



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Conservation Area Character Appraisal

Swinbrook

What are Conservation Areas?

Conservation Areas are places of special architectural or historic interest, which have a particular character or appearance worthy of preservation or enhancement. Groups of buildings, walls, trees and hedges, open spaces, views, and the historic settlement patterns all combine to create an individual sense of place. It is this character, rather than individual buildings, that Conservation Area status seeks to protect. The first Conservation Areas in the District were identified in the late 1960s. Since then, there has been a rolling programme of designations. Recent Conservation Areas are designated under the provisions of Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Swinbrook Conservation Area was designated in 1990, following a process of public consultation.

The purpose of this document

This Conservation Area Character Appraisal describes the main aspects of character or appearance which contribute to the special interest and quality of the area. This document is intended to complement the approved policies for Conservation Areas contained in the West Oxfordshire Local Plan. In Conservation Areas there are controls over the demolition and minor alterations of unlisted buildings, and on works to trees. Full details can be obtained from the Planning Service. The Preservation and Enhancement document for Swinbrook accompanies this Character Appraisal and describes strategies for the future maintenance and improvement of Swinbrook, as well as providing development advice and guidance on conversions, extensions and the design of new buildings within the Conservation Area.



Location and setting

Swinbrook lies in the west of the District, two miles east of Burford. It is connected to Fulbrook to the west and Asthall to the south-east by a network of minor roads running along the Windrush valley. The site of the deserted medieval village of Widford lies just to the west. This is one of a number of sites abandoned after the plague in the 14th century.

Swinbrook has a distinctive loose-knit form and a peaceful and informal rural character. Stone-built houses and cottages dating from the 17th and 18th centuries stand beside winding, undulating lanes; or lie partially hidden by trees, hedges and drystone walls. The church occupies a slightly elevated site close to the centre of the village. When viewed from across the valley it seems to hover just above the village.

In landscape terms, Swinbrook occupies a flat-bottomed valley setting next to the river Windrush. To the north this relatively expansive floodplain landscape gives way to a more intimate setting, as the village stretches and thins northwards up a narrower, spring-fed valley. Beneath Swinbrook the great oolite of the limestone plateau gives way to narrow bands of inferior oolite and lias clays. The valley floor is lined with alluvium and shows occasional pockets of terrace gravels along the valley sides.



Historical development

Early human activity along the Windrush valley is indicated by Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts and remains (particularly at Asthall and Minster Lovell, east of Swinbrook). The area seems to have been settled and exploited in the Roman period. Akeman Street - the arterial route linking Cirencester with St. Alban's - passed by to the south-east; and along the Windrush valley there were a number of Roman military camps and settlements. St. Oswald's church at Widford stands on the foundations of a Roman villa.

Swinbrook once lay within the southern fringes of Wychwood forest. The practice of herding pigs in the forest is echoed in the name Swinbrook: originally 'swine brook'. The meadowland adjacent to the Windrush was supplemented with land to the north reclaimed from the forest. Settlement at Swinbrook was probably well-established by the early medieval period (as it was elsewhere along the Windrush); and the centres of religious and administrative control formalised with the building of a church and manor house. The church at Swinbrook dates from the 11th century. The manor house nearby belongs to the 16th century but may occupy the site of an earlier structure.

The impact of the plague in the 14th century saw the populations of many villages in the area drastically reduced. Neighbouring Widford, which at the time consisted of 13 houses, a mill, church, manor house and farm buildings, was lost altogether. Today only its church remains. The Fettiplace family resided for a time at Swinbrook in a very fine late-15th-century mansion.

The 17th and 18th centuries saw the building of new properties and the replacement of many of the village's timber structures with houses and cottages of stone, topped with the stone slate roofs. Even into the early-19th century, Swinbrook was still fringed by Wychwood Forest (indeed, the final disafforestation of Wychwood took place in c.1850, when the forest lost most of its copse from Swinbrook). The 20th century witnessed both very little infill and the retention of the village's distinctive rural character.

Settlement pattern

Swinbrook has been served by a number of important early routes. Akeman Street passed by on a north-east to south-west axis, and was in use until at least the 4th century. A major route running north to south passed through neighbouring Asthall. Meanwhile, the east to west axis was served by a route established by the 11th century that occupied the southern ridge of the Windrush valley. This was part of a long-distance route which terminated at Gloucester, 30 miles to the west.

Besides good communications, the advantages of Swinbrook for its earliest settlers included a good water supply (from both river and spring sources), the suitability of the riverside land for meadow pasture and, along its northern spur, the enclosure and shelter afforded by this narrower valley setting. The adjacent forest would have provided timber and game for the settlers, along with foraging for pigs.

Swinbrook has a polyfocal form and provides a particularly good instance of a settlement pattern dictated largely by topography. The grouping of church and manor house evidently formed the early nucleus of the village, with houses and cottages loosely clustering about this core. From here settlement extended to the north in piecemeal fashion, thereby (and with the notable exception of the mill) avoiding the floodplain of the river to the south. With nowhere else to go, settlement was also funnelled in straggling linear fashion up the valley to the north. The shape of this valley, which is steep-sided and narrow, has again dictated the form and development of the village here, with the more forgiving setting of the roadside chosen (in preference to the slopes on either side) for the siting of houses, cottages and farm buildings.

The 19th and 20th centuries witnessed only negligible alterations to the form of Swinbrook. Most building work during this period involved additions to existing houses and cottages. The few properties added to the village during this period conform to the colour precedents set by Swinbrook's early buildings. There are, for example, no brick-built structures in the village. The 20th century also saw a marked reduction in the number of working farms.





Swinbrook Conservation Area





- Key**
-  Conservation Area Boundary
 -  Listed Buildings
 -  Locally Listed Buildings
 -  Significant Boundary Walls
 -  Significant Hedges
 -  Significant Trees and Tree Groups
 -  Tree Preservation Order
 -  Significant Views

This map is based upon Ordnance Survey material with the permission of Ordnance Survey on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office (C) Crown copyright. Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings. West Oxfordshire District Council LA 100024316 2007.

Listed Buildings

There are 17 Listed structures of architectural or historic interest in the Conservation Area. Listed Buildings are classified in grades of relative importance.

Grade II* – Particularly special and important buildings (4% of Listed Buildings)

13/128 Church of St. Mary

Grade II – Buildings of special interest

14/126 Court Cottage East and Court Cottage West

14/143 SWIN LANE (North side) The Bell House

14/129 Group of 5 chest tombs approx. 6-9m E and NE of chancel of Church of St. Mary

13/130 Group of 6 chest tombs approx. 7-10m S of Church of St. Mary

13/131 (14/131) Group of 8 chest tombs approx. 1-3m S and E of chancel of Church of St. Mary

13/132 Headstone and footstone to ME approx. 3m S of chancel of Church of St. Mary

14/133 Headstone to Richard Willson approx. 9m E of chancel of Church of St. Mary

13/134 Pebble Court

13/135 Pebble Court Cottage

14/136 Stream Cottage

14/137 Swinbrook Cottage

14/138 Swinbrook Manor House (Formerly listed as Manor House and Barns in Farmyard)

14/139 Sheltershed approx. 10m N of Swinbrook Manor House (Formerly listed as Manor House and Barns in Farm yard)

13/140 (14/140) Swinbrook Manor Farm Cottage and attached barn and outbuildings (Formerly listed as Manor House and Barns in Farm yard)

17/141 The Swan Inn, Mill Cottage, and Mill

14/142 Yewtree

Note: The numbers indicate the unique identification number by which Listed Buildings are referenced



Architectural character and quality of buildings

The architecture of Swinbrook is almost exclusively vernacular in character: even Swinbrook Manor does not employ a formal architectural vocabulary. Partly as a consequence of this the village shows a marked degree of consistency. Most of the houses and cottages date from the 17th and 18th centuries and employ the local grey, oolitic limestone in coursed rubble form. Roofs are mainly of stone slate. Three- and four-bay ranges, stone chimney stacks, timber casement windows and gabled dormer windows predominate.

Swinbrook Manor dates from the 16th century and has additions and alterations from the 18th and 20th centuries. It probably originated as a double-ended hall-house, and has gabled cross-wings to either side of a two-bay central range.

The church of St. Mary has an 11th-century core and north and south aisles dating from the 12th and 13th centuries respectively. Its chancel is lit by a fine and expansive Perpendicular window with panel tracery. The chancel contains a pair of memorable triple-decker monuments to the Fettiplace family, and a set of choir stalls with lively misericords (possibly from Burford priory). The churchyard features a number of fine 17th-century chest tombs.

The late 15th-century mansion of the Fettiplace family stood in Swinbrook. It was one of the great family houses of Oxfordshire, but was pulled down in 1806. The former dairy (in Pebble Court, south of the church) and the fishponds and formal terraces either side of the footpath to Widford are the only surviving remnants of the property.

Pebble Court takes its name from an area of pebble cobble stones that lies opposite the village hall, and runs between the Old Post Office and Hillside Cottage. What makes the cobbles noteworthy is that some are of a darker shade and have been laid to form Hearts, Diamonds, Spades and Clubs (some of the shapes being clearer than others): a precious reminder of the Fettiplace house and family.

Boundary treatments

Drystone walling forms the most conspicuous boundary feature in Swinbrook. This employs the same pale limestone as the buildings, and contributes greatly to the visual cohesion of the village. A number of the cottages and barns lining the road front directly onto the road, some of them standing gable end on. Meanwhile, several buildings link directly on to stretches of drystone wall, emphasising the linear character of parts of the village.

Other properties stand back from the road behind verges of varying depth, or stand further back still and are accessed by driveways. The lanes through the village are also a distinctive component of the character area. They undulate and wind, following (and being channelled by) the contours of the landscape. A number of these are noticeably incised (indicating that they follow the course of streams), and one of them crosses a ford.

Landscape, trees and views

Swinbrook is set within the attractive and largely unspoilt landscape of the Upper Windrush valley. It falls within the Upper Thames Tributaries Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) and the Cotswolds AONB. Settlement in the surrounding area is sparse, giving to Swinbrook an isolated, tranquil atmosphere.

The village, and in particular the church, are well-seen from the higher ground to the south, lying in the shallow bowl of their valley setting. Within the village itself various components (topography, walls, trees, and the winding nature of the road) all conspire both to give a feeling of seclusion and to restrict internal vistas. Occasionally, however, views through to the fields and hillsides beyond Swinbrook are glimpsed between the trees and houses.

Scattered throughout Swinbrook are a variety of mainly smaller trees, including old apple trees, and the settlement is fringed with scrubby vegetation.

West Oxfordshire District Council - Planning Service
Elmfield, New Yatt Road, Witney, Oxfordshire, OX28 1PB

General planning enquiries and application forms
List entries and grant enquiries
Trees and landscape enquiries
Architectural and technical enquiries

01993 861683
01993 861666
01993 861662
01993 861659

