

Conservation areas: ideal and reality reviewed¹

by

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Conservation areas, introduced into the United Kingdom in 1967 with the aim of extending protection beyond individual listed buildings or ancient monuments, are widely regarded as being successful. The Civic Trust's view is that 'the creation of conservation areas has done much to ensure that there is a heritage to build upon'.² The comprehensibility of the idea of conservation areas, and their ease of designation, has been favourably compared to other aspects of conservation.³ The popularity of the concept of area-based, rather than individual monument or building-based, conservation is such that, a mere thirty years after their introduction, there are over 9,000 designated conservation areas in the UK. Although they include only about 4-6% of the building stock, they are probably the single aspect of heritage conservation which most people meet in their daily lives.

This very popularity is one clear measure of success. At the same time, however, there are concerns about over-designation, 'debasement of the coinage' and similar issues which have been voiced in the professional press (Fig. 1). The resources available per conservation area, from both national and local government, have not kept pace with the rate of designation, and so there are doubts over whether some areas are designated and forgotten, rather than being 'managed' through comprehensive study, monitoring, policy formulation and implementation. It thus seems appropriate, thirty years after the pioneering 1967 Civic Amenities Act introduced by Duncan Sandys, to review the UK's conservation area system.

DESIGNATION

The process of designation of conservation areas is easy and can be rapid. The great majority of areas are designated by the local planning authority (LPA), usually the district council. In Northern Ireland, however, the situation is different as designations are made centrally by the Department of the Environment (Northern Ireland).⁴ Elsewhere in the UK, an LPA resolution is required, and the designation must be registered as a local land charge and advertised in a local paper and the *London Gazette* (or equivalent). English Heritage and/or the appropriate regional Government Office should be advised of designation. Other authorities have powers to designate, including county councils, National Park planning boards, English Heritage and the Secretary of State. However, these powers are used only very

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Fig. 1

School Road conservation area, Birmingham. Suburban conservation areas are increasingly numerous and have led to criticisms that the concept is being debased.

rarely. It was only in 1995, for example, that English Heritage first used its power to make a designation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of very early designations, including the first, were, in fact, made by County Councils rather than the LPA.

No extensive survey of the area, or public consultation, is statutorily required; areas can be, and have been, designated virtually overnight, particularly in response to clear threats. Nevertheless, it is strongly suggested that:

The greater the public support that can be enlisted for designation before it takes place, the more likely it is that policies for the area will be implemented voluntarily and without the need for additional statutory controls.⁵

Data collected by English Heritage help to assess the take-up rates of conservation areas, over time and across the country.⁶ In general, the number of designations rose quite steadily from 1967 and, although there was a slightly higher rate until the mid-1970s, and a slightly lower rate until the late 1980s, these differences are relatively slight (Fig. 2). The concerns in the professional press about over-designation in the late 1980s/early 1990s relate to a quite short period. The feared continual rise in new designations into the mid-1990s has not occurred,

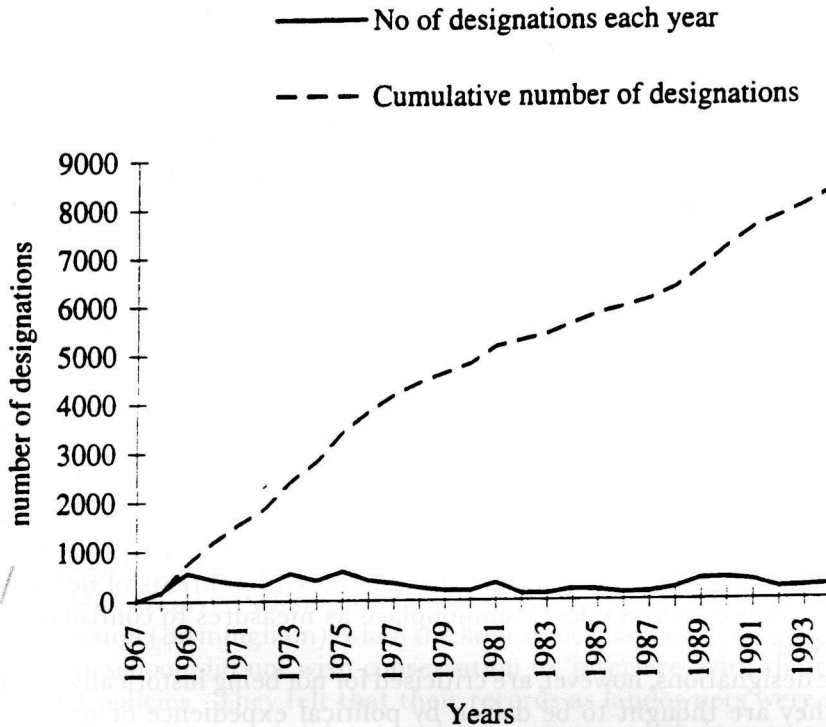


Fig. 2
Number of conservation area designations, England, 1967-94
(English Heritage data).

with 1992-94 being significantly lower than 1989-91.

This raises the issue of reactions to continued designation. The question of whether these devalue the concept, effectively 'debasement the coinage', has been examined by Morton. He found that the process of designation is not rigorous, not democratic and, in some cases, the reasons for designation are not well understood (it would appear that this criticism is applicable both to planners and the public).⁷ Others have suggested that, since the criteria for designation are only loosely governed by statute, the system is open to abuse and is being abused.⁸ There are current concerns of continual erosion of character through unsympathetic attention to detail and inadequate maintenance, with some local authorities being accused of 'incompetence and lack of concern'.⁹

Motivations for designation are questioned: 'snob zoning' to prevent change and development, political motivation, and designation to enhance development control powers all devalue the process and deviate from the original Act.¹⁰ Reade's critique of the system, based on a study of Upper Bangor, sharply criticises the system of designation and management:¹¹

Is an area so defined because it is already seen as rather special, and is thus valued and cared for and thought to merit protection against insensitive development? Or is it, by contrast, an unappreciated area, whose potential architectural or historic interest is to be made manifest to all? For clearly these are two different cases. Neither the legislation itself, nor the advice note which accompanies it distinguishes between them.¹²

The vast majority of designations appear to be officer-led. They predominantly aim to control development, control demolition, to protect the 'very special' and to encompass familiar and cherished townscapes. There are also a range of 'knock-on' effects of designation. Not only does it enable the LPA to keep a watching brief on the effects of change, but designation is also valuable to national bodies who would not be consulted about developments outside designated areas. The Council for British Archaeology, for example, considers that area status provides valuable protection for sites which are not scheduled and are not necessarily of national importance.

In some cases, designation is the result of a systematic initial townscape appraisal by officers. However, this is certainly not a commonplace activity and most appear to be a response to actions which challenge what is 'very special' or familiar. In such cases, designations are stimulated by threats of demolition: a situation that may become less commonplace as measures to control demolition become clear.

Some designations, however, are criticised for not being historically worthwhile. Rather, they are thought to be driven by political expedience or pressure from residents. Such designations fuel the argument that the protection of further areas of townscape is devaluing the 'special' quality of the older, more historic areas.¹³

In a very small number of cases, new conservation areas appear to be designated for political reasons rather than for the benefit of the historic townscape. Developers complain of instances where rapid designations have been made following the submission of large-scale development proposals for previously unprotected areas. These designations are considered by members of the British Property Federation to be deliberate blocking tactics to delay or attempt to prevent developments taking place.¹⁴ In some of these instances 'political' designations result from changes in local authority administration during the planning stages of development, and there are some examples which suggest that conservation area designation may be used as an obstructive or delaying tactic.

A further explanation for patterns of designation, forming at least an administrative motive, is provided by changes in legislation and practice.¹⁵ Both nationally, and within the West Midlands region, peaks in designation can be related closely to new legislation, guidance reminding LPAs of their statutory duties, and administrative changes such as the 1974 local government reorganisation. An increasing recent impetus is given by the growing importance of the development plan system: as LPAs prepare plans, they use the process to review areas, amend or make new designations, and thus 'bursts' of activity occur.

In many situations, local residents will be anxious that conservation area status is approved; if for no other reason than the frequent assertion by estate agents

that property values are higher in designated areas. Indeed, pressure may be placed upon the planning authority by influential or active local groups and parish councils to designate particular localities. Many local amenity societies have exerted such pressure on their local authorities, and a number of societies have been formed expressly for this purpose (mostly in middle-class suburbs and commuter villages¹⁶). Experience from several LPAs shows that, where the public and local groups are consulted on designations, they tend not only to be in favour, but to support the largest possible area boundary.

However, not all views on designation are as favourable as those usually put forward by residents. In a few cases, a vociferous public group, usually a minority, has organised campaigns against designation. In one example, the pre-1974 Structure Plan for Eardisland (Hereford and Worcester) suggested conservation area designation, and proposals were made to the LPA's Planning Committee in 1975, 1981/2 and 1990. In each case, despite some local support, members of the Parish Council remained vehemently opposed to designation. Their objections were not well articulated, but revolved around fears that designation would restrict potential development.¹⁷

Large local landowners may object, fearing the curtailing of current or future activities. This occurred when an extension was proposed for the conservation area of Edgbaston (Birmingham), when the largest local landowners, the University and grammar school, did not wish conservation to 'interfere' with their property management policies. They felt that their records as landowners were sufficient protection for the area, and did not wish to compromise their requirements to alter uses or properties on their campuses in the light of changing educational circumstances. More important, perhaps, than such localised objections are those from national bodies. For example, the British Property Federation has raised the issue of politically-motivated designations undertaken at speed and without consultation (as has been suggested earlier). The Outdoor Advertising Council (OAC) suggested that the designation process should be amended, as they oppose the wide spread of 'ordinary shopping and business areas' included, and the controls over certain advertisements afforded by conservation area status. The OAC proposed, amongst other things, that no new conservation areas should be designated without the prior approval of the Secretary of State, and that all conservation areas should automatically lapse after five years unless reconfirmed by the Secretary of State after going through the same procedures as for the designation of a new area. The OAC justified these proposals on the grounds that they would 'make LPAs act in a more responsible manner in considering whether to put forward designation proposals'.¹⁸

Likewise, in his acerbic critique of conservation area planning, Reade clearly suggests that there is no value in designation for the sake of designation. Such action is of real value only where significant policies are developed and resources allocated for their completion. Without this, designated areas inevitably will stagnate or even decay, rendering designation eventually fruitless and (by implication) de-designation inevitable.¹⁹

THE CHANGING SHAPE OF THE CONSERVATION AREA

The boundaries of early designations were precisely and tightly drawn. Nevertheless, some careless designations were made: one example in the Malvern area clearly bisected a house! There appears to have been a widespread, although barely articulated, feeling that only the most important parts of towns should merit designation; and this importance was more usually architectural than historical. Areas not in themselves of special interest were excluded, although they might, clearly, have an effect upon the designated area itself.

For this reason, Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council designated two areas, Tettenhall Greens (1975; an amalgamation of three smaller areas) and Park (1975) which both specifically excluded small areas within the overall boundary. The Tettenhall Greens area excludes a group of houses built in the late 1950s-early 1960s, while the Park area excludes some 1950s system-built flats. Both are, admittedly, incongruous in the context of the Victorian and Edwardian villas around them. The current conservation officer noted that the 'rather sparse' documentation relating to these designations contains no specific reference to the holes, although that in Tettenhall was designated as an 'area of special development control'.²⁰

Likewise, Chipping Norton, another early designation, had an anomalous boundary. Here, the town is essentially a two-row planned medieval town, with market-place and typical medieval burgages (narrow but deep plots). The designated boundary, however, cut through the medieval plots on the east side of the market square, rather than following the line of the back lane.²¹ The line of the lane would, logically, complete the original medieval plan-unit layout. Relatively little is known of the uses to which these plot tails were put, and they are vulnerable to truncation and development; they now seem to be a logical candidate for protection.

However, Bath well illustrates the apparent trend outwards from originally tight boundaries which even Wolverhampton had accepted in their revision of the three Tettenhall areas (Fig. 3).²² The first designations in Bath consisted of six areas totalling 432 acres, accepted by a Council meeting on 5th November 1968. In response to 'mounting concern for conservation in Bath' these areas were extended and amalgamated in July 1973. The extended area 'also took account of views into and across the city, roofscapes and certain skyline features such as church towers and spires' and encompassed 1,296 acres. In April 1975 a further, and substantial, extension included areas of early-nineteenth century housing, architecturally less significant than the central Georgian parts of the city. The Council considered that to prevent the conservation area from growing in a piecemeal way, the new designation should be fairly broad based. The two main factors behind this approach were:

- (i) that the conservation area should define all those elements that make up its architectural and social heritage; and
- (ii) that it should define the principal visual setting of that heritage.

In 1985 the Draft City Plan expressed concern over the potential loss of character following permitted development in areas of Edwardian suburbs, and further

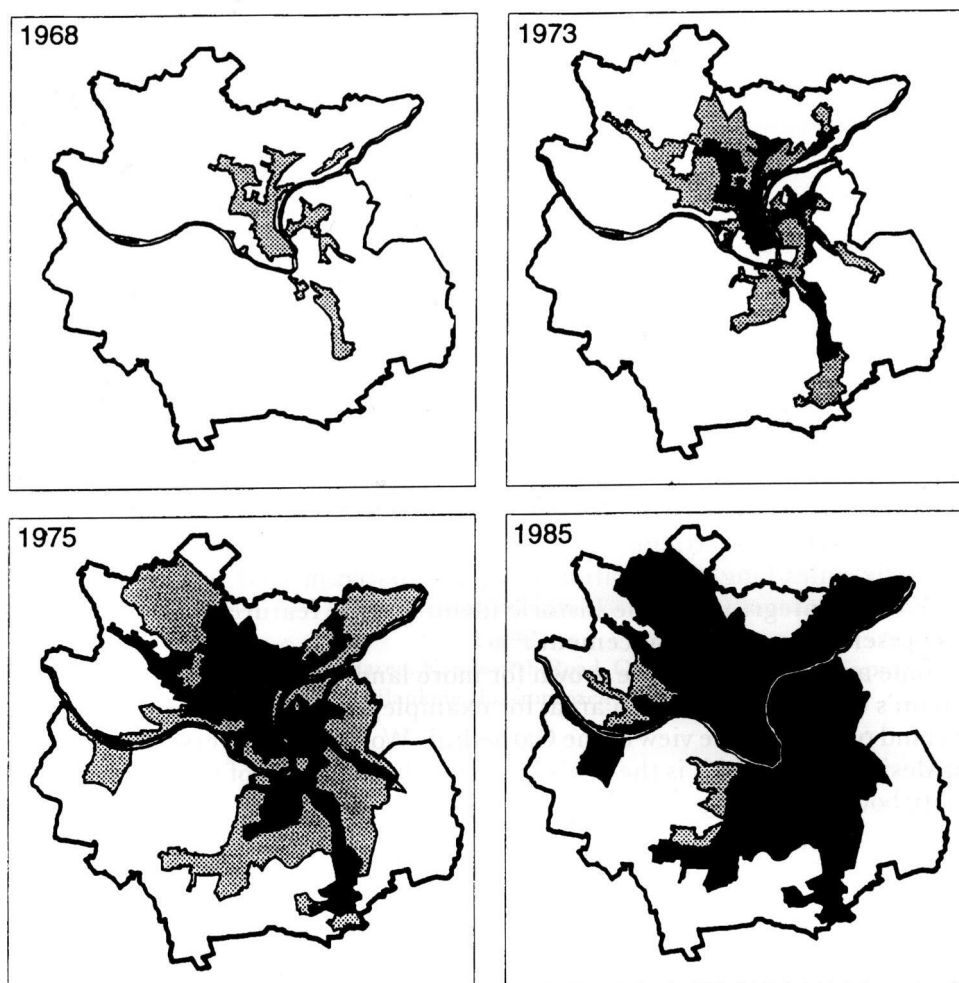


Fig. 3

The growth of Bath conservation area (redrawn from Bath City Council, *The Conservation Area in Bath* [Bath, 1993]).

extensions were designated in December 1985. The conservation area then covered 1,914 hectares, or 66% of the total area of the city.

The percentage of the LPA's area covered with designated conservation areas is even higher in some of the London boroughs. Those containing the expanses of Georgian aristocratic estate development, for example Kensington and Chelsea, have in the region of 80% of their area designated.

Norwich likewise reviewed its numerous early city-centre designations. In a 1969 policy document, the original boundaries were identified to include 'numbers of surviving listed and historic buildings and other historic features'. Other

contiguous areas were excluded 'because they had largely been redeveloped with modern buildings or later industrial development of no architectural or historic merit'. In reviewing the boundaries in 1992, using the same design criteria specified in the 1969 document, it was suggested that the entire walled medieval city be designated, to emphasise the importance of the medieval street plan, the defences, bridge crossings, waterfronts and quays, surviving buildings, and views into the historic core from outside. The new boundary would also coincide with an archaeologically-sensitive area as identified by the Norfolk Archaeological Unit.²³

Other recent giant areas owe their size to the diffuse nature of the features which they seek to protect. Two designations in the Yorkshire Dales National Park cover large expanses of rural landscape, protecting the vernacular agricultural buildings (principally field barns) and dry-stone walls characteristic of the hay-meadow farming cycle.²⁴ The Upper Swaledale and Arkengarthdale area covers seventy-two square kilometres and includes 1,242 field barns and some 250 farmsteads. The smaller villages were excluded from the designation after consultation with parish councils. The more recent designation of Littondale does, however, include the settlements. Similarly, the Settle-Carlisle Railway is now a seventy-six-miles long conservation area, designated in 1991 to 'promote respect for the line's integrity and the historic identity of its features and to provide for their preservation and enhancement'.²⁵

Some areas, however, have grown for more landscape-related reasons (Fig. 4). Durham's central conservation area, for example, includes a significant extent of open land protecting the view of the Cathedral. Worcester's Riverside conservation area, designated in 1992, is the city's largest and protects all of the riverside within the city boundaries (Fig. 5):

it is important to look at both banks of the river as one would in a normal street scene. ... The City Council has long recognised the cohesive nature of the river valley and its importance to the City. In 1987 it commissioned consultants to prepare a riverside strategy ... Stage One of this report was published in 1988 and was primarily concerned with 'establishing the purpose and overall direction of the Strategy for the River'. Central to this report's recommendations is the idea of River Park designation for the whole of the riverside within the City boundaries. Conservation area designation is a natural extension of this holistic approach.²⁶

However, in the case of the designation of the Barham conservation area, the High Court accepted the argument that conservation areas should not be enlarged – and thus, arguably, originally defined – to include 'buffer zones'. Although not every part of every designated area need be of intrinsic architectural or historical interest, the Court felt the extension of an area specifically to include such land, even though it formed the setting of the village, was unjustified.²⁷

AREA APPRAISAL AND ISSUES OF CHARACTER

Since the definition of conservation areas revolves around issues of character and appearance, it might be assumed that appraisals of these two key characteristics would be integral to the designation and review processes. However, the standards



Fig. 4

A landscape-related conservation area: Kenilworth Road, Coventry, designated to preserve the spinneys flanking this approach to the city

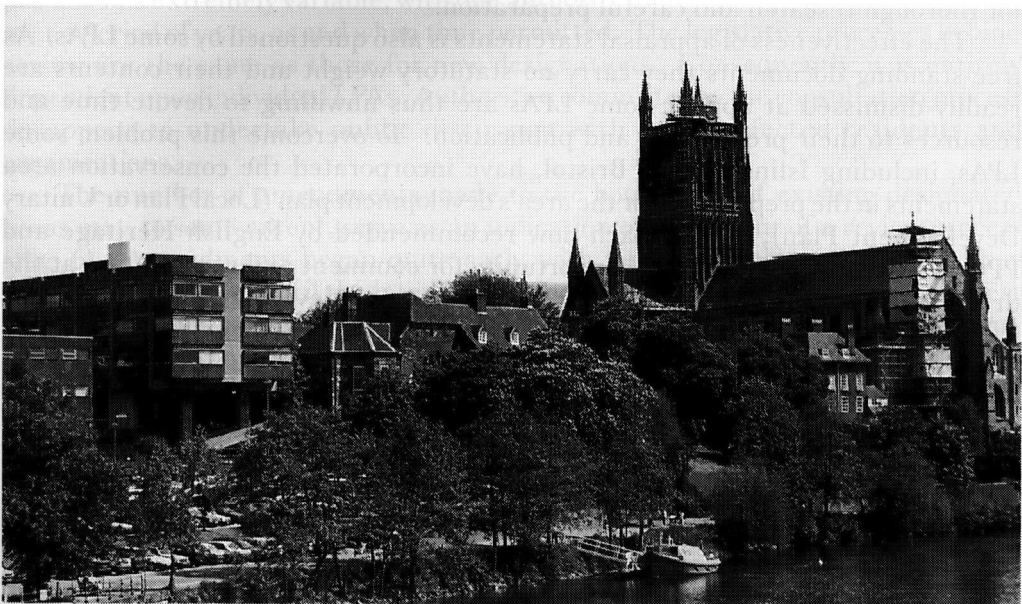


Fig. 5

Worcester – part of the Riverside conservation area in the heart of the city, protecting the riverside landscape

of such reports have raised concern in the professional planning press.²⁸ A survey found no recent examples of inadequate short reports, although extensive consultations suggested that these do still exist, especially for designations which relate to extensions of areas.²⁹ There is, however, a wide range of committee reports which examine the issues in some detail.

It is clear that quality, not quantity, is important in these documents. They are a significant stage in policy formulation. It is unlikely that the reported two-line committee report would be sufficient in any circumstances, but acceptable reports may be produced ranging from a few paragraphs to a dozen pages, depending upon the size and complexity of the area concerned. Nevertheless, with Morton suggesting that his extensive professional practice and academic research show that specific character statements or appraisals only exist for about 10% of the UK's 9,000-plus conservation areas,³⁰ the designation report is clearly important. In many cases, it may be the only written record which an LPA could use in policy-making, development control decision-making, appeals and court action which may explicitly refer to 'character' and/or 'appearance'.

Criticisms of character appraisals have come from LPAs themselves. These focus on their providing 'ammunition' for developers in cases of appeal. If statements omit an element of the character of an area, then an LPA's case is weakened. Costs may be awarded against an LPA losing even part of an appeal. The incidence of such challenges actually occurring, rather than being feared or threatened, is as yet unknown. However, possible challenge strengthens the case for thorough research and careful preparation.

The effectiveness of appraisal statements is also questioned by some LPAs. As free-standing documents they carry no statutory weight and their contents are readily dismissed at appeal; some LPAs are thus unwilling to devote time and resources to their preparation and publication. To overcome this problem some LPAs, including Islington and Bristol, have incorporated the conservation area statements in the preparation for the area's development plan (Local Plan or Unitary Development Plan), an approach now recommended by English Heritage and PPG15.³¹ This has given ample opportunity for comment and consultation at the draft stage and, given the increasing primacy of development plans,³² has strengthened the ability of these authorities to utilise these studies effectively. There is increasing evidence that Inspectors at appeal place considerable weight on such appraisals, which might be contained as Supplementary Planning Guidance to the Plan itself, as Bristol has done.

DESIGNATION REVIEWS

The formal and regular reassessment of designations, whether in terms of reviewing character change brought about by continuing development, or to review boundaries, is not particularly common. The legislation does require review, but only 'from time to time'. None of the LPAs responding to Jones and Larkham's survey makes annual reviews of conservation areas, with only 8% having any set time period within which to reassess each area. The vast majority are 'reassessed as and when

necessary' or when resources are made available. This non-committal response accounts for over three-quarters of responding LPAs.³³

Many LPAs have large numbers of conservation areas, differing greatly in character and development pressure. Such LPAs had insufficient resources to review each area within a set period of time, and instead relied on *ad hoc* reviews or would review an entire area when a particular issue arose in, or even adjoining, it. Some LPAs are, however, being more conscientious and systematic. For example, Stratford upon Avon, with over eighty areas, hopes to review ten areas per year, although these are carried out in batches by consultants after a competitive tendering process.³⁴ It could be argued that the use of a range of consultants, and seeking low tenders, may lead to a diverse range of survey approaches and thus different influences on review decision-making.

One in nine responding LPAs have never reassessed their areas. This is more common in the most rural areas, including 27% of Welsh authorities and 23% of non-metropolitan districts in the north-west. None of these LPAs is part of a city or based around a major town. All describe themselves as rural or mostly rural.

Local authorities suggest that reviews either result in adjusting boundaries (almost always an extension), comprehensive additions of streets or quarters, or occasionally result in no change being thought necessary. Of the LPAs interviewed who had undertaken reviews, all either had made, or were in the process of making, additional designations. Two had used students on placement to undertake comprehensive area surveys and propose boundaries. The duration of the review process was extremely variable, with one authority undertaking reviews continually over a period of years, as and when time permitted. The legislative processes behind review are the same as those for new designations. Consequently, it is entirely dependent upon individual LPAs. Authorities committed to the consultation process do appear to undertake public discussion with newly affected residents and organisations.

The number of amendments made to the boundaries of existing designated areas may, to some extent, serve as an indication of the extent of a review process (Fig. 6). Amendments began quite early, with a small number in 1971-2. They rose at a steady pace until the late 1980s, by which time the crude numbers suggest that perhaps 800, or a little over 10%, had been amended. In 1988, amendments rose significantly, and have continued at a higher rate to the present; showing a very similar pattern to the rate of new designations. Even so, just over 2,000 amendments have been made to the 8,300+ areas existing.

Although reviews of designated areas and, indeed, the most recent new designations, are incorporating a new variety of townscapes, it is inevitable that further regular reviews will be required to incorporate selected post-war townscapes or localities which are the subject of new detailed study.

In a comprehensive review of several village areas for the Malvern Hills District Council,³⁵ it was noted that information accompanying early designations 'lacked clarity and offer[ed] no clue as to why certain areas of land had been included'. Some areas had suffered from nondescript speculative housing estates and also

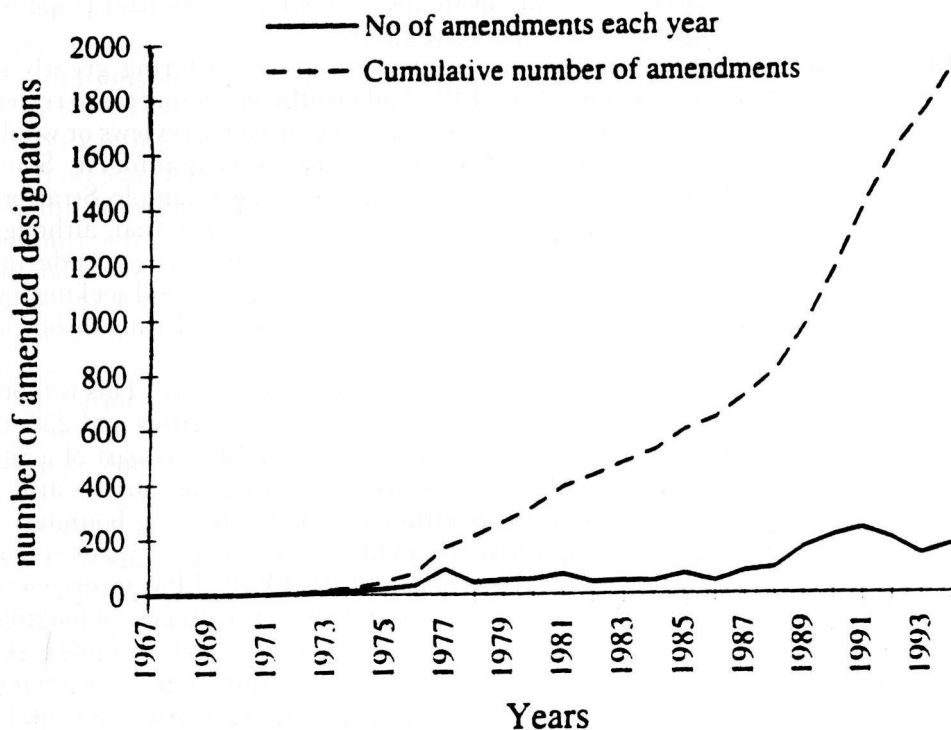


Fig. 6
Number of conservation area amendments, England, 1967-94
(English Heritage data).

included large fields which did not contribute to the setting of the villages. Boundaries were revised to remove these anomalies; particularly where trees could be protected with Tree Preservation Orders³⁶ and where other forms of designation would protect the open countryside:

The public reaction to this review process varied between complete indifference on a small number of occasions to a hostile public meeting at others. It would appear from these meetings that the concern of most members of the public related to the status or property value of the houses being included within the conservation area rather than any related concern for the wider environment. This was particularly relevant to areas where new speculative development had intruded into historic areas and our proposal was to restrict or cancel the designation because the area had lost the special interest which led to its original designation.³⁷

FUNDING

Funding for conservation and/or enhancement within designated areas has always been problematic and limited. A parliamentary question in 1989 revealed that

English Heritage's spending per head of population amounted to only £1.42 for 1987, £1.50 for 1988 and £1.65 for 1989.³⁸ Section 10 of the 1972 Town and Country Planning (Amendment) Act introduced grants for those conservation areas designated as 'outstanding'. However, the method of designation of an area as 'outstanding' was not made explicit, and this criterion was abandoned in 1980. These Section 10 (now Section 77 of the 1990 Act) grants have usually been used to fund 25% of the costs of major restoration projects, with the average grant in 1986-7 being £7,093, and only 544 grants being made.³⁹ The 1972 Act stressed the policy that 'conservation should always where possible be carried out on a self-financing basis, particularly by realising the enhanced value of improved property values'.⁴⁰ How conservation could be self-financing, particularly with regard to area-based conservation action, was not made clear. A particular disadvantage of Section 10/77 grants is that they are administered by English Heritage: this is costly and slow, and small applications are not welcomed.⁴¹ In a small number of cases, English Heritage has awarded 'agency status' to LPAs, such as Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council, which has significantly improved speed, efficiency and cost of handling of all conservation grant procedures.⁴²

The use of Town Schemes in funding repairs to, or restorations of, historic buildings in conservation areas increased in popularity through the 1980s. The limited availability of grants from both local and central government has led, in the majority of cases, to a high take-up rate but the sums involved were modest, the schemes funded were small, and much often rested on the quality of the local authority staff involved.⁴³ Indeed, the aim of Town Scheme grants was generally to aid more minor repairs than the Section 10/77 grant regime. Some LPAs found Town Schemes so attractive that they ceased applying for Section 10/77 grants. In Bath, for example, the Town Scheme has funded 40% grants towards major stone repair and restoration projects, and is seen as having considerable financial and administrative advantages.⁴⁴

The 'barns and walls' conservation area at Upper Swaledale and Arkengarthdale, despite its rural nature, also has a Town Scheme. Its budget was £126,000 in 1992/3 and, by 1993, 116 barns and over 4.5km of dry-stone walls had received financial assistance. The farmhouses within the designated boundary are not eligible for Town Scheme assistance. The Settle-Carlisle Railway area has also been recommended for a Town Scheme but, as this area was a joint designation by several authorities, there have been some administrative and financial problems.

The perceived advantage of Town Schemes has been that, as the LPA had to match the grant from English Heritage, it promoted a conservation-consciousness in the LPAs concerned. The schemes could also stimulate renewed interest in vacant or under-used buildings, and promote investment in run-down areas.⁴⁵ A major problem is that Town Schemes have operated in a relatively small number of conservation areas; a percentage that has decreased as the number of designations rises.

In October 1992, English Heritage launched a new funding strategy for conservation which proposed targeting funds on a small number of areas to achieve

greater impact than the existing Town Schemes provided.⁴⁶ The new Conservation Area Partnership (CAP) schemes involved agreements with the LPA to secure greater input and local financial commitment. Jocelyn Stevens, Chairman of English Heritage, noted that 191 applications were received from 128 LPAs in 1994, the first full year of the scheme, instead of the expected ninety or so; and that many of these were from LPAs with which English Heritage had not previously worked in partnership.⁴⁷ English Heritage stated that

around £11M is now being allocated to Conservation Area Partnerships in all areas of the country. This sum is more than double the sum which we have traditionally put into the 300 or so Town Schemes ... and our whole approach in developing the Conservation Area Partnerships has been to make our ability to respond to specific problems ... more flexible and cooperative with other initiatives which take place ... We are already winding down our involvement in Town Schemes as some of them come to the end of their life, and others, where there is still work to do, are converted into new Partnership schemes.⁴⁸

However, there are problems in that the budgets of some LPAs - and of English Heritage - have cut, rather than increased, funding for conservation during the current depression. Other problems may arise if the take-up of grants is low during the target period: this was identified by the consultants Gillespies for the pilot CAP project in Hastings Old Town, and there is a 'crucial uncertainty which hangs over any environmental improvements that depend on action by individual property owners: they may not take up the grant offers available, or at least not in the timescale envisaged'.⁴⁹

The continuing rise in the number of conservation areas suggests that, although they do not all require the same investment in maintenance or enhancement, funding from central government is ever more inadequate. The CAPs scheme is a move towards even more selective funding in an attempt to make effective impacts on at least some areas.

ENHANCEMENT

The formal aims of UK conservation, as embodied in the legislation, place considerable weight on the value of 'enhancement'. Indeed, under Section 71 of the 1990 Act, LPAs are now required to prepare proposals for the enhancement of each conservation area. The wide variety of environmental enhancement schemes now existing are usually highly localised and often do not result from co-ordinated enhancement proposals following from the protection of areas through designation.

Yet, although this legislative emphasis upon enhancement does explicitly recognise that designated areas can and should change, and should not be 'preserved in aspic', the direction of that change is problematic. Enhancement is another legislative term never defined in statute. It is 'a wildly indefinite term'.⁵⁰ Guidance does suggest that enhancement appropriately could include the removal of all that currently harms the character of the area and the promotion of positive improvements.⁵¹ Such approaches raise the question of whether enhancement is *de facto* changing the character or appearance of areas, or merely reinforcing existing characteristics. In either case, one should know exactly what the character and

appearance of a given area are, which strengthens the requirement for detailed character appraisals (see above).

Yet there have been several critiques over what LPAs are actually doing under the label of 'enhancement'. Even in 1971, the urban designer Gordon Cullen noted the proliferation 'of decoration using bollards and cobbles'.⁵² A decade later, Oliver suggested that the manner in which small-scale streetscape enhancements were being carried out in the 1970s was destroying individual character and place-identity by promoting a form of nationwide anonymity and uniformity.⁵³ Another decade on, Booth suggested that early enhancement schemes could be seen as positive, in that they took steps to remove unsightly items which detracted from the appearance of areas; particularly overhead power and telephone wires and street sign clutter. More recent schemes, he contends, add new and alien elements, such as 'floorscape enhancements' using inappropriate materials such as coloured block pavers in herringbone pattern and the proliferation of 'heritage street furniture', purchased from catalogues, not specific to the area, and appearing throughout the country's historic (and other) towns.⁵⁴ From an urban design perspective, Montgomery criticises this as being merely 'bland "mail order" street furniture'.⁵⁵

A rare deliberate attempt to move away from standard cast-iron 'heritage furniture' was made in Derby Street, Leek, in July 1995. This enhancement scheme used sixteen hand-carved oak bollards, gritstone horse troughs as planters, and brightly-painted benches. Yet, overall, it seems, as Gamston noted over two decades ago, that there are 'evident dangers in the idea of enhancement becoming too closely associated with our own culture-bound notions of "prettification"'.⁵⁶

Recent guidance from English Heritage reinforces Booth's message to do less but to do it better.⁵⁷ Vallis⁵⁸ and others also note with regret a growing tendency for use of the term 'enhance by contrast', particularly relating to the insertion of new, large-scale developments, usually of alien style and materials.

In order to direct 'enhancement' towards the definition of 'strengthening existing qualities', Booth has suggested several guidelines to avoid the insidious mediocre schemes of recent years. These include:

- selection of natural, not imitation, materials;
- departing as little as possible from originals;
- limiting the range of materials to those functionally necessary;
- observing local detail in surfaces and in street furniture;
- and, above all, to resist gilding the lily.⁵⁹

Regardless of the above debate, LPAs often carry out a wide variety of 'enhancement schemes'. In this way they can be seen both to be discharging their statutory duties to conservation areas, and also to be actively managing processes of change. Yet not all schemes are initiated or wholly funded by the LPA. Jones and Larkham, from their survey of LPAs, illustrate the variety of schemes and the agents involved.⁶⁰ The most common form of enhancement scheme by far, with over 1,000 schemes reported, is pedestrianisation (Fig. 7). The success and failures of pedestrianisation have been well documented in the planning press: issues of planning and design are particularly important. In planning, the resolution of

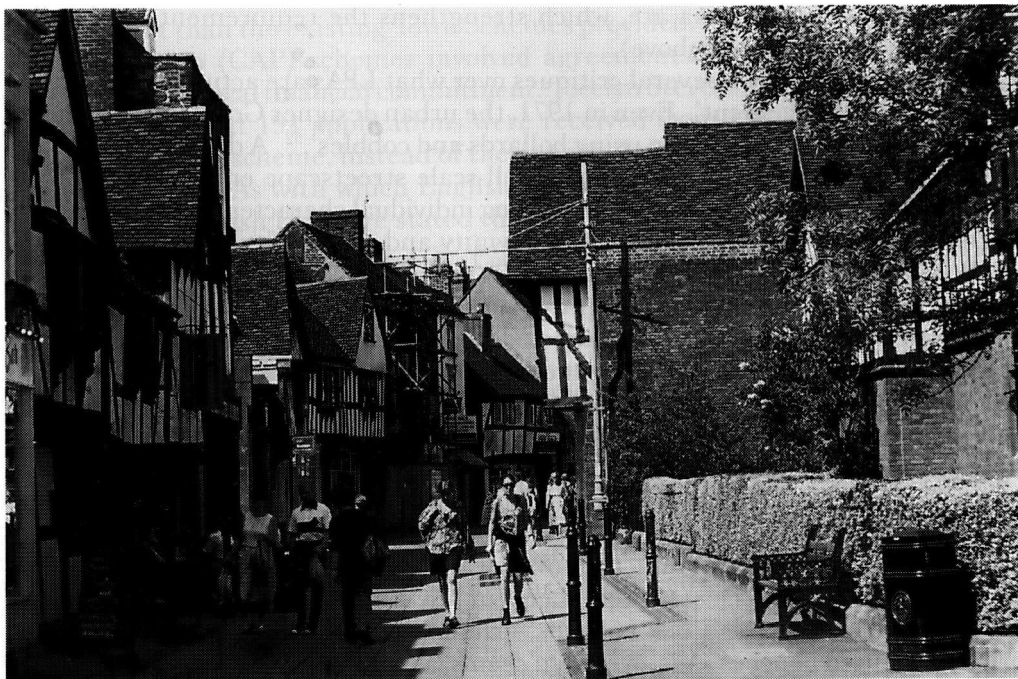


Fig. 7

Pedestrianisation, Worcester: note the 'heritage' street furniture.

pedestrian/vehicular conflict often takes priority over the character and appearance of the area. In design, the traditional patterns and proportions of building : pavement : street : pavement : building have often given way to an undifferentiated sea of paving stretching from wall to wall. Falk, an active consultant and researcher on urban regeneration schemes, caustically notes that 'solving the problem of unsuccessful public places by eliminating traffic is not the answer'.⁶¹ Nevertheless, pedestrianisation remains a very popular strategy.

ATTITUDES OF RESIDENTS

Relatively little academic research has been carried out to ascertain the attitudes of residents towards conservation area designation and to the restrictions which the additional planning powers impose. Instead there is more anecdotal evidence of the benefits, particularly in terms of increased status or property values (as is discussed elsewhere).

However, the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham has carried out a survey of residents, published in 1984 and covering 584 properties in six designated areas (a sample response rate of 51.8%).⁶² Several findings are of interest.

First, a considerable number of residents was unaware that they lived within a conservation area. In two areas, designated less than four years before the survey,

only 25% of respondents were aware of this.

Secondly, significantly more residents in one of the areas (comprising late-1920s cottage-style municipal terraces) considered that picture windows, modern porches, metal window frames, etc. improved the appearance of the area: 'Therefore the views of many residents are directly opposed to those of the Council. As more tenants buy their homes this conflict will increase'.⁶³ In the other five areas, residents' views were more in line with those of the LPA, except that rear extensions were generally not a matter of concern.

Thirdly, there was widespread support for the imposition of additional controls via the Article 4 system, which would restrict the usual rights to make certain alterations without the need for specific planning permission. In particular, control of roofs, gables and dormers, painting of brickwork, front windows, porches, and the paving of front gardens for car-parking was mentioned.

The survey's findings did, however, vary considerably from one area to another. The areas were of different socio-economic and physical characteristics, and had been designated at different times. In particular, there were differences in the degrees to which owner-occupiers and tenants (both council and private) were aware of the advantages and disadvantages of area designation. This highlights the fact that residents of conservation areas cannot be considered as a homogeneous group.

The survey findings on knowledge of living within a conservation area were countered by a survey asking the same question of residents of two planned nineteenth-century villages in Gloucestershire.⁶⁴ Here, 70% of respondents were aware of designation but only 23% were aware of the extent of the boundary. Again, this varied considerably between the two villages, and between those living within the designated area and those outside it but within the village.

These few surveys suggest that residents are generally under-informed about even the significant facts of designation and boundaries, let alone the nature and extent of additional planning controls. Several LPAs have attempted to address this through programmes of information and education. Hove Borough Council spends

a great deal of time and effort on education through leaflets and information in the local press. However, populations come and go, and residents move house. Most of the damage which is done to conservation areas is done when people move in, and quite often they are completely oblivious to the standards of development control which are required.⁶⁵

Hove has been a leader in campaigns of the English Historic Towns Forum, and has won awards for its design guidance and information booklets. Bradford Metropolitan Borough Council has instituted a comprehensive programme of distributing door-to-door explanatory leaflets and newsletters several times each year in the Saltaire conservation area. However, on comparing successive photographic surveys of this area, dozens of infringements of its Article 4 Direction can be found each year. Most are relatively minor, and most residents plead ignorance of the restrictions.⁶⁶

CONCLUSIONS

A range of issues arising from three decades of operating the UK's system of conservation areas has been raised in this review. Although, as was stated from the outset, the conservation area concept has received widespread support, a number of lessons can still be learned for the continued operation of the system:

1. The local level of operation remains one of the enduring strengths of the system. The ability to react quickly to threats has been beneficial, as has the closeness of the decision-makers to the electorate.
2. It is quite possible that the large numbers of areas reflect different conditions on the ground as well as different motives for justification. The increasing range of types of area suggests that this could receive explicit recognition; with, for example, 'preservation areas' such as the small Ashleigh Road in Solihull needing a very different approach and policy regime to the varied giant Norwich area. Areas of potential, such as Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter, require far more expertise and investment. The 'outstanding' categorisation briefly used in the UK was a crude form of differentiation, discriminatory in its application; what may be more beneficial is a categorisation based on character and need.
3. It seems clear that grant regimes which demand explicit commitment from the LPA, but which also delegate administration to the LPA, are more efficient, quicker in reaching decisions and cost-effective. It is too soon fully to evaluate English Heritage's new Partnership scheme, but this may indicate the direction for funding. However, its competitive nature, and the waste of resources expended by unsuccessful competitors, may be an issue.
4. There is still some concern that conservation area planning, designation and review should not be wholly tied to the plan-making process, as the DoE had proposed in 1989. The plan-making process is, clearly, increasingly widely used as a stimulus for designation and amendment, and this can produce anomalous and regular peaks in designations at the local level. However, it is clear that actual designations and other changes do result from a separate decision-making process in the majority of cases. The plan-making process is simply used as a convenient vehicle for local surveys and consultation, thus saving resources.
5. It is increasingly recognised, particularly following Morton's commentaries, that accurate and appropriate character appraisals are a *sine qua non* of good conservation area planning. Policy-making and development-control decisions may hinge upon such studies, most particularly if cases are taken to appeal or the courts.
6. Appropriate policies should be developed which are area-specific (if not site-specific), and not merely derived largely from the wording of the enabling legislation. If such policies are embedded in the development plan at an early stage, for example as supplementary planning guidance, considerable weight may be placed upon them at appeal.
7. LPAs should monitor the nature and rate of changes within their designated areas more closely. This suggests a form of monitoring in which the development

control process regularly supplies data; rather than reviews at (possibly) lengthy intervals. Continued development, of whatever kind, may mean that area character changes. The conservation-worthy qualities of areas may change, or even vanish, despite the efforts of the LPA. In these cases, LPAs should be prepared to take the step of de-designation, despite its potential unpopularity.

8. An interesting comment reported by several LPAs is that early designation committee reports suggested that designation had no financial implications for the LPA. Increasingly, guidance and practice suggest that this cannot now be the case, and that there can be significant implications in terms of finance, officer time, etc. The different system in Northern Ireland, whereby the DoE(NI) does not make designations unless policies and funding are in place, has some strengths. Those LPAs which may have been ready to make designations on the basis of little or no financial implications may not be so ready when the costs are pointed out to them. They will also have to bear the costs of earlier designations.

Three decades of operating the UK conservation area system suggest that this is a strong and popular planning concept, and it is likely to continue. Designations will continue; and new and different types of area will be designated. It is most likely that minor amendments will be made to the system. It is far from perfect, but has also suffered far less adverse criticism than have other area-based conservation systems.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The information on which this review is based is taken from a decade of conservation research. In particular, the influence of Dr Andrew Jones, co-author of a study of conservation areas carried out for the RTPI, is acknowledged; considerable detailed information has also been generously given by conservation officers and other local authority staff, some of which is quoted here.
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