

POTTON

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 Potton Conservation Area was designated by Bedfordshire County Council in June 1971. 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 Potton Conservation Area through the planning system.

2.0 SUMMARY

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

- Small market town in rural surroundings at a cross roads on the route from Bedford to Cambridge;
- Historic town recorded in Domesday survey of 1086 with a market charter granted by William II in 1094;
- Prosperity based on market gardening generated high status buildings in the centre;
- Much rebuilding after a major fire in 1783;
- Particularly fine Market Square;
- Shambles replaced with Clock House in 1956;
- Surviving evidence of mediaeval timber framing some encased in later brickwork;
- 13th century St Mary's Church on higher ground to the east linked by Church Causeway;
- Views from churchyard over extensive countryside to the south ;
- Strong concentration of listed buildings in the Market Square, King Street and Sun Street;
- Expansion west and south of Market Square creates an informal grid with continuous historic frontages along Blackbird Street, Chapel Street, Bull Street and Horslow Street;
- Georgian red brick succeeded by a decorative mix of red and yellow brick in 19th century houses;
- Trees particularly important to the church and church hall group.

3.0 LOCATION AND SETTING

- 3.1 Pottton lies on the east side of Bedfordshire, close to its border with Cambridgeshire. It is about 6km (3½ miles) to the north west of Biggleswade and a similar distance to the east of Sandy, both of which are on the A1 trunk road.
- 3.2 Pottton also lies at the crossing of two routes: the B1042 running west to east linking Bedford with Cambridge and the B1040 linking St Ives to Hitchin.
- 3.3 The town is on the edge of the ridge of Lower Greensand that runs across Mid Bedfordshire. This produces a countryside with a large scale 'mosaic' of arable fields, plantations and open heath, and there is a strong tradition of estate parkland. Pottton is also adjacent to the fertile alluvial soils of the Dunton Clay Vale to the south east, which has supported an economy of market gardening.
- 3.4 Historically, sandstone and gravel have been extracted in the area. Pottton's economy, however, was based on providing services to agriculture, particularly through trading, and the production of leather goods. In the mid-19th century, coprolites were extracted locally. These were nodules of fossilised dung rich in phosphates and, therefore, prized as a fertiliser.
- 3.5 Pottton is not supplied by a significant watercourse. Instead, there are minor tributaries, such as the Pottton Brook, that feed into the River Ivel following a gentle fall in levels from approximately north to south.
- 3.6 The focus of the conservation area is the historic Market Square. To the west and south of this rectangular space there is an informal grid of narrow streets while King Street leads away to the north west.
- 3.7 Pottton is distinct from most small towns in that, St Mary's Church is set apart from the centre on a higher bluff of sandstone to the north west. It is linked to the town by a pedestrian causeway across lower lying meadows now used as playing fields.

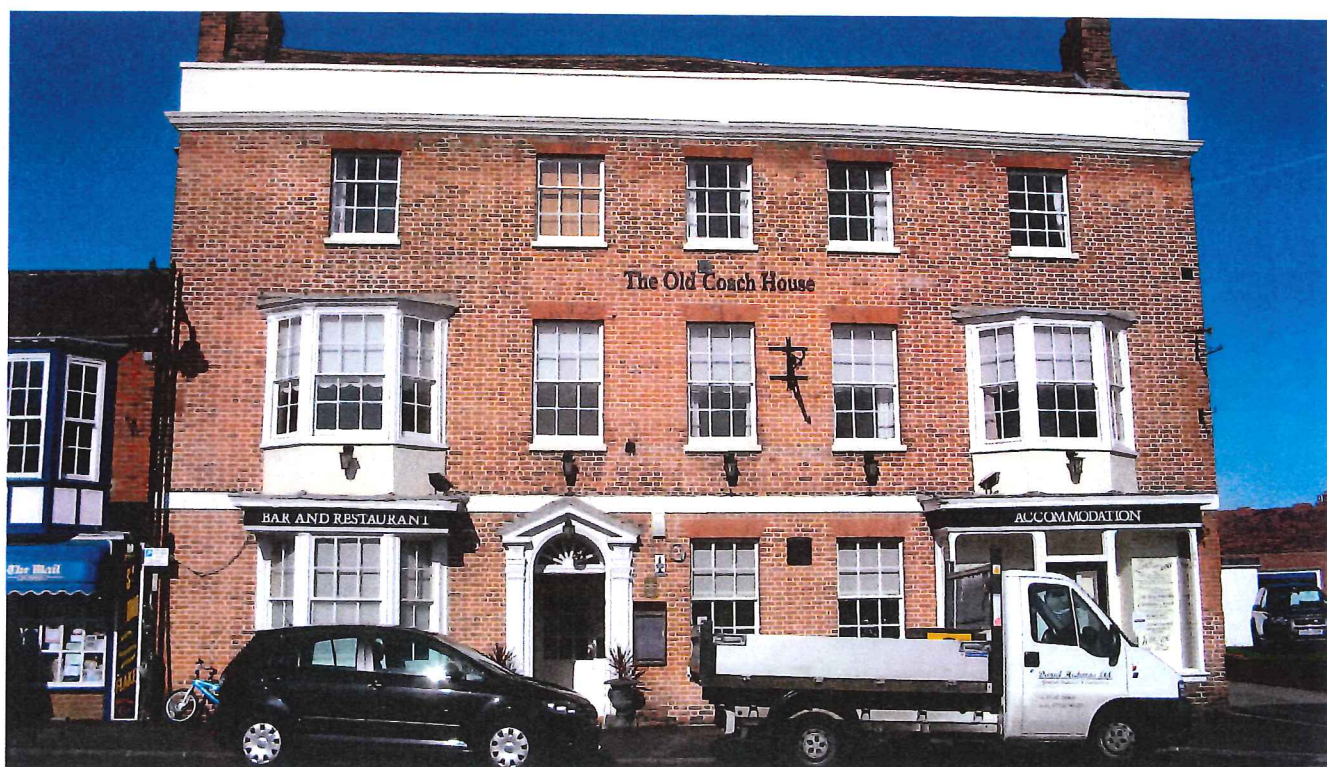


Market Square



4.0 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

- 4.1 From the analysis of cropmarks, we know that there were settlements in the area from late-prehistoric and Roman times. Potton certainly existed as a Saxon town and, by 1094, it had received a market charter. There were also four annual fairs which included a cattle sale and a horse fair that continued until 1932.
- 4.2 In 1237, Potton was held as four manors, Potton Rectoria, Potton Burdetts, Potton Regis and the curiously named Potton Much Manured. These were brought together under the Burgoyne family by 1637. By the end of the 17th century, the Market Square was transforming from a vernacular townscape of timber-framed houses to the more design-conscious brick facades as can be seen from the date plaque of 1697 on the south side.
- 4.3 A major fire in 1783 destroyed much of King Street and about half of the Market Square causing losses valued at £25,000, a massive sum at the time. Redevelopment has given Potton several fine Georgian buildings, such as the Old Coach House Hotel.



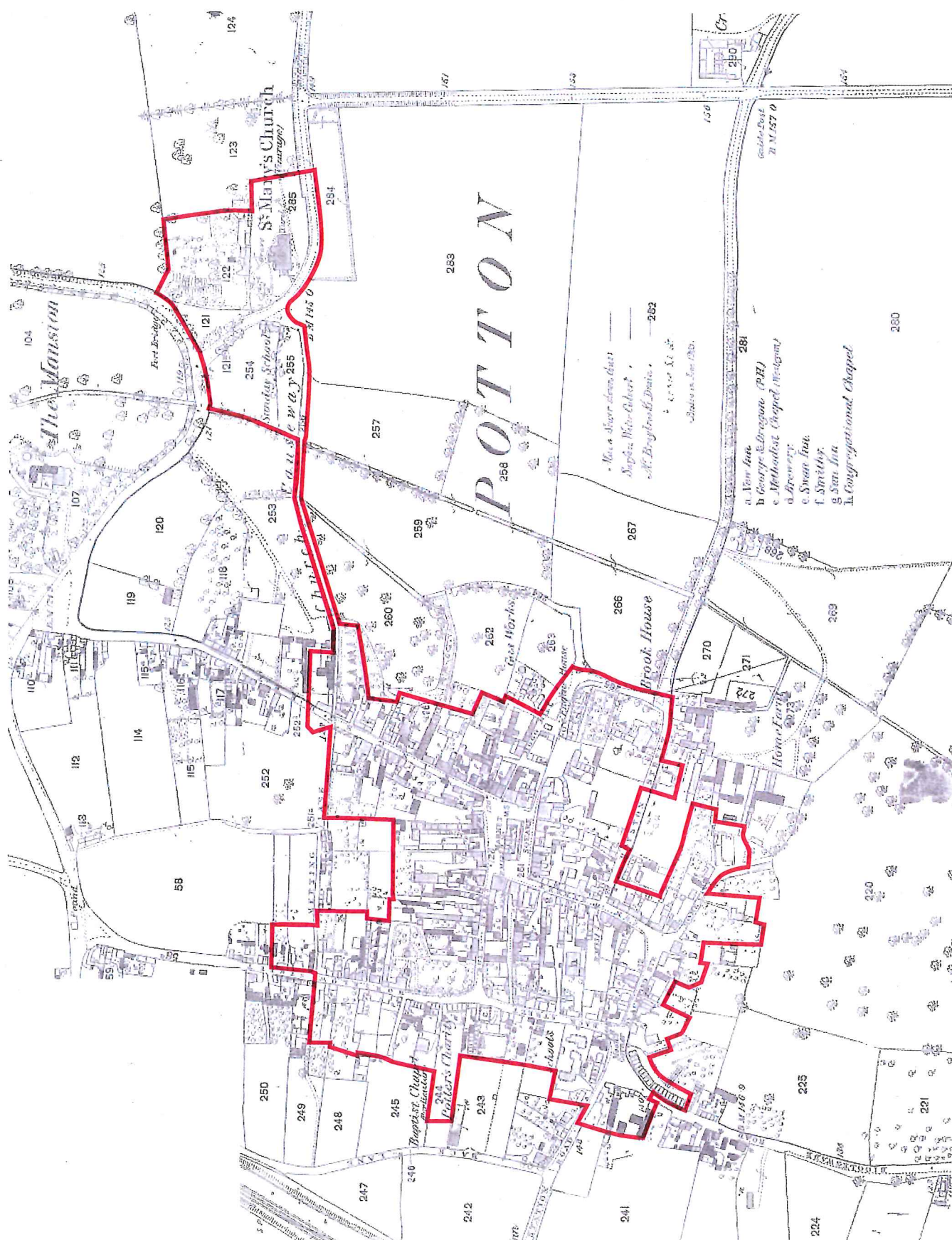
The Old Coach House Hotel

- 4.4 The fire, however, was a turning point in the fortune of the market, once one of the largest in Bedfordshire. The Great North Road had been improved under the turnpike Acts effectively by-passing Potton and providing better access to markets for competitors. Conversely, the opening of the Potton to Sandy railway line in 1857 enabled local market gardens to develop and despatch goods directly to London.
- 4.5 In the 1930s, the Land Settlement Association sought to provide rural employment to counter the effects of the depression. There were 21 estates, of which two were in Bedfordshire. At Potton, Sir Malcolm Stewart, Chairman of the London Brick Company, gave 284 acres to the east of the town to provide 30 smallholdings for unemployed people to grow market garden produce.

- 4.6 The fabric of St Mary's Church dates largely from the 13th and 14th centuries although the ecclesiastical use of the site is thought to date back much further. The church, which was repaired and re-fitted in 1889, has an unusual open porch on the north side and a four-stage west tower. The churchyard is notable for a large group of decorative gravestones from the 17th and 18th centuries.
- 4.7 The late 19th century saw expansion of the village due to rail links with London and the improvement of artisan dwellings. There is much evidence within the town of farms and former workspaces, and the Ordnance Survey of 1891 shows a pattern of building running from narrow frontages deep into the plots behind.
- 4.8 In the 20th century, the town has expanded progressively with new housing developments, particularly to the west and north. With the decline of the market, the shambles in the Market Square fell into disrepair and was demolished. In 1956 it was replaced with a building of similar form to house the local library. The original Town Clock from the shambles was accommodated in the new building. The central area around the library has recently been improved with a scheme of new paving and street furniture including a new bus shelter that echoes the timber-frame tradition of Potton.



Home Farm, Home Lane



5.0 CHARACTER

- 5.1 Most of the buildings in Potton are residential and it is clear that the town now serves larger settlements in commuting distance more than it does local agriculture. Indeed, many farm buildings and workshops have been converted to domestic use and other uses. Home Farm in Horne Lane, for instance, is no longer in farming use.
- 5.2 The Market Square and King Street are the focus for small businesses and shopping. There are also several public houses, notably the George and Dragon on the east side of Market Square and the Royal Oak.
- 5.3 In addition to St Mary's Church, there is the chapel on Horslow Street and the former chapel behind Sun Street. For secular assembly, the community centre in Brook End has been converted out of the former fire station.
- 5.4 The conservation area is isolated from the open countryside to the north and west by modern development. Fields to the south are not readily apparent, but the playing fields to the east are a significant resource for the town, which is generally devoid of green open spaces except in the area of St Mary's Church. Elsewhere, there are 'borrowed' views of trees and planting in the private gardens of Chigwell House in Horslow Street and Granville House in Royston Street.



Market Square

- 5.5 The Market Square is, of course, the main space and focus for the town. It is described by Pevsner as 'specially attractive compared with Biggleswade, for instance'. The formality of this rectangular space has an underlying organic feel as the routes running from it lead obliquely from the corners.
- 5.6 There are further generous spaces at the junctions to either end of Blackbird Street defined by rounded corners and giving views towards notable buildings, such as the Royal Oak on Biggleswade Road. However, at times, constant traffic can detract from the appreciation of space.



- 5.7 The town centre is very self-contained and the continuous frontages give a strong sense of enclosure. Views are generally internal, therefore, including those on Blackbird Street and from streets leading into the Market Square. The notable exception is the dramatic panorama of open countryside seen from the elevated churchyard of St Mary's Church.
- 5.8 The quality of the town centre is confirmed by the consistency of buildings that make a positive contribution, including the statutory listing of almost all the buildings in the Market Square. The 20th century has been least kind to Potton at Royston Court and, to a lesser extent, at Nos.1-3 Market Square. New development continues on backland off King Street and Horslow Street and there is a strong case for avoiding intensification to the point where the qualities for which the conservation area has been designated are diminished.



6.0 APPEARANCE

- 6.1 In the middle ages, the local material for most buildings was timber. Evidence of timber framing can be seen at Sun House in Sun Street and it also survives under plastered finishes at 26-28 Market Square. Indeed, much of the south side of Market Square is timber framed albeit behind later brick frontages. At No.6 Market Square, the timber frame is clad with timber planks cut to look like masonry.
- 6.2 Stone was used for higher status buildings. St Mary's Church is built variously of cobblestones, ironstone and ashlar. Ironstone is an iron-bearing sandstone that weathers to a rusty brown colour as the iron salts oxidise. It is also seen as 'slips' often laid in a decorative herringbone pattern as, for instance, at the Church Hall or No.22 Chapel Street.



Sun House

- 6.3 From the late 17th century, brick takes over as the dominant building material and Potton has fine examples from before and after the 'Great Fire' at 23 Market Square or the George and Dragon.

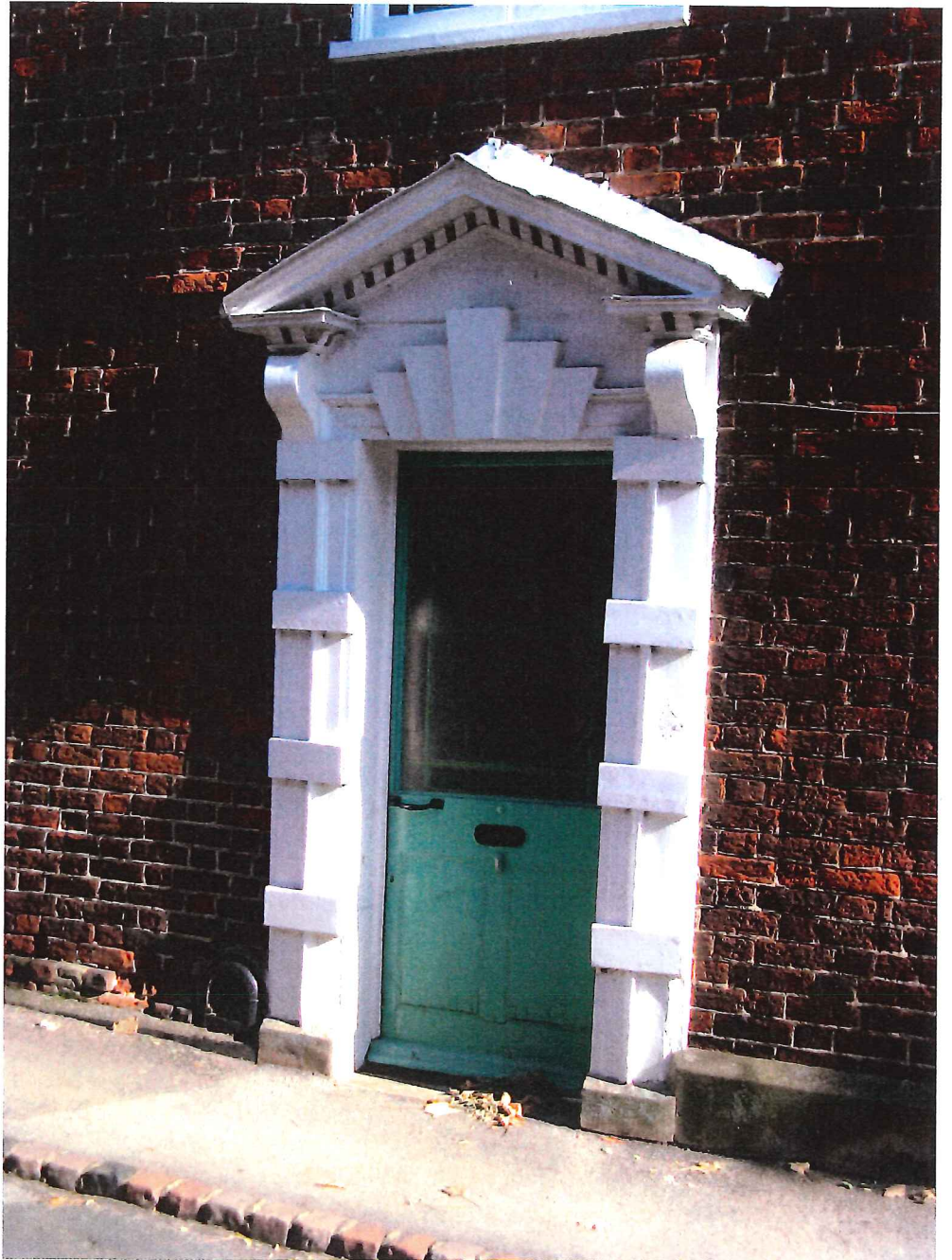


The George and Dragon

- 6.4 The Gault clays of the Ivel valley are particularly suited to the production of cream and pale yellow bricks, which are used to good effect on the later terraces. In the 19th century, red and blue bricks were used to decorative effect with the Gault bricks, a notable example being the houses of the Potter's Charity on Horslow Street.
- 6.5 Bricks are generally laid in Flemish Bond – alternating stretchers and headers and, at No.33 Horslow Street, there is an interesting example of tuck pointing where a narrow band of lime putty gives a refined appearance to an otherwise coarse joint. There are also rounded corners that show off the bricklayer's art as at No.28 King Street where it turns into Church Causeway. Lime render was used to conceal inferior walling materials or to protect timber frames, as may be the case at Lodge Farm.
- 6.6 Early roofs were thatched and an example survives at No.2 Biggleswade Road. However, clay tiles were introduced with brickmaking and, following Potton's connection to the railway network, blue Welsh slates were imported.
- 6.7 Side-opening casement windows were generally used in earlier vernacular buildings, while vertically sliding sashes were introduced for higher status houses in the 18th century after which they became more fashionable. Window frames were always made of timber except in rare cases where iron-framed casements provide the opening windows for the leaded lights in timber-framed buildings or cast-iron windows are used to add a Gothic effect. Many of the historical windows in Potton have been replaced with less traditional designs and materials, such as plastics. These changes are always to the detriment of the historic character of the town.



- 6.8 Potton also has several fine examples of historic panelled doors, moulded and pedimented doorcases and timber shopfronts, such as Potton Post Office in Brook End or the Blackbird Street elevation of No.2 Chapel Street.



Chigwell House, Horslow Street - doorcase

- 6.9 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 main survival in the streets is of granite kerbs. Street furniture is sparingly used as befits a functional rural town. Street lights with a traditional flavour have been introduced throughout the conservation area. However, there are also telephone wires distributed on wooden poles in Blackbird Street and Biggleswade Road. Boundary walls make an important contribution to the definition of streets particularly around the gardens of Chigwell House, Granville House and in Horne Lane.

Market Square

- 6.10 This highly significant and dignified space is defined by its listed buildings. The rectangle has the library as its focal point flanked by specimen trees on an apron of modern paving. The access points are not axial to the formal layout. Instead they approach each corner obliquely so that the appearance unfolds as one approaches.
- 6.11 The buildings are of two to three storeys with eaves or parapet frontages, the exception being Nos.24-28, where gables provide immediate evidence of mediaeval origins, and No.7 where the Victorian bank returns to the gabled form.
- 6.12 The earlier history is also evident in the long narrow plots that extend to north and south suggesting a deliberately planned layout. These plots accommodated working premises behind the principal frontage buildings and the vehicle entrance between Nos.10 and 11 demonstrates the need to service such uses. Indeed, the provision of vehicle entrances is a theme that adds distinctiveness throughout the conservation area.



New shelter, Market Square

King Street

- 6.13 Rebuilding after the Great Fire has left a fine legacy of Georgian buildings. On the west side Nos.3-9 are listed, as are Nos.21, 22 and 28 opposite. Further south, the Co-op store has a mildly Art Deco frontage to a complete range of service building round a courtyard behind. South of this, the open space gives a fine view of the subsidiary range running back from the Old Coach House Hotel, but this is unintended and some form of enclosure might be an improvement.
- 6.14 On the east side, the site of the former Hollies, a large house demolished in the 1960s, is being developed with housing and a supermarket. The latter has re-established a street frontage that joins the range of listed buildings, including the George and Dragon, linking back to the Market Place.





- 6.15 For a through route, King Street is relatively narrow and is often restricted by service vehicles. It tends, therefore, to suffer from congestion that detracts from its historic qualities.

St Mary's Church

- 6.16 King Street is connected to the church area by a causeway that once crossed water-meadows either side of the Potton Brook. It is well-used, but poorly surfaced and lit. St Mary's Church is sited to take advantage of higher ground on a sandstone bluff.
- 6.17 The church area, once isolated from the town centre is now connected by subsequent development to the north of Church Causeway. The churchyard with extensive views to the south has an open aspect punctuated by trees and the characteristic standing tombstones.



St Mary's Church



- 6.18 Adjacent to St Mary's Church there is a large red brick Georgian house that was once the vicarage. Beyond this is the modern vicarage largely hidden in trees. Opposite is the church hall of 1845 built of ironstone slips with a fishscale tile roof. Behind is an open field in recreational use surrounded by trees. Indeed, this area is characterised by trees and open spaces in a complete contrast with the more urban quality of the town centre.

West of Market Square

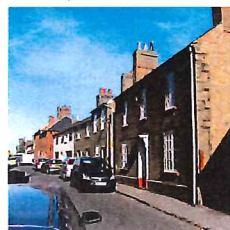
- 6.19 The area to the west of Market Square forms an approximate grid and the long plots on Bull Street and Sun Street suggest further planning in their layout. Bull Street is narrow with a range of historic buildings on the north side and the relatively discreet infill of Burdett's Court to the south.

- 6.20 Sweeping corners at the west end lead into Horslow Street and Chapel Street, the former with the high brick wall to the gardens of Chigwell House. The slight curve of Horslow Street provides an unfolding townscape of largely continuous frontages ranging from the late Georgian of Nos.31-35 to later 19th century artisan houses and also the polychrome brickwork and cast-iron latticed windows of the Potter's Charity houses.



Horslow Street

- 6.21 Chapel Street starts with the Salvation Army Hall. Although built of red brick in 1931, the hall took the historical style of its predecessor, an ironstone Methodist chapel of 1851. It has muscular cast-iron railings in front of the associated house, which is set back from the street. Also set back is No.22 opposite, one of the few houses to be built of ironstone.
- 6.22 The rest of Chapel Street comprises short terraces with important glimpses between. These reveal the chapel in the backland between Chapel Street and Sun Street and, behind No.9, a large timber workshop.



South of Market Square

- 6.23 The plots leading south from Market Square have been truncated by the development of Royston Court and only one service building of any size survives. On Sun Street, the dramatic timber framing of Sun House, the former Sun Inn, is complemented by Nos.2-5 opposite giving a hint of the 16th century Street. Behind is the large bulk of the Sun Street Chapel and, to the south, Georgian building gives way to the 19th century housing on a smaller scale that curves into Blackbird Street. Here, one range has an unusual band of red and blue ceramic tiles set into the Gault brick façade.



No.26 Station Road



6.24 Royston Street leads east with a row of late 19th century houses on its north side – No.25 has a datestone of 1883. Brook House and Granville House are late Georgian properties on what were once the outskirts of the town. Royston Street doubles back as Brook End past the open space of the Henry Smith Playing Fields and the former fire station to join the south east corner of the Market Square.



Blackbird Street - shopfront

- 6.25 Blackbird Street completes the grid. Here, the houses are generally mid-to-late 19th century. No.15, Homehurst, is notable for its brick banding and woodgrain painting, while there is a well-preserved shopfront on the return elevation to No.2 Chapel Street. At the east end, Home Lane has a more rural character as it curves to Home Farm. At the west end is the spacious junction of Moon's Corner.
- 6.26 There are picturesque views across the junction to the Royal Oak public house and no.2 Biggleswade Road, the only remaining thatched house in the conservation area. The curve into Biggleswade Road is lined with a late 19th century terrace at the town end of which is an unsightly billboard. Station Road leads west from Moon's Corner between an ironstone outbuilding behind the thatched house and the steeply pitched roof of the former school. Late 19th century red and yellow brick houses continue on the north side of Station road culminating in the eccentric battlements of No.26.



No.2 Biggleswade Road

7.0 OPPORTUNITIES FOR ENHANCEMENT

- 7.1 While the general condition of conservation area is good, and the Market Square has recently been upgraded, there are always opportunities to enhance buildings and spaces:
- The introduction of an Article 4 direction would stem the further loss of traditional materials and detailing from single family dwellings;
 - There is scope for improving shopfronts through the restoration of traditional details;
 - Special attention must be given to traffic management, particularly in King Street. This may involve traffic calming, reduced speed limits or restrictions on lorry sizes for through traffic;



- Improvements to the surfacing and lighting of Church Causeway would greatly enhance this historic route;
- Moon's Corner and the triangle by the Royal Oak could be developed as a 'gateway' to the town;
- Removal of the hoarding between No.1 Biggleswade Road and No.21 Blackbird Street would be a significant improvement;
- The unenclosed space on the west side of King Street to the south of the Co-op store would benefit from landscaping or development to increase the sense of enclosure;
- Overhead wires in Blackbird Street and Biggleswade Road could be placed underground;
- 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.



Hoarding opposite Moon's Corner

APPENDIX 1: REFERENCES

- Mid Beds District Council – *Potton Conservation Area* – 2002
- Mid Beds District Council – *Mid Bedfordshire Local Plan*
- P Ibbett – *Potton, Bedfordshire: A brief history*
- Potton Town Council – *Potton Town Guide*
- 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

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:

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APPENDIX 2: LISTED BUILDINGS

Listed buildings within the Potton Conservation Area:

• Biggleswade Road	No.2, The Cottage	Grade II
• Biggleswade Road	Nos.4 & 6, The Royal Oak PH	Grade II
• Brook End	No.8	Grade II
• Bull Street	No.1 (Includes No.5 Market Square)	Grade II
• Bull Street	No.8	Grade II
• Chapel Street	Nos.6 & 8	Grade II
• Hatley Road	St Mary's Church	Grade I
• Hatley Road	Group of 160 headstones	Grade II
• Hatley Road	St Mary's House	Grade II
• Hatley Road	Church Hall	Grade II
• Horne Lane	No.5, Home Farm	Grade II
• Horslow Street	No.2, Chigwell House	Grade II
• Horslow Street	No.41	Grade II
• King Street	Nos.2 & 4, The George and Dragon	Grade II
• King Street	No.3	Grade II
• King Street	Nos.5, 5a, 7 & 7a	Grade II
• King Street	Nos.6 & 8	Grade II
• King Street	No.9, Linden Lodge	Grade II
• King Street	Nos.20 & 22	Grade II
• King Street	No.28	Grade II
• Market Square	No.6	Grade II
• Market Square	Nos.9, 10 & 11	Grade II
• Market Square	Nos.12 & 13, Rose and Crown	Grade II
• Market Square	Nos.16 & 17, Claytons	Grade II

• Market Square	No.18 (Tysoe & Son)	Grade II
• Market Square	Nos.19 & 20	Grade II
• Market Square	No.21, The Post Office (Includes No.2 Brook End)	Grade II
• Market Square	Nos.22, 23 & 24	Grade II
• Market Square	No.25	Grade II
• Market Square	Nos.26 & 26a	Grade II
• Market Square	Nos.27 & 28	Grade II
• Market Square	Milestone 10m east of centre	Grade II
• Royston Street	No.24, Brook House	Grade II
• Royston Street	Nos.33 & 35, Granville House	Grade II
• Sun Street	Nos.3 & 5	Grade II
• Sun Street	No.4, Sun House	Grade II
• Sun Street	No.6	Grade II
• Sun Street	No.12	Grade II

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