



Rothbury Conservation Area Appraisal

Alnwick District Council
Supplementary Planning Guidance

October 2001

INTRODUCTION

Rothbury Conservation Area was designated on 10 October 1972. The following report offers a detailed analysis of the factors that contribute to the special character and appearance of Rothbury Conservation Area, and has been prepared in response to the successful setting up of the Rothbury Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (2000 – 2003), and in accordance with advice contained in Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning and the Historic Environment.

SETTLEMENT DEVELOPMENT

Physical Setting

Rothbury is situated in the heart of the Coquet Valley. The greater part of the settlement lies on the north side of the river, where terraces of glacial boulder clay along with alluvial sand and gravel have built up as the valley narrows between the Fell sandstone crags on either side. To the east lies the Thrum gorge, where the Coquet is forced through a narrow channel. This contrasts with the setting to the west, where Coquetdale opens into a wide bottomed glaciated valley, through which the River Coquet now meanders.

The physical setting of Rothbury has had a significant impact on the character of the conservation area, both in terms of determining the materials used in constructing the village and in the positioning and layout of the settlement. The terraces between the river and hillside have created a long ribbon of development along High Street. The positioning of the trackway along the centre of the middle terrace, high enough to avoid flooding but lower than the steepest slopes, has allowed a wide stepped green to develop which has contributed greatly to the distinctive appearance of Rothbury.

The surrounding Fell sandstone has provided the main building material for the conservation area. Other sandstone has been imported to provide ashlar work for some of the finer buildings, but in the main it is the local sandstone, now weathered to grey, that gives Rothbury Conservation Area its consistent unity of appearance.

The Historic Interest of the Conservation Area

Rothbury is situated in a strategic location, where the Coquet Valley opens up westwards and where the routeways from the uplands and coastal lowlands converged to cross the river. It has therefore been an attractive area to settle in since prehistoric times.

Settlement in the area can be dated back to late Neolithic period and the Beaker Folk of the Bronze Age, with cairns and standing stones being located on the hills behind the current village. Continuing settlement in the area can be seen through the multivallate hillfort of Old Rothbury, which dates from the Iron Age. The first historic evidence of settlement within the conservation area dates to the time of Anglian settlement and the Kingdom of Northumbria, when Rothbury is noted as being a royal 'burh', indicating a settlement of some importance if not of any great size. The only evidence of these times is part of an Anglian cross that is now located in the parish church. There is also a suggestion, mainly from surrounding place-names, of Danish influence.

Following the Norman Conquest and the emergence of a unified England, Rothbury maintained its importance as an administrative and service centre. In the 13th century, market rights were granted for a weekly market on a Thursday and a three day fair to be held on the feast of St Matthew in September. Although there is no longer a weekly market, Rothbury's function as the market town and main service centre for Coquetdale has continued into the present day. The Market Place is located within the heart of the conservation area and this area of open space has contributed immensely to the character of the village.

In 1331 Rothbury was granted to Henry Percy, Lord of Alnwick. From that date up until the Industrial Revolution, the fortunes of Rothbury and the Percy family have been closely linked. Throughout the 16th century march warden courts were held at Rothbury, and in 1580 Rothbury is recorded as being

spoiled by the soldiers of Queen Elizabeth I after supporting a rebellion led by the Earl of Northumberland.

An early 18th century map shows the nucleus of Rothbury as the square area bounded by Bridge Street, Haw Hill, Church Street and High Street. The triangular form of the Market Place is also clear on the map of 1720. This area holds many of the landmark buildings that one would expect to find in the heart of a settlement of this type, such as a church, parish hall and market cross. This is a continuation of a practice that can be dated back to the early Middle Ages when a hall for the use of the Earls of Northumberland was located on Haw Hill, on the site of the present graveyard. By 1760 Rothbury was served by turnpike roads to Hexham, Newcastle, Morpeth and Alnwick and was holding fairs for black cattle, as well as exporting wool to Newcastle. It was, however, still a, 'poor town of two streets which are not paved,' in the words of Bishop Pocock.

The next major stimulus in the development of Rothbury came in the 19th century with the arrival of the entrepreneur Sir William Armstrong, who transformed the Cragside Estate. The large building and planting projects employed large numbers of local people and stimulated growth in the local economy. By 1870, another great force for change had arrived in Rothbury in the form of the Newcastle Central Railway. This led to development on the south side of the river and also encouraged the development of a 'suburb' of large detached houses to the north-west. The village was largely re-built as the structures became more permanent and building techniques improved, although the street pattern and layout and the original burgage plots of the village remained. The arrival of the railway led to the use of slate as a roofing material and the gradual withdrawal of heather thatch and sods. The development of the railway also led to the establishment of a stock mart, a function that has continued in the village up until the present day.

Accessibility

Rothbury is accessed from the east by the B6341 from Alnwick, which runs through the town to form the High Street, and progresses west towards Thropton and beyond. From the south Rothbury is accessed by the B6342, which enters the town from across the river via Bridge Street. The only other road access is the B6344, which approaches from the south east to join the B6341. High Street and Bridge Street thus form the core of Rothbury. Secondary roads within the centre are Haw Hill, Church Street, Brewery Lane and Providence Lane.

Pedestrian access routes are a key characteristic of the area. On the southern boundary, it is possible to walk the length of the riverside, with several pathways leading through to the town centre via Wellstrand, Model Buildings and the steps by the cemetery. The riverside can also be accessed by the footbridge from Cow Haugh carpark. Similarly, much of the northern boundary can be accessed along the Back Lane, which is in turn accessed via Providence Lane and a narrow walkway. These pedestrian routes have an intimate atmosphere, providing access to areas that cannot be viewed from the main thoroughfares in Rothbury.

Conservation Area Boundaries

The present conservation area boundary is very cohesive and clearly defined, encompassing the historic core of the settlement. The river to the south forms a natural boundary, and the northern boundary is drawn along the rear of the historic burgage plots, beyond which lies more modern development. The eastern and western boundaries mark the points at which the B6341 enters and leaves Rothbury. The north eastern corner includes Addycombe Cottages and Rothbury First School, along with some of the surrounding land. Coplith Burn forms another natural boundary to the north.

The boundary is presently restricted to the north of the River Coquet. Just across the river from the south eastern corner of the conservation area lies the stock mart and associated buildings, referred to in the Historic Interest section. This group is linked to the conservation area via a set of stepping stones across the river, and forms a pleasing vista from the north side of the river. Because of the historic significance of these buildings to the settlement of Rothbury, the physical link across the river, and the positive visual impact of the grouping, it is recommended that the boundary be widened to encompass the stock mart and associated buildings.

At the western edge of the conservation area, the boundary crosses the grounds of the (unlisted) St Agnes RC Church, but does not include the church. This would seem to be illogical, as the church building would form a neat 'book-end' to the conservation area. It is thus recommended that the boundary be widened to include the church building.

BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Although the conservation area is clearly recognisable as a whole, it is possible to identify several sub-areas with specific features that contribute to the character of the whole conservation area. These are: Haw Hill/Church Street; the Central/Western Area; Bridge Street; Townfoot/Eastern End.

1. HAW HILL AND CHURCH STREET

PHYSICAL EXTENT AND LAYOUT

This small subsection encompasses the length of Haw Hill and Church Street, from the Bridge Street junction through to the Market Place. A number of dwellings line the road, but these terraces are interspersed by the open spaces provided by the church yard and the cemetery. The road rises fairly sharply along Haw Hill, turns almost 90 degrees to join Church Street, and descends gently into the Market Place. At one time, this area would have had central importance in Rothbury, as the location of the parish church and the now vanished Haw Hall. It is now something of a backwater, as the main traffic for the town enters via Bridge Street. It is thus quiet and residential in character.

BUILDING CHARACTERISTICS

All Saints Church dominates the area, and contains the earliest surviving fabric in Rothbury, with the chancel and east walls dating from the 13th century. The greater part of the present building dates from the mid-19th century. The churchyard and cemetery contain listed monuments, and are important open spaces within the conservation area.

Nos. 1 and 2 Church Street are stone and slate houses dating from the early 19th century. Features include 16-pane sash windows (these have unfortunately been replaced with uPVC windows in No. 1 Church Street), and openings in alternating-block surrounds with narrow chamfers. **No. 3 Church Street** is a rather fine 2-storey, 3-bay stone and slate house. Its frontage is symmetrical, plain, sober, but with decorative detailing such as alternating block surrounds to the windows and doors, and carved kneelers.

Haw Hill is lined by the rear elevations of a row of 2 storey stone and slate dwellings whose frontages look out over the river. The result is a rather irregular elevation facing the road, with various roof heights and profiles. The most handsome of these dwellings is **Beech Cottage**, prominently located on a large corner site overlooking the bridge and the river. It is the most decorative of this row of houses, with Edwardian sash windows, squared coursed stone, raised quoins, decorative timbered gables, and a turreted bay feature to the corner that neatly finishes the row.

2. CENTRAL/WESTERN AREA

PHYSICAL EXTENT AND LAYOUT

The Central/Western Area is taken as lying between the western side of Providence Lane and the western boundary of the conservation area. The road gradually narrows and rises as it progresses west and forks at St Agnes RC Church, which is located just outside the boundary of the conservation area.

The layout of the central area has been shaped around the ancient form of the burgage plots to the rear of the buildings, and the open green space that predominates High Street. It is likely that the buildings were placed at the edge of each plot to maximise the amount of land available behind. As a result, most of the buildings open directly onto the street. The linear arrangement of the buildings contrasts strongly with the surrounding open spaces.

The north side of High Street is characterised by its dense, unbroken line of buildings. The south side is more fragmented, with the buildings being arranged in shorter terraces. The Market Place is also

located on the south side, further breaking up the dominant linear pattern on this side of the street. Any development on either side of High Street should respect these established patterns.

The area surrounding the Market Place is the modern-day heart of Rothbury, and is thus a busy focal point of the town. The presence of public buildings and monuments adds an extra civic dimension to the atmosphere. Retail usage predominates, mixed with cafes, pubs, B&B's, a doctors' surgery, a veterinary practice, and residential properties.

BUILDING CHARACTERISTICS

The majority of Rothbury's listed buildings are located within this central section, clustered on Market Place and lining the north side of High Street. The architecture of the buildings as a group is a combination of vernacular styles with some finer buildings displaying refined decorative detailing.

1-5 Market Place is a row of listed buildings showing typical characteristics of the area. Ranging from the mid-18th to the early-19th century, the two and three storey houses are of squared coursed sand stone with Welsh slate roofs. Within the uniformity of the materials there is significant variation from building to building. The sash and case windows, for example, range from 4-pane to 16-pane. No.1 Market Place contains a fine 25-pane shop window. **Stephenson Terrace** and **Model Buildings** are examples of later planned terraces. **Wellstrand** is an example of several rows that have developed at right angles to the main axis of High Street.

Public buildings are a feature of this corner, including the **Newcastle Hotel** and **Rothbury URC**. The **Parish Hall** and the **Northumberland Park Authority** office are both set back from the road, with pleasant green spaces in front. The **Armstrong Cross** and the **War Memorial** also provide focal points which fit well with the scale of their surroundings.

The northern side of High Street is a long, continuous, almost unbroken line of buildings, incorporating a wide variety of building styles and detailing. The most dominant buildings in terms of scale are **Lloyds Bank** (c.1900) and **Conway House** (1876), standing at 3 and 3½ storeys respectively. The bank is one of few ashlar buildings in the conservation area, with rusticated ground floor. The façade is symmetrical with carved stone detailing and a mansard roof. Conway House displays one example of the many fine surviving shopfronts in Rothbury. In this case, the twisted cast iron uprights, ornamental timber cornice, and gates leading to the rear yard are of particular interest. Other good examples are the shopfronts of **Thomas Rogerson's** and the **Pharmacy**. The majority of buildings have pitched and gabled roofs of blue/grey Welsh slate. Although several have dormers, the norm is to have no roof openings. An exception to the roofline pattern is the **Turk's Head** (1874) with its twin gabled frontage. To the west of the commercial core, High Street is characterised by plainer stone and slate dwellings of modest scale, predominantly of two storeys.

The western end, beginning where High Street narrows, is a transitional area between the densely developed core of Rothbury and the countryside beyond. It has a more private atmosphere than other areas within the conservation area, with a mixture of private and institutional residential buildings and medical uses. **Rothbury House** and **Coquet House** are large buildings which are set back from the road behind fairly sizeable forecourts. Both retain sections of their boundary walls, although in each case, part of the wall has been cut away to facilitate vehicular access. Both buildings have an air of grandeur and formality that contrasts with much of the rest of the conservation area. The **Rectory** is also set well back from the road, and is screened by a substantial wall and dense planting. Interspersed with the larger buildings are several smaller cottages which open directly onto the pavement, for example, **Highfields** and the adjacent cottage, a pair of listed houses dating from the late 18th century

3. BRIDGE STREET

PHYSICAL EXTENT AND LAYOUT

Bridge Street runs on a north/south access between Rothbury Bridge and Townfoot, narrowing to a pinch point in the middle. This is a rather functional area, in a more run down state than other parts of the conservation area. There is a mixture of usages, including the Post Office and various retail, business and residential properties.

BUILDINGS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Rothbury Bridge is medieval in origin, with a 20th century concrete and steel superstructure which are not of particular interest. Bridge Street is significant in terms of its initial visual impression of the town. In particular, the view across the bridge, neatly terminated by the **cottage at Bridge End**, should be protected.

Close to the north end of the bridge is a cluster of listed buildings, most notably the **former Tomlinson School**, a Tudor style building dating from 1841, which forms a strong corner piece on the Haw Hill junction, and the adjacent **Bridge Street House**, a handsome early 19th century building of understated character.

Jubilee Hall dominates the junction of Bridge St and Townfoot. Dating from 1887, the building was largely rebuilt following a fire in 1939, and is architecturally poorer as a result. However, it occupies a key position within the conservation area, and is of significant character. **Jubilee Hall**, the **Post Office**, a pair of brick houses and the **public toilets** form a row on the west side of the street which is set back from the street. The chiropodist clinic suddenly brings the building line forward at the pinch point. Several of the buildings on Bridge Street are of a modest vernacular character, for example, **Thrumb Cottage** and **Lindisfarne Cottage** on the west side, one of which incorporates an attractive little curved timber shopfront (not currently in use).

On the east side is a mixture of 2-storey vernacular houses and shops/businesses, all opening onto the street, as is the grain in much of the conservation area. Moving towards the bridge, the configuration of buildings changes, with a couple of gables facing the street (eg **Harley's Restaurant**). The **Railway Hotel** is an imposing 3-storey building with plain sashes which dominates the narrow street.

4. TOWN FOOT AND THE EASTERN END

PHYSICAL EXTENT AND LAYOUT

The Townfoot/Eastern End sub-area roughly takes in all the land east of Bridge Street and Providence Lane, and running north from the river to encompass **Addycombe Cottages**, **Rothbury First School**, and the land surrounding the school. The main characteristics include: the old burgage plots immediately to the east of Bridge Street; the unadopted roadway and long row of dwellings fronting the river; the banking to provide flood defence; the clusters of buildings (**Abbeyfields**, **Armstrong Cottages**, **Addycombe Cottages**), the greater number of detached buildings; sizeable open spaces; and the gradual rise of land from the river northwards. The modern houses along the Riverside to the east of Rothbury Bridge are not of interest, but do maintain the line of the settlement established to the west of the bridge.

As the settlement progresses east, the conservation area undergoes another subtle shift in character. This section shows a greater diversity in terms of landuse and building types, ages and styles. Uses include: private dwellings; supported accommodation; bed and breakfast accommodation; industrial buildings; the former garage/petrol station, Forestry Commission offices, and the school. Many of the buildings are not immediately obvious from the road as it enters Rothbury from the east, thus giving the Eastern End a private, secluded atmosphere. Most are indeed private dwellings or workplaces, thus lessening the need for interaction between buildings and public spaces.

BUILDINGS AND CHARACTERISTICS

The row of very substantial 2½ to 3½ storey buildings, comprising **Barclays' Bank**, **Albert House** and the **Queen's Head Pub**, lend a built-up urban feel to this part of Townfoot. **Rothbury Motors** garage, purpose built in 1913, is one of the few industrial buildings in the conservation area. Built in random squared stone, it is an unassuming building of strong character, occupying a visually prominent position. Modern industrial buildings occupy the burgage plots to the south of Townfoot, but are not of interest. However, new industry in this location should not be discouraged. The place names of Brewery Lane and The Maltings point to more traditional industries that have now vanished from Rothbury.

As already noted, the nearby Cragside Estate has had a marked impact on Rothbury. Retiring staff of the Armstrong household were accommodated in flats at **Addycombe Cottages** (grade II*), an L-shaped terrace built by Norman Shaw in a distinctive Domestic Revival style that is markedly different to the prevailing character of the rest of the town. Of particular note are the timbered gables, red clay tile roofs with ornamental terracotta ridges and finials, and transomed and mullioned casement windows. **Armstrong Cottages** (grade II), built in 1896 as almshouses by Lord Armstrong, also demonstrate the architectural influences of the turn of the 20th century, but lack the flair of Addycombe Cottages. The simply laid out rectangular cottage gardens set the buildings back from the roadside, and anticipate the more extensive public green areas in the centre of Rothbury.

Across the road, **Walby Hill** is a group of larger houses which provided tied accommodation for the professionals who served Cragside Estate. Post-dating the almshouses, this handsome group is more conventionally Edwardian in character, with the eastern most house directly overlooking the main road as it enters Rothbury.

At the eastern edge of the conservation area, the **former workhouse buildings** and former recreation area opposite provide a sense of enclosure as the road progresses from countryside to settlement. **Well Close Cottage**, adjacent to Armstrong Cottages, is one of very few free standing buildings located within their own grounds in the conservation area. The mid-19th century villa has high boundary walls which continue the sense of enclosure on the approach to the town centre.

Brewery Lane leads to the north, and the location of **Rothbury County First School**, also built towards the end of the 19th century. It is quite isolated from the main settlement, and the open land around the school should be protected. In the field immediately adjacent to the school grounds to the west stands a **field hemmel**, a rather flimsy building of timber with a slate roof. The possibility of protecting the structure, possibly by listing, is being investigated.

GROUND AND BOUNDARY TREATMENTS

For the most part, the ground treatments throughout the conservation area are plain and utilitarian in nature. At present the grass patches in the centre of Rothbury have no border treatment. Some of the grassy areas are marked out with concrete posts and chains. Although these are not particularly attractive, they are plain in character, and their visual impact is neutral rather than negative. Proposals to 'enhance' the ground and boundary treatments within this space should complement its plain, informal character. Any proposal to introduce unnecessarily fussy or formal treatment should be resisted.

Pavements are predominantly tarmac and/or concrete. Again, these are presently neutral in character, and any proposal to upgrade them should preferably be supported by evidence of historical surface materials.

SPACES, LANDSCAPE AND VIEWS

Rothbury is largely characterised by the contrast between the dense development and the surrounding spaces. To the south, the riverside provides a long open corridor from which the ground begins to rise. The gardens of Haw Hill are quite steeply terraced, with a sandstone wall running along their southern boundaries. Doubling in height at the cemetery, the wall forms a strong visual divide between the public stretch of green space along the river bank and the functional spaces of the private gardens, the public cemetery, and the private burgrave plots further to the east. This division should be maintained, and any proposal to demolish boundary walls should be resisted.

The burgrave plots form an important visual transition between the built up areas and the surrounding countryside, and the strong linear plot divisions form the character of the spaces. Proposals to alter the plot boundary lines or to develop within the plots should be resisted. If development is to be permitted, it should be orientated along the burgrave plot lines, and not across them, as has happened with the Maltings development.

Usually backland spaces are hidden from view, but the rear elevations of the buildings on the southern side of High Street are clearly visible. Thus any development proposals affecting the rear elevations and/or outbuildings must be carefully assessed for their likely visual impact on the character and appearance of the conservation area.

Landscape plays an important role in the character of the Rothbury Conservation area. The topography of the area, with the terraced hillside, leading back from the river, has moulded the way in which the settlement has developed. The terraces have created a stepped appearance to the village, easing it gradually up the hillside. As has been mentioned before, the greens are central to the open character of the village and provide the framework. In particular the trees form an important part of the character of the settlement. This has obviously developed over time, to create the atmosphere and outlook that is familiar today. A mixture of species are present.

The other key space within the conservation area is the Market Place and High Street area. Because of the way the land rises, the central space has the distinctive feature of two parallel roadways at different levels, with linking roads cutting in a criss-cross pattern through the grassy bank. The grassy patches and trees in the Market Place and along High Street are key features which should be retained. The visual amenity of this area might also benefit from tighter parking restrictions, for example, along the pavement surrounding the Armstrong Cross.

In the north-east corner of the conservation area, the ground rises again from the High Street/Townfoot level up Brewery Lane to Addycombe Cottages and Rothbury First School. This is another transitional space between the settlement and the countryside beyond, and the fields act as an important visual buffer.

Even in the built up heart of the conservation area, vistas of the countryside beyond can be glimpsed through occasional gaps between the buildings and above the rooflines. The cemetery on Haw Hill provides excellent views of the town and the countryside.

NEGATIVE FACTORS AND ENHANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The historic built environment of Rothbury is of a very high quality, and deserves to be protected. So far the incidences of unsympathetic modern intrusions are low, with the possible exceptions of the Spar and Co-op shops on High Street. The modern flats at Rodsley Court fit in with the scale of the surrounding buildings, and are neutral in terms of their visual impact.

There are presently only a handful of development opportunity sites within the conservation area, namely the yard surrounding Rothbury Motors garage, and the gap site adjacent to Christine's Flowers (both located on Townfoot). Development on these and any new gap sites must be of a quality consistent with that of the conservation area.

Rendered, painted and brick facades are exceptional in Rothbury, and should not be encouraged. Modern replacement windows, particularly uPVC types, are beginning to make an impact within the conservation area and should be resisted. The introduction of an Article 4(2) Direction is considered to be the best mechanism by which to control incremental erosion of historic and architectural character within the conservation area.

The Bridge Street and Townfoot areas are the most likely to benefit from enhancement works. Traffic problems in this area serve to detract significantly from its character and its attractiveness to potential users of the area. The provision of safe pedestrian routes is regarded as a priority. The enhancement of the appearance of the listed Rothbury bridge would also significantly improve an important entrance point into the conservation area.

SUMMARY OF SPECIAL CHARACTER

- *the present physical layout of Rothbury Conservation Area has been determined by the river, the topography of the land, and the medieval core of the settlement, and the associated burgage plots.*
- *development is particularly dense in the centre of Rothbury, thinning out at the eastern and western ends of the settlement.*
- *most buildings are arranged in terraces running along the axis of High Street, or at right angles to it.*
- *important open spaces are the burgage plots, the riverside, the market place and fields to the north.*
- *visual unity is provided by the use of local sandstone and Welsh slate.*
- *within this unity there is a wide range of detailing and building styles and types.*