

PROPOSED DESIGNATION OF A CONSERVATION AREA AT SUMMERHOUSE

INTRODUCTION

The Town and Country Planning Act 1971 places a duty on Local Planning Authorities to determine which parts of their area are of special architectural and historic interest, the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance, and to designate these as conservation areas.

Conservation Areas have already been designated in Darlington at Cockerton, Haughton-le-Skerne, North Road Station, Stanhope Road/Grange Road and the Town Centre and in the villages of Hurworth, Bishopton, Heighington, Middleton One Row, Piercebridge, Sadberge and High Coniscliffe.

The village of Summerhouse is a compact, attractive settlement with a rural character that compares favourably with these areas and I consider it would be appropriate and beneficial to designate the village a conservation area.

The Village and its setting

Summerhouse lies on the B6279 Darlington to Staindrop road just west of the old Roman road from Piercebridge to Royal Oak. It is one of a number of small attractive villages scattered throughout the Tees Valley between Darlington and Barnard Castle.

Little is known of the village's history but the site appears to have been occupied since Saxon times. There is a rectangular moated enclosure, named "The Castle", at the southern end of the village which is Saxon in origin and is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Although only earthworks remain, this was certainly a Saxon or Norman homestead.

The land was owned by the Neville family for many years and it is thought that the site was used as a summer retreat, hence the name Summerhouse. Subsequently, the estate changed hands many times until it became part of the Raby Estate under Lord Barnard in the 19th Century.

Summerhouse sits astride the Darlington-Staindrop road with its green at right angles to the road, on a north-south axis. The informal green is physically separated from the main road by "South View", an early 19th

century house which is included in the old Grade III Provisional List of Buildings of Architectural or Historic Interest but is not yet statutorily listed. North of this, the green is sub-divided by "Laurel Dene" (the Post Office), a late 17th/early 18th century building which is statutorily listed Grade II. To the south of the main road, "The Grange" is an 18th century house also included in the old Grade III Provisional List.

Although these are the only buildings formally recognised for their architectural or historic interest, the majority of the buildings in the village have 18th or 19th century origins. They have consistency of style and detail and are compactly grouped around the green, and to the south of the main road, in such a way as to produce a pleasant relaxed and informal atmosphere.

A particular feature is the white colourwashed finish on a substantial number of the buildings. This traditionally identifies most of the agricultural villages and farm groups within the Raby Estate. This contributes not only to the character and appearance within the village but also to its attractiveness when approaching it. The views are of a cluster of contrasting white-washed or stone-built houses and darker farm buildings set within a gently undulating agricultural landscape. The belt of woodland immediately to the south-west of the village plays an important role in anchoring the village to its setting.

Threats to the village and its setting

The village is under no threat of substantial development, e.g. for housing, but its small size and compact form make its character vulnerable to even one or two badly sited or poorly designed houses or farm buildings. Similarly, the loss of some buildings through redundancy, or the careless alteration or extension of others, could jeopardise the unspoilt nature of the village.

Loss or damage, including lack of proper management, to the woodland belt or the individual mature trees within the village could cause a long term detrimental effect on the village's character and its setting.

Maintenance or improvement of the roads and tracks within the village, for example, using black macadam surfacing or precast concrete kerbs, would introduce modern rigid elements to a setting whose principal feature is its traditional informality.

Benefits of Conservation Area Designation

Although conservation area designation does give some additional powers of control, its principal benefits are to give formal recognition to the quality of character and appearance, and to place a duty on the Local Planning Authority to prepare and publish schemes to maintain and improve that quality. Conservation legislation seeks not to prevent change but to ensure that any changes which do take place are carried out in an appropriate and sensitive manner.

The additional powers of control in conservation areas are that:-

- (a) listed building consent is required for the demolition of any building in a conservation area and consent should normally only be given where there are acceptable detailed plans for redevelopment;
- (b) in appropriate cases, the local planning authority should consider only detailed proposals for development rather than give outline planning permission;
- (c) six weeks notice should be given to the local planning authority of any work to be done on trees not covered by a tree preservation order.

There is also the requirement to advertise any planning application proposal which may adversely affect the character of a conservation area and to take into account any representations made by the general public in deciding whether or not to grant permission.

In preparing improvement schemes for publication, consideration will be given to:-

- (a) the landscape in and around the village, including the management of existing trees and shrubs and the village green, new tree and shrub planting if appropriate, maintenance and improvement of hard surfaces, verges, walls, etc.
- (b) the undergrounding of overhead wires within the village, although the existing pole-mounted sub-station may create difficulties;

- (c) advisory schemes for the maintenance and improvement of existing individual properties;
- (d) the responsibilities for implementing and financing these and any other improvement possibilities which come to light.

Recommendation

I recommend that a conservation area be designated at Summerhouse, the boundary to include the whole of the village, the scheduled ancient monument and those areas of surrounding countryside which are appropriate to the setting of the village. The proposed boundary is shown on the attached map.