

Shepherds Hill, Selling conservation area character appraisal

(Extract from report to Development Committee 22.11.2000 - Agenda item no. 6Bi Annex B)

Location

1. Shepherds Hill is situated in the heart of the Kentish North Downs, in the parish of Selling, approximately five kilometres (three miles) south of Faversham and close to the south eastern edge of the Borough of Swale.

History

2. Shepherds Hill is one of a group of rather closely spaced settlements which includes the nearby village of Selling, together with Hogben's Hill, and other later sporadic areas of development around the edges of Perry Wood. The hamlet of Shepherds Hill is centred on two farmsteads, one where the surviving farmhouse dates from the fifteenth century; the other where the house is rather more recent, dating from the early nineteenth century. The name 'Shepherds Hill' derives from a corruption of an earlier form of 'sheep wood', or wooded hill grazed by sheep, and serves to emphasise the agricultural origins of the place.

Buildings

3. Most of the buildings in Shepherds Hill are grouped loosely along a winding country lane (known as Shepherds Hill or Shepherds Hill Lane) leading south from Hogben's Hill, at a point where two other lanes (Goldups Lane and Grove Road) join from the east. The spaces within the hamlet are informal in character and appearance, and the landscape of the North Downs is ever present.

4. Akhurst Farm lies at the northern end of the hamlet and is a fifteenth century, four bay, timber-framed hall house, set close to the road although now largely surrounded by a screen of trees. The house is characteristically Kentish in form and appearance: the timber framing is exposed, the first floor is jettied, and the large steeply-pitched roof is covered with Kent peg tiles. The condition of the building is currently less than perfect but its well-worn character has a certain affinity with its location deep in the Kentish countryside. Two weatherboarded store buildings (the smaller one slated and the other one roofed with corrugated iron) help to delineate an informal grassy parking area/yard around the rear and side of the farmhouse, and aptly reflect the rural character of the site.

5. Set up the slope behind the farmhouse is Akhurst Cottage, also dating from the fifteenth century and timber-framed, although by way of contrast this is a single storey building (with attics). Equally Kentish in appearance, the cottage has a characteristically low-sweeping, hipped, clay tiled roof. A timber store building and a modern timber-clad garage, set a little apart from the house, continue the rural character.

6. Shepherds Hill Cottages lie on the opposite side of the lane, and were built in the second half of the nineteenth century - probably as farmworkers' accommodation. These cottages are built in yellow stock brickwork and have slate roofs, materials which nicely reflect the later date of construction. Markedly different in appearance to the farmhouse opposite, this neat pair of cottages has a rural simplicity well suited to the location.

7. The second farm in the hamlet is Shepherds Hill Farmhouse which lies a short distance to the south. This is an early nineteenth century, two storey house set down a little below the level of the road within a large domestic garden much of which is

screened from view by trees and hedgerows. The brickwork of this substantial house is now painted; the slated roof is punctuated by red brick chimneys.

8. The adjoining foldyard to the south is of special interest, particularly as it can be viewed from the road. Two sides of the yard are defined by ranges of single storey animal shelters, largely built of knapped flint with red brick detailing and with pitched roofs covered with Kent peg tiles. Other materials are also present, including weatherboarding and black painted corrugated iron. The third side of the yard is rather less well expressed with two flimsier timber buildings and a fairly modern detached brick built store/garage facing the opposite way. The fourth side is open and the yard itself is grassed. Although a part of this range of buildings has been converted to a holiday cottage, the foldyard still retains a genuinely rural appearance and continues on occasions to be used as an animal shelter. It consequently retains an authentic working character which is becoming rare locally. The form of the buildings and the easy mix of materials, especially the locally sourced flints, timber and locally made tiles, combine to create an attractive complex of agricultural buildings which has a truly rural Kentish character and which is attractively set within the North Downs landscape.

9. A converted oast house, comprising a single square kiln attached to a two storey stowage building, lies on the opposite side of the road and perhaps was once connected to Shepherds Hill Farm. It, too, is a mid-nineteenth century building, in this instance built in yellow stock brick with pitched roofs covered in natural slates; the loading doors and hoist have been retained in the conversion. Its slightly elevated position means that the building is particularly prominent when approaching Shepherds Hill from the south.

10. Strawberry Fields is an attractive, timber-framed house set a little distance away to the east along Grove Road and dates from the sixteenth century. It was clad in brick in the eighteenth century and extended in more recent times. A hedge along the front boundary partially screens the property from view.

Landscape

11. The landscape of the North Downs around Shepherds Hill has an undulating, rather rounded, appearance being comprised of a series of gentle hills sculpted by intervening dry valleys. Superimposed on this landform is a mosaic of arable and grazing fields, woodlands and (to the north east) orchards, which results in an attractive and traditional appearance to the countryside. However, the wider planting of arable crops now limits the area devoted to sheep grazing in this vicinity, the activity once so closely linked with the origins of Shepherds Hill. The surrounding countryside nevertheless continues to be very well wooded.

12. Shepherds Hill itself sits on the brow of one of these hills, so that views out over the North Downs countryside are always present. Each of the approaches to Shepherds Hill is via narrow winding country lanes; for much of their length they are still bounded by hedgerows and overhanging trees which are native to the area, although in places some stretches have been grubbed out. The winding lane running north-south through the hamlet provides the means by which the loose arrangement of traditional buildings is firmly linked together in this small rural community; trees, woodland, hedgerows, roadside banks and grass verges all contribute to the structure and character of the place. The absence of kerbing, footways, street lighting and intrusive road signing/markings enable the lane's informality to predominate. A cast iron road sign, which survives on the corner of Grove Road, is an attractive example of street furniture from earlier times.

13. Two small blocks of woodland are present within Shepherds Hill and they reflect the well-wooded character of the countryside around. A small plantation to the north of Shepherds Hill Farm includes beech and conifers, whilst the area fronting Grove Road is comprised of large oak standards with an understorey of holly. The latter occupies the highest ground and is important in the landscape.

14. Buildings in the hamlet are readily interspersed with fields and woodland, so that the countryside permeates the hamlet and is an essential part of the character of the place.

Other comments

15. The built environment in Shepherds Hill is characteristically Kentish in character and remarkably free from modern intrusions. In addition, the surrounding countryside has a strongly Kentish character and is also unspoilt. The relationship of these Kentish vernacular buildings one with one another and with the countryside of the Kentish North Downs landscape results in an area of special quality.

16. Modest conversions of parts of the building fabric in Shepherds Hill have nevertheless been taking place. These subtle changes provide evidence of the changing relationship of the hamlet with the surrounding countryside, and emphasise the importance of addressing such changes in ways which fully respect the special character of this quiet hamlet.

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