

HIGH WYCOMBE CONSERVATION AREA

Civic Area and Crendon Street Area Study 4

This document forms part of a larger conservation appraisal for High Wycombe, and should be read in conjunction with the master document, which gives development control guidelines.

1 LOCATION AND LANDSCAPE SETTING

The Civic Area and Crendon Street sub area lies close to the historic heart of High Wycombe Town Centre. Originating with Queen Victoria Road and its Edwardian Queen Anne style Town Hall of 1903-4, and Neo-Georgian Council Offices, former Library, Police Station and Post Office, the civic and public buildings area spreads east to include the modern expansion of the Council Offices and west to include the Wycombe Swan Theatre. This area fronts Abbey Way and forms the southern boundary of the town centre. Crendon Street runs north from the High Street - Easton Street crossroads. It was rebuilt in Neo-Georgian style from the 1930's to the 1960's in brick with stone enrichments and barred sash windows. Its character is remarkably consistent and a good example of such a street.

Location and population

This sub area of High Wycombe lies within the boundaries of the medieval borough and thus close to the centre. It is bisected by the historic High Street and Easton Street. The southern part, Queen Victoria Road, mainly consists of civic buildings – The Town Hall, Police Station, Library and Council Offices, with no residential uses. Crendon Street, which runs northwards from the cross roads is mainly commercial with residential on upper floors. The former medieval borough boundary line runs along Birdcage Walk which is a narrow alley between the station buildings and the top of Crendon Street.

General character, plan form and landscape context

This sub area is one of the main axes of the town dating from 1901 to the 1930s, but based in part on a much earlier layout.



Queen Victoria Road was laid out as a grand civic avenue in 1901, from the crossing of the Wye at the southern end. It is a wide street, flanked by grand buildings, and lies on the valley floor. The alterations to the area cut through part of the parkland to Wycombe Abbey and the civic buildings cut across the burgage plots of the High Street and Easton Street to either side. It is now a busy through route. The original layout of a grand avenue can still be seen, and the buildings are set for the most part slightly back from the street, adding to the feeling of spaciousness.



The Town Hall by CE Bateman and A Hale. This is the grandest building in the sub area, and richly embellished in a Queen Anne style.

Crendon Street (formerly Lane) is one of the oldest routes across the valley and was once part of the main route between Reading and Hatfield. Much of its original layout has been lost as the road was widened and realigned during the early 20th century. It rises steeply towards the station and beyond to Amersham Hill. The built form here is highly urbanised and consistent, due to the uniformity and height of the buildings in relation to the street width. This urban form only continues as far as Castle Street, after which the form becomes more suburban in character and greener.

2 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Origins and historic development

This section deals with specific history for Queen Victoria Road and Crendon Street.

Crendon Street is the more historic area, as Queen Victoria Road dates from 1901. Queen Victoria Road was originally the carriage drive to Loakes Manor and prior to the 20th century, played little role in the physical development of the town.

Crendon Street is now a major through route with grand Edwardian-styled quadrants at the junction with the High Street. It lies on a much older trade route across the valley, once part of the pre-Conquest British Way. Old maps show that it was originally a narrow lane with medieval buildings, including almshouses, to either side on shortened plots, with the High Street and Easton Street creating an almost continuous frontage.

Crendon Lane was originally gated near the station, which is also where the medieval borough boundary lay. From here a track wended up to Amersham Heath, notorious for highwaymen. The route was an important link to Hatfield via Amersham. The 1798 Turnpike Act established a toll



The severe Neo-Georgian frontages on Crendon Street, uniform at upper floor level. Amersham Hill can be glimpsed in the background.

South across the library gardens towards Wycombe Abbey. Signage dominates the view. This is the main visual link from the High Street to the verdant hillside of Wycombe Abbey.



road from Hatfield to Reading, and the route was improved. The station at the top was originally constructed in 1845 and rebuilt in 1857 when the GWR extended the line. Castle Street was formed to link Crendon Lane with Church Street to allow better access to the new station. Crendon Lane remained a narrow road until it was improved in the 1930's, and the medieval buildings on either side replaced in a grand neo-Georgian style with quadrants at the junctions in a style much favoured by Edwardian architects. This led to the loss of many historic buildings, in particular Christchurch, halfway up the hill, and Dial House, to the north eastern quadrant of the crossroads. The sundial from this was moved to one of the new buildings fronting Crendon Street. The eastern side of the street was completed at a later date than the western, and is more piecemeal in appearance. Old photographs show the western side of the street with the new buildings constructed in full behind the originals. When these were demolished the street almost doubled in width.

To the south of the High Street originally lay the entrance drive to Loakes Manor, later Wycombe Abbey. This was defined by an entrance lodge, the Rupert Gates, and east of this Wheelers Brewery. In 1901, after the Abbey had been sold to the girls' school, the drive was no longer required. The gates were moved to their current position on Marlow Hill, and Earl Carrington, Marquis of Lincolnshire, donated the land to the town, to form a civic avenue. A fine wrought iron bridge crossing the river was constructed and the road laid out to its present alignment. A plaque on the bridge in memory of Queen Victoria's reign commemorates the donation. In 1904 the first civic building, the Town Hall, was constructed. Early photographs show it in splendid isolation on a tree lined avenue.

In 1929 Wheelers Brewery was closed, and its buildings, which had occupied the south eastern side of Queen Victoria Road, were demolished. Christchurch Sunday School lay behind these, on the site of the present Post Office car park. The early 1930s saw a slew of building projects. The Council Offices were begun in 1931, as was the County Library on the other side of the road. The post office and business buildings, which swing in an elegant arc around into Easton Street were constructed in 1934. The police station, south of the Town Hall, was built in 1934. South of the river, The Liberal Club also dates from this period.

The Library has now been relocated into Eden Shopping Centre, and the building is at present unused

Archaeology

Although more recent in construction than much of the medieval parts of town, the area is still of interest, particularly close to the junction of High Street and Easton Street. However the reconstruction works of the 1930s are likely to have disturbed archaeological deposits.

Historic maps

1876 OS, 1899 OS. These are the editions that show clearly the original layout of the routes through this area. In particular the parkland for Wycombe Abbey runs up to the High Street, and the former lodge can be

All historic photographs courtesy of SWOP, Bucks County Council and the Bucks Free Press



The Town Hall.



The Station Yard looking down Crendon Lane.



New buildings constructed behind the originals.



Dial House prior to demolition.



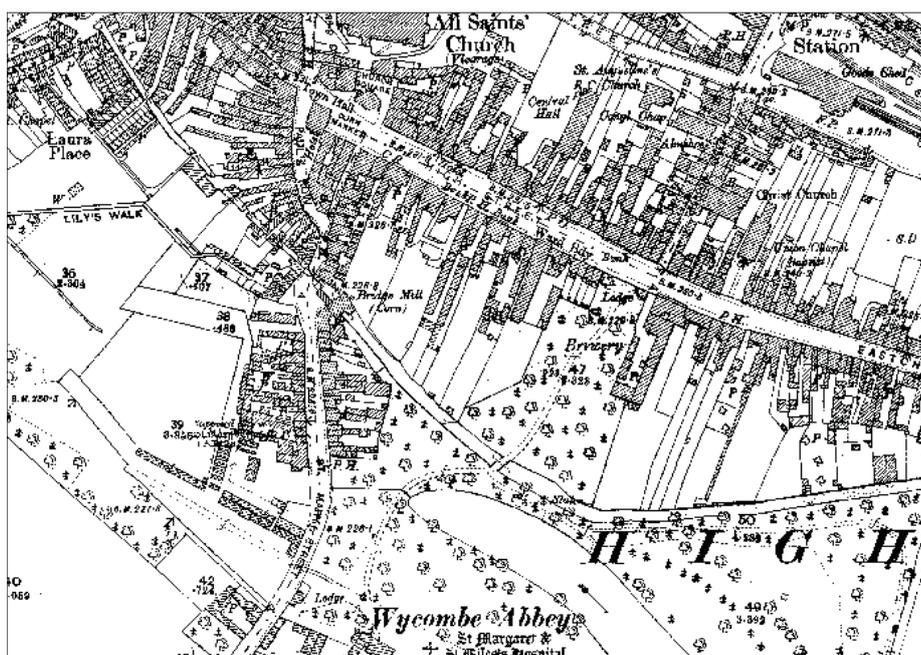
The Rupert Gates.

clearly identified. The narrowness of Crendon Lane is also apparent.

3 SPATIAL ANALYSIS

The Character and inter-relationship of spaces within the area

There is some formal space within the area, which has resulted from the Edwardian design plans for Queen Victoria Road. However the through-road dominates the area, sweeping from Abbey Way along Queen Victoria Road and then diverging three ways at the crossroads. Originally laid out as a wide avenue, it now takes a high volume of traffic in three lanes. The width of Queen Victoria Road is emphasized by the open space of the library gardens adjacent to the crossroads with the High Street, which help to create a feeling of spaciousness, albeit one that is usually filled with traffic. The curve of the buildings at the crossroads also visually open the area up. The library gardens are an open formal space surrounded by low walling, which allows for views across to the High Street buildings opposite. The Council Offices have an area of grass by the riverbank, but the forecourt of the building is cluttered by carparking. South of the river, a small area of land left over from the Abbey Way road scheme has been transformed into a riverside park, screened by walling from the dual carriageway



The OS map of 1899 showing the original road layout of Crendon Lane, and the northern entrance to Wycombe Abbey.

Important views and vistas

The long range views in this sub area are a result of the relief, which allows for views right across the valley to the surrounding hillsides. Key views are marked on the appraisal map, and include:

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The long range views in this sub area are a result of the relief, which allows for views right across the valley to the surrounding hillsides. Key views are marked on the appraisal map, and include:

- North along Queen Victoria Road and up Crendon Street to the hillside beyond – terminating in the tree lined Amersham Hill. The Neo-Georgian corner buildings dominate the middle ground as they sweep the corner. There is borrowed architectural interest from the listed buildings opposite the library, which contrast nicely with the formal lines of the cross road quadrants.
- Down Crendon Street south toward the crossroads, with the Post Office crescent prominent on the corner. Beyond is the backdrop of Wycombe Abbey, its parkland and the tree covered hillside of Daws Hill.
- From the central crossroads westwards along the High Street, terminating in a distant view of the Guildhall.
- South west from the Post Office buildings across the road towards the town hall and adjacent buildings.
- East into the “secret” riverside gardens.
- Northeast across the library gardens to the sweep of the corner buildings on Easton Street.
- Northwest from the Post Office.



The historic sundial, rescued from Dial House after its demolition, and reinstalled half way up the east side of Crendon Street.

The east side of Crendon Street showing less uniformity of architecture due to its later, piecemeal development, and distracting fascia signage.



4 CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Activity and landuse

Civic uses dominate Queen Victoria Road. The Town Hall, Police Station and Library lie on the western side, their frontages concealing the bulk of the Swan Theatre, a modern building. Across the river is the Liberal Club. On the east side of the road lie the Council Offices, and the main Post Office sorting office, as well as some business premises in the same parade of buildings.



The north west quadrant of High Street turning the corner into Crendon Street, with uniform architecture on the upper levels.

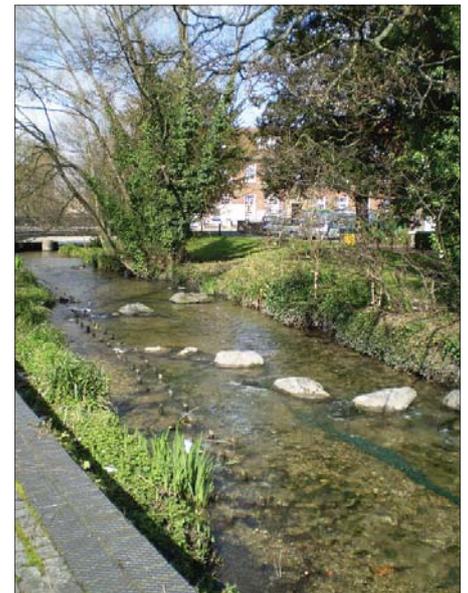
Commercial uses are concentrated in the quadrant crescents and up Crendon Street. Whilst there are the usual issues of ground floor shop fronts which can be less than harmonious, the upper floors retain a good deal of their original fittings, and the overall design ethos of the Crendon Street buildings remains. The upper end of the road has similar curved buildings round into Castle Street, although the original buildings on the eastern side have been replaced with a modern office block.

Architectural and historical quality of buildings and the contribution they make to the special interest of the area

There is one listed building in this sub area, although others along the High Street and Easton Street are “borrowed” as they are important in views, and creating a sense of contrast with the planned architecture. This is particularly the case with High Street buildings which face across the road to the library gardens. Due to the large scale (pre-planning system) redesign of the area, the buildings all date from the 20th century, although their architecture harks back to an earlier period.

The Town Hall, by CE Bateman and A Hale is the earliest building in the sub area, dating from 1902-4 and is Grade II listed. Its symmetrical front is of brick, with elaborate carved stone bays with segmental pediments contrasting the orange of the brickwork. The upper floor houses the former Council chamber, and has stained glass windows representing local political figures, and activities associated with the town. To the front is wrought iron proclamation balcony.

To either side are later buildings following the municipal theme. All exhibit a pared down Neo-Georgian style on the frontage buildings, although many have been later extended to the rears. The library to the north is by RG Brocklehurst, 1932-5. It is linked to the town hall by an arch with stone dressings to the lower floor. The building has a date stone to the front. South of the Town Hall, and set slightly back from the road frontage, lies the 1935-7 Police Station, in a similar style, by EAL Martyn. The main range is domestic-looking, with a hipped roof, and originally



The restored river bed at the Jack Scruton Memorial Garden looking towards the Queen Victoria Road Bridge.

Paving details at the park.



the southern elevation addressed the River. A later rear extension now dominates the riverside. On the other side of the river, somewhat divorced from the main avenue and aligned to face the roundabout, lies the Liberal Club, again in a similar style.

To the other side of Queen Victoria Road the Council Offices, also by Brocklehurst and Cowles, are Neo-Georgian, of brown brick with little embellishment apart from the Vitruvian scrolled ironwork to the first floor. Large extensions have been added over the years at the rear of the site, and these dominate views from Abbey Way. North of the Council offices lies the Post Office sorting office which leads into the gentle curve of the Easton Street quadrant. This building was designed to turn the corner, and its main entrance faces south, now somewhat obscured by the railings and incidental clutter of the carpark. It dates from 1934, and was built as one of the civic avenue buildings in a free Neo-Georgian style. Arched windows embellish the road side elevation. A former Sunday School (dating from the late 1920s) between the Council Offices and the Post Office, was demolished to make way for the sorting office car park, probably when the building was extended in the 1960s. This later extension is of no architectural merit.

Crendon Street sweeps up the hill from the crossroads. The north east and south east quadrants are in a Neo-Adam style. The east side of Crendon Street, which was completed piecemeal and at a later date than the west, is a mixture of Neo-Georgian frontages. The west side is more uniform in design. Generally three storeys, the buildings have white painted sash windows to the upper floors and subtle stonework detailing. On the west side the buildings step gently up the hill, tied together at first and second floors by the uniformity of brick detailing to window surrounds.

Key unlisted buildings

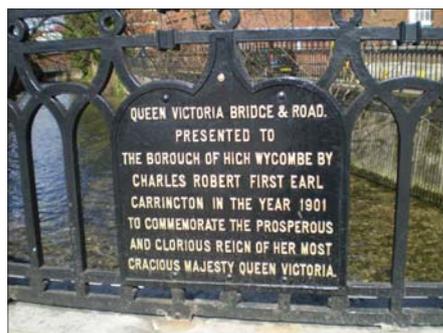
There are no locally listed buildings within this sub-area. Overall it is the stylistic detailing and grand scale of the Civic Avenue and Crendon Street which is important in creating the character of the area.

Local details

The uniting theme is the grand style of neo-Georgian architecture that runs through this whole area, due mostly to a design of what was intended to be a grand civic area. The buildings date from the 1900's to the 1950's, and the architectural theme is remarkably consistent throughout, even on later buildings, with the exception of the corner next to the station. The listed Town Hall is the undisputed jewel in this sub area, its façade of orange brick and stonework, with stone embellishments and a lantern. The neo-Georgian theme means that even quite utilitarian buildings are embellished with architectural details, grand entrances, and a uniformity of sash windows on the upper floors. The post office for example has fine acanthus detailing around its arched windows, and many of the buildings on Crendon Street have a pleasing austere symmetry based on Palladian principles, enhanced by vertical embellishments and pilasters to central windows in contrasting materials, and enlivened in some cases with wrought ironwork Juliet balconies. Different coloured



Stonework embellishment and the cupola of the Town Hall, a landmark building.



Railings on the Queen Victoria Road bridge, commemorating the gift of the land to the Town.

The Jack Scruton Memorial Garden creates an oasis from the busy road system.



brickwork highlights quoining and window headers. The lower floors were always intended to be shop and business premises and have large frontage windows, originally uniform in design, with classically inspired pilasters and pediments.

Prevalent and traditional building materials

Brick is the universal building material in the sub area, due mainly to the planned layout of the locality and the rebuilding of much of the earlier streetscene. In some cases it is embellished with stone, such as at the Town Hall. The brick is mostly a buff brown, again excepting the town hall which is red brick.

Contribution made by the natural environment

The former Library gardens are a formal space, with carpet bedding and no public access. They provide a green link to the Council Offices and The Rye beyond.

The riverside park was improved in 2001 and dedicated to the memory of Jack Scruton, founder of the High Wycombe Society. It has natural stone paving, carved poetry inscriptions and the riverbed has been restored and naturalised to create a tiny oasis in the heart of the busy road system. The Council Offices also have a sliver of riverside garden to the north of The Wye, shaded by mature trees.

Borrowed greenery from hillsides is important in this part of the conservation area. It softens the view, particularly when looking south down Crendon Street.

The extent of loss, problems and pressures

Retention of timber windows on the neo-Georgian facades up Crendon Street: The detailing on the elevations play a key role in the character of the architecture. The buildings are in non residential use, which means that they have no permitted development rights. This has provided the Council with the means to control the replacement of windows and make sure that the original design and materials are employed. Should alien modern materials be introduced, the impact on the character would be great. The Liberal Club has lost its original wooden windows.

Traffic: Queen Victoria Road and Crendon Street have become part of the major road network linking High Wycombe to Amersham, and



The Council Offices main buildings - there are large additions to the rear of the original.



The Vitruvian scroll balcony at the Council offices enlivens the sombre facade.

The well maintained neo-Adam facades on the corner of Easton Street and Crendon Street, with the original detailing and fascia retained.



taking a great deal of traffic through the centre of town. Queen Victoria Road is now essentially a three lane one-way highway which links into Crendon Street and the Easton Street gyratory system. It becomes a bottleneck at certain times of the day. Furthermore the frontage of the Council Offices is marred somewhat by car parking, although at a lower level than the road. There is an opportunity here to visually relink this area back to the green spaces of the tree covered hillsides to the south and Wycombe Abbey, and create an attractive pedestrian route to The Rye from the town centre.

Traffic is also slowed by the gradient of the road and pedestrian traffic lights as it climbs Crendon Street up to Castle Street.

Signage and shop fronts: The ground floor display windows of the buildings that line Crendon Street were designed as shop fronts, with ready made fascias for signage, and grand entrances between the units to the upper floors of the buildings, all defined architecturally. Unfortunately much of the signage does not relate to the overall proportions of the fascia boards, with the result that it looks disjointed. In some cases new signage has been erected below the original fascias so that the proportions of the shop fronts are wrong. Where the signage does reflect the original proportions, and fits in well with the architectural detailing, then the effect is far more uniform and reflects the ethos of the original design. Dralda House is a good example of the architectural detailing dominating the frontage. Traditionally styled shopfronts which do not consist of large expanses of plate glass do still exist on Crendon Street, but are in a minority. Fascia sign design varies immensely on Crendon Street, but the most effective signage tends to be the traditionally lettered and coloured fascias. Control over materials and lighting is sometimes difficult, and many of the fascia signs do not conform to guidance.



Acanthus detailing on the windows of the Post Office building. Small details like this, although not immediately obvious, add greatly to the quality of the architecture.



Detailing on doorways to the upper floors of the Crendon Street buildings.

View north past the Town Hall to Amersham Hill.



Dralda House, with grand door and window arrangement to signify the main entrance.



Civic Area and Crendon Street

Area 4 Study Appraisal



For illustrative purposes only; not to scale