

STALHAM CONSERVATION AREA: (Designated 17/1/75)
FORM AND CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Stalham is a small market town with a population of just under 3000 people in the east of the District. Situated on the northern edge of the Broads it is 13km from both North Walsham and Wroxham and only 9km from the coast at Sea Palling.
- 1.2 The town has grown up as a tight linear settlement on the Yarmouth to Cromer road with its main axis aligned North West to South East along the High Street and a convergence of minor approach roads as its eastern end.
- 1.3 Stalham Staithe is connected by a system of navigable dykes to Sutton Broad and thence to the whole Broads network, but it is cut off from the town by the A149 bypass that follows the line of the old Midland and Great Northern railway. The main road skirts around Sutton Broad in a wide sweep to cross the river Ant at Wayford Bridge, just beyond which the A1151 branches off to Norwich via Wroxham.
- 1.4 Stalham continues to function as a service centre for the surrounding rural area as it has since the middle ages, but its position as a market town in the settlement hierarchy of north east Norfolk is constrained by the greater range of facilities available in North Walsham. As a visitor attraction it must compete with the rival attractions of nearby Wroxham, the centre of the Broads tourist industry.

2.0 HISTORICAL GROWTH

- 2.1 The rich loamy soil of north east Norfolk drained by the slow flowing rivers Ant and Thurne proved attractive to the first agricultural settlers and by the 5th century AD the area had been colonised by a close network of villages. Ludham with its place name ending in HAM was already established among the larger more nucleated settlements on a tributary of the river Ant.
- 2.2 The family of De Stalham held the lordship of the manor after the conquest and, isolated between the sea and the low-lying valley marshes before the advent of mediaeval peat digging created the Broads, the administrative unit known as the Hundred of Happing, settled down to a lengthy period of economic prosperity.
- 2.3 Communications with the rest of the country were difficult - the main overland route through Stalham between Cromer and Yarmouth provided some contact but for centuries agricultural products were transported downstream to Yarmouth in return for fertiliser and later coal, using the well developed river network from the staithe that served places like Stalham.
- 2.4 Stalham continued to consolidate as a local centre and distribution point serving the surrounding farming community. Specialist trades included the making of harnesses and horse collars, corn milling at the tower mill on the Yarmouth road (destroyed by fire in 1903) and wherry building/repairs at Stalham Staithe. In the High Street the Maid's Head and the Swan grew to become the main coaching inns. The twice weekly horse-drawn coach service to Norwich ran until 1916, the last in the county. The weekly market

livestock and the construction of the corn hall in 1855, modest by Norfolk standards and now the Town Hall, confirmed the town's role as a market town serving a prosperous rural hinterland.

- 2.5 The arrival of the railway in 1876 connected Stalham to the main network, providing quicker, easier access to Norwich and other main towns. As with other small rural towns, the railway revived the fortunes of Stalham and transformed the appearance of the town centre. The mediaeval church of St. Mary the Virgin had been extensively restored some years earlier with a new chancel and steep slate roof to the nave. The new Baptist Chapel (1884) at the eastern end of the High Street provided a new focal point of worship and the Board School (1879) opposite the church in Brumstead Road replaced the National School operating in the Church rooms.
- 2.6 The new Victorian burial ground was another reflection of the town's growth while in the High Street many of the existing commercial premises acquired new shop fronts or were replaced by late 19th century red brick and stone buildings - banks, offices and retail establishments. Residentially the town began to grow north of the railway line with modest rows of late Victorian and Edwardian villas along St John's Road and Brumstead Road.
- 2.7 The period between wars saw the development of the Broads holiday industry. Stalham Staithe, the most northerly point on the network became a thriving centre for sailing cruises. Dykes were widened to provide additional moorings and the boat yards brought a new prosperity to the town that continues to benefit from the influx of summer visitors.
- 2.8 During the same period the town's role as a service centre was extended by the establishment of Stalham as the headquarters of Smallburgh RDC with offices in Lower Staithe Road, and the decision to build the High School to serve the educational needs of the town and surrounding villages.
- 2.9 Since the war the town has continued to grow with new residential estates north of the High School, between the old and new Yarmouth roads and in the outlying hamlet of Stalham Green.

3.0 SETTING

- 3.1 Stalham is surrounded by flat, low-lying farmland less than 10 metres above sea level, but unlike many of the villages in this part of Norfolk whose tall church towers dominate the skyline in an otherwise open landscape, the tower of St Mary's church is large but squat and not a prominent landmark.
- 3.2 The landscaping of the A149 by pass is now sufficiently mature to obscure any view of the town from the Yarmouth direction and the western edge of the High Street with the church tower beyond only becomes visible just before the turning off the bypass from the Norwich direction.
- 3.3 The third main approach from the north east along the B1151 is scarcely more impressive.

4.0 FRAMEWORK

- 4.1 The existing Conservation Area, consisting largely of the High Street, is bounded on the north side by Brumstead Road. On the south side the boundary runs behind properties fronting the High Street with short extensions eastwards along Yarmouth Road to include Church Farm and south along one side of Lower Staithe Road.
- 4.2 The Conservation Area Statement that forms the second half of this Appraisal includes proposals to extend the boundary. Because of this the Description will consider not only the Form and Character of the existing Conservation Area but the various extensions proposed in the Statement.
- 4.3 The historic centre consists of a number of smaller Identity Areas (see map 1) each with its own distinctive character that together constitute a hierarchy of spaces. The most important is the High Street, a simple linear space defined by commercial buildings on both sides. The eastern half is the oldest and most distinctive nucleus with the church and some of the more attractive vernacular buildings. The western half from its junction with the bypass as far as Bank Street is an important prelude.
- 4.4 The main approaches form a series of secondary identity areas that converge at the cross roads at the eastern end of the High Street. Of these the most important is Yarmouth Road as far as Mill House, the eastern half of Lower Staithe Road and Brumstead Road in conjunction with Campingfield Lane as far as Dexlyn House. The cluster of terraced houses south of the High Street - Baker Street, Sutton Terrace and Market Row completes the sequence.

5.0 FORM AND CHARACTER

5.1 Yarmouth Road

The survival of two small groups of buildings distinguish this main approach to the town centre although much of its open rural character has been destroyed by new development. The first of these, the plain late Georgian facade of Mill House at right angles to the road and framed by Yew trees, marks the beginning of the historic centre. The high brick wall and single storey cottage, all in brick and pantile, completes this attractive group. The view opposite is across flat cornfields to the school playing fields and more estates. The view ahead is framed by a mixture of planting - poplar, lime and horse chestnut in succession - and then by mature copper beech overhanging the road at the entrance to Church Farm. The effect is to create a tunnel vision terminated at the crossroads by the corner turrets of the Baptist Chapel.

- 5.2 The suggestion of leafy enclosure is abruptly lost at the entrance to Miliside with its wide visibility splays and the attention switches to the opposite side. Church Farm, similar in age and materials to Mill House (yellow brick and black glazed pantiles) is set back from the road and only just visible through the trees. The effect is rather one of dense planting, a thick screen continued along the roadside by a tall holly hedge. The horse chestnut on the grass verge opposite frames the view to the chapel and beyond to the High Street sloping gently uphill with another dense mass of trees.

- 5.3 Nearing the cross roads the view opens up to reveal the church tower on a slight rise visible beyond the petrol station and large, asbestos garage buildings. This unsightly

and prominent group of buildings together with the houses on the opposite corner have severed the Yarmouth approach from the High Street.

5.4 Lower Staithe Road

This short, one-sided arm of the Conservation Area, is now the main approach off the by-pass from Yarmouth. The western side with its row of 1960's chalet bungalows and council depot, has been completely redeveloped. The lopsided effect is curiously unsatisfying with the informal group of traditional buildings on the east side a reminder of how the opposite frontage must have once appeared.

5.5 The well-wooded grounds of Staithe Way, a large squarish Victorian house in red brick and slate, give way to an attractive mixture of smaller early 19thC houses and cottages in brick and orange pantiles, some with their original sash and casement windows. The effect is informal and accidental with plain cottages and outbuildings, some at right angles to the road, others set back facing the road or further forward behind low brick and flint garden walls.

5.6 Because of the curving alignment of the road, the short sequence of spaces is most evident from the cross-roads isolated beyond the rather bulky form of the old RDC offices (1935). The view in the opposite direction off the bypass is terminated once more by the twin turrets of the Baptist Chapel, offset by a single roadside oak. This angular Victorian building with its own Church Hall is an important but isolated focal point surrounded on all sides by ugly post war development.

5.7 Brumstead Road

The minor road from Brumstead is the only approach from the north through a familiar sequence of post-war houses and inter-war bungalows. Beyond Barton Cottage the character changes, not dramatically, the road is still straight and quietly residential but the thick hedges and mature shrubs partially screen a series of regularly spaced late Victorian and Edwardian villas. Most are in solid red brick and slate but include two mock-timber cottages with conical thatch in the Broads vernacular revival style of the 1920's.

5.8 At the junction of Bank Street and Campingfield Lane three of the four corners are more closely defined. On the north side is a rather undistinguished Edwardian house and opposite is Haughley House, a heavily detailed late Victorian house dignified in its setting behind a low flint boundary wall and hedge. The other corner is marked by a large mature copper beech and high flint garden wall that runs round the corner and together with outbuildings on either side forms an attractive and tightly defined section of Bank Street. The fourth corner is taken up by the Victorian burial ground, open and without its original railings and showing signs of vandalism. It is bounded along the northern edge by a dull line of sycamores planted as a screen to the telephone exchange.

5.9 Campingfield Lane emerges from more estate development. As it curves quite sharply the sudden change is marked by a brick and black pantile coach house hard against the road; with a high brick wall running from it to enclose the courtyard of Dexlyn House, a mid Victorian red brick residence set off by one large sycamore and further along by a sweet chestnut. This compact group of traditional buildings announces the edge of the historic centre in much the same way as Mill House in Yarmouth Road. Beyond, the

leafy character of the road is reinforced by several mature beech trees in front of the telephone exchange.

5.10 High Street West

Turning off the by-pass from Norwich, the visitor arrives almost immediately at the western end of the main street. The first distinctive feature is the wedge of trees, mainly sycamore, that encircle the small public car park.

5.11 Together with the yew trees beside the library and more deciduous trees in the garden of an attractive 18thC thatch house at right angles to the road, now a solicitor's office, they create an important mass of planting on the edge of a tight, urban street otherwise devoid of trees.

5.11 This section of the High Street consists largely of undistinguished late Victorian development, originally a mixture of short terraced and plain or bay windowed houses by the road side that extended the High Street westwards as far as the railway station in the late 19thC. There is little variety in scale, style or materials - almost all are or were 2 storey red brick with pantile roofs unenlivened by elaborate features and, hard against the road, there is little to relieve the straight linear space.

5.12 All have been converted to commercial use since the war and this explains the absence of any original Victorian shop fronts. Some now have short ground floor projections, the original sash windows on others have been replaced by large plate glass shop windows and by UPVC to the upper floors. The north side has suffered especially from post war redevelopment. The design of the new purpose-built row of shops is well intentioned but dull like the rest of the street and beyond at intervals several single storey, flat-roofed shops destroy any continuity.

5.13 Apart from the view north along St John's Road, the views out down side streets between buildings that often enliven an otherwise uniform main street, are disappointing ; a mixture of ugly gaps, parking areas and rear service bays. With few exceptions, notably in Market Row, the short terraces of 19thC. housing behind the High Street have lost much of their traditional character as a result of inappropriate windows and rendered brickwork.

5.14 High Street East

From the junction of Bank Street eastwards the character of the High Street becomes more distinctive, closely defined by a greater variety of buildings in terms of scale, style and materials and with more interesting glimpses down side streets and alleyways, especially on the south side. This short stretch is the historic core of Stalham and the most attractive part of the Conservation Area. There is even a slight change of alignment just before the churchyard where the High Street begins to slope gently downhill.

5.15 The Victorian buildings are still predominantly red brick and slate but, like those opposite the Grebe pub, have managed to retain their original shop fronts. The 1950's pub set back at the corner of Bank Street, reveals the first glimpse of the church tower, just the top, beyond the neo-Georgian elevations of Barclays Bank. Here on the north side the range of Victorian commercial buildings increases to three storeys, anticipating the first full view of the Church; while on the opposite side the view down Market Row

reveals domestic scale flint cottages as a reminder that beyond the town near the coast, cobble is a more common wall material.

- 5.16** Further along the south side the buildings are earlier - late Georgian with small pane sashes. The Maid's Head may be earlier like the 17thC thatch building next door. The church opposite, set back behind a confusion of ornamental trees, is large and disappointing. Heavily restored by the Victorians it displays a steep slate roof and a tower unrelieved by decorative stonework. The churchyard is flanked on the west side by a range of outbuildings, drab roughcast, and one large, asbestos workshop right against the base of the tower. The late Georgian house and rear flint buildings along the east side are more attractive but the old fire engine shed (1833) in the south east corner is sadly overgrown and neglected.
- 5.17** From this point the street narrows slightly and the view downhill is attractively framed by a closely planted row of horse chestnuts on the north side and a taller 3 storey Victorian office building opposite. The turrets of the Baptist Chapel are visible beyond and the view is terminated by the dark green mass of trees in Yarmouth road.
- 5.18** Just beyond the churchyard on the south side the attention is diverted down Upper Staithe Road, the first part of which is defined by a range of colour washed buildings and overhung by a row of mature beech in the rear garden of the Maid's Head to create a tunnel effect.
- 5.19** Continuing down the High Street the sense of enclosure is soon lost beyond the row of horse chestnuts. The new house beyond is set back in line with Rosedale, the setting of this Grade 11 Listed Building now ruined by the filling station forecourt.