


# Bletchley Conservation Area Review

**March 2020**

Conservation & Archaeology

This document is to be read in conjunction with the  
General Information Document



**Block B, Bletchley Park, Bletchley**



# Historical Development

Bletchley existed as a medieval village of some local importance, as may be judged by the quality and size of the parish church. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, it had declined and was described as 'scattered and mean looking, consisting chiefly of poor thatched cottages'. The antiquarian and Lord of the Manor, Browne Willis, built Water Hall c1711. In 1882 Sir Herbert Leon acquired the estate and altered and extended an existing house, which stood to the west of the site of Water Hall, in 1883-6 and c1906. In 1937 the estate was sold and the Crown subsequently acquired the house and the park for use as the Government Code and Cypher School (1938-45). The intelligence and code-breaking activities on the site during World War II are now recognised to have been of international importance.

Following the war, the areas of land not in government ownership developed rapidly from around 1955 onwards. Although the land around Bletchley Park was developed at a relatively low density, with significant open spaces, some donated by Herbert Leon, surviving for use as playing fields, the once rural setting has gradually transformed into that of extensive modern suburban housing developments.

The result is that the remnants of the park, now owned by the Bletchley Park Trust, and the core of Old Bletchley itself (around which the conservation area boundary has been drawn) have become an enclave of older buildings and spaces within a large area of mid to late twentieth century housing development.



Bletchley Park House: east front

# Dominant building styles, materials and details

Whilst the definition of special interest (below) embraces all of the conservation area there are streets, places and spaces within its boundary that combine to create discernibly different character areas. In Bletchley conservation area these variations contrast sharply between the attractive, leafy, predominantly domestic suburb, diverse in building ages and materials outside the park; and the area within Bletchley Park that was requisitioned at the outbreak at the second world war, upon which the military establishment was quickly superimposed, adhering only to its own idiosyncratic, short term, ad hoc layout requirements rather than any considerations in respect of the pre-existing park and garden landscaping.

Map 2 'Bletchley Conservation Area: Character Areas' shows the division between the two character areas.

Bletchley conservation area is unusual because the part inside the Bletchley Park Trust's boundary is not freely accessible to the public.

## Character Area 1, Bletchley Park (Museum / Commercial)

The core of the site is the house, although historically, the site's crucial war-time operations took place in other buildings to the north. The principal house frontages (the south and west) are a piecemeal accumulation of architectural details and flourishes which in combination impart an uncertain, contrived, yet still imposing appearance to the composition. This piecemeal appearance has not been helped by wartime and late twentieth century accretions made with scant regard to visual appeal. Nonetheless the house is eye catching and provides a strong focal point from various vantage points in the site. Viewed from the lake to the east, the house retains something of its intended picturesque setting. Around the grounds are numerous trees many of which survive from the house's pre-war parkland. The trees provide important setting for the buildings and provide relief from the sometimes austere atmosphere created by the resolutely dour wartime buildings.



Bletchley Park east front showing the distinctive collision of roof details

The house is a much-extended former farmhouse built close to the location of the original Water Hall. Surviving parts of the earlier house can be seen as plainer elements visible from vantage points on the northern and western flank of the house as it now is. The site boundary and the line of the conservation area run along the rear of the outbuildings that stand behind the house leaving only a narrow strip of land between the house itself and the modern housing development beyond, built over a once extensive walled kitchen garden. The effect of the presence of outbuildings with houses immediately beyond them gives a strong sense of enclosure and encroachment at odds with a house of this size and status.

The outbuildings themselves are a mix of standardised military garaging and storage adjacent to more ornamental outbuildings built to serve the house as part of its aggrandisement. Although this inevitably creates awkward contradictions in built forms and materials that might normally be considered detrimental to authentic character, the circumstances that brought this contrast about is part of the site's unique history.

To the north stands an attractive complex of outbuildings arranged around a courtyard, the majority of which are grade II listed. These include staff living accommodation, stables, stores and a smithy, all reached from the house via an ornamental gatehouse. The original level of finish was very high but there is evidence of wartime and later modification, not least the slight forward extension to

the cart shelter in the stable range to accommodate a senior officer's motor car. The group survives well, albeit with a creeping air of neglect compounded by some unsympathetic alterations and some long standing unrepaired damage here and there. Despite the institutional approach to repairs and alterations, dating from the military and the later GPO / British Telecom occupation of the site, the buildings still retain the picturesque appearance that the original composition evidently set out to create.



Nearby, to the east is the memorial to Polish mathematicians and the invaluable early contribution made by them to the decryption of German communications, information which they shared with the French and British. Beyond are the huts and blocks in which the 7000 personnel stationed at Bletchley worked under the strictest levels of secrecy. Sadly, Block F which housed the world's first electronic digital information processing machine, Colossus, has been demolished. The remainder of the site, whilst looking rundown in places, remains sufficiently intact to give a good impression of the establishment's war time appearance.

Most of the huts and blocks are low in height, rarely exceeding two storeys, and mostly of one storey, but have large floor areas. In particular, the larger blocks,

known as spider blocks, take the form of a series of rooms set at 90 degrees to a central linking corridor.

The huts tend to have pitched roofs whilst the later blocks are frequently flat roofed with metal windows. Timber ship-lap board, plaster board and brick plinths are common on the huts, whilst the blocks are steel frame and brick with precast concrete floors and roofs.

Plan forms are complex and, even to a trained eye the outward appearance gives away little of each individual building's purpose and function. The buildings are resolutely plain and, despite their wartime sensitivity, there is little evidence remaining of any camouflaging. It is highly unlikely that the buildings would have been painted in white, as some of them now are, during the war. Nonetheless the general uniformity and purposeful appearance of the buildings accords with the familiar appearance of the modular war time office block architecture of the 1940's and later.

The unremarkable and once commonplace appearance of the buildings, combined with the high levels of secrecy that prevented any talk of what took place at Bletchley Park, and indeed the highly technical, complex nature of codebreaking and the machines involved, conspired to mask the significance of the site. Although the site's processes are openly discussed today, the detail of the encryption and decryption processes still remain largely opaque to all but the most technically minded people. Reading the interpretive material now available in some of the buildings, examining examples of the comparatively primitive machines used, and the implications that successful decryption had in shaping the outcome of the war lends considerable historic significance to the site.



Block B, Bletchley Park, a complex but plain looking building set in attractive parkland surroundings

## Character Area 2, Suburban / Domestic

Not all of the Bletchley Park GC&CS establishment is located within the perimeter fence. Contained within the suburban domestic quarter, along the west side of Sherwood Drive, are a canteen complex and an assembly hall (Wilton Hall). Whilst a fragmentary remnant wing of the women's quarters survives at the south end of Sherwood Drive. These were all ancillary structures built after 1942 to serve the growing workforce.

Despite an undeniable principal association with Bletchley Park their location beyond the gates gives them a different context. These are important historic buildings by virtue of being part of the Bletchley Park story but their size, mass, materials and finish are not domestic. Wilton Hall was, until recently, in commercial use as a conference and banqueting suite whilst the canteen lies abandoned with as yet unrealised potential to contribute to the enhancement of Bletchley Park albeit in a new use. The vestigial fragment of the women's quarters left over from recent housing development is now the local driving test centre.

Also located in this character area are a number of remnant buildings from the Leon estate, including estate cottages, the former laundry, a cricket pavilion and the gatehouse and gates. Their outward appearance is not as overtly unorthodox as the house, indeed the height, mass and positioning of the dwellings conforms to those often found on houses of the late Victorian era. The high quality of the materials and the judicious manner of their use is also not unusual. What sets the estate houses apart from others of a similar age in the locality is the degree of ornamentation in the form of applied decorative timber framing on gables, tile hanging and decorative porches and chimneys. These details are reminiscent of those used on the listed stables and staff accommodation adjacent to the house itself, and, although not uncommon in the late Victorian Edwardian era, their use here helps to distinguish the properties from the more standardised terraces and mid to late twentieth century housing that lie beyond the existing conservation area boundary.



Leon cottages

Other estate buildings include the West, or Wilton, Lodge with original gates surviving (the gates have been granted grade II listed status) although the historic line of the drive has been obscured by Wilton Hall. Also surviving but in a very poor state is the former cricket pavilion. This building is obscured from general view by now untended former parkland trees, as well as the later accumulation of self-set trees and vegetation. This screening has, in part, allowed the worsening condition of the pavilion to escape general attention. Nonetheless the building bears the decorative motifs and hallmarks of Leon Estate backed investment and still has considerable potential to contribute to local character and distinction. The pavilion is brick built with an outer covering of timber. The cricket field has been redeveloped as a site for a local college thus robbing the pavilion of its historic context.

There are two principal gatherings of buildings in the conservation area, one overlooking the junction of Buckingham Road with Church Green Road and the second close to the junction of Rickley Lane with Church Green Road. The two are effectively linked by a line of semidetached inter-war housing that lies outside the conservation area but whose presence adds weight to the local domestic character. Although well-proportioned this later housing is lacking the criteria (age, rarity, intactness, architectural quality/innovation and historic associations) that would make it appropriate to consider them for inclusion in the conservation area.

Positioned along the north side of Buckingham Road is a varied collection of buildings. Amongst these are Leon Cottages, a richly ornamented terrace built for Herbert Leon as estate housing in 1889. The row is distinguished by applied timber frame and roughcast detail and hanging tiles and by the presence of the (estate's) Old Laundry, now Rose Cottage. Also well

preserved and maintained is the Freeman Memorial Methodist Church. In collection the row overlooking Buckingham Road and the junction with Church Green Road lend significant character and distinction to this south eastward spur from the body of the conservation area.

The remainder of the suburban area, the heart of the old settlement, is characterised by a combination of historic buildings and the green open spaces which contribute to their setting.

The green and church grounds, in particular, provide important neatly kept public space. St Mary's church (grade II\*) is an imposing presence and a key focal point of the conservation area. The tower also acts as an important local landmark. The path up to the church from the war memorial to the south gives partial but attractive views of the church, framed by mature trees. Although not part of the conservation area the attractive if sombre yard and graves to the west of the church, accessed by stylised iron gates and railings from Whalley Drive, add to the sense of spaciousness and greenery that characterise this corner of the conservation area.



St Mary's church seen from Whalley Drive

Although of a distinct character Church Green and the church grounds have not been taken to be a separate character area. The overall feel is one of green spaces that are strongly integral to the built up areas that surround them. The churchyard and green are connected and form pleasant short cuts between the houses and facilities on Whalley Drive and Church Green Road. Furthermore, the character within the green space is divided between that of the church and the more open spaces (albeit dotted with trees) of the Green.

Standing at the south east end of the Green and overlooking Church Green Road, are Rectory Cottages (grade II\*) with a distinctive weather boarded hall

range that dates from 1475 and contains within it a 3 bay hammer beam roof. The timber frame and cottages are a later extension of 1618.

Across the road and lying at the far end of a long front garden is Freefolk Cottage (grade II). Although absent from oblique views along Church Green Road the cottage, which lies at the end of a long front garden, can readily be seen from public spaces on the other side of the road. The church, Freefolk Cottage and Rectory Cottage add considerable historic character and interest to the conservation area.

The Rectory (grade II) is tucked away from public view down a short drive and is further shielded by mature trees and the rear wall of a stable block that sits beside the building. Views of shallow pitched roofs and yellow London brick and sash windows give an impression of the imposing building that lies beyond, otherwise the Rectory's contribution to the historic character and appearance of the conservation area is muted.

A handsome and imposing terraced row, built in 1908, overlooks the junction of Church Green Road with Rickley Lane. Named Noel Cottages, a play on the name Leon, these houses, too, were built for estate employees. They are slightly more imposing if less embellished than Leon Cottages, set back behind front gardens and a larger total plot size in total.



Noel Cottages

# Statement of Special Interest

The conservation area includes St Mary's church, Church Green, Church Green Road and most of the surviving elements of Bletchley Park. The conservation area is broadly divided between the institutional buildings of Bletchley Park and the more conventional domestic suburb of Old Bletchley.

Church Green is an area of public open space, pleasantly landscaped and including the fourteenth century timber framed Rectory Cottages. To the south, the open character is maintained despite the suburban dwellings, amongst which Freefolk Cottage survives from the seventeenth century, and a terrace of estate cottages add further interest. To the north the churchyard and Old Rectory garden extend the open character of Church Green to which St Mary's Church and partial views of the Rectory add architectural interest.

Further to the north-east lies Bletchley Park House and the landscaped grounds of the former estate. The house was developed and extended by Sir Herbert Leon during the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth Century. Immediately to the north of the house are the old stables and outhouses. These have considerable architectural interest, being attributed to the locally significant Victorian architect Edward Swinfen Harris. These buildings also have historical interest arising from their use during World War II as the 'think tank' of British code breaking operations.

The northern boundary of the conservation area embraces all of the surviving war-time buildings built following the acquisition of the house and grounds by

the government at the outbreak of the Second World War. This part of the site includes the site of the former 'F' block, demolished circa 1987. These functional, plain looking buildings housed the code-breaking equipment (including the world's first electronic computer), now acknowledged as having played a decisive part in the war's outcome.

The eastern boundary extends beyond Sherwood Drive to the boundary of the Leon Estate adjacent to the railway. This area includes the remains of a thick belt of trees which screened the railway from the house and park. A retaining wall forms the conservation area's eastern boundary. This feature is of interest because it is constructed using the large stone sleeper blocks of the original London and Birmingham Railway. Part of the wall is of brick construction and this is all that remains of the engine shed, which measured 100ft by 250ft. To the south of the boundary are Buckingham road and Church Green Road. A number of buildings of local architectural and historic interest are included, set against a surviving belt of parkland trees. The buildings include the Park Lodge and entrance gates; Rose Cottage and the terrace of Leon Cottages and the cricket pavilion, of which the latter is now in a state of abandonment but with the potential to add a great deal to the special architectural and historic interest of the conservation area.

A handsome and imposing terraced row, built in 1908, overlooks the junction of Church Green Road with Rickley Lane. Named Noel Cottages, a play on the name Leon, these houses, too, were built for estate employees. They are slightly more imposing if less embellished than Leon Cottages, set back behind front gardens and a larger total plot size in total.



Rethatching at Freefolk Cottage, Church Green Road. The pronounced decorative ridge is not a traditional detail of the area.



Rectory Cottages



# Building Materials Guide

An appreciation of materials (in terms of both variety and methods of use) and their role in establishing the character and appearance of Bletchley conservation Area is critical to a successful development project, whether a domestic house extension or a larger scale development.

Materials such as brick and slate help to create 'blocks' of colour, while the subtle variations in timber windows add visual detail and can provide important dating evidence.

Such an understanding often prevents loss of character through ill advised, poorly specified alterations or just unnecessary and counter-productive work; for example, applying modern cement render to good quality traditional brickwork, or the loss of characterful original windows. Using traditional materials also encourages the retention of craft skills which are important for repair and maintenance in the future and the avoidance of premature replacement.

When selecting material for a new development it is worth taking time to source complementary materials so that mismatches between old and new work do not occur. Below are examples of features commonly found in Bletchley conservation Area with a brief description of the traditional materials from which they are built:

**Walls (1):** Local, non-standardised or imperial size brick, red / orange in colour, for house and boundary walls. The listed Rectory is of a yellow London stock brick. Occasionally dark and pale varieties are used in



Hut 1, ship lap timber with remnant of blast wall in front and bitumen coated timber roof.



Cusped mullioned window, St Mary's church Bletchley. Note the use of dark brown ironstone in the paler limestone wall. It's presence adds distinctiveness and character.

combination to create patterns. A selection of triangular and half-round brick boundary wall copers (used to finish wall tops) are also evident. Flemish and English bond is typical whilst modern, metric, stretcher bond is absent.

**Walls (2):** Within the park the older huts are timber and plaster board or ship lap timber. The later blocks are of brick.

**Walls (3):** Stone is occasionally used for external walls and as dressing for windows. Also used for decorative detailing. Usually local Blisworth limestone where used for building houses or boundary walls. The ashlar work on the church may be from a different source but the rubblestone used in the church body is likely to be local. Some ironstone from the nearby Greensand ridge is evident in external walling and the upper part of the tower.

**Walls (4):** Timber framing, frequently of oak posts, transoms, braces and collars, the black and white outer faces of timber buildings add immediate vernacular distinction to the town. Infilled with brick, lath and clay and possibly rubble stone (no evidence for this was found in the conservation area as part of the review) timber framing is indicative of an area short of building stone at a time before or contemporary to the onset of local brick making. It is vital to ensure that the grain of new timber is placed so that moisture cannot cut across the grain.

Lime mortar and plaster must be used for any patch repairs as damp held against timber by impermeable cement renders can have disastrous long term consequences.

**Pointing:** Lime mortar. Until the nineteenth and early twentieth century building mortars were cement free. The use of lime-based sandy or earth mortars created a true sacrificial pointing which allowed moisture in masonry to evaporate from between individual bricks or stones. The mortar decayed slowly as a result of this process and would be repointed at intervals of about 35 to 50 years. Indeed there are examples of Victorian houses that have never been repointed since construction but the masonry is still in very good condition. Pointing an old building requires skill and understanding.

**Roofing (1):** Plain clay tiles add a mottled and darker orange hue to the blocks of colour found in the conservation area. Concrete tile replacement varies significantly from clay in terms of colour, texture, finish and size. Such tiles often fade to brown, irrespective of their original colour. Clay tile is often used in conjunction with lead. Often crowned by fancy ridge tiles although these are frequently missing now.

**Roofing (2):** Welsh slate has a more textured finish compared to the smoother finish of imported replacements. Welsh slate also tends to be more robust and lends itself to recycling with typically 70% being reused on roof refurbishment work. Often used in conjunction with lead.

**Roofing (3):** Within the park roofs are of timber coated with bitumen or pre-cast concrete.

**Roofing (4):** Thatch. The traditional thatching material for the North Buckinghamshire area is long straw. Historically a simple form of thatch which took long stemmed wheat from the fields and, after threshing, bundles were pulled from the pile of beaten straw and fixed to the roof. This basic process left the heads and butts of the straw mixed together on the surface of the thatch. The method of applying the material gave a coarse, rounded finish rather than the abrupt cut and chopped surfaces of other thatching techniques and materials. The renewal of long straw often requires only a top coat replacement thus leaving a layer of the previous coat (the spar) on the roof. Over a series of rethatches this process of reserving underlying layers will increase in volume giving a further pleasing smooth roundness to the ridges and verges. Because long straw is flexible it can be folded over a roof ridge. Hence

there is no need for a chopped decorative ridge, just a single or double ligger line below the ridge and at the eaves. The absence of ornament is a feature of long straw and is indicative of its origins as rudimentary labourers' rick thatching. The preservation of underlying spar coats allows historic craft techniques, materials and detritus to be preserved into the modern day. This frequently lends surviving long straw thatch roofs significant archaeological potential.

An alternative to long straw frequently found in the locality is combed wheat. This is beaten straw that has passed through a comber setting all the heads and butts in the same direction.

Replacement of combed wheat on a like for like basis will normally be acceptable but the council's Conservation and Archaeology Team must be consulted first. The use of reed and other materials is discouraged and will not normally be allowed on existing straw roofs. Like for like replacement of reed for reed may be permissible but the council's Conservation and Archaeology Team must be



Stone, brick, timber, roughcast, lime mortar, lead and iron used harmoniously on a wing of Bletchley Park House

consulted first. Where evidence of an older straw roof survives there will be a preference for its reinstatement.

**Decorative detailing (1):** Gutters and down pipes: originals in wrought or cast iron, often hand-made or bespoke. Iron guttering is more substantial and has greater longevity than plastic replacements. Officers will encourage retention of iron detailing whenever possible. **Decorative Detailing (2):** Applied decoration in hung tiles, timber and roughcast, or similar, to evoke a stylised rustic finish, often as a mock timber frame effect.

**Doors, windows, some gates, fascias (bargeboards):** Timber, frequently painted in white but the option exists to vary colours (this is normally encouraged in conservation areas providing the final finish does not draw the eye away from the overall composition of a building). Failed parts can usually be replaced and, if attention is paid to repair and maintenance, timber items can survive for decades.

**Windows:** Timber with glass. Being handmade rather than mass produced, timber windows feature slight irregularities and imperfections which add to the individuality of the properties where they survive.

The combination of longevity and quality of construction provides dating evidence and insights into the status of buildings in the conservation area. Officers will not normally support their replacement. Installing uPVC alternatives often leads to a shabby, tired look to a property and causes awkward mismatches between neighbouring properties, particularly where these were intended to form a row with shared features.

This relatively limited palette of historic materials is central to understanding and maintaining the special character and appearance of the conservation area. Larger developments can harm local character by ignoring the subtleties of context and as a result look awkward and imposed upon their surroundings.

It is also important that the process of small incremental change arising from modern replacement is prevented or mitigated against whenever possible so that the historic character of the conservation area is not undermined. Appreciating the contribution of authentic materials and the traditional combinations and manner of use when repairs and new development are being specified helps to prevent loss of local character.

# Management Plan

Proposals for new development should be particularly mindful of the provisions of national and local policies set out in the General Information Document. The appearance and character of the conservation area as it is set out in this review should be demonstrably understood in proposal for new development. Milton Keynes Council (The Council) will expect applications to demonstrate how proposals will sensitively respond to and reinforce local character and distinctiveness

The Council will normally refuse applications for development that are deemed to be inconsistent with national and local plan policies intended to protect designated conservation areas from insensitive change.

The council will seek to work positively with the Bletchley Park Trust to manage the buildings of, and spaces within, the Bletchley Park site sensitively and effectively so as to retain them for the insights they provide into the achievements that took place there during World War II.

The council will encourage the preservation of historic boundaries within the conservation area. Proposals that interrupt existing open views of properties across parkland or gardens will be resisted.

The council will encourage new development to respect and preserve existing building lines in order to ensure that existing buildings that contribute positively to local character remain prominent in the street scene.

Whilst there are a variety of boundaries within the

conservation area close-boarded fencing is generally absent.

The council will encourage boundary treatments that follow those of adjacent buildings where they reinforce local character. The use of close boarded fencing and metal railings will normally be discouraged.

Extensions should be unobtrusive and clearly defer to the principal building in order to preserve historic plan forms and built scale (height and massing) and will respect the character of the different types of housing within the village. The spaces between houses provide views of planting behind the houses so side extensions and increases in roof volume should be resisted.

The council will encourage proposals or initiatives that would improve sites or buildings that detract from the character of the conservation area. In particular the council will work positively towards a resolution of the derelict pavilion site.

There is limited evidence of loft conversions within the conservation area. However, an Article 4 Direction should be considered to ensure the front planes of roofs of domestic dwellings remain clear of dormers or roof lights.

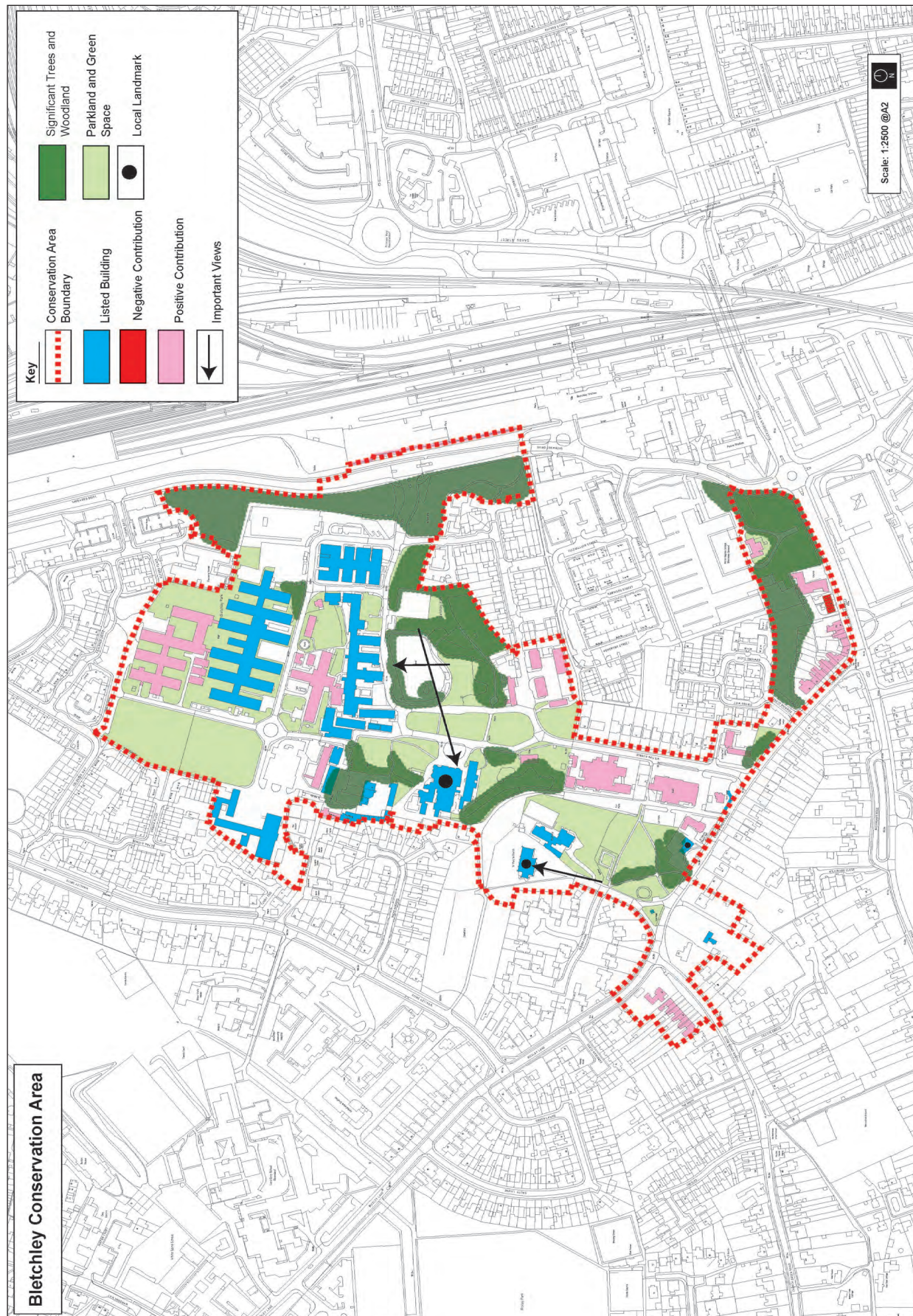
Where deemed appropriate to do so, the LPA may withdraw permitted development rights as part of granting new planning permissions for proposals to develop within the conservation area.

Schemes that result in the loss of chimneys to unlisted buildings within the conservation area should be resisted.

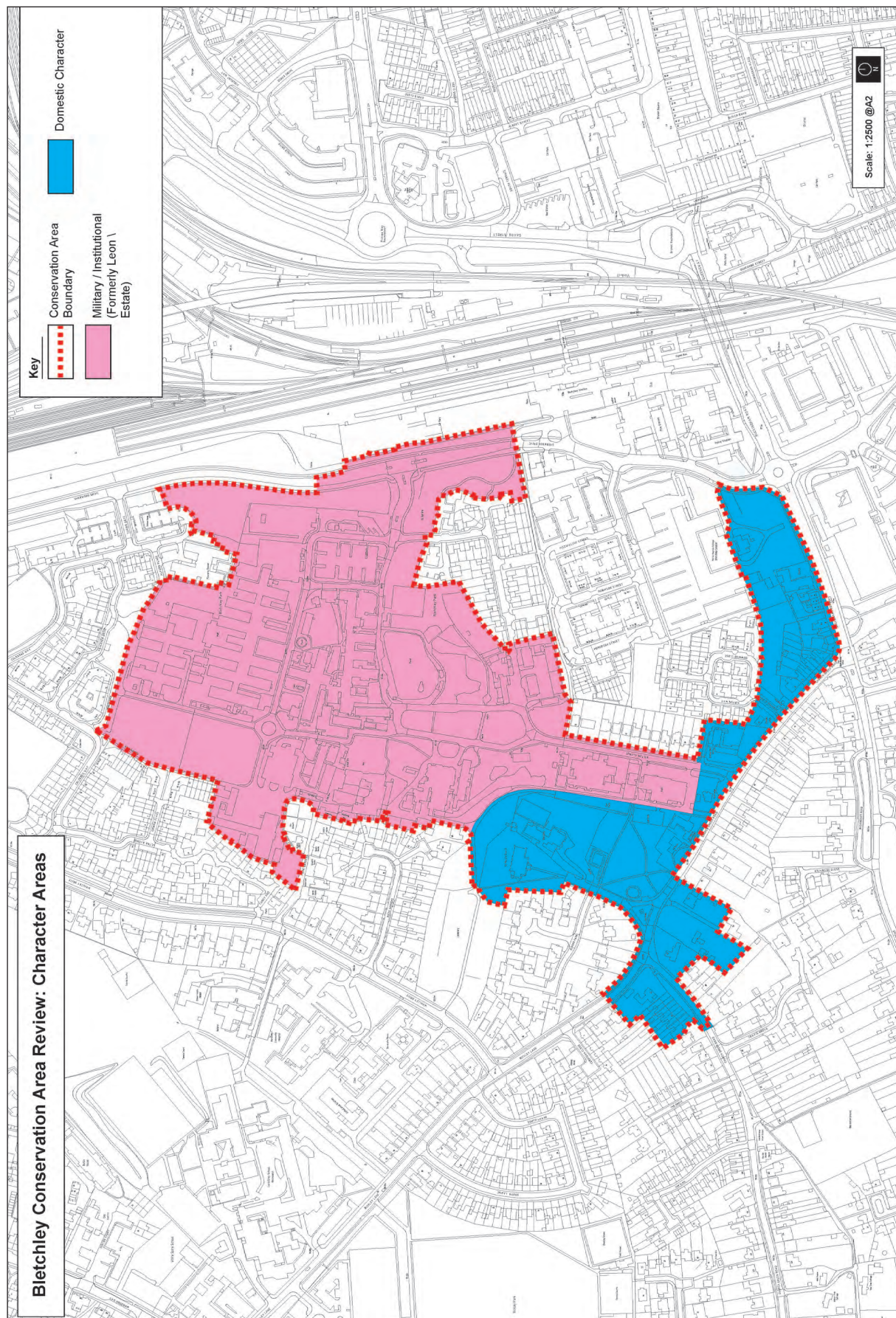


Leon Cottages

# Map 1: Principal Features



# Map 2: Character Areas





[www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/planning-and-building/conservation-and-archaeology](http://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/planning-and-building/conservation-and-archaeology)

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