

RAMSBURY

Village Design Statement

2002





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Ramsbury Village Design Statement

Introduction

What is a Village Design Statement?

A Village Design Statement is a description of a village (which is not necessarily the same area as a parish) at a point in time, highlighting the qualities its residents value, and setting out the residents' wishes for the design of development in the village.

It is intended to help to manage the process of change, whether that change stems from large developments or small-scale additions and alterations. It is not to be used to determine whether development should take place; that is the purpose of the Local Plan produced by the District Council. It sets out guidelines as to how planned development should be carried out and is designed to be complementary to the Local Plan.

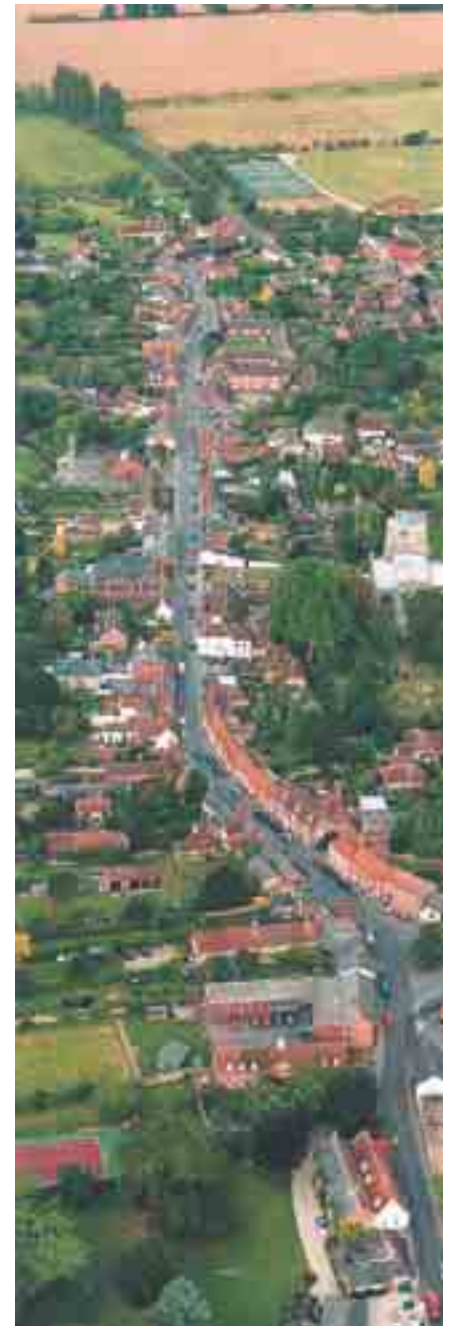
Who is it for?

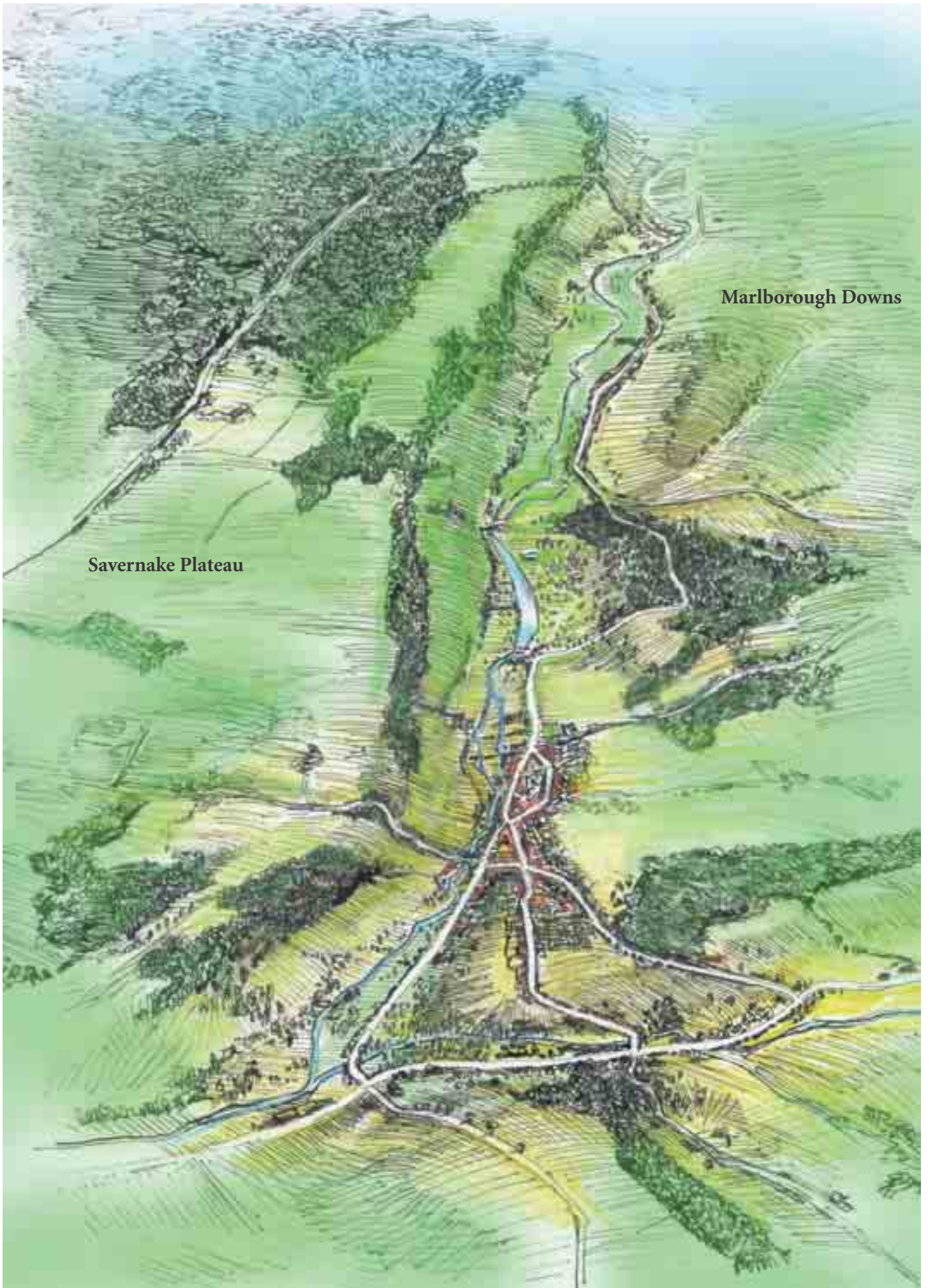
The Statement is for everyone concerned with the physical form within which the daily activity of the village takes place. In particular:

- for residents, it provides guidance for keeping any alterations and extensions in sympathy with the character of the village;
- for developers, their architects, and designers, it explains what the village community would like to see in new and altered buildings, and in changes to the village's landscape setting;
- for local authorities, it sets out material considerations to be taken into account in arriving at judgements on planning.

How will Ramsbury's Design Statement work?

If a village design statement (VDS) is adopted by a local authority, it becomes "Supplementary Planning Guidance" (SPG). SPG does not form part of the Local Plan, and therefore a VDS does not have the status that the 1990 Town and Country Planning Act gives to the Local Plan in deciding planning applications; but SPG may be taken into account as a material consideration, and the Government's Planning Policy Guidance Note 12, *Development Plans*, emphasises that the Secretary of State will give substantial weight in making decisions on matters that come before him to SPG which derives out of and is consistent with the Local Plan.[1]





Savernake Plateau

Marlborough Downs

Ramsbury's landscape setting

Ramsbury's landscape setting

Ramsbury, population just under 2,000, lies on the River Kennet, seven miles east of Marlborough, in the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. In the words of the Kennet Landscape Assessment: “The whole [Kennet Valley] has an essentially tranquil, intimate and pastoral character within which only small-scale, sensitively designed development, associated with existing built form could be successfully accommodated without adverse landscape impacts” [2].

The approach to Ramsbury down Froxfield Road



The approach to Ramsbury down Manor Hill



The village is set in the Kennet Valley Character Area, within the valley formed by the north slope of the Savernake Plateau and the south slope of the Marlborough Downs [3]. The geology and land form of the valley have led to a linear development of the village, which stretches for more than a mile, mainly on the north bank of the Kennet. The attractive landscape of the Kennet Valley and its unspoilt riparian nature mean that the majority of the area is in the “Conserve” category from the point of view of Kennet District Council’s landscape strategy [4].

The river meanders through floodland between chalk downs, which are capped by clay-with-flints and are wooded at Whitehill, Park Coppice, and in scattered woods and coppices to the north of the village. Before modern farming improvements, there was an economic link between the semi-natural habitats of river and stream, water meadow, chalk grassland and native woodland. This link, which helped maintain habitats rich in wildlife, has fallen into abeyance.

Ramsbury's landscape setting - *continued*

Guidelines for the future

1 All proposals for development should take into account the official Kennet Valley "enhancement priorities" [6].

2 The willows, alders and poplars must be preserved, pollarded and replanted, but tree-planting on unimproved meadows can adversely affect nature conservation value.

3 The existing access to the river, which is central to the location of the village, should be maintained and improved.

4 New developments should retain hedgerows on site, and boundaries should be marked with broadleaf hedges rather than fences.

5 Where planning conditions require plantings, use of native species appropriate to the landscape character and ecology of the location should be encouraged.



Wagon-crossing over River Kennet, Mill Lane

The land around the village is now mainly farmed as arable or grazing land. The centre of the village is a designated conservation area. Ramsbury Manor, a fine late 17th century private residence, to the west of the village, is classed as an Historic Park [5], and much of the river corridor is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).



The Square



The village, off main traffic routes, is approached along five country lanes lined with grass verges, hedges and mature trees. A visitor approaching from the south, over Elm Down, comes on an impressive open view of the village, in which the effect of trees in and around the village is significant. Willows, both fully grown and pollarded, play an important part in the vista. Planning conditions imposed when construction began in the 1970s on a new housing development to the east of the village at Ashley Piece required comprehensive landscaping, and the results show how valuable such conditions can be. All roads converge on The Square.

Spring Hill, looking west and King's Ditch path



Features which help to define the setting of the village are:

- The river itself, along with its braids of streams, races and ditches.
- Willow scrub. A key ‘green’ feature is the prevalence of willow beds and trees, mainly crack willow (*Salix fragilis*) along with alders and poplars.
- Woods. The lines of ancient coppices, mainly of oak, beech and hazel are visible from most parts of the village. They still lie in the mediaeval pattern, on poor clay soils on the more distant parts of the parish, connected to it by ancient tracks.
- Wet fields and meadows along the valley bottom. Old water meadows represent classic Wiltshire scenery, lacking to the same extent in any other county.
- Chalk grassland. This is an important feature framing the village, with easy access. It is unimproved downland and may become Open Access Land.



in the surroundings of Ramsbury:
 “the loss or poor maintenance of field boundaries and riparian vegetation” and
 “the intrusion of roads and the influence of built development on ... settlements within the [river] corridor”[7]. ●

Two of the “principal threats and issues important to landscape quality in [the Kennet Valley] character area” can be seen

Focal points and landmarks

Guidelines for the future

6. The open character of The Square should be retained at all costs.

7. Holy Cross Church and other landmarks need to be retained and conserved.



Holy Cross Church and War Memorial



Lych gate

Ramsbury has at its centre Holy Cross Church, completed in the 14th century on the site of a Saxon church. Its tower offers commanding views over the village and across the Kennet's water meadows. An early 20th century lych gate on High Street leads into the eastern side of the churchyard and a path past the village war memorial gives access to the western side. Built in 1876, the romanesque Methodist Chapel is a landmark on Oxford Street.

There are three mill houses on the river – Howe Mill on Newtown Road, The Old

Mill at the junction of Scholard's Lane and Froxfield Road, and The Mill House on Mill Lane at the western end of the High Street.

The Square is the focal point of the village. Vehicles pass around a centrepiece tree, an oak planted in 1986, replacing a 300-year-old elm, a symbol of Ramsbury over the years. The Square is used for gatherings on special occasions. Key buildings on it include The Bell, one of Ramsbury's three remaining pubs, the recently closed branch of the Portman Building Society (once the Ramsbury Building Society) still showing the village tree symbol on its door handle, and the Arab Horse Society in what was once an inn. The village's other pubs are the Burdett Arms, midway along High Street, and the Crown and Anchor at the junction of Oxford Street and Crowood Lane.



Methodist Chapel



The Burdett Arms

In 1998, it was agreed that a plan be prepared for a Millennium project to make The Square more attractive by extending the cobbled area around “The Tree” and by some changes to the carriageways.

In addition to Ramsbury Manor, other landmark houses include Ramsbury Hill, Parliament Piece (a grand house and stable complex built in the 17th Century on Back Lane), and Oakes House, formerly The Institute and now a residential feature of the High Street. ●



1



3



2



4



5



6

1. The Knap 2. Parliament Piece 3. The Institute 4. Windsor House
5. The Crown & Anchor 6. The Old Forge, formerly The Bleeding Horse

Housing types, layouts, and design features

Guidelines for the future

8. The principal housing need is for affordable homes. It is important to help create “mixed and inclusive communities, which offer a choice of housing and lifestyle” [8]. The general principle for development should be that “every new open-market house should be matched with an affordable home” [9].

9. Suburban “pattern-book” layouts should be avoided. New developments should be diverse, with varieties of style, house types and siting, using materials appropriate to a rural environment and avoiding an excess of roadway. “New development should respect the local distinctiveness of the rural and urban character of the District” [10].

10. Developers should protect existing views within the village and into the countryside, and should create vistas for newly developed areas. Any new development or large building extension proposed for a significant gap or space between buildings should be resisted.



Burdett Street

Ramsbury is an attractive and well-located village, with a wide variety of housing types. In recent years, however, its attractions have caused house prices to soar, so that the village is short of “low-cost open-market housing” (defined as being priced at or below the lowest quartile of prevailing market values [11]), and lacks sufficient subsidised housing to meet a small local demand.

Many buildings in the village are ‘listed’ as Buildings of Architectural or Historic Interest, and much of the village is designated as a Conservation Area, defined as such to prevent damage to historic buildings and to protect the ‘spirit



Inglenook Antiques

of the place.’ The 1973 designation statement said: “The existing character of the streets must be maintained and therefore any proposals for new development or redevelopment will be considered with particular regard to the existing building line, scale and materials.”[12] This remains true today.



Isles Court



The Paddocks



Evelyn House and Millstream

Stretching more than a mile east to west, with the High Street, Oxford Street and Whittonditch Road as its linear “backbone”, the village has housing clusters at Knowledge Crescent, Swan’s Close, The Paddocks, Orchard Close, Hilldrop Close, Ashley Piece, Greenacres, Isles Road and Court, and Townfield. These are all modern, but Ramsbury comprises a mix of buildings spanning several centuries. There are large houses in their own grounds (Parliament Piece, the Old Vicarage, Kennet House, Ramsbury Hill), large and small houses lining the main roads, estate arrangements and infilling.



The Old Bakery

On the main roads, pre-1700 timber-framed thatched cottages sit comfortably with pre-1800 brick and flint cottages with tile or thatch roofs, and pre-1900 brick houses. Developments in the 20th century have been mainly brick, with tile or slate roofs.

Some areas have a coherent style, deriving from a uniform roof-line and lengthy garden walls, all made from the red brick from the village kiln or from nearby Littlecote kiln. Other areas are more varied: the village has buildings and walls made of flint (knapped or rough), bricks, sarsen stone, ashlar, weatherboarding, timber and brick noggin, timber and plaster infill, tile hanging and render.



High Street

Guidelines for the future

11. No extension of the limits of development should be permitted in the Local Plan period to 2011.
12. “The needs of people [should be put] before ease of traffic movement in designing the layout of residential developments” [13]. “New development should help to create places that connect with each other sustainably, providing the right conditions to encourage walking, cycling and the use of public transport. People should come before traffic.” [14].
13. Extensions to existing buildings should generally be subordinate in scale and appearance to the existing building, and existing features of period buildings, including outhouses, utility buildings and walls, should not be destroyed. Garages attached to new developments should be recessive, not dominant.
14. In future developments, boundaries should be walls of brick, or brick and flint, or broadleaf hedges.



Ashley Piece

Housing types, layouts, and design features - *continued*

Guidelines for the future

15. All proposals for development in the Conservation Area should be designed to fit sensitively into the context[15].

16. High-quality contemporary architecture, harmonising in proportion, materials and detail with the village environment, should be permitted. The existing variety of building materials in the village should be protected, and variety should be encouraged in new buildings.

17. The use of projecting string courses, dentil brickwork below the roofline, purple headers, hoods, and flint and lacing to ensure a thematic link the Ramsbury vernacular style. A matching colour of brick for extensions is vital.

Modernisation of windows and doors should be done sensitively. Where possible, existing chimneys should be retained, or chimneys should be incorporated in new building work.



Ramsbury Hill

Much of the housing brickwork is of a very high standard and demonstrates various English, Flemish and Header bonds. A number of houses, including Newtown Cottages, No. 5 Oxford Street, and the new Post Office are good examples of patterns using blue glazed headers. Many cottages in the High Street have a string course of blue or red, sometimes glazed headers separating the ground floor from the upstairs. Others have interesting patterns and infills.



Old Theatre Place

Walls are often banded with flint, or made mainly of flint laced with single or double courses of brick. Pointing is often natural sand colour, struck joint, not recessed. Many houses have dentillated brickwork below the eaves, and eaves with only a small projection.

Many doors have attractive hoods, some with elaborate decorated side panels and pillars. There are some elegant door cases with fanlights and pediments. There are



Crowood Lane



Back Lane



Burdett Street corner

exceptional bow windows at the Post Office and at first-floor level on Oakes House. Bay windows feature on a number of buildings.

There are at least 26 buildings with a thatch coat in Ramsbury. The majority are thatched with combed wheat reed and a few with long straw. There are two houses thatched with water reed. The roof ridges are covered either with wrap-over ridges (either flush or block cut) or butt-up ridges. The whole coat may then be

covered with chicken wire. The pitch is generally 55 degrees. Slate roofs feature on many houses large and small. There are also many plain clay tile roofs. The eaves do not project far. A large number of chimneys and chimney pots have been lost during conversions, modernisation and the introduction of central heating. When the houses concerned were built, the chimneys were part of the overall design. Loss of chimneys has altered the proportions of many houses and changed the roof line of the village. ●



Oxford Street leading to The Square



Anvil Cottage, Newtown Road

Guidelines for the future

18. Designers, including those modifying existing buildings, should avoid:

- large areas of hard surfacing
- monotonous repetition of one house type – though uniformity of design in small developments can be acceptable, such as in terraced housing
- mixing styles or historical references in the same building
- use of rendering or masonry paint as an alternative to replacement of worn bricks, particularly on terrace properties
- introducing flat roofs

19. Features to be resisted:

wide-frame double-glazing (except in modern buildings); flat glass-panel doors, pantiles; modern 'rustic style' buildings with complex, fussy roofs; pebble dash; recessed or coloured pointing, stone cladding.

20. Frontages, including upper storeys, should be kept in sympathy with neighbouring facades. Roof lines should be maintained, and slight variation permitted. Dormer windows should have pitched roofs. Roof materials, pitches, dormers, gable ends, porches, chimneys and brick colours should be designed to blend with existing buildings.

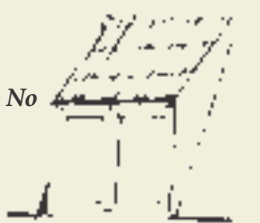
21. Whenever possible satellite dishes should not be mounted on street frontages.

22. Owners of listed thatch-roofed houses should ensure that their re-roofing complies with the requirements of Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 [16], the English Heritage booklet "Thatch and Thatching" [17], and Kennet District Council's leaflet "Re-thatching" [18].

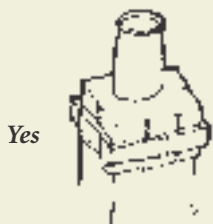
Preferred design features

Do's and Don'ts

DORMER WINDOWS



CHIMNEY



ROOF TILES



The purpose of a Village Design Statement is to draw up design principles based on the distinctive local character and to help guide small-scale changes to individual properties. The recommendations outlined below will enhance the character of the building. Examples of the local characteristics are shown in the many illustrations throughout the VDS.

Walls

Light red brick matched to the traditional brick in the village. Patterning with blue headers. Pointing in accordance with traditional brickwork in the village. Dentillated brick course below eaves. Avoid painting or rendering.



Dentillated brick courses

Roofs

Straight pitches with red flat clay tiles, 45° pitch or slate 30° pitch, eaves with only small overhang. Dormer windows with pitched roofs to light roof spaces, rather than inserted roof-lights.

Sliding sash window over upper storey with brick flat arch over



Sash windows and typical door hood



Windows

Brick flat arch over. Small panes with glazing bars. Narrow-framed double glazing.

Front Doors

Plain panelled, with glass only in upper panels, simple hood with styled brackets.

Chimneys

New buildings should, preferably, have chimneys with corbelled courses and plain pots.

Rainwater Fittings

Downpipes on end walls, or single pipe on front wall, preferably cast iron.

Services

To be underground. Meter boxes on end walls or to blend with front walls.

Exterior Paintwork

Within the Conservation Area, exterior paintwork predominantly white. Avoid varnished natural wood finish. Coloured front doors with discretion.



Above: Brick and flint wall, door hood and sash windows

Top right: 19C Flemish bond, door hood and slate roof

Right: 18C buildings in the High Street

Below: Traditional windows



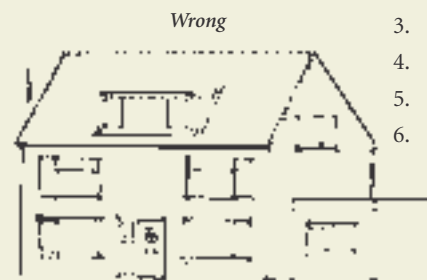
Restoring existing buildings

Acceptable features

1. Retain roof pitch, different levels, and materials
2. Develop traditional features
3. Retain original wall texture repointing with traditional materials and techniques
4. Retain existing windows and doors if possible. Fit new windows and doors in traditional style, if necessary.



Right



Wrong

Features to avoid

1. Roof pitch at one level. Pantiles
2. Long dormer
3. Chimney removed
4. Picture windows
5. Modern door
6. Flat roof extension

Street furniture

Guidelines for the future

23. Utility services to all new developments should be provided underground when possible. Existing overground wires and cables should be replaced as opportunities arise.

24. Whenever possible, developments which provide street lighting should do so on buildings or on well-chosen poles. The lighting should have a low light-pollution level.

25. Private security lights should be shielded and carefully sited to illuminate the required area without creating a traffic hazard.

26. Utility meters and service units should be sited on side elevations where possible or coloured to blend in on front elevations.



Whittonditch Road

Some street lights are mounted on brackets high on house walls. In other areas, a variety of lighting standards is installed. The Millennium project included a plan, in partnership with Kennet District Council and the Bell, to restore a more agreeable appearance to The Square. A change to white lighting from period “lanterns” has been completed.

Wiltshire County Council (WCC) was responsible for road signs up to the late 1930s. A sign on a west-facing wall adjacent to Hill’s Stores in the High Street and another on The Bell car-park wall, were installed by WCC in the 1930s and show the earlier classification of the road as the A419 from Swindon to Hungerford. A sign on a house to the north side of The Square was provided by the Automobile Association in the 1920s.

Some areas of the village are marred by overhead telephone and electricity lines. In some cases, poles are shared, but there are instances of duplication in close proximity.

There are seven post- or wall-mounted letter boxes and two traditional round pillar boxes in the village. Classic red telephone boxes are sited outside the Memorial Hall and in Whittonditch Road.



A number of unsightly steel tubular bollards are sited along the south side of the High Street to deter traffic from mounting a low kerb. Damage from large vehicles to these bollards is a problem. A bollard outside 32 Oxford Street is sited to protect a thatch overhang and three more protect a litter bin in Burdett Street. Various types of litter bin are used in the village, wall-mounted units and more free-standing units. The Parish Council has control of more than 20 seats provided for the public, some of them donated by relatives as memorials to individuals. ●

Roads, streets, byways, pathways



Scholard's Lane

Ramsbury does not lie on a natural route for through traffic. Traffic from Swindon to Hungerford passes to the north and east on the B4192; traffic between Hungerford and Marlborough passes to the south on the A4; and traffic from Swindon to Marlborough passes to the west on the A345. The village is on the Wiltshire Cycle Route.



Whittonditch Road from The Halfway

None of the routes into or out of the village is really suitable for large vehicles because of narrow widths and bends, and, to the south, the steep gradient on Spring Hill. Some such vehicles, however, must make the journey for commercial and agricultural reasons and their drivers do experience difficulties. The main routes converge on The Square. A lack of off-street residential and public parking causes difficulty, particularly on the High Street and Oxford Street. Pavements along these roads have shallow kerbs of natural stone encouraging vehicle encroachment and illegal parking on the footway.

Stretches of Back Lane and Hilldrop Lane are narrow and in some places have no pavement at all. There is no footway access from about 100 houses to the centre of the village. Pedestrians, including children and people with prams, must walk in the roadway. Pavements are lacking at the crossroads at the west end of the High Street and at the junction of Union Street and Newtown Road.

Buses on routes to and from Swindon, Marlborough and Hungerford avoid the High Street, but do use Back Lane, Oxford Street or Newtown Road.

Ramsbury is well provided with public footpaths, bridleways and byways. Important byways are Tankard Lane and Halfway Lane, and another provides access to properties in Swan's Bottom and on through to Love's Lane. These have unmade surfaces and are not suitable for regular or heavy traffic. ●



Swan's Bottom

Guidelines for the future

27. During the maintenance of roads and pavements, consideration should be given to raising the kerb height or reducing the accumulation of tarmac to restore levels for efficient run-off of storm water and to ensure that the width, level and surfaces are adequate for the safety of all pedestrians. This would help to discourage the parking of vehicles on the pavements. Natural stone kerbs should be retained where possible.

28. Direction signs remote from the village should continue to route traffic for major destinations around the village on the A and B roads and not through it.

29. Any new dwelling should be designed with two off-street parking spaces on the site.

30. Walking or cycling to school along safe routes should be facilitated.

31. Unmade tracks, byways and paths are important parts of the village character and should be retained and remain unsurfaced.

32. Traffic-calming measures, compatible with the character of the area should be introduced at all entrances to the village, and at strategic points within the village (for example, by the primary school).



Manor Hill



*The Old Forge, formerly
The Bleeding Horse*



The Square



Hilldrop Farm



Back Lane



Approach to Ramsbury from the west



Burdett Street



The "Lion" Gates



Recreation Centre



Holy Cross Church



Rachel Cottage



Mill Lane



High Street

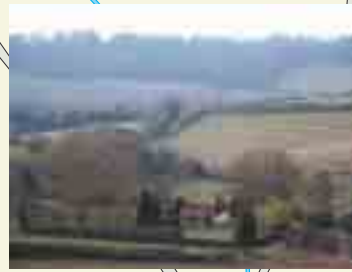
— Conservation Area



Oxford Street



Approach to Ramsbury from the east, Whittonditch Road



Whittonditch



Crown & Anchor, Crowood Lane



Smithy Cottage, Whittonditch



*Newtown Road
(footpath to Seven Bridges)*



The Boot



The Knap



Newtown Road

Community life, shops and services

Guidelines for the future

33. To keep a diverse population, any future developments in the village should consist of a mixture of open-market housing suitable for all income levels, and some subsidised housing, with proper parking facilities for all, and shared recreational areas.

One of Ramsbury's greatest assets is the sense it has, by virtue of size, of being a community in which people generally know and have a mutual regard for each other and their property. People in the village feel safe and enjoy easy access to the countryside.

The population is diverse, including a significant percentage of retired people, some of whom are frail and elderly and for whom a supportive community is important. At the other end of the spectrum are young wage-earners with small children, and the presence in the



village of a good primary school is an asset, the value of which cannot be overestimated. The present school population is 210, with about 20 children from outside the village. There is no free teaching space left in the building and any future housing developments would put considerable pressure on the school.

Ramsbury is well equipped with sports facilities, including tennis courts and

*Above: Ramsbury Primary School
Left: The "Ramsbury Flyer" Bottom Left: Library
Below: Memorial Hall*





football pitches, which are supported by active organisations. The village is well supplied with meeting-halls and rooms. The largest are the Memorial Hall on High Street and the Church Room on Back Lane. Additionally, meetings can be held at the British Legion Hall, the Red Cross Room, the Methodist Hall, the Scout Hall and the Primary School Hall. These cater for the many clubs and societies that flourish in the village.

In contrast to the national trend, Ramsbury has been fortunate in being able to retain several retail outlets, including a post office. There is also a small branch library and a fire station.



The village medical practice, like the school a vital village asset, has expanded to serve almost 8,000 patients in a broad catchment area. The Ramsbury Silver Band performs regularly. ●



*Top: Church Room
Middle: Fire Station
Above: Ramsbury Surgery
Left: Playground at Knowledge Crescent*



*From top to bottom:
Jennie Whiting Aromatherapy
Hill's Stores
Midway Stores
Post Office*

Employment in Ramsbury

Guidelines for the future

34. New developments should be designed to include premises attractive to people looking for opportunities to work from home, and/or to young people wishing to start small businesses. Provision of low-cost, basic premises for small B1(a) or (b) enterprises, adjacent to new residential developments, should be encouraged.

35. Re-use of redundant agricultural buildings within the village and the outlying settlements should be considered favourably, provided the changed use is compatible with the amenity of surrounding properties.



Business premises on Hilldrop Lane

Of the present population of Ramsbury approximately a third are children, a third employed and a third retired. There are three major employers drawing staff from within and outside the village. About 20 self-employed individuals provide building services, painting and decorating, electrical work, cabinet making and joinery, and garden services. There are three small computer services firms. Seven shops and three public houses provide full and part-time employment. Also a number of smaller businesses covering a wide range of activities have a few employees. The medical practice has a full range of staff.

Many managerial and professional people commute by car to adjacent towns or by rail from Swindon or Hungerford to Newbury, Reading, Bristol or London. There is a substantial demand for part-time domestic employment.

Every encouragement should be given to

home working to reduce the need to travel. The growing number of households with internet access will increase the opportunities for such home working. National statistics show that 40% of households now have access.

Any developments for employment should be directed to simple start-up premises with rudimentary facilities. New light-industrial premises in Ramsbury have not attracted new small businesses for several years, because of high rents.

Continued patronage of local shops and services is absolutely essential to sustain the life and economy of the village.

Few people are now employed on the land. For example, one local farm once employed 21 people. Today it is run by one man with part-time help. Farmers are under considerable pressure to diversify. ●

Wildlife and the natural environment

Much of the value of the village neighbourhood depends on the places that are still unimproved agriculturally. Chalk grassland now is restricted to isolated patches, notably on Spring Hill. What banks remain often have cowslips in the spring, and attractive butterflies in mid-summer, including marbled white, common blue and brown argus, as well as 6-spot and 5-spot burnet moths.

The water meadows provide an important habitat. The willow scrub, for example, at the Seven Bridges path, is valuable for song-birds such as nightingale, sedge warbler and reed bunting, and the tall grass is hunted over by barn owls. However, drying out has taken its toll of former bird residents such as snipe and redshank. The parts of the water meadows that are grazed in summer by cattle seem in better condition than those that are mown. The area west of the Seven Bridges path is mown in late summer, but the cuttings are left to lie. The decaying cuttings encourage the spread of stinging nettles.



Spring Hill and watermeadows

The village is home to a wealth of wildlife, including many protected species, such as bats. There is a public Nature Reserve, an area of about three acres between the Leat and the Kennet south of the High Street. A pond in the reserve area supports a frog and toad population and some important species of flora. The Parish Council is improving access to the reserve and intends to open a small section of riverbank adjacent to it to provide a point from which the view along the valley can be enjoyed. ●



River Kennet at Mill Lane

Guidelines for the future

- 36. Developments on the village edge should give high priority to landscape design to protect and improve the external view of the village.*
- 37. Developments, including changes in boundary hedges, fences and gates to fields and dwellings, should be designed to allow views of the river and water meadows.*
- 38. The continued voluntary care of the Old Churchyard should be encouraged.*
- 39. Regular grazing by sheep has proved the key to successful management in the Nature Reserve and it is vital that this should be maintained in consultation with Wiltshire Wildlife.*
- 40. The long-standing practice of encouraging tree-planting by obtaining suitable trees direct from nurseries for planting by the Amenity Group and by householders should be maintained.*
- 41. Work to improve wetland habitats may require planning approval. Especially, any proposals that might affect the River Kennet SSSI (site of special scientific interest) would require consent from English Nature. [19]*
- 42. When considering conversions and extensions to their properties, owners should be conscious of possibly disturbing protected species, especially bats, which are common in Ramsbury. They should seek advice from English Nature, and Kennet District Council, taking note of the Council's supplementary planning guidance "Protected species: a guidance leaflet for developers and planners". [20]*

Outlying settlements and their relation to the village core

Guidelines for the future

43. All the houses on Marridge Hill are on private water supply and, to be sustainable, any development would have to make minimal demands on that important natural resource.

44. Proposals for development in the countryside around Ramsbury should be scrutinised carefully to ensure that it would not harm the tranquillity of the country lanes, be contrary to AONB policy, or lead gradually to coalescence of settlements.



Whittonditch

The boundaries of Ramsbury village are at present clear, and the traveller on any approach road has a distinct sense of arrival or departure. But several “satellite” farms and hamlets outside the village development boundary are felt to “belong” to Ramsbury. These are mainly residential or agricultural, apart from Whittonditch, where a cluster of six light-industrial units is sited.

Notable among houses outside the village core are:

- Ramsbury Manor to the west.
- Old Smithy Cottage and Whittonditch House.
- Crowood House (and Crowood Press in its outbuildings) to the north and Hilldrop Farm to the northwest.
- Whattendyke, a thatched cottage, on the B4192 at Marridge Hill Road.
- Baydon Manor, in Marridge Hill



Whattendyke Cottage



Crowood House



Hilldrop Farm

Residents of these outlying settlements consider that they are a part of Ramsbury and see it as their local community. However, they have to drive to use its services and meeting places. ●

References

- 1 Planning Policy Guidance Note 12, Development Plans, paragraphs 3.15–3.18
- 2 *Kennet Landscape Assessment*, Draft Supplementary Guidance, Kennet District Council, August 2000, p.73
- 3 *Kennet Landscape Assessment*, Kennet District Council, August 2000, pp69-73 and figures 14.2 and 14.3
- 4 *Kennet Landscape Conservation Strategy*, Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance, Kennet District Council, August 2000, p.13
- 5 *Kennet Landscape Conservation Strategy*, Kennet District Council, August 2000, p.13
- 6 *Kennet Landscape Conservation Strategy*, Kennet District Council, August 2000, p.13; *Kennet Landscape Assessment*, Kennet District Council, August 2000, p.72–73
- 7 *Kennet Landscape Assessment*, Kennet District Council, August 2000, p.72
- 8 Planning Policy Guidance Note 3, *Housing*, DTLR, paragraph 10
- 9 *Replacement Kennet District Local Plan*, Second Deposit, Kennet District Council, March 2001, p.41, paragraph 2.56A
- 10 *Replacement Kennet District Local Plan*, Second Deposit, Kennet District Council, March 2001, p.8, paragraph 1.21
- 11 *Affordable Housing Policy Guide*, Draft Supplementary Planning Guidance, Kennet District Council, August 2000, p.2, paragraph 2.3
- 12 *Ramsbury Conservation Area Statement*, Kennet District Council, 1973
- 13 Planning Policy Guidance Note 3, *Housing*, DTLR, paragraph 2
- 14 Planning Policy Guidance Note 13, *Transport*, paragraph 28
- 15 *Wiltshire Structure Plan 2011*, Wiltshire CC, Jan. 2001, p.107, para. 7.26
- 16 Planning Policy Guidance Note 15, *Planning and the Historic Environment*, DTLR
- 17 *Thatch and Thatching*, English Heritage, 2000
- 18 *Re-thatching*, Kennet District Council, 1998
- 19 *Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs): England's special wildlife and geological sites*, English Nature, 2002
- 20 *Protected species: a guidance leaflet for developers and planners*, Kennet District Council, 1998

Status of the Statement

This Village Design Statement was adopted by Kennet District Council as Supplementary Planning Guidance on 12th November 2002. Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) provides guidance on the interpretation and implementation of policies and proposals contained in a Local Plan.

Paragraph 3.16 of PPG12 – *Development Plans* states that adequate consultation is a requirement for adoption of SPG. Kennet District Council considers that the consultation undertaken in the preparation of the Ramsbury Village Design Statement, as outlined in this publication, is consistent with Government advice and meets the obligations set out in PPG12.

The Replacement Kennet Local Plan (March 2001) is at an advanced stage of preparation having been subject to two stages of Deposit and a Public Local Inquiry. This SPG provides detailed background information for the interpretation of policies contained in the Replacement Local Plan, particularly Policies HC22 and NR5. In addition, the guidance will be relevant to the application of Policies PD1, HC5, HC31, HC31a, HC32a, ED8a, ED9, ED11a, ED11b, HH5, HH6, and HH12.

How our VDS was produced

At a public meeting and exhibition on 28th April 2001, more than 120 villagers agreed that a village design statement should be prepared for Ramsbury. From the 40 people who volunteered to help with preparation, a Project Committee of 10 was formed, with permission to co-opt others when special expertise was needed.

In June, a leaflet was delivered to every household and business in the village, inviting everyone to contribute ideas and information for the statement. In July, eight teams of two to five people toured the village, photographing and making notes on the features and characteristics of Ramsbury. From the assembled material (32 written submissions, and many oral comments), the Committee, strengthened by co-option of three more members, produced a rough structure, which was turned into a first draft by two small groups — a group of four produced a text, and then a group of three chose photographs and drawings to illustrate the text.



Public meeting and exhibition

The draft was made available for scrutiny and comment by all villagers for six weeks in April–May 2002. Many changes suggested during that period were incorporated in the draft, and amended copies were sent for preliminary review to Kennet District Council, Wiltshire County Council, the Environment Agency, English Nature, English Heritage, and Thames Water. The draft was amended further in the light of comments from those organisations, and the final draft presented to Kennet District Council on 15th October 2002.

Project Committee

Alex Brown, Susan Findlay, Caroline Franklin, Sheila Glass, Ron Howard, Peter Kearns, John Kirkman, Simon Orton, Christine Perkins, Ronny Price, Geoffrey Rissone, Sue Smith, Ben Tottenham.

Acknowledgements

The Statement designed by Orton Design. Aerial photographs by Commission Air, Market Deeping.

APPENDIX I

Origins and history of Ramsbury

by Barbara Croucher

The first settlement of Ramsbury is thought to be Saxon in origin. The name “Ramsbury” is derived from the Saxon man’s name Hraefn (i.e. Hraefn’sburg), who may have settled on the site. A 7th–8th century Saxon iron smelting forge was discovered in the High Street in 1976 and was found to be the most complete of its kind in the country. There are also pieces of two well-carved Saxon preaching crosses preserved in Holy Cross Church. These had been used as building material in the 14th century south wall of the church and were discovered during restoration in 1891.



Documentary evidence exists of a well-organised Saxon commonfield system around the central nucleus of the village on the south-facing slope of the River Kennet. The Saxon period ended with the establishment of a bishopric in 909 A.D. which lasted until 1075, having joined with Sherborne and formed the bishopric of Old Sarum and then Salisbury. It was revived in 1974.

The Manor of Ramsbury was owned by the Bishops of Salisbury who built a palace on the site of the present manor house. They frequently stayed there and used its chapel and Holy Cross church in the village for many ordinations of priests. At the



Photo: *Ramsbury Then and Now* by Barbara Croucher

Reformation the Manor was granted to the Earls of Pembroke, of Wilton.

During the Civil War, the 4th Earl of Pembroke, Lord of the Manor, supported by the three Popham brothers at Littlecote declared for the Parliamentarians. Cromwell, staying with the Earl in 1649, held a Council at the Rookery in Back Lane, a house later renamed Parliament Piece in commemoration.

In 1676 the Manor was sold to Henry Powle, Speaker of the House of Commons, and two others. They ‘asset

stripped’ it, selling many properties to the local craftsmen. This made Ramsbury an ‘open’ village where people were no longer under the feudal authority of the Lord of the Manor, and they could move in and out of the village more freely. In 1680 Powle sold the remaining property to Sir William Jones, Attorney-General to Charles II, who built the present house. His descendants lived there, including Sir Francis Burdett, the Reform MP and his youngest daughter, the great philanthropist, Baroness Angela Burdett-Coutts, until the Burdett baronetcy died out in 1951.



Photo: *Ramsbury Then and Now* by Barbara Croucher

The original village and its commonfields, continuing until enclosure in 1778, developed on the bedrock of chalk, above the alluvial water meadows of the Kennet. There is some clay with flints on the upper valley slopes and many flints within the chalk soils of the lower slopes, left there as the river eroded down through the chalk. In choosing the north side of the river not only could the early Saxons benefit from the warmed south-facing, less steep slopes of the valley, but they had greater space to spread out their commonfields.

The growth of the village depended on a number of physical factors. The situation on the main east-west fluvial routeway between the Roman towns of London and Bath, until 1744, and later Bristol, brought much trade and communication. Equally important was the suitability of the soils and lie of the land for agriculture. The water of the Kennet was vital to both farming and local industries.

Barley, for brewing, was especially well suited to the soil, and local trees, growing on clay with flints, provided bark for a thriving tanning industry. Sheep from the chalk downs provided raw material for the tanners. Kennet water provided power for the 10 mills recorded in the Domesday Survey of 1086 and gave the means to float the water meadows for fresh grass for spring lambs. The earliest documented float occurred in 1620. The permanent water supply also aided the tanning and brewing industries of the 17th to 19th centuries, providing a special flavour for 'Ramsbury ale', and in the 1930s was the basis of a flourishing watercress



Photo: *Ramsbury Then and Now* by Barbara Croucher

industry. Although the river water is no longer used directly for industries (though it is extracted at several nearby points to supply local villages and towns), agriculture does continue to flourish on the chalk soils.

The turnpiking of the present Bath road in 1744 took the main London to Bristol routeway away from the village. Then it was decided to route the canal away from the Kennet River, and thus Ramsbury. When the railway was proposed, the villagers objected to it going through the Kennet valley so it also was built away from Ramsbury. Thus the new communications of the 19th century by-passed the village and its industries so trade greatly declined. The whole community suffered, extreme poverty drove some people to sheep farming in Patagonia, set up by the Waldron family of Marrison Hill, while many others moved to Swindon to the railway works.

During World War Two, the U.S. 437 Troop Carrier Group, which was stationed in Ramsbury, took U.S. airborne infantry from the Royal Air Force airfield on Spring Hill to take part in the D-Day landings at Utah Beach and in Operation 'Market Garden' aimed at Nijmegen and Arnhem.

By 1971 the population had declined from a peak of 2,500 in 1851 to about 1,300. Then in 1972 the M4 motorway was opened. It is the situation of Ramsbury adjacent to major routeways, the M4 and also north-south links, that continues to influence its development. Communication is the key to employment, and thus to the economic growth of the village which has brought a thriving community in this new Millennium. ●

APPENDIX II

Notes about thatch coats on houses and cottages

by Ian McCall

Thatching materials

There are three main thatching materials in common use and available in England:

- Long Straw;
- Combed Wheat Reed (sometimes called Devon Reed), which is actually wheat straw;
- Water Reed (grown mainly in the Norfolk Broads and hence traditionally called Norfolk Reed in England).

English Heritage distinguishes Long Straw from the other materials in these terms: “Long straw is a more pliable material than either water reed or combed wheat reed, and its tendency to swell slightly above its fixings gives it a somewhat more rounded and ‘poured on’ appearance than combed wheat reed”¹. One of English Heritage’s aims is to sustain the use of all three materials in thatching in England, specifically targeted at retaining local traditions and techniques. It urges local authorities to limit the loss of thatch and to conserve the local thatch characteristics in their area. There is great regional diversity in numbers and styles of thatched premises in the counties of England. The Kennet district has more than 1500 thatched properties, of which almost 900 are listed.

All three materials are laid so that bundles of plant stems slope downwards. In Long-Straw thatching, the straw in the bundles may be laid with the tops (ears) or bottoms (butt ends) of the stalks pointing both up and down the roof, and long lengths of the material are visible. In Combed Wheat Reed thatching and Water-Reed thatching, the thatching material is usually laid so that the butt ends point downwards, and only those butt ends are visible as the sloping sides of the roof.



There is much debate about the life-expectancy of roofs in the three materials. Water Reed is generally expected to have the longest life, perhaps as much as 75 years in the drier eastern parts of the country. However, only 11 of the 889 thatched listed buildings in Kennet are thatched with Water Reed, and at least two of those have failed in less than 20 years.

Life-expectancy for Long Straw and Combed Wheat Reed is variously quoted as between 15 and 40 years. In its 1998 leaflet, *Re-thatching*², Kennet District Council states that its experience over 25 years has been that, in the Kennet district, there has usually been little to choose between the merits of well laid, good quality Long Straw or Combed Wheat Reed. Master thatchers are cautious in their claims: for example, in notes on their website, the Rutland and Leicestershire Master Thatchers Association emphasises that “many variables can affect the life”.

Significant variables are the quality of the straw harvest, the ability of the thatcher, the aspect and location of the roof, the pitch of the roof and over-all roof geometry, acid rain, the amount of rain, the quality of ancillary materials, and the rigour with which the roof is

maintained and patched. Length of life also depends on the general climate of the area and the micro-climate around the thatched dwelling, including proximity of trees and shrubs, and whether any damage is caused by rodents (mainly squirrels and rats).

However, in the words of English Heritage: “Each method or style [of thatching] has its qualities and may be regarded as a tradition to be cherished. Broad generalisations on longevity are unhelpful or even wrong, and should not obscure this objective. In any case, conservation policy suggests that thatch should be considered more often for repair than for replacement: this was the normal practice in the past”³.

Ridges

All thatched “coats” have a separate ridge-covering along the apex of the roof, covering “ridge rolls” — tightly tied bundles of thatching material, laid along the ridge, to give an edge to the final course of thatch and to provide a base for the ridge covering. The ridge itself can be one of many types, all being variations of the following two forms:

- wrap-over ridge (whether flush or block-cut)
- butts-up ridge

A wrap-over ridge is formed by taking the ridge material over the ridge and fixing it on each side. A butts-up ridge is formed by butting up the thatch material from each of the completed slopes of the roof. A flush ridge is formed flush with the surface of the main thatch; a block ridge is formed with an additional course of material — the ‘block’.

As with the thatched coat itself, the detail of the ridge should relate to the traditional form in the locality and to the style and quality of the building. Life-expectancy of a ridge again depends on the quality of work and materials, and on the micro-climate of its location, including proximity of trees and shrubs, and whether any damage is caused by birds or rodents. The usual life of a wrap-over ridge is between 10 and 15 years, but some last longer. Renewal of fixing-spars can often be required between total renewals of ridges, but such work does not usually extend the life of the ridge.

Re-thatching procedure

Normally, re-thatching in Long Straw and Combed Wheat Reed involves stripping the spar-coat (top-layer) of thatch until a suitable base is found in the under-coat on which to build up the spar-coat. It would be unusual to find that the existing thatch must be stripped to bare rafters because the under-coat has been decayed by water-penetration, rodents, or other cause, but where poor maintenance has compounded the normal effects of weathering, it is sometimes necessary to strip more of the under-coat to get a good fixing. In early cottages, the base coat of thatch can be several hundred years old, and is an important historic component of the building. Retention is therefore a major conservation objective.

Retention of the under-coat usually means that the timber components of the raftered framework under Long Straw and Combed Wheat Reed rarely see the light of day after being built, and therefore may carry a greater risk of undetected deterioration. It is sometimes possible to see something of

the raftered framework in upstairs rooms or in a small roof-space, but often no timber components are easily accessible.

However, when re-thatching in Water Reed, it is normal (but not invariable) practice for the entire coat to be stripped to expose the whole of the raftered framework, which may cause the loss of historically important material. It does mean, however, that it may be possible to inspect the timber components of a Water Reed roof every 50-70 years for on-going serviceability and repair, if appropriate. Water Reed is now widely imported from Eastern Europe, but it is still grown in Norfolk and other areas.

A thatched coat about 12 inches (300mm) thick usually provides good protection against the elements, and good insulation against heat-loss.

Alterations

The design of alterations affecting thatched properties requires a careful analysis of the characteristics of the original roof. The position and size of dormer windows can have an adverse effect on thatch geometry. The introduction of a lower pitch over a new dormer, or the incorrect positioning relative to other parts of the roof, such as valleys, will adversely affect the wearing qualities of the thatch.

References

- 1 English Heritage, *Thatch and Thatching*, English Heritage, 2000, page 9.
- 2 Kennet District Council, *Re-thatching*, Kennet District Council, 1998, page 3.
- 3 English Heritage, *Thatch and Thatching*, English Heritage, 2000, page 2.



APPENDIX III

Notes on natural history in the village

by Peter Marren

The chalk grassland, water meadows, and woodland that once were the main features of the setting of Ramsbury are still in evidence, but have been much changed by modern agricultural methods. Small patches of chalk grassland remain, but the network of ditches, controlled by sluice gates, that maintained the water meadows has fallen into disrepair. The meadows are no longer intentionally flooded to preserve the pasture from severe winter frosts and fertilise it with river silt, but grazing in summer is helping to maintain the character of the water-meadow setting.

Whitehill and Park Coppice (the only woods I know first hand) have been much replanted. One of the least changed parts, with quite a rich plant and fungus flora lies along the bridleway which forms an ancient holloway running between wood banks at 285708, with a long downhill tongue of chalk scrub over some old chalk pits. The bluebell woods of the parish are notable, though the best one I know in the area, Brick-kiln Copse lies outside the parish. This is over-grown coppice, with carpets of wild flowers — perhaps what our woods were like before they were replanted.

Trees

There's a very fine oak by West Lodge. It has shed some limbs (a natural process in crown reduction with old trees) and is starting to get stag-headed, but is a magnificent tree, probably 500 years old. Fertiliser-drift has robbed it of the special lichens you would expect, but there is one, looking like tiny black tartlets called *Lecanactis premnea* sheltered in the root buttresses, and characteristic of dry, brittle bark on 'veteran' oaks.



A recent rare instance of natural flooding

The row of trees above West Lodge seems to mark an ancient estate boundary and includes a fine, hammer-headed ash pollard.

Most of the village poplars are Italian hybrid or white poplars (plus the Lombardy poplars to the west of the village). The mature London plane trees near the bridge overlooking Ramsbury Manor are notably fine ones.



There is something seriously wrong with our crack willows. Along much of the Kennet Valley, the trees have been infected by fungi which cause the canopy to thin out, leaves to blacken, and which can result in the death of the

tree. The Ramsbury willows are infected by willow scab, willow canker and twig blight, often in combination. The disease is spread from tree to tree, and has probably been helped by a run of mild winters and wet summers. The last epidemic on this scale was over 20 years ago. By contrast, the alders, which are suffering from a fungal blight elsewhere, look fine.

Wild flowers

Ramsbury has a good range of species of marsh, down, wayside and woodland flowers, which add seasonal colour. There is a succession of umbellifers on the road verges — cow parsley, followed by rough chervil, water dropwort, hogweed and hedge parsley. Among the notable species is round-leaved mint (*Mentha suaveolens* [= *M. rotundifolia*]), which has a conservation verge on Newtown Road. This is a very local mint with sage-like leaves, mainly in SW England but with a curious outlying population in the Marlborough-Ramsbury area where it may be an escape from cultivation.

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The plant would benefit from more frequent cutting of the bank — preferably annually or every other year, in winter. Its bank is usually too crowded with hedge sprouts for the mint to do well.

Small teasel is frequent at edge of trees along the bridle path to Littlecote, known there for half a century or more. By the way, we should try to resist planting trees in such places — it suburbanises the countryside, and what is wrong with natural trees? Wood vetch (*Vicia sylvatica*) is common on the south edge of Whitehill Coppice. Slender rush (*Juncus tenuis*) which grows in the concrete wartime tracks, was probably introduced in the wheels of US army vehicles, as this is an American species — if so, an interesting relic of World War II.

Among the less common species are nettle-leaved bellflower, Solomon's-seal, herb paris, toothwort, dwarf elder and broad-leaved helleborine. Near West Lodge is a beautiful large patch of wood anemone, along with a few plants of stinking hellebore (possibly of garden origin, although we are within what is believed to be its native range). Another of our special plants is grey sedge (*Carex divulsa*), local in the county — found on roadsides and dry parts of the water-meadows.

Part of our 'garden' at Newtown Lodge is still a wet natural meadow, with a good range of marshland wild flowers, including early and southern marsh orchids and common spotted orchids and their hybrids; also lady's smock, marsh marigold, marsh woundwort, common fleabane, ragged robin, meadow-sweet, fen bedstraw,

water mint, marsh valerian, wild angelica, comfrey, purple loosestrife, several kinds of forget-me-not and speedwell, hemp agrimony, meadow vetchling, common persicaria, marsh thistle, butterbur, yellow iris, greater pond-sedge, gipsywort, creeping jenny and so on. Light surface disturbance actually encourages the display. One takes these flowers for granted in Ramsbury, but this is a diminishing habitat. Even garden flower beds can produce unexpected wild flowers. In 2002, a beautiful purple form of common broomrape and the rather scarce yellow-juiced poppy appeared in ours.

The wild form of summer snowflake (*Leucojum aestivum*) occurs by the Kennet between Ramsbury and Chilton Foliat. The strawberry clover (*Trifolium fragiferum*) is an interesting clover which occurs on some grass verges eg. in front of The Beavers on Newtown Road. It has tight pink or white heads which swell up into a strawberry shape.

A big problem is the spread of stinging nettles and the loss of diversity on road verges and river banks. The most probable cause is soil enrichment, especially nitrogen and phosphates, from river silt, traffic fumes and farm fertiliser run-off. A notable victim is the water crowfoot of the Kennet, *Ranunculus penicillatus* — an economically important plant (for trout) and a significant one in European terms — which is unable to root in loose silt. It has recovered somewhat from the dry summers of the mid-90s, but is less frequent than before. Another is meadow cranesbill — a signature

species of the Wiltshire chalk, which has diminished even during my seven years at Ramsbury.

There's a primrose bank near the crest of the road up Spring Hill at about 279709, producing a beautiful display, including barren strawberry, dog-violets and other flowers in March and April. Oh - and fungal earthstars in autumn.

Butterflies and moths

I have logged 22 species of butterflies and just over 300 larger moths from my garden during the past seven years. This is not unusual for a large country garden in the south of England. The butterflies were nothing out of the ordinary, though a male purple emperor paid us a brief visit on 7 July 2001, suggesting it may be present in the local woods. I am told there is a small population of the rare Duke of Burgundy on Spring Hill, where brown hairstreak was also recorded in 1981. Essex skipper has colonised the village at some stage in the recent past and is now common. As you would expect, we are well off for marshland species, including specialist moths whose larvae mine reeds and reed-mace, like southern wainscot and the bulrush moth. A notable one is the butterbur moth, which is present in my garden, and probably in all large patches of its food plant near the river. This is a secretive species which is rarely seen. Red underwing sits on walls and trunks, and in flight is easily mistaken for a butterfly. Other notable moths include the olive, scarlet tiger (easily seen in flight near the river; its larvae are common on comfrey in April and early May), double-lobed, lesser cream wave, large wainscot, pale pinion, alder moth,

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great prominent, Blair's shoulder-knot, scorched carpet, coronet, and white-spotted pug. Of the hawk-moths, we have lime, poplar, eyed, privet, elephant and small elephant, all commonly. I reckon we must have at least 400 species of butterflies and larger moths, and perhaps as many 'micros'.

Noteworthy in 2001 were the webs on spindle in the hedge by the bridltrack running parallel with the river. These were made by the micro-moth, *Yponomeuta cagnagella* (spindle ermine).

Other insects

I hardly know where to start, but some species arguably contribute to the character of the area. One is the bee-fly (*Bombylius major*), which I look forward to seeing every spring, feeding on the flowers of primrose, periwinkle and self-heal e.g. near West Lodge. Another is the beautiful banded agrion damselfly by the Kennet with its blue wing blobs and butterfly-like flight — not rare, but very characteristic and easily seen. The cockchafer is still common in our meadows, and comes to light. We also have hornets, glow-worms, musk beetles and lesser stag beetles. The chirping of bush crickets on quiet evenings is one of the sounds of early autumn. These are made by grey bush-crickets, but we also have the oak bush-cricket, sometimes seen on windows.

Birds

Nightingale has defied predictions by continuing to visit us, though never as many as in 1993. We are now at the frontier of this declining species. Ramsbury still has numbers of declining birds like bullfinch, spotted

flycatcher and yellowhammer, and also both marsh and willow tit, and woodcock. The high-pitched twitter of a party of long-tailed tits is a common Ramsbury sound, as is the succession of song-birds: great tit, blue tit, mistle thrush, chiffchaff (which surely overwinters with us), wren (surely our commonest bird), blackbird, willow warbler, song thrush, cuckoo, blackcap, sedge warbler and spotted flycatcher. Judging by numbers, we must be optimum habitat for grey wagtails (a pair regularly forage in my roof gutters, and last year nested under the *Pyracantha* by my study window). Swifts, swallows and house martins seem to be holding their own. A pair of buzzards regularly nest near my garden since about 1996, and we regularly see sparrowhawk and kestrel. I saw my first red kite (chased by a buzzard) over the garden in 2001. Cetti's warbler was present in 1993 — at least three singing males heard — and I heard another in 2001. Nuthatches are regularly seen and heard in Whitehill Coppice. Treecreepers are often seen in the garden. Green woodpeckers are notably common at Ramsbury, as are grey heron, little grebe, moorhen, coot, song thrush. Are we now important for lapwings and yellow wagtails?



A pair of lapwings displays in the field opposite in most years, and you see often numbers of them in the crop fields near the old airfield and down by the river, especially in the autumn. I think golden plovers have declined steeply, and I've never seen a snipe in Ramsbury, though I gather they were formerly here. I have also never seen a corn bunting, though they are still common on the downs near Aldbourne. In the late 1990s there was a huge roost of goldfinch near The Beavers, with 100+ birds in autumn. Grasshopper warblers were present most years on the water meadow, but they seem to have quickly moved on in the past two years. We also have water rail and a few grey partridges, though most partridges are red-legged. The skeins of Canada geese and mute swans flying up and down the valley are a defining part of the village character, ditto the swifts in the village square and, I suggest, song thrushes, singing loudly from a high perch, often a willow.

Animals

We are an important stronghold for water vole. I see them along the stream through our garden from time to time, and more often find their characteristic prints when the mud is in the right condition. I haven't seen one for some time, though a man who repaired our bridge in June 1997 saw them on several occasions; also a weasel's nest.

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Ramsbury is a stronghold for bats, especially pipistrelles, which use houses for their summer nursery roosts. Brown long-eared bat and Natterer's bat have also been recorded. All bats are protected by law.

The grass snake is another Ramsbury species — you see them occasionally, often near (or in) water, especially in spring and autumn — and unfortunately, squashed on roads. Common toads are another local feature. We also have common frog and smooth newt, and I've seen slow-worm in the village. The woods are full of roe deer — I've even seen them on the road at dusk, and the rasping bark of the roebuck in late summer is another 'Ramsbury sound'. Brown hares are seen occasionally, dead or alive, especially on the hill tops around Littlecote.

Fungi and other things

Larger fungi are a special interest of mine, but they scarcely impinge on village life. At least one Ramsbury garden has summer truffles. My lawn is covered with shaggy inkcaps in early October. Whitehill Coppice has a good variety of fungi, including the famous Death Cap (please don't harm them — no one seems in any danger of eating them). Though identifying them is a specialist business, you can enjoy the subtle colours of toadstools — purple, red, yellow and orange — in autumn. One easily recognised species is the appropriately named magpie toadstool, found under beech.

It might be worth mentioning the red stains on many flint pebbles in the river, e.g. by the ford. These belong to the red alga, *Hildenbrandtia* and are

characteristic of clear, well-oxygenated streams. There's another recognisable one called the frog-spawn alga *Batrachospermum*, most easily found in the spring. Most red algae are marine. The floating brown sludge you see in the quieter reaches of the river and its streams is made by diatoms. These brownish algae live on the surface of mud but in spring and summer often float to the surface with the aid of the oxygen they produce through photosynthesis. The main genera involved are probably *Synedra* and *Melosira*. Diatom 'blooms' seem to have increased, and may be a by-product of the phosphate-stripping plant upstream at Axford. Phosphate stripping may release silicon into the water, essential for diatom growth. The common floating green scum in ditches is *Spirogyra*. Associated with it are vast numbers of water fleas and other zooplankton.

Ramsbury has brown trout, rainbow trout (unfortunately), grayling, stone loach, bullhead, pike, 3-spined stickleback, minnow and brook lamprey — quite a notable species nowadays. I've seen it massed on stones in front of the white cottage on Newtown Road.

Nature conservation in Ramsbury

English Nature (the government body concerned with nature conservation) has divided the country into 120 'natural areas' based on landscape and wildlife features. Ramsbury lies within the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs natural area, which includes the upper part of the Kennet valley. English Nature lists the characteristic natural habitats of the area as chalk grassland — mainly on scarp slopes

too steep to plough — broadleaved woodland, 'wood pasture' wet meadows 'and associated tall fen and carr' (i.e. wet scrub) and chalk rivers. Ramsbury has good examples of all of these except wood pasture, which is confined to Savernake Forest. In addition, arable land can be important for birds and certain scarce 'weeds', depending on how it is managed.

English Nature notify Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) for their nationally important features. In Ramsbury there are two of these. The River Kennet is a chalk river 'of national importance' for its special features and associated wildlife. And Chilton Foliat Meadows is notified as an example of 'wet neutral meadows, watercourses and tall fen'. The latter area is also a 'candidate SAC' (Special Area of Conservation) under European Union law, on account of its populations of Desmoulin's whorl snail. Some of the listed 'key species' characteristic of the Berkshire and Marlborough Downs occur in Ramsbury, particularly water vole, and pipistrelle bat, which English Nature consider to be 'priority species requiring special attention'. Other 'key species' include:

CHALK GRASSLAND — brown hare, skylark, song thrush, lapwing, Roman snail, Duke of Burgundy butterfly.

WOODLAND — buzzard, bluebell, purple emperor.

WET MEADOWS — reed bunting.

ARABLE LAND — grey partridge, spotted flycatcher, bullfinch.

Other species I personally would regard as important on grounds of conservation concern or their prominence in the parish, are stream

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water crowfoot, scarlet tiger-moth, nightingale, water rail, willow and marsh tit, brown trout and brook lamprey.

Conclusion

What is special about Ramsbury?

First and foremost, the Kennet, an important 'chalk river', with clear, fast-running water fed by springs and underground aquifers, and a bed of flints, pebbles and firm clay. Its importance has been recognised in its designation as an SSSI. The River Kennet Restoration Project is a partnership scheme between Thames Water, the Environment Agency, English Nature and ARK.

Unfortunately, the quality of the river has suffered partly through low flow rates and reduced volume. Essentially, the river is carrying more muck from sewage treatment works than it can cope with. Today the tributary streams are often cleaner and in better condition than the main river.

Associated with the river are its banks and former floodplain, still undeveloped though no longer managed as 'water



meadow'. Habitats include thick beds of pond-sedge and reed sweet-grass (important for water vole) and marsh flowers like yellow iris, purple loosestrife, marsh marigold and comfrey. Again, plant diversity has suffered, particularly from the spread of stinging nettle. Annual mowing and removal of the clippings may help, but there is an underlying need to improve water quality and reduce chemically-enriched silt ... and ARK are right on to it!

The willow scrub that has spread over parts of formerly open meadow is an important habitat for birds, including declining species like nightingale and reed bunting. It is also rich in insects — many of the attractive moths that visit our gardens, like puss moth, sallow kitten and poplar hawkmoth, are dependent on willow.

Our natural woods are important both for wildlife and for their long history, visible in their banks, hollow



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tracks and old trees and stumps. Some of them are ancient woods (English Nature has a full list, with maps) which are much richer in plants and insects than more recent woods. Good indicators of older woods are wood anemone, early dog-violet and carpets of bluebells. Our woods also have a skirt of scrub with shrubs characteristic of the chalk, like wayfaring tree, dogwood, spindle and guelder rose, often draped in *Clematis* or traveller's joy. The main problem in our woods is too many deer. They prevent natural regeneration by browsing the fresh shoots and foliage. We must be thankful to the estates that our woods were not converted to conifer plantations. I view the recent tree plantings around the parish as contributing more to amenity than wildlife.

The habitat that has declined most in Ramsbury is chalk grassland. Since the 1940s, it has been reduced to odd banks and corners, the most accessible of which is on Spring Hill. Environmental schemes like stewardship offer

some longterm hope of habitat restoration, but chalk grassland takes a long time to establish, and you cannot recreate it simply by sowing. It is important, therefore, to conserve the little that is left as core areas from which the habitat may spread if conditions are right.

Almost anywhere in Britain, there was more wildlife in the past than in the present. Ramsbury, fortunately, is still quite rich in wildlife, especially in woodland and marshland birds and wild flowers. Among less well-recorded groups there is still a lot left to discover. What is perhaps most important is that our wildlife does not belong to the countryside in general, but to a particular and well-loved part of it — a village by a chalk river running through downs crowned with clay woods, a tapestry of habitats matured by time.



