tidy up the area.
Plate IX Church Street winds into the Town

Plate X Church Street looking towards Church of St Mary
note the interesting building line
The Church of St Mary, although mostly early 19th century, is an important landmark and sits on the site of the original Parish Church. In close proximity is the Bury, the old Manor House of Rickmansworth until 1741. It retains pleasant although not extensive grounds and provides an air of seclusion, away from the busy centre of the town. This area has the only significant greenery inside the Conservation Area but at present it is very desolate. The water environs is not well maintained and the house is currently unoccupied. A use for the building should be found as a matter of urgency to revitalise this area of the town centre.

SUMMARY

The character of Rickmansworth is that of a typical small Hertfordshire town, surrounded by a network of communication routes of Canal, Railway and Road which has enabled it to maintain a tight nucleus within which is a mixture of commercial, residential and industrial uses. The High Street is still the core of the commercial life of Rickmansworth, High Street East containing a mixture of residential and light industrial uses, whilst Church Street is a quieter small-scale area.

Rickmansworth is under a lot of pressure for traffic improvements and additional development. This, however, is an ideal opportunity to provide a framework for the enhancement and improvement of the Conservation Area.

A policy of tighter restrictions on development should be put in place to safeguard what is left of the character of Rickmansworth
Plate XI Bury Lane - room for improvement

Plate XII Festival of Britain style railings requiring attention
and to identify improvements which can be made in the future as opportunities arise. By stringent policies the mistakes of recent years can with time be rectified. Improvements to the streetscape can start with the following suggestions to improve the appearance of the Conservation Area.

PROPOSED IMPROVEMENTS

1. Reduce the amount of street signage and the impact of traffic markings. Relaxations are available in Conservation Areas to types of street sign, their location (they can be erected on buildings as opposed to posts) and to the width and colour of yellow lines.

2. Remove unsightly lampposts and street furniture and replace with a co-ordinated scheme. The visual intrusion of light fittings can be diminished by a system of flood washing/lighting or attaching fittings to buildings.

3. Provide detailed guidance for new development ie: scale, bulk, height, details, materials etc.

4. Improve shopfronts.

5. Provide guidance notes to encourage sympathetic home improvements.

6. Review all car parks as the majority are unsightly with no attention to landscaping.

7. Tidy up the following areas: Both railway bridges and entrances to Soloman's Hill and Bury Lane from High Street.

8. Prepare acceptable design briefs and uses for Talbot Road and Bury Lane.

9. Provide guidance for the improvement and maintenance of the Town Ditch whose importance as a historical remnant of the development of Rickmansworth should be more appropriately recognised.
BUILDINGS OF NOTE

Listed Buildings - The Bury

Church Street - 7 & 9, No.21 (The Chequers Rest), Nos 25 and 27, Nos 29 and 31, Nos 53 to 61, No. 10 (The Old Vicarage), Nos 34 and 36 (The Feathers P.H.), Nos 38 and 40 (The Priory), Church of St Mary, War Memorial, Wilson Monument, Pair of chest-tombs with fluted corner piers, K6 Telephone Kiosk.

High Street - No 32 The Hour House, St Joan of Arc's Convent High School, Nos 133, 133a and 133b, No.183 The Fox and Hounds, No. 20, No 22 The Coach and Horses, No 46 Basing House, No 72, 72a & 72b, Nos 142 & 144.

The Rose Gardens - War Memorial Statue

Buildings of Local Interest - possibilities for listing

High Street - W.H.Smiths, The Victorian Pharmacy, Natwest and Barclays Banks, Garage.

Church Street - No.49

Bury Lane - Almshouses, The Gables