Woburn Conservation Area

Introduction 19 March 2008

Woburn Conservation Area was designated on 30 April 1973. This document assesses the setting, character and appearance of the conservation area. Areas where enhancement opportunities exist are also identified.
Summary

The special interest that justifies designation of the Woburn Conservation Area derives from a number of architectural, historic and environmental factors, including:

- Small settlement with Saxon origins, which grew in association with the foundation of the Abbey in the 12th century, and subsequently through the cultivation of Woburn Abbey as the seat of the Earls (subsequently Dukes) of Bedford through the 16th and 17th centuries;
- An estate village for Woburn Abbey; many of the buildings in the village were erected by the Dukes of Bedford, including the Church of St Mary (grade II*) and numerous cottages for agricultural labourers;
- Rural setting surrounded by woodland, open fields, and Woburn Park (a grade I listed registered park and garden of outstanding interest and national importance);
- An area containing many buildings of architectural and historic interest, a high proportion of which are listed buildings (9 grade II*, 54 grade II) and many others which make a positive contribution to the area’s historic character and appearance;
- Building stock reflects the growth of the settlement during the 18th and early 19th centuries as an important point on the stagecoach route, for example a large number of historic inn buildings with coach entrances;
- Settlement arranged along linear routes which meet at a crossroads;
- Imposing landmark buildings: Old Church of St Mary (grade II*); Town Hall (grade II); Church of St Mary (grade II*);
- Building stock predominantly of 18th century date, with some refronting of earlier buildings;
- 19th and early 20th century cottages for the Bedford Estate in the plain vernacular manner;
- Predominance of high quality red brickwork, laid in a variety of brick bonds; use of locally distinctive ironstone in key buildings;
- ‘Green corridor’ created by hedges, front gardens, grass verges and mature trees along Leighton Street and Park Street;
- Bedford Street, High Street, and George Street characterised by a continuous building line, set at back-of-pavement;
- Important survival of historic street surfaces: cobbles and granite kerbs.

Location and setting

Location, landscape setting and geology

The village of Woburn lies 7km north-east of Leighton Buzzard, 15km south-east of central Milton Keynes and 22km south-west of the county town of Bedford. London is now only 80km away on the M1. The settlement grew up around the crossroads. The current principal route through the settlement is the A4012/A507 Hockliffe to Ridgmont road.

Woburn lies on the Greensand Ridge escarpment, which comprises low, well-wooded, hills, lying to the south of the valley of the Great Ouse. The sandstone was quarried for building stone and a number of examples of the use of this ironstone are seen within the conservation area. However, bricks from the local clays are the predominant building material.
Historic development

History of the conservation area

The earliest known reference to Woburn is a document of 969 in which King Edgar grants Aspley to his thegn Alfworld and that part of the boundary was up to the little knoll, thence to the apple tree where three land boundaries meet, of the men of Woburn, of the men of Wavendon, of the men of Aspley... ‘Woburne’ was recorded in the Domesday Book 1086; the name is of Saxon derivation, meaning crooked stream.

In 1145 Hugh de Bolebec founded the Abbey of St Mary at Woburn and invited the Cistercian Order of monks at Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire to make a foundation on his land. The Abbey was located a short distance from the hamlet of Woburn and the nearby parish church of Birchmore. Woburn Abbey has had an influence on the settlement of Woburn since this date.

In 1547 Woburn Abbey and its estates were bequeathed to Sir John Russell of Chenies (Buckinghamshire) who later became the first Earl of Bedford. The 4th Earl established Woburn as the principal family seat in 1619 and began the extension and adaptation of the ecclesiastical buildings and the surrounding grounds. In 1694 the family received the ducal title. The history of Woburn Abbey is well documented elsewhere.

The parish church for Woburn was originally at Birchmore, but from 1242 the settlement had its own chapel-of-ease. The estate church was built on a new plot on Park Street in 1868.

In 1846, with the arrival of the railway in Woburn Sands, much of the commercial and through traffic ceased.

Three large fires have destroyed swathes of the settlement over the centuries: in 1595 130 houses were destroyed; in 1645 the Royalists fired the town; and in 1724 fire brought widespread destruction. Following this third fire the village was largely rebuilt by the 4th Duke of Bedford. Many of the buildings in Woburn were constructed by the Bedford Estate in the 18th and 19th centuries; the cottages erected for the agricultural labourers are a characteristic built form.

Character

Buildings in the conservation area are predominantly in residential use. The area surrounding the Market Place and along High Street contains a number of businesses: these are a combination of shops, restaurants, and offices. These together with the surviving historic inns, such as The Inn at Woburn, contribute to a vibrant village core, serving the local community and visitors alike. The Town Hall now contains an antique centre. Woburn Heritage Centre occupies Old St Mary’s Church. Woburn Lower School and the Church of St Mary’s are important centres for the village. Public recreational space within the village is restricted to the allotments on Caswell Lane, but Woburn Park and the network of public footpaths which traverse the surrounding countryside provide opportunities for leisure. While Woburn Abbey and the surrounding parkland and gardens lie outside of the conservation area, the Abbey
and Woburn Safari Park are tourist attractions which bring large numbers of visitors to the area.

Woburn has a quiet semi-rural atmosphere, particularly on the back lanes, however there is a busy traffic presence on the four principal routes that connect at the busy central crossroad junction. A large number of heavy goods vehicles pass through the village and these can feel particularly threatening in the locations where the pavements are narrowest. On part of Bedford Street a long row of bollards have been introduced to protect pedestrians.

The conservation area has an enclosed character, with many of the buildings arranged to form almost continuous linked buildings grouped at back-of-pavement line. Long views along the street are restricted by the meandering course of the historic throughfares and instead the streetscene is characterised by short views terminated by single structures or groups of buildings. The widening of the streets at the Market Place does not dilute this sense of enclosure, as the building height increases.

There are a number of instances where open space interrupts the sense of enclosure, particularly in the churchyards of the Old Church of St Mary, Bedford Street and the Church of St Mary, Park Street. These spaces form an appropriate setting to these landmark buildings and contribute an important element of visual surprise and green open space into the otherwise built-up historic townscape. Development along the streets becomes more permeable moving away from the village centre, with detached or small groups of buildings set in gardens, allowing views through to the surrounding countryside and across Woburn Park. With this change in character, boundary treatments to plots begin to make an important contribution to the streetscene: there is an attractive brick wall, partly on a base of ironstone, running along the east side of George Street and enclosing the grounds of Bedford House; hedges enclose the gardens of many of the estate cottages on Leighton Street.

Appearance

Buildings in the conservation area date from two principal phases of construction: early 18th century, in some instances developed around an earlier core; and 19th century. Many of the 19th century buildings were erected by the Bedford Estate; the Dukes of Bedford constructed around 500 cottages in the locality between the late 1840s and World War I.

Red brick is the prevalent visible historic building material, although many of the 18th century and earlier structures are of timber-framed construction. Roofs are of plain clay tiles, although these have been regrettably gradually lost to replacement concrete tiles. Woburn is notable for the high quality of the brickwork; Flemish bond is prevalent, with flared headers used on some buildings to add decorative interest, while there are also examples of English bond and the costly display of header bond. Fine rubbed and gauged brickwork is visible above many of the window heads, while on other buildings such gauged brickwork articulates elevations with pilasters, cornices and aprons below the windows, for example on nos. 11 and 12 Market Place. Staunton House (nos. 2-8 and nos. 9-18 Bedford Street) are key gateway buildings at the northern entrance to the conservation area; these 19th century former almshouses are notable for the use of yellow brick and the decorative display of Jacobethan detailing. Built in 1850 by the 7th Duke of Bedford, the almshouses had been founded by Sir Francis Staunton in his will in 1635. The use of brick creates a harmonious, unified appearance to the streetscene, which could be disrupted if the brickwork is painted or rendered. However, there are a few examples of historic stucco render in the conservation area, such as Lion Lodge on Park Street.

Markets Place

Staunton House, Bedford Street
Variety is introduced to the conservation area in the use of stone for a number of civic and religious buildings. Locally quarried ironstone is visible at the Old Church of St Mary (now the Woburn Heritage Centre and Tourist Information), the associated boundary walls, and Woburn Lower School. Ashlar dressings are employed to add crisp detail, as also on some of the brick buildings, such as the Town Hall. The Church of St Mary stands as a distinctly grand statement in ashlar, which reinforces its presence on Park Street, set in a large churchyard, with clear views across the space opened up by the ha-ha.

Surfaces of the public realm comprise a palette of historic and modern materials. Pavements are generally of tarmac although textural interest is provided by bands of cobbles set at the back of the pavement, abutting the buildings, particularly on High Street, Bedford Street and George Street. Where pavements widen large expanses of cobbles are used to surface the area, such as Market Place, adjacent to the Town Hall. These surfaces require maintenance in places, but every effort should be made to retain the irregularity of textures created by groupings of variously sized cobbles. Kerbs are predominantly of granite. The western approach to the conservation area is more rural, with a single narrow pavement and a hedge-lined verge.

Items in the public realm are predominantly modern, but utilise high quality materials and a traditional design, to sit comfortably within the streetscene. A number of cast iron benches with slatted timber seats were introduced in 2001. There is a grade II listed K6 type telephone box adjacent to the Town Hall. An unusual post box is set into the wall at nos. 2-4 Bedford Street. This takes the form of a ‘Ludlow’ letter box, a form of box introduced at sub-post offices, and paid for by the Post Office from 1895, characterised by an enamel plate bearing the words POST OFFICE LETTER BOX.

High Street, Bedford Street and George Street

These streets connect to form a north-south spine route through the settlement; the architectural and historic importance of these streets is demonstrated by the fact that nearly every building is a listed structure.

The streets are bound by tight-knit development set at back-of-pavement line, which enclose views through the village. These built-up near-continuous frontages frame views along the street, and in many instances terminate a view where the street turns. These deflected views of short sections of townscape introduce an unfolding panorama of visual interest with movement through the village. Attractive glimpses through to the intimate courtyards and gardens at the rear of plots are obtained through the numerous former carriage arches. Woburn became an important staging post on a countrywide network and at its peak had around 30 inns; the road from Hockliffe to Woburn was turnpiked in 1706 and this was extended to Woburn Sands in 1727. At the junction of High Street and George Street, the road widens out at a crossroads, with the principal route to Leighton Buzzard running to the west. This widening of the street encompasses the cobbled Market Place, ‘The Pitchings’, and two areas of open green space; one of these gardens contains the War Memorial erected in 1920, of a Portland stone cross mounted with a bronze sword.

The Market Place is framed by imposing 18th century terraced buildings, which line the southern end of High Street, as it flares onto the Market Place. These early 18th century buildings are of three- and four-storeys in height, and of individual design, but the use of red brick and an underlying use of the Classical language creates a unified streetscene. This is enhanced by the decorative fenestration on a number of the buildings and the numerous historic timber shopfronts. Nos. 4-7 Market Place (grade II*) features two full-height canted bays.
articulated by a different window design at each level; the windows all feature Gothick pointed-arch glazing bars. No. 19 Market Place (grade II*), was reworked in 1820 for the 6th Duke of Bedford by George Maddocks, who designed new shop windows for the draper then occupying the building; the projecting bowed shopfront occupies the full ground floor, and with its elaborate glazing patterns, adds an element of decorative delight to views of this part of the village.

The Town Hall is a key landmark building located at the centre of the conservation area. Its distinctive Jacobethan style, to a design of 1830 by Edward Blore, is an eyecatcher, particularly in the immediate views to the Market Place from the east and west. A plaque on the south elevation reads “Built by John VI Duke of Bedford 1830. Restored by Hastings IX Duke of Bedford 1884. Enlarged by Herbrand XI Duke of Bedford 1912.”

The Woburn Heritage Centre, at the Old Church of St Mary’s (grade II*), is one of the key focal buildings on Bedford Street. The spire with its crocketed pinnacles is a distinctive landmark, visible from many points within the conservation area, and also on approach to the village, such as along the A5130 from the north. This former parish church has late medieval origins. It was remodeled as a mortuary chapel, between 1865-8, when a new parish church was erected on Park Street. The work to the old church, for the 8th Duke of Bedford, was executed to the designs of Henry Chutton, although the tower had been reworked in 1830 by Edward Blore. The building is a rare example of the use of ironstone in the village; the dressings are of limestone. The building was given to the village by the Marquess of Tavistock in the late 1970s. After the erection of the new parish church on Park Street, a large villa of 1864 designed by Edward Blore, at the corner of Bedford Street and Crawley Road became the Vicarage, and it remained in this use until 1960. The Old Vicarage is set within a large plot and heavily screened by trees; there are clear views from Crawley Road of the elaborate Jacobethan style building.

Immediately to the north of the Old Church of St Mary’s lies Woburn Lower School, which has been the village school continuously from 1582. It was founded by Francis Earl of Bedford. Girls were accepted to the school from 1825. The coursed ironstone building with ashlar dressings, remodeled by Edward Blore circa 1830, visually complements the adjacent former church. The former church, the school, and the mid-18th century The Old Parsonage (grade II*) form an important group surrounding part of the churchyard. This attractive grassed area is contained by an ironstone wall, with gatepiers of clunch, erected circa 1830 by Edward Blore. The churchyard stretched eastwards behind the Woburn Heritage Centre and contains many interesting monuments and a number of mature specimen trees. Wide views extend across the open countryside beyond.

**Park Street**

Park Street comprises part of the historic route between Woburn and Froxfield; this public route now bisects Woburn Park. It has a spacious, green character formed by the wide roadway which is bordered by deep grass verges. A number of mature trees are irregularly placed along the route. The street is little encumbered by built development, and has a character more directly allied with the formal parkland to the east.

The separation between the village realm and that of Woburn Park is marked by a gate lodge and a pair of gatepiers. A cattle grid provides an indication of the parkland beyond, home to various species of deer. Lion Lodge is a late 18th century stucco lodge, probably for Francis 5th Duke of Bedford. The adjacent pair of 18th century ashlar gatepiers (individually listed grade II*) are of vermiculated rustication beneath a Greek revival entablature. A recumbent lion surmounts each pier, facing inwards across the roadway. This entranceway provides an
important focal point in views from the village centre eastwards, and provides a key visual reminder of the grandeur of Woburn Abbey beyond.

![Church of St Mary, Park Street – a dominant landmark](image)

The principal feature of Park Street is the Church of St Mary (grade II*); the Bedford Estate church located between the village and Woburn Park. The building is set back a substantial distance from the linear route of the street, and is well-screened by groups of mature yew trees around each entranceway. The opening-up of the uninterrupted vista to the church, as the trees clear and the grass verge is cut away to create a ha-ha, introduces a dramatic design set-piece into the conservation area. This Parish Church was commissioned in 1865 by the 8th Duke of Bedford from Henry Clutton. It was completed in 1868 and originally had a 200ft spire, but this was taken down in 1892. The Church is an interpretation of 12th century French style.

The churchyard of St Mary’s is an important area of green open space within the conservation area and makes an important contribution to the setting of the listed building. This green character is enhanced by further open space beyond the conservation area boundary to the open fields to the north and the glimpses through the trees to Woburn Park, to the north east. From Park Street the area of woodland known as the Evergreens is visible, an extensive area of shrubs and rhododendrons, planted in 1743 by the 4th Duke to commemorate the birth of his daughter Caroline. Beyond this lies Lower Drakeloe Pond, part of Humphrey Repton’s early 19th century landscape scheme for the Park.

The western end of Park Street becomes increasingly ‘urban’ in character progressing toward the crossroads and the Market Place. No. 2 Park Street is the only building designed to face the thoroughfare, otherwise the appearance of the townscape at this point is dominated by views to the rear of the buildings on the east side of High Street and George Street. Looking north, from the western end of Park Street, the view encompasses an interesting, multi-layered roofscape arrangement; this comprises the strip development running back along the medieval burgage plots. The view west along Park Street is terminated by the Town Hall.

**Leighton Street**

Leighton Street is the historic route which runs west from the centre of Woburn towards Leighton Buzzard. The street, at the westernmost reaches of the conservation area, has the qualities of a rural lane, but becomes increasingly built up toward the village centre, as the street broadens out to the Market Place. The lane has an open appearance, with houses typically set back from the pavements behind large front gardens. Hedges create a ‘green corridor’ which runs through to the village centre; the hedges provide a unifying link along the street between areas where they bound rural fields, and the stretches where they contain front gardens.

![Leighton Street – Bedford Estate Cottages](image)

Many of the oldest buildings on Leighton Street are those located at the eastern end closest to the historic centre around the crossroads. Most date from the 18th century, some constructed around a 17th century core, and are listed structures. One such building is no. 4 Leighton Street, which displays an elevation of high quality vitrified header bond with red brick dressings. Further east, also on the north side of Leighton Street, nos. 8-8a is an attractive mid-18th century house, now divided into two dwellings, which also displays vitrified brick headers in Flemish bond to create a chequered effect. Opposite nos. 8-8a is The Old Fire Station, which was built by the 12th Duke of Bedford in 1945 and continued to serve the village until the current Fire Station was built on George Street in 1998.

One of the defining characteristics of Leighton Street are the many cottages erected by the Bedford Estate which run along both sides of the street.
Nos. 25-30 Leighton Street, dated 1851, were erected by the 7th Duke. These six cottages comprise a neat terrace set directly onto the pavement, and form an important landmark building at the western entrance to the conservation area. The cottages are constructed from an unusual rat-trap bond, where the bricks are laid on edge, and with cast iron lattice casement windows. These dwellings represent the earliest phase in a building programme initiated by the 7th Duke to house agricultural labourers in comfortable dwellings; the Duke’s plans were published as *Plans and Elevations of cottages for Agricultural Labourers*, London, 1850. From the 1840s onwards the Estate began to place emphasis on utilitarian rather than Picturesque cottages for their labourers, and these were constructed to a high quality. Further terraces of cottages on Leighton Street include: nos. 11-16; nos. 40-45; nos. 46-49; and nos. 50-56. These are all of a distinct vernacular tradition common to many of the cottages erected by the Bedford Estate, but are also distinguishable by cipher on them of a ‘B’, a coronet and the date of the building. These dated cottages range in date from 1846 to 1911.

![Bloomsbury Close](image)

**London End and Duck Lane**

The area encompassing Duck Lane and the land to the west of this, with houses grouped around London End and Bloomsbury Close has an appearance characterised by post-19th century comprehensive redevelopment of the buildings and former historic streets. A number of groupings of residential buildings have been constructed by the Bedford Estate during the 20th century, to provide modern standards of accommodation. Duck Lane is a historic back lane to George Street, cutting through to the Market Place. In the 19th century it was lined by terraced cottages on the west side and a further street, New Street, ran off to the south west. There was also an Independent Chapel and burial ground. The area is now characterised by 20th century red brick detached houses, which have design references to the 18th century Classical tradition. New Street was lost to these developments. An undeveloped back lane has been transformed into London End, and Bloomsbury Close developed on the site of the Woburn Union Workhouse. Such a redevelopment of the area has allowed the new planned development to be laid out like a small ‘garden suburb’, with buildings set in large garden plots, lending a spacious, green, character to the environs. There is little through traffic along London End and it has a tranquil atmosphere.

One of the few surviving historic buildings in this part of the conservation area is the former Wesleyan Methodist Chapel, now converted to a residential dwelling and called ‘The Old Chapel’. The entrance front, which faced Leighton Street, is now concealed by the former fire station building, and the former chapel is now an unexpected discovery on London End. The red brick building is articulated by pilasters and a cornice of yellow brick. The slate roof is decorated with terracotta crested ridge tiles.

Two of the groups of houses on London Road are constructed in the style recognisable as cottages of the Bedford Estate, such as those which are found in number on Leighton Street. One row of four cottages and one pair of cottages are constructed from the distinctive high quality red brickwork, laid in Flemish bond and with fine gauged brickwork above the window heads. The design references the vernacular tradition and the Arts and Crafts idiom, with gabled eaves, hipped roofs, prominent brick chimney stacks and decorative brickwork. A particularly distinctive feature is the string course created with dog-tooth brickwork and the projecting brickwork under the eave, rising from kneelers. These two groups of buildings both present the recognisable date plaque of the Bedford Estate, inscribed 1905.

Further buildings on London End erected by the Bedford Estate include no. 1, no. 10, and nos. 19-23. These are all dated 1901, with a motif applied into the render: a lozenge containing a ‘B’ surmounted by a coronet and with the date below. These buildings are unusual for having a render coat, and are more explicitly in the Arts and Crafts style than other Bedford Estate cottages. The cottages are asymmetrical, and feature projecting gables, prominent chimney stacks, offset entrances, and jettied first floors.
Opportunities for enhancement

Whilst the general appearance and condition of the conservation area is good, there are a number of buildings or areas which detract from the special character.

Opportunities for enhancement are:

- The public conveniences on Duck Lane are set within a poorly maintained plot. This could be enhanced through appropriate landscaping to correspond with the established palette of traditional materials in the village, together with a regular programme of maintenance.
- The area of public pavement to the south of no. 12 George Street is cobbled, but the surface has become overgrown with weeds and requires some patch repairs. The area is protected by cast iron bollards, creating an appearance of ‘dead space’. The introduction of seating or appropriate planting would enhance the streetscene.
- The pavement surrounding the bus shelter on High Street is laid as random broken stone paving. The technique does not reflect the character of the established palette of surfacing materials: cobbles, tarmac and gravel.
- The driveway approach to Marquis Court has parking spaces marked by painted white lines and numbered spaces. Concrete bollards line the pavement. These elements neither reflect nor enhance the character of retained historic surfaces throughout the village, nor high quality modern street furniture.
- Re-introduction of plain clay tiles and natural slate in place of replacement concrete roof tiles; cast iron rainwater goods in place of plastic; lime mortars in place of cement mortar re-pointing; York stone in place of concrete paving.

General Conservation Area Guidance

To maintain the distinctive character of the Woburn Conservation Area it will be necessary to:

1. Retain listed buildings and buildings of local interest. There will be a presumption against the demolition of unlisted buildings, such proposals will only be considered appropriate where the building does not make a positive contribution to the conservation area.

2. Ensure that all new development is sympathetic to the settings of listed buildings and/or the character and appearance of the conservation area in terms of siting, scale, design, materials and detail.

3. Ensure that there is a consistent application of sympathetic, sensitive and detailed development control over shop fronts, alterations, highway works, kerbs, surfaces, paving, all street furniture and lighting schemes.

4. Where necessary, seek to retain and repair important boundary treatments (such as brick or ironstone walls or good hedges) as identified on the Woburn Conservation Area Plan.

5. Where necessary, protect and retain trees, important hedgerows and important green spaces within the conservation area and ensure that, where new development is permitted, proper consideration is given to tree planting and appropriate landscape treatment.