

WELLS-NEXT-THE-SEA CONSERVATION AREA:
FORM AND CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

(Designated 6/6/74)

1.0 INTRODUCTION.

- 1.1** Wells-next-the-Sea is located on the North Norfolk coast, at the western extremity of the North Norfolk District Council's area. It is situated some 25 miles north-west of Norwich along the A1067 and B1105. The town is a popular summer holiday resort and had an estimated population of 2,375 in mid-1996. A large part of the town centre is within the Conservation Area and the rural area surrounding it is part of the North Norfolk Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- 1.2** Wells Conservation Area was designated in 1974, one of the first to be designated by North Norfolk District Council. The boundary as it exists today remains unaltered since 1974. The existing Conservation Area is roughly 'T' shaped and is the largest urban Conservation Area in the District. The northern boundary follows the Quay and continues west along Freeman Road, ending abruptly at the western edge of the town where development gives way to meadow land. It includes all of the block of properties between Freeman Road and Bases Lane/Theatre Road before running south along Greenway Lane, to the rear of properties on the western side of Buttlands and Plummers Hill. At the corner of Burnt Street the boundary runs east along the rear of properties fronting the south side of that street and Church Street. It then follows Polka Road, runs along Northfield Lane and continues north along Jolly Sailor Yard to the Quay.

2.0 HISTORICAL GROWTH.

2.1 Medieval.

There had been a fishing village at Wells, one of many along the North Norfolk Coast, since the late Saxon period, but its transformation into a port resulted directly from the charter granted by King John to Ramsey Abbey in 1202. This allowed the Abbot to build a town on higher ground that slopes down to Wells Haven. Ramsey Abbey chose Wells as the port through which to export grain, salt and reeds from its estates because the more accessible port of Lynn was already controlled by the Bishop of Norwich. As the Fenland Abbey grew rich it developed trade links with the Low Countries and Wells was soon exporting agricultural products abroad in addition to other parts of Britain.

- 2.2** The original early 13th century port is an early example of town planning with a rectangular grid pattern of streets running down to the Quay and bounded by what today are Station Road, Clubbs Lane and Standard Road, with Staithe Street as the main north-south spine. From here the High Street continued south to St. Nicholas Church situated inland on what was already the coast route linking the North Norfolk ports.

- 2.3** Foreign trade continued to grow throughout the Middle Ages, particularly with the establishment of the Hanseatic League, a group of German towns that controlled trade in the Baltic. Lynn became the chief point of contact on the Norfolk coast but Wells with its sheltered harbour was also well placed to benefit from the increase in trade. Warehouses were built along the quay and wealthy merchants houses grew up a few yards inland on

slightly higher ground; some of which survive, at least in part, on the east side of Staithe Street.

- 2.4 Although the coast at Wells is a mixture of salt marshes and sand dunes, considerable areas of shingle bank exist a few miles east along the coast road. In addition, flint cobbles were plentiful in the valleys of the Stiffkey river and over the glacial drift that covers much of North Norfolk.
- 2.5 Not surprisingly flint was the most common local building material before the widespread manufacture of brick and can be found on most of the buildings that survive from the 16th and 17th centuries. Characteristic features include cobbles laid in regular courses, sometimes in alternating patterns with brick headers.
- 2.6 The earliest surviving buildings - the 16th and 17th century houses near the quay - all have steeply pitched roofs and would originally have been thatched with reed from the salt marshes. Although, unlike most small market towns, there is no record of a major fire having destroyed much of Wells, thatch is a very combustible material. With the availability of cheap pantiles from the mid 18th century onwards, thatch was gradually replaced with this more fire resistant material to the extent that there is now not a single thatched building in the town.
- 2.7 **Jacobean and Georgian.**
Trade continued to grow throughout the 17th century following the setting up of the Port Commissioners in 1568 and an Act of Parliament a century later which enabled the Commissioners to levy tolls on all cargoes for the upkeep of the harbour. The Old Customs House at East Quay dates from this time.
- 2.8 The port continued to consolidate in and around its medieval grid layout with short extensions west along what is now Freeman Street and short narrow lanes and yards lined by fishermen's cottages running parallel up to Theatre Road. In the other direction a similar mixture of terrace flint cottages grew up along East Quay and in the network of alleyways around Jolly Sailor Yard. The earliest surviving 16th and 17th century houses are grouped together from the harbour end of Staithe Street eastwards. The original nucleus almost certainly spread in the other direction as well along the harbour but has been replaced by more recent development.
- 2.9 Further inland there was some consolidation around the church and along the High Street where evidence may survive behind later facades, but the main growth centre remained along the quay side. During the 17th and early 18th centuries the town probably consisted of two quite separate areas, the port and the inland village around the church and coast road with some commercial development along the High Street.
- 2.10 It was not until the late Georgian period that Wells began to take on much of its present shape and appearance. It continued to grow westwards along Freeman Street with early 19th century terrace housing on the north side in particular in the form of ribbon development. Across the road more fishermen's cottages and boat builders' yards grew up around Chapel Yard, Boatman's Row and Brigg Square. As the town's population grew, all parts of Wells filled out with a mixture of cottages and some more substantial late Georgian residences set in their own modest grounds surrounded by brick and flint boundary walls and mature trees.

Most notable of them are 'Normans' in Standard Road, Marsh House in Marsh Lane and The Ostrich (which was once a Public House) in Burnt Street.

- 2.11** The most elegant development was that of The Buttlands, a formal layout of detached and semi-detached brick villas around a rectangular tree-lined green; a spacious planned development bolted onto the existing street pattern behind the High Street. Wells soon acquired a theatre, school and chapels but never developed much beyond the village green atmosphere of The Buttlands.
- 2.12** By the mid 18th century the use of red brick had begun to make a significant difference to the character of much of the Conservation Area. Cobble buildings were re-fronted and new buildings displayed brick or rendered facades. The use of cobble was restricted to the less conspicuous side or rear elevation, outbuildings and boundary walls. As the most traditional wall material, cobble or flint rubble laid randomly continued to be used on only the cheapest fishermen's' cottages, e.g. the rows in and around Jolly Sailor Yard and Mindham's Yard.
- 2.13** Red brick made its first appearance on some of the wealthier merchants' houses in the late 17th early 18th century off Staithe Street and confined as the most widely used wall material right through the vernacular period until the late 19th century, particularly when improved firing techniques in the late 18th century made local manufacture much more economic. Today its widespread use is still clearly evident but because cobble is more difficult to render effectively it must be assumed that most of the rendered facades today were originally red brick. From some of the best surviving late Georgian examples, notably on the west side of The Buttlands, it would appear that impurities in the local clay produced a brownish/pinkish orange colour mix more like the bricks in Kings Lynn than the bright orange of the brick earth inland around Aylsham or Fakenham. The variations in colour are probably due to the higher iron content that occurs further westwards near the carrstone outcrop.
- 2.14** The distribution of each main walling material - flint, cobble, red or yellow brick and render, as they occur today are misleading. Although some houses were originally plastered or stucco finished over brickwork, the rendered finish of many is a more recent, non-traditional cement render over red brickwork that was originally meant to be left exposed. The amount of visible red brick has been further reduced by the application of colourwash directly onto the brick surface (the assumption is that any painted brickwork is almost certainly red not the more distinctive gault brick). The effect of painted and rendered brick is to transform the character of some main streets, notably the High Street, Staithe Street and Freeman Street as well as residential back areas, e.g. Chapel Yard and Jolly Sailor Yard. In most cases the change to lighter painted facades has been in response to the need for more reflected light in narrow streets as much as the fashion for colourwash along the coast.
- 2.15** Black glazed pantiles, more frost-proof and therefore more expensive to manufacture, became the fashionable new roofing material from the mid 18th century for the next 100 years. Originally imported by sea from the Low Countries, black glazed pantiles were soon being manufactured in local brickyards together with the cheaper, more widely used orange clay pantiles. Their use in the late 18th century was restricted to the more imposing new houses notably The Norman's and Marsh House in association with red brick. They are also a distinctive feature of some older properties refashioned in the late Georgian period e.g. in

Staithe Street and the High Street and were used to help distinguish some more prominent corner buildings.

- 2.16** With very few exceptions black glazed pantiles were too expensive for use on more ordinary early 19th century cottages. A cheaper alternative that satisfied the need for a distinctive new roof material came in the form of the smut grey pantile. Cheaper than glazed pantiles, they were first used as early as orange clay pantiles on larger buildings from the late 17th century onwards. They continued to be used in preference to orange pantiles throughout the Georgian period, notably on several detached late Georgian houses around The Buttlands, occasionally in association with equally distinctive gault brick but more often with red brick. By the early 19th century smut grey pantiles were being used less frequently on large houses with the introduction of black glazed tiles or imported Welsh slate but continued as a popular roofing material on more prominent cottages and small houses, notably the south facing roof slopes of properties along the north side of Freeman Street. The relatively widespread use of this type of clay pantile, sometimes only on the more exposed roof slope, may be due to its more widespread use on properties on the Holkham Estate.
- 2.17** Orange clay pantiles remained the cheapest and most widely used of the three types of pantile on all types of building from houses and cottages to barns and outbuildings from the late 18th century through much of the Victorian period.
- 2.18** Orange clay pantiles give large parts of the Conservation Area their particular character, especially those roofscapes seen from across car parks or back lanes where the rear slopes of main frontage buildings, extensions and outbuildings are all covered in this one roof material. It is noticeable also that virtually all buildings in the High Street and many in Staithe Street which are both narrow and where the roofs are hardly visible, are covered with orange pantiles. Buildings made more visible by a gap in the street frontage opposite are more likely to be roofed in black glazed or smut tiles.
- 2.19** Welsh slate was first imported for use on a small number of more fashionable late Georgian houses before the arrival of the railway made them more widely available. Notable examples include the tall gault brick house on the west side of The Buttlands and the commercial building at the corner of Staithe Street. This early use of the material, particularly in association with yellow brick, may be linked again to the proximity of Holkham Hall, among the earliest examples of the use of imported Welsh slate in the country (18th century). Elsewhere slate became the common roof material on Victorian warehouses, chapels and houses, but due to the absence of large new areas of 19th century development slate does not dominate the character of any one part of Wells.

2.20 **Victorian.**

The prosperity brought about by the town's improved status, can still be seen in the number of surviving early Victorian shopfronts in the High Street. By the early years of the Victorian period it was the main commercial street with older properties re-fronted and others built in the gaps along the street frontage. Throughout the 19th century more shops and pubs were opened along the High Street and Staithe Street. The railway from Fakenham arrived in 1857 and revitalised the town's economy. The harbour wall was rebuilt with imported free stone and several large brick warehouses arose along the waterfront. Grain and animal feed were still the most important goods handled by the port with fishing always a secondary activity. Malting was also important to 19th century Wells with 13 Malt Houses

being located in the town at the height of this activity. Several of these Malt Houses have been demolished but some still survive and have been converted. A good example is in Theatre Street where the Wells Centre has been created. The Lifeboat Station was built in 1869 on Beach Road, and several late Victorian chapels appeared around the town. The police station and Church Rooms in Church Plain completed the range of institutional buildings.

- 2.21** A flour mill and coal yard in Maryland opposite the Great Eastern station in Polka Road are a legacy of the town's modest industrial development but it never became a popular Victorian resort like Cromer or Sheringham and despite the railway, was always too remote from Norwich and other markets to have an industrial future. For these reasons, with the exception of a few Victorian houses on the outskirts, Wells is unusual for the absence of late 19th century housing. The existing housing stock proved sufficient for the needs of the town and the large work force employed by the Holkham Estate was provided for in the park and model estate village.

3.0 FORM AND CHARACTER.

- 3.1** A series of identity areas have developed within Wells which together form the fabric of the town and its CA. These areas are diverse but the most general distinction is between the parallel rows of narrow streets that run down to the quay/coast road and the open landscape areas on either side of the High Street.

3.2 Freeman Street / Theatre Road.

A mixed residential area with a series of short alleyways and yards running from the more spacious residences of Theatre Road down to the early 19th century ribbon development along Freeman Street. Cut off from a similar pattern of development in The Glebe and eastwards by the large public car park are a series of irregular and informal spaces bounded by terraced cottages and others orientated at right angles linked by flint boundary walls, (e.g. along Dogger Lane). Some fishermen's cottages are 18th century, or even earlier, but the great majority are late 18th/early 19th century, either red brick, cobble or render. The character of Theatre Road and its western continuation, Bases Lane, is due largely to the boundary walls being in brick and cobble and several larger houses on the north side which are overhung by trees. There are equally important brick walls to the council houses on the other side. This wall is continued along Clubbs Lane, Park Road and Mill Road.

3.3 The Quay.

Wells is the only port still open on the North Norfolk coast. There is some small trade in animal foodstuffs and a little fishing but the Victorian warehouses have been converted either to flats or amusement arcades. The lifeboat station is now a maritime museum and the central quay area is now given over to the facilities - entertainment, gifts and fast food - that constitute Wells as a small seaside resort. The dominant feature along The Quay is the Old Maltings and its gantry which straddles the road and emphasises the underlying reasons for Wells' existence.

3.4 East Quay.

A mixture of warehouses and fishermen's cottages, this is the oldest surviving part of the port of Wells clustered around the old Customs House and stretching east with a delightful

jumble of older 17th century houses and later terrace cottages around Jolly Sailor Yard and nearby alleyways. The character here is small scale, the spaces intimate and irregular, the product of haphazard growth and dwellings grouped together against the onshore northerly winds. The atmosphere here is very similar to that of the Freeman Street/Theatre Road area.

3.5 Staithe Street.

This is the longest and most central of the many narrow streets sloping down to the harbour. Grouped around the seaward end are some of the oldest surviving merchants' houses constructed in red brick or coursed cobble with distinctive smut or black glazed pantiles.

3.6 Later 19th century development has spread south along the street to its junction with Station Road, with a 1960's row of shops on the east side built in the grounds of No 42 (formerly The Mayshiel). The Ilex tree in front of the house and the other by the footpath through to the Health Centre, illustrate the importance of individual mature trees in the street scene. Staithe Street is the main commercial spine with a mixture of provision shops for local residents and gift shops for visitors. This is reflected in the mixture of traditional and modern shop fronts.

3.7 High Street / Church Plain.

At the southern end, Church Plain is quite wide, curving gently and lined by a mixture of late Victorian institutional buildings (Church Rooms and old Police Station), both constructed in brick and slate, and there are continuous terraces of 18th century cottages. At the junction with Marsh Lane and Whalebone Yard, the road narrows considerably and the view is terminated by a terrace of infill houses on the corner of Marsh Lane. Northwards, the High Street slopes gently uphill on a long slow curve before straightening towards Station Road. Once the main commercial street, lined with original late Georgian and Victorian shop fronts, the High Street is now entirely residential. It is a tightly defined linear space. Colourwashed brick and stucco facades with orange pantile roofs are punctuated by the occasional gault brick front, enlivened by some subtle colourwash shades and distinctive joinery details, which include panel doors, door case reveals and bracketed door heads as well as finely proportioned shopfronts.

3.8 Church Street/Burnt Street.

Unlike other villages and market towns like Blakeney, Cromer and Fakenham, Wells is not dominated by its church. St. Nicholas is neither central nor is it in an elevated position. But it was built alongside the main coast road that is here some half a mile inland. It is never a great focal point on any of the main approach roads but does become a local landmark on the immediate east/west approaches along Church Street and Burnt Street. This main route is marked by the wooded grounds of the old and new rectory at the south-east corner of the Conservation Area and by the group of outbuildings to Manor Farm on the south-west corner. Between them the character of the two roads is defined by a mixture of cottages, some at right angles and larger houses set back with roadside trees and boundary walls. There is a tarmac parking area and brick wall with new infill housing directly opposite the church. Along these streets there is no great sense of enclosure or consistency of character.

3.9 The Buttlands.

From the whitewashed facades of the High Street two narrow lanes, Green Dragon Lane and Whalebone Yard, lead through to the late Georgian elegance of The Buttlands. The transition from narrow High Street along even narrower flint and brick alleyways to spacious formal green is both dramatic and for the visitor, quite unexpected. Everything

changes, colourwash and red pantiles to yellow or red brick and smut grey pantiles or slate. The Buttlands is a rectangular Green with rows of Lime trees that partially obscure the late Georgian houses, a mixture of imposing three storey houses on the west side and more modest portico houses with short approach roads/back lanes at each corner. The character is discreetly residential with continuous on street parking. It is busier and more commercial at the northern end next to the Globe Public House and the car park. The Crown Hotel sits at the southern end of this area and is the key building on this side of the Green.

3.10 Polka Road.

This is the main approach road to the town centre from Sheringham and Walsingham. On the west side the meadows and cemetery form an important landscape setting for the church with the pantile roof line of houses in Church Plain and the High Street clearly visible. Further along this landscape area changes from open countryside to large houses in wooded grounds bounded by tall brick and flint garden walls to the north of Marsh Lane. The mature trees to Marsh House and the dark evergreen Ilex trees that form the main approach to the former early 19th century board school (now the Field Study Area) are important roadside features together with the row of Horse Chestnuts which are opposite. This leafy, tree lined approach continues north of the junction with Station Road and around into Northfield Lane, a loose-knit landscape zone running south-north along the eastern side of the Conservation Area.

4.0 LISTED BUILDINGS.

4.1 In 1951, as a result of the first survey of historic buildings in Wells, a total of 5 buildings were listed, including St. Nicholas Church and four of the most important Georgian houses. This remained the situation for 20 years until in 1972 when the first major re-survey was undertaken. This resulted in the current "Green Back" list. Large numbers of buildings were listed for the first time including important concentrations along the High Street, Staithe Street, Buttlands and the narrow streets that run down to Freeman Street and the Quay. As a result the number of listed buildings in Wells increased to 181.

4.2 Five more buildings have been added since 1972 as a result of "spot listings", including two K6 telephone kiosks in 1991 and the Old Lifeboat House in 1993. The current total stands at 192 buildings, by far the largest number for any town in the district. The total is made up as follows:-

Grade I St. Nicholas Church
Grade II* St. Michael's Cottage, Jicklings Yard;
Ostrich House, Burnt Street;
Marsh House, Marsh Lane;
Tudor Cottage, Jolly Sailor Yard
Grade III 187

5.0 CONCLUSION.

- 5.1** The origins of Wells-next-the-Sea lie in its association with the ocean. It has developed from a fishing village to a port, had some association with the Georgian trend of health spas and is now a tourist resort. The distinctiveness of the different areas of the town and the CA are therefore more subtle than other towns within North Norfolk. The different materials used in the construction of the built fabric of the CA illustrate the changes that have occurred as Wells has evolved, the prime example being the use of pantiles within the town. The properties with smut pantiles illustrate a period of Georgian prosperity but the overall character of the CA is defined by the use of orange pantiles across the majority of the town. There are obvious exceptions to this rule, notably the late Georgian elegance of The Buttlands with its open grassed area lined by Lime trees, and The Quay and East Quay which provide a reminder of the character of the old port of Wells and a backdrop to the openness of the estuary.
- 5.2** Wells CA is also dissimilar to other CA's within North Norfolk towns in respect of the impact of its church. The Church of St Nicholas is not central or elevated and therefore does not dominate the surrounding townscape in a similar fashion to the churches at Cromer or Fakenham. The absence of late 19th century housing is also an anomaly found within the town. Diversity has been shown to exist within the Wells CA created essentially by subtle changes across its identity areas. These provide a unique form and character which sets Wells apart from the other town CA's in Cromer, Fakenham and North Walsham. Finally perhaps the most dramatic and panoramic impression of Wells comes from the north and from the sea, which given the origins of the town seems most appropriate.

(Approved by Development Committee 5.11.98)