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The Duver Conservation Area

Appraisal

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Introduction

Local Planning Authorities have a duty under The Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to designate as conservation areas any areas considered to be of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to protect or enhance.

The Conservation Area boundary is inevitably subjective in complex environments, and is based not only on architectural, land-use or historic attributes, but on the dynamic experience of walking or driving through an area. Map based boundaries are taken into consideration, but sensational qualities such as the awareness of enclosure or openness and degrees of noise and activity are also important in defining edges to Conservation Areas.

In coastal areas, the boundaries may follow the line of the mean low water mark which is the extent of the jurisdiction of the Council and so is used for consistency.

The legislation also makes provision for schemes to enhance the area, so the inclusion of areas of potential allows for schemes to be put forward which will improve the Area in keeping with its own individual character, and to the same high standard.

Designation does not mean that development cannot take place within the proposed Conservation Area or within its setting. Designation means that special consideration is required for applications in the Conservation Area to ensure that any demolition is justified and that schemes (which are acceptable on all other planning grounds) are of a suitable design and of a high enough standard. This additional level of consideration allows Members to insist upon the best possible standards of design for the new developments within a Conservation Area, and allows them to refuse the poor and mediocre with confidence.

CHARACTER STATEMENT



Character

A visually impressive natural shoreline distinct from the Green, with a romantic and exciting feel. The fairytale character is influenced strongly by the ruined church tower and the local legends which surround it. The wild physical landscape of rocky shore, natural woodland, sand dunes and sea dominates the area although attempts have been made to tame it.

NB this expression of 'character' is derived from the study below.

History of Development

This character area incorporates the coastal site of the former Priory church tower, now painted white and acting as a seamount. The Priory was founded in the 11th Century. Records suggest that St Helens was an important port in the medieval period. In 1302, St Helens was required by royal command to provide a ship for Edward I. The quay area would probably have been the focus of settlement, however its location is unknown. Other than the Church tower, no building dates to the medieval period.

Along with the Church tower, a stone building called Old Church Lodge is shown on the 1st edition Ordnance Survey maps. It is not thought that this building originally developed in association with the early Church in terms of its function. Three large detached villas (Seamark House, Links House and Moorlands), which remain today, were built some time before 1909. These three broad plots are set a little way back from the sea, to provide an access track and are the focus of the character area. The record of a sand pit on the 1909 maps suggests that the extraction of sand was taking place on the Duver, much of which is also put to use as a "Golf Course". By 1946, the character area incorporates a Club House, west of Seamark House, a block south of Moorlands, possibly the existing toilets, and a row of bathing huts (former train carriages) are installed south of the Sand Pit.

Setting

This character area is a satellite of the Conservation Area, and lies nearly 1km east of the centre of St Helens Green. Its coastal setting is very important and it is approached via a single track winding road which travels downhill on the edge of the wooded St Helens Common to a wide, level expanse of sand called The Duver. The open views to the sea provide an important and ever changing backdrop. The tower dominates the landscape and provides important links to the history of the village and its close associations with the sea. To the north the land rises to Nodes Point. To the south the wide Duver continues to Bembridge where a channel allows access to the harbour. The character area incorporates part of the Duver beach. Sand dunes lie to the west of the character area boundary and are National Trust land.

Archaeology

The archaeological interest in this part of St Helens is high. The quay area would probably have been the focus of medieval settlement, however the changes in coastline and harbour have disguised the location of the medieval quay and all traces of any tradesmen's workshops, storehouses, shipmasters and merchants houses. The small Priory is also thought to have been located nearby, possibly connected to the church itself although no archaeological remains have yet been discovered to support this.

Materials

The front facades of the three villas are local limestone whereas the side and rear are brick. Zig zag brick dressings are employed around the windows whereas bays are constructed with soft yellow brick. The roofing material is plain clay tiles and is decorated with painted timber bargeboards. Local stone was used to build the church and the old church lodge is stone with a slate roof.

Height, mass & form

The three villas are very similar; large, detached 2 storey houses set back behind front gardens, with garages and access to the rear. The villas have extensive plain tile roofs, particularly dominant where shallow pitch extends over two storey unit to side. They are generous in plan and appear to have 3 separate chimneys and high ceilings. In contrast, the Old Church Lodge is a shallow roofed low compact building dug into in its small plot. The Club House has a similarly low profile but with a covered raised veranda looking over the former Golf Links.

Typical details

The villa details are typical late Victorian with an Arts and Crafts influence; stone finials and dressed quoins, tudor arch and roundheaded sash windows stressed with soft yellow brick, pierced painted timber bargeboards, half hips above bays and square section gate pillars with brick garden walls. The Old Church Lodge is dressed stone with slate tiles. The Club House is partially timber weatherboarded, and includes 12 pane metal frame square windows.

Paving

No pavement is provided to access this Area. The narrow Duver Road has a well maintained tarmac surface. This lack of pavements enhances the natural setting of the character area. The road turns south east to access the discreet National Trust Car Park and the sandunes at the rear of the Victorian villas where it is noticeably uneven due to subsidence. An unmade road runs through the character area along the raised promenade and a broad tarmac area provides parking near the slipway. From the car park, a narrow concrete pathway runs in front of the church tower.

Trees and open space

Several mature cypress trees in the gardens of the Victorian villas are visually impressive and important to the character of the area, particularly at the boundaries.

The small open green by the Church tower is key in providing a vantage point from which to see the ruin, however a few immature trees have been planted and these threaten to erode the dramatic impact of the tower when fully grown.

The preserved woodland owned by the National Trust and centred on Nodes Point, forms the northern boundary of the character area. The boundary is a discreet low wooden fence and the direct line of site to the rocky shore beyond and the wild woodland is important to the feel of the character area and to its setting.

Sound and smell

There is intense activity on the beach during the day, particularly during the holiday season. Much of this clusters immediately south of the Conservation Area, drawn by the beachside café and outdoor tables. Watersports and walkers exploring the adjacent National Trust land and the Coastal Path provide constant flow and movement, whereas family groups commonly settle at the waters edge/on the beach for long periods. Two campsites in the vicinity and the lights of nearby Bembridge Harbour to the south provide source of energy and activity into the evenings.

Positive Elements

- Open space, natural setting
- Historic cast iron lamp post on Green area
- Historic Bollards on southern CA boundary
- Mature pine trees in gardens and low brick wall fronting the gardens of the three Victorian villas
- Open green area providing an important view point for the Tower
- Unmade road with light gravel surface adjacent to the promenade
- Discreet yellow lines and signage and lack of pavements on the access road, enhancing the wild, natural setting
- Reserved use of bunting and flags
- Retention of 1930's beach huts (formerly railway carriages) south of the Character Area

Negative Elements

- Poorly maintained public toilets on the southern edge of the character area
- High security, unattractive boundary treatment
- Over crowded car park which is intrusive to the setting of the Listed Church Tower, and the general feel of the area
- The church tower, a landmark Listed Building features several plaques and modern railings which fence off former doorways, which are at odds with the atmosphere of the ruin and visually intrusive to the character
- The concrete pathway along the western side of the tower which harshly divides the ruin from a natural landscape setting
- The proximity of planted trees to the tower which may erode the dramatic impact and view of the ruin when fully grown
- Bulky and unattractive pumping sub station in the car park

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Background note to The Duver Conservation Area boundary

The reasons for the boundary being in the location shown on the map are outlined below:

- This Character Area concentrates on the 3 beachfront properties of The Duver. From the south west corner of the Moorlands plot, the boundary of this Character Area runs north eastwards along the property boundary which reflects the access track to the National Trust Car Park. The boundary then turns north and joins to the boundaries of Links House until turning west wards and crossing the access road to meet the southern boundary of the former club house.
- At the south east boundary of the club house boundary, the character area boundary begins to follow the property boundary turning northwards towards Church Lodge, traversing a small drain and meeting up with the southern plot boundary of Church Lodge where it turns westwards to take in the whole plot.
- At the south west corner of the Church Lodge plot, the character area boundary turns north to the road which it runs eastwards along the gently curving road to the edge of the grassed area south of the ruined church tower.
- At the rear entrance to the Holiday Park, the character area boundary follows the extent of the grassed area, picking up its western boundary and running north to the edge of the National Trust woodlands which are excluded from the Conservation Area.
- The boundary continues along the National Trust boundary and runs due east out to the Mean Low Water Mark before following this south (purely for terms of administration and jurisdiction) to return by taking a course due west of the point opposite the southern boundary of the south east corner of the Moorlands plot.