

12. PEMBURY ROAD

12.1 Context

Setting

- 12.1.1 A separate conservation area was previously designated for Pembury Road, which adjoins the main Tunbridge Wells conservation area at Ferndale/Carlton Road at its west end. The area more or less equates to an elongated plateau of land at about 150 m above sea level from Sandrock Road in the west to the A21 in the east, which reduces to a narrow ridge above Dunorlan Park. This topography gives enormous potential for views from the area, which is best expressed at Dunorlan Park.
- 12.1.2 The essential character of the conservation area is, however, linear with views strongly contained by dense planting along the Pembury Road corridor. At Sandrock Road and Pembury Road west of Dunorlan Park the conservation area includes a broader area of housing, which is linked in age and character to the Victorian suburban area of Camden Park and St. James'.
- 12.1.3 Pembury Road is one of the major access routes into Tunbridge Wells. Not only does this generate very high traffic flows and congestion on Pembury Road itself, it also attracts traffic trying to access and by-pass the route via adjoining roads, notably Halls Hole Road, Sandrock Road and Sandhurst Road. Traffic is perhaps the greatest threat to the integrity of the conservation area, both in the damage directly done to it and engineering measures that might be proposed to deal with it.

Historical background

- 12.1.4 At the time of the development of the Calverley Estate, Pembury Road was known as Fairmile Road. In the 1860s William Willicombe developed some enormous mansions here and along Sandrock Road, and some of the wealthiest people in Tunbridge Wells came to occupy them. The heart of this area has been redeveloped, and the great houses lost. However, a number of Willicombe's houses survive on the north side of Sandrock Road, and one or two other houses on Pembury Road (such as Concord House, Chilston House and St. Christopher's).
- 12.1.5 At this period, plans were also made to develop the area between Pembury Road and Camden Park along similar lines, with a central reserved area and tight stipulations to the value and type of development permitted. They did not come to fruition, and it was not until the 1890s that Louis Beale, who also built Maderia Park, began to develop the area. His mansions include Macquarie Lodge, Rosset Holt and Kingswood Birches.
- 12.1.6 By the 1900s many of the larger houses were, because of their size, changing to institutional uses. St. Christopher's, originally Ravensdale, became a Catholic girls' boarding school as early as 1881. The Salvation Army's interests in the area also expanded in Kingswood Road. The fate of Dunorlan House, built in 1862 for Henry Reed, was finally sealed after the Second World War, when it was demolished. Its splendid grounds have, however, passed into the ownership of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council for the enjoyment of the general public.

Architectural and historic qualities

- 12.1.7 With the loss of so many of the mid 19th century mansions from the area, the specifically architectural interest of the conservation area is diminished. Nevertheless, there are some key remaining buildings, mentioned throughout this chapter, and their remaining lodges and gate piers still provide important architectural references. As in the other "Arcadian" areas of Tunbridge Wells, the direct impact of the buildings is in any case reduced by the density of trees and

planting that screen them from the road, and this is an essential part of the conservation areas quality.

- 12.1.8 So, although lost in many instances, the heritage of Willicombe and his contemporaries' vision of the area continues to influence its character, and the context of the new development that has replaced the original buildings.
- 12.1.9 The importance of the conservation area in Pembury Road is related strongly to its significance as a major entrance route to Tunbridge Wells. Dense boundary planting and trees along its length emphasises its linearity, and the periodic interest of elements gate lodges and curved, often elaborate entrance walls underline its distinctiveness.

12.2 Special identity areas

- 12.2.1 The Pembury conservation area has 3 distinctive sub-areas, all linked by the character of their green landscaped setting: the original area of mansions around Sandrock Road, Dunorlan Park, and the green approach from the A21.

Sandrock Road

- 12.2.2 The landmark of St. James' church marks a transition point from the older residential areas, characterised by streets of villas, to the originally much lower density and exclusive housing area of Willicombe's mansions in Sandrock Road.
- 12.2.3 Looking east from the church towards the hairpin junction at Ferndale Point, the lush green cover retains some of that earlier visual impact. But concealed behind it in many instances are the boxy mid 20th century forms of St. James' School and blocks of flats, rather than the classical and Gothic mansions of Willicombe's era.
- 12.2.4 Sandrock Road is a busy traffic route, particularly at school opening and closing times. The Old Stables, a picturesque brick lodge opposite the Ferndale junction, marks the beginning of the green corridor of Sandrock Road. Red brick pavements remain in places, but close-boarded timber fencing now intrudes in front of the boundary hedges along much of the road length.
- 12.2.5 A stuccoed terrace of modern houses on the corner of Carlton Road, and another group, Ferndale Point on Ferndale, have both been developed with open frontages, removing the original boundary planting, and intrude into the scene as a result. Within the heart of the area, the school and new cul-de-sacs have destroyed the original character of the area, retaining only earlier names, like Shrublands Court. While retention of the green setting has mitigated some of this impact, the intrusion of widened accesses has damaged the character of the eastern end of Sandrock Road.

Dunorlan Park

- 12.2.6 Dunorlan Park is now an important municipal facility. It also assures the penetration of landscape well into Tunbridge Wells, limiting further expansion of the town in this quarter: albeit that it is of a highly managed character compared to the landscape that adjoins it. Immediately below the lake, between Bayhall Road and Halls Hole Road, wetlands have an important ecological value.
- 12.2.7 Dunorlan Park's sloping southerly aspect is its greatest asset. This generates broad views south-eastwards to High Wood and the ridge that extends from it towards Pembury. The most significant are from the Pembury Road car park and the Halls Hole Road car park. In reverse there are views back to buildings on the edge of Tunbridge Wells. St Peter's spire in Camden Park is a key landmark, but also prominent are the intrusive flat roofed blocks of the Nuffield Hospital in Kingswood Road, and the 1960s point block Heathfield House, at the corner of Sandrock and Pembury Roads.

- 12.2.8 Within the park numerous mature specimen trees maintain its character. Potentially intrusive elements like the car parks are screened by beech hedges. Mature trees lining Pembury Road also provide an important backdrop in views up from the lake (see below).
- 12.2.9 The old Dunorlan estate entrance is a feature of some note in Pembury Road, visible particularly across the junction with Sandrock Road. Its unusual and elaborate wrought iron and timber gates remain as access for a group of recent and unremarkable detached houses: the gates could do with some maintenance, however. The lodge itself is a relatively simple single-storey building, whose slate and lead-hipped roof seems to have been modernised - it certainly lacks chimneys and other architectural detail. The municipal entrance is less notable; its brick piers have been damaged and vehicle access onto the busy Pembury Road is difficult. Damage has occurred to verges from large vehicles making manoeuvres at the Sandrock Road junction.
- 12.2.10 Opposite Dunorlan Park, St Christopher's retains much of its original character, with its extensive grounds and remaining gate lodge. The setting is spoiled by a number of subsidiary buildings and annexes in the grounds, but the overall low density of development is maintained. Similar issues apply to Beechwood an extensive Italianate mansion, now a private boarding school. With Dunorlan Park, it preserves an overall low density green "buffer" to this edge of the town. It, too, enjoys broad views from its grounds over countryside to the south east.

Pembury Road

- 12.2.11 A busy traffic node occurs at the junction of Halls Hole Road and Blackhurst Lane, known as Blackhurst Corner. It is marked by a dense woodland block between Halls Hole Road and Pembury Road, and heavy tree cover all around the junction. On the north side of the road a covered reservoir prohibits development, and its site extends into Gregg's Wood. Thus a green belt separates the small residential area of Sandown Park from the town, defining its eastern edge, and the location is in effect the eastern gateway to Tunbridge Wells.
- 12.2.12 East of Blackhurst Corner, the conservation area reduces to a relatively narrow corridor comprising the enclosing hedges and trees at the roadside. Along its length, mature trees occur in boundaries and in certain key groups, including St George's School, Beechurst School and at Blackhurst Corner. Species typically include cedar, oak, cypress, lime, yew, redwood and sweet chestnut, reflecting the planted parkland character.
- 12.2.13 Despite the challenging environment created by the traffic, Pembury Road retains an informal character. Of particular note in this respect are the grass verges and the footpath set back from the road edge on the southern side, which meanders around mature trees to lend unexpected and much needed charm.
- 12.2.14 Views within the area are generally limited to those along Pembury Road, characterised by subtle curves and changes of angle that are generated by the road line. There are also excellent views northwards across open fields under the canopy of roadside trees, now that the undergrowth along the field boundary has been cut back, and views from north and south outside the conservation area to the trees lining Pembury Road along the ridgeline.

12.3 Summary of elements that contribute to the area's special character

Key building groups

- 12.3.1 The character of Pembury Road lies in its linearity and enclosure by dense vegetation. There are no key groups of buildings that define urban space. Nevertheless, there are certain buildings that have significance in the area, notably

Beechwood School, St. Christopher's and the landmark of St. Peter's spire (outside the conservation area), as well as remaining lodges, gates and railings alongside the road.

Views

- 12.3.2 Again, the contained linear character of Pembury Road governs the character of views in the area. Broader views exist northwards from the east end of Pembury Road across Sandown Park and southwards from Dunorlan Park over countryside to the south-west.
- 12.3.3 Views along Pembury Road reveal themselves progressively, initially from the east end at its junction with the A21 to the woodland at Blackhurst corner. The view back to Blackhurst corner from the junction of Sandrock Road is of similar importance leaving the town. There are also important vistas into Sandrock Road, Sandhurst Road and Blackhurst Lane from Pembury Road between dense green property boundaries.

Traditional building materials and colours

- 12.3.4 The area shows the change in tastes from the classical Italianate styles by Willicombe in the mid-19th century in the Sandrock area to the more English revivalist styles of the Edwardian period. The materials and details of these developments are covered in other suburban areas of St. James and Broadwater Down (q.v.) and they are similar in Pembury Road.
- 12.3.5 In Dunorlan Park the Pembury Road conservation area possesses one of the most significant public amenities in Tunbridge Wells.

Contribution of green spaces, trees and hedges

- 12.3.6 As in other Arcadian areas, greenery is the essential ingredient of the Pembury Road conservation area. Its impact is primarily an overall effect that does not rely on individual stands or specimens of trees.
- 12.3.7 The following elements are of note:-
- 12.3.8 Generally: high laurel and other evergreen shrubbery, creating a "green wall" effect.
- 12.3.9 Mature trees on the ridgeline of Pembury Road, including groups at St. George's School and Beechwood School. Species include cedar, oak, cypress, yew, lime, redwood, sweet chestnut, etc.
- 12.3.10 Woodland group at Blackhurst Corner concealing water tower dense deciduous, immature, including oak, birch, beech, with scrub of holly, laurels and elder.
- 12.3.11 Tree groups north of Blackhurst Corner, around reservoir and closing views in Sandrock Park residential area.

12.4 Summary of elements that detract from the area's special character

Intrusion, loss and damage

- 12.4.1 The main detractor from the conservation area is the very heavy traffic in Pembury Road, which is often stationary during the congestion of peak periods.
- 12.4.2 Visually, high rise buildings (e.g. Heathfields) and recent housing is intrusive on the skyline, particularly viewed from Dunorlan Park. The council depot and reservoir opposite the woodland are also intrusive elements, but for much of the year are well screened by the woodland trees that surround them.

- 12.4.3 The physical environment of Pembury Road has been damaged by turning traffic overrunning verges at Sandrock Road. Elsewhere extensive use of timber lapped and close-boarded fencing in front of hedgerows compromises their appearance.
- 12.4.4 There have been many detrimental changes to the area that are to some degree mitigated by retention of the dense green cover of the conservation area. They demonstrate the importance of the green setting, and while they contribute nothing positive to the conservation area, their detrimental impacts are limited. They include:-
- The water tower at Blackhurst Corner, screened by the surrounding woodland.
 - Housing in Dunorlan Park
 - The Pines, Sherwood Park
 - Trinity Close: a suburban terraced development in parkland gardens.
 - The Salvation Army Citadel: a utilitarian building on a key street corner, including Bucklers Close.