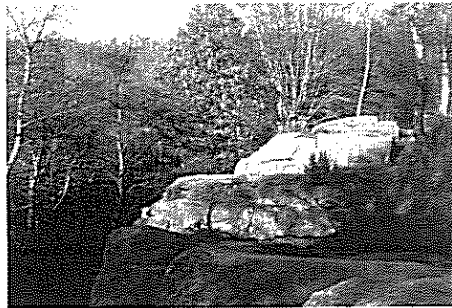


16 DENNY BOTTOM AND RUSTHALL COMMON

16.1 Context

Setting

- 16.1.1 The spectacular geology of this part of the Kent Weald defines the character of Denny Bottom and Rusthall. Thrown out from the fault line of the local sandstone ridge are the exposed rocks which characterise the Rusthall area. Rusthall Common to the south of the developed area represents a high plateau along the ridge which falls away steeply to the north east to Denny Bottom and more gently to the north west toward Lower Green.



Exposed Sandstone rocks on the southern side of Rusthall Common

- 16.1.2 To the south, the change in topography is just as dramatic as the Common gives way to the sharp inclines of the valley. Nowhere is this more dramatic, than at the one hundred and one steps above Happy Valley, from where there are spectacular views across the valley to High Rocks, the Ashdown Forest and the High Weald beyond.

Historical background

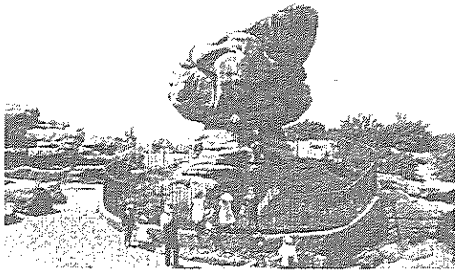
- 16.1.3 Denny Bottom developed in the 19th century as an area for housing the workers employed in the nearby quarry. Rusthall developed on the north side of the Common and is still known locally as Rusthall New Town. The oldest part of the Rusthall area is that part of the village which occupies the corner of Rusthall Road and Lower Green Road, adjacent to the village green and centred on a group of late 18th/early 19th century buildings. Unlike Tunbridge Wells on the other side of the Common, Rusthall was never seen as a fashionable area. Despite the construction of a number of fashionable villas in the 19th century, Rusthall was primarily constructed as a rural settlement quite separate from Tunbridge Wells.

16.2 Denny Bottom

- 16.2.1 Denny Bottom is the area defined by Upper Street, Harmony Street and Woodside Road. In many ways though, these boundary definitions are unimportant because the character of Denny Bottom is quite separate and distinct from the surrounding areas, and it has perhaps one of the most distinctive characters of any residential area in the region. This special character is derived from the exposed sandstone rocks that surround, and in places penetrate, the developed area and the dramatic level changes between Denny Bottom and its environs.

Harmony Street and Toad Rock

- 16.2.2 Perhaps the most spectacular way of approaching Denny Bottom is from Harmony Street at its junction with Rusthall Road. The upper portion of the road remains at the same level until it takes a sharp turn to the right and descends steeply past the Rusthall rocks. Entering on foot, one is drawn to the rocks at the Rusthall Road level, which in places stand some thirty metres above the houses below. Standing on these rocks, one is afforded a spectacular panorama over Denny Bottom to Bidborough and Southborough Common beyond. In the foreground one is immediately struck by the close proximity of the exposed rocks to the terraced cottages along Upper Street.
- 16.2.3 As Harmony Street progresses down hill, the road cuts deeper into the rocks creating a strongly defined gateway into the area. At this point, the road forks and spurs into Rusthall Park, actually splitting a prominent rock in two, creating an even tighter gateway.
- 16.2.4 Moving further north along Harmony Street, opening up to the left is a natural amphitheatre, at its centre is the 'Toad Rock' landmark. The feature itself is a naturally formed rock outcrop which, when viewed from this point uncannily resembles a squatting toad. In 1881 the rock had become such an important local landmark that it had to be fenced to prevent climbing which was starting to cause the gradual erosion of the form. The rocks within the area have traditionally been given names associated to the forms they represent. This tradition was exploited to the full in Victorian times when local people living in the adjacent cottages would act as guides to visitors, naming all rocks of any prominence.



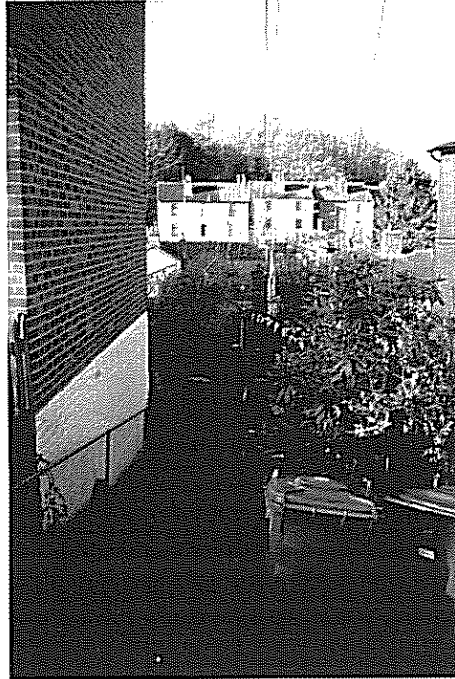
Toad Rock, 1906

- 16.2.5 This amphitheatre is bounded on the northern side by the terraces of Upper Street, the 'Toad Rock Retreat' PH and no. 26 Harmony Street. At this point, the houses on the eastern side of Harmony Street are set above the street behind retaining walls. This enhances the enclosure of the space adding to the variety of level changes within and around the area.
- 16.2.6 Harmony Street continues down hill to the crossroads with Woodside Road. An attractive row of terraced cottages on the western side of the road is set back slightly from the carriageway and between numbers 9 and 10 the buildings give way to offer glimpses of associated back gardens and the backs of the terraces along Apsley Street above to the west.
- 16.2.7 The cottages within Denny Bottom were constructed in the mid-19th century. Although of a variety of designs, they are unified by a similar palette of building materials. The palette primarily consists of a red and yellow brick, whilst on certain properties the elevations are painted white.

Upper Street and Apsley Street

- 16.2.8 Upper Street is probably the most distinctive of the streets in Denny Bottom. This is because of the close proximity of the terraced cottages to the rock outcrops.

- 16.2.9 Entering Upper Street from Harmony Street this close proximity is immediately apparent. Numbers 1-6 Upper Street are an attractive group of cottages in a white render with small front gardens bounded by white picket fences. For many of the properties in this area the threshold space, associated structures, hanging baskets and wall climbing plants greatly enhance the historic semi/rural character. Vehicular access only extends as far as no. 22, from where the road turns into an unmetalled footpath.



The backs of the houses on Apsley Street as seen from Upper Street on the other side of the valley.

- 16.2.10 Before reaching no. 22, a tight alleyway drops away from the street to the right. This route offers pedestrian access to numbers 9 – 21 Upper Street, a number of cottages which nestle in the valley below Upper Street and Apsley Street. This gap in the terraces on Upper Street affords views of the backs of the properties across the valley along Apsley Street. This vista is particularly attractive with fine views of the 3 storey rear elevations of the buildings set against the backdrop of the wooded cliffs above the street. This view also encompasses the chimneys and roofscape of the buildings below which provides a striking contrast emphasising the changes in topography.
- 16.2.11 Upper Street is interrupted between no's. 30 and 31 by 'Loaf Rock'. Another outcrop similar to 'Toad Rock'. This terrace just south of the rock sits beneath the dramatic cliffs, which roughly follow the line of Rusthall Road. At certain points from Rusthall Road, there are spectacular glimpsed views of Denny Bottom below, particularly where the road runs close to the cliff edge. The view from Upper Street looking back up hill is equally impressive with the rising cliffs and over hanging vegetation combining with the glimpses of the traffic moving high above.



Loaf Rock divides the two halves of Upper Street

16.2.12 Rounding the corner of the end terrace on Upper Street, one enters Apsley Street. The southern half of the street is another unmetalled thoroughfare, which runs parallel to the cliff face. A gap between 37 Upper Street and 24 Apsley Street is defined by intermittent use of close board fences. This is an unattractive boundary which would benefit from better management or even sensitive infill development completing the block. The buildings accessed from Apsley Street are two storey on the street elevation and three storey to the rear. This disguises the change in levels until one catches a glimpse of the back yards through the gaps between the No's. 15-24. These areas fall away from the backs of the properties quite steeply to the bottom of the valley.

16.2.13 Moving further north along Apsley Street the sheer cliffs give way to a hollow of exposed rock above which, Apsley Street climbs to Rusthall Road. There are impressive views from the upper portion the street over Denny Bottom to the wooded residential areas of Mount Ephraim and Molyneux Park.



This view demonstrates the dramatic change in levels from Rusthall Road to Denny Bottom

Woodside Road

- 16.2.14 Apsley Street moves downhill taking a sharp right hand turn into Woodside Road. At this point Woodside Road is set below a stone retaining wall which has mature trees and shrubbery over hanging it. Combined with the flank elevation of No. 1, this creates an attractive gateway and pinch point into the road.
- 16.2.15 The properties on both sides of Woodside Road step pleasantly down hill whilst curving gently with the subtle bend of the road. On the northern side of the road four groups of terraced cottages constructed in the late 19th century are set back from the footway behind small front gardens. On the southern side, semi-detached properties provide a pleasing contrast in housing form, particularly No's 10-16 which face the road with gabled end elevations.



Woodside Road

- 16.2.16 The unifying visual characteristic on the street is the combined use of red brick with a yellow brick defining lintels and window surrounds. Similarly, the brick footways on either side of the street create a unifying element within the streetscape. The bricks have weathered to an attractive form and are bounded by Ragstone kerbs, which have weathered in a similar way to create smooth edges.
- 16.2.17 Moving further north east along Woodside Road, but now outside the conservation area, the retaining wall adjacent to No's. 44 – 88 is particularly striking, creating a high embankment above the street and dominating the houses on the northern side of the street. The character is more 'urban' at this point and clearly separate from the Denny Bottom area. Views back along the street to the conservation area are attractive, primarily because the terraces within Denny Bottom 'climb' up the steep hillside and are framed by the trees above.

16.3 Rusthall Common

Rusthall Road

- 16.3.1 Leaving Denny Bottom from Apsley Street one enters a village green area adjacent to No's. 3-7 Rusthall Road. This space creates an appropriately proportioned buffer between Rusthall and Denny Bottom.
- 16.3.2 The corridor along Rusthall Road is defined on the northern side by a collection of large 19th century villas and on the southern side by the heavily wooded edge of Rusthall Common. Rusthall Common was traditionally managed by sheep grazing, restricting tree growth and retaining an open character in the area. In the post war years, the tree growth has taken over creating an enclosed character along this corridor. The villas are set back from the road and the curtilages of the properties are bounded by mature landscaping and boundary walls. This landscaping significantly contributes to the 'arcadian' character. The post box outside No. 9 Rusthall Road is an important visual element in the street providing a splash of red amongst the predominance of dark greens on either side of the road.



The elevations of buildings along Sunnyside Road adjacent to Rusthall Green

- 16.3.3 The conservation area boundary takes in the buildings which front the Common. A particular character is derived from the contrast between the 'hard' urban edge of the developed area and the 'soft' rural character of the Common. This is particularly noticeable at Rusthall as the rectilinear street pattern gives way to the open common. The open and well manicured 'greens' adjacent to the development do however provide a transition from the 'wilder' wooded portion of the Common and the terraces of Sunnyside Road and Common View. The contrasts of brick colour against the green of the Common are particularly noticeable. In particular, the yellow brick of the terraced cottages of Sunnyside Road against the green make a pleasing juxtaposition. No. 7 Lower Green Road is an impressive late 17th century tile hung building, which appropriately defines the corner of the adjacent green. This is reinforced by the attractive stone wall and associated mature Yew trees that define the boundaries of the front garden.



Rusthall Green

- 16.3.4 The green in front of these buildings is bisected by Lower Green Road which is marked out by low wooden bollards to prevent parking on the Common. This subtle form of traffic management has maintained the rural character of the Common. It is important to ensure that the roads at this point continue to be managed in this manner and that highway related structures and kerbing do not impinge upon the character of the area.
- 16.3.5 The cross roads is marked by a memorial structure on its southern side which creates a focus emphasising the area's nodal function. St. Paul's Church Centre is a critical landmark building in the area. Rusthall Road becomes Rusthall High Street at this point and commercial and community uses line either side of the road. These uses give the clear impression that this stretch of road represents the heart of the community.
- 16.3.6 The buildings that line the north western side of the Common View and Rusthall High Street junction create a distinct corner to this part of the Common. No's. 2, 4 and 6 Rusthall High Street are the most prominent buildings here with their gabled ends facing the Common. Unfortunately, recent ground floor shop fronts have impacted upon the integrity of the buildings. Although not within the conservation area, a number of unattractive shop fronts along the Rusthall High Street do impinge upon the historic character of the view along the High Street to the west.

- 16.3.7 Of particular concern is the impact on the historic character and environmental quality of the recycling centre adjacent to No's 1 - 5 Common View. This, combined with the car park site on the corner of the junction with Vermont Road detracts from the historic character greatly.

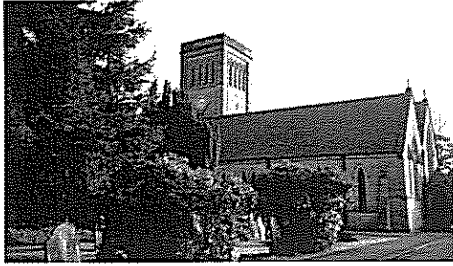
The Common (south)

- 16.3.8 Rusthall Common constitutes the bulk of the conservation area at this point and at the junction with Langton Road and Coach Road is the highest point within the conservation area. Nowhere is this more graphically illustrated than at the exposed rocks above Happy Valley to the south.
- 16.3.9 The most spectacular element of this area is the surprise one experiences as one emerges from the densely wooded part of the Common to the exposed high rocks above Happy Valley. The cliff above Happy Valley affords spectacular views out towards the Ashdown Forest and the High Weald in the distance. A central element of this is the '101 steps' that link the Cold Baths (local bathing pools) on the valley floor to the Common some 60m above.



The 101 steps linking Rusthall Common to Happy Valley below

- 16.3.10 Moving east from 101 steps, St. Paul's church nestles on the south eastern side of the Common. St. Paul's was built in an early English style in 1849 by Henry and NE Stevens. It is set in a walled church yard adjacent to some attractive former school buildings. The Common to the north of the churchyard remains free from extensive mature tree and scrub growth and is of a character and style similar to the original management of the Common. This part of the Common is bounded on the northern side by a tree lined avenue which bounds either side of Langton Road. On the southern side of this area, the Common has as its focus an impressive war memorial built into the boundary wall of St. Paul's Church.



St. Pauls Church

- 16.3.11 Due to its location high above the valley, the church tower and double gabled roof line is given added emphasis as it is set against the open sky. Interspersed throughout the churchyard are a number of mature Yew trees and other evergreen species. The church and school complex are set well back from the Langton Road giving the area a tranquil, rural character.

16.4 Summary of elements which contribute to the character of the area

Key building groups

- 16.4.1 Rusthall village is characterised by the close relationship of the urban edge to the open spaces of Rusthall Common and the rocks. Streets such as Common View, Upper Street, and Apsley Street are small scale terraces that one might find in any inner urban area, but that in this case face not a mirror image of themselves opposite, but out onto unique natural features.



Apsley Street

- 16.4.2 The St. Paul's Church Centre, Rusthall Road is an important focal building which identifies its place as the heart of Rusthall. Buildings in Lower Green Road, Sunnyside Road and Rusthall Road (including mature gardens and boundary walls) contribute with it to the enclosure of a central "village green" location.
- 16.4.3 Quite separately from the rest of the village, St. Paul's Church and the adjacent school buildings are a grouping of historic buildings set within a wooded area.



Upper Street

Key spaces

- 16.4.4 The varied topography of the area generates many distinctive spaces. In the Denny Bottom area exposed cliffs and rocks are characteristic:
- Bulls Hollow – impressive space created from the quarrying in the area. Mature trees growing on the rocks above generate a strong sense of enclosure.
 - Toad Rock ‘hollow’ – a natural amphitheatre created by the weathering of rocks, with Toad Rock at its centre.
 - Exposed rock and associated spaces adjacent to Upper Street and Apsley Street – distinctive spaces sandwiched between the buildings and the exposed cliff faces below Rusthall Road.
- 16.4.5 The other village spaces are green space of a more “conventional” character, such as the little green at the junction of Rusthall Road and Bretland Road, and Rusthall Village Green itself. These areas are mown to emphasise their managed relationship to the village itself.
- 16.4.6 North of St. Paul’s Church and to the south of Langton Road, Rusthall Common provides an important open setting for the churchyard. Again mowing links them to the buildings associated with them.

Key views

- 16.4.7 The topography of the Rusthall Conservation Area creates numerous views within it and to its surroundings. There are long distance views from the southern side of Rusthall Common over Happy Valley to the Ashdown Forest beyond, and a panorama from the upper part of Harmony Street out over the Denny Bottom. The approach to Rusthall village green from Coach Road reveals a steadily widening view of the centre of the conservation area.

- 16.4.8 Within the conservation area there are some closely defined vistas. The most unusual and powerful of all is to Toad Rock, which can only be seen specifically as 'the toad' from a certain point on Harmony Street. Other local views, such as glimpses to the backs of the Apsley street buildings and from the Harmony Street crossroads to Woodside Road 'climbing' uphill with trees in background, add to Rusthall's special character.

Building materials and colours

- 16.4.9 The predominant use of red and yellow bricks in the Rusthall area is a unifying element. Where both brick colours are used, the yellow brick is used to define key features such as lintels and windowsills, as well as decorative courses. Some properties have used a white painted render to good effect on south and west facing elevations. Roofs are predominately of slate. Other distinctive materials include the use of red brick pavements on footways and ragstone kerbs, which have weathered to an attractive state.

Local details

- 16.4.10 The overwhelmingly distinctive element throughout the area is the series of exposed rocks, which define the character of Rusthall. The main rock groups are identified on the analysis plan.

Green spaces, trees and hedgerows

- 16.4.11 In addition to the key spaces identified in paragraph 16.4.4, there are also a number of specific green elements that contribute to the character of the area. These are as follows;
- Trees on Rusthall village green
 - Boundary planting within the gardens of no's 8 –12 Rusthall Road.
 - Trees along the Rusthall Road corridor.

16.5 Elements which detract from the historic character of the area

- 16.5.1 There are a number of elements that detract from the historic character of the conservation area.
- Rusthall Grange development – modern residential blocks which are set in mature woodland to the north of Denny Bottom.
 - No. 35 Harmony Street – an acceptable building which unfortunately is vacant and boarded up.
 - Recycling centre and car park on Common View Road – unattractive spaces and uses in such a sensitive location.