

Reading
Buildings

The Trooper Potts VC Memorial Site



YGCG0012

Castle Hill Conservation area

The following text is taken from the appraisal of the Conservation area by:

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4.3 The development of the Russell Street/Castle Hill area.

The Conservation Area lies on a hill to the west of the River Kennet, above the flood plain and on the historic main route westwards (the A4) to Bath and Bristol. A Norman castle existed south of Castle Hill but was demolished in 1151. There is no evidence of medieval settlement but John Speed's map shows buildings lying along Castle Street with fields and gardens to either side. A leat (the Holy Brook), cut to provide water power to the Abbey Mill, lies along the foot of the cliff overlooking the River Kennet. By the 18th century the area had established itself as an up-market residential suburb to the main town, without a church or other municipal buildings.

Rocque's Map of the mid-18th century shows buildings as far as Tilehurst Road, while Tomkin's map of 1802 is far more detailed and shows Back Lane and Hosters Lane, parts of which now form Baker Street. There is little development along Panghurst Road (Oxford Road). Nos. 154-160 Castle Hill are shown as King's Arms Inn, and to the south, to the rear of what is now nos.113-121 Castle Hill, lies an area of disturbed ground labeled "Old Fortifications", presumably the site of Reading Castle. "Mrs Zinzan's Field" lies on the site of modern day Zinzan Street and Waylen Street.

The Commissioners' Map of 1834 shows how development was strung out along Castle Street, which stretched as far as the town centre around St Mary's Church. Russell Street is laid out, with development particularly along the north-west side, and similar development along Oxford Road and Prospect Street. To the south-west of Coley Hill, Coley Park, a detached house of some substance, is set within its own parkland close to the River Kennet. This building provided the name for many of the roads in the Conservation Area (Coley Avenue, Coley Park Road, Coley Hill)). Brick kilns are also shown, and development along Coley Hill.

By the end of the 19th century the area was developed in an intensive way with the only open spaces being the gardens around Ascham House (also known as Castlehill House and now known as Yoemanry House) and an area to the east of the southern end of Russell Street. The prevailing use was residential with the occasional Non-Conformist Church – the Providence Chapel in Oxford Road (dated 1859), and the Carey Chapel in Carey Street. Jesse Terrace was built in the 1850s by Thomas Jesse, the earliest part being nos. 1-13, complete

by 1853. The other terrace was built by 1871.

In the early 20th century, Field Road replaced Weston Street, necessitating the demolition of one of the older buildings in Castle Hill. Similar terraces utilising multi-coloured brickwork can also be found in Clifton Street. In 1900 the Reading Synagogue was built in Goldsmid Road, the finest religious building in the Conservation Area.

Today the Conservation Area retains many of its late 18th and 19th century buildings, with the best examples lying along Castle Hill, the most prestigious location. Modern development has impinged in some locations, most notably on the eastern edge of the Conservation Area, facing the Inner Distribution Road (Central Evangelist Church and the Salvation Army Citadel). New flats have also been built between Russell Street and Jesse Terrace, but these are relatively concealed from the public viewpoint.

4.4 The effect of historical development on plan form.

The oldest street is Castle Hill/Castle Street, the historic route westwards out of the medieval town centre. It possibly dates to the Saxon settlement of the area in the 6th century and almost certainly existed by the time of the Norman Conquest, as a castle was built just to the south of it during this period. Baker Street and Tilehurst Road are both shown, in somewhat altered layouts, on Rocque's map of the mid-18th century, but the majority of the streets in the Conservation Area date to the late 18th or early 19th centuries, when the wealthy middle classes deserted Reading town centre and moved to the more fashionable suburbs to the west along Castle Hill and to the south along London Road. The 1840 map shows Castle Hill, with just Coley Walk and Coley Terrace (since demolished) to the south, and Prospect Street (Prospect Place), Prospect Hill (Tilehurst Road), Russell Street, Baker Street and Howard Street, to the north. The other grid-iron of streets are all the result of mid or late-19th century infilling.

5 THE CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE OF THE RUSSELL STREET/CASTLE HILL CONSERVATION AREA

5.1 General description.

The Russell Street/Castle Hill Conservation Area is defined by the following features:

- The Conservation Area is the product of late 18th and 19th century development
- Castle Hill is the principal street, notable for its varying width, hilly topography, and substantial Georgian buildings which lie on either side
- Front gardens and mature trees make a major contribution to views along Castle Hill
- Residential suburbs to south contain listed terraces of early 19th century terraced houses (Coley Hill) and detached or semi-detached late 19th century houses (Castle Crescent) in leafy gardens
- Residential suburbs to the north are more urban in character, with continuous terraces of early- to late-19th century houses, set on the back of the pavement
- Grid pattern of streets with Baker Street (which predates the early 19th century development of this area) cutting across this pattern
- Oxford Road is more varied with more commercial uses and the best quality listed terraces to the west

5.2 Activity and uses.

- Residential uses predominate
- Flat conversions predominate along eastern end of Castle Hill, Waylen Street and Zinzan Street
- Oxford Road has most of the shops, with offices or flats above
- Some offices and shops along Castle Hill/Castle Street
- Local authority offices in Yeomanry House (Register Office), Castle Hill
- New Berkshire County Record Office next to Yeomanry House
- A number of buildings in religious uses: Carey Baptist Church in Carey Street, Providence Chapel in Oxford Road, Reading Spiritualist Church in Baker Street, and Jewish Synagogue in Goldsmid Road
- Two public houses: The Oasis in Baker Street, and “120 Castle Street”

5.3 Noise and quiet.

- Castle Hill/Castle Street, the A4 main road to Bath and Bristol, is notable for its busy traffic
- Garden of Yeomanry House is the only semi-public open space where there are trees and planting, but also fairly constant noise from the traffic in Castle Hill
- Oxford Road is a busy shopping area, and a major route into and out of Reading, particularly for pedestrians walking into the Town Centre
- Off these main roads, activity is limited to local traffic and residents or workers
- Noise from the Inner Relief Road, to the east of the Conservation Area, is intrusive in Howard Street, Baker Street and Castle Street

5.4 Townscape : morphology.

The morphology, or historic form of development of the Conservation Area, is as follows:

- Castle Street/Castle Hill: prestigious blocks of three or four storey houses built on the back of the pavement or set back from the road with landscaped front gardens
- Yeomanry House, no. 81 Baker Street (Reading Spiritualist Church), no. 2 Bath Road, and no. 3 Castle Crescent the only substantial detached villas in their own grounds
- Castle Crescent has detached or semi-detached houses set back from the road with pleasant front gardens, some now lost to car parking
- Coley Hill and Field Road both have well defined blocks of terraced houses along their eastern sides with very mixed, modern development or rear garden plots on their western sides
- North of Castle Hill, the streets are contained by continuous terraces of 19th century houses, set back slightly from the pavement, with small front gardens or yards
- Modern development, such as nos. 61-71 Russell Street, has largely followed the historic pattern of development

5.5 Trees, landscape and open spaces.

This is a predominantly urban conservation area, although trees and planting are important in Castle Hill and in several parts of the Conservation Area, most notably in Castle Crescent and Baker Street. The most significant street and garden trees are marked on the Townscape Appraisal map, but of special note are the following:

- Large cedar in garden of nos. 154-160 Castle Hill
- Long avenue of trees in Howard Street, providing a vital barrier between the street and the

Inner Relief Road

- Extensive trees in front garden to Yeomanry House, Castle Hill
- Trees in garden to south-west of no. 3 Castle Crescent

There are no public parks or gardens in the Conservation Area, apart from the front garden to Yeomanry House, which is roughly cultivated and only open to visitors to the Register Office. Public spaces are limited to the streets and their pavements, of which Castle Hill is the only significant example.

5.6 Views and vistas, including focal points

The hill topography of parts of the Conservation Area, and the grid pattern of streets, provide some notable views, marked on the Townscape Appraisal maps. The most significant are along Castle Hill, Russell Street, and Baker Street, with some interesting vistas over the modern town centre and beyond from Howard Street, Castle Street and Garnet Street. There are several groups of buildings, or individual houses, which can be said to act as important focal points. These are:

- No. 3 Castle Crescent
- Yeomanry House, Castle Hill
- The new Berkshire County Record Office
- No. 111 Castle Hill, on the corner of Field Road
- Heritage Court, nos. 146-152 Castle Hill
- Nos. 154-160 Castle Hill
- No. 81 (Reading Spiritualist Church), Baker Street
- Jewish Synagogue, Goldsmid Road
- Providence Chapel, Oxford Road

5.7 Gardens and boundaries.

The majority of the buildings in the Conservation Area were built in the 19th century when it was considered desirable to mark the front boundary with decorative cast iron railings, and with other details such as cast iron balconies and verandah supports. Before World War II, when a national appeal for cast iron resulted in most of the country's railings being removed, many of the buildings in the Conservation Area would therefore have had railings to their front boundaries, apart from the Inter-War properties which utilised brick or painted render walls. However, where safety was an issue, such as where the building had a basement access, or front steps, the railings were left, and the Conservation Area therefore retains an interesting variety of original railings, which make a very positive contribution to the character of the Area. These are generally attached to listed buildings, so their future is assured, but the high cost of repair and maintenance does threaten this very special feature. The Conservation Area is also largely the result of intense, speculative 19th century development, and the majority of the buildings are therefore terraced, meaning that their gardens were largely hidden from the public viewpoint. This remains a feature into the 21st century.

To the north of the Conservation Area, the majority of the streets are lined with continuous terraces of three or four storey 19th century buildings, hiding their gardens (Howard Street, Zinzan Street, Waylen Street, Carey Street, Jesse Terrace, Russell Street, and the south side of Oxford Road). Each house has a small front garden or front area, usually no more than two metres from the pavement, apart from Jesse Terrace, where the two terraces on

either side of the road sit back approximately eight metres from the front boundary. The buildings are therefore fronted by mature gardens, attractively landscaped, which give this part of the Conservation Area a special character. On the east side of Russell Street, late 19th century development, of generally paired rather than terraced houses, has been set back slightly more than the late Georgian terraces on the opposite side of the street. These properties therefore have some planting in their front gardens, with the occasional view through to the rear gardens. The rear gardens of some of these houses can be seen from Baker Street, which cuts across the grid pattern of roads. The western end of Baker Street, between the Russell Street junction and Goldsmid Road, is noticeably more open, with views from Baker Street to the gardens belonging to the listed buildings on the west side of Russell Street, and also to the large garden which is part of the Reading Spiritualist Church.

Boundaries in this area were traditionally provided by cast iron railings set in a stone coping, on a low brick or rendered plinth. Few of these remain, but there are some notable examples of either plain iron railings, with a beaten arrow head, or more decorative cast iron railings, with spear heads. These can be seen in Baker Street (no. 23), along the east sides of Waylen Street and Zinzan Street, and in Howard Street. In Oxford Road, a number of houses (now used for offices) retain their original, quite plain, wrought iron railings which lie on either side of the front steps. Jesse Terrace similarly retains its original cast iron verandah supports, and some railings to the entrance steps, but the front boundaries are usually defined by round-headed modern metal railings set into a low brick plinth, often with planting growing through. The front boundaries to the listed buildings in Russell Street are now provided by red brick walling, with a variety of modern metal railings.

The 19th century buildings facing Russell Street had long gardens backing onto Franklin Street, which have now been largely developed with 20th century houses. Beyond, and facing Franklin Street and Clifton Street, lie the late 19th century houses which are less prestigious and had small rear gardens, separated by a narrow alley. Inter-War development on the west side of Clifton Street provided more long, thin gardens facing Goldsmid Road, which have remained as gardens with small, modern garages. To the rear of the mainly listed houses facing Oxford Road, the long thin gardens have been incrementally developed with modern mews houses and garages, or lost to car parking.

Castle Hill provides the greatest number of trees and front gardens within the Conservation Area, with the majority of the buildings being set back some distance from the street. Originally, the front boundaries were defined by cast or wrought iron railings but these have largely disappeared – a stone plinth wall can still be seen, somewhat damaged, outside no. no.111. There are a few examples of modern iron railings, in a traditional style, such as outside no.160. Nos. 162-166 still retain some of their original cast iron verandah supports and balcony railings in a Decimus Burton style of c.1840. Otherwise, front boundaries are very varied – low brick walls, with hedging, being particularly popular. Occasionally, these have been lost to make way for car parking, such as no. 162 and 162a.

To the south of the Conservation Area, in Castle Crescent, gardens are more evident as the buildings sit back from the road and are detached or semidetached. Brick walls, modern railings and a variety of other treatments are evident. The loss of containment caused by opening-up some front gardens for car parking is noticeable. In Coley Hill, the listed buildings have small front areas, with some basements, so they have retained their original cast iron railings, mainly very simply detailed with an ornate spear head, sometimes triangular shaped. Field Road retains in places the original curved brick copings to the front boundary walls.

