

Planning & Transportation Committee

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Director of Environmental Services

F Webb

Designation of Conservation Area, Birch

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The designation of a Conservation Area based on Birch is suggested as the area is of architectural and historic interest and has a character which it is desirable to preserve and enhance.

2.0 Need for a Conservation Area

2.1 The village of Birch is situated 5 miles to the west of Colchester. The settlement is sporadically spread out in attractive countryside and the part of the village around the church does not have a village envelope.

2.2 The character of this part of the village is formed by an informal grouping of properties. It is situated in a slight valley through which a narrow water course flows through 'The Bailey Meadow'.

2.3 The village is bisected by a road which runs north - south. There is a T junction at the top of the settlement and a track stems from this junction and arcs around to the War Memorial situated in the centre. The track was originally the main road through Birch, however, between the years 1777 and 1874 the road was straightened to its present line.

2.4 The area has a range of social and domestic uses, including 2 farms, a school and a church. These buildings form the main elements of the village. Both the church and the school owe their origin to the 'Round Family' who commissioned their building. The Round Family lived in Birch Hall which was situated nearby. It was a Victorian building and was demolished in the 1950's. The grounds now are called Birch Park.

2.5 Birch Parish Church of St. Peter was rebuilt by Charles Gray Round in 1850 to the plans of Teulon who has been described as "the fiercest, ablest and most temerarious of architect adventurers". The building is typical of the architecture of mid-Victorian period. It is in the decorated Gothic style, built in flint with Caen limestone dressings and tiled roof. The exterior has mellowed with the surrounding landscape and the west front forms a pleasing feature standing on rising ground above the Memorial Green. Pevsner describes the exterior as "ambitious, but not showy". He also refers to "the village spire whose silent finger points to Heaven". The spire is a prominent feature and is seen from many points in the district. Birch Rectory was built in 1860 and is also in the Teulon style.

2.6 The Birch Church of England School was built in 1847 again by Charles Grey Round. It is a neat school of white brick. Several urns and other Roman relics were found in the school foundations.

2.7 Also within the boundary of the proposed Conservation Area is Birch Castle. The Castle stands a few yards south of the Parish Church and formerly belonged to the Gernon family. A short length of rampart and a ditch on a spur of high ground is all that remains of the earth works of the Castle. In the valley to the north-east of the Castle is an old dam which is now disused.

2.8 Many of the buildings in the area are of local vernacular character and have significant design interest. The area also contains several Listed Buildings. These are shown on the map in Appendix 1.

2.9 It is considered that the designation of a Conservation Area is justified by the special architectural, townscape and historical qualities of the area. Designation will provide additional powers to protect the area from inappropriate change and in particular demolition of unlisted buildings of townscape quality.

3.0 Proposed extent of the new Conservation Area

3.1 The map in Appendix 1 shows the proposed extent of the new area. The boundary has been drawn tightly to encompass the area of special merit. It incorporates the main historical elements of the settlement. It excludes the Village Hall and 'Farnhams' since these are modern developments and are not of townscape interest.

3.2 The County Planner's specialist staff have been consulted. Their opinion is as follows:-

"A number of my officers have now looked at the village and your suggested CA boundary and the concensus of opinion is that a Conservation Area can be justified. The landscape setting is excellent - there are a small group of Listed Buildings and a number of features of archaeological value."

3.3 The Parish Council have also been consulted. Their comments are as follows:-

"Our comments on the proposed boundary are that we would like to see "Farnhams" and the school playing field included in the scheme, as we feel it would "tidy" the area."

3.4 These comments have been considered. However, it is not felt that the two sites are of sufficient architectural or historic interest to merit inclusion in the Conservation Area.

3.5 The County Planner's specialist staff concur with this view.

4.0 Conclusion

4.1 It is considered that the area of Birch Village proposed for Conservation Area status is of sufficient architectural, historic and townscape interest to merit such a designation.

5.0 Recommendation

5.1 That the area of Birch Village, as defined on the map in Appendix 1, be formally designated as a Conservation Area.

6.0 Background Papers

6.1 Birch School - 1847-1947, Millatt, 1948
The Churchs old and new of Birch and Layer Breton, T.B. Millatt, 1963