

Willen Conservation Area Review

March 2020

Conservation & Archaeology

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



4 Milton Road, Willen

Historical Development

Willen is not mentioned by name in the Domesday Survey of 1086, although it can be identified as part of Caldecote, which in turn was part of the neighbouring parish of Newport Pagnell.

Ownership and tenancies of the parish in the medieval period were complex and are fully described in the Victoria History of the Counties of England, Buckinghamshire. In brief, one part of Willen was held by the Abbot of Lavendon until the Dissolution, and the other larger part was held by the Crown. Tenants included Philip de Kaynes (c.1150), Roger de Salford (before 1196), Hugh de Salford, Rose de Verdon (1208-09), Nicholas de Verdon, and John de Verdon. In 1499 the manor was held by Thomas Malyns of Blunham and conveyed by him to John Mordaunt of Turvey. After passing through various ownerships it was conveyed soon after 1653 to Col. Robert Hammond, of Chertsy. After his death his three daughters and their husbands sold the manor to Dr Richard Busby in 1672.

Dr. Richard Busby (1606 – 95) was a Royalist and churchman, and for 55 years the celebrated Master of Westminster School among whose eminent pupils were Wren, Hooke, Dryden and Locke. It is to his munificence that Willen owes its celebrated church, built in 1678-82 to the design of Robert Hooke, the scientist and inventor of Hooke's law. The church, dedicated to St Mary Magdalene, replaced an earlier derelict church. It is a simple hall built of brick with limestone dressings, with arched windows with clear glass, and fine oak pews and plasterwork. It has an elegant Baroque tower whose upper part is framed with limestone Corinthian corner pilasters, and crowned with pineapple finials, but has lost its timber cupola. In 1861 the rectangular chancel was replaced with a semi-circular apse. The church was set in the middle of a contemporary rectangular enclosure, walled in red brick, with tall gate piers facing east and west.

Willen has always been a small village, with a population never exceeding 100 souls. Before the arrival of Milton Keynes new town it stood a short way to the east of the B488, the road between Newport Pagnell and Fenny Stratford. The lane which led through the village (now Milton Road) crossed the River Ouzel, before heading south to Milton Keynes village and beyond to Walton and eventually Great Brickhill. An 1822 map shows the Manor House south of the church, and Brook Farm to the east, with



St Mary Magdalene church (Grade I listed) built principally of brick with ornate stone dressing

several associated barns. The vicarage is on axis with the church, down a path to the west. Leading south to the mill on the River Ouzel, is a road (Milton Road) with a number of cottages in pairs, some dated 1814 and 1817. Later in 1847, a village school was built facing south by the church, soon to be followed by more houses nearby (nos 1-5 Milton Road). With the coming of Milton Keynes, the B488 has been closed and downgraded to a minor access route in the

village, and Milton Road is now a cul de sac, having been severed at the Ouzel. Nonetheless, Willen still reflects the pattern of earlier days. The church, enclosure wall, lime avenue and village green are all intact. The Vicarage was rebuilt in the 1930s, having been destroyed by fire. Its large site was developed by Willen Priory (Society of the Sacred Mission) and is now The Well. Farming is no longer part of village life and Willen Hospice now occupies Manor Farm whose barns and outbuildings have all been cleared away to make way for new hospice buildings and 'The Hooke' a somewhat indifferent, if neatly kept, C20th housing development. One of the stone barns at Brook Farm

has been converted into a house, while other farm buildings have been demolished and replaced by the new houses in Corbett Close. The village school has been converted into a private house for some time. The cottages down Milton Road have all been extended and turned into convenient family houses, many with new garages, while the site of the mill (demolished in 1825) and a nearby moated site were both destroyed with the construction of Willen Lake. What was once a rural farming village has now become a quiet residential enclave within Milton Keynes new town.

Dominant building styles, materials and details

By virtue of being a diminutive settlement comprising just a few farmhouses, dwelling houses, church and the Old School House the variety and manner of use of materials is not as wide as for larger villages and towns. Those materials that are present speak eloquently of the underlying local geology and the impact that it has had on the settlement's appearance. Frequently these once traditional materials and methods have become unorthodox and are rarely used but an appreciation and understanding of them is required if the authentic historic character of the conservation area and its individual buildings is to be maintained.



Churchyard wall - Churchyard boundary wall built in brick of varying hues using English bond – alternating courses of headers and stretchers – with triangular brick coping detail

Underlining the importance of locality to settlement appearance, the British Geological survey's online 'Geology of Britain Viewer' confirms that typically for settlements lying south of the River Ouse, Willen sits on a bedrock geology of Oxford Clay which lends itself to brick making. Thus it is that the majority of buildings in Willen are built of this material. Rather than being homogenous in appearance there are variations in colour, quality and decorative techniques for brick that add a subtle richness to its presence.

In Willen the bricks that stand in or adjacent to the public realm are fairly rudimentary, evidenced by the unevenness of the surfaces and numerous indentations caused by hand stacking and drying on dry straw before kiln firing. Although no examples were spotted, impressions of fingerprints, paw prints, ears of corn etc. are not uncommon. The church's bricks are slightly darker than on others in Willen suggesting they were sourced closer to the centre of the kiln they were fired in or were fired for longer, perhaps to improve durability. The slightly darker colour may therefore indicate a more expensive choice of brick. Some bricks are blackened with glass crystals embedded where the clay and sand has burnt and transformed due to direct exposure to heat at the core of a kiln. The bricks in the body of the church are laid to a 'Flemish bond' pattern of alternating header (short length) and stretcher (long length) on each course creating a decorative cruciform effect. On the churchyard walls and gate piers headers are placed along one course and stretchers along the next creating a striped effect known as English Bond. The School House uses a slightly brighter orange brick in Flemish bond but Manor Farm mixes two shades to produce a hue closer to that of the church. One last bond detail is found in the wall to Brook Farm's garden on Milton Road. Here Flemish garden wall bond is used where three stretchers are placed between each header.



Brook Farmhouse walls - The mellow cream limestone of Brook Farmhouse (GII listed) and soft orange locally made brick in Flemish garden wall bond – three stretchers and a header to each course of bricks – beside Milton Road. It will be important to point the open joints (where the mortar has been flushed out by rain and road splash) in a cement free lime mortar.

Stone is generally a secondary material reserved for dressing door and window openings. Significant quarrying of the Blisworth limestone formation at Cosgrove supplied a rugged off white limestone for use in the general locality although it may be that stone from a smaller delve north of Newport Pagnell may have been transported south by road to Willen. The lack of decorative detail suggests the stone, whatever its source, was not capable of being freely carved. Only Brook Farm remains as an example of a stone building, its stone is mostly unshaped rubble stone but laid to courses of various depth.



Brook Farmhouse - A view of Brook Farmhouse from the road. Note the timber side hung and flush fitting casements set under a timber lintel.

The mortar for brick and stonework is white with small pebbles and/or black hearth grit evident. The whiteness comes from the slaked quicklime into which coarse and smooth sand and material

considered to aid consistent curing of the mortar was added. Lime mortar can be temperamental and inconsistent when used by inexperienced hands so, as a result, its use in general building has ceased. The porosity of the material and its suitability for use in softer handmade brick and porous limestones means that air curing lime mortar is more widely available for use again.



The School House - The School House (GII listed) built in brick and clay tile with ornamental stone dressing around the door and windows. The windows are metal casement in a distinctive diamond pattern.

The early roofing materials appear to have been locally fired clay tiles with lime cement rather than lead fillets. They often have a shallow curve that imparts a pleasing slightly jumbled look as at the School House roof. Later, following the establishment of canal and rail routes, hard wearing, flat grey slate that could be used on shallower pitches is present on the domestic dwellings on the west side of Milton Road and hence is a useful guide to dating.



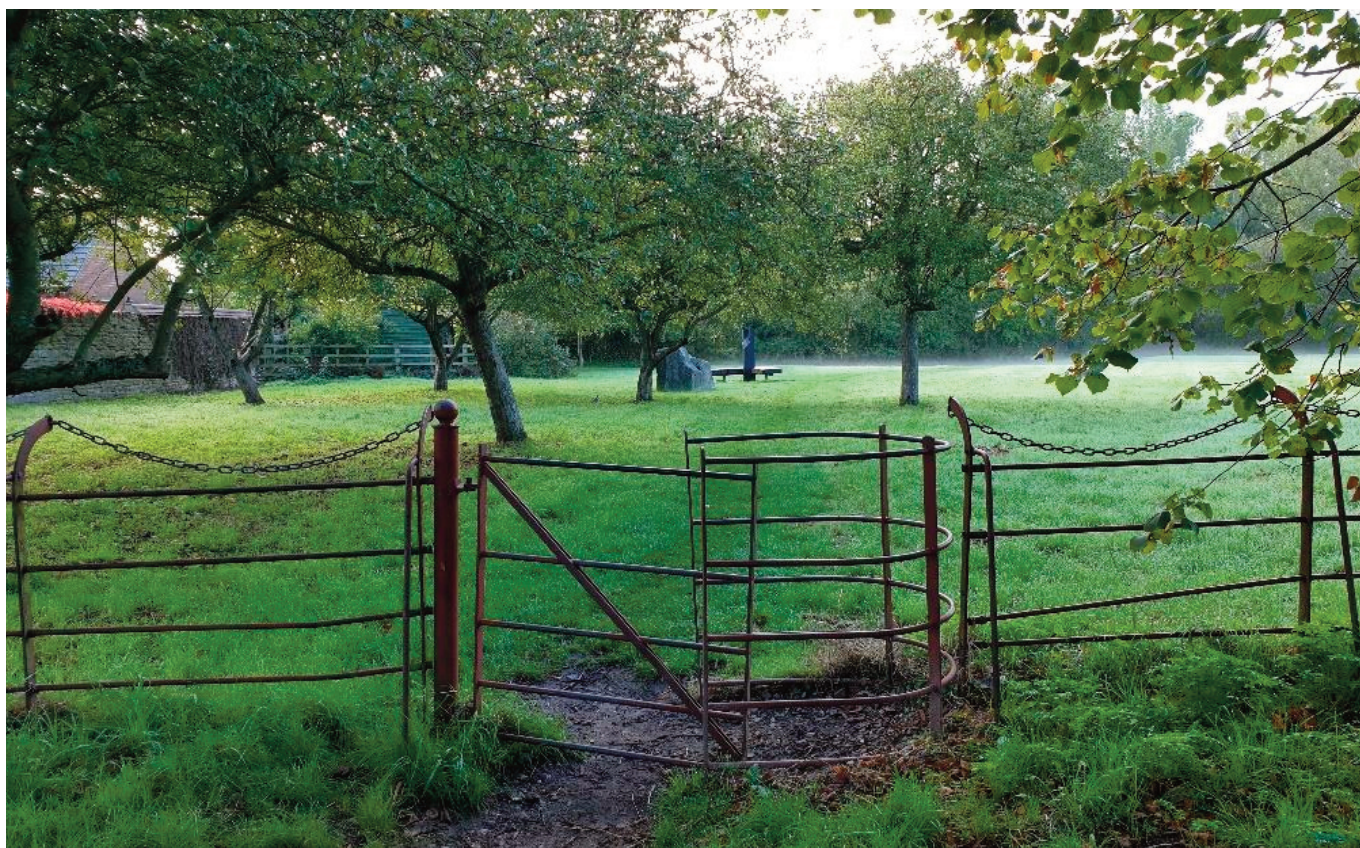
Houses overlooking Milton Road - Houses on Milton Rd of brick with stone dressing around the doors and windows. The roof is of Welsh slate suggesting a late C19th date of construction. The roof has a shallower pitch than that for clay tile.

Timber, glass and lead and occasionally metal would have once been commonplace materials for details such as doors and windows, each tending to be made bespoke rather than to standard 'off-the-peg' sizes.

Iron too would have been in evidence for incidental features and details around the village but not for major structural elements. The presence of iron is rare in Willen but an exception are the undemonstrative but refined gates to the church yard and the distinctive railings that stand alongside the lime avenue and orchard field.

Historic cobbles and kerbs are also now largely absent from the village replaced by modern granite sets. Some kerbs on the line of the old Milton Road may still survive.

Improvements in transport, DIY, fashions, and short-term cheap fixes have cumulatively caused a great deal of harm to characterful buildings but the variety of designs and quality of materials means that significant numbers of original features still survive nonetheless but not every building is of sufficient merit to warrant statutory listing there are still those of local interest which either individually or cumulatively contribute to the character or appearance of the conservation area. Failure to mention a specific building, structure or open space in the review does not necessarily mean that it has no part in reinforcing local identity. Where historic materials survive they usually impart a strong sense of character and individuality to the buildings and areas in which they are located.



Railings and kissing gate leading out of the lime avenue into an adjacent orchard - Distinctive rustic iron railings still survive reinforcing the historic rural character that permeates the village.

Statement of Special Interest

Willen is as small village arranged in an inverted 'U' around the line of the old Milton Keynes Village Road at its three-way junction with the Newport Road and Linford Lane. A cluster of chiefly brick and tile buildings, including the definitive Hooke Church, stand to the north of the modern wide-open spaces of Willen Lake North. Although now half encircled by conventional new town housing estates, the sense of a once isolated, peaceful, rural hamlet remains.

By road, the signed route directs the visitor to Willen Village southward, via Millington Gate, off Danstead Way and into Millington Gate. As a result the first view of the old village is from the northwest. Passing the leafy and neatly manicured lawns and grass verges of conventional late C20th executive homes the visitor arrives at a flat circular grassed traffic island. From this forced slowing down those arriving by car first glance a distant view through carefully placed trees of St Mary Magdalene's (Grade I listed) distinctive brick and stone dressed church tower topped by its distinctive four pineapple finials. At the end of Millington Gate, on the threshold of the conservation area, a 'T' junction is reached with Milton Road, leading off to the left and Newport Road, (the old B488) to the right. The prevailing impression at this point is of a church standing amongst trees in a tranquil parkland setting. Turning right leads the visitor deeper into denser wooded shade whilst to the left the first glimpse is had of houses that form the body of the village. There are plenty of places to leave a vehicle with car parks and laybys dotted generously about, encouraging exploration by foot of the important green open spaces that lie to the north and west sides of the village. As well as the church, there are views, over a small, attractive pond and of the backs of houses that front Milton Road. A playground and curious public art / benches catch the eye in an otherwise seemingly unaltered meadow land / orchard environment bordered by estate railings and hedges at the village edges. Further exploration south on the line of the

old Newport Road leads through yet more important enclosing trees and hedges before they gradually recede to reveal the magnificent, vast green open spaces and the expansive glistening waters of Willen North Lake on the village's southern perimeters.

Returning north back up the lane one comes to a point by a church notice board where a narrow lime tree avenue leads eastward to the church along which, particularly in high summer, the visitor is engulfed by greenery. At its end is the church yard and a key, close at hand, view of the church's imposing if unorthodox late C17th brick and stone west tower. The church is the dominant feature of the village and is the focus of numerous views. The church's yard is defined by a low rectangular wall (grade II listed) of locally made brick topped by triangular brick copings.

Leaving the yard and standing on the small green there is an important group of historic buildings and features hereabouts including the church, the iron church yard gates with piers crowned by unusual 'cottage loaf' finials, the bright red George V (1910-36) post box set in the church yard wall, a war memorial (grade II listed) and the Old School House (grade II listed). This grouping imparts a strong and distinctive and highly memorable local character. The Old School's metal lattice windows and gothic timber door, both dressed with stone quoin surrounds, kneelers and steeply pitched roof of plain clay tile with stone parapets lend the building a 'Jacobethan' gothic appearance somewhat at variance with the restrained classical references of the neighbouring church but one which is still harmonious with the surroundings as a whole.

The quietness of the locality is disturbed by surprisingly frequent traffic making for the Willen Hospice complex, formerly Manor Farmhouse (grade II listed), now with substantial extensions in a conventional late C20th idiom but which has sought to reduce height by taking advantage of a southward fall in land and mimicking the hipped roof of the

farmhouse. The farmhouse, lying in the foreground of the church tower, is a conspicuous presence in northward views from Willen Park.

Brook Farm (Grade II listed) can be glimpsed from the green but is hidden by tall hedges and a length of garden wall. To the north end of Milton Road are five distinctive brick cottages where a consistent application of stone detailing around doors and windows, reminiscent of the Old School, suggests a concerted investment by an estate or benevolent individual. They are set back from the road by grass verge and thick hedging but which allow views over and through gates attractive garden spaces

populated by trees. Their position close to a small car park means these houses are pivotal in establishing the early sense of historic character that permeates the conservation area.

Newly added to the conservation area is the tree lined path from Smabridge Walk to Aldrich Drive which continues eastward the axial alignment of the Well and lime tree walk on the west side of the church. Emerging from the tree lined path one encounters the brick cottages and schoolhouse gathered together and crowned by a view of the church tower.



The historic church and gates, School House and memorial arranged around The Hooke create a memorable group at the village centre.

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 proposals 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.

New or replacement buildings within these developments should remain subordinate in scale (height and massing) to the street frontage properties to preserve a sense of hierarchy within the plot.

Planning applications will be required for material alterations to the exteriors of buildings in non-domestic use in the conservation area. For example changes to windows, doors, roofing material will normally be held to be a material change to buildings in non-domestic use that would require planning permission.

There is no article 4 direction withdrawing permitted development rights in Woughton on the Green Conservation Area preventing the loss of original features on unlisted buildings in domestic use and there are no proposals to alter the existing levels of control. However, where deemed appropriate to do so, the LPA may withdraw permitted development rights as part of granting planning permissions for proposals to develop within the conservation area.

New development within the conservation area should consider the extent of spacing and rhythm between buildings and placement within the plot. Parking spaces should be provided in a way which minimises impacts to landscaping to the front of houses or the loss of verges beside the road.

Proposals for development should seek to avoid disruption or loss of historic boundaries unless there are clear and convincing reasons for so doing.

Boundaries within the conservation area are generally formed by hedges, brick walls or estate railings. The use of timber fencing and stone walling

will normally be resisted. Similarly the loss of indigenous hedgerow, railings and walls will be discouraged.

In line with the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 six weeks' notice must be given to the Local Planning Authority before undertaking works to trees.

New development will be expected to employ good quality materials that are consistent with the historic materials used in the conservation area.

The Council shall give careful consideration to the positive contribution made by the open spaces in the conservation area when considering proposals for development within or adjacent to them.

The Council shall continue to offer pre-application advice to occupiers of unlisted property in the conservation area in order to avoid unsympathetic, ad hoc choices for replacement or repair of properties and features such as windows or boundary walls.

Accumulations of street furniture or visually intrusive individual items of street furniture will be discouraged. Traffic orders should take account of the sensitive historic environment and use muted colours and minimise applied road surface lines and signing. The Council will seek to encourage utility companies to co-ordinate works and reinstate disturbed road and pavement surfaces sympathetically. Road improvements should avoid 'urbanising' the rural character of the conservation area.



The lime avenue

Map 1: Principal Features





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