

Welwyn Hatfield Council

DIGSWELL

CHARACTER APPRAISAL



January 2004

Credits

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This document was approved for consultation by the Council in February 2003.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1

This appraisal has been commissioned by Welwyn Hatfield Council in order to identify the character of Digswell and thus provide a framework within which to assess the appropriateness of proposed development and the design of development on individual sites within the settlement.

This Appraisal and supporting guidelines is intended to complement, at the neighbourhood level, the Supplementary Design Guidance document produced as part of the Welwyn Hatfield District Plan Review. It should be noted that the Hertfordshire Structure Plan and the Hertfordshire Sustainable Development Guide 2003 contain policies on design and the quality of development, landscape character and visual amenity. They also stress the need to consider context in achieving good design.

It has been considered necessary to produce this appraisal as Digswell is regarded as a desirable place to live by its residents due to its setting and environmental quality. If this quality is to be maintained certain issues need to be addressed.

1.2

One of the main issues facing Digswell is the pressure for new development. This pressure for more residential development has manifested itself in the acquisition of portions of large residential sites thereby creating "tandem" development, as has the sale of other large individual houses and replacement with higher density development. The question arises is there a maximum capacity for the redevelopment of sites? There are virtually no sites which are undeveloped and therefore Digswell is faced with intensification with the possibility of the erosion of the very character of spacious suburbia to which so many residents and prospective residents may aspire.

1.3

Moreover it is not only the plot coverage which is increasing, but the multiplication of vehicular access points along the roads and lanes, thus destroying sections of boundary banks, hedges and trees. This report raises the issue of the cumulative effect of individual and piecemeal development decisions which may require concerted action to deal with these matters in a consultative and cooperative manner.

Another issue is that of a lack of tree management in a number of locations. A regime of tree surgery and slow replacement needs to be instigated to prevent the erosion of the wooded character of most of the settlement and to maintain this rich area of wildlife habitat.

1.4

In order that the positive elements of the character of Digswell are maintained and enhanced, design guidelines for new development are set out in section 8.0. These guidelines should serve to inform applicants, elected members and planning officers in setting out the parameters regarding appropriate density, massing, layout, scale and materials, related to various character sub-areas.

1.5

This Appraisal was approved as Supplementary Planning Guidance to the emerging Local Plan in 2003. This approval follows the production of a consultation draft and two public meetings with residents in May 2003 and the subsequent receipt of written comments from residents, the Parish Council and Hertfordshire County Council. All these contributions are gratefully acknowledged and have been considered in this final revised document.

2.0 The importance of character appraisal

2.1 Context

Recent government advice* stresses the need for the design of new development to have regard to the character of the context in which it is located. The objective of this advice is that new development should relate to its context in that buildings and the spaces between them are designed to be site specific and sit well in their settings, avoiding the much criticised anonymity or placelessness of much post war development.

In order that new development responds to local character it is obvious that local character must be identified and evaluated. The Welwyn Hatfield District Plan Review and its Supplementary Design Guidance reinforce and expand on government advice in that they stress the need for an understanding of the character and context of the area and that Design Statements should be produced for all significant design proposals and new development.

2.2 What is character?

The concept underpins so much planning policy but is rarely defined comprehensively.

Character is a multi dimensional concept, comprising the interaction of the following aspects which are considered when defining the character of Digswell in general and its parts.

Setting

- how does the settlement relate to its location?
- does the topography govern layout?
- what is the form of the landscape?
- does the landscape setting allow views into and out of the settlement?
- does the landscape define areas and spaces?
- is there a characteristic pattern of hard landscape?
- does the setting and landscape foster biodiversity and a sense of tranquillity?

Built form and structure

- is the built form compact or dispersed?
- what is the proportion of building footprint to size of plot?
- is the 'grain' of plots, buildings and streets fine or coarse: does it have a particular alignment?
- what is the townscape character? eg. levels of enclosure, types of spaces, types of street and settlement frontage, landmarks etc.

Building styles and materials

- is there a pattern of predominant building materials?
- is there a vernacular pattern of building?
- what is the predominant range of architectural styles/periods?
- is the scale of built form domestic, civic, grand, utilitarian etc?
- what is the level of ornamentation, texture, colour?

Evolution

- how has the settlement grown and changed?
- are there significant specific property lines, ancient boundaries etc?
- is there evidence of former land use which should be conserved?

Uses, activities and community

- are there mixed small scale uses or large single uses and what effect do these activities have on the community?

Land ownership

- what is the pattern and type of land ownership and how will this affect building condition? Is the population transient or fixed?

Relative connectivity

- is the settlement well connected to existing routes or is it isolated?
- can potential pedestrian routes be identified?

Image and association

- what are the views of residents within the settlement: what do they value about the place: what do they wish to change?
- what is the image of Digswell to those visiting the settlement or living nearby?

*'By Design' DETR/CABE 2000
'Building in Context' EH/CABE 2001

3.0 Description, location and context

3.1

The present day settlement known as Digswell lies 3km north of the centre of Welwyn Garden City. It straddles the main 'Great Northern' railway line from London to the North. (see figure 01) Digswell is relatively small being about 1.2km north to south and 0.75km east to west and has a population of about 1,600 people.

Digswell is a compact and yet low density detached suburb, contained by belts of mature trees on most sides, rendering it virtually invisible from most main roads in the area. The settlement lies on the southwest facing slope of the valley on the north bank of the River Mimram and rises 60 metres from the valley floor to the plateau of Harmer Green, at 120 metres above sea level.

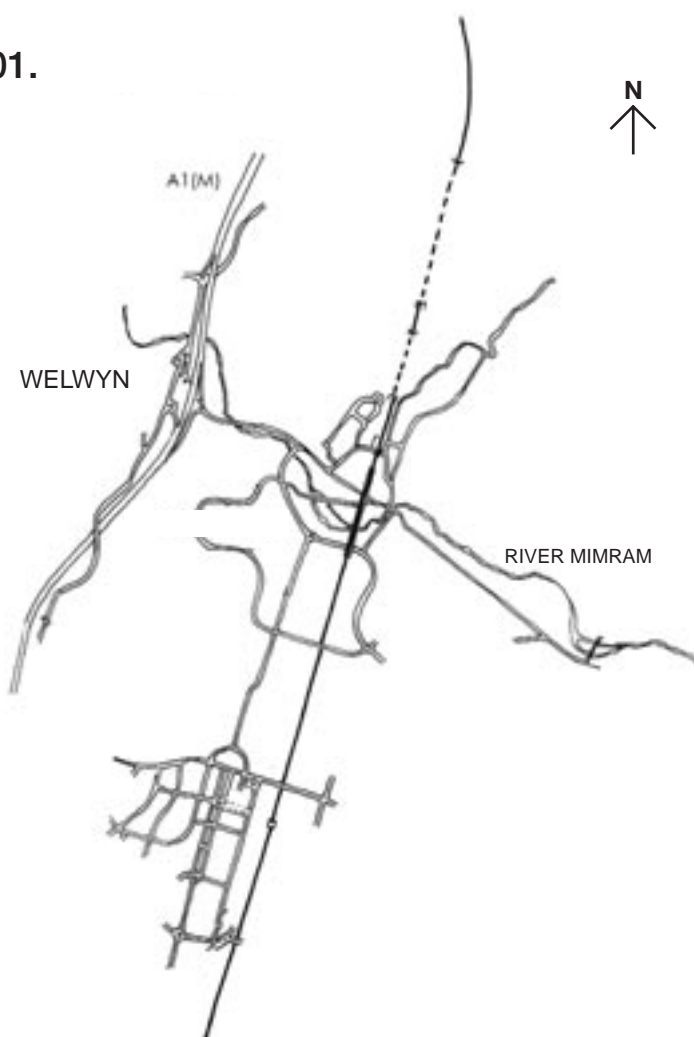
Digswell is predominantly a residential suburb, considered by many residents as a village and is attractive to commuters, with the main line station at the heart of the settlement and good access to the A1(M) 1.5km away to the west. A bus service links Digswell to Welwyn Garden City via the station.

3.2

There are a few shops and businesses in Digswell, mainly centred near the station and Woodside Road. These include a public house and a Post Office; these are augmented by visits from a mobile shop. Given its small, dispersed, car borne population and the detached nature of the settlement, it is unlikely that the shopping provision will expand.

There is some provision for leisure activity as the valley floor accommodates a sports field and pavilion. The village hall is located just north of the station, on Harmer Green Lane.

Fig 01.



4.0 Planning policy context

4.1

The map from the District Plan Review, figure 02, shows Digswell surrounded by designated Green Belt, which extends up to the boundary of its built up area. On the southern side of Digswell a narrow band of Green Belt runs along the Mimram valley, separating the settlement from that of Welwyn Garden City.

It will be noted that the Green Belt boundary and the boundaries of sub areas B, J and F do not coincide in places. The reasons are twofold. Greenbelt boundaries are usually drawn along roads or major property lines for administrative convenience. The sub area boundaries are drawn to define areas of specific visual character.

4.2

There are a number of Wildlife Sites identified in the District Plan located in the Digswell area.

These are:

- WS24 – Digswell Meadows South
- WS52 – Digswell Lake
- WS27 – Scrub Slope east of Digswell
- WS16 – Lockleys Wood
- WS6 – Lockleys Woods Meadow
- WS15 – Lockleys Chalk Bank, Harmer Green
- WS37 – Pasture north of Lockleys Wood
- WS33 – Harmer Green Pond, Pennyfathers House
- WS35 – Harmer Green House

4.3

The wooded nature of the settlement is almost wholly within the curtilage of residential properties, with only three very small pockets designated as Urban Open Land (UOL 13; 14 and 15) all in the New Road area. There is a considerable number of Tree Preservation Orders scheduled in Digswell: these cover individual trees, groups of specimen trees and groups of woodland trees. The designation of TPO's is a continuing process aimed at maintaining the wooded character of the settlement.

4.4

There are no designated Conservation Areas in Digswell although there are 11 Listed Buildings. These are the Railway Viaduct, Station, Tunnel Portal, 5 buildings in Digswell Water and three in Harmer Green (see Fig 10). The setting of each of these buildings must be fully considered when development is proposed. In the case of the Viaduct its setting can be taken as the valley landscape that it dominates.

Fig 02. District Plan Review map



5.0 Evolution

5.1

The settlement of Digswell in its present location and form appears to be relatively recent, but some of its ancient roots are apparent at its northern and southern extremities, Harmer Green being its highest point and Digswell Water its lowest respectively. However the original settlement of Digswell is to be found 1.5 Km to the south west, around Digswell Church, of Saxon origin, lying within Digswell Park and the bounds of its House. This south western part of the two centred Digswell was largely surrounded by the development of Welwyn Garden City from the 1920's.

5.2

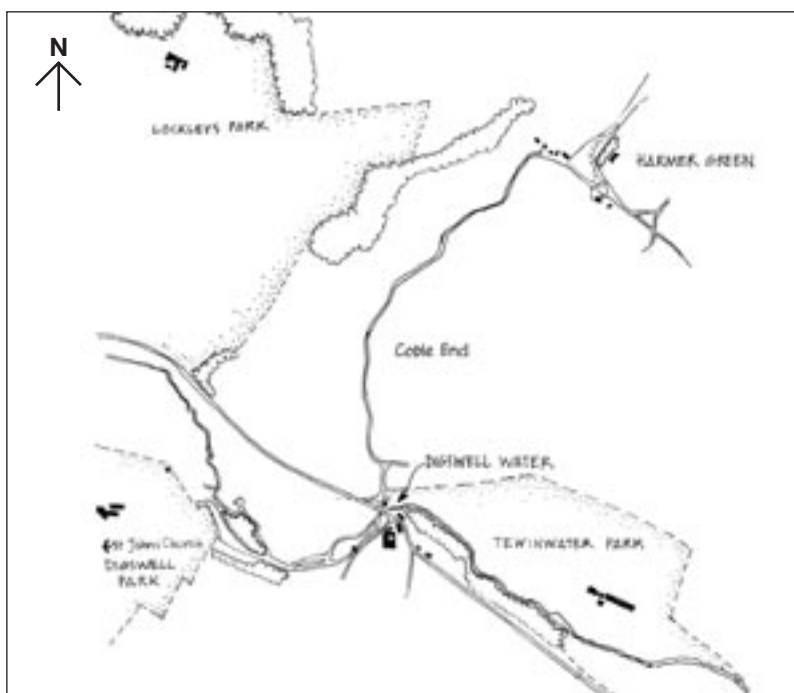
There are marked stages in the evolution of the northern settlement now known as Digswell (see figs. 3–6). These stages each have their own architectural, spatial and topographical character sub areas identified in this report.

Harmer Green is a hamlet also of medieval origin. Pennyfathers House presides over the south side of the duck pond whilst at the western end there is a range of brick cottages. It appears that the only other significant building phase was in the early 20th Century when the creation of the New Road stimulated the building of some architecturally distinctive and spacious houses. One or two recent large houses have been added, whose front boundaries are more 'urban' in character.

Digswell Water, originally a medieval settlement is situated at a bridging point on the river Mimram, where the broad valley becomes more enclosed. It was also near this point that the Watermill was established, still surviving with a well designed functional extension dating from the turn of the 19th/20th centuries. The mill ceased to operate soon after this date. A handful of timber framed medieval buildings, heavily restored in the early 20th century can also be seen in this area.

The landscaped parkland of Tewinwater estate lies on the north bank, approached over the picturesque Gothick bridge, rather hidden and through the entrance guarded by a lodge. The eastern extremity of this area is marked by two short garden city type terraces set back from the road by a green.

Fig 03. Digswell c1800



A conceptual map showing the area prior to the arrival of the railway. The original Digswell is situated to the west, absorbed in the grounds of Digswell Park. An outlier settlement, Digswell Water, is centred on the watermill and river crossing. 'New' Digswell is known as Coble End at this time.

Fig 04. Digswell 1899



The railway, station and Station Road are well established by this time. There are one or two houses south of the station and a Beehive works is built close to the station to distribute bee-keepers supplies around the country.

Fig 05. Digswell 1925



The commuter value of the station is being realised. Spacious new development located well within large plots is being set out along the Edwardian New Road and Adele Avenue. Woodside Road is not shown, but it was being developed by 1926. A small gas works was established near the station, convenient for coal supplies from the railway. The settlement is now referred to as High Welwyn, presumably to distinguish it from the hamlet around Digswell church.

Fig 06. Digswell 1947



A revision of the 1939 OS map. The Hertford Road and Station Road/Woodside Road are fully developed with typical interwar suburban houses. Much of the northern end of New Road is occupied by the extensive grounds of large houses such as Mornington. Harmer Green Lane has very large plots on its eastern side with little development to the west. The Beehive Works and Gasworks still remain.

6.0 General character

6.1

Digswell's sloping site and enclosed nature form the basis of its character. The railway was virtually the *raison d'être* of the settlement. The straight line of the track and its level alignment emphasises the slope by providing a datum. The railway has had the effect of dividing the community, with the eastern side developing first, rather spaciouly along Harmer Green Lane and New Road. The western side developed from the mid 1920's onwards mainly with typical interwar suburban development and then later a large 1960's chalet style estate. Subsequent infill completes the scene.

Unlike Welwyn Garden City immediately to the south, with its consciously formal and informal urban design of buildings, spaces and roads, Digswell possesses no overall urban plan, but is a patchwork of many different developments and individually designed houses.

The architectural character is varied, but mainly within an overall derivative neo vernacular style with later suburban types in well defined pockets. Materials are generally brick with groups of houses in white render or natural pebbledash. Predominant roofing materials are clay plain tiles. Building height is overwhelmingly two storey. A few buildings with attic storeys in the roof pitch add occasional accent.

Whilst the overall architectural quality is unremarkable there are some individual buildings of quality. Similarly there are few urban spaces or building groups of special merit; it is the dominance of the wooded landscape, winding, often sunken lanes and roads, the topographical setting and its sense of containment or separateness which give Digswell its attraction.

6.2

Trees dominate most views and enclose the street scene in most places. Trees occur in different contexts in Digswell. Much of the periphery of the settlement is bounded by belts of mature, native, deciduous trees and in the north western corner by Lockleys Wood. The northern ends of Harmer Green Lane and New Road have near continuous trees fronting the highways, providing a canopy which creates arcadian tunnels at these points. Other smaller groups of woodland exist such as the Dell. Many fine specimen trees especially Wellingtonia can be seen in gardens. In one or two locations trees have been planted in key locations on lane and road frontages to provide accents of colour contrast with the general background of evergreens. Many trees have reached full maturity and will require management and eventual replanting. The maintenance of this density of trees will contribute to the continuation of the biodiversity of this area. The spacious informal leafy character no doubt makes Digswell a much sought after residential location.

6.3

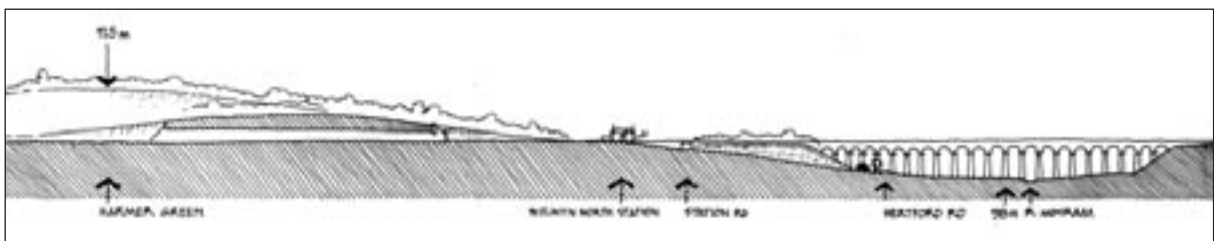
The following maps and diagrams illustrate some aspects of the general character of Digswell.

Fig 07. Topographical context



The sloping site between two dry valleys is clearly evident in the pattern of contours.

Fig 08. Diagrammatic North/South section through Digswell



Diagrammatic long section through Digswell, illustrates the changes of level from north to south and how this has been resolved through the engineering feats of the viaduct and tunnel.

It also explains the situation of the station on the level, where the cutting ends and the embankment commences.

Fig 09. Townscape and landscape appraisal



The townscape and landscape appraisal conveys the different types of spaces in the settlement and how and where the trees define and enclose spaces. The map also identifies views and viewpoints and pivotal corners linking one space with another. The winding lanes and roads deflect the view giving interest in the street scene.

Views, skyline, variety of enclosure and landmarks are important elements in the townscape and landscape for maintaining the identity of a place.

Key

















	Significant tree belts defining/enclosing spaces
	Tree canopy over lane with banks
	Formal avenue trees
	Visible ridgeline/crestline
	Building skyline impact
	Important long/wide view
	View to object
	Building terminates view
	Deflected view
	Area of identity
	Significant corner
	Pinch point
	Landmark
	Enclosure lost

Fig 10. Listed Buildings and buildings of local architectural interest



The Listed Buildings reflect the formative stages of Digswell's development: the medieval origins, the feats of railway engineering and architecture and a few later examples. The buildings of local architectural interest are selected as good examples of Edwardian domestic architecture and of the vernacular revival characteristic of the Garden Cities.

-  Listed Building of special architectural or historic interest
-  Building of local architectural interest

7.0 Character sub-areas

7.1

Section 6.0 identifies the aspects which contribute to the overall character of Digswell. However it is clear that whilst the settlement has broad overall characteristics, that analysis does not fully reflect the detailed nature of Digswell. Consequently, this section identifies a number of sub areas which differ from each other in terms of landscape, built form, density, age of buildings, levels of openness or enclosure and nature of roads or lanes, yet which possess some common characteristics.

7.2

The sub-areas are defined using the criteria set out in section 2.2. Their boundaries are mostly quite clearly defined although in some cases one should assume that sub-areas will overlap where there is a gradual transition from one area to another.

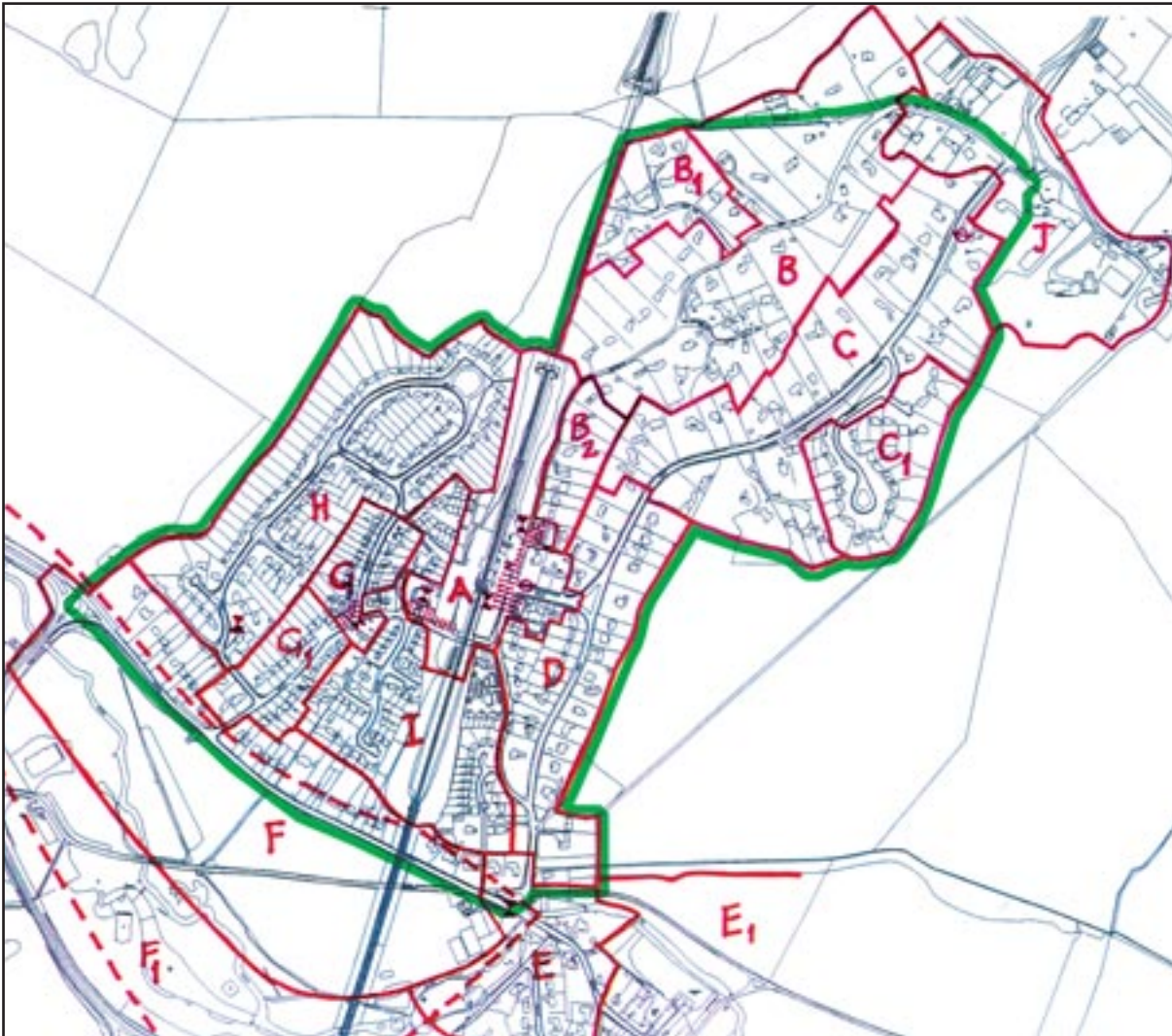
7.3

Density is one of the main indicators of character; this is particularly true of Digswell. Figures 12 and 13 demonstrate that each sub area can be defined by the relative density of dwellings per hectare, plot size and the distance between the frontage of the plot and the dwelling. Thus, even though the whole settlement has a density well below the current suburban norm there is considerable variation within the settlement; ie between 3 and 18 dwellings per hectare.

7.4

An analysis of each sub-area now follows. This also includes broad design guidelines in critical locations.

Fig 11. Character sub-areas



Key



Character sub-area



Setting of Viaduct



Semi commercial/ community frontages



Nodal/meeting point



Bus stop



Green Belt

- A** The core of the 'new' Digswell
- B** Harmer Green Lane
- B1** Recently developed land behind Harmer Green Lane
- B2** Mid Harmer Green Lane
- C** New Road
- C1** Mornington
- D** Southern end of Lane and Road
- E** Digswell Water and the eastern gateway
- E1** Tewinwater valley and estate
- F** The Mimram Valley frontage and the viaduct
- F1** The setting of the viaduct
- G** Interwar development: Woodside Road
- G1** Interwar development: Lower Station Road
- H** Warren Way
- I** Smaller groups of recent housing
- J** Harmer Green

Fig 12. Analysis of selected sub-area plots

Sub Area	Average Density per ha	Average Frontage depth (m)	Average plot width (m)	Average plot depth (m)
A	9	12 (5-20)	15	40
B	3	30 (10-50)	30	90 (45-130)
B1	8	20	25	40
C	3	20	35 (25-50)	75
C1	8	10	20	45
D	10	17	20	50
E	4.5	4	30	55
F	6.5	30	12	80
G	18	6	10	50
H	16	7	14	60
I	18	6	11	30
J	3	15 (10-25)	50 (20-55)	60

Figures in brackets show min-max dimensions, where there is considerable variation from the average. 'Average' is taken to be that at May 2003.

Fig 13. Map of selected sub-area plots (each rectangle equals 1 hectare)



A. The core of the ‘new’ Digswell

This area covers the original buildings of the new settlement, at the point where the railway emerges from the tunnel, and continues as an embankment. This is also the main place where east and west parts are linked through the road bridge. The area is the main nodal point in the settlement, generating bursts of activity when trains arrive buses stop and when pub and shops are open. The area in the immediate vicinity of the station is subject to brief but high noise levels when trains pass through.

The sub area includes the setting of the listed station ie: the places from which the station can be viewed.



The Station forms the focus of the formally planted Adele Avenue. Laid out in the Edwardian era, Adele Avenue links the station to the new development following the creation of New Road.



The ‘forest track’ leads to the Railway Cottages – some of the earliest buildings in Digswell, following the construction of the railway.



Welwyn North Station

and its associated buildings are the earliest in the ‘New’ Digswell. It is Italianate in style, the building with its canopies and bridge staircase is listed. Its condition and setting therefore must be safeguarded.



Adele Avenue

A late Edwardian Vernacular Revival house sets the tone for so much of the area; an informal, asymmetrically balanced façade, with gables, dominant roof and grouped mullioned windows. Note also the lush landscape of the garden and boundaries.



The entrance to the station from Harmer Green Lane. The setting of this Listed Building is compromised by the domination of parked cars, both on its boundary and against its main façade. The forecourt should be enhanced and enclosed somewhat to create an elegant, pedestrian-friendly sense of place reflecting its nodal position and focal point at the head of Adele Avenue.



The Cowper Arms

contemporary with the station, in the same style, has good views across the south of Digswell from its elevated position. The impact of the parked car should not be increased.

B. Harmer Green Lane



Harmer Green Lane

This winding, narrow semi sunken lane descends towards the station from the plateau of Harmer Green. The overhanging trees form a near continuous canopy. This character is being slowly compromised by the opening up of vehicular access ways for new development. The established character of large plots (see figs. 12 and 13) is particularly compromised by this process.

The compact enclosed nature of the lane should not be compromised if limited development is considered. Proposals to 'open up' frontages or to infill between properties would damage the essentially arcadian character. The plot analysis in figs 12 and 13 should provide a guide.

The boundary of the Green Belt cuts diagonally across the northern tip of the sub area. The properties within the Belt will therefore enjoy increased protection. The Green Belt boundary continues along the western edge of the sub area (see Fig 02).

At its northern end this ancient sunken green lane predates the settlement and its canopy of trees and high banks emphasise its rural character.



This cottage at the northern end of the lane is framed by the tree canopy and both terminates the view and deflects it to the left. Note the absence of kerbs or pavement emphasising its rural nature.

The tranquillity of this quiet green lane is an essential characteristic of this area and should be the guiding principle in developing sensitive measures in calming and limiting vehicular movement.



Harmer Green Lane at the junction with the recent Sharmans Close. The cumulative effect of junctions to this generous suburban design standard would erode the contained, informal rural character of the Lane.

B1. Land to the west of Harmer Green Lane

Recent houses have been developed here through the sale and subdivision of large plots. The resulting small plots and suburban character of the development and road design contrasts with the much larger plots facing the ancient lane.

Further plot subdivision with accompanying proliferation of access drives and shallow frontages, will change the character of this area in terms of density and dominance by buildings instead of treescape.



B2. Mid Harmer Green Lane

Here the lane was realigned to follow the railway and has smaller, narrower plots. The road is relatively straight and is 'single loaded' with development on its eastern side. Trees still dominate the street scene



The Village Hall, an important community focus.



Harmer Green Lane just north of the station. The trees on the left mask the station platform and fine ex-railway cottages.

C. New Road

The road was created prior to World War 1 to improve access and provide development opportunities. Its northern end is a more spacious, wider, regularised version of Harmer Green Lane, with its curving form, overhanging trees, boundary banks and pavements.

Houses along this stretch of the road are only fleetingly visible behind well screened green boundaries. The deep set backs, generous spaces between houses, (see 'C' on fig 13), and varied design on derivations of the vernacular style set the pattern for any new development.

This section of the road frontage has been opened up and some of the containment of the area has been lost.



C1. Mornington

The Mornington Area, Cul de Sac developments of the 60's and 70's, replaced original large houses. The development comprises generous detached frontages, virtually continuous, thus preventing views out to the surrounding countryside from the public realm.

Many groups of trees have been retained with houses being built between them. This, plus the open frontages gives a faintly Scandinavian atmosphere.



D. Southern end of Lane and Road

The lower sections of New Road and Harmer Green Lane converge in an area that is less enclosed than areas B and C. There are fewer trees and banks and more hedges and fences. The open fields and ridge to the east are glimpsed between the houses. A little further south the roads converge, funnelled by trees. Plots become smaller and more regular in this section, with frontages somewhat closer to the road.



New Road at the junction with Adele Avenue, where glimpses of the enclosing ridge to the east can be seen.



The point where Harmer Green Lane joins New Road. It can be seen that the trees at this point define and enclose the junction. It can also be seen that they need some sensitive management and perhaps some replacement planting.

Care needs to be taken to ensure that infill development and redevelopment does not erode the character of this area by creating virtually continuous frontages and new openings in the hedge banks.

E. Digswell Water and the Eastern Gateway

This small hamlet along the river forms the approach to Digswell from the east, its bridge and historic buildings are earlier than the main settlement. This area is perceived locally as experiencing pressure from increasing traffic movement and cars setting down and picking up. Any consequential traffic calming measures should have regard to the sensitivity of the landscape and should not result in further loss of enclosure.



The Lodge

A vernacular revival building – forms a pivotal corner as one turns north to enter New Road and Harmer Green Lane. The Lodge also guards the entrance to Tewinwater Park behind it on the right.



The elegant neo 'gothick' bridge at the eastern entrance to Digswell – an early piece of estate enhancement and management – is hardly noticeable. Perhaps a more sympathetic alignment and design of the footbridge on the left could aid the appreciation of this structure.



Digswellwater Farm (Maran House)

One of the earliest buildings in the area, predating the railway settlement by some 400 years.



The Water Mill

for grinding corn lies within the old settlement of Digswell Water. This interesting building deflects the road and creates a small 'place' where driveway and road meet. The oriel window reinforces the termination of the view. Perhaps this alignment might be a model for new built form.

E1. Tewinwater



This linear area is a valley landscape enclosed by a ridge to the north. Some development fronting the roadside has the potential for refurbishment. There is little hint of the Digswell settlement at this point, although the viaduct terminates the view to the west as one approaches Digswell Water. Some short terraces of Garden City-type cottages are set back from the road on the southern side and emphasise the linear character of this sub area.



A basic traffic calming measure has been installed to slow traffic where there are multiple access parts to the main road. A more permanent, sensitive solution needs to be developed. Modest enhancement opportunities exist along this road, especially on the right hand side.

F. The Mimram valley frontage and the Viaduct

The river valley widens along this frontage and is semi wild in places. When the trees are in leaf the southern and western edges of the settlement are scarcely visible.

The gables and hipped roofs of mainly inter war houses can be glimpsed between the trees on this green southern edge of the settlement. The buildings are low and set well back in their long plots thus minimising their impact on the valley.



The Viaduct from the East. The southern edge of Digsweil lies to the right. The piers pinch and frame the converging roads at this point. The car park is well used but could be enhanced.



The approach to Digsweil from the north west. The western edge of the settlement is screened by a fine range of mature trees.



The secretive western entrance to Digsweil is framed by trees. The bucolic nature of the Mimram valley reinforces the separation of Digsweil from Welwyn Garden City, off to the right. The Welwyn Viaduct terminates the view to the east.

F1. The setting of the Viaduct

As the viaduct is a Listed Building its setting has to be protected from the impact of development. The area on the map (fig.11) outlines the main extent of views and the dominance of the viaduct.



The Welwyn Viaduct

The majestic arches (40 of them) stride across the Mimram valley. This structure has formed a major skyline and gateway feature of Digsweil since 1850. Here it glows in the sunset.

G. Interwar development: Woodside Road

Woodside Road, a creation of the mid 1920's. Many of the original buildings line the road, including this informal terrace of shops with accommodation over. The terrace is a late version of the vernacular revival style, characteristic of Letchworth and parts of Welwyn Garden City.



View of the opposite side of the Mimram valley from the upper end of Woodside Road. Note the predominance of white render in this small area.

One of the mid 1920's houses in Woodside Road. Its character is retained in original window frames (with stained glass toplights). The door and elevational materials have also been retained.

G1. Interwar Development: lower Station Road

Similar in character and appearance to Woodside Road, with more semi-detached plus some post war infill. The west side of the road has no pavement, with drives, hedges and trees fronting directly onto the carriageway.

These boundaries and the hedges on the eastern side are the unifying components of the character of this road. The road becomes very busy as it is a link between the station and the main road.



H. Warren Way

Unlike so much of Digswell, this area was developed consistently within a relatively short period in the 1960's. The detached, mostly 'chalet' type houses present a near continuous frontage along the road, denying views of the open countryside to the west from the public realm.

The highest point of the development is marked by a horseshoe green surrounded by bungalows. This welcome device perhaps needs some more height and enclosure to give it an increased sense of place. Possibly taller trees planted formally to follow the horseshoe might help.



The consistent style, footprint and form of the housing is apparent here. The road is suburban in character with few street trees and open plan frontages creating a spacious feeling.



The 'Horseshoe Green' at the head of Warren Way.



Looking south across the Mimram valley from the upper part of Warren Way.

I. Smaller groups of recent housing

This area comprises linked pockets of infill development dating from the 1970's to 1990's. Few of the developments have major frontages but are situated in plots either side of the railway embankment which is high at this point. The housing is generally of slightly higher density than much in Digswell. There is little agreement on style, materials and form of the houses, but this gives each estate its own personality. The most recent developments are built on the sites of the Beehive Works and Gasworks respectively.



Recent development terminating the view from the station forecourt



One of the more recent higher density developments with "mews-type" vehicular access.



1970's split gable and monopitch houses, typical of the period. Note the tighter layout.

J. Harmer Green

Harmer Green an archetypal hamlet with duckpond, green, cottages and farmhouse. Strictly, Harmer Green is a separate settlement from Digswell, but it is directly linked to it and the focus of the northern ends of Harmer Green Lane and New Road.

Long established boundaries and drives are in 'soft' materials such as hedges and gravel, with occasional brick gate piers. 'Hard' materials such as railings, brick walls and fences over 1m high or paved drives, are less appropriate to this informal hamlet.



This composition of cottages and later cottage style buildings enhances the village character of Harmer Green through a coherent relationship to each other and the green frontage.

The boundary of the Green Belt runs along the lane here; the Green and the cottages on the right lie within the Green Belt and are therefore afforded greater protection (see fig 02).



Facing Harmer Green this house is a significant example of the Vernacular Revival or Arts and Crafts style of domestic architecture prevalent in 'progressive' circles at the advent of the 20th century. The simple asymmetrical design, horizontal, irregular bands of mullioned windows, interspersed by oriels, tall chimneys, buttresses and gables, gathered under a sweeping roof, are characteristic of this influential style.



8.0 Design Guidelines

8.1 Objectives

1. The guidelines set out below have been drafted to provide applicants, elected members and planning officers with criteria with which to assess the appropriateness of development proposals. The criteria have been developed to ensure that the positive elements of the character of each sub area and Digswell as a whole, as identified in this Appraisal, are maintained and enhanced.
2. National policy set out in 'By Design' 'Better Places to Live By Design' 'Building in Context' and 'Places Streets and Movement' have a common theme in that good design should be achieved throughout the built environment, not just in conservation areas; it should have regard to the character, context or setting in which it is located and that provision for the vehicle should not dominate the aim of making good places.
3. These design guidelines should be regarded as a framework of local parameters within which a range of design solutions can be developed, within the general context of national policy. The guidelines are intended as a springboard for good, sensitive design; they are as prescriptive only as necessary to achieve a reasonable response to the character of the area
4. These guidelines refer to Digswell as a whole and each of the sub areas, in particular, those that are under the greatest pressure for infilling or redevelopment.

8.2 Process

1. In determining any development proposals, whether they be for new building on undeveloped or previously developed sites, alterations or extensions to existing buildings, proposed work to boundaries or to the public realm, it is advisable to follow the sequence below:

- note the character appraisal of Digswell overall (section 6) then the sub area in which the site is located
- note the opportunities, constraints and issues to be addressed (eg. site characteristics loss of boundary hedgerows, intensification of sites)
- consider the design guidelines related to the sub areas

In particular consider the relative densities and plot layouts as set out in Figures 12 and 13.

2. Design Statement

Applicants are required to submit a design statement to accompany their application drawings. The statement should comprise:

- a statement demonstrating how the design responds to the character of Digswell and the sub area in which it is located, as described in this appraisal
- how the design of the application responds to the opportunities and constraints of the site
- the statement should be supported by a site plan showing surrounding development

8.3 Guidelines for sub-area A: The core of the 'new' Digswell

- 1.** This area is dominated by the railway and the station. For many it is the gateway to Digswell; however its character is being eroded by the domination of the motor vehicle and the poor condition of the Listed Station building.
- 2.** Whilst one or two small pockets of land might have development potential, the noise and vibration impact of fast through trains makes this possibility less attractive. Should development be proposed this location is probably suitable for small scale, two storey mixed development eg. live-work units, subject to access and good neighbour considerations. Attention to the design of frontages and the setting of the Listed Station will be material considerations.
- 3.** The station building requires a sensitive intensification of use in order that the vacant and under-used accommodation is utilised.
- 4.** It is suggested that an enhancement plan is drawn up to address the car parks, their frontages and the forecourt of the station. The plan should aim to increase the sense of enclosure, ensure improved access for pedestrians and disabled people and improve and coordinate signage.
- 5.** Pedestrian safety and traffic calming may need attention in the area of the bridge.

8.4 Guidelines for sub-areas B: Harmer Green Lane and C: New Road

1. The analysis of these two areas (see section 7) shows that their essential characteristics are variations on the theme of very low density development exemplified by:

- large plots
- detached houses set in the centre of the plots
- houses set well back behind the front boundaries
- ‘soft’ front boundaries of banks with hedgerows and/or trees veiling any views of the houses.

Moreover this arcadian character is reinforced by:

- informal vehicular entrances which are merely occasional opening gaps in the banks
- soft materials for drive surfaces and green boundaries
- informal asymmetrical house design in footprint and elevation with pitched, often hipped roofs

2. It has been recognised that all of these elements have been compromised and eroded in recent years and that if the character of these two areas is to be maintained and enhanced, then the following guidelines will influence the consideration of any application for planning permission regarding extensions, replacement, or new development.

a) There will be a presumption against the intensification of plots through “tandem development”. Tandem Development occurs where one or more dwellings are developed in the rear of a property or back garden of a plot, of an existing dwelling. This process has the effect of increasing the density of the plot by at least 100% and perhaps up to 500%. Exceptions will normally be confined to above average sized plots in the sub area concerned (see figs 12 and 13).

b) No further new driveways will be created involving the removal of front hedgerow banks. Vehicular access to any new dwelling shall be by extending and adapting the existing driveway, rather than creating a new driveway at the site entrance.

c) The removal of banks, hedgerows and trees on front boundaries will be resisted. The replacement of any dead or decaying trees will be required, one for one, by semi-mature species characteristic of the area. Applications proposing hard boundaries such as brick walls, fences, railings or hard surfaces with extensive areas of brick paviors or tarmac driveways will be resisted. Regarding boundaries, an Article IV Direction, removing permitted development rights covering boundaries is being considered at present. In the meantime, planning conditions will be attached to any permission granted in order to safeguard the green front boundaries.

d) The layout and location of any new dwellings should be consistent with the following principles:

- the house will normally be set out with its long axis across the site (virtually parallel with the front boundary)
- the front façade of the building (excluding minor projections such as porches and bay windows) should be set back from the front edge of the property by the same dimension as its adjacent neighbours or the average set back of the houses built along the side of the road on which the site is situated, (relating to buildings built prior to 1950), whichever is the greater. It is likely that the dimension will be around 30m
- any new building shall have its long axis (including garage) measuring a maximum of half the front boundary width, with a minimum gap of 5m from the side boundaries

e) House designs should reflect the variation in house type which is a notable characteristic of these sub areas. In particular where two or more dwellings are proposed on an existing plot, house designs should not be identical. However architecture should have regard to the broad established pattern that includes the following principles which are most common throughout these sub areas:

- irregular/informal footprint
- pitched roofs (usually 40-50 degrees) with hips and gables
- chimneys (or brick vents/flues)
- ranges of windows with mullions and the use of brick (red/brown) and /or render materials

Architects and designers are encouraged to create inventive solutions within this palette. Architecture which incorporates “green” building techniques will be welcome; such as the inclusion of turf or similar green roofs, timber cladding, timber framed conservatory structures for passive solar gain, photo-voltaic cell panels (if the effect of reflection is not deemed unduly intrusive).

Eclectic styles such as neo-georgian or Mediterranean types are regarded as being alien to the broad character of the settlement.

**Guidelines for sub-area B1:
Land to the West of Harmer
Green Lane**

The appraisal indicates that this area has been subdivided and redeveloped quite recently. Very few opportunities for redevelopment still exist.

- a sense of spaciousness along the street must be maintained
- many plots back onto the Lockleys Wood. Attention to the consideration and design of the boundaries facing this high quality landscape is essential. Perhaps hedges should be associated with any fences. Brick or railings would be inappropriate
- privacy between living rooms must be a key consideration, which can be achieved through design and layout as well as key dimensions

**Guidelines for sub-area B2:
Mid Harmer Green Lane**

This sub area has an intimate scale due to the sense of enclosure on its western side and the narrowness and shallow depth of plots. Consequently it is not considered that plots could be subdivided.

8.5 Guidelines for sub-area C1: Mornington

1. The analysis of this area (see Page 21) indicates that it has homogeneity arising from its being planned and designed as a coherent whole.
2. The inclusion of landscape as greens, open frontages and the retention of trees especially the pines and birch which contribute to the areas 'Scandinavian' character, should be recognised as an essential element of this housing cluster, to be maintained and enhanced when considering development proposals.
3. The built form, whilst low density, presents an undulating semi continuous street frontage and is characterised by housing types of characteristic 1960's and 70's style and use of materials.
4. There are few opportunities for infill and no immediate pressure for redevelopment. Should these situations arise it would be essential to maintain the existing building line and the existing average plot coverage. Development which would result in the loss of mature trees in good condition should be resisted. Built form which 'threads its way' through the trees with glazed walls and 'green' roofs could be an appropriately modest response to this arcadian setting.
5. Extensions and alterations which would result in a virtually terraced effect, by visually linking adjacent houses will be resisted. Side and rear extensions should be subservient to the main building, usually by being slightly set back from front corners and walls and by setting any roof ridge lower than the main building. Dormers should be set well back from verges.

8.6 Guidelines for sub-area D: Southern end of Lane and Road

1. The analysis of this area (see section 7) indicates that the character is similar to that of areas B and C, but the plots are shallower, it is less enclosed by mature trees, and that the fields and ridge to the east are glimpsed through trees. Moreover hedgebanks and boundary trees are less prevalent and hedges and fences more apparent. As the plots are shallower, the building line of the houses is closer to their front boundaries. The range of style is common to Digswell as a whole although they are slightly more recent.
2. The issues are that new development could threaten to erode the established positive character by creating minimal spacing between buildings, eroding boundaries by creating frequent vehicular openings and generally "opening up" frontages. Many trees are likely to be lost due to neglect and full maturity.
3. There are very limited opportunities for subdivision of sites and generally this will be resisted if subdivision results in sites being less than the average plot size for the sub area.
4. It is essential that the gaps between buildings are retained. On the east side of New Road building frontages should be no more than 60% of the width of the site and on the west side 80%. Existing building lines and setbacks must be adhered to.
5. Where subdivision of plots is approved, it will normally be a condition that vehicular access to two properties should be shared, in order to maintain the continuity and integrity of boundaries.
6. All front boundaries should be hedges or hedgerow banks depending on location. Replacement tree planting may be required in order to ensure the continuity of enclosure which would be lost with the decay and removal of existing trees.

8.7 Guidelines for sub-areas E and E1

Design guidelines for Sub area E: Digswell Water and the Eastern Gateway

As identified this is one of the two historic centres at the edges of Digswell. It has the greatest concentration of listed buildings in the settlement. The historic walls are an important element in the streetscape. This area owes its character partly to the concentration of routes and is an entrance to Digswell. It is considered that development opportunities do not exist in this area.

- as this area possesses some of the qualities which might make it eligible for designation as a conservation area, a 'preservation and enhancement' approach should be adopted in all decisions regarding
 - (a) the alteration and extension of existing buildings and
 - (b) any measures to manage and calm the flow of traffic

Design Guidelines for Sub area E1: Tewinwater

This 'approach' zone running along the Tewinwater valley is dominated by the landscape elements of a ridge to the north, the valley floor and the rising land on the south. Green Belt policy covering this area means that only replacement development will be allowed.

- any proposed traffic calming measures should use signage, street furniture and painted road surfaces with restraint in order to respond to this rural setting

8.8 Guidelines for sub-areas F and F1

Design guidelines for Sub area F: The Mimram Valley Frontage

1. The analysis of this area (see section 7) indicates that the character is of a frontage to the settlement along the Hertford Road, on rising ground overlooking the Mimram valley. There are generally regular narrow plots of some considerable depth with correspondingly deep set backs of approximately 15-30m. The hedgerow on the south side of the Hertford Road contributes to the screening of the development as well as do the boundary hedges themselves.
2. Generally the built form is of a low profile and consists of hipped roof forms, dating from the inter war and post war eras. There is some response to the 'gateway' at the junction with Station Road where houses are oriented to 'turn the corner' somewhat. The narrowness of the plots means that there is only limited distance between each house and its side boundary. Few opportunities for subdivision exist, but perhaps some sites could be redeveloped.

3. Here again adherence to the building line is required and a hedgerow front boundary should be maintained.

4. Low profile built form of one and a half storey type, with accommodation in the roof-space would be appropriate. The use of white or any other assertive colour on bargeboards or gable end boarding or similar area above the ground floor would be inappropriate as this would have an undue impact when viewed across the valley.

Design Guidelines for Sub area F1: The Setting of the Viaduct

1. This sub area overlaps with that of F and is identified purely to establish the setting of the Listed Viaduct, which dominates the Mimram valley. As the valley lies largely within the Green Belt and as it contains flood plain and nature conservation designations it is protected from possible development. The frontages along the Hertford road are addressed in the guidelines relating to sub area F.
2. The car park at the foot of the Viaduct and related structures and signage should be considered as potentially affecting the setting of the Viaduct and therefore any works of maintenance and enhancement should have regard to the visual sensitivity of the site.

8.9 Guidelines for sub-areas G and G1

Design Guidelines for Sub area G: Interwar Development: Woodside Road

The sub area is characterised by a predominance of buildings designed in the 1920's in typical vernacular revival and suburban styles. Whilst few development sites exist, it is important that in the repair, alteration and extension of existing buildings, original design features, details, materials and rooflines are maintained in order to enhance the character of the area. It is perhaps worth reiterating that buildings which retain as much as possible of their original features tend to retain their value.

- it is noted that the limited retail uses in this area have declined recently. However due to its location and established character, the continuation of some mixed uses would be a desirable objective to ensure some diversity

Design Guidelines for Sub area G1: Interwar Development: Lower Station Road

This area possesses many of the same characteristics as sub area G. Additionally it has remnants of a substantial hedge bank. The road is subject to short periods of relatively high vehicle movement throughout the day.

- the soft landscape of the bank should be maintained in any highway works and further erosion of the bank will be resisted
- the comments in the guidelines to sub area G regarding alterations and extensions are relevant to this area. It should also be noted that there is a concentration of white painted rendered buildings in the area and that the perpetuation and possible extension of this would add to the identity of the area

8.10 Guidelines for sub-area H: Warren Way

The analysis of this area (see page 27) reveals that there is a pattern of virtually continuous frontage development of a broadly consistent form and style. The absence of hedgerow boundaries adds to the difference in character evident in this area.

- few opportunities for infill exist as there are only narrow gaps between buildings and the relatively recent building age and small building plots suggest that redevelopment is less likely to take place in the short term
- where opportunities for redevelopment of plots is identified, development should respect/maintain the continuity of the building line, house style and open frontages
- there is the possibility however, that alterations and extensions could take place. In this case and in the case of possible new development, it is essential that the building line and open frontages are retained. The terracing effect of wide side extensions virtually joining previously detached or semi detached properties will be resisted
- wherever possible, any garage extension should extend to the rear of the property and not project further forward than the front door. This is advocated in order to minimise the impact of the parked car
- dormer windows should be set back from any verge or edge to a flank wall on a pitched roof in order that continuous lines of dormer windows giving a strong horizontal emphasis are avoided
- whilst the general pattern of materials for walls and roofs should be respected, proposed alteration or development at key positions in the streetscape eg. significant corners or focal points could be accentuated architecturally, (within the parameters of average height, massing and scale of openings)
- where opportunities for redevelopment of plots are identified, development should maintain the character of the area, specifically the building lines, style and open frontages

8.11 Guidelines for sub-area I: Smaller Groups of recent Housing

The appraisal for this area suggests a varied and eclectic mix of styles and materials in this a most recently developed of the sub areas. As these are mainly infill plots and as they are developed to a relatively high density related to Digswell as a whole, virtually no opportunity exists for development.

- if development does occur however, imaginative solutions will have to be found to make the best use of small, often inward looking sloping sites. Given the size of sites the use of shared surfaces would be acceptable. The 'accidental' impact of views of new development from the south should be avoided

8.12 Guidelines for sub-area J: Harmer Green

1. The analysis of this area confirms its 'village green' character on the plateau at the highest point of Digswell. The focus of the area is framed by woodland and smaller groups of trees. The Green Belt boundary cuts across the village green area, as most landscape is on the north side of the lane. However as the Green *and* its enclosing buildings are perceived as a whole, they are considered as such in this sub area.
2. The built form is quite varied, ranging from a domestic scale short terrace of vernacular cottages, to historic farmhouses and one or two expansive houses of the Edwardian era. There are also some large houses of more recent origin. Due to the ancient and informal nature of this settlement, plots are more varied in size and shape than most of Digswell
3. The issues facing this area are the replacement of mainly soft boundaries by lengths of above eye-level wall and fencing, reducing the soft informal nature of the area. Few opportunities exist to intensify frontage development through new building although there may be eventual pressure for replacement and tandem development on larger sites.
4. It should be remembered that there are three Listed Buildings in this area and that their setting must be considered when applications are made in their vicinity. Additionally three other building groups have been identified as being of local architectural interest (see figure 10).
5. Further replacement of frontage boundaries with above eye-level walls or fences will be resisted as being out of character with the area.
6. Subdivision of plots would be inappropriate except perhaps on the largest of plots within the excluded settlement, subject to sensitive siting of units to minimise visual impact from a) the Green, b) adjacent Listed Buildings and c) the open countryside. The very low density and low plot coverage (see figure 12) would have to be maintained. As this area (with sub-area E) contains the greatest concentration of buildings of architectural interest it will be expected that any proposal would reflect and contribute to this established quality.

9.0 Conclusions and recommendations

9.1

This report has set out the factors which contribute to the character of Digswell. Whilst that character has evolved over a century or so, the resulting low density tree-dominated arcadian informal suburban character should not be lost through significant demands for new development. The large residential plots have not been built upon and there are virtually no brownfield sites remaining to develop in order to raise density.

9.2

Plot subdivision can have significant effects on the increase in density and the proliferation of access drives which break into the laneside banks in sub-areas B and C. If this trend were to continue the essential character would be eroded.

9.3

The effect of increased traffic resulting from commuting to and from the station and from any significant increase in development is already making Station Road and the lower reaches of Harmer Green Lane quite busy at peak times. It is recommended that the road network in Digswell be monitored to assess capacity.

9.4

Applications for new houses should be considered against the sub area guidelines in this document. If any new houses are proposed their design should have regard to the character of the sub-areas in which they are situated. Modern designs which are predominantly horizontally proportioned, incorporating energy efficient design (perhaps including 'green' roofs may be acceptable.

The neo Georgian style has little to do with the established pattern in Digswell: more asymmetrical, roof dominated architecture derived from the vernacular revival would be a more positive contribution. In particular, front boundaries should be 'soft' ie avoiding brick walls or railings as these are essentially urban features. Instead banks, open vertical fences below eye level and hedges (not laurel or fir) would be appropriate.

9.5

Harmer Green (sub-area K) and Digswell Water (sub-area E) might be considered of appropriate quality for designation as Conservation Areas in order that alterations, extensions, infill development, boundary proposals or work to the public realm might receive detailed consideration.

9.6

Digswell has long benefited from its inheritance of woodland and tree planting. However this inheritance is reaching its maturity and residents and the local authority might consider developing a detailed landscape assessment and management plan considering areas under threat, trees that need statutory protection and areas that need replanting. In undertaking this plan Digswell will not only continue the sensitivity and foresightedness of the English Landscape Tradition founded in the 18th Century but will be contributing to its sustainable development through the maintenance and increase in biodiversity and clean air supply.

