

Sustainable Communities

# **Dunstable**

Conservation area appraisal

# Draft (2010) (Amended version)



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 Central Bedfordshire 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.

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#### 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Dunstable conservation area was designated in 1976. It was reviewed in 1990, in the Dunstable Interim Local Plan, reviewed again in 1993 and extended in the 1995 South Bedfordshire Local Plan, covering an area of 28.067ha. at the time of the current review.
- 1.2 The designated area includes 53 listed buildings and 1 scheduled monument (see Appendix 2), along with the important green open spaces of Grove House Gardens and Priory Gardens, which are recognized as parks and gardens of historic interest in the South Bedfordshire Local Plan Review, January 2004.
- 1.3 Dunstable has a rich and important archaeological heritage. In 2003, Albion Archaeology was commissioned to produce an archaeological assessment of the town as part of an Extensive Urban Survey (EUS) for Bedfordshire initiated by English Heritage, with the partnership of Bedfordshire County Council. The final report, edited in 2005, provides a history of the town, and relates this to its known archaeological finds and features, and also to its archaeological potential.
- 1.4 This conservation area appraisal document assesses the setting, character and appearance of the conservation area. It also identifies opportunities for improving the character of the area, and has been produced as an advisory document which will support the Town Centre Masterplan (May 2011) guiding redevelopment of the town. The Appraisal is intended to assist an informed and consistent approach to historic environment considerations throughout development and implementation of the Masterplan proposals.



Rear of Priory House, High Street South – view south west from Priory Gardens with The Square and market clock beyond

#### 2.0 Summary

- 2.1 The special interest that justifies designation of the Dunstable Conservation Area derives from a number of architectural, historic and environmental factors, including:
  - A rich and significant archaeological and architectural heritage with great potential as a resource to promote local distinctiveness, sense of place and community pride
  - The historical character of Dunstable as a market town spanning some 890 years, reflected in its layout and in the type and character of its historic buildings
  - The enduring 'landmark' predominance of the Priory Church of St Peter
  - The significance of the crossroads to the historic layout of the town
  - Key elements of historic development preserved in the present townscape (eg. Priory Church, market place and Middle Row, Old Sugar Loaf Hotel, nonconformist chapels, 19<sup>th</sup> century and later housing)
  - A picturesque 'jumble' of building forms and rooflines
  - The high-quality of brick building, and the distinctive use of local brick, into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century
  - Priory Gardens and Grove House Gardens as important green open spaces within the present town
  - Important individual and groups of trees



Chews House, High Street South (detail)

#### 3.0 Location and setting

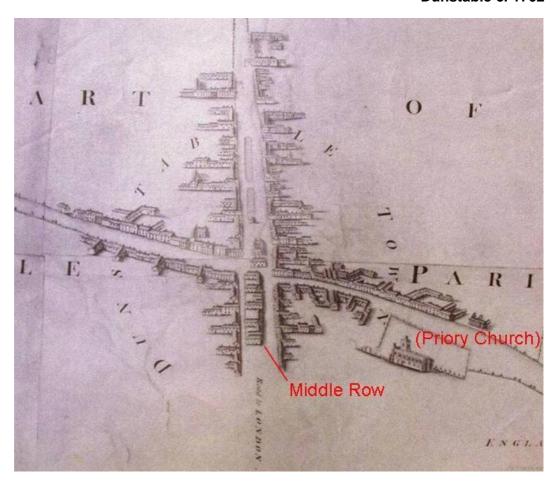
- 3.1 Dunstable is located approximately 17 miles (27km) south of Bedford,
  7 miles (11km) ESE of the historic market town of Leighton Buzzard,
  12 miles (19km) NNW of St Albans and 4 miles (7km) west of Luton (centre to centre). The town has no rivers or large streams.
- 3.2 The town sits on chalk, with clay-with-flints to the south-east and limestone to the north-west. The land rises to the south-west, to Dunstable Downs, a popular local landmark. The Downs, together with Barton Hills to the north-east, form the northern termination of the Chiltern Hills, much of which is a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and the town has significant potential in respect of the support of leisure activities associated with the AONB. The land falls gradually away to the north.

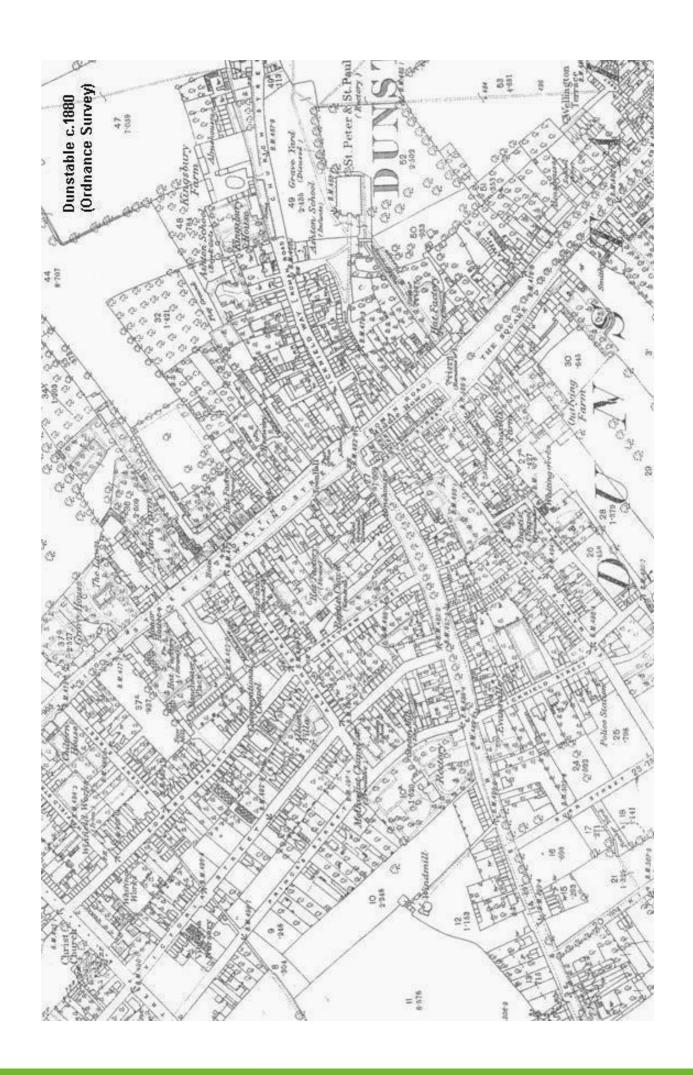
#### 4.0 Historical development

- 4.1 Dunstable town is historically focused upon the intersection of two ancient routes, the Neolithic Icknield Way, running from east to west, and the Roman Watling Street, running from north to south. The crossroads remains a dominant feature in the character and topography of the town.
- 4.2 The town has its origins as a Roman town, Durocobrivis, centred on the crossroads, which appears to have been abandoned at the end of the Roman period.
- 4.3 Subsequent to this early abandonment, the town was re-established as a new town in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century by Henry I, centred on the royal lodge of Kingsbury and the Augustinian Priory (dissolved in the mid-16<sup>th</sup> century).
- 4.4 A market was established in the wide streets and market place, where permanent buildings began to encroach to form Middle Row, possibly from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards.
- 4.5 The town continued to prosper as a market town in the post-Medieval period, and also as a significant staging post for coaches travelling along Watling Street.
- 4.6 The 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the arrival of the railway, new municipal buildings, and the development of the backland with new terraced housing and small industrial premises, notably hat-making.
- 4.7 The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the growth of the town as an engineering centre. Residential expansion continued apace, with associated provision for schools, churches, and other public buildings.

4.8 The post-war period has seen much new development within and around the present conservation area, sometimes at odds with the historic scale, grain and character of the historic town.

Dunstable c. 1762





#### 5.0 Character

- 5.1 Dunstable is set on the edge of the chalk downland which characterizes this part of Bedfordshire. Although there are some gentle slopes, the general sense of the urban landscape is that of a level topography, with principal streets of generous width and open areas, and some significant green open spaces. While this gives the built character a spacious urban form, the space is filled with obtrusive signage, urban clutter and heavy through-traffic which detract from this character.
- 5.2 As in many historic towns there are buildings of many types and ages which are given coherence by size and scale and relationships to each other rather than by any overall architectural design.
- 5.3 The town's long, rich history has left an urban form, an architectural diversity and archaeological potential which combine to give the area its local significance. The crossroads is at the heart of the town, and the historic town market took place in the three wide streets leading from it High Street North, High Street South and West Street.
- What appears to have been an open market place began to be filled in at an early date, possibly from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, forming 'Middle Row'<sup>1</sup>, which is therefore a significant element of the historic town plan.
- 5.5 Investigation of part of the Row undertaken by John Bailey in the 1970's revealed evidence of a remarkable group of late-medieval timber-framed shops, three-storey in height and constructed back-to back around a common frame to provide shop units at front and rear, thus maximizing commercial potential out of a narrow plot width.



Nos. 26-32 High Street South (right to left). Reconstruction of late-medieval shop row from surviving evidence (J.M. Bailey, 1980).

Reproduced by permission of the estate of John Bailey.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> (presently Nos. 1a and 1b West Street, Nos. 2 - 40 [even] High Street South, and corresponding units in Ashton Square).

- 5.6 In the context of the evolution of the medieval town, such specific design responses to local circumstances (seen, for example, in an elaborate form in the Row buildings of Chester) have particular historic significance, and the buildings of Middle Row, though as yet not completely investigated and fully understood, should be seen as a unique feature of the town's historic character and interest.
- 5.7 The crossroads divides the town into four quadrants, but it also forms the links which join the quadrants into a single urban unit, and the town has historically evolved and functioned around it.
- 5.8 In this Conservation Area Appraisal, the quadrants have been used to define "character areas" as an aid to the analysis and understanding of the town's varied and complex townscape.
- 5.9 Each quadrant is individually described in Section 6 of this document. Key elements of conservation area character identified in the appraisal are shown on the Townscape map on page 23, and in detail, quadrant by quadrant, in Appendix 3 (pages 29 -34).

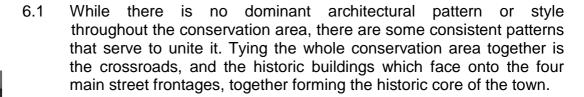


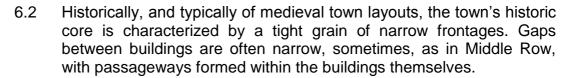
- 5.10 The conservation area is notable for its variety of architectural expression. On the Townscape map, and the Appendix 3 quadrant maps, listed buildings within the conservation area are indicated, and all other buildings have been assessed and indicated in terms of their contribution to conservation area character positive, neutral or negative.
- 5.11 Distant and glimpsed views of the Priory Church, and the spire of the Methodist Church in The Square at the north end of High Street South, provide important visual 'anchors' in the crowded modern townscape, and are therefore identified as 'landmark' buildings.

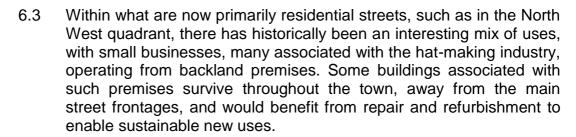


- 5.12 The Priory Church, which dominates the western (Church Street) approach to the town centre, is the pre-eminent symbol of the town's historic importance.
- 5.13 The conservation area includes important individual and groups of trees. They have particular townscape significance, such as the mature specimens of Grove House Gardens and the remnants of street planting in High Street South and West Street, and also particular historic significance such as those at the edges of the south-west quadrant marking field boundaries of the historic agricultural margins of the town.
- 5.14 Trees of recognised importance outside the existing conservation area boundary are protected by Tree Preservation Order (TPO).

#### 6.0 Appearance









Historic small-scale industrial buildings surviving behind the street frontage of High Street South (east side)

- 6.4 Inns and alehouses proliferated; these survive at several street corners in the North West quadrant and elsewhere. In 1880 there were four public houses in Middle Row alone.
- 6.5 The lack of architectural uniformity produces a picturesque informality, characterized by steeply-pitched roofs, gables and bay windows.



- 6.6 This informality is accentuated by the variety of historic building materials and methods stone, timber-frame, gauged brickwork (for fine window arches), patterned brickwork using distinctive plum-coloured local bricks and vitrified headers, slate and weathered clay roof tiles may all be seen, for example.
- 6.7 The result is a pleasing mix of colours and textures in the traditional building stock and is the product of both the historic availability of materials (such as the post-Dissolution robbing of stone from the Priory buildings), and later, reflecting the prosperity of the town in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, by the dictates of fashion-led architectural expression, carried-through with fine window and door joinery, and the use of high-specification 'tuck pointing' for brickwork.





19<sup>th</sup> century 'Tuck Pointing' – (left) example from Matthew Street; (right) a damaged example elsewhere in the district, revealing the skilled technique in detail, with mortar joints of standard width filled-out with coloured mortar and finished with applied fillets of white mortar, to simulate the fine and regular joints of prestigious gauged brickwork









- 6.8 The rich architectural diversity of the town's traditional building stock, and the historic 'record' it represents, is a key element of local character, but can be easily eroded by relatively minor changes, such as door and window replacements.
- 6.9 The public realm is dominated by the presence of heavy throughtraffic and the concomitant requirement of road signage and street lighting. The conservation area would undoubtedly benefit from a coordinated approach to street lighting and signage provision, reducing unnecessary clutter wherever possible.
- 6.10 At pavement level, 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century granite kerbing, ornamental boot-scrapers and coal-chute covers survive in places in the residential areas behind the four principal streets. Such features are easily overlooked, but should be preserved wherever possible as interesting examples of historic streetscape contributing to local character.



#### **North West quadrant**

- 6.11 The North West quadrant retains some ancient properties on the main street frontages, such as the 15<sup>th</sup> century properties at Nos.16-20 West Street and the early 17<sup>th</sup> century gatehouse at No.13 High Street North (The White Horse Public House).
- 6.12 Most of the main frontage buildings are of late 18<sup>th</sup> century date or later (but possibly incorporating older fabric), with many Victorian and early 20<sup>th</sup> century commercial and municipal buildings. The frontages are more or less continuous, but there are some unfortunately overscaled modern interlopers in both West Street and High Street North.
- 6.13 The streets behind are characterized by 19<sup>th</sup> century terraces, with some corner pubs and places of worship. Houses are usually of two bays and three storeys, giving straight onto the street with no front gardens, providing the streets with characteristic strong enclosure. In Albion Street this has an almost canyon-like feel, with long-views also terminated by striking buildings at either end. The brick detailing of the terraced buildings is often fine, with the use of high-specification tuck-pointing widespread.
- 6.14 Sadly there has been a widespread loss of historic joinery, notably windows and doors, and the replacement of original slate roofs with concrete tiles.



Albion Street - view south to High Street North

#### **North East quadrant**

6.15 The North East quadrant has seen considerable development in the post-war years, much of it out of keeping with the character of the conservation area, from which it is therefore excluded. However, the

area is one of considerable archaeological potential, not least on account of including the probable site of the early 12<sup>th</sup> century royal lodging of Kingsbury.

6.16 There is an important grouping of historic buildings on the north side of Church Street, as well as along the High Street North frontage, where a number of old coaching inns, such as The Old Sugar Loaf (c.1717), are prominent. At the northern end of High Street North, Grove House and Ashton Middle School are substantial and striking historic buildings.



The Old Sugar Loaf, High Street North



6.17 Grove House Gardens is one of two important green open spaces in the conservation area which are valued public parks.



#### **South East quadrant**

- 5.18 The South East quadrant is dominated by the Priory Church, and its churchyard setting. As well as being an important green space and public park, the churchyard overlies the remains of the priory buildings, and is a scheduled monument.
- 6.19 There is a large surface car park on land to the west of the church, which is an unsympathetic setting for the town's most important historic building.
- 6.20 The south side of Church Street contains some buildings of local interest, but there has been much rebuilding, and the corner with High Street South has been significantly weakened by demolition for highway improvements.

6.21 The building scale at the top of High Street South is fairly high (four storeys) but tends to drop away further south, where the pavements become wider and properties are more likely to be set back from the footpath. This gives an agreeable suburban character to this southern entrance to the town, marked by terraced houses, almshouses and historic inns and accentuated by the remains of an historic planted tree avenue approach.



The tree-lined approach – High Street South (view north)

#### **South West quadrant**

- 6.22 The South West quadrant is notable above all for the picturesque grouping of the historic buildings of Middle Row, with The Square to the south forming an important open space. This has been refurbished in recent years and given a new clock tower, and the town market is held here and on the car park behind.
- 6.23 The Square and the island site of Middle Row are important reminders of how the town plan has developed. Despite the loss of at least one building at its northern end for street widening, and other unsympathetic alterations, Middle Row has a richly varied character, including several listed buildings and others which retain the character of market infill. Behind this, the spire of the Methodist church (rebuilt in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) is a notable landmark feature.



'Middle Row', High Street South - view from south.

In the middle of the picture, and distinctive through their streetfacing straight parapet walls and gable ends, are four adjoining shop buildings of late-medieval origin whose form can be reconstructed from surviving roof and frame elements (see page 8).

- 6.24 Older properties survive on the main frontages of High Street South and West Street, although there are some regrettable modern intrusions. The western edge of the conservation area is characterized by a mix of late Georgian terraces, Victorian terraces and villas and interwar detached houses, with some modern infill.
- 6.25 Beyond the West Street police station, a terraced group including the Victoria Public House has an intimate, almost village-scale, screened from the road by a mature line of trees which once extended all the way to the town crossroads.
- 6.26 Further west, and beyond the existing conservation area western boundary,, good examples of brick terraced and villa housing mark the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century residential suburbs of the town, and reflect its growth and prosperity at this period.



View south-west to The Victoria PH, West Street (south side)

#### 7.0 Boundary changes

- 7.1 Consideration should be given to the following proposed amendment of the conservation area boundaries, as shown on the Management map (p.24). Detailed map-based townscape evaluation of the proposed extension areas, including an assessment of the architectural contribution of individual buildings to local character-positive, neutral or negative is set out in Appendix 4:
  - 1. Extension of the conservation area to the west to include good examples of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century housing in parts of Princes Street and West Street, and the inclusion of St Mary's Catholic Church and the Windmill, West Street

#### Reason:

To acknowledge as part of the historic development of Dunstable the importance of particular buildings, or groups of buildings, in the town's historic western outskirts, and to acknowledge the important contribution these buildings make to the western 'gateway' of West Street.



St Mary's Roman Catholic Church, West Street, by Desmond Williams & Associates, Manchester, c.1962-64 – an important postwar church building which should be considered for listing

Extension of the conservation area to the south west to include terraced properties in Burr Street grouped around Dunstable Icknield Lower School.

#### Reason:

These buildings form an interesting townscape grouping of early-20<sup>th</sup> century terraced housing and School (c.1908).

3. Extension of the conservation area to the south east to include Priory Middle School, Britain Street, with its outbuildings and playing fields.

#### Reason:

The school incorporates the original school building (c.1911) designed by the notable Northamptonshire architect J A Gotch, and is a building of particular architectural interest. Behind the school, to the north-west, the school playing fields form an attractive green open space, extending the open setting of the Priory Church.

#### 8.0 Opportunities for enhancement

8.1 In recent years, there have been localised but notable townscape enhancements throughout the town centre, such as at Grove House Gardens and Priory Gardens, and around The Square. The majority of the town's listed buildings are acceptably maintained, and there has been some reasonably sympathetic infilling and new development.

- 8.2 In 2008, however, a Local Planning Authority 'health check' survey of the conservation area, on behalf of English Heritage, identified traffic congestion, retail decline, vacant upper floors, inappropriate shopfronts and shop signage as significant issues.
- 8.3 As a result, English Heritage identified Dunstable town centre in 2009 as a 'conservation area at risk' (ie. a conservation area that has seen, or is threatened with, a significant deterioration in its condition).
- 8.4 It is apparent that traffic blight is a significant problem with farreaching consequences in respect of the town's retail environment.
- 8.5 The crossroads, the historic and physical heart of the town, ought to be a visual focal point; instead it is a hostile environment. The buildings at three of the four corners here are poor in quality, and the end of the important historic and townscape group of Middle Row is disfigured by advertisement hoardings and insensitive modern shop fronts.



The town crossroads (Church Street junction)

- 8.6 Conservation area character is generally eroded through numerous unsympathetic post-war developments, both within the designated area and on its boundary edges.
- 8.7 Opportunities for conservation-led enhancement should be firmly linked to retail revival and the associated issue of building vacancy and under-use.
- 8.8 Appropriate building refurbishment, and the upgrading of shopfronts and shop signage, complemented by 'public-realm' streetscape improvements, will add quality to the retail environment.

- (Middle Row)
- 8.9 High (and visually prominent) levels of shop vacancy, and an almost complete abandonment of upper floors, along with the proliferation of inappropriate shop and advertisement signage, make the 'Middle Row' group of buildings a logical focus for targeted enhancement.
- 8.10 The historic significance of the Middle Row building group is highlighted in this Appraisal document (see page 8), and building refurbishment within the group, particularly in respect of the adaptation of upper floors, must be conservation-led, and based on a thorough understanding of surviving historic fabric, established through detailed building survey and analysis.



'Middle Row', High Street South – view towards The Square

- 8.11 The town's historic market town status should be the 'driver' behind (conservation-based) regeneration in its historic core. In the development and implementation of proposals with this aim, the following are considered as opportunities for enhancement:
  - The reduction and coordination of traffic signage and pedestrian guard railing, where practical
  - The coordination of street furniture and lighting design
  - The encouragement of appropriate and high-quality shop front and shop signage design

- Pursue, through the planning system
  - the appropriate maintenance of buildings and associated land
  - the removal of unauthorised satellite dishes
  - the appropriate repair and reuse of 'at risk' or 'vulnerable' buildings
  - the removal of unauthorised and obtrusive shop signage and advertisements
- Encourage, generally, the reinstatement of traditional doors, windows and roof coverings (eg. slate) throughout the conservation area
- (Middle Row) Develop conservation-led schemes of building investigation and targeted building repair and refurbishment
- The architectural lighting of key buildings

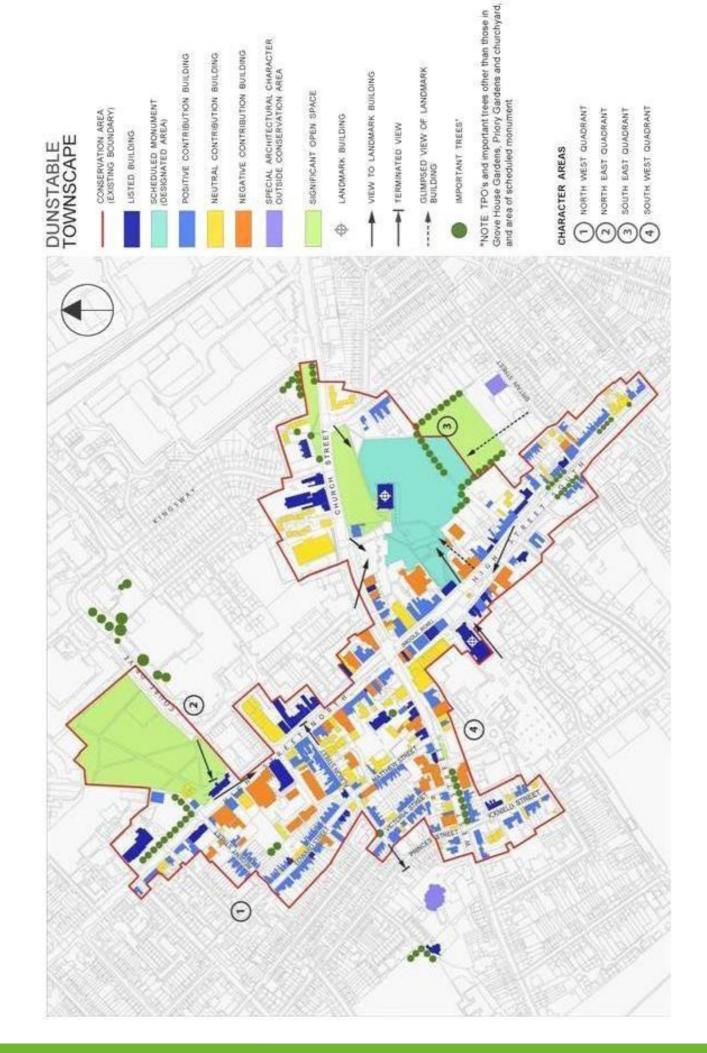
#### Additional recommendations



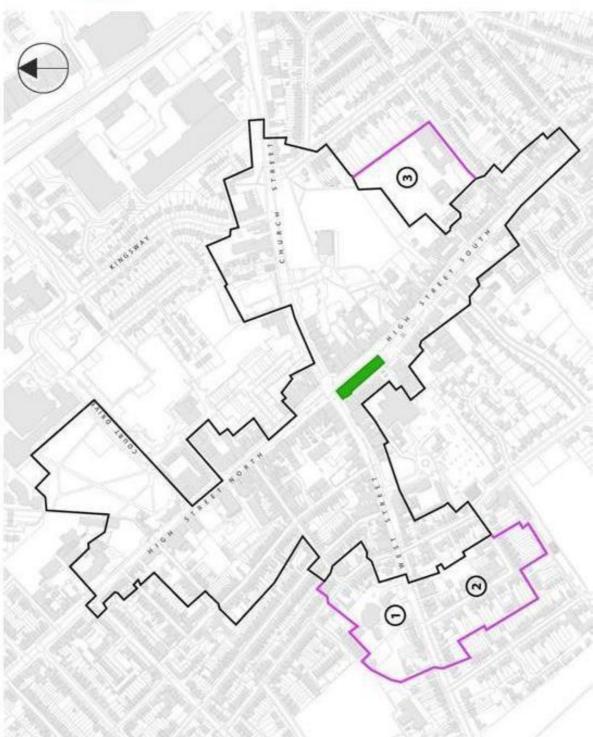
- To assist conservation area management through the planning system, to undertake and maintain a full external photographic record of all buildings in the conservation area
- To establish town 'Heritage Trails' with appropriate directional and information signage, incorporating surviving paths and passageways of the medieval town (eg. Church Walk)



High-quality townscape - rather let-down by the use of concrete bollards (High Street South, east side)







#### **Appendix 1: References**

- A History of the County of Bedford: Volume 3 Victoria County History (ed. W. Page) 1912 <a href="http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=42447">http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=42447</a>
- Extensive Urban Survey for Bedfordshire: Dunstable Archaeological Assessment, Albion Archaeology, 2003 (edited 2005)
   <a href="http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/projArch/EUS/bedsluton\_eus\_2006/downloads.cfm?CFID=3778022&CFTOKEN=44139956&town=Dunstable">http://ads.ahds.ac.uk/catalogue/projArch/EUS/bedsluton\_eus\_2006/downloads.cfm?CFID=3778022&CFTOKEN=44139956&town=Dunstable</a>
- Bailey, J.M. 'Timber framed buildings: a study of medieval buildings in Bedfordshire and adjoining counties' (Beds., Bucks. and Cambs. Historic Buildings Research Group, 1979), p.23.
- Bailey, J.M. 'Numbers 26 to 32 Middle Row, Dunstable', Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal 14 (1980), p.98.
- Benson, Nigel C. Dunstable in Detail, 1986
- Beresford, M.W. New Towns of the Middle Ages, 1967
- Evans, V. Proud Heritage: A Brief History of Dunstable 1000 -2000 AD, 1999
- Horne, B. (ed.) Chronicle: The Journal of Dunstable Museum, No.1 (Middle Row), November 1986
- Pevsner, N. The Buildings of England: Bedfordshire, Huntingdon and Peterborough, 1968
- 'The Hat Walk': a Dunstable Heritage Trail guide, Priory House Heritage Centre/ Dunstable Town Council
- Walden, R. Streets Ahead: An illustrated guide to the street names of Dunstable, 1999

#### Maps

- Estate map of the parish of Houghton Regis 1762 (Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service [BLARS] ref. B 553)
- Ordnance Survey 1880 1:2500 map (1<sup>st</sup> ed.)

# Appendix 2 : Listed buildings and scheduled monuments

#### **Listed buildings**

#### Grade I

#### **Church Close**

Church of St. Peter Priory House Gateway

#### Grade II\*

#### **High Street North**

(West side)

No.13 (The White Horse Public House)

#### **High Street South**

(East side)

Priory House Chew's House

#### Grade II

#### **Albion Street**

(North side)

The Borough Arms, No. 24 [also No.2 Edward Street]

## Church Street (North side)

Kingsbury Court and Old Palace Lodge Hotel

The Norman King Public House [De-listed 7<sup>th</sup> September 2012]

K6 Telephone Kiosk to south of Marshe Almshouses

Marshe Almshouses, Nos. 97 to 107 (odd)

#### (South side)

No. 26

#### **Edward Street**

(West side)

Nos. 9 to 15 (odd) Nos. 29 and 31

#### (East side)

[No. 2 The Borough Arms, No. 24 Albion Street] Nos. 52 and 54

## High Street North (East side)

No. 20

Nos. 36A and 36

Nos. 38 and 40

No. 42

No. 44 Outbuilding of Old Sugar Loaf Hotel adjoining on south

The Old Sugar Loaf, No. 46

No. 48

**Grove House** 

Dunstable Grammar School [now Ashton Middle School]

#### (West side)

[former] Union Social Club, No. 51 [now Dunstable Community Church Conference Centre]

No. 81

## High Street South (East side)

No. 19

Nos. 47 and 47A

Nos. 49 and 49A

Cart Almshouses, Nos. 65 to 75 (odd)

Front terrace wall to Cart Almshouses

Front terrace wall to Chew's House

The White Swan, Nos. 91 and 93

#### (West side)

[Middle Row]

No. 4

No. 24

No. 26

No. 28

No. 30

No. 46

No. 48

No. 52

No. 82 (The Friars)

# Icknield Street (East side)

Nos. 1 and 3

No. 5

No. 7

## St. Mary's Gate

Baptist Chapel [Dunstable Baptist Church]

#### **The Square**

**Methodist Church** 

## West Street (North side)

Baptist Chapel [West Street Baptist Church]
[former] Plume of Feathers Public House [now 'The Way'
Christian Community Centre]

Nos. 12 and 14A Nos. 16 to 20 (even)

No. 26

Nos. 34, 36 and 38

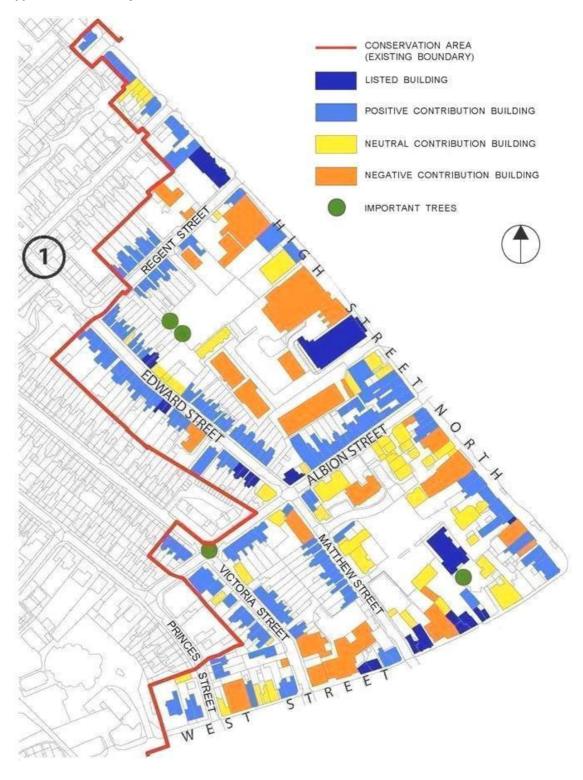
Windmill [Dunstable Sea Cadet HQ]

#### **Scheduled monuments**

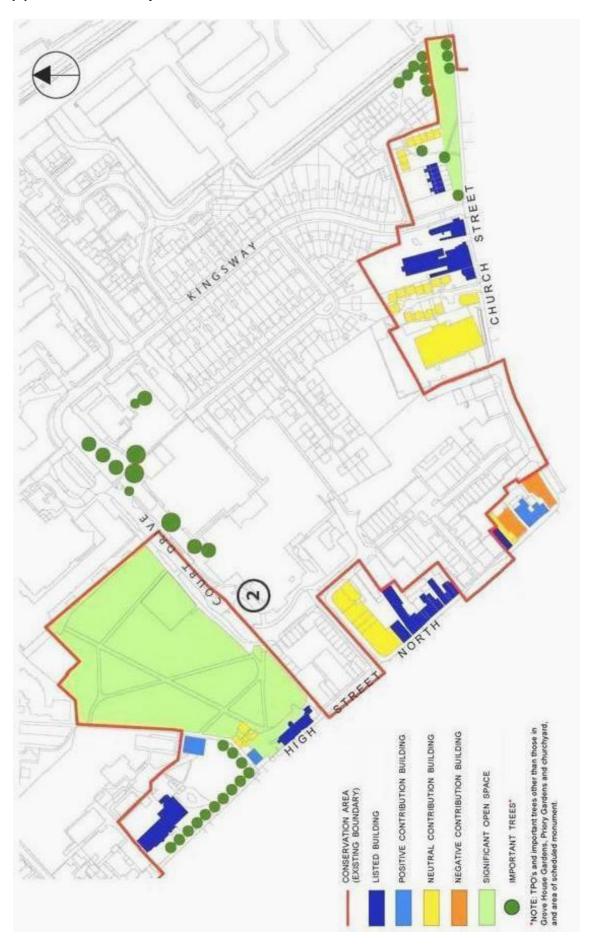
Dunstable Priory (Monument No. SM3)

## Appendix 3: The quadrant 'character areas' in detail

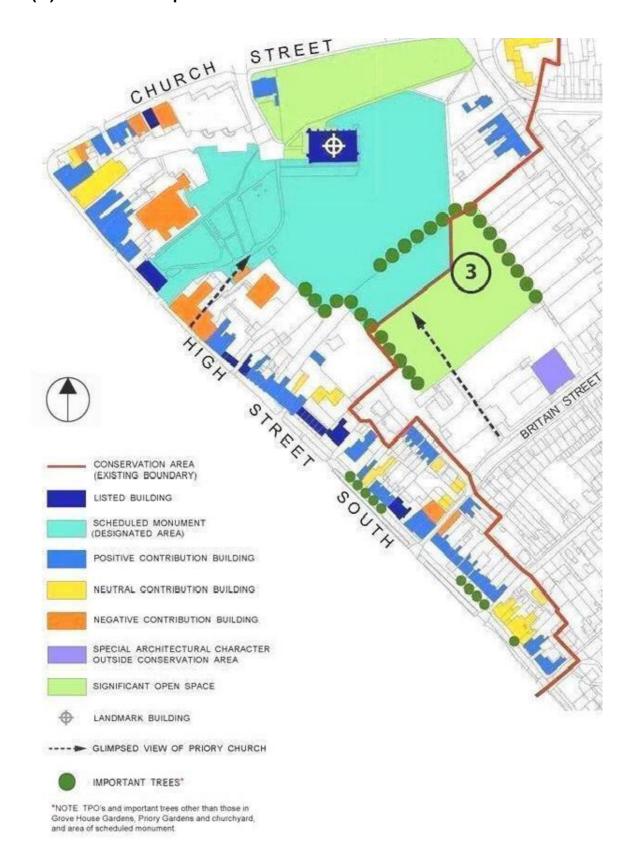
#### (i) North West quadrant



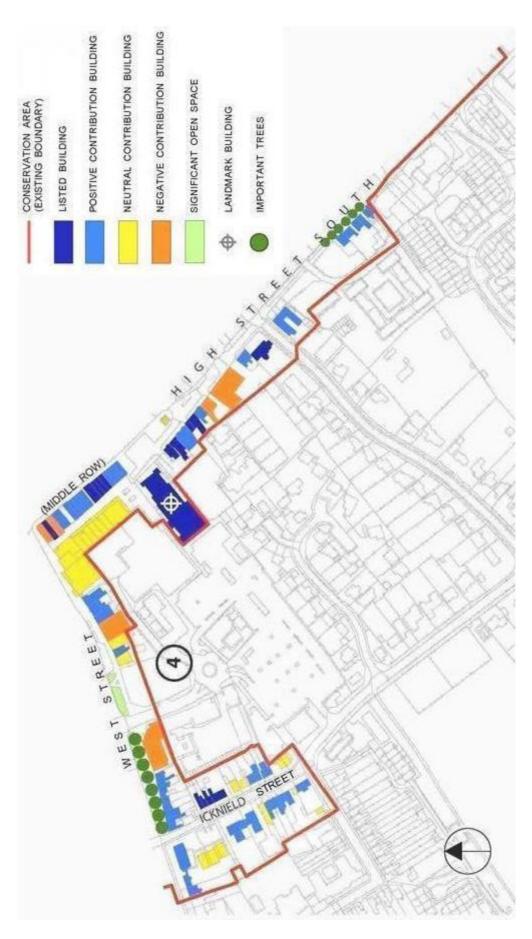
## (ii) North East quadrant



#### (iii) South East quadrant



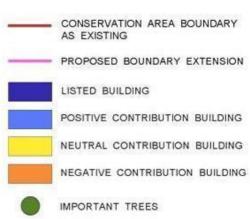
## (iv) South West quadrant



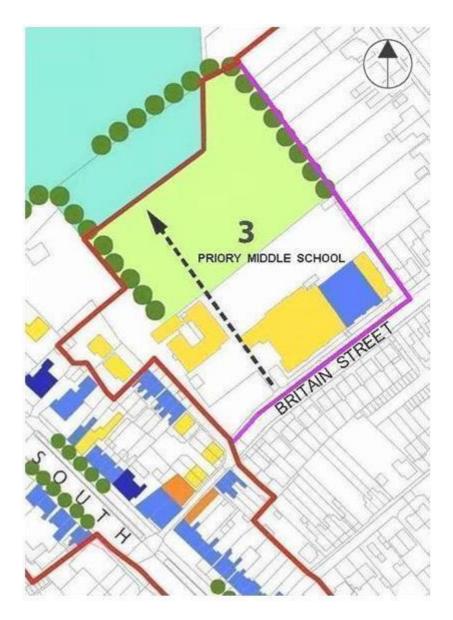
## Appendix 4: The proposed extension areas in detail

## (i) Extension areas 1 & 2





#### (ii) Extension area 3





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