

Ashwell Parish Council

Suggested changes to the Ashwell Conservation Area

Report for David Sorapure

November 2021



Ashwell Village looking south from the church tower

Working Group

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St Mary's Church

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Introduction

Ashwell Parish Council was asked by David Sorapure on behalf of North Hertfordshire District Council to make suggestions for alterations to the conservation area of Ashwell. The Parish Council set up a small working group to look into the matter and report back.



Ashwell's Lock Up



Ashwell Bury



Merchant Taylors' School House

Ashwell in its Physical and Historical Setting

The Physical Setting

Ashwell is a thriving parish of 4,108 acres in North Hertfordshire, on the borders of Cambridgeshire and Bedfordshire, with a population of about 1,900 (2019 estimate). It is the largest of a group of villages situated in a rural area of some 45 square miles, bounded on the west by the A1, on the east by the A14 and on the south by the A505. The nearest small towns are Baldock (4 miles to the south-west), Royston (6 miles to the east) and Biggleswade (6 miles to the north). Visually this is an extremely attractive area. The approach to Ashwell from the south or west is through open arable land and on to the steep north-facing scarp of Newnham and Claybush Hills. This provides a wide view over the valley where the river Cam has a source and on to the hills of Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire. The village of Ashwell nestles amongst the trees mostly below the scarp and stretches along the spring line. The magnificent parish church, dedicated to St Mary, is clearly visible. Approaching from the north and east the low-lying arable fields, pastures, trees and hedgerows provide a green contrast with the unspoilt horizon of the chalk hills to the south.

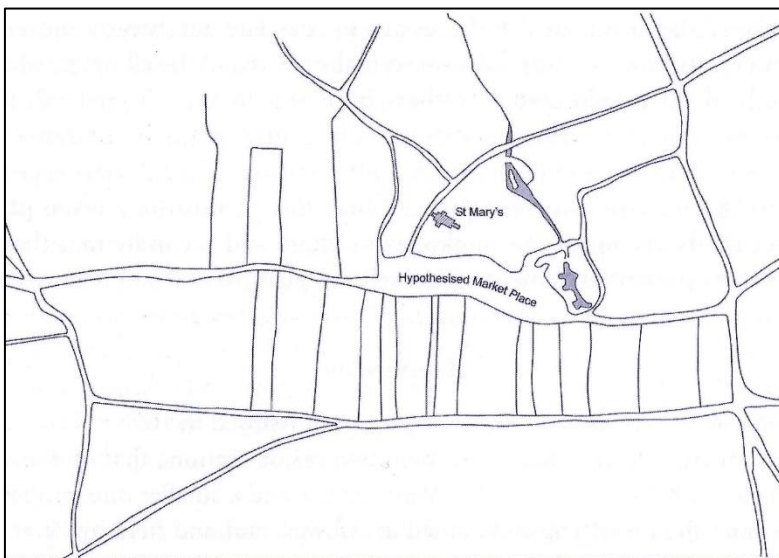
In the northern part of the parish the land is low-lying and gently undulating, formed on chalk marl. To the south the land rises quite steeply to the Eastern Heights. This chalk escarpment is a north-westerly extension of the East Anglian Heights. Boulder clay, deposited at the end of the last Ice Age, caps the highest point, Claybush Hill (99.1 m).

At the base of the escarpment are outcrops of Totternhoe stone, a well-jointed form of chalk used in the building of St Marys' church, which produces springs from water gathered in the porous chalk. Much of the older part of the village stretches along the lower slope where water could be reached easily from shallow wells.

All the soils in Ashwell are alkaline. That on the escarpment is light, easily worked and drains quickly. It contrasts with those on Claybush Hill and on the chalk marl which are quite wet and heavy.

Historical Background

From early times the present parish of Ashwell has been a focus for settlements. In 2005 a Neolithic (2,700 -2,000 BC) henge was excavated near the corner of Station Road and Ashwell Street. In the Bronze Age (c. 1800 to c. 800 BC) the presence of a number of burial barrows in the southern half of the parish suggest that there must have been settlement in the area. During the Iron Age (c. 800 BC to 100 AD) Arbury Banks was built and used as a defensive position when necessary. The main settlement at that time was probably at Buttway, halfway between the village centre and Ashwell End. During the Roman period there was a shrine at Ashwell End dedicated to the goddess Senuna.



Hypothesised Ashwell when created c. 920
© David Short

Having a shrine there implies that there would be services to feed and house the visiting pilgrims. To date the area has not been investigated thoroughly to see where exactly this settlement was. Not far from the shrine was a villa with a possible bath house. There was also a Roman villa on the south facing slope of Partridge Hill, not far from Arbury Banks. Ongoing excavation suggests that in the Roman period there was also a religious site to the south of the springs.

The present village, or town as it was known until the beginning of the twentieth century, probably began as a frontier borough, built by King Alfred's son Edward the Elder around

920.¹ The placename is first recorded in the will of Athelgifu who died c. 990. By 1086 (Domesday Book), Ashwell was one of the most important towns in Hertfordshire. It was a borough, a market town, with fourteen burgesses. Annual dues amounting to 49 shillings and 4 pence were paid to the Abbot of Westminster, who was lord of the manor.

For many centuries, the market played a central role in the life of Ashwell. From earliest times it attracted the interest of people in the neighbouring areas. High Street, with its important farms, was one of the boundaries of the marketplace, the others being Gardiners Lane, Swan Street, Hodwell and the footpath from Hodwell to High Street at the Springs. When the market declined in the seventeenth century the fortunes of Ashwell also declined. In 1850 there was a disastrous fire when buildings in Back Street and Silver Street were destroyed as well as those on High Street between Ratcliffe House and Jessamine House including the Independent, now URC, chapel. Sketches and an account of the event can be seen in the Ashwell Museum.

St. Mary's Church dominates the landscape with its great nave and tower. Built between 1320 and 1390, it reflects the prosperity of the town of that period. Life in Ashwell is reflected in other ways in the Church; the graffiti tells of the disaster brought by the plague of 1348-50 and the great storm of 1362. The interior, devoid of murals, ancient stained glass or statues, reflects the strong influence of Protestants in Ashwell in the seventeenth century. There have been no less than six different non-conformist chapels in the village although not all were in operation at any one time.



Ashwell 1841 Tithe Map. Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies Ref: HALS DSA4/6/1

In 1334 a case in the Hertfordshire assizes suggests that the lord of Ashwell manor, the Abbot of Westminster, enclosed some land much to the annoyance of the people of Ashwell who were accused of taking up trees and hedges and even killing animals. This land is probably what in 1841 was termed 'ancient enclosure', land to the north and northwest of the town. Enclosure of the rest of the parish came late in 1863. The structure of the town still reflects this. Up to the Second World War

¹ Short, David, 'Ashwell: an example of Anglo-Saxon town planning', in *Hertfordshire a county of small towns* Terry Slater and Nigel Goose eds.

the main farms of the parish could still be found in the village, particularly High Street, as they would have been in Anglo-Saxon times. In the last fifty years, however, changes in farming methods have meant the decline of these farmyards as working farms. Today, there are no working farms in the village. The two breweries started in the nineteenth century, Fordham's and Page's, both now defunct, once employed a large proportion of the population of the village.

It is almost impossible to estimate the population of Ashwell prior to the census of 1801, but a few rough figures are available. In the Domesday Book, of 1086, there are 83 families recorded in the borough, making a population of between 350 and 450 people. In 1307 this figure had risen to 129 families making a population of between 550 and 600 people. By 1563 the number of families had fallen to 87, once again to between 350 and 450 people. In 1801 there were 715 people. The population increased to 1,576 individuals by 1871 and then fell back to 1,360 in 1971. In 2021 the population was around 2,000.²

History of Buildings

The oldest part of a building so far discovered in Ashwell is part of a wall in The Old Cottage in High Street, which has been dated to c. 1250. St Mary's Church was built between 1320 and 1370. During this period Bear House was also built. During the second half of the fifteenth century a number of distinctive buildings were erected including Dixies farmhouse, The Guildhouse of the Brotherhood of St John the Baptist and the Town House (Ashwell Village Museum) which was probably a shop and court room of the Manor of Ashwell. Forrester's Cottages in High Street was built in stages; an initial hall house in the fifteenth century with the cross wings added in the sixteenth century and some time later the jettied eastern end. In the seventeenth century three timber-framed houses with central stacks, sometimes called baffle houses, were built.

In the 1680s the Merchant Taylors' School House was built of local bricks as was a barn at Farrows Farm. These are the earliest brick buildings in the parish. In 1812/13 the new vicar, Revd. Henry Morice, took down the timber-framed vicarage and built a new one, now the Old Rectory, in a contemporary style. After the fire of 1850 and up to the end of the century there was a good deal of building using either Cambridgeshire and/or Arlesey white bricks.

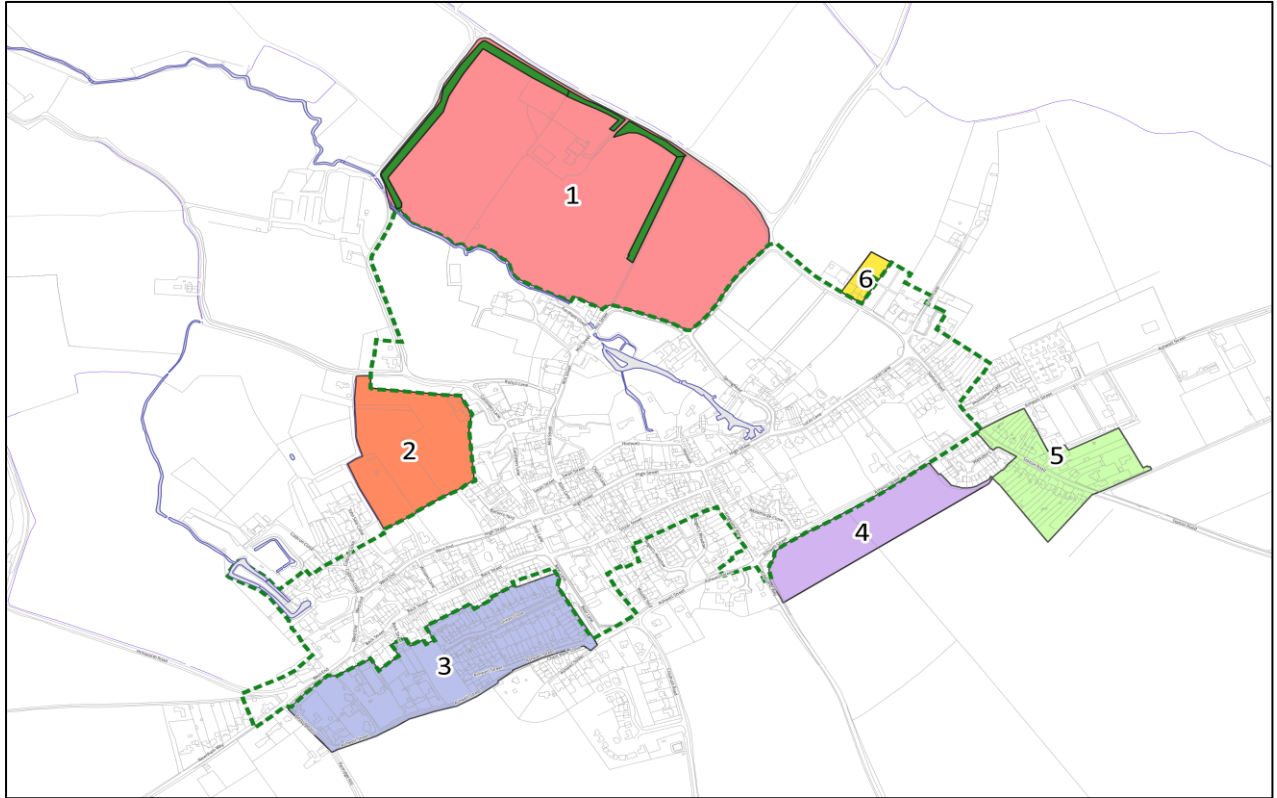
In the twentieth and twenty first centuries a number of estates such as Woodforde Close, Fordham's Close, The Rickyard, Angell's Meadow, Philosophers Gate, Chalk Bank Close, Townsend Meadow and Claybush Hill Meadow have been built.

For centuries there has been housing for the less well off. Alms houses in Alms Lane were owned by the parish by the mid seventeenth century. They were demolished in the 1960s. George Moss had the alms houses in Hodwell built in 1910. They are still in use. In 1926 Ashwell Rural District Council built council houses in Station Road as part of the 'Homes for Heroes' campaign. J Tickle of Letchworth was the architect and Baileys the local builder and contractor. The design was influenced by the Arts and Crafts designs used in Letchworth Garden City.

After the Second World War the District Council developed Dixies Close using the Airey design which were refurbished in 1992. Further council houses were built in Dixies Close, Bear Lane and Ashwell Street. In the late 1960s Wolverley House was built as sheltered housing. Since then, social housing has been built in new estates of more than nine houses.

² For a fuller discussion of Ashwell population figures and how these allow you to compare Ashwell with the surrounding area see Short, David, 'Using population figures to tell a wider story:' Census figures appear to be accurate but assumptions were made about under-registration by the compilers and adjustments made.

Proposed Additions to the Conservation Area



Ashwell Village showing the Conservation Area and the proposed additions

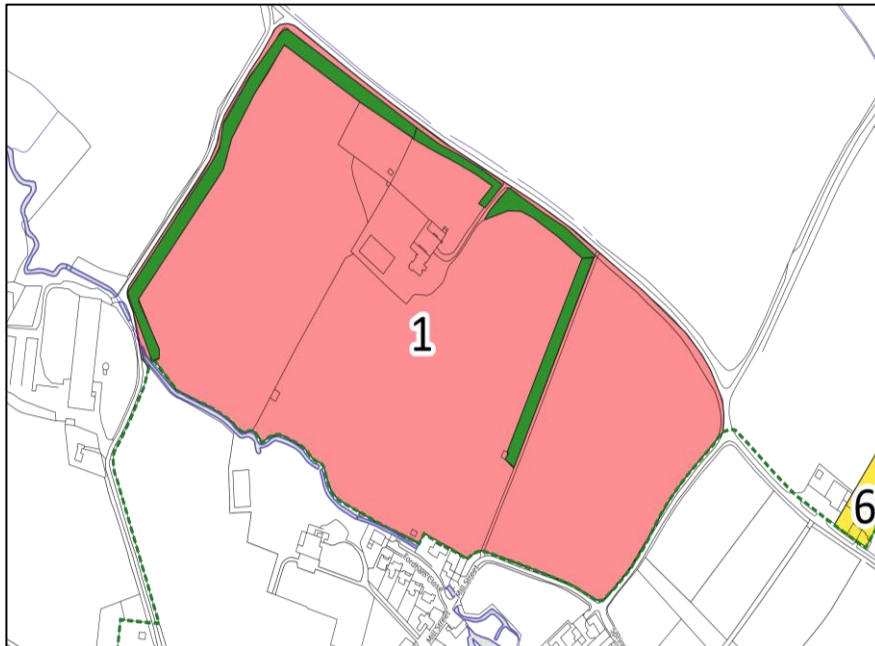
Key

- 1 Elbrook Meadow and Cow Lane Meadow
- 2 Land north of Dixies Meadow - Lawyers Close and two fields to the west.
- 3 Ashwell Street between Bear Lane and Partridge Hill
- 4 Land to south of Ashwell Street between Station Road and Kingsland Way
- 5 Station Road south of Ashwell Street
- 6 Ashwell Cemetery
- Existing Conservation Area
- Wooded area
- Rivers

1 Elbrook Meadow and Cow Lane Meadow

Description

Area of land to the north of the village bounded by Mill Street, Cow Lane, Northfield Road, Elbrook Lane and the River Rhee. This includes the wooded areas.



Reasons for inclusion:

- This open space contributes well to the visual character of the village.
- Beautiful views across the meadow towards St. Mary's Church.
- Views away from the village provide a strong connection to the countryside and rights of way offer public access.
- To maintain the rural character of the village and the importance of wildlife
- The pathway around the meadow is frequently used by the community for regular exercise and social gatherings. All ages can access this pathway and enjoy the diverse wildlife
- Local community groups use the woods for social and educational reasons (Brownies/Cubs/Scouts).
- These fields have been the venue for the Ashwell Gymkhana/Ashwell Horse Show/Ashwell Show for over a century and as such are part of the history and community life of Ashwell and over the last 10 years has raised over £100,000 for local clubs, societies and organisations.
- It ties in with, and contributes to, the listed Ashwell Bury Garden and Park.



Aerial view of Elbrook and Cow Lane Meadows

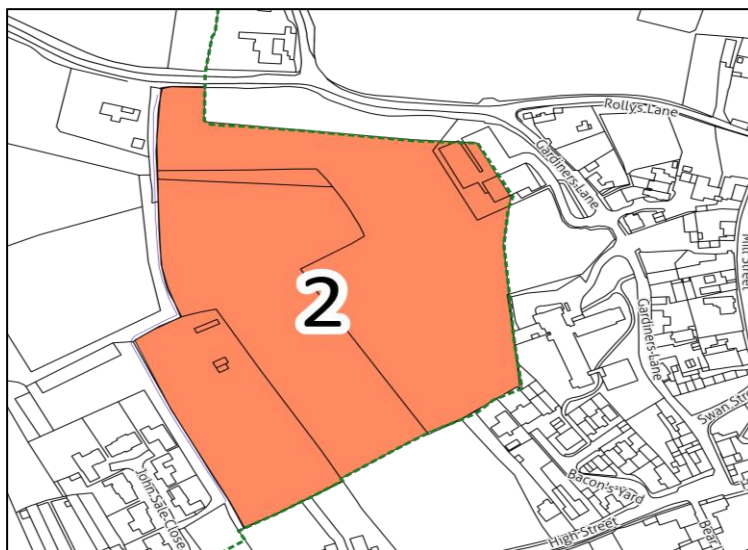


View over Cow Lane Meadow

2 Land north of Dixies Meadow – Lawyers Close and two field to the west.

Description

Dixies Meadow which butts onto High Street is already within the Conservation Area. Lawyers Close to the north is partly within the Conservation area but, together with the two fields to the west, should all be in the Conservation Area.



Reasons for inclusion

- This open space within a densely populated part of the village is part of the character of Ashwell and has a strong visual impact.
- The openness creates a strong connection to the countryside and the diverse wildlife there.
- There are stunning views across this open space from the Bushel & Strike public house.
- The Inspector's comment in 1987 refusing the appeal for development on Dixies Meadow said: 'The site was said to provide a visual link between the village and the open agricultural land to the north. Its contribution to the Conservation area is its contrast with the built-up areas on either side. If the land were built upon the views through to the agricultural land and countryside would be lost and that would change part of the character of this attractive village. This link would be destroyed if developed.'³ This applies as much to the land north of Dixies Meadow as it does the Meadow itself.
- The close opposite The Grange was probably the site of one of the medieval annual fairs. Although never properly surveyed there have been many archaeological finds there.



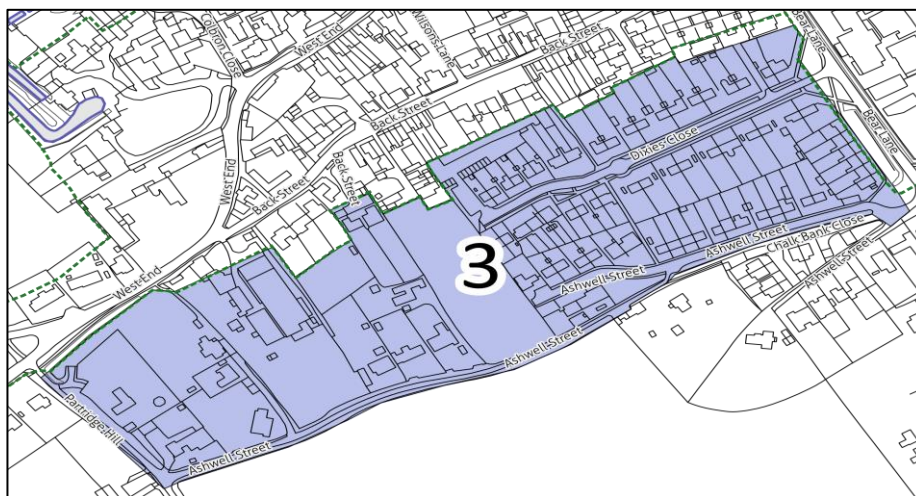
View of Lawyers Close and adjacent fields

³ D G Hollis, BA, DipTP, MRTPI, Inspector's Report, Dixies Meadow Enquiry January 1987

3 Ashwell Street between Bear Lane and Partridge Hill

Description

Extend the Conservation Area from the corner of Newnham Way and Partridge Hill, up Partridge Hill to Ashwell Street and along the south side of Ashwell Street to Bear Lane linking up with the present Conservation Area.



Reasons for inclusion

- Dixies Close is an important council housing estate. When in 1989 the Airey houses had to be re-clad the solution was innovative and sensitive to the locality and needs of the occupiers. As such it provides a good example of what was (and still is) possible.
- Dixies Close is a distinctive and cohesive development that is defined by its uniformity. That uniformity should be protected from creeping significant structural change or rebuilding that over time could threaten the area's character.
- The preservation of this type of housing will contribute to the continued encouragement of the provision in the village for diverse housing need in both the private and public sector.
- This part of Ashwell Street was probably created c 920 when the borough of Ashwell was created.
- The unpaved parts of Ashwell Street are quiet and peaceful and are valuable to Ashwell's sense of open space.
- The area is a transition between the built environment and the countryside and a link between the village and Arbury Banks the Iron Age hillfort.
- The houses in Ashwell Street are set back from the road with large gardens which conserve existing wildlife habitats.
- The allotments are vital for the community providing a local amenity, open space, conserving existing wildlife habitats and encouraging new.
- Encouraging villagers to grow their own vegetables and fruit helps reduce the need to travel to neighbouring villages and towns, thus lowering our carbon footprints and traffic flow through Ashwell. This is in line with messages from COP26.
- The hedge flora is important, especially the wild plum, or bullace, and blackthorn hedges as indicated in the 2003 Government Consultation on Future of Legal Protection for Hedges and are found in this section of Ashwell Street. There is also Duke of Argyll's tea tree next to the twitchel Back St to Dixies Close.
- There are views out of the village to open fields. This provides a strong connection to the countryside.



Ashwell Street from Partridge Hill



Dixies Close

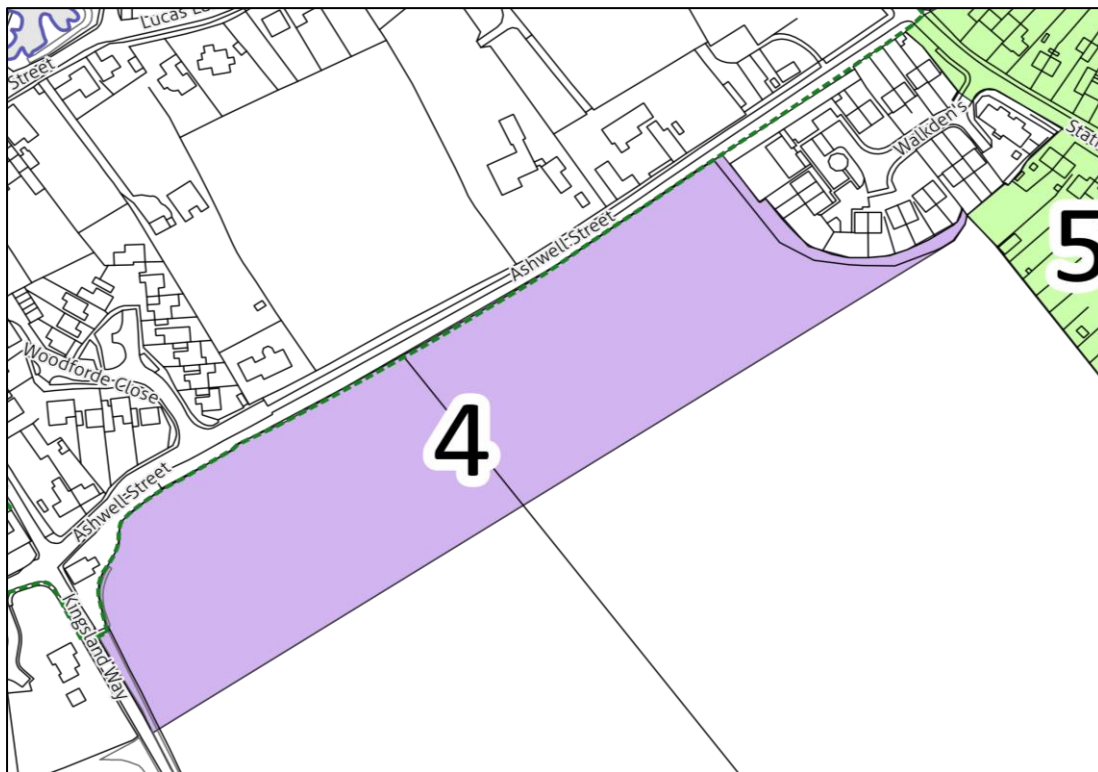


The Foresters' allotments

4 Land to south of Ashwell Street between Station Road and Kingsland Way

Description

The present Conservation Area runs to the south of Ashwell Street from Kingsland Way to Station Road. This boundary should be extended as far south as the southern boundary of Walkdens.



Reasons for inclusion

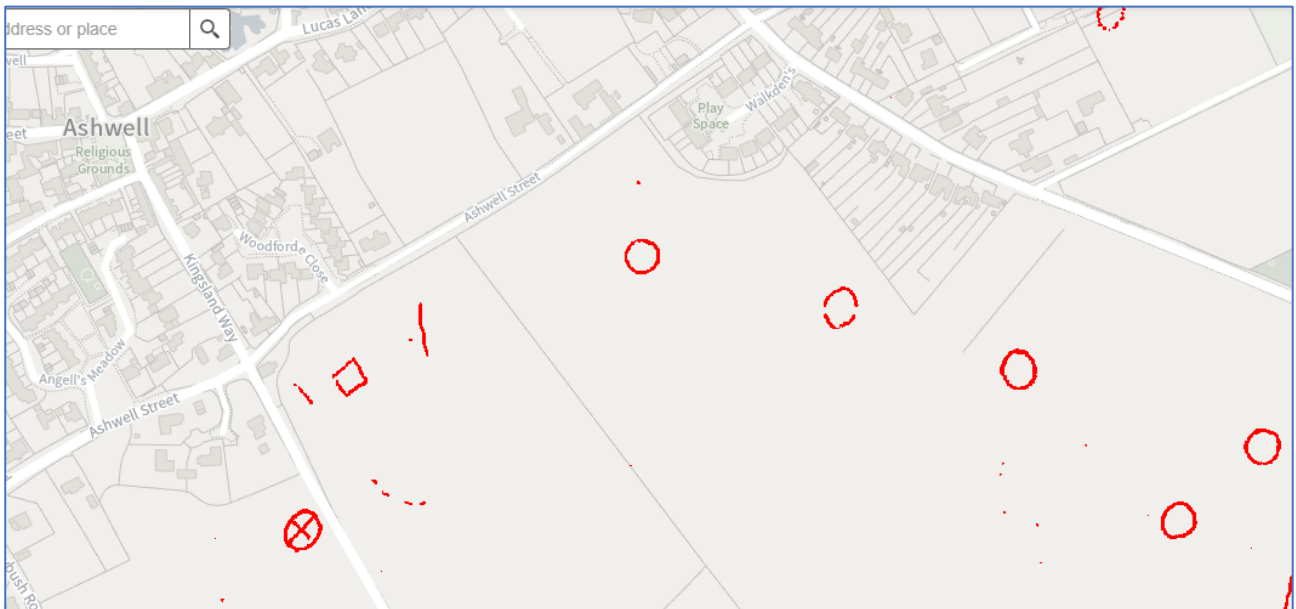
- This area falls just outside the Settlement Boundary and marks, along with the unpaved section of Ashwell Street, the distinct transition between the settlement boundary to the north and open rural countryside to the south. Given the historical and geological importance of this landscape this area should be brought into the Conservation Area to recognise and reinforce its rural character and significance.
- Looking over Hunts Close there are stunning views of the village and Cam valley beyond.
- The eastern part of the land to the south of Ashwell Street was, because of the archaeological deposits there, designated a scheduled monument in 2018.⁴ There are more archaeological features in the field west of it.⁵ (See plan on page 13)
- The scarp lies about 1km east of the Iron Age hillfort Arbury Banks and is part of the Hertfordshire chalk scape from Hexton to Royston.
- The area is visible from the Guilden Morden Road and housing development would have a negative impact.

⁴ Historic England Listing. Crop Marks of five Ring Ditches (west of Station Road and south of Ashwell Street, List entry no. 1451703)

⁵ Features can be seen on Historic England's Aerial Archaeology Mapping explorer



The field in the foreground now contains Walkdens' extension and is the scheduled field

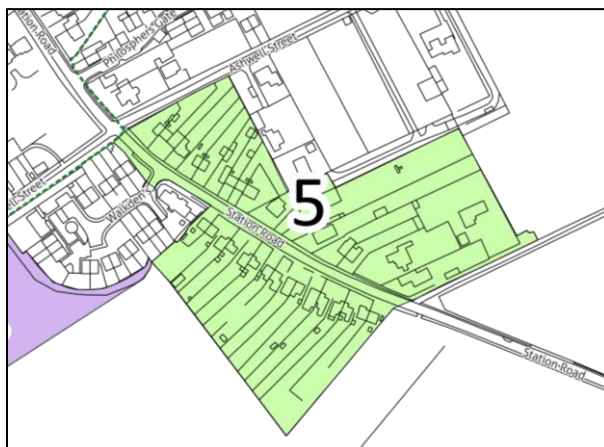


Historic England's Aerial Archaeology Mapping Explorer showing features in Area 4

5 Station Road south of Ashwell Street

Description

Both sides of Station Road from Ashwell Street south to the end of the houses including The Beacon.



Reasons for inclusion

- This part of Station Road provides an important gateway into the village.
- Early, 1920s, council housing and part of the 'Homes for Heroes' movement.
- All of Station Road to be included to maintain character/style of housing.
- Style of housing influenced by the Arts and Craft architecture of Letchworth Garden City
- Specific design - long gardens at the back to create an open space and a good-sized front garden which allows the houses to be set back from the road.



Arts and Crafts houses in Station Road

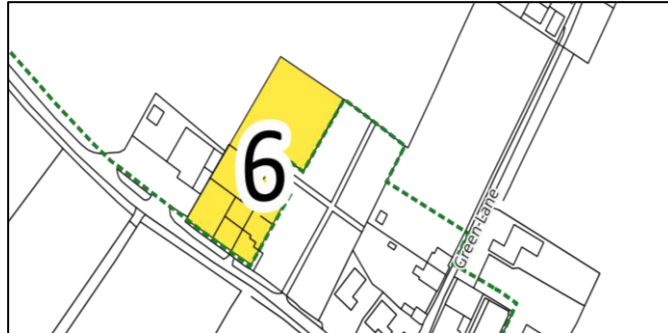


Southern part of Station Road from the air

6 Ashwell Cemetery

Description

The village cemetery on Station Road is a square piece of land divided into four quadrants with a chapel of ease in the centre. As the north-east quadrant is not yet needed it is presently leased to a local farmer. However as the third quadrant is filling up the last one will be needed in the not too distant future.



Reasons for inclusion

- The conservation area needs to include the whole of the designated cemetery which contains two listed tombstones and an Arts and Crafts style chapel of ease designed by Sir Albert Richardson in the 1930s. (The chapel ought to be listed)



Ashwell Cemetery with the Chapel of Ease



The Chapel of Ease

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