

**FAKENHAM CONSERVATION AREA:
FORM AND CHARACTER DESCRIPTION**

(Designated 28/2/75)

1.0 INTRODUCTION.

- 1.1** Fakenham is a historic market town in North Norfolk with a population of about 7000. It is approximately 10 miles from Wells-next-the-Sea on the B1105 County Road and roughly equi-distant from Norwich (25 miles east) and Kings Lynn to the west. To the south on the A1065 County Road is Swaffham. Fakenham is an important service centre for a wide rural hinterland. Weekly open-air retail and antique markets continue and the town still serves as a local centre for agricultural business and shopping.
- 1.2** Fakenham Conservation Area was originally designated in 1975; one of the first to be designated by North Norfolk District Council. The boundary has remained unchanged since 1975. As originally designated the boundary includes the commercial town centre around the Market Place with short extensions along Norwich Street and parts of Oak Street and Bridge Street. From here residential areas extend southwards via Mill Lane to the River Wensum and northwards via Wells Road and Nelson Road to Highfield Road.
- 1.3** Situated in the upper reaches of the Wensum, Fakenham has grown up along the northern flank of the valley away from the Willow-fringed water meadows that wrap themselves around the southern and western outskirts of the old town in a protective swathe. New estates have spread up onto higher ground but the topography here is more subdued than the opposite side of the valley, levelling off beyond the bypass in the form of a watershed before spilling over into the headwaters of the river Stiffkey by Thorpland Hall.
- 1.4** By far the best approach is from the south across Hempton Green, uncluttered as it is by more recent development. From as far as Colkirk the land begins to fall away in a broad sweep, gathering around the distant prospect of the town's Perpendicular church tower. Despite the distractions of the town's water tower and gas holder, the church's 115' high tower remains the undisputed landmark for miles around. Down in the valley the view changes again across the uneven grassy mounds that mark the site of Hempton Priory. Framed by the line of trees along its eastern boundary (covered by a Tree Preservation Order) the dark outline of St Peter and St Paul's church rises emphatically above pantile roofs in the Market Place, buttressed against the sky. As you approach the town more closely the church tower offers a constant reference point. It is often seen above the town's roofscape, and rises above the properties in the Market Place often providing a focal point.
- 1.5** Hempton, itself designated as a Conservation Area, is an attractive introduction to Fakenham. The huddle of small, flint cottages around the edge of the village's huge common stands in contrast to the intricate urban spaces and elegant Georgian houses that lie beyond.

2.0 HISTORICAL

GROWTH.

2.1 Saxon

The name "Fakenham" is of Saxon origin and refers to the first settlement established on the north bank of the upper Wensum by a group of Saxons led by one Facca in the 6th century A.D. The earliest stonework in the north east corner of the church may well survive from the first Saxon building on the site.

2.2 Medieval.

During medieval times Fakenham developed as an important market town and as a strategic crossing point on the river. Roads converged from the coast and from King's Lynn and Norwich. To the north lies Walsingham, destination both in the past and present for pilgrims to its shrines. With the establishment of a weekly market in 1250 Fakenham became increasingly the centre of a prosperous agricultural hinterland that paid for the reconstruction of St Peter and St Paul's church on an impressive scale in the 14th century.

2.3 Fakenham's parish church, with its magnificent west tower entrance, would almost certainly have occupied a more spacious position in a churchyard that once stretched down to the Market Place. But as so often occurred during the late middle ages, temporary market stalls began to encroach into the churchyard as space became scarce and these in turn became permanent structures. The present row of shops along the north side of Upper Market and the east side of Oak Street represent these early encroachments. The two island sites in the Market Place represent further medieval encroachments and were shown to be occupied by buildings on the earliest surviving map of 1650. The Old Sessions House, built about the same time lay immediately north of where the Corn Hall now stands. It reputedly had "an upper room and space for stalls underneath". It probably replaced a medieval market cross on the site.

2.4 Jacobean

During the 17th century the town was clustered around the church and Market Place. New flint buildings replaced some of the dilapidated timber frame structures, a few of which still survive behind later brick fronts. The main approach up from the river was via Mill Lane and Tunn Street formerly known as Stone Street. The importance of Tunn Street is confirmed by the existence of several late 16th, early 17th century houses, notably Grove House and No. 21 Tunn Street which possesses impressive ashlar quoins.

2.5 Timber framed constructions were widespread in this part of inland North Norfolk during the Middle Ages, as is evident at Little Walsingham, but throughout the 17th century cobble became increasingly used as a more fire resistant alternative, dug from gravel deposits in the Wensum Valley. Apart from a single 18th century weather boarded barn behind Old Post Office Street, no other examples survived the town centre's regular fires.

2.6 A small number of early cobble buildings did survive the fires intact, e.g. Grove House in Tunn Street and the Star Public House in Oak Street. Elsewhere rear wings have been incorporated in later Georgian rebuilding, for example behind the Old Red Lion in the Market Place and Swan Street, behind The Limes Public House. In the yard opposite The Star Public House is an early 18th century cobble barn converted into 19th century cottages. Together with the long wall running south along Mill Lane from Grove House, all these 17th century survivals are typical of the coursed cobble construction found most frequently between Fakenham and the coast. Elsewhere in the town examples of this durable and

skilful building technique survive in the gable ends of brick or stucco fronted Georgian properties e.g. No. 37 Bridge Street and No. 18 Oak Street (the former Royal Oak Inn), with facing courses at intervals in red brick. Work of a similar quality, sometimes alternating coursed brick and cobble has occasionally survived in the form of early 18th century boundary walls around parts of Bridge Street car park.

2.7 Despite the widespread availability of red brick, some cheaper terrace cottages and outbuildings continued to be built in cobble throughout the late 18th and early 19th century in Swan Street, Hall Staithe and off Oak Street. By then the technique of coursed construction had given way to less costly random cobble work, sometimes a mixed cobble and brick rubble

2.8 **Georgian.**

In the late 18th century the town's position as a market town in an area of progressive agricultural estates (Raynham, Houghton and Holkham) transformed the town centre and led to its expansion outwards along the main approach roads (Oak St, Norwich St and Bridge St.). The roads around Fakenham were among the last in the County to be turnpiked and river transport continued to be the town's commercial lifeline. Goods were brought upstream to Hall Staithe and the track across the meadows remained a well used route for horse drawn traffic.

2.9 Later in the 18th century the Wensum was diverted to its present course and straightened to provide a greater head of water for the new mill buildings. Bull Street, renamed Bridge Street on completion of the new brick structure over the river in 1833, became the main thoroughfare as Mill Lane proved too narrow to accommodate increased traffic.

2.10 Fakenham is situated very much on the boundary of cobble and red brick construction in Norfolk; the emphasis changing from 17th century coursed cobble characteristic in the area to the north and west, to 18th century red brick that covers most of east and south-east Norfolk, so that the town now displays more the architectural characteristics of places like Reepham and Aylsham.

2.11 Several brickworks grew up around the town to supply building materials for the new houses needed to accommodate the town's rapidly increasing population (1300 in the early 19th century to 3000 by 1891); and as a result a new cemetery was required by 1856. In addition to the new workers' housing on the Mount (between Queen's Road and Church Lane), Victorian villas consolidated the residential development along Oak St., Nelson Rd., and Wells Rd., which was begun in the early 19th century.

2.12 The main opportunity to rebuild the town centre in the new style with brick and pantile had come as a result of several disastrous fires in 1680, 1718 and 1738, the last of which destroyed 26 houses at the eastern end of the Market Place. Several earlier buildings were given smart new Georgian facades, but most were entirely rebuilt in brick, although some were given stucco facades. The Red Lion Public House and the Crown Hotel, its rival coaching inn opposite, epitomised the Georgian rebuilding, which was rather earlier at the eastern end of the Market Place because of the fires and later towards the western end of the Market Place. From the mid 18th century right through to the end of the Edwardian period and beyond, red brick was used everywhere to rebuild and extend the town centre. A whole range of town houses, commercial and industrial buildings, chapels, institutes and many outbuildings grew up with plain red brick facades, the gable and rear elevations which were

sometimes finished in cobble. The more sophisticated buildings were often two and a half storeys in height and entirely of brick with features typical of the new provincial style - rusticated quoins, large sash windows under flat rubbed and gauged brick arches and pedimented Georgian door cases. Fakenham was transformed into a stylish new Georgian market town.

- 2.13** The more elegant buildings proudly displayed new stucco facades e.g. the Crown Hotel, 8 and 10 Oak Street and 1/3 Oak Street with central pedimented bay, all with black glazed pantile roofs. Other brick buildings were rendered at some later date or painted. This mixture of red brick and colourwashed facades contributes greatly to the variety of colour and texture which is so much part of the character of the town. Red brick is prevalent along the north side of the Market Place and Norwich Street, stucco on the South and West sides of the Market Place and painted brick on the East side; the result of aspect and attempts to give commercial premises a more distinctive appearance.
- 2.14** A series of yards evolved off alleyways behind the Market Place, at the back of Old Post Office Street and Oak Street. These artisan quarters were a mixture of workshops - shoemakers, leather workers and carpenters - and late 18th century workers. The Market Place became too small for the weekly cattle market and it transferred in 1857 to a new site in what became known as Cattle Market Street.
- 2.15** Away from the commercial centre, plain Victorian residential and industrial buildings in the Oak Street/Nelson Road/Wells Road area and Hall Staithe have tended to remain red brick. The boundary walls to Church Lane are also constructed from red brick as is the unusual 18th century serpentine wall to the north of the present day youth centre.
- 2.16** During the early 18th century gault or yellow brick made its first appearance, the colour reflecting the higher chalk content in the clay and a reduced firing temperature. The bricks were probably made near Norwich where Costessey "whites" became famous, and although never widely used in Fakenham because of the distance, they represented a distinctive new material. preferred to red brick on a few late Georgian buildings and used with either black glazed pantiles or roof slates.
- 2.17** Fashion has always played an important part in determining the choice of materials and throughout the town centre it is possible to detect a hierarchy of preference for certain combinations of wall and roof material. On the more important buildings the newer, more expensive materials were used first. Yellow brick was considered to be more distinguished than red and is always found in association with slate or black glazed pantiles in the early 19th century.
- 2.18** In the late 18th century stucco was fashionable and is almost always found with black glazed pantiles. Red brick was considered more elegant than the older, more local cobble walling; but the latter was still frequently used on less prominent gable ends and rear elevations. Most often cobble buildings have cheaper orange tile roofs.
- 2.19** Although traditional materials remain predominantly red brick and pantile, the survival of some earlier cobble buildings, the rendering or painting of brickwork, the occasional use of gault brick, stone and slate in the 19th century give the town centre an interesting mixture of colours and wall/roof material combinations.

- 2.20** As part of the comprehensive refashioning of the town centre, the thatch roofs of those few buildings that escaped the fire were replaced with more durable pantiles, manufactured locally in the small brickworks that sprang up on the outskirts.
- 2.21** Around the Market Place, on the north side of Norwich Street and on the larger Georgian town houses around the periphery, this fashionable new roof material was widely used. Because they were more expensive to manufacture, black glazed pantiles were used sparingly to achieve the greatest effect; usually on the more prominent roof slopes and hipped corners facing the Market Place and the main approach roads. Rear roof slopes, extensions and outbuildings were almost invariably clad with cheaper orange clay tiles. They give a quite different character to the back of the Market Place when viewed from the Churchyard, from Tunn Street or Hall Staithe.
- 2.22** Elsewhere in Bridge Street and on later buildings in Oak Street and Wells Road, black glazed pantiles continued to be used on better quality houses throughout the 19th century.
- 2.23** **Victorian.**
During this period, the commercial character of the town centre began to change with new buildings such as the Midland Bank and the Corn Hall (1855), symbols of Fakenham's growing agricultural prosperity. Elsewhere around the Market Place 18th century houses acquired new Victorian shopfronts and commercial activity began to edge out along the main approach roads. Oak Street, with its mixture of shops, pubs and chapels, became a local centre, while many of the retail premises in Norwich St., and Bridge St. were redeveloped.
- 2.24** Due possibly to the late arrival of the two main railway lines and the well established manufacture of cheap pantiles locally, slate was never widely used in Fakenham in the 19th century. Notable exceptions are the small group of buildings in the Market Place, due largely to the renewal of the roof of St Peter and St Paul's church in grey/green Cumberland slate in the late 19th Century. Heavier and more expensive than Welsh slate it was also used to roof the new Midland Bank and to re-roof No. 34 Market Place, the materials probably coming from the same batch of slate. In all these cases the slates are graded in size from the smallest at the ridge to the largest at eaves level.
- 2.25** Thinner Welsh slate could be used on lighter softwood roofs constructed to a lower pitch and was occasionally used on early 19th century hipped roof villas (No. 1 Hayes Lane and No. 12 Wells Road). It was used in association with gault brick and at a time when both materials were relatively new, expensive and fashionable. Later in the 19th century slate became more readily available and was the preferred choice on new industrial buildings such as maltings, e.g. the small group of Victorian buildings at the end of Hall Staithe as well as on the standard-red-plan terrace cottages in Nelson Road and on Constitution Hill.
- 2.26** **Post 1945.**
With the notable exception of Aldiss's drapery store, the pattern of streets and the range of traditional buildings that had developed by the beginning of this century remained virtually intact until after the second World War. Described as "a quiet, drab and rather neglected place" during the 1950's, the fabric of the town centre had by then become rather frayed around the edges with numerous run-down cottages and abandoned workshops behind the Market Place.

2.27 With little thought for conservation, the town embraced the economic upturn of the 1960's. Slum properties off Bridge Street, Queen's Road and Whitehorse Street were swept away to accommodate the demand for new car parks. The desire to clear away reminders of the past even extended to the churchyard where generations of headstones were replaced by the present garden of rest.

3.0 **FORM AND CHARACTER.**

3.1 The town of Fakenham has evolved throughout its history and has developed a series of identity areas which together form the fabric of the town and its CA. The most general distinction is between the landscape areas and the historic town centre. Within each of these are the succession of identity areas, from open countryside to formal landscape, from spacious layout to tight knit grouping and from residential to a range of commercial activities.

LANDSCAPE AREAS.

3.2 **Wensum Meadows.**

The landscape area between the town centre and the River Wensum consists largely of open countryside, a network of water meadows interlaced with drainage ditches and bounded by pollarded Willows - a quintessential lowland valley landscape. Around the built-up edges the character changes to large, informal gardens - lawns instead of meadows and belts of mature trees - that stretch down to the old course of the river. This is true particularly of the land south of the public footpath - the grounds of Grove House. Here the grazing is improved and the landscape, still informal and tree-lined is private, enclosed and well planted.

3.3 **High School.**

As the land rises north of the built-up area there is an abrupt change from the regular rows of early 19th century villas in Wells Road to the spacious landscaped grounds of the High School. Originally a small, late Georgian country house, its position was carefully chosen on a north-south axis to take full advantage of the view down Wells Road. This set the tone for the area and large detached houses soon followed as well as the Catholic Church. Gathered around a junction of roads just west of the school in generously planted gardens this grouping forms a distinctive approach to the town centre.

3.4 **Queen's Road Cemetery.**

By their nature, cemeteries have a unique atmosphere, and the one between Church Lane and Queen's Road is typically Victorian - a formal open space, main gravel paths bisected by an avenue of Yew trees with the flint chapel almost central at the intersection; and rows of 19th century headstones. Elsewhere a few deciduous trees and more Yews have been planted randomly.

3.5 **The Churchyard.**

Approached through one of two narrow alleyways from the Market Place, the change from intricate urban spaces and commercial activity to peaceful garden around a large medieval building is refreshing. The tower of the church, such a landmark from almost every

direction, rises from its small enclosed grounds, its richly decorated west doorway almost entirely obscured by outbuildings.

To the north the character of the churchyard has been completely transformed by the removal of headstones and the planting of exotic species - flowering Cherry and specimen conifer set in manicured lawns, creating a garden of rest. The discreet 'alms-houses' development of the old people's homes and 1960's Community Centre overlook the churchyard.

TOWN CENTRE.

3.6 Wells Road.

With no obvious planned layout, this main northern approach is still decidedly residential, defined by regularly spaced early Victorian brick villas and short terraces set back from the road with long gardens on the east side running up to Church Lane. Constitution Hill, an attractive pedestrian link bounded by brick walls, forms a natural extension to this area of 19th century housing. The mature Beech trees along Wells Road and behind several larger houses contribute greatly to its dignified residential character.

3.7 Nelson Road.

Largely residential, its character is nevertheless quite different from Wells Road. There is less traffic and the street curves gently, lined by buildings which in terms of age, materials and size create a varied and close-knit structure. They range from the Georgian elegance of Red House and its roadside wall to the late 19th century carrstone villas of Intwood Terrace. Narrow cottages and outbuildings, some at right angles, others hard against the roadside, help define a series of small intricate spaces. With its lure of larger Georgian houses, late Victorian villas, early 19th century cottages and workshops, the road still retains much of its "neighbourhood" character despite the closure of the Nelson Public House.

3.8 Oak Street.

Here the irregular mixture of buildings has more in common with Nelson Road than Wells Road but its character is more commercial on a gently curving alignment with small, local shops on one side and late Victorian terraced houses on the other. The tucked away Star Public House and the alleyways opposite leading to backyard cottages and outbuildings, provide interesting diversions from the heavy traffic and strong linear emphasis of the main street. Further along two gaps by the library and the car forecourt opposite effectively cut the street in half. The view to the north is terminated by the corner building at the junction of Nelson Road with Wells Road.

3.9 Norwich Street.

The character of this short stub of a street is entirely commercial, at ground level a mixture of Victorian shopfronts and replacements. Because of the traffic, the narrow pavements and tall buildings, it is seldom possible to get a good look at the upper storeys, but only here can one appreciate the variety of styles and changing roof lines. This mixture of Georgian and Victorian commercial buildings, interrupted by the occasional glazed Edwardian unit over an archway, vary in height from one and a half storeys to three storeys, some with dormers, others with parapets; red brick and painted stucco punctuated by regular sash windows abound.

At the eastern end the view is terminated by a row of new shops which, like the other corner buildings where several roads meet, is effective more for its scale and position than its design in defining the space. The Victorian shops on the north side of Norwich Street curve round as the street width widens out.

3.10 The Mill.

The Mill Pond with its bridge overhung by two large Sycamores, forms an attractive setting for the impressive group of large Victorian industrial buildings arranged around it; The latter which include the Grade II Listed Wensum Lodge Hotel mark the main approach to the town centre from the south. New residential development in the form of Mill Court, continues the sense of enclosure, by taking its scale from the original Mill buildings.

3.11 Bridge Street.

Mature Beech trees define the southern entrance to Bridge Street, rather like a medieval gateway. Ahead the cross-roads is closely defined by an agreeable mixture of traditional buildings. Beyond, the streetscene is significantly interrupted by Bridge Street car park which involved the demolition of a whole range of frontage buildings allowing views onto the rear of other buildings on Tunn Street. The view which has been opened up across to the church does not compensate for this loss of enclosure. Opposite, is a thin line of indifferent Victorian buildings with gaps through to the other main car park and the new shopping development behind. These buildings are interspersed with poorly designed shopfronts. The northern end of the street tightens again and there are some good Georgian buildings marking the sudden turn into the Market Place.

3.12 Tunn Street.

Together with Swan Street and Mill Lane, Tunn Street contains some of the oldest buildings and the most interesting sequence of spaces in the Conservation Area. Mill Lane, bounded by the long Grade II Listed cobble and brick wall to Grove House's garden which is overhung by trees. This is a delightful pedestrian route into the town centre, continued northwards by Tunn Street. Here, as in Swan Street, tall 17th century coursed cobble buildings rear up right by the edge of the road. Further along the early 19th century 3 storey brick wing of the Manor House and the matching building on the opposite corner, define the view ahead to the church tower across pantile roofs. Together they give this short, narrow lane a very urban feel before it opens out into the triangular space left after clearance of an "island" group of buildings. Beyond, the space is closed down yet again, a narrow neck defined by flint boundary walls, before finally opening into the Market Square. All the while the church tower forms a distant focal point, overlooking the Market Place and the vistas along Tunn Street and Quaker Lane.

3.13 The Market Place.

The main traffic route doglegs across the Market Place via Bridge Street at the south east corner and Oak Street at the north west corner. The result is a large, elongated central space on an east-west axis with a southern extension in the form of the Market Square. Originally a smaller secondary space it has assumed a greater importance, as the main Market Place has become reduced to a series of streets firstly by the encroachment of market stalls and then by the Corn Hall.

The Market Place and Square are the natural focus of town centre activity, and are at the heart of the Conservation Area. The area is dominated by the Grade I Listed St Peter and St Paul's Church on the high ground to the north and also contains the only Grade II* Listed

building, the former Red Lion Hotel, now occupied (1998) by North Norfolk District Council, the Tourist Information Centre and Town Council Office.

Approached down Oak Street as the road widens before dividing either side, the large, square Corn Hall is the focal point. The land slopes away from this corner of the Market Place. At the other end of the Market Place the Dutch gabled corner building with its tall, fanciful bay window, is the perfect point and foil to the plain Georgian buildings around it.

A whole series of routes converge on the Market Place that, depending on their size and point of entry, create a range of views in and across to the church tower, visible above roof tops from almost every vantage point. Oak Street is the most important approach. Bridge Street and Norwich Street are both busy and straight while Quaker Lane and Hall Staithe converge at the opposite corner. Alleyways between buildings in Old Post Office Street and narrow passageways/archways create a series of dramatic pedestrian entrances into the central space.

The northern section of the Market Place is pedestrianised and is used for the erection of market stalls on Thursdays.

"Island" buildings and prominent buildings contribute greatly to the character of various corners or 'sub-spaces' in the Market Place. The war memorial has become a central focal point rather like a medieval market cross. The varying spaces, views and focal buildings in the Market Place form a dynamic series of shops and vistas.

With a few interesting exceptions, notably Aldiss's store and the Midland Bank, all sides of the Market Place and Market Square are lined by a mixture of 2 and 3 storey Georgian buildings. Some still retain their original town house or coaching inn entrances, others have acquired attractive Victorian and Edwardian shop fronts, especially along the north side. The scale of these frontage buildings, the unity of black pantile roofs, the mixture of red, painted brick and stucco facades and the regular pattern of upper floor sashes all give the Market Place a delightful variety and coherence - "the happy inconsequence of things" that have come about through historical accident; and now define the character of the town centre's main civic space and the buildings which enclose it.

4.0 CONCLUSION.

4.1 Fakenham is a historic market town with a significant number of attractive buildings, streets and spaces focusing around the Market Place, which lies at the core of the Conservation Area. Roads and alleyways radiate away from this important space creating access to other parts of the Conservation Area as well as creating other important spaces and identity areas within the town. The Conservation Area as a whole cannot be seen as a uniformed entity. It comfortably combines open spaces with tight knit development of different ages and in the process creates a form and character which is both intriguing and unique.

4.2 When viewing Fakenham Conservation Area in a broad sense, its relationship with Hempton village Conservation Area becomes important. It forms an attractive introduction to Fakenham, highlighting many of the significant features within the Conservation Area but it also provides an important focus on the Wensum Valley and the water meadows which border this area, parts of which are designated as important Sites of Special Scientific

Interest. These provide an interesting backcloth or foreground to the town - views towards and from these areas are extremely important and deserve maximum protection in the future.

(Approved by Development and Conservation Committee 5/11/98)