



Civic Pride article – December 2019
“Working to Protect Special Areas of our Towns And Villages” - by Roger Thomas

One feature of Abingdon of which many of us are proud is its ‘Conservation Areas’ - but what are they, and where are they?

Under legislation introduced in 1967, a Conservation Area is an area is “of special architectural or historic interest, the character of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance”. They are normally designated by the local council and designation helps protect them from unsympathetic development and changes.

There are about 10,000 Conservation Areas in England. Most cover historic areas, although some are quite unusual – including for example Oxford’s Greyhound Stadium. Abingdon has three Conservation Areas, of widely differing character. The Town Centre area contains many historic buildings, of very different dates and styles; Albert Park has green spaces, trees and Victorian architecture; Northcourt has a rural village character, despite being surrounded by modern housing estates.

What can you and can’t you do in a Conservation Area? The key point is that the council, when carrying out its planning work, must pay ‘special attention’ to the need to preserve or enhance the area. A development which might be fine somewhere else may be unacceptable in a Conservation Area. New development can take place, but the the design needs to be in harmony with the surroundings.

Many things which householders want to do, such as replacing doors and windows, are still allowed in Conservation Areas, unless local orders have been made to prevent them. Minor changes of this kind can really affect the appearance of an area, though, and many owners are happy to respect the character of their chosen area.

One rule which affects many home owners is that all trees in Conservation Areas are protected, and (except for fruit trees) council permission is needed before they can be felled or lopped.

Another important rule is that buildings in Conservation Areas, even if they aren’t listed, can’t generally be demolished without permission. In Abingdon, this would apply, for example, to Old Abbey House, although the position there is complicated by the fact that it belongs to the Vale Council, so in theory they could give themselves permission to demolish it.

Despite these restrictions, research has shown that properties in many Conservation Areas are worth more because many people are willing to pay a small premium for the protection from unsympathetic new development. So Conservation Area status benefits owners financially, as well as protecting the most attractive parts of our towns and villages.

To achieve their aims, though, Conservation Areas require more than just designation. Each area should be “appraised” periodically and a statement produced detailing the features which make it special and should be “preserved or enhanced”. This provides vital guidance both to those considering alterations or new developments and to council officers reviewing planning proposals.

The Northcourt area appraisal was done a few years ago and the Friends of Abingdon are currently working with the Town Council and others on an appraisal for the Albert Park Area.

We are determined to keep these areas special.