

Tunstall conservation area character appraisal

(extract from report to Planning Committee 27.02.03 - Agenda item 1.2 Annex B)

Location

1. Tunstall lies approximately two kilometres (1.25 miles) south of Sittingbourne town centre, on the northern edge of the North Downs dip slope. Tunstall has always been a small, distinctly separate settlement set in countryside a discrete distance from Sittingbourne, but at the beginning of the 21st century it finds itself on the very edge of post-war housing development which now defines a new southern edge to Sittingbourne, following the town's rapid outward growth onto farmland, including the old Gore Court estate.

History

2. The name 'Tunstall' is believed to derive from the old English 'Tunsteall' or farmstead. The nearest farmstead now is Grove End, which lies a short distance to the south.

3. The oldest standing fragments of building in Tunstall are contained within the church, where parts of the structure date from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It has been suggested, however, that a church was present here in Saxon times. The oldest domestic property is The Den, where the rear part of the house is timber-framed and dates from late medieval times.

4. The most outstanding domestic property, however, is Tunstall House which was built in the middle of the seventeenth century either for Sir Edward Hales or John Grove, gentleman steward to Sir Edward. Hales House to the north was built for Sir Edward Hales' grandson. Writing at the end of the eighteenth century Hasted commented: 'Tunstall House which although not large yet has the look of some respectability'.

5. Tunstall now comprises a small residential enclave; the church, the school and the parish hall are the exceptions to an otherwise uniform pattern of residential use.

Buildings

6. Tunstall is comprised of three small groups of properties interspersed with parcels of undeveloped land. The buildings are set along Tunstall Road for a distance of some 500 metres; the alignment of the road here is notable for the sequence of sharp turns and pinch points which are an integral part of the form and character of the place.

7. The largest group of buildings is situated at the south-western end of Tunstall and includes the school and Tunstall House. The second group embraces the church and Cedar House (formerly The Rectory). The third, and smallest, group of properties marks the northern edge of Tunstall and is centred on Hales House.

8. The recently completed village hall defines a new southern edge to Tunstall, but the start of frontage development is still neatly marked by a yellow brick oast roundel (and thatched oast house) prominently situated on a bend in the road on the very edge of the carriageway. A thatched single-storey cottage (formerly two cottages) adjoins to the north where red brick cladding hides the seventeenth century timber framing beneath. In contrast to most Kentish oasts this one has escaped conversion to residential use and although not now used for agricultural purposes it retains a pleasingly authentic character despite the absence of a traditional cowl.

9. Tunstall School, built in 1846, lies next door to the north. This is a delightful building faced with knapped flints and with details executed in contrasting red brick; the roof is covered with

clay tiles. The flint work is distinctive, and an excellent example of the skilful and sensitive use of a local building material (derived from the chalk of the North Downs). White painted diamond paned windows, and a studded central door complete the picturesque front elevation. The building makes an important contribution to Tunstall's distinctive identity. By contrast a collection of modern appendages skulks at the back of the school, inferior in quality and lacking in real character and identity; fortunately these additions are hidden from view from the road.

10. To the north is a pleasant cottage, built in 1863, which has been sensitively extended in recent times. Tunstall House to the north again is an outstanding property. Built in the seventeenth century it stands behind a high, buttressed boundary wall. Viewed from the south the peg-tiled roofs and lead capped and louvred cupola can be seen above the boundary wall attractively silhouetted against the high trees in the nearby churchyard. The warm colours of the red and blue chequered brickwork are especially appealing. Close-up views of the house are restricted to glimpses through gates positioned between high brick pillars topped with ball finials. A simple gravelled and grassed forecourt lies to one side attractively enclosed by a converted stable building, brick-built dovecot, store buildings and boundary walls which all complement the main house.

11. The buttressed high brick wall along the front boundary is a major feature in the street scene and indicates that here is a house of substance. The proximity of the wall to the carriageway markedly narrows and focuses the street scene. A small Victorian post box inserted into the wall creates an additional point of interest.

12. Tunstall House Cottage is situated on the opposite side of the road; it also dates from the seventeenth century and is built in a similar red brick to the main house. Leaded light windows on the ground floor, small mullioned windows on the upper floor, creeper-clad brickwork and clay tiled roof all contribute to the appealing, cottagey character of the place.

13. Tunstall House Cottage is linked to the south-west by a high brick boundary wall which markedly squeezes the width of the road. 'The Den' then faces squarely onto the road; the front portion of the house dates from the eighteenth century and is built of grey bricks with red brick dressings. The section to the rear is older, being timber framed and dating from the late medieval period. A range of outbuildings situated alongside to the south includes stables and a coach house which, together with the main house, creates a pleasant grouping and enclosure.

14. A public footpath separates The Den from the former village hall; the latter was built in 1920 but following the construction of the new hall has been converted to residential use. To the south again are two pairs of semi-detached houses plus a pair of linked detached houses (former police houses). Built in the 1960s these are relatively ordinary in appearance, but they are prominently positioned at the southern end of Tunstall and occupy a substantial length of road frontage. Alterations have generally been in ways that respect the form and character of the original buildings.

15. The second group of buildings is centred on the parish church of St John The Baptist. Built mainly of knapped flint, and with peg tiled roofs, the church has a distinctive appearance and is another fine example of the use of local building materials. Despite the presence of a tower at the western end of the building, the church is relatively modest in size and is consequently rather hidden behind a screen of encircling trees which virtually fill the surrounding churchyard. The graveyard is bounded on the highway frontage by a long length of knapped flint wall, finished partly with stone copings and partly with red brick. This boundary is important in the street scene and plays a key role in defining the shape of Tunstall Road. The churchyard contains a number of interesting monuments; two date from the first half of the nineteenth century. A red brick vestry building with pre-cast stone detailing, completed in 1987, stands immediately behind the church. Each of the three

pedestrian entrances into the churchyard is nicely identified by overthrow, Victorian style, lighting lanterns.

16. On the opposite side of the road the former rectory, now known as Cedar House, is set well back within its own grounds. This is a restrained, regular fronted yellow brick house which dates from the 1830s. The front boundary walls marking the entrance into the grounds are built of flint; they nicely echo the flint wall around the churchyard and also play a key role in defining the shape of Tunstall Road. Two houses (Wickham House and a new rectory) have been built in the grounds of the former rectory within the last fifty years, but also being set well back from the road and screened by trees they have little direct impact on the street scene. A tarmac parking area for the church has been formed in front of the new rectory.

17. The flintwork theme is continued in the adjoining pair of nineteenth century Flint Cottages to the south, where the black faces of knapped flints contrast with red brick dressings and band courses. The steep, clay-tiled roofs are relieved by bands of shaped tiles and the large gables are finished with decorated bargeboards.

18. The third group of buildings is centred on Hales House, which is, in effect, a rather plainer and reduced version of Tunstall House. Also built in the seventeenth century, it is in red brick and has a plain tiled roof. Its position on the right-angled bend in Tunstall Road is especially important in the street scene as it closes the view from the south. Stables in matching brickwork are situated alongside to the east; the flank wall projects southwards to create a pinch-point in the road, and is consequently important in defining the form of the street. Hales Cottage, also dating from the seventeenth century, is tucked in behind the stable building. A brick and stone mounting step adjoining the front boundary wall to Hales House is an interesting historical survival.

19. Orchard Cottage, a late eighteenth century house, has in recent years been extensively modernised to the extent that much of its character has been lost. Nevertheless, the building clearly relates to Tunstall rather than suburban Sittingbourne and the garden space around it is generous.

Landscape

20. Despite the southwards expansion of Sittingbourne up to its very northern edge, Tunstall's setting continues to remain remarkably rural in character. The surrounding agriculture is fairly mixed: land to the east is in mainly arable use, but land to the south and west is used for sheep grazing and fruit growing. There are extensive views to the north across Sittingbourne from a number of vantage points in Tunstall, but elsewhere the place is characterised by a strong sense of enclosure created by buildings, boundaries and also by trees and hedgerows.

21. The gaps between the building groups are a key feature in Tunstall and allow the countryside to penetrate into the settlement. They complement the buildings and in certain key respects are as important as the buildings themselves because of the resulting interplay. These gaps are consequently an integral part of the character of the place and their preservation in their current form is critical to the special character of Tunstall.

22. Undeveloped spaces are present between the school and Tunstall House, and also between Tunstall House and the church. Both of these are embraced within the curtilages of the adjoining properties. By contrast the larger gaps between Tunstall House Cottage and Flint Cottages, and between the church and Hales House both continue to be used as grazing meadows so that the character of the surrounding Kentish countryside is here attractively interwoven with the built environment of Tunstall. The paddock opposite Hales House comprises the last of these gaps.

23. Boundary treatments in Tunstall make a particularly important contribution to the character and appearance of the street scene, almost to the extent of there being an observable order: brick boundary walls associated with prestigious properties, flint walls for other important situations, close-boarded fences, diamond chestnut spile fences and paling fences for cottages, and post-and-rail and estate railings for agricultural land. Boundary treatments here might be said to reflect, albeit unconsciously, the character and standings of the buildings and uses to which they relate. These boundaries all help to define and shape the street scene in crucial ways.

24. Trees and hedgerows make a substantial contribution to the appearance and character of Tunstall. In the vicinity of the church the tree canopies meet across the road, and the strong presence of evergreen trees results in a dark, and somewhat mysterious, character. Huge cedar and Wellingtonia trees are particularly notable, but native species make an important contribution also and yew trees are prominent in the churchyard. Hedgerows, trees and roadside banks abutting the carriageway give important form and definition, at intervals, along the length of the street.

25. The pond, situated opposite Hales House, is hidden behind an encircling low brick wall and in some respects is isolated on the 'wrong' side of Tunstall Road so limiting its value as a local amenity. However, the recent village sign and seat positioned immediately to the south have helped to reinforce the local importance of this feature.

The public highway

26. The twisting alignment of Tunstall Road, coupled with the pinch-points in its width imposed by adjoining buildings/boundaries which give a constantly changing shape to the road, is a special feature of Tunstall. Sections of the road are kerbed in concrete whilst other parts have soft margins. Discontinuous lengths of footways, some extremely narrow, are present alongside the carriageway, but so limited is the road space that in places the footway is forced to divert through the churchyard and behind hedgerows in order to thread its way through. This all adds to the individuality of the place, although pedestrian safety is a continuing problem.

27. Concrete haunching formed at the base of the churchyard boundary wall effectively deters pedestrians from straying into a dangerous section of carriageway, but detracts from the character of the flintwork and the general appearance of the road.

Other comments

28. Tunstall is a place with a distinctive identity, bound together by Tunstall Road which winds with pleasing eccentricity through the settlement. It is comprised of an attractive mix of historic buildings interspersed with pockets of traditional countryside. Local materials are strongly in evidence including yellow and red bricks, Kent peg roofing tiles and flint. The sequence of brick walls, rustic flint walls, paling and chestnut spile fences, estate railings and hedgerows make a particularly special contribution to the character of the place.

29. The mix of historic Kentish buildings interspersed at intervals with pockets of countryside, and linked together by the winding form of Tunstall Road, comprises an area of special architectural or historic interest.

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Tunstall conservation area policies and proposals for continuing preservation and enhancement

(Extract from report to Planning Committee 27.02.03 - Agenda item 1.2 Annex C)

Planning policy context:

Swale Borough Local Plan; adopted July 2000.

Supplementary planning guidance:

Listed buildings: a guide for owners and occupiers; adopted November 1993.

Conservation Areas; adopted April 1993.

The conservation of traditional farm buildings; adopted November 1993.

Designing an extension; adopted April 1993.

Repair and maintenance of, and improvements to, buildings, boundaries and other structures:

The palette of materials present in the built environment of Tunstall is of central importance to the special character and local distinctiveness of the place; key materials in this regard include locally manufactured red and yellow stock bricks; Kent peg clay roofing tiles; knapped flints which are locally sourced and of good regularity and colour quality; long straw thatch at The Oast; and Welsh slate. The retention of these indigenous materials will be important in the continuing preservation and enhancement of the character of the place; the use of these materials is also likely to be preferred in any new works of improvement and alteration.

Boundaries, especially their various forms and individual treatments, are an outstanding feature of the Tunstall environment; they are delineated in a variety of ways that includes walls, estate railing, fences, and hedgerows, and in many instances they reflect the relative standings of the buildings to which they relate. The use of locally produced bricks and locally sourced knapped flints in the principle boundaries is especially notable, but the grading of fencing treatments to suit other lesser situations, which includes palings, close-boarding, chestnut-spile and stock-proof treatments, is also important. The maintenance and preservation of these various boundary treatments will be important for the continuing preservation and enhancement of the character of the place; any new works that require alterations or extensions to these or other boundaries should be undertaken in ways that follow these well-established themes.

Owners and occupiers will be encouraged to seek the highest possible standards in the repair, maintenance and improvement of all the buildings, boundaries and other structures that contribute to the special character of Tunstall, and to employ traditional work practices and materials wherever appropriate.

The Borough Council maintains a small budget for grant aid towards the cost of repairs, in appropriate cases, of buildings of architectural or historic interest.

The management of the local landscape:

The established pattern of trees and hedgerows plays a vital role in the special character of Tunstall. Features of particular importance in the Tunstall landscape include trees and hedgerows which define and enclose the undeveloped gaps within the built environment; areas of dense and distinctive planting such as around the church, Tunstall House and Cedar House; and roadside trees, hedges, hedgerows and vegetated embankments alongside Tunstall Road.

The retention and enhancement of all these features of local distinctiveness in the Tunstall landscape will be important for the continuing preservation and enhancement of the character of the place and the positive management of these planting areas will be essential to ensure their future well-being.

Planting which contributes to the form and structure of the local environment in and around Tunstall should normally be comprised of native species, although other species now assimilated into the Kentish rural scene may also be appropriate.

Six weeks notice must be given to the Borough Council in writing before any works are undertaken to trees within the conservation area.

The public highway:

The form and appearance of Tunstall Road is crucial to the character and appearance of the conservation area and the sensitive treatment of the highway environment will therefore be important, including the retention of the informal character and shape of both the road and the carriageway areas; the retention of soft edges, verges and roadside banks; the choice of materials used and the manner of their use; and the restrained use of signing and road markings.

Pedestrian safety, the speed of traffic, and the vulnerability of buildings/walls to physical damage at carriageway pinch-points present particular problems in Tunstall. The highway environment is of such fundamental importance to the special character of the conservation area that conventional traffic engineering solutions to these problems are unlikely to be appropriate.

Works to the public highway will be carried out in accordance with the guidelines prepared by the highway authority for works in conservation sensitive areas as set out in The Highway Management Reference Book produced by Kent County Council.

Wherever possible further clutter in the highway from the statutory companies will be avoided (eg. additional poles, overhead wires, and cabinets).

Other enhancement measures:

Other possible enhancement measures include:

- i. the re-instatement of the traditional cowl on the old oast house;
- ii. the substitution of concrete road kerbs with granite kerbs as and when the opportunity arises;
- iii. the improvement of the appearance of concrete haunching along the base of the flint boundary wall to Tunstall church;
- iv. the repair/re-instatement of estate railing fronting Tunstall Road between Flint Cottages and Tunstall House Cottage.

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