

15 MOLYNEUX PARK

15.1 Context

Setting

- 15.1.1 Molyneux Park was originally established as a separate conservation area from the Tunbridge Wells conservation area, which it adjoins at Mount Ephraim. As a separate identity area, it comprises a coherent estate development built over a relatively short period at the turn of the 20th century, based on Molyneux Park Road, Boyne Park, Earls Road, Court Road and Oakdale Road. The area is almost entirely residential.
- 15.1.2 The topography of Molyneux Park is striking. Mount Ephraim runs along the top of a high ridge, with the Common sloping south-eastwards, and the Molyneux Park area lies on the north-east side of the ridge. The ridge extends east-west, and is incised by numerous small valleys running northwards from it, which are typically heavily wooded with more open ground on the spurs between. At Mount Ephraim, levels are over 130m above sea level, dropping to just 100 metres at Bishops Down Park Road at the northern extremity of the area.
- 15.1.3 Boyne Park runs on the south-west facing side of a gentle spur below the main ridge of Mount Ephraim, and rises a little towards its junction with Oakdale Road. Molyneux Park Road drops lower on the spur, and is retained above a steep embankment at Molyneux Court, which descends further to a deeply incised valley at Bishops Down Park Road.
- 15.1.4 The whole area drops steeply from the ridge, creating a valley-like setting with long views along Boyne Park and Molyneux Park to distant features such as Speldhurst Church to the north west. Trees are important in the setting, and provide an overall green outlook, screening and breaking up the potential visual impact of extensive areas of housing.

Historical background

- 15.1.5 With the growth of the Wells as a fashionable attraction, the north side of the Common began to be developed from about 1680 with residences and lodging houses to take advantage of the elevation and views southwards. By the time of the first Ordnance Survey map of 1867, large houses existed all along Mount Ephraim, with extensive areas behind of gardens, meadows and trees.
- 15.1.6 These included Boyne House built for Viscount Boyne in the late 18th century, where Boyne Park now joins Mount Ephraim. The house was bought and demolished in 1891 by Charles Gallard to access the land behind, in order to build Boyne Park, Somerville Gardens, Mayfield Road and Oakdale Road. Gallard had houses designed by the architect Herbert Murkin Caley, and they were built to clearly defined minimum standards: for example, it was covenanted that all houses should be detached. Development of the whole area was complete by about 1910.
- 15.1.7 In 1866 F G Molyneux had Earl's Court built, but the estate was sold off in the 1890s following his death. The house itself was greatly extended to become Reliance House, a significant landmark on Mount Ephraim visible from extensive areas of the town to the south. The present Molyneux Park Road was created from an access lane to the grounds behind the house, which adjoined the Boyne House estate. It linked Oakdale Road and served Earls Road and Court Road behind. The development followed similar lines to Boyne Park: William Barnsley Hughes was the main architect.



Reliance House

Architectural and historic qualities

- 15.1.8 There is a strong consistency of character in Molyneux Park that comes from the original design controls and the relatively brief development period of the area. The buildings themselves are usually generously scaled two-storey with an attic storey, in red brick following English vernacular details with tile hanging, timbered and rendered panels at first floor levels, and elaborate woodwork. Rooflines are broken up with slated or plain-tiled gables and dormers. Plan forms, too, are articulated with square and splayed window bays, often carried for the whole building height to gabled projections. Chimneys are critical features, carefully sized to further enhance the varied roofscape.
- 15.1.9 Within these overall principles, there is great individual variety, with turrets, stained glass, and many subtle patterns and motifs formed in rendered panels ("pargetting"). Nevertheless, it is the consistency of the appearance of the area that is of primary importance in creating its special character.
- 15.1.10 In this respect the street itself is extremely important. The houses are not deeply set back, only 4-6 metres, but their front gardens are generally well planted, and they provide a linking theme between the detached houses. Stone front boundary walls reinforce the theme, and in many instances form retaining structures to sloping sites, which adds to their impact. In this way, the street is immediately very well defined by front boundaries and gardens, while the houses behind give a second level of definition with their height and architectural interest.
- 15.1.11 It is evident that in the past there was more planting and that, for example, street trees have been lost. It is evident too that Tunbridge Wells' classic red brick paving was also used throughout the area, and there were elaborate cast iron lighting columns. A particular variation in Molyneux Park is the use of blue-black stable paviments at footpath crossing points into those few original houses that had carriage access onto the site. Again the loss of these elements has diminished the quality of the street: many areas of brick have been replaced with red tarmac, and just a few "barley-sugar" lampposts remain.
- 15.1.12 A number of influences put these intrinsic qualities at risk. Many of the larger houses have been converted for multiple occupation, as flats or institutional residences. The area has been relatively fortunate in avoiding detrimental changes, such as modern replacement windows, but intrusive elements like external fire escapes have crept in. The most damage has occurred at street level, not just in the loss of original surfaces to tarmac, but also in the introduction of car parking in front areas. The consequence is to lose walls and the "matrix" of planting that binds the whole together.



Boyne Tower, and parking

- 15.1.13 Similar impacts arise from new infill housing, where car access and an “estate” style of site planning ignore the importance of front boundary walls, planting and enclosure. Without these elements, the disruption that modern standardised house forms create by unsympathetic and mean scale, detailing and material is completely unmitigated. Worse still is the adaptation of older buildings to this style, with the introduction of garages into ground floors, for example, and removal of architectural detail.

15.2 Special identity areas

- 15.2.1 Within the overall scope of the Tunbridge Wells conservation areas, the Molyneux Park conservation area has a strong single identity. For the purpose of its description, it is set out here in two parts that represent the subtle differences between the Boyne Park development and the Molyneux Park Road development.

Boyne Park

- 15.2.2 Boyne Park is architecturally the richer of the two developments. The slightly curving alignment of the street also provides greater subtlety of experience progressing along the street, which is enhanced by the dipping levels of the road as it drops from Mount Ephraim, and then rises a little to Oakdale Road.
- 15.2.3 The first landmark, no. 1 Boyne Park, is technically outside the Molyneux Park conservation area, and indeed is by another architect (E J May) in Queen Anne revival style. Nevertheless it occupies a key corner, addressing both Boyne Park and Mount Ephraim equally well. Within the street, Boyne Tower is placed strategically in the focus of views at the first curve in the street, from where the long view downhill takes the eye to the octagonal corner tower of no. 27, with its spired roof and prominent gables. Again, it illustrates well the power of the corner site, here on Mayfield Road, and similar devices are used at no. 38 on the corner of Oakdale Road.
- 15.2.4 The view along Boyne Park is closed quietly with the neat villas of Oakdale Road, fronted by canopies and pretty gardens. It is unfortunate that there is not more consistency in the treatment of boundaries, which are variably low walls, pickets and hedges. The houses here, as in Mayfield Road, are a little less imposing, but the street has a smaller scale charm. Houses group together a little more tightly and lie a little closer to the street, allowing the passer-by to see more of their individual details. Front gardens, too, seem more visible, and at each end of the street trees form the skyline.



Corner turret

Molyneux Park

- 15.2.5 The long uninterrupted straight of Molyneux Park Road creates a less intimate character than Boyne Park. The natural contours have also been to some extent ironed out with a retaining section built up above Molyneux Court. The extended and altered office block of Reliance House (formerly Earl's Court) dominates the entrance to the area from Mount Ephraim. Once into Molyneux Park Road, stuccoed boundary walls provide important enclosure to the street, but one's eye is drawn through, to the horizon, and the distant vista of Speldhurst Church.
- 15.2.6 There are many intrusions into Molyneux Park Road at its southern end, notably the seven-storey block of Regina Court, whose height is exaggerated by its position relatively high on the ridge and above Molyneux Court. However, the setting of mature trees - horse-chestnuts, limes and maples - mitigates its impact and is a valuable conservation asset.
- 15.2.7 The lower part of the Molyneux Park conservation area, around Earl's Road and Court Road, feels more sheltered and has a more intimate character. At its heart is the private Molyneux Park garden, with its lawns enclosed by mature trees, rhododendrons and other shrubs. Some impressive pines remain, but many trees were lost in the hurricane of 1987. Nevertheless, trees here, on boundaries between Boyne Park and Molyneux Park Road, and in the valley of Bishops Down Park Road to the west, provide a very important green backdrop to the housing.
- 15.2.8 Earl's Road and Court Road were built in the later stages of the development of the estate, and exhibit "Tudor" features, such as heavy timber porches and other decoration that would later be picked up (usually in a degraded form) by spec house-builders after the Great War. Here it still has the charm of a design fantasy in the English vernacular tradition that can be seen throughout the identity area.

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

Key townscape groups

- 15.3.1 In a suburban context like Molyneux Park, groups of buildings exert a less direct influence on the scale and quality of street space than they do in a town centre area. Here it is rather the interrelation of buildings and planting that creates the overall character of the conservation area. Loosely, the main groups in the conservation area are:
- *Boyne Park*: large houses with imposing focal features, e.g. the turrets and spires of nos. 12 (Boyne Towers), 27 and 38;
 - *Oakdale Road*: compact villas with small well kept front gardens, and a more intimate street character;

- *Molyneux Park*: plainer houses than Boyne Park, providing strong containment of the street;
- *Earl's Road*: large villas on the west side, tall semi-detached houses more tightly packed on the east;
- *Court Road*: again, relatively tightly packed houses of variable designs; the main character generated by the curving alignment of the street.

Views

- 15.3.2 Certain buildings create local incidents and focal points within the conservation area. The large corner houses in Boyne Park are of particular note, and they provide the focus for internal views. In a broader context, the topography of the area provides some longer views to the surroundings.
- 15.3.3 Views from the east ends of Molyneux Park Road and Boyne Park to the Common are particularly fine, as are those from Mount Ephraim eastwards and southwards over the Common to high ground on the south side of the town: and similar views in reverse. From the higher areas and properties at the east end of the area there are long views north-westwards to Speldhurst
- 15.3.4 Within the area corner houses and houses such as Boyne Towers are placed to occupy focal positions in the street scene, and these features unfold as one progresses along the street.

Traditional materials and local details

- 15.3.5 As in Tunbridge Wells' other suburban areas, consistency of building materials is a key component of Molyneux Park's special character. The English vernacular styles that were adopted by the architects of the two estates particularly use local constructional elements such as red brick, tile hanging and decorative plasterwork.
- 15.3.6 In the streetscape, the use of the Tunbridge Wells "palette" of red brick footways, stone kerbs, and stable pavements at pavement crossovers is typical.



Ground surfaces, Boyne Park

Contribution of green spaces, trees and hedges

- 15.3.7 The green space of Molyneux Park gardens is one of the area's prime assets. However, because it is so discreetly hidden from view and not readily accessible to the general public, its contribution to the character of the conservation area is indirect. Most significantly, its shrubbery provides glimpses of green between houses, and its trees a soft backdrop above the rooftops.
- 15.3.8 Generally, garden planting and hedges are so fundamentally a part of the suburban character, that identifying key individual, examples risks undermining the importance of greenery everywhere else. Perhaps the most important observation is that there are relatively few significant trees in the streetscape now, and that this probably does not meet with the original design concept of the estates' architects.
- 15.3.9 The key vegetation elements are:
- Belts of trees south and west of the area, featuring birch, ash, cypress and laurel, extending into gardens in Bishops Down Park, that create a tree-lined skyline in views from the area;
 - Mature trees around Molyneux Court and Regina Court, mitigating the visual impact of these developments;
 - Oak trees on boundaries between Molyneux Park Road and Boyne Park;
 - Trees enclosing footpath links from Oakdale Road to Royal Chase, and from Molyneux Park Road to Bishops Down Park;
 - Boundary hedges and planting in front gardens;
 - Pine, cedar, beech and other trees in Molyneux Park gardens. Glimpses into Molyneux Park Gardens from Molyneux Park Road, Earl's Road and Court Road.



Molyneux Gardens

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

- 15.4.1 The main threats to the integrity of the conservation area are from insensitive alterations to the original houses, loss of garden and boundary wall features through alterations carried out by property owners, and loss of street surfaces and features through works carried out by highways and services authorities.

Loss and damage

- 15.4.2 The buildings themselves have fared relatively well in retaining original windows, doors and other features. The risk areas are:
- roofs: replacement of slate and clay tiles with concrete machine-made tiles;
 - windows: replacement with UPVC, often hinged rather than sliding sash, applied glazing "bars" to large double-glazed units;
 - boundary walls and hedges: removed for car access;
 - Pavements: red-brick areas lost to tarmac (red tarmac is not a suitable substitute); vehicle crossovers in asphalt rather than stable-paviours;
 - Underground utilities causing unrepaired damage to historic paving surfaces.

Intrusions

- 15.4.3 While the essential green cover of the area can mitigate the worst visual intrusions, a few locations of negative impact exist.
- Apartment blocks at no's. 9 and 14 Boyne Park: loss of front boundaries and gardens to car access and parking, poor architectural form;
 - New houses between no's. 12a and 12b Molyneux Park Road: inappropriate spec. built form
 - 4a Court Road: ditto;
 - Garages adjacent no. 1, Court Road;
 - Somerville Road Molyneux Park Gardens: ditto;
 - Regina House, Molyneux Park Road: inappropriate, over dominant building form.
 - Utilities: overhead telephone wiring;