An Assessment of Aston le Walls

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Introduction
Aston le Walls lies close to the north-western edge of the District, 3km north of Chipping Warden and 14.5km north of Banbury. The historic core of Aston le Walls lies just off the main Welsh Road linking the settlement with the Boddingtons to the north and Culworth to the south. It is also linked to various outlying farmsteads such as Appletree (a former hamlet) by a network of minor country roads and footpaths.

Aston le Walls is set in an elevated and gently rolling landscape bounded by the West Northamptonshire Uplands to the east and Cherwell to the west. Although formerly an agricultural settlement, remnants of which survive today, the economic mainstay of the community is situated in neighbouring towns and villages. As such the majority of the residents utilise transport links in the area to work outside the village in employment centres such as Banbury, Daventry and Leamington Spa.

Figure 1: Location map of Aston Le Walls © Crown Copyright and database right 2017. Ordnance Survey 1000022487
As part of the review of conservation areas, the Council has a duty to consider areas currently undesignated. Aston le Walls has been identified as an area to be assessed in regards to conservation area designation. Conservation areas are based on the statutory legislation in Planning (Listed Building Conservation Area) Act 1990 that states that conservation areas need to be “areas of special architectural and historic interest the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance.” In determining an area’s special interest there are a number of criteria which have been identified in regards to the built environment, highlighting the integral features of a settlement that contributes to an area’s character. The criterion aims to establish if an area warrants conservation area designation, with regard to its “special architectural or historic interest”. National Planning Policy Framework, Paragraph 127, places further emphasis on the concept of “special”, stating “When considering the designation of conservation areas, local planning authorities should ensure that an area justifies such status because of its special architectural or historic interest and that the concept of conservation is not devalued through the designation of areas that lack special interest”. The criteria can be viewed in Appendix B.

Origins and Archaeology
Aston le Walls was one of two medieval settlements in the parish each with its own land. The second, Appletree, was not recorded by name until 1175 but was presumably included in the six-hide manor of Aston le Walls listed in the Domenser Book. Appletree was noted as a separate settlement in the Nomina Villarum of 1316 but thereafter was always taxed with Aston. The historic remains of Appletree have been damaged by later activity and are in poor condition as such very little is visible and no coherent former plan can be read. There are two holloways with slight traces of embanked and scarped closes, as well as some level platforms, but few certain house-sites can be identified. Very little archaeological evidence has been found in the area, however a small quantity of green-glazed pottery probably of late medieval date was found on the south west of the main holloway.

The site of the original Manor House is located north-west of the existing Manor House in Aston le Walls. It is traditionally said to have had a surrounding moat but now only a nineteenth century ha-ha bounds it on the north eastern and southern sides. To the north-west are fragments of two enclosures bounded by low banks and shallow ditches, and to the east and north-east are other indeterminate hollows, scarps and banks forming no distinct pattern. The remains are probably old paddocks and sites of buildings connected with the original Manor House. The earthworks may perhaps be associated with the ‘foundation walls’ which Bridges records as having been dug up on this side of the village in the early eighteenth century, and which he took to indicate that the village had once been much larger than it was in his day.

Bridges, writing in 1719 recorded that there had been 52 fishponds in Aston le Walls in the early seventeenth century and that 'some still remain', as well as 'vestiges of others now disused'. It is unlikely there were ever as many as 52 ponds; however the sites of 20 can be detected.
Plan Form and Historic Development

The name of the village derives from the word *ast* (Old English) meaning eastern, *tun* (Old English) meaning farmstead; village; estate whilst *Walls* refers to the local earthworks of uncertain date and provenance. Little can be surmised from this and unfortunately limited evidence exists that indicates prehistoric activity in the area.

However for the earliest settlers the site at Aston le Walls possessed some obvious attractions. It occupies a prominent, flat position overlooking the surrounding landscape. From an early date it also looks to have been well served by a number of routes, including the roads still in use today.

The dates of the enclosure of Aston le Walls and Appletree are unknown but there were common fields at Appletree in the fifteenth century. Much of the evidence of ridge and furrow has been lost across the parish, however where evident it is mainly a combination of interlocked blocks and end on furlongs.

As previously mentioned the available evidence suggests that an area north of the Manor House was the location of the original Manorial complex. The existence of these finds confirms settlement here in at least the medieval period; and the manorial nature of the buildings here suggests that this location may have formed an early focal point to the settlement. The siting of the Church almost immediately east of the site supports this theory.

It is likely that Aston le Walls was originally a nuclear settlement which over time coalesced to form a more contiguous linear settlement, with the majority of the early houses and cottages concentrated along the Main Road.

The ground plan of the settlement remained relatively unchanged from the mid eighteenth century until the late twentieth century when a significant amount of development and infill took place in the village.

Figure 2: 18th century enclosure map of Aston le Walls- Northamptonshire Records Office 2017
Space and Relationship between Different Areas

The boundary treatments of Aston le Walls do not comprise an especially distinctive feature of the parish. The boundary walls in the general vicinity of the Church, The Old Rectory and parts of Main Street, whilst varied in nature, together do not create a cohesive or definable character.

The village’s houses and cottages typically front directly onto the roadside, where gable-end onto the road this usually indicates a former agricultural nature. Later developments tend to be situated further back from road behind verges, hedges or small closes. The only area, which could be highlighted as creating some form of focal point, would be the churchyard at the western end of Main Street.

![Figure 3: c.1843 Map illustrating the plan form and street pattern of Aston le Walls.](image)

The historic built environment is predominantly simple vernacular properties of an agricultural nature. Along the southern side of Main Street the buildings are generally similar in appearance made up of properties which sit parallel to the road. To the north of Main Street the historic buildings begin to be individual in form and appearance, although fairly simple in regards to their design and detailing. Unfortunately a significant amount of modern infill has taken place along Main Street in a variety of unsympathetic materials and design.

The Church and the Old Rectory sit towards the western end of Main Street. The Church is Grade I listed and has early Norman origins. It helps provide some scope to the date and development of the
village. Due to the mature vegetation and stone walls surrounding the Old Rectory it is not visible from the public realm.

The Grade II listed Manor House sits on the western edge of the village. William Plowden a colonel in King James II’s guards, rebuilt the manor house at Aston le Walls. By the early nineteenth century the house had been "reduced in size and modernised". Setback, the significance of the fairly imposing building is somewhat diluted through the modern development and farm buildings to the south of the plot.

Development from the mid to late twentieth century in the north east of the village conforms to more stringent highway standards-the accesses are more open and the frontages of the buildings do not relate to the historic street scene, being set back within their own plots.

The properties within Aston le Walls on the whole are typically modest, fairly simple in terms of the architectural detail and design. They are not considered to be exemplary of local or regional vernacular design and are not considered to have any innovative or unusual features which are not considered for this area. The majority of the properties date from between the eighteenth and twentieth century, with the majority being later. They are therefore not considered to be of sufficient architectural quality to be considered as “special” within the wider context of the district.

**Positive Views**

Views are a key feature within the area due to Aston le Walls position within the landscape. Looking west towards the Manor House uninterrupted, panoramic views of the surrounding countryside can be had. As the village is set on slightly raised, flat ground characterised by gentle undulations the views are fairly uninterrupted which contributes to the setting of the settlement.

A channelled view of the historic buildings within Aston le Walls is visible when looking east down Main Street. Here, a very short corridor of historic streetscape is created before giving way to more modern development.

Along the eastern side of Welsh Road, where hedges and trees permit, further unspoilt views of the landscape can be experienced again relating to the setting more so than the character of the village itself.

**Traditional Building Materials and Local Details**

The predominant building material within the historic core is a mixture of limestone and ironstone. Roofing materials tend to be slate however there are some clay tiles present. Most of the vernacular cottages would have been thatch; unfortunately none of this material survives.

Windows and doors would have originally been timber; however, there has been some loss of traditional fenestration within the village, with modern alternatives being used. These are not appropriate to the style and age of the properties.

Brick appears to have been used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as later extensions. It can also be seen on the large enclosure wall along Blacksmiths Lane however this is not common
throughout the village with the majority of walls being constructed of local stone. This continuous use of local stone goes someway in creating a slight level of cohesion within the historic core.

**Contribution of Green Space and Trees**
Aston le Walls is located on an elevated plateau above a generally expansive, gently undulating landscape. The open space provided by the countryside is one of the key features of Aston le Walls; with some places benefitting from very attractive views of the surrounding area. The churchyard and open space in front of the Manor House are important green spaces, creating a focal point within the settlement.

Trees and hedges do not play a major role in the overall village-scape, though valuable tree groups border the churchyard and stand prominent in places along Main Street.

**Negative Features**
Modern development within the village has unfortunately eroded the character of the historic linear core. Incompatible and unsympathetic extensions and designs also detract from the streetscape causing a number of traditional features either to be lost or overshadowed. Whilst there are no substantial negative elements within the village, the modern developments have had a substantial effect on the character and appearance of the area.

**Conclusion**
The recommendation following the assessment for Aston le Walls, is based on criteria (see Appendix) and the legislation regarding designation of conservation areas, as defined in the Planning (LBCA) act 1990, which states that conservation areas need to be “areas of special architectural and historic interest the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance.” Aston Le Walls, although an attractive rural village, is not considered to fulfil the requirements set out under legislation. Therefore Aston le Walls is not considered to be an area suitable for conservation area designation with the reasons for the recommendation set out below:

- The incremental loss of architectural detail to historic buildings has diluted the character of the area. The use of inappropriate modern material, such as uPVC and unsympathetic alterations and extensions has had a negative impact on the appearance of the buildings concerned and the area.
- Modern development to either side of the road of Main Street in particular has negatively impacted the linear streetscape by disrupting the means of enclosure and boundary due to siting far back within the plots.
- There is no definable special architectural or spatial character desirable to preserve or enhance.