

ASTWICK

CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

21 JANUARY 2009



A conservation area is *an area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*. This document is one of a series of up-to-date conservation area character appraisals published by Mid Bedfordshire District Council.

The purpose of the appraisal is to define which features contribute to the special interest, what is significant and what requires preservation. Opportunities for enhancement are also identified in the appraisal.

**Central
Bedfordshire**

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The Astwick Conservation Area was designated by Bedfordshire County Council in March 1979. This document assesses the setting, character and appearance of the conservation area. It also identifies opportunities for improving the character of the area. The appraisal is, therefore, the basis for the management of the Astwick Conservation Area through the planning system.

2.0 SUMMARY

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

- Small rural hamlet in a wide countryside setting;
- Located on the River Ivel and close to the A1 trunk road;
- Historic settlement recorded in Domesday survey of 1086;
- Evidence of a more extensive deserted mediaeval village;
- Local economy based on agriculture and milling;
- Grade II* Church of St Guthlac is 15th century but on a much older site;
- Fine examples of timber-framed barns;
- Other farm buildings include a granary and a dovecote;
- Bowman's Mill now disused and Taylor's Mill converted to residential;
- Other significant houses include the Rectory and the Bury;
- Important open spaces and tree planting;
- Extensive views to open countryside.

3.0 LOCATION AND SETTING

- 3.1 Astwick lies almost adjacent to the west side of the A1 trunk road and about 8km (5 miles) south of Biggleswade. The county town of Bedford is some 21km (13 miles) to the north east. The village is located on a minor road leading from the A1 to Stotfold and thence to Hitchin.
- 3.2 Astwick is also located on the River Ivel, which has been a factor in its past economy. Underlying the broad valley of the Ivel are Gault clays with pockets of gravels and alluvium. Historically, the clays have been extracted for brick-making and the gravels have been used for road improvements and for building, while the alluvial deposits have provided fertile soils for arable farming.
- 3.3 Following the 18th century enclosures, there was a rationalisation of field patterns into large rectangles to suit the introduction of steam ploughing engines. Recent decades have seen the loss of more hedges to provide the wide open landscapes of a modern mechanised arable economy. This does, however, allow extensive views northwards to the greensand ridge that crosses the middle of Bedfordshire.

- 3.4 The River Ivel is a significant feature of the conservation area providing the power and, therefore, the location for two mills. The rest of the village lies on marginally higher ground.
- 3.5 Astwick Road leads west from the A1 broadly parallel with the river and it then turns sharply south east. The conservation area includes the small hamlet clustered around St Guthlac's Church at the bend in the road. It also includes water meadows to the east and a stretch of the river that takes in the two water mills.



Bowman's Mill

4.0 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

- 4.1 In the middle ages, Astwick was variously referred to as Estwiche, Estewike and Asswyk. Evidently, the derivation comes from 'east' and 'wyke', a winding brook. The village was clearly an established settlement in Saxon times as it is recorded in the Domesday survey of 1086 as a manor held by Hugh de Beauchamp. Significantly, the Domesday Book records that there were two mills in existence even then.
- 4.2 Whether it was due to the Black Death or simply economic downturn, there was a subsequent depopulation of the Astwick area. There is evidence of a deserted mediaeval village and this suggests that what survives today is a fragment.
- 4.3 A lease of 1479 describes the manor house as a substantial household 'with the chambers in the eyr end of the hall, with botry, pantry, kechyn, stabylle, with the chambers above the staybille, the hawkes house, and the garden within the mote on the east side of the hall' as elements not included in the lease. Reference is also made to a 'vinery' and to the growing of walnuts. The manor house, or hall, no longer exists and there is debate as to whether the present moat at Astwick Bury is the same site.



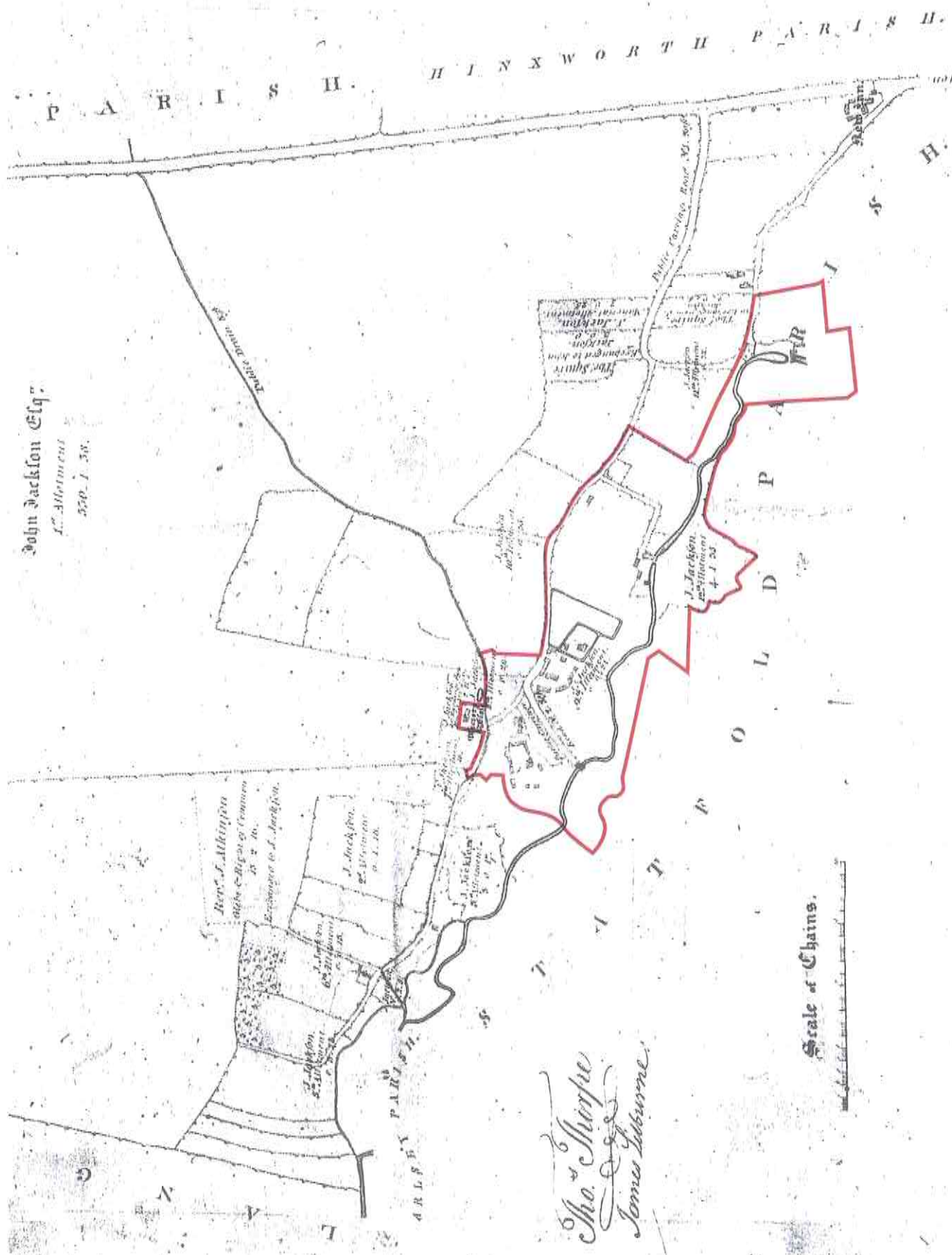
- 4.4 A court held in 1564 declared the village stocks to be in ruin and the inhabitants were ordered to make repairs.
- 4.5 The church is one of eleven dedicated to St Guthlac who lived as a hermit on an island in the fens until his death in 714AD. It is a fragment of a much larger building, which again gives credence to Astwick having once been a more substantial settlement. It appears that the existing west tower was once the centre point of a cruciform plan, and that the existing nave is on the site of the historical chancel. The existing chancel was built out of re-used 15th century masonry.
- 4.6 The great North Road became a turnpike in 1725 providing much better access to markets further afield. This allowed for more intensive agriculture, such as market gardening, which may explain why Astwick has retained its early pattern of enclosures for the 'infields' while the wider landscape was subsequently opened up for large-scale arable farming. Grain production was, of course, important to Astwick as a centre for milling and the two surviving mills are successors to those recorded in 1086.
- 4.7 The 18th century saw the consolidation of the farms and the building of the Rectory (1720) and Astwick Bury. The mills were modernised in the 19th century and little has happened since, save the building of a pair of houses on Mill Lane in the 1930s.



Barns at Astwick Bury

ENCLOSURE AWARD 1808

With Conservation Area Boundary



5.0 CHARACTER

- 5.1 Astwick is a very small hamlet with less than a dozen houses. Added to these are the two mills, one of which has been converted to residential use, and St Guthlac's Church. Then there are several ranges of agricultural buildings.
- 5.2 At Church Farm there is a 17th century barn with a granary and a dovecote from the 18th century. At Astwick Bury, there are extensive barns from the 17th century onwards and at both sites there are more recent steel-framed farm buildings. At Bowman's Mill there is a range of 19th century brick garden buildings.



Church Farm



- 5.3 As important as the buildings is the open spaciousness of the hamlet. Instead of focusing on the thoroughfare as many villages do, the buildings are dispersed among small fields and paddocks. This makes the network of footpaths important and brings trees and hedges into prominence. There are signs of deliberate planting of lines of Ash and Chestnut.
- 5.4 There is a prominent tree belt along the River Ivel going away from the conservation area to the west of Astwick Road. Trees are also important to the west of Mill Lane and in the gardens of Mill House. Many of the trees are fine specimens and are certainly too numerous to plot other than symbolically on the Character Appraisal Map.
- 5.5 Doubling back on itself, Astwick Road is not a through route for many. It has a very rural feel with hedges and grass verges without kerbs. However, on its north side opposite Bowman's Mill, there is no hedge as this is the beginning of the larger arable fields. Here there are extensive views towards the greensand ridge where a large water tower acts as a distant eye-catcher.

6.0 APPEARANCE

- 6.1 In the middle ages, the local material for most buildings was timber. An abundance of timber framing survives in Astwick in the barns and cart sheds, which are also clad with timber weatherboarding. The granary and dovecote at Church farm are also timber framed as is the farmhouse itself beneath its roughcast exterior.
- 6.2 Stone was used for higher status buildings, such as St Guthlac's Church and for the monumental tombs in the churchyard. For the church, a mix of coursed limestone and river cobbles was used with limestone ashlar for the dressings. Clearly stone had a high commodity value and masonry was re-cycled in the construction of later phases. However, the brick patches on the tower are more likely to have been used to provide contrastingly 'honest' repairs rather than just introducing a cheaper material.



St Guthlac's Church



The Old Rectory



- 6.3 From the 18th century, brick takes over as the dominant building material and the first edition of the Ordnance Survey shows a brick kiln a short distance to the west of the conservation area. Early brickwork can be seen at the Rectory and at Astwick Bury. At the Rectory and at Taylor's mill, the brickwork includes contrasting blue headers to make a deliberate pattern. These are produced by over-burning red bricks until they vitrify or by adding a glaze.
- 6.4 The Gault clays of the Ivel valley are particularly suited to the production of cream and pale yellow bricks. These can be seen at Bowman's Mill and at Ivel Mill House. Bricks are generally laid in Flemish bond – alternating stretchers and headers. At Taylor's Mill, there is an outbuilding that has a wall of unusual brick slag.
- 6.5 Clay was also used for roof tiles and for the decorative terracotta date plaque on the Rectory. At Church Farm and at the Rectory, contrasting roof tiles have been laid to form decorative patterns. An exception is the thatch on Church Farm Cottage and also the pantiles on the roof of a summerhouse at Taylor's Mill. After the 1840s, blue slate was imported for roofing. The roofs of the main range of barns at Astwick Bury have been re-clad with corrugated iron which has weathered to an earthy rust colour. Once seen as a cheap substitute, corrugated iron has become a traditional material for farm buildings.
- 6.6 Side-opening casement windows were generally used in earlier vernacular buildings, such as the upper floor of Church Farm, while vertically sliding sashes were introduced for higher status houses in the 18th century after which they became more fashionable. Window frames were usually made of timber. In some cases, replacement windows have been altered to provide top-hung quarter lights or to make use of modern plastics but always to the detriment of the historic character of the village.



Astwick Road

- 6.7 In the past, street surfaces would have been little more than rammed earth and stone until tarmac provided a more durable successor from the early 20th century. The absence of kerbs lining the carriageway in Astwick is an important rural characteristic. There is little street furniture apart from the small red cast-iron letter box. In front of the churchyard, overhead wires carried on wooden telegraph poles are an intrusive feature.
- 6.8 Approaching Astwick from the south, the village is entirely hidden behind trees. On crossing the small brick bridge over the River Ivel, there is a line of ash trees to the right through which the bold forms of the Astwick Bury barns become apparent. Their steep corrugated iron roofs form the main landmark. The cluster of farm buildings at Church farm is on the left set well back from the road in a treed landscape.





Church Farm Cottage



- 6.9 St Guthlac's Church lies in a sequence of open spaces between low outbuildings at the farm and the thatch of Church Farm Cottage. Tombstones have been removed from the churchyard except for a chest tomb of 1713 and a stone memorial urn on a tapered plinth. The church itself is much repaired with a low slate roof. Beyond it, quite isolated from the modern road is the red and blue brick Rectory proudly proclaiming 'RW 1720.'
- 6.10 The Astwick Bury barns form a private courtyard with the red brick house to the east on its moated island. To the north, a timber framed cart shed is set at right angles to the road at the entrance to an otherwise modern farmyard. South of this complex there are small enclosures that fall towards the river.
- 6.11 A larger field to the east of the Bury gives views towards the Gault brick of Bowman's Mill and the white painted brick of Mill House against a backdrop of trees. The mill is disused although there are modern laylights in the roof. At its southern end there is the decaying iron skeleton of a wide water wheel.
- 6.12 On Mill Lane, there is a pair of pebble-dashed 1930s houses which, apart from a few modern farm buildings, are Astwick's only gesture to the 20th century. Adjacent, is Old Mill Cottage, which has an historic core but has been much altered and extended.
- 6.13 Although Taylor's Mill is on a separate road, it is connected to the village by the river along which it is only a short distance upstream from Bowman's Mill. The functional part of the mill, now converted to residential use, is timber framed and clad with black weatherboarding. It has a pitch-roofed hoist at the eaves, although the taking-in door below it has become a window. At the east end, the millwright's cottage is built of red brick. This has blue headers up to the top of the first floor window suggesting that the upper part has been rebuilt.

- 6.14 The adjacent Ivel Mill is a substantial Gault brick house with low-pitched slate roofs and bays to the front of flanking wings. It is set behind a brick wall that has a bold half-round coping. The two houses at Taylor's Mill lie within a densely treed landscape.



Bowman's Mill



7.0 OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCEMENT

7.1 Astwick is not the sort of place where dynamic change is welcome. However, there is scope for modest improvements:

- The undergrounding of overhead wires would allow the removal of wooden telegraph poles;
- Encouragement to be given for the re-use of Bowman's Mill;
- This should include the restoration of the waterwheel as a priority;
- Creative re-use of the Astwick Bury barns is also necessary;
- Traffic calming on Taylor's Road;
- The most significant of the unlisted buildings should be put forward for the Council's proposed list of Buildings and Structures of Local Importance;
- Street furniture should be well-designed and co-ordinated;
- Encouragement to be given for the reinstatement of traditional doors and windows;
- Encouragement to be given to the reinstatement of traditional thatched roofs, using long straw with vernacular plain flush ridges and detailing;
- Promotion of the use of lime-based mortars, plasters and renders for older buildings and structures in place of cement-based materials.



Ivel Mill

Central Bedfordshire Council

Astwick Conservation Area

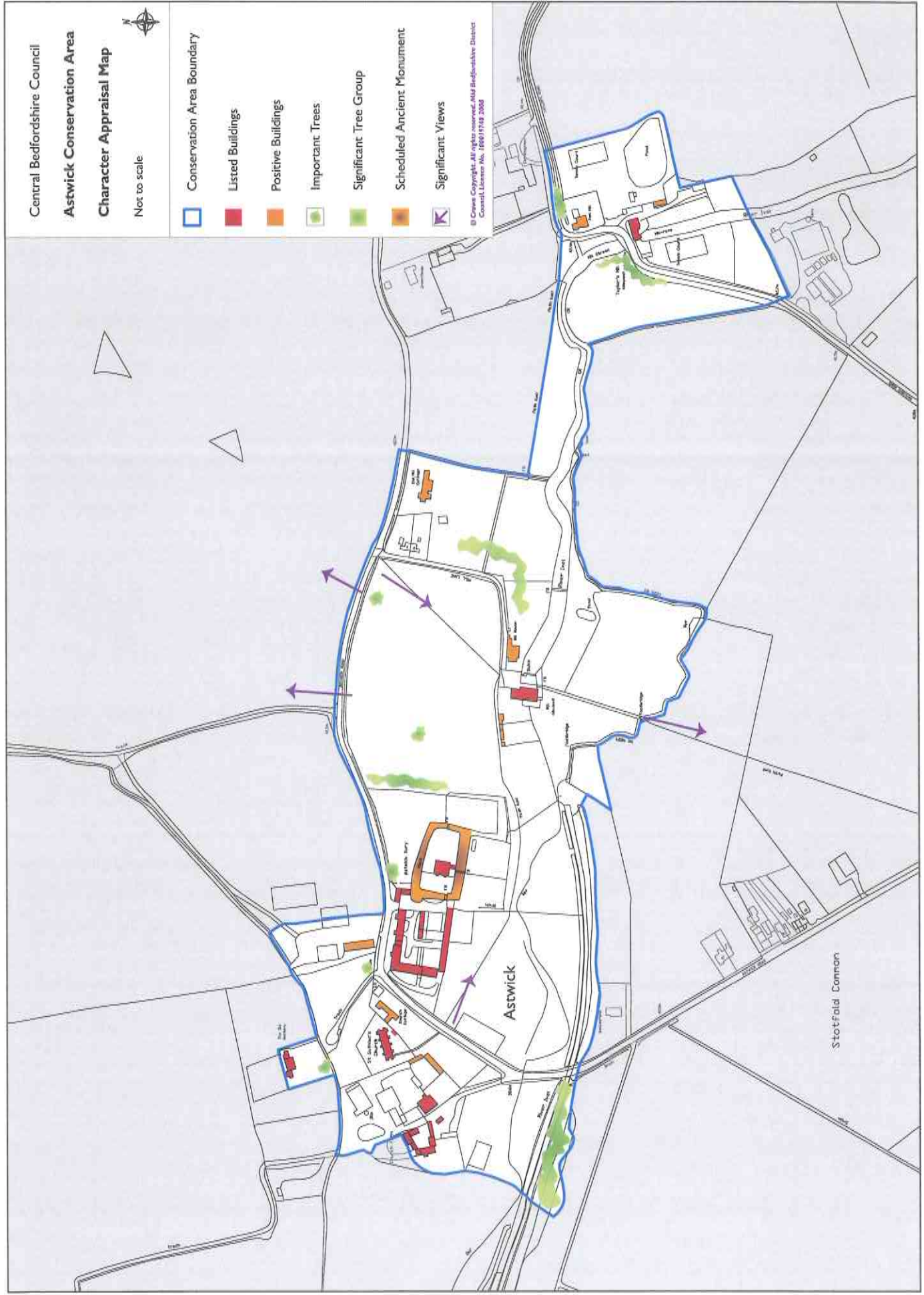
Character Appraisal Map

Not to scale



- Conservation Area Boundary
- Listed Buildings
- Positive Buildings
- Important Trees
- Significant Tree Group
- Scheduled Ancient Monument
- Significant Views

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APPENDIX 1: REFERENCES

- Mid Beds District Council – *Mid Bedfordshire Local Plan*
- Ed. William Page – *A History of the County of Bedford: Volume 2 – Victoria County History* 1908
- N. Pevsner – *The Buildings of England: Bedfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Peterborough* – 1968
- www.listedbuildingsonline.org

Maps:

- Ordnance Survey Old Series 1805-1874 – *Map 153: Bedford and Huntingdon* – Cassini edition 2006
- Bryant, Map of the County of Bedford, 1826
- Ordnance Survey – 1st Edition 1882
- Ordnance Survey – 2nd Edition 1901

Websites:

- The Heritage Gateway gives access to national and local heritage records: www.heritage-gateway.org.uk
- English Heritage will also access a range of free publications under the HELM initiative: www.english-heritage.org.uk
- The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings provides advice on maintenance and repair: www.spab.org.uk
- The Georgian Group: www.georgiangroup.org.uk
- The Victorian Society: www.victorian-society.org.uk
- The Twentieth Century Society: www.c20society.org.uk
- For a range of general information: www.buildingconservation.com

Contact:

The Conservation and Design Team at Mid-Bedfordshire District Council are always interested in receiving further information or updates in relation to conservation areas. They can also give advice on the repair and maintenance of historic buildings and on the management of conservation areas:

Conservation and Design Team
Environmental and Planning Services Department
Mid Bedfordshire District Council
Priory House, Monks Walk
Chicksands
Shefford
SG17 5TQ

01462 611339 or 08452 304040 (Customer Services)

rob.uff@midbeds.gov.uk

APPENDIX 2: LISTED BUILDINGS

Listed buildings within the Astwick Conservation Area:

• Astwick Road	Granary SW of Church Farmhouse	Grade II
• Astwick Road	Dovecote west of Church Farmhouse	Grade II
• Astwick Road	Barn NE of Church Farmhouse	Grade II
• Astwick Road	Chest tomb S of chancel, St Guthlac's Church	Grade II
• Astwick Road	The Old Rectory	Grade II
• Astwick Road	Astwick Bury	Grade II
• Astwick Road	L-shaped barn group NW of Astwick Bury	Grade II
• Astwick Road	Church Farmhouse	Grade II
• Astwick Road	St Guthlac's Church	Grade II*
• Mill Lane	Bowman's Mill	Grade II
• Taylor's Road	Taylor's Mill	Grade II

Note also: The moat at Astwick Bury is a Scheduled Ancient Monument

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This appraisal has been prepared in association with Mid Bedfordshire District Council by:

The Conservation Studio
1 Querns Lane
Cirencester
Gloucestershire
GL7 1RL

t. 01285 642428

www.theconservationstudio.co.uk



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