

Civic Pride Column – October 2020

Albert Park Conservation Area – by Roger Thomas

During the long months of lockdown many of us became even more appreciative of our surroundings in this beautiful town. One area which was extremely popular with all age groups was Albert Park.

This Park is the centrepiece of the Albert Park Conservation Area, one of three in the town. These are protected by law from inappropriate development: councils must pay special attention to preserving or enhancing their character or appearance. If a development would harm a Conservation Area, there is a presumption that it won't get planning permission.

Albert Park and the roads around it were laid out, as a new suburb of Abingdon, from the 1860s onwards. It was given Conservation Area status in 1975, to protect its green and spacious character from infilling and other unsuitable changes. The area is bounded on three sides by Bath Street, Faringdon Road and Spring Road. The houses and playing fields along the south side of Park Road are included, along with parts of Victoria Road and Conduit Road.

The area falls into three zones, of quite distinct character: Albert Park and the large houses on Park Crescent, the buildings and playing fields of Abingdon School, and the housing to the south of Park Road. Almost all the houses were built before 1914, giving the area a harmonious appearance. The Park, maintained to a very high standard by Christ's Hospital, is outstanding and surrounded by wide roads with tree-lined grass verges. Notable individual buildings include the older parts of Abingdon School, the churches of St Michael and Trinity, and the memorial to Prince Albert. There are important views within the Conservation Area, such as along Park Road. All these create an extremely attractive environment.

An important tool for protecting Conservation Areas from unsympathetic changes is a document known as a Conservation Area Appraisal. Such Appraisals, illustrated with photographs and maps, define what is special about the area: its overall layout, the character of different zones, the architectural styles and building materials, important views, the contribution made by green spaces. Anyone planning new development in a Conservation Area can refer to the Appraisal, and then make sure that their proposal will "preserve or enhance" the area.

Members of the Civic Society, working in partnership with Abingdon Town Council and others, have recently completed a draft Appraisal for the Albert Park Conservation Area. This will be sent to the Vale of White Horse District Council for review, followed by public consultation, especially with local residents.

This is very timely, because Abingdon School is currently planning to build two large new dormitory blocks. One is off Park Crescent, the other is a major extension to Austin House, a listed building on Bath Street. The Civic Society feels that these blocks are overbearing, and will harm the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. We hope that our work on the Appraisal will help to ensure that the very special character of the area is protected and preserved for future generations of Abingdon people.