



Comments on the draft Winchelsea Conservation Area Appraisal

The draft Winchelsea Conservation Area Appraisal is very timely. It is also a diligent and highly professional piece of work that will do much to help protect Winchelsea's special historical and unique architectural interest. We have already made some minor technical comments informally to the Conservation Officer. Having consulted with our members, this submission is our formal response.

The Society has no significant problem with any part of the draft Appraisal. The only changes we are seeking are to have highlighted certain threats to the archaeology of the Conservation Area and to ask for management proposals to deal with these threats to be included in the Appraisal.

The Society strongly supports the proposed extensions of the Conservation Area to the north and west of the present Area. We note that the western extension was sought by the Corporation of Winchelsea back in 1969, when the original Conservation Area designation was made.

Although part of the proposed extensions to the Conservation Area no longer have buildings on them, it is entirely appropriate to include them. Given that historic buildings can be protected by individual listing or scheduling, the essential purpose of Conservation Area status is to conserve the wider context of historically and architecturally important buildings, including their landscape setting. This was made clear in the 1969 Designation Report which stated "Section 1 of the Civic Amenities Act 1967 made provision for the first time for the preservation of areas, as distinct from buildings, of architectural or historic interest" and noted that, in the case of Winchelsea, "the merit and interest of the village lie in its quality as an area, a place, as much, if not more than, in the nature of the buildings" (para.3.2). The draft Appraisal quite rightly notes that the archaeological interest underlying the Conservation Area status of Winchelsea extends beyond the present built core.

The proposed extensions are undoubtedly an important part of Winchelsea in terms of their archaeology and history. This is confirmed by their inclusion in the County Council's Area of Archaeological Sensitivity and it makes good sense for these two areas to match. In addition, given its uniqueness, the medieval town layout preserved in Winchelsea should be treated as an integrated whole.

The northern extension will bring within the Conservation Area the sites of:

- the medieval harbourside;
- the medieval saltern which is now Ferry Marsh;
- the reclaimed land and medieval reclamation works in St Leonards Marsh;
- the area around the sewage works, which sit on the identified foundations of an ancient building;
- the ancient road from the village of Iham that ran around the base of the northern cliff;
- the causeway out to the ferry.

The inclusion of the harbourside site is particularly welcome. Winchelsea was a port town. Although there is a documentary record, it is limited and there has been no physical archaeological investigation of the harbourside apart from the exploratory work done by the Society in 2000 under the supervision of the County Archaeologist. As the draft Appraisal makes clear on page 18, the hidden archaeological record in this area is likely to be rich. Indeed, we believe that the archaeology of a medieval quayside would be unique.

St Leonards Marsh is also important. A geophysical survey by the Society in the summer of 2007 established the presence of important archaeology in St Leonards Marsh, either part of the port of Iham or the second site of the Blackfriars Monastery. This is due for exploratory excavation in 2008. The Marsh also includes part of a medieval sea wall.

The proposed northern extension of the Conservation Area will help protect the sedimentary structure of the ground, which represents a valuable archaeological record of the evolving geography of the area, including the Saxon-period flooding of the Brede Vallley and subsequent medieval reclamation.

The proposed western extension will bring with the Conservation Area the sites of:

- the western defences of New Winchelsea including the Town Dyke;
- the road from Pewis Gate to Fifth Street (the latter is now Hogtrough Lane), which was the principal route into the town from the west between the 13th and 16th centuries;
- Budge Lane leading down to the Walewell bridge;
- Pook or Poke Lane;
- the foundations possibly of the town wall;
- the Betmores area that includes the probable site of a medieval gatehouse;
- the suburbs along this side of the town (quarters 16A and 22A);
- the bulk of the pre-foundation town and port of Iham on the slopes of the hill.

However, the Society would like to see the Conservation Area extended further north and west to encompass:

- **Ferry Farmhouse.** This is the site of the ferry that operated from medieval times until the 17th century. The ferry building is therefore of considerable importance to the history of the Town and it seems more logical to include this site since most of the 13th century causeway leading to the ferry has already been proposed for inclusion.
- **St Leonards Fleet** (also know as Heifers Marsh). This would include the western end of the medieval sea wall and the drainage ditch beyond. The proposed extension includes the eastern end of the sea wall, so it is logical to include the other end. Both the sea wall and the ditch were associated with inning completed (according to Homan) by 1339.
- A southward elongation of the proposed western extension of the Conservation Area to include **Pewis Marsh**, as this includes an extremely rare undisturbed sequence of sediments from which a definitive history of the Brede estuary and Rye Bay is being extracted, and is therefore a key part of the archaeological record.

Our remaining comments are specific to particular sections of the draft Appraisal.

2.0 Winchelsea Conservation Area

The draft quite correctly stresses “the immense historic and archaeological interest and value” of Winchelsea, and its status as “an outstanding and rare example of early medieval town planning”. The Society feels that is important to contrast the importance of the town with the relatively limited amount of archaeological investigation of the buried remains of the original medieval town in general and the port in particular. Our knowledge of the original town comes largely from documentary sources or surveys of the 4-6 buildings which are reasonably complete survivals from the late 13th century. There have been few excavations in Winchelsea (18), mostly of individual plots, and few geophysical surveys (only 7 before the WAS started work, covering only 0.2% of the hilltop). The Conservation Area therefore has a particularly vital role to play in conserve this untapped archaeology.

2.1 Description

The draft comments, on page 5, that the A259(T) “acts as a ‘by-pass’ to the inner town, protecting it from through-traffic”. Regrettably, this is not true and is contradicted by the statement at the bottom of page 6 that the A259 brings “a high traffic flow through” the town. The Winchelsea Speed Watch action group has estimated, on the basis of an extensive traffic survey conducted in February-March 2006, that as much as 40% of the traffic transiting Winchelsea along the A259(T) and C298 cuts through the town (along the C298 --- which used to be the A259) in order to avoid the bottlenecks on the A259(T) at Ferry Hill. This “rat-running” is a major problem that is degrading the character of the town and poses a real physical threat to some historic sites including the Strand Gate (which has suffered repeated collision damage) and Court Hall (which was hit twice by speeding cars in 2005).

2.3 Historical Development

We would suggest that rather more could be made of the medieval wine cellars given that Winchelsea has a collection which is rivalled only by Southampton.

3.1 Setting of the Town

We strongly endorse the statement on page 9 that “the most significant definers of the character of the setting of the town to be the legibility of the profile of the hill, against the surrounding flat land, and the visible sides of the hill”. Is there any way that this statement could be given more prominence within the document?

There is another significant view of Winchelsea, which conveys the full impression of an island in the marsh, from the Udimore Road. This aspect is historically important given that the ferry across the Brede from what is now known as Station Road to Udimore (which derives its name from being “o’er de mer” or across the water from Winchelsea) linked the medieval town to Rye and the road to London.

3.2 Approaches to the Village

Mention is needed of the risk to the Strand and Pipewell Gates of traffic passing through the narrow gateways (see above).

3.3 Streetscape Character Analysis

The comments on the archaeological importance of Tanyard Lane cannot be endorsed too strongly.

3.4 Architectural & Archaeological Value

We feel that it would be difficult to say too much about the archaeological value of Winchelsea.

The draft Appraisal is quite correct to highlight the importance of the buried archaeology of Winchelsea.

3.7 Landscape Features

The Society strongly endorses the first point but would suggest specifically noting that what has actually been preserved is the original medieval landscape setting. The point about the landscape setting of Winchelsea is not just visual but historical.

4.3 Archaeology

The Society welcomes the commitment of the District Council to work with the County Archaeologist “to develop an appropriate method of consultation on applications for development within the Conservation Area, and of creating and monitoring archaeological conditions on planning permissions”. The archaeology of the town is indeed a “valuable resource in furthering our understanding of the history of the place”. The Society hopes that there will be no repetition of the failure of the planning authority to ensure that the archaeological investigation at St Thomas’s School of the important Butcheries site was not written up and published. It is essential to the archaeology of Winchelsea that records are published and do not disappear into the so-called “grey literature”. Publication feeds public interest and fosters support for conservation. It also generates new research.

We would therefore ask that the Appraisal include a specific management proposal that all archaeological investigations required for planning permission should be written up and published.

In addition, our understanding of the archaeological interest of Winchelsea depends upon the publication of physical investigations. There is therefore a need to tackle the problem of the “grey literature”. The Society believes that the District and County Council have an obligation to Conservation Areas such as Winchelsea to do more to collect and disseminate information on their archaeology and that action in pursuit of this objective should be included as a management proposal.

Annex 4: Article 4 Direction

We support the draft Article 4 Direction and the proposal that it cover the whole of the extended Conservation Area. It would be confusing and inequitable if the Direction varied within such a small Conservation Area.

Winchelsea Archaeological Society
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