Character & Design
in Stratford-on-Avon District

A COUNTRYSIDE DESIGN SUMMARY

Introduction

- The purpose of this document is to summarize the character of Stratford-on-Avon District and provide design guidance.
- The main objective is to help to secure designs that are local and enhance the unique character and qualities of the District for the good of both present and future generations.
- This objective is partly a response to the growing sense that places are losing their identity due to standardized designs being used everywhere.
- In response, this summary outlines important general features that contribute to the character of the countryside and settlements in the District. The separate character map identifies and describes the distinct areas in the district. The summary is made up of two sheets. The separate character map identifies and describes the distinct areas in the district. This sheet sets out general design principles that might be used to help maintain and enhance the distinct character of each area.

Context and support

- This document is meant to be used alongside the Stratford-on-Avon District Local Plan (Deposit Draft - as Proposed to be Modified), the Warwickshire Landscapes Guidelines, Conservation Area documents, Village Design Statements and Parish Appraisals, the Design Guide for the Conversion of Redundant Farm Buildings as well as the emerging District Design Guide.
- Support for this summary is provided at various levels including, Planning Policy Guidance notes *PPG1 (Revised): General Policy and Principles* and *PPG7 (Revised) the Countryside - Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development*; Warwickshire Structure Plan 1996-2011 - Draft for Public Consultation, Written Statement (Policies GD.1e, ER.1b and ER.1f); the emerging Stratford-on-Avon District Local Plan (Policies ENV1, ENV26 and ENV29) and the Stratford on Avon District Council EMAS Environmental Programme.
- The summary was initiated by Council resolution and was produced with the participation of Council Members, District and County Council officers and members of the public including specialists in geology, landscape, ecology, architecture, urban design and history. A Consultation Draft was circulated for comment to the participants and to Parish Councils and the final draft was adopted as Supplementary Design Guidance by the Strategy Committee on 7 September 1998.
- The basic idea for the summary comes from the Countryside Commission's advice as set out in *Countryside Design Summaries: achieving quality in countryside design* (CCP 502). The core, objective information used in identifying the character areas was provided by the *Warwickshire Landscapes Guidelines*, produced by Warwickshire County Council in partnership with the Countryside Commission.

How the summary works

- As a working document, the summary is intended to serve as a source of information and guidance for applicants for planning permission, council officers, as well as for council members and the general public.
- It is **not** intended as a detailed account of all parts of the District nor a source of ready-made design solutions.
- Rather, the summary sets out a range of general issues and principles concerning design that the Council regards as necessary to consider in formulating specific proposals.
- Applicants for planning permission must demonstrate in the material submitted that they have given due consideration to those issues and principles in the formulation of the proposed design (for details concerning specific material required please refer to Planning Practice Note 6).
- **The central goal of this design guidance is to maintain and enhance the distinctive qualities and character of the district. New development should therefore share some of the characteristics that define the area in which it is located.**

- It should be clear that the new development has features in common with buildings and landscapes of a similar kind in the surrounding area. The extent of common features is likely to be a matter of degree. There should, however, be enough common features to judge the proposal maintains the quality and character of the area.
- In outline, the procedure should, involve the following:
  - check the proposal is acceptable in policy terms;
  - identify the character area within which the development is proposed;
  - read the information regarding that area in this and other documents;
  - identify the specific characteristics that make up the area, using the general categories set out in this summary;
  - demonstrate in text and graphics that the design submitted shares a sufficient number of those characteristics.

Character

Central to this document is the idea of character. Another way of saying 'character' is to say identity or distinctiveness. Character is the combined effect of all those features that make a place identifiable. What are those features? It could be said that everything matters - all the features you could point out. Such a definition is clearly unworkable in practice. For the purposes of this summary, therefore, the descriptions and principles will focus on a selection of aspects that contribute to the character of the countryside and settlements in the District.

The selection has been based on the need to choose characteristics that are readily observable as well as readily taken as considerations in design. It is worthwhile, however, to note that character is not entirely a matter of the physical aspects of a place. Firstly, the location of the District within a larger context influences its perceived character. The setting and surrounding regions - the places you have to go through to get to the District - contribute to its identity. This consideration underlines the fact that character is only possible to identify by comparison and the contrasts between one place and another. Secondly, character involves far more than the bricks and mortar of a settlement. The human activities that have taken place and continue to take place in a settlement also make a significant contribution to character. The character of the District is the result of an extended historical development, involving many generations of people living and working in particular places.

Design Principles

While the aim of this document is to provide design guidance that takes account of the landscape as a whole, the landscape is not itself the *object* of design. The common unit of development tends to be the plot or field (in part, as a whole or several taken together) rather than an area of countryside. The concern must be, therefore, *the cumulative effect of smaller scale changes on the countryside*. Development within settlements that changes the built up area and skyline of a village can have an effect on the landscape. Equally, changes within a village such as infill and backland development can change the overall impression of the countryside. With this in mind, **the following general aspects should be considered in the design of new development:**

1. **the position of the settlement relative to land forms, water features, other settlements and roads;**
2. **the extent of the built up area, the skyline and edge character of the settlement, including landmarks visible from a distance;**
3. **the internal characteristics of settlements, from street pattern to materials.**

Before setting out considerations in detail, it is important to note that achieving an acceptable form of development involves a balance of issues. Every solution entails a compromise between competing ideals. Achieving one ideal may exclude the possibility of achieving another. While there is no formula for attaching importance to the concerns, the existence of this guide is an indication that quality in design should be given due consideration. **This document sets out ideals that must be balanced with all the other considerations material to planning. In seeking to achieve that balance, the approach recommended here is not, 'does the development meet standards' but 'how can the best design be achieved within the bounds of what is acceptable in other terms.'**

1 Settlement position and built up area

[Note: Within the context of the Local Plan, the location of settlements is principally a matter of policy and secondarily a matter of design. Policy considerations will, therefore, take precedence over design considerations. Design principles should thus be followed within the bounds of what is acceptable in policy terms.]

- Examination of settlements in the District suggests **there are two basic types of development: dispersed hamlets and farmsteads** on the one hand and **compact villages and towns** on the other.
- The character of historic farmsteads and hamlets is rooted in the association between the buildings and productive land. Dispersed settlements can thus be characterized in terms of the size and number of fields traditionally associated with a given building. **There is thus a characteristic density of farmstead buildings within open countryside.**
- **The location of hamlets and farmsteads** relative to land forms and water features tends to follow the same pattern as for compact settlements.
- **There are three types of compact settlement** in terms of the position of the village or town relative to the principal features of land forms and water features:
  - i. hilltop or ridgetop;
  - ii. hillside or hillside terrace;
  - iii. valley bottom, usually at the foot of the valley side and/or near a stream or river.
- Each type has distinctive characteristics and so different principles apply to each. Given the underlying aim of maintaining and enhancing existing character, **the first and most general design principle is that settlements should remain identifiable as a particular type.**
- For dispersed settlements, this suggests the principle **that the density of building relative to field area must be maintained** if the character of the countryside is to be maintained.
- For compact settlements, ensuring settlement types remain identifiable points to the idea of *topographic limits to development*. Hilltop villages should, on the whole, remain above a given level. Hillside or hillside terrace settlements should, on the whole, remain within upper and lower limits. Valley bottom settlements should, on the whole, remain below a given level.
- The reasoning behind the original choice of position will likely have been based on a number of considerations. These may have included ground conditions (avoiding steep, wet or flood prone ground), distance to springs for fresh water, the presence of a ford or bridge, orientation to the sun (to increase light and warmth), protection from prevailing winds, the crossing of main routes etc. **Where these reasons still apply they should be followed in judging the acceptability of development.**

- Once established, a settlement will, generally, tend to expand along the main routes through it and on flatter ground. The main route provides ready access and flatter ground is easier to build on. Secondarily, development tends to extend off from main routes connecting to other routes forming a network. This suggests three further principles regarding position and built up area. New development should extend along or gain access from the main routes serving the settlement. It should occur on flatter rather than steeper ground. Routes should eventually connect to form a network.
- Even a quick look at actual settlements will show that there are many exceptions to these tendencies due to the need to balance the range of considerations. New development may also present exceptions. In such cases, proposals must be accompanied by a statement that sets out the considerations taken into account, demonstrates why the exceptions are justified and the logic behind them.
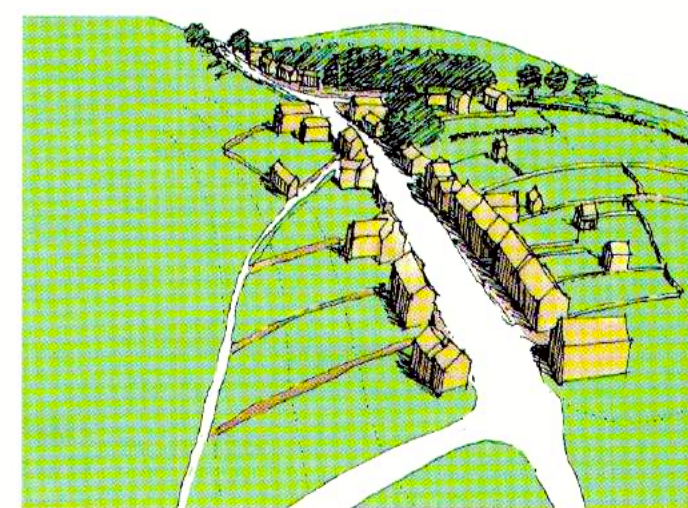

Hilltop or ridgetop settlements tend to extend along ridgelines and plateaux and secondarily downward along main routes.
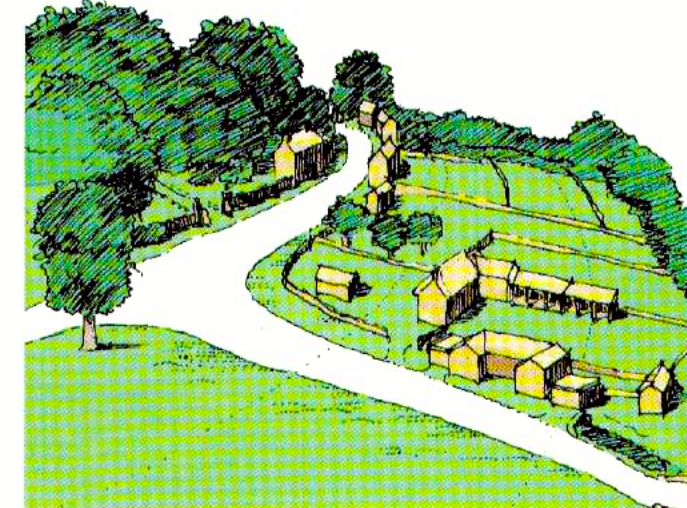
Hillside or hill terrace settlements tend to extend parallel to the contour lines of the hillside. Secondarily they tend to extend downward along main routes.

Valley bottom settlements adjacent to a river tend to sit on a terrace above the river level and extend along the line of the river or at right angles to it, depending on the direction of the main route. Settlements that contour a river tend, secondarily, to extend away from the river, more or less at right angles to the main route. Settlements tend to remain on one side of the river or stream.
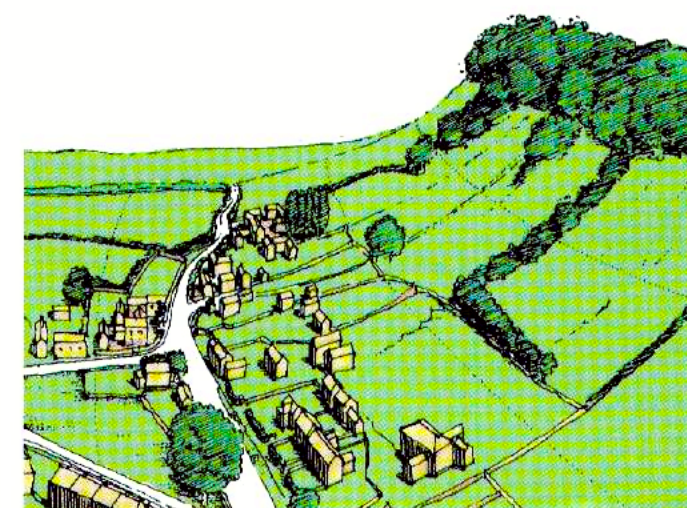
Valley bottom settlements at the foot of the valley side tend to extend along the line of the valley, that is, following the contour lines. Secondarily, they tend to extend out into the valley rather than up the slope.

A slice through Stratford-on-Avon District
Vertical section from Tanworth-in-Arden to Ratley (vertical scale exaggerated)

Dispersed hamlets and farmsteads tend to be located within an irregular pattern of lanes and an irregular plot pattern.

2 Skyline, views and edge character

- In addition to its position and built up area, the appearance of a settlement as seen from a distance is largely a matter of its *skyline* and *edge character*.
- The main issues affecting skyline are the relative height and arrangement of buildings and other features.
- In most settlements the church with its spire or tower is the tallest landmark and is also often found on a rising site. Spires and towers are thus prominent landmarks and an important part of the landscape. Other features in settlements such as large public or private buildings, monuments and trees can play a similar part in the landscape. New development should not block or obstruct views of such landmarks as seen from highways, footpaths, bridleways, public open spaces or other public areas outside and within the settlement.
- Views of a settlement from the surrounding countryside are an important way in which the settlement is rooted into the landscape. Similarly, views out toward the countryside from within a settlement through gaps between buildings, down roads, streets and lanes and across open spaces) help to connect it to its surroundings. New development should not block or obstruct views out as seen from highways, footpaths, bridleways, public open spaces or other public areas within the settlement.
- The edge of a settlement is in many cases soft, mainly made up of trees and hedges or other planting. In other cases it is hard, made up of building walls or fences. The edge may be diffused, made up of large plots with detached houses, or dense, with terraced or other closely spaced buildings. New development should maintain the most common traditional edge character of the area in which it sits in a settlement. New development may present exceptions. In such cases, proposals must be accompanied by a statement that sets out the considerations taken into account, demonstrates why the exceptions are justified and the logic behind them.

In general, both planned and piecemeal development tend to occur in a similar general pattern. That pattern includes a street or lane lined on both sides by plots containing buildings. **For the purpose of this guidance, the term 'street' will refer to the carriageway and the plots that line it either side taken together as a unit.**

The combination of streets making up a settlement generally forms a network of public spaces defined by the public fronts of plots and buildings. The resulting pattern of spaces, along with other public rights of way such as footpaths, is an important aspect of a settlement. **The position of a site within the pattern of spaces and defining buildings and boundaries is an important consideration for design.**

One means of assuring that new development shares characteristics that define an area is to carry forward existing elements into new schemes. In particular it is important to preserve specific features that have been identified as of value due to their architectural, historical, archaeological, ecological, or geological, importance. In other instances, existing features can be carried forward not necessarily in substance but at least in position and arrangement, for example, by keeping existing paths or routes as streets.

Close examination reveals that many settlements are composed of a number of different sorts of a number of different sorts of street. The main street of a settlement, for example, tends to be wider with a different range of plots and buildings compared to the side streets and lanes. In this respect, settlements tend to have a hierarchy of routes from primary main streets to secondary and lower side streets. **The position of a site within that hierarchy is of an important consideration in design.**

**The village of Kineton, lias uplands, Feldon**
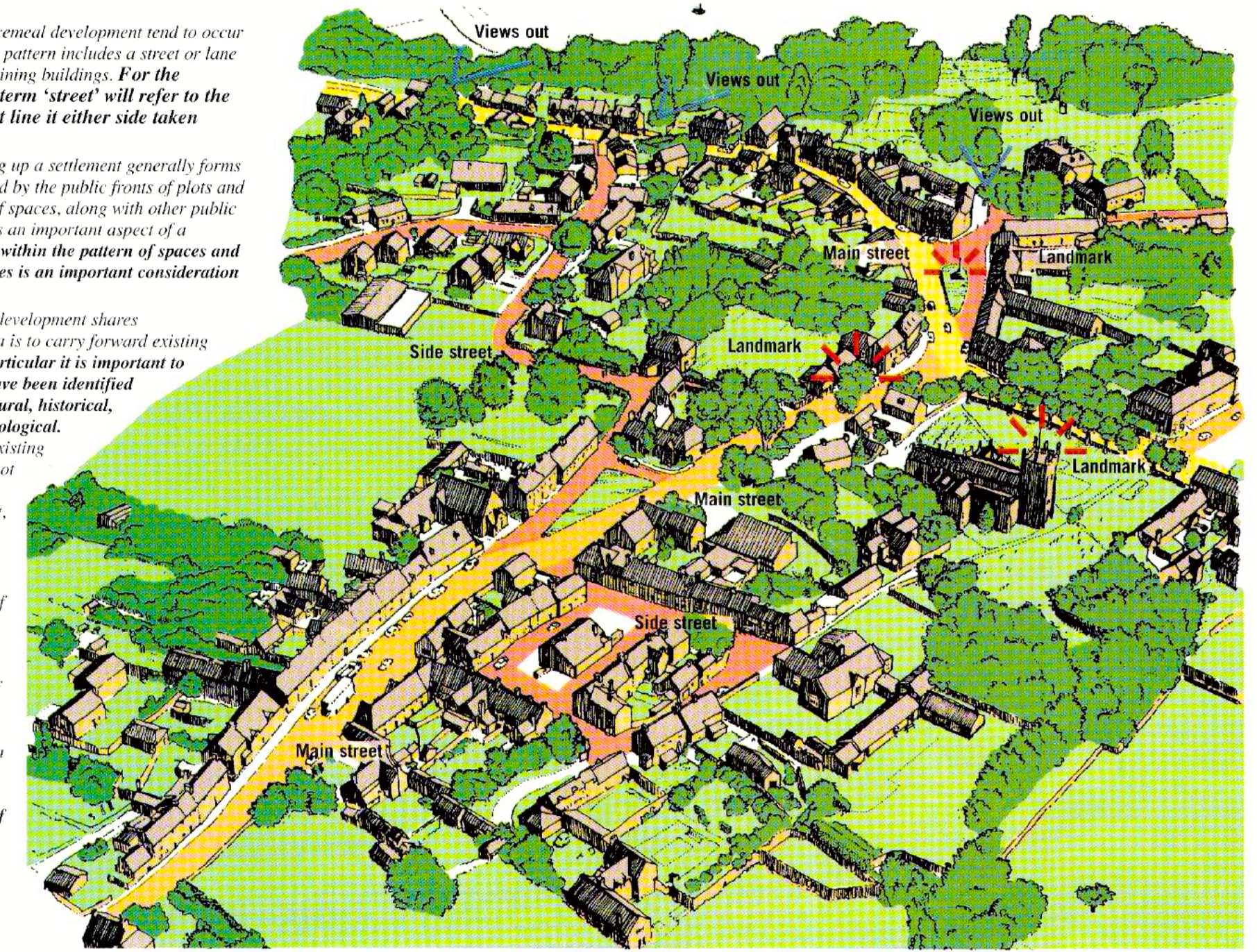
3 Internal characteristics: aspects and elements of design

- Generally speaking, settlements are all made up of the same *kinds* of elements such as buildings, plots, streets, greens etc.
- Each town or village has a specific character and identity because it is made up of *specific examples* of those elements in specific locations and patterns. For example, the village of Kineton has a curving main street on a gentle slope lined on either side mainly by terraced houses. In the middle of the street is a grassed area that contains a monument. The grassed area is close to a T junction with a straight street lined with trees.
- Every element in a settlement is both part of something larger and made up of smaller parts. Smaller scale elements are the parts of larger scale elements, as, for example, is a part of a plot. A convenient way to analyze and describe a settlement, therefore, is in terms of *levels of scale*.
- Describing the character of a settlement is largely a matter of identifying the PATTERNS of elements at different LEVELS OF SCALE. Those patterns at the different levels are therefore of primary importance as considerations in the design of new development. The process of design should thus address the following questions:
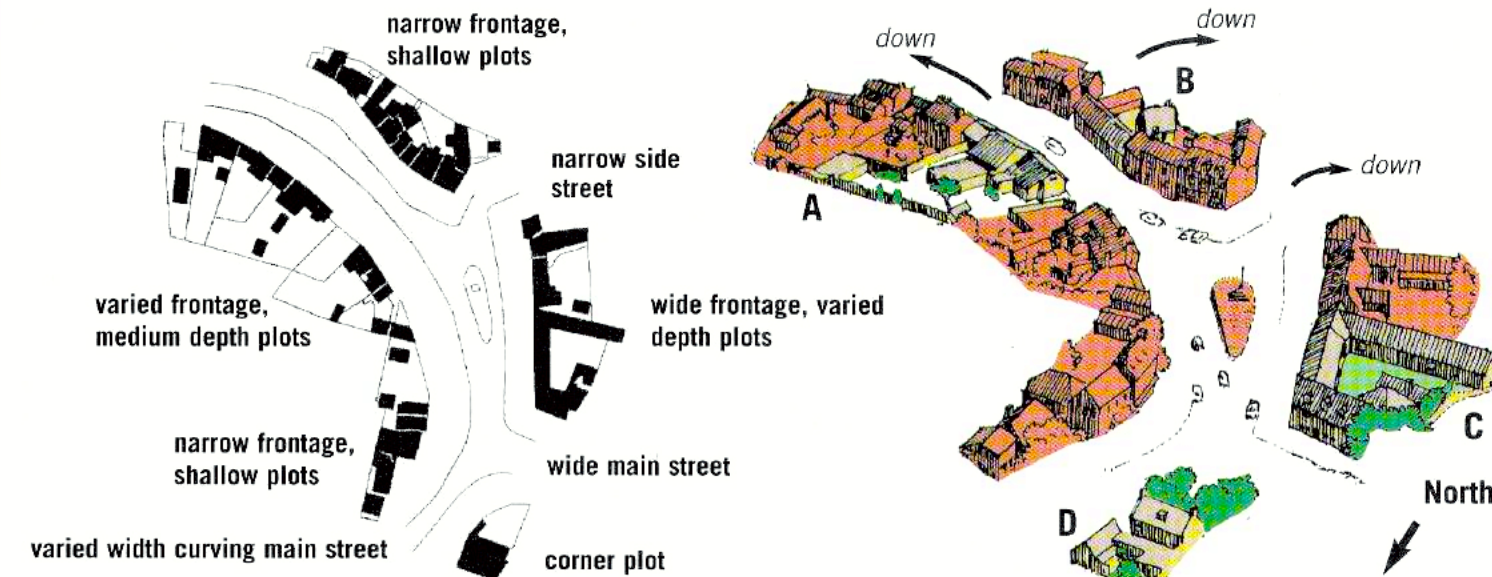
1. Streets within a settlement

- Are there distinct streets within the settlement? How are they arranged? How are they different?
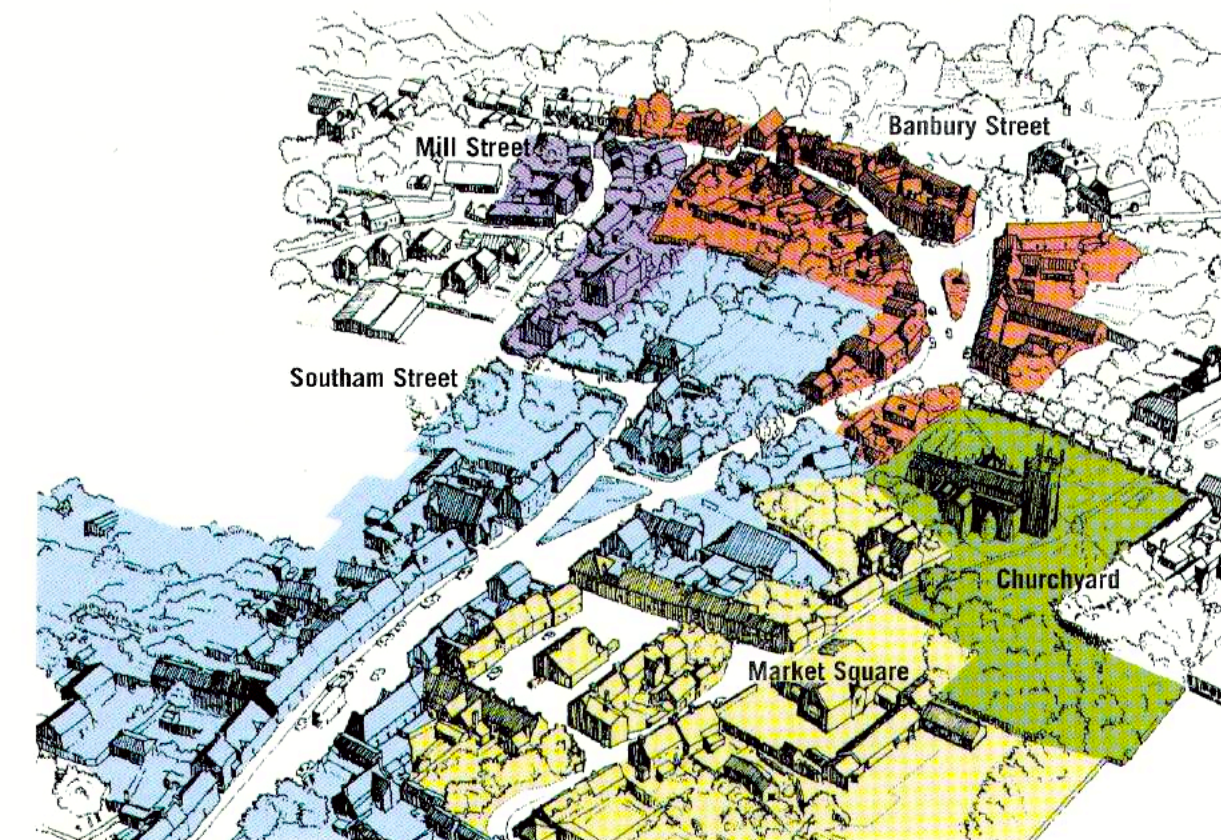

2. Highways and open spaces, plot series and blocks

- What is the position of highways and open spaces relative to land forms; streams, rivers, lakes; vegetation; the path of the sun; prevailing winds?
- Are there different kinds of highways and open spaces in each area? How are they different? What is the shape of the highway? What is the arrangement of elements such as verges, trees, footpaths and carriageway? Does the highway open out into a square or green? At what point? Are there different kinds of plot series either side of the highway? How are they different?

narrow frontage, shallow plots
narrow side street
varied frontage, medium depth plots
wide frontage, varied depth plots
narrow frontage, shallow plots
wide main street
varied width curving main street
corner plot

3. Plots

- Are there different kinds of plots in terms of size, proportion, boundary treatment? Are there associations between particular kinds of plots and different positions in a series or block? Are the plots different in terms of the kinds of things within them? Are there different arrangements of trees and plants and buildings?
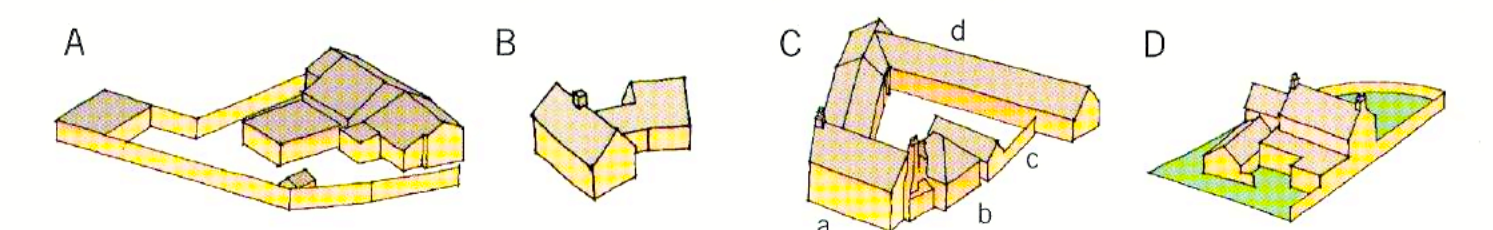
mid-block plot, combination of different buildings, main buildings parallel to street with walls on street frontage
*mid-block plot, single building parallel to street with walls on street frontage and rear extension*
corner plot, courtyard arrangement of various buildings, parallel to street with walls on street frontage
corner plot, garden at corner with wall on street frontage, main house perpendicular to street, gable end on street

4. Buildings

- What is the position of buildings relative to the street, to other buildings and plot boundaries? What is the relation of buildings to land forms; to the path of the sun; prevailing winds?
- Are there different types of building? How are they different? Do they have different plan and roof forms, storey number, facade arrangement, internal arrangement?
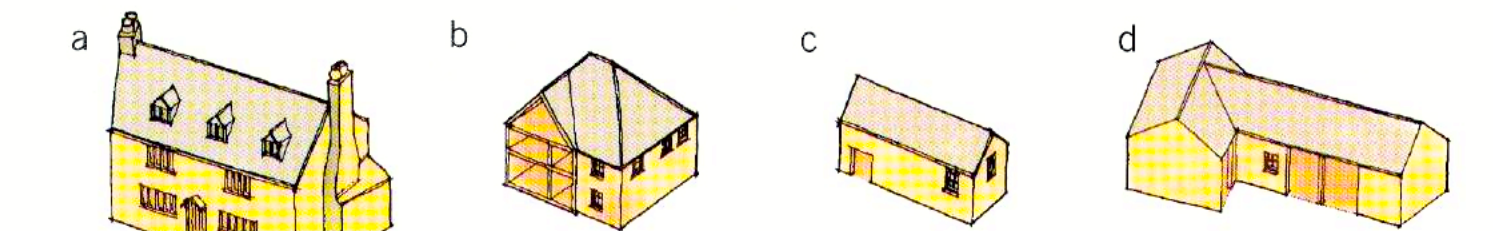
rectangular plan, two storey, simple gabled roof, gable end chimneys, roughly symmetrical facade
*Square plan, two storey, mixed hipped and gabled roof, chimneys at eaves, vertical alignment of windows*
rectangular plan, double height single storey, simple gabled roof, symmetrical arrangement on gable end
'L' plan, two storey, simple gabled roof, carriage entry from street, one storey rear wing

5. Details and materials

- What are the characteristic types of construction and materials? Are there typical associations of building form and details? Because materials make up the actual substance of a settlement they are of particular importance to its character. What different materials are used in the building? Are particular materials used in characteristic locations within a structure? What is the shape, colour and texture of the materials?
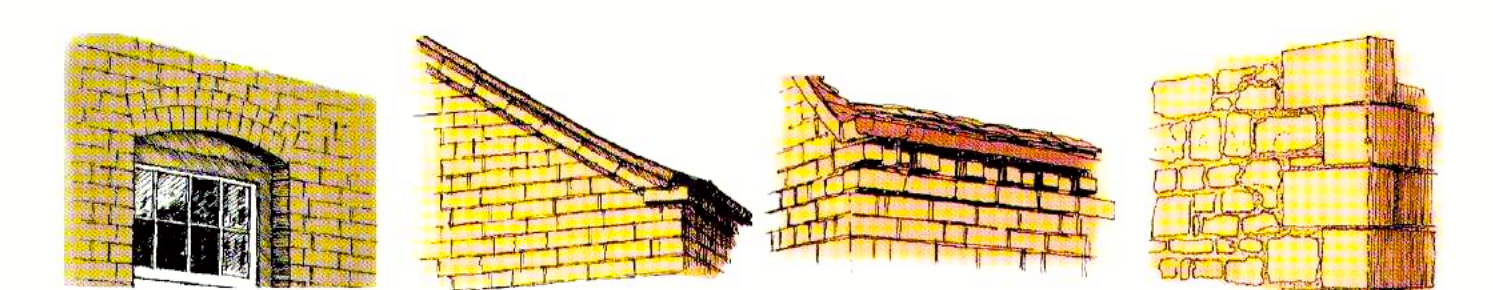
window head - brick, segmental arch, one course of headers on edge, one course of flat headers
verge - brick with single projecting stretcher course and slate undercloak
eaves - brick with dentillation (alternating projecting headers and projecting course above), half round gutter
corner - stone, quoin (larger dressed stone) at corner and smaller rough stonework making up body of wall

Any development will fall within some level of scale, as part of something larger and with its own internal parts. All levels of scale are important to even small scale development. In this regard there are three principal considerations in judging the quality of a proposal: the way it forms part of a larger element, its shape and size as a whole and its internal arrangement. Again, the basis on which judgements should be made is that new development should share some of the characteristics that define the area in which it is located.

River Alne — Tanworth-in-Arden — Henley-in-Arden — Stratford-upon-Avon Canal — Snitterfield — Hampton Lucy — Charlecote — Wellesbourne — Fosse Way — Compton Verney — Kineton — River Avon — Radway — Ratley — Edge Hill