

NORTH WALSHAM CONSERVATION AREA:
FORM AND CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

(Designated 5/5/75)

1.0 INTRODUCTION.

- 1.1** North Walsham is a historic market town located some 15 miles north-east of Norwich on the B1150 county road and 8 miles south of Cromer on the A149 county road. Its role has broadened over the centuries but it is still primarily a market town serving a rural population. The town stands in open countryside, straddling the railway line from Sheringham to Norwich. It is typical of the truly traditional English market town - a nodal point providing local services for local people.
- 1.2** The Conservation Area (CA) was designated by Norfolk County Council in May 1972 and its boundary has remained unchanged since this initial designation. The boundary which has been drawn tightly around the historic town centre, defines a CA which is basically rectangular. It covers the area from Vicarage Street along the northern edge south to Grammar School Road and from Yarmouth Road westward to King's Arms Street with a south-westerly extension along Aylsham Road. As a whole the CA consists of a number of identity areas, each with its own distinct form and character. The most general distinction is between the tree-lined approach roads with loose-knit residential development and the tight-knit series of spaces in the historic commercial centre.

2.0 HISTORICAL GROWTH.

- 2.1** By the early 19th century the part of the town centre which today forms the nucleus of the Conservation Area had already taken on much of its present character. In his 1836 Directory of Norfolk, White described it as "a pleasant, but irregularly built market town on a commanding eminence with a declivity descending northwards to the River Ant, consisting chiefly of three streets forming an irregular triangle intersected by a few cross lanes." He went on to record that "many neat houses have been erected in the suburbs. especially on the roads to Norwich and Antingham" and added that "many of the old houses have been re-built with handsome fronts."
- 2.2 Medieval.**
The original Saxon settlement (Ham means Homestead) was established on the eastern slope of a shallow valley beyond Lyngate, drained north-east to the River Ant. The parish came under the jurisdiction of St Benets Abbey and its growth was encouraged in the 13th century when the Abbot granted the right to hold a weekly market as a way of raising extra revenue.
- 2.3** With this incentive North Walsham became the centre of a prosperous agricultural hinterland. Together with Worstead and Aylsham it grew wealthy from the weaving industry during the Middle Ages so that by the 14th century the woolbooths, together with those for finished cloths, outnumbered the produce stalls in the market place that included an area known as The Butchery.
- 2.4** One further event during this period is evident in the fabric of North Walsham and this is of the clash between Geoffrey Lister and Bishop Despenser of Norwich during the Usurping of 1381. A cross marks the spot where the battle was fought and the remains can be seen on Norwich Road.

2.5 Jacobean.

A disastrous fire in 1600 destroyed much of the medieval town and its timber frame buildings except for the church. As part of the rebuilding, encouraged by Sir William Paston who bought up land on which to build the Free Grammar School that still bears his name, many of the temporary market stalls that had crowded along the southern edge of the churchyard, known as The Foreland, were rebuilt as permanent shops. This explains their narrow depth along the north side of the Market Place. The huddle of buildings between the Churchyard and Market Street owe their origins to this same process.

2.6 As a result of the fire in 1600 much of the town centre was rebuilt in more durable brick and tiles. Redevelopment began in a piecemeal fashion but gathered momentum during the 18th and early 19th centuries to the extent that today the Market Place owes its character largely to the efforts of Georgian tradesmen. The rebuilding was financed by the agricultural prosperity of the surrounding area and the woollen trade; made possible by the presence of local brick earth and improved firing techniques that ensured a ready supply of durable materials.

2.7 Despite the widespread use of cobble in a well-defined belt along the coast that stretches inland to the edge of the town, the earliest surviving examples are today confined to the occasional gable end and side walls of buildings fronting the Market Place and the main approach roads, notably the entrance to Mitre Tavern Yard, the outbuilding at the beginning of Aylsham Road and several boundary walls of the Market Place.

2.8 The use of more decorative and therefore more expensive knapped flint experienced a minor revival in the late 19th century; inspired by a thorough restoration of the Parish Church. This in turn led to the large scale employment of knapped flint with yellow brick dressings on the new Victorian church in Cromer Road and several distinctive secular buildings, most notably No 26 King's Arms St with its neo-Jacobean stepped gable, and the Edwardian villa on Yarmouth Road.

2.9 Although the surrounding countryside is part of the reed thatch belt that extends up from the Broads, and despite the fact that several generations of thatchers have lived in and worked from the town, the risk of fire since the conflagration of 1600 was so great that the material was soon replaced with clay pantiles in the 17th century as is evident from the steep pitch of the few surviving buildings from that period, e.g. The Feathers Public House in Market Street. Apart from the 1920's neo-vernacular cottages at the end of Aylsham Road, complete with thatched outbuildings, the only remaining reed thatch roof is at the junction of Cromer Road and Mundesley Road.

2.10 Georgian

The town continued its role as market town for the surrounding population but during the 18th century with the decline of the woollen industry, it failed to attract the wealth of the local gentry. Despite the presence of Westwick House to the south, the town found itself on the eastern edge of the North Norfolk parkland belt and failed to capitalise on the new estate wealth in the way that Aylsham did. Despite the opening of the Norwich to North Walsham Turnpike Trust 1797, the town was never on a major cross-country route. There are few elegant Georgian town houses apart from the Masters House (1796) to the Grammar School and Aylsham Road. The commercial buildings are solid or refronted rather than distinguished with no civic buildings and no larger coaching inns to command attention.

- 2.11** The areas between Vicarage Street and Market Street and south of the Market Place were an intricate network of lanes and yards. Here were concentrated the remaining weavers' cottages, cramped terraces round central courtyards each with a pump and named after local taverns e.g. Bear Yard, Black Swan Loke, Ship and Dog Yards. The houses running south off the Market Place known as The Terrace are among the few remaining examples of late 18th century weavers' cottages. Elsewhere, remnants of Mitre Tavern Yard and White Lion Yard. approached through passageways are all that survive of this network of back streets.
- 2.12** North Walsham lies on the eastern edge, but firmly within the red brick area of east/central Norfolk. By the late 18th century the whole of the town centre had been rebuilt in brick even though some properties were plastered over on completion to the latest fashion for smart new stucco facades. Others have been rendered or painted over at a later date so that today red brick is less evident around the Market Place and Market Street than it was two centuries ago. The rear elevations of many of these same buildings, especially those backing onto the churchyard still display original red brick exteriors.
- 2.13** Red brick continued to be used almost exclusively for the next 300 years right through to the 1920's to rebuild and extend the town centre. Commercial and institutional buildings display the whole range of brick details associated with their architectural style(s); especially throughout the Georgian period. Most notable is the elegant early 18th century town house in Aylsham Road and Ivy Cottage opposite of the same date. Its gable together with the shaped brick gable on No. 14 Church Street and Nos. 22-24 King's Arms Street are a reminder that the town lies within the area of Dutch gable distribution that characterises much of North-East Norfolk. The platbands on Nos. 22-24 King's Arms Street, the chequered pattern using vitrified headers in Mitre Tavern Yard and the rows of solid red brick facades with sash windows under flat rubbed brick arches around the Market Place are further evidence of high quality workmanship.
- 2.14** Orange pantiles, originally imported from Holland, were soon being manufactured in large quantities from the early 18th century onwards in local brickyards on the outskirts of town. Used initially on the more important buildings they soon became commonplace on buildings of all kinds and remained the cheaper, fire-resistant roof material throughout the 19th century despite the introduction of slate.
- 2.15** What makes the traditional roofscape of North Walsham so unusual is the relatively widespread use of smut grey pantiles. They were first manufactured as a more fashionable alternative to orange clay tiles in the early 18th century, e.g. the early Georgian town house at No. 14 Aylsham Road, the wing of the former Girls' High School at right angles to Market Street, and the cluster of 18th century shops at the eastern end of the same street. In some cases shop owners could only afford to use them on the more prominent roof slopes visible from the Market Place but still managed to transform the appearance of whole rows of commercial properties at little extra cost.
- 2.16** **Victorian.** Partly because of the canal and its geographical position, North Walsham was one of the last towns in England to be connected by rail. The link to Norwich was quickly followed by a loop to the Victorian resort of Cromer and a branch line to the growing holiday village of Mundesley. Before long North Walsham had acquired two railway halts - Main and Town stations.

- 2.17** During the 19th century North Walsham acquired all the hallmarks of a small agricultural market town. The gas works appeared in 1838, the Corn Exchange a decade later in White Lion Yard and the Town Hall soon after. The Cattle Market expanded on Yarmouth Road and Amiss's printing works was established during the latter part of the century together with the foundry in King's Arms Street and another (Randall's) in Bacton Road. East Bridge Mill (also known as Ebridge Mill) was purchased by Cubitt & Walker in 1869 and ground corn until 1966. There were also a number of small brick fields around the town, the principal site being at Brick Kiln Farm on Spa Common that made bricks for Lord Wodehouse's estate at Witton.
- 2.18** During the early 19th century gault or yellow brick made its first appearance, the colour due to the higher chalk content in the clay. The bricks were probably first brought in from Norwich after the opening of the turnpike, where they were manufactured in large quantities at Costessey. They represented an expensive new material and were only used to build or refront a few of the more distinguished properties in North Walsham; usually in association with the more fashionable roof materials such as black glazed pantiles or slate. Examples are to be found dotted around the town centre such as the early Victorian villas in Cromer Road and Grammar School Road and most notably the late Georgian former High School house in Market Street.
- 2.19** The existence of smut tiles meant that the introduction of black glazed pantiles in the late 18th century had less of an impact on the town centre than in some other market towns such as Fakenham. With their greater frost resistant qualities, they were clearly preferable to unglazed pantiles but at least initially cost more to produce. They soon became fashionable however, but are restricted to a few clusters of commercial buildings at prominent corner sites - the entrance to Church Street, the eastern end of Market Street and some of the new early 19th century villas in Cromer Road and Grammar School Road.
- 2.20** With the late arrival of the railway and the absence of Victorian industrial buildings or terrace housing, the use of imported Welsh slate in the Conservation Area is restricted to a few more prominent buildings, often in association with yellow brick, notably the Girls' High School in Market Street, Nos. 2-4 Church Street and villas in Grammar School Road. Slate is however noticeable on some of the smaller late 18th and early 19th century shops around the Market Place. Here because of the small roof area, owners were able to afford to re-roof properties in the late 19th century at a lower pitch to accommodate a more weathertight covering of slates.
- 2.21** Roman or corrugated pantiles and machine cut plain tiles became increasingly used on other late Victorian and Edwardian institutional buildings, particular in King's Arms Street and Grammar School Road.

3.0 FORM AND CHARACTER.

MAIN APPROACHES

3.1 Yarmouth Road.

This main approach to the town centre from the south is wide and straight. Overhung on both sides by closely planted mature trees, the effect is one of a "green tunnel" between the Police Station and Grammar School Road. The trees on the western side overhang low brick

and flint walls and provide a protective screen to a sequence of late Victorian and Edwardian villas set back from the road in their own wooded grounds. Glimpsed beyond gravel driveways these large detached houses in red or yellow brick or flint are important more for their landscape setting than any architectural distinction. Opposite, the trees form a narrow belt running along the western edge of the War Memorial Park. Within the park the formal layout of the memorial garden is in contrast to the groups of mature deciduous trees in a more informal park-like setting.

3.2 Aylsham Road.

This is the most attractive and varied approach to the town centre. Truncated by the combined effect of railway and by-pass, it begins with an attractive group of 1920's neo-vernacular cottages complete with stepped gables, thatch dormers and regular casements.

3.3 Immediately beyond, the road is overhung on both sides by mature trees that, together with long red brick boundary walls, funnel the view ahead. Emerging from this the handsome two and a half storey Georgian facade of No 14 rears up, although the road at this point is too narrow for it to be fully appreciated. Opposite, Ivy Cottage is almost hidden behind a high brick garden wall.

3.4 The character changes again as the road becomes tightly defined by rows of cottages - late Georgian on one side and a late Victorian terrace on the other. The view ahead is terminated by the bulk of No 20 Market Street.

3.5 Cromer Road.

Beyond the recent development off the by-pass, the road is lined by detached late Georgian brick houses, notably No 20 on the north side (now a hotel), large and ivy clad and set off by some specimen trees. Much nearer the road stands the late Victorian Congregational Church in knapped flint with yellow brick dressings. Heavily buttressed with imposing gable end it demands attention. Beyond, the road slopes away to the cross-roads, defined by short rows of late Victorian cottages on one side and new "mews" court development on the other. The view ahead across rooftops comes to rest on the partly ruined tower of St Nicholas Church. Rising above trees in the churchyard it takes full advantage of its elevated position. Looking back along Cromer Road from the cross-roads, the steep expanse of the Congregational Church's slate roof looms above the mixture of brick and colourwashed cottages.

3.6 King's Arms Street.

This was originally the main approach from Norwich. The southern end, tightly defined by plain late Georgian houses on either side has something of a "gateway" feeling, announcing the entrance to the street. From here the road curves gently, exposing the flint and stepped gable end of No 26 and the adjoining Dutch gables of Nos 24-22. Mature trees opposite help to set off this attractive group of buildings. Beyond here, the character of the road becomes more severe, tightly defined by a series of late Victorian and Edwardian institutional buildings on one side, in plain brick and plain tile. On the other side of the road there is a gap, the street frontage flanked by a wing of the King's Arms Public House. The view ahead is terminated by a yellow brick facade above shop units on the far side of the Market Place.

3.6 Grammar School Road.

Immediately north of the by-pass, Grammar School Road branches off to the right, built in the 19th century as a link through to Yarmouth Road. Lined on the south side by late Georgian semi-detached houses in brick and black glazed pantiles. The late Victorian school building and church give the north side a more institutional character. The mid 19th century yellow brick and slate villas at the entrance to Bank Loke help to screen recent commercial development and car parks behind.

LANDSCAPE AREAS

3.7 Paston College.

Paston College is tucked away off Grammar School Road. A series of 1950's teaching blocks flank the large, plain brick Georgian master's house at the end of a long grass quadrangle overhung by mature Beech trees. The atmosphere is quiet and collegiate away from the traffic and with a rear entrance off the Market Place

3.8 The Churchyard.

Several pedestrian alleyways off the Market Place and Market Street, and a gateway from Church Street, mark the transition from intricate urban spaces and commercial activity, into the quieter churchyard area behind. Grade I Listed St Nicholas Church, the largest in Norfolk after Great Yarmouth, stands alone and scarcely visible surrounded by neatly kept lawns from which all the headstones have been removed. The northern and western sides have been planted with rows of Lime trees to screen St Nicholas Court. It has been subject to restoration in the 19th century. The long range of shops along the north side of the Market Place have turned their backs on the church. The long gardens and rear elevations of the late Georgian houses in Vicarage Street present an attractive view.

COMMERCIAL CENTRE

3.9 Church Street.

Approached from the north the isolated terrace of late 18th century cottages on the right help frame the view ahead with the entrance to Church Street which is another 'gateway' tightly defined by plain late Georgian buildings, tall and narrow rising to 3 storeys. A glimpse of the ruined church tower can be seen. Beyond here the street is short in length, but straight and one-sided, being a pleasing mixture of traditional buildings. On the other side, the Church, hidden behind a screen of trees, is only partly visible.

3.10 The entrance from New Road is again defined by tall two and a half storey buildings at the southern end of Church Street with the view ahead to the Church tower and the eastern end of the Market Place.

3.11 Market Place.

In townscape terms, The Market Place represents the heart of North Walsham. It is a long funnel shaped space which widens gradually from its narrow neck at the junction with Church Street. The 'island' block of shops on the south side, the result of late Georgian infill tightens the space creating a second funnel-shaped area with the octagonal Market Cross as a focal point. It fails to dominate due largely to the way in which the road slopes away downhill.

3.12 The northern side is flanked by long continuous rows of narrow late 18th century buildings, commercial at ground floor with regular rows of sash windows to the upper floors. The roof

height remains even but the facades are an attractive mixture of brick and colourwash. The only gap reveals a glimpse of the church's richly decorated south porch.

- 3.13** Apart from the elaborately glazed front of No 9, the row along the south side consists of more plain late 18th century buildings together with some Victorian commercial premises. Deeper plots have allowed for expansion to the rear and this explains the presence of national retailers and banks on this side.
- 3.14** Further west towards the Market Cross the 'island' has created a narrow back alley obscuring the entrance to Paston College and part of the King's Arms Public House. The upper floors are punctuated by more Victorian sash windows with shop fronts at ground level. The 3 tier Market Cross is eccentric and faintly oriental rather than picturesque and vernacular.
- 3.15** **Market Street.**
Market Street is interesting, the space more intimate and the buildings more irregular as the road sweeps round and downhill in a dogleg from the Market Cross. From the other direction the road slopes gently uphill to a range of narrow gable end buildings, descending in height and separated by alleyways leading through to the churchyard. With a jumble of roofings, colourwashed facades and irregular windows they look more like a stage set.
- 3.16** An archway leads through to Mitre Tavern Yard but the sense of enclosure maintained by a staggered building line is soon lost. The Feathers opposite is one of the oldest buildings in the street, its irregular pattern of windows in contrast to the symmetry of the late Georgian yellow brick house further down.
- 3.17** Within the commercial centre most of the attractive Victorian and Edwardian shop fronts were replaced in the 1960's, before the designation of the Conservation Area, with new fronts that in terms of design and materials bear little relationship to the buildings on which they have been superimposed. A few traditional shop fronts have survived, notably the delightful 1920's example near the entrance to the church.
- 3.18** Elsewhere on Market Street there are whole rows of shops with large plate glass windows, tile surrounds and aluminium or stained wooden frames. Large illuminated fascias, sometimes running across more than one property, disguise traditional details. The cumulative effect has transformed the character of the Market Place, altering the relationship between upper stories with their regular rows of sash windows, and the ground floor street scene.
- 3.19** The network of spaces in and around the Market Place/Market Street is inherently attractive, defined with few exceptions, by rows of well maintained historic buildings. The narrow passageway through from Market Street to the Butchery is indicative of the interesting network of walkways into and out of the Butchery and the area around the Churchyard.

4.0 LISTED BUILDINGS.

- 4.1** 74 of the 102 Listed Buildings in North Walsham lie within the existing Conservation Area boundary. Of these there is a heavy concentration in the Market Place and Market Street where virtually every building is Listed. There are several in King's Arms Street and a row in Vicarage Street as well as an isolated but important group in Aylsham Road.

5.0 CONCLUSION.

- 5.1** North Walsham is a fine historic market town set in its own hinterland. By the early 19th century the nucleus of the CA had been formed. North Walsham has continued to evolve and this has resulted in a series of unique spaces within the town. The heart of the CA is the Market Place. The majority of the Listed buildings are found here and in Market Street which runs off it. Soft Norfolk red brick predominates across the CA, creating a certain uniformity in materials although other local bricks are evident. However there is distinct character within different parts of the CA which provides some diversity. The network of routes, particularly alleyways and lanes which lead into and out of the Market Place are particularly interesting features of the town in urban design terms.

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