

Somerton Conservation Area Appraisal

DRAFT JUNE 2017

Introduction

Conservation areas are areas of 'special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance'. Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 imposes a duty on local authorities to identify appropriate parts of their areas, to designate them as conservation areas and to keep them under review. Historic areas are now extensively recognised for the contribution they make to our cultural inheritance, economic well-being and quality of life. Public support for the conservation and enhancement of areas of architectural and historic interest is well established. By suggesting continuity and stability, such areas provide points of reference in a rapidly changing world: they represent the familiar and cherished local scene. Over 9000 have been designated nationally since they were introduced in 1967 and there are over 80 in South Somerset

The Somerton Conservation Area was first designated in 1970 and extended in 1978. The District Council is required by the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to define the special interest and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of conservation areas. Conservation area appraisals contribute to the fulfilment of this requirement.

In order that designation is effective in conserving the special interest, planning decisions must be based on a thorough understanding of the Conservation Area's character. Appraisals are therefore essential tools for the planning process and to manage informed intervention. They will provide a sound basis, defensible on appeal, for the relevant development plan policies and development control decisions and will form the framework for effective management of change. The appraisal will help provide the District Council and the local community with a clear idea of what features and details contribute to the

special character of the conservation area. The more clearly the character or special interest of a conservation area is defined, the easier it is to manage without damaging that interest.

The appraisal document follows the content recommended in *Conservation Area Designation, Appraisal and Management* Historic England 2016

Summary of special interest - the area's key characteristics

- The historic street plan reflecting influences from the pre-Roman period onwards.
- The open rural landscape setting with glimpsed views out from the conservation area
- The unusually unified character of townscape with strong building lines defining the streets
- The consistent use of Blue Lias stone for walling and boundaries
- A consistency of roof materials in red/orange clay tile in a number of different styles
- The consistent scale within streets and survival of historic plot boundaries
- A good mix of uses to the central core
- The Market Place with its varied spaces, the fine Market Cross and grouping of good quality buildings
- Unusually extensive listing along principal streets in the urban core
- A rural peripheral area of open farmland, farms, country houses and parkland
- Some high quality historic shopfronts
- Substantial town houses and many good examples of well-proportioned smaller houses.

- The presence of stone boundary walls throughout the conservation area

Assessment of the special interest

Location and context

Somerton is situated in the Mid Somerset Hills landscape character area on the low ridge between the Yeo and Cary rivers, close to and overlooking a crossing of the latter a short distance to its east. The town occupies a spur of higher ground between the River Cary and the Mill Stream that lies in a small valley on the south side.

Historic development and archaeology

The town is first referred to in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle of 733, when Aethelbald, King of Mercia occupied Somerton, a royal possession of the West Saxon kings. The kings of Wessex re-established their control of the town in the early 9th century. At Domesday the Somerton estate is listed first of the land in the Kings possession. At this time Somerton was clearly the central place of a large royal estate but may not have been urban in character. The extent of the estate was not known, neither was tax paid for it. As an estate centre a royal residence might be expected around which a settlement may have grown up and perhaps formed a short lived burh evidenced by the place name 'Bury' in a court roll of 1349.

A market had been granted in 1255 and Somerton was chosen as the county town in the later 13th century, perhaps due to the erroneous tradition that the town had been the Saxon capital of Wessex. The shire courts and gaol were transferred to Somerton from Ilchester in 1278 and 1280 respectively, which has been cited as the main cause for Ilchester's waning economy in the late 13th and 14th century. By 1290 a 'new borough' had been added, increasing the number of burgages.

The position as county town was short lived with the gaol out of use by 1371 and the last visit of the circuit judges in 1530. General decline is also shown by the market ceasing in the late 16th century. However, a new grant was made in 1606

and the economy of the town seems to have picked up as the market increased in importance, reflected in the growing number of inns situated around the market square and the number of fine quality buildings put up in this period. Despite the successful market and some cloth industry up to the mid-18th century the economy of the town remained essentially agricultural. Following a further slump in the 18th century some recovery was felt in the 19th with new industries in the town; Somerton brewery on West Street, a collar factory on Broad Street, a gloving and shoe bindings factory, a cardboard box factory and quarrying for building stone. However, the town suffered from the lack of a railway, particularly with the line passing through nearby Langport. When a new railway was eventually built through Somerton in 1906, the station was maintained for less than sixty years. The town is now little more than a village despite large modern housing developments added, particularly around the west end of the town, in the 20th century.

See Victoria County History for more information.

Archaeological potential

An Area of High Archaeological Potential (AHAP) has been designated across the core of the town reflecting the potential of the archaeological resource relating to the prehistoric, Roman, Saxon and medieval development of the settlement. The wider area was densely populated in the prehistoric and particularly the Roman periods. Nine Romano-British farmsteads or villas have been located in the area around Somerton which was a rich agricultural hinterland to the Roman town at Ilchester. The historic buildings of the town are an important archaeological resource in their own right as well. Any proposed development within the AHAP will need to include appropriate measures to assess and, if necessary, protect or record the archaeological interest of the site or building.

Landscape setting

The town is situated elevated above the point at which the River Cary issues from its passage through the Mid Somerset

Hills into the open moors to the northwest, the town centre being a mile or so to the southwest of the river

The immediate landscape setting of the town is defined by the steep hillsides of the Cary valley falling from its north edge, and the valley of the tributary Mill Stream to the south, which currently contains the town's southward extent. To the west, Somerton's setting is less clearly defined, with the town extending across open plateau land toward the Bancombe and Somerton Hills.

General character and plan form

The form of the town is influenced around the east-west direction of old routes that were dictated by the local topography and the bridging point on the River Cary. The early core of the settlement may have been located in the area to the north of the church overlooking the river valley, known as Bury, the result perhaps of a short-lived Saxon Burh being established here.

Alternatively it could have been situated on the elevated spur east of the present town but no firm evidence has been revealed. Later, in the C13th, the borough was established south of Bury and burgage plots laid out around the rectangular market place and along Broad Street south of the east-west route which ran down to the river crossing. The eastward line has disappeared but may be revealed in the historic boundaries that survive north of the churchyard and around the vicarage.

West End seems to have evolved from sporadic developments first in C17th and infilled in the C19th. Since then much development and further infilling has occurred to the west and north-west.

The present planform incorporates three early foci – at Cow Square, perhaps relating to the earliest urban focus; at the C13th market place and at West End where routes from the south and west converge into West Street. The present core of the town is Market Place with churchyard immediately adjoining. This and the streets leading off, Broad Street and West Street, seem to have been laid out in C13th along with burgage plots that are still evident.

The town possesses a particularly distinctive and homogenous character of modest buildings in the soft grey Blue Lias stone with warm orange clay pantiles and roman tiles particularly in the principle streets mentioned above with consistent built-up frontages forming a strong enclosure of space.

Beyond this urban core, which would be sharply defined from its rural surrounds except for the existence of extensive C20th development around the east, south and west sides, the CA encompasses peripheral areas with a marked rural character. These are the pastureland of the eastern extent of the town's ridge site above the Cary valley, known as the Millands; Pestors Lane and the southern slopes down to the Mill Stream; Lower Somerton following the stream east and areas east of the B3151 with more of a parkland character around Somerton Court, Somerton Randle, the Mill, The Grange and Somerton Court Farm.

Character and interrelationship of spaces

The Market Place is now the centre of the town. Streets radiate from here; east as Kirkham Street, west as West Street and northwards via Broad Street, the former beast market, to Cow Square and then north and east through North and New Streets. St Michaels Church is contained within a distinct inward-looking churchyard hidden behind the Broad St buildings; a green oasis formed with the substantial trees of the Vicarage garden. Beyond the core area the CA has a quiet, very much more 'villagey' feel and beyond that a rural one partly because the town or the urban core ends as the south and north sides of its ridge-top site are reached and partly as the CA is designated around an extensive hinterland of open and parkland: The Millands and part of the Somerton Randle estate to the east and the Mill stream valley to the south.

Key views and vistas

The topographical position of Somerton provides contained views between buildings out over the surrounding landscape both northwards and southwards

Prospects of the open moors to the north are had from Horse Mill Lane and the lanes east of New Street with Hurcot Hill prominent and, in the further distance, Dundon Hill while the open landscape to the south also offers views out from behind West Street, in Pestors Lane and from Parsonage Hill. However there are no formal vistas or views across the landscape from key areas in the urban core. The town is seen from the south on its ridge where the distinctive material colouration can be appreciated. Views from the western side reveal the town less fortunately, with modern development hiding the masking the distinctive character of the historic core. With the CA there are no major urban vistas but of some local views of significance are
The vista to St Michael's through the churchyard gates from the Market Place
The length of tree-lined Broad Street towards the end of North Street.

Landmarks

The Market Square with Market Cross, war memorial and church of St Michael behind;
The former Town Hall in centre of Market Place and historic inns adjacent.
Cow Square with Manor House and small central greenspace.

Character analysis

Somerton's historic core has a particularly cohesive character based upon the mostly close-set built frontages of modest vernacular buildings, the distinct palette of materials and consistencies of scale. The southern side of the urban area and the more rural parts to the east including Somerton Randle have a contrasting rural character so the area, to aid description, can be subdivided into 2 areas together with a third in the western extensions

1. The urban centre

Including Market Square, Broad, North, New, Kirkham and West Streets and Behind Bury

2. Lower and eastern Somerton

The rural south and east; Mill stream valley, The Millands, and Somerton Randle

3. Western Somerton

Proposed extensions to conservation area.

1. THE URBAN CENTRE

Form and Layout characteristics

The street layout has a grain that runs east-west; Behind Bury, New Street with now-lost East Street north of the church which were the historic e-w routes. North-south connecting streets linked into the present core (Broad and North St) while the urbanised area has drawn out westwards along the routes west and south forming West Street and beyond West End and Sutton Road.

Trees and green spaces

- The churchyard with prominent large trees on its west side extending through to the garden of the Old Vicarage
- Small green in Cow Square
- Street trees along Broad St are significant to its character.
- Trees and rear gardens on the east side of Broad Street also but much hidden from public view
- Gardens and open land of north side of New St
- The parkland setting and surrounds to Somerton Randle and Somerton Court with the fine treescape along B3151 road.

Building materials - Blue lias stone walling overwhelmingly predominant with some Ham Hill dressings. Isolated examples of white or pale render. Roofs clay pan- and roman-tiles mostly, infrequent slate. Stone on Market Cross.

Key colour characteristics

Strongly characterised by the warm grey of lias stone and the orange clay tile roofs.

Characteristic details - Lias walling, white painted or Ham Hill stone dressings,

simple gabled ridge roofs, roof lines uninterrupted except for gabled windows that feature regularly. Tabled gable ends common.

Windows – Stone mullion and white painted trad box sash predominate – 6 over 6, 8 over 8, 12 over 12 (The Globe) stone mullioned oriel bays Market House. Window surrounds Ham stone, some dressings painted.

Doors and doorways, porches – Classical porches and doorcases in Ham Hill stone

chimneys - brick or lias stone

dormers – atypical and limited to behind parapets (Red Lion) and gabled (The Market House and Tudor Cottage) and isolated single (Churchside Cottage)

Other features and details- wall and iron gates to churchyard, good stone paving, stone kerbs, ‘Somerset’ lamp standards, iron bollards etc unify and set off buildings in central area around war memorial; Iron railings.

STREET BY STREET

Market Place

‘One of the most happily grouped urban pictures in Somerset’¹. A formerly rectangular market space now with an infilling with island buildings that create two irregular subspaces the principal of which is that immediately south of the churchyard, an attractive grouping of Market Cross building (of 1673), former town hall, (C17 origins) war memorial, memorial hall, and formal gateway and railings to churchyard with wide paved areas defining a carriageway and an area set aside for parking on the west side. The second space is contained by the infill buildings and ranges on the south and east sides, forming a quieter area.

Scale - Domestic scale predominates with some more substantial examples

Height - two storey with a single example at 3 storey (Selwood House)

Building line – Consistent at back of footways except two railing- enclosed forecourts SE corner

Features and details – Gables at Market House, Good railings eg churchyard, Selwood house. Lias and other stone pavings generally to footways, cast iron fingerpost, Somerset street lamps. War memorial with good figure on plinth.

Formal path leads into churchyard through gateway. Clipped yews form an avenue to south porch. Churchyard a rather private, enclosed, tranquil space bounded by some fine trees. Church tower, although not tall, features over rooftops.

Key buildings- Parish Church of St Michael GI and The Vicarage GII* adjacent

Market Cross GII*

The Market House C17 with gables and oriel bays GII*, War Memorial, Old Town Hall GII

Ranges of listed buildings surrounding and within Market Place, unified by consistent materials particularly Former Red Lion Hotel II*, White Hart GII, Globe Inn GII.

Broad Street

A fine wide street with consistent built frontages of buildings both sides; especially good range on east side. Pollarded trees feature each side (with parking between – somewhat intrusively) to create vistas each way, notable northwards to three storey end of 1 North Street.

Scale – Domestic with some more substantial houses and larger 3 story blocks on west side.

Height - Two and three storey and with gables at Linden House

Building Line – To back of footway without setbacks

Key Buildings - Mildmay House, Craigmere II* The Narrow House

Features and details – Some high quality houses; lias pavings; trees both sides.

Cow Square

A small square at the intersection of Broad, North and New Streets enclosed by good substantial houses and featuring a small (private) green in the centre

¹ *Somerset South and West* Julian Orbach and Nicholas Pevsner 2014

Scale – Distinguished domestic.

Height - Two and three storey

Building Line – To footway except Donnisthorpe set back with railings and gates.

Key buildings- Donnisthorpe II*, Old Hall and London House with late C19 shopfronts.

Features and details – Railings, lias pavings, Edwardian iron horse trough and lamp standard unit in paved surround; SCC finger post; curved corner buildings. Old Hall mansard roof. No dormers, chimneys brick or stone

North and New Streets

Fine low-key streets of small houses in typical Somerton style

Scale – Domestic

Height - 2 storey

Building Line – North Street has set back frontages behind railings. New St mostly to back of footway without setbacks

Key Buildings – Prominent 1, North St; Scott Gould House opposite with seven gables to street frontages;

London House as above

Cockspurs at focal point of New Street above Old Hill.

Features and details – Two streets of fine small houses with a unity of character – lias stone, clay tile roofs, white joinery

Kirkham Street

Kirkham Street runs east with the urban character of the town core dissipating quickly into a quiet suburb

Scale – Domestic

Height - 2 storey

Building Line – To back of footway without setbacks at western end broken up by garden areas contained by walls and setbacks further east. North side with open playing field.

Key buildings – Kirkham House, Monteclefe House

Features and details – Broad open play/sports ground behind railings on north side.

West Street to railway bridge

The principle thoroughfare running west from Market Place is a narrowly closely

enclosed space but broadening after junction with Pestors Lane.

Scale – Urban domestic

Height - Two storey but the United Church is the exception at a larger scale

Building Line – Mostly to back of footway without setbacks although the Methodist Church garden and the United Church frontages of wall and railings break pattern as does Locke's garden centre. Late C20th Brunel Centre and associated car park forms an open break in this consistent frontage.

Key buildings United Church and hall with strong gabled frontages

Unicorn Hotel – C17 and gabled porch projecting into street;

Isolated timber frame and jetty at Leavers Court;

Hext Almshouses

Features and details – Valuable street tree on corner of Market Place. Lias pavings Some good shopfronts (no.5 and Stacey's butchers both with fine iron cresting, 'Natural meats' and pair opposite Pestors Lane)

Behind Berry/ Horse Mill Lane

The rural north edge of the town on the top of the northern scarp. Only the north side of Behind Berry is in the CA. Horse Mill Lane has a marked rural character.

Scale – determined by two small country houses with domestic scale outbuildings to Behind Berry frontage.

Height - Two storey but more substantial in The Lynch

Building Line – Behind Berry frontage is of walls, incidental outbuildings and greenery. Horse Mill Lane has stone retaining walls on south side and a few incidental outbuildings.

Key Buildings – The Lynch hotel and The Dovecote in Behind Berry

Features and details - Woodland setting to The Lynch containing substantial trees and many trees in the surrounds to both principal buildings

2. LOWER AND EASTERN SOMERTON

Form and Layout characteristics

The rural peripheral areas to east and south of the urban centre are formed of the open paddocks of The Milllands, parkland around Somerton Randle in the river valley below, the sporadic development in the Mill Stream valley, the parkland and paddocks at Somerton Court Farm and Somerton Court.

Trees and green spaces

This markedly rural character area is dominated by open spaces of paddocks and parkland with many significant trees particularly at:-

- Parsonage Hill and around Old Parsonage;
- In grounds of and around Stonebrook House, Vale House, Old Somerton Mill, Somerton Erleigh and along the B3151;
- In the mill stream valley, west of Crane Farm;
- Good parkland trees at Somerton Court, Somerton Randle.

Key colour characteristics

Strongly characterised by the warm grey of lias stone and the orange clay tile roofs

Building materials - Blue lias stone walling overwhelmingly predominant some Ham Hill dressings. Roofs clay pan and roman tiles, some slate and thatch

Characteristic details – Lias stone walling simple gabled ridge roofs, roof lines uninterrupted. Some tabled gable ends. White finish windows, brick or stone chimneys

Windows – Mixed range of sashes and casements, with generally white finish in plain openings.

Doors and doorways, porches – Simple vernacular doorways generally.

Chimneys- brick or lias stone, some with Ham detail.

Dormers - not a feature

Features and details – stone walled boundaries along roads, some distinctive and very high walls in Lower Somerton

STREET BY STREET

Pesters Lane

Urban back lane with suburban elements becoming rural further east

Scale – Domestic/ cottage and agricultural

Height – 1 and 2 storey

Building Line – varies; some set-backs

Key Buildings – Sunhouse Farm, Crane Farm

Features and details – walled boundaries and prospects towards south over open countryside

Parsonage Hill

A quiet arcadian backwater, with both suburban and rural characteristics

Scale – Domestic

Height - 1 and 2 storey

Building Line – Most buildings set back, gardens with boundary walls in stone

Key Buildings – Old Parsonage GII*, The Mount

Features and details – Boundary walls, especially fine boundary walling and gateway at Old Parsonage.

Lower Somerton

A lane contained by stone boundary walls and occasional buildings set hard by road edge. Rural character of trees and gardens, walled enclosures and small outbuildings.

Scale – Domestic but with a series of grander houses in private grounds set back partly hidden.

Height – 2 storey but varied between cottage and country house

Building Line – informal layout of buildings at road edge or frequently set back behind walls.

Key Buildings – Stonebrook House, Vale House, Somerton Court

Features and details – Some high boundary walls. Glimpses through trees to mill stream. Mill wheel at Watermill Cottage.

Acre Lane

Suburban C20th built form, many single storey, on north side with The Millands open area opposite

Scale – largely suburban domestic

Height – 1 or 2 storey

Building line – Set back generally with gardens

Features and details – Views northwards over open countryside

Lodge Hill B3151, Huish Road and eastern Somerton

Busy road with rural character – boundary walls in stone, scattered buildings, substantial trees along roadside, in parkland and around Old Somerton Mill and woodland to east.

Scale – Generally substantial domestic

Height – 2 storey

Key Buildings – Somerton Randle GII, C19th country house in classical manner, Somerton Erleigh GII modern house of c.1970, Old Somerton Mill G II*, Randle Lodge, Old Estate Yard, The Grange, Somerton Court farmhouse.

Features and details – Fine trees and parkland, mill leat at Old Somerton Mill

3. WESTERN SOMERTON – including The Triangle, parts of Langport Road, West Street, West End, Camden Road, Water Lane etc to the west of railway line.

Form and Layout characteristics

Built up along and around the historic routes to Long Sutton and Langport, the area is a series of streets that contrast with the ordered layout of the town core but still possessed of the typical Somerton building characteristic and modest scale vernacular.

Trees and green spaces

Principally in gardens. Trees around Lomans, prominent evergreen dominates Water Lane at The Old manse; in Camden Road.

Building materials – Blue lias stone walling overwhelmingly predominant
Roofs clay pan and roman tiles, some slate and thatch

Key colour characteristics

Strongly characterised by the warm grey of lias stone and the orange clay tile roofs

Characteristic details – Lias stone walling, simple gabled ridge roofs, roof lines uninterrupted. A few tabled gable ends

Windows – Mixed range of sashes and modern replacements, with white finishes in plain openings, some bays.

Doors and doorways, porches – Simple vernacular doorways generally

Chimneys- brick or lias stone, some with Ham detail and yellow clay pots

Dormers - do not feature

Neutral and negative areas and factors
West End - derelict Home Farmhouse and land behind

The Triangle - poor flat roof shop in prominent position, traffic signage
Wirescapes.

STREET BY STREET

The Triangle and Bartlett Row

Where Sutton Road and West Street intersect, a triangle formed with Bartlett Row. Well-enclosed urban space in attractive local C19th character.

Scale – Domestic

Height – 2 storey

Building line – Generally to back of footway without setbacks.

Key buildings – Bridge House GII, Gilpins GII, George Jones Estate Agent, fine late C19th shopfront on prominent corner of The Triangle, The Post Office. In Sutton Road, Hillhaven and former Zion Chapel GII; Former Bible Christian schoolroom GII.

Features and details – Early road sign on gable of Loxson adj Bridge House; Pillar Box and Somerset finger post in Triangle

West Street/ Langport Road/ West End

West Street here has a good urban street character, well-enclosed by built frontages while maintaining the typical Somerton characteristics with a C19th flavour. At

West End former farmhouses and their buildings survive.

Scale – Domestic

Height – 2 storey

Building line – Largely to back of footway along West Street. Some gable ends to street. Some setbacks walled with gardens.

Key buildings - School House, Coundon House, West Street, Sage Cottage Langport Road, Ballacree and Home Farmhouse, West End.

Features and details – Mid C20th petrol pump at Old Pump House, West End;

Maypole Knap/ Camden Road/ Water Lane

A quite, attractive area of ‘villagey’ charm and narrow lanes somewhat encroached upon by the C20th residential spread of the town although character evolved from the time this area was one of small farms and orchards outside the town survives and includes several fine (farm)houses in gardens, some early cottages/ farmhouses and good C19/20th terraces.

Scale – Domestic

Height – 2 storey

Building line – Some set at road edge but generally set back with walled garden areas of varying extent.

Key buildings - Lomans GII, The Manse GII, Maypole Knapp House GII, Camden House GII, fine terrace of 1907 on Camden Road

Features and details – small green at junction with Water lane; gardens well enclosed by stone walls; grass verges and some absence of footways – part of semi-rural character.

Summary of suggested boundary changes – numbers keyed to maps

1. School Lane - add length of School lane as far as entrance to King Ina's School with prominent Lias stone boundary walls each side and exclude the lower length
2. Mount Hey off Parsonage Hill - add the attractive late 1960s group of

- four houses with monopitch roofs and their gardens
3. Belvedere Grange - Exclude late C20th houses and estate road
4. Somerton Randle – Add area of new parkland with lake forming the setting of the house and make amendments to boundary to follow physical boundary features.
5. Somerton Court Farm - Amendments to boundary to follow physical boundary features
6. Crane Farm, Pestors Lane - Minor Amendments to boundary to follow physical boundary features
7. West Street - Minor Amendments to boundary to follow physical boundary features and inclusion of listed Bingham House
8. Behind Berry - Minor Amendments to boundary to follow physical boundary features
9. Somerton Court - Amendments to boundary to follow physical boundary features
10. Chaps Hollow, Pestors lane - Amendments to boundary to follow physical boundary features
11. Somerton Erleigh – Include listed house
12. Horse Mill Lane/ Old Hill - Amendments to boundary of Conservation Area to follow physical boundary features
13. West End – a large extension to include the core of this historic area with its many Lias stone building frontages and several significant listed buildings.
14. Camden Road/ Water Lane
15. Cox's Yard, West Street and Unicorn carparks, Brunel Precinct – exclude area not of historic interest
16. The Vicarage annex Minor Amendments to boundary to follow physical boundary features

