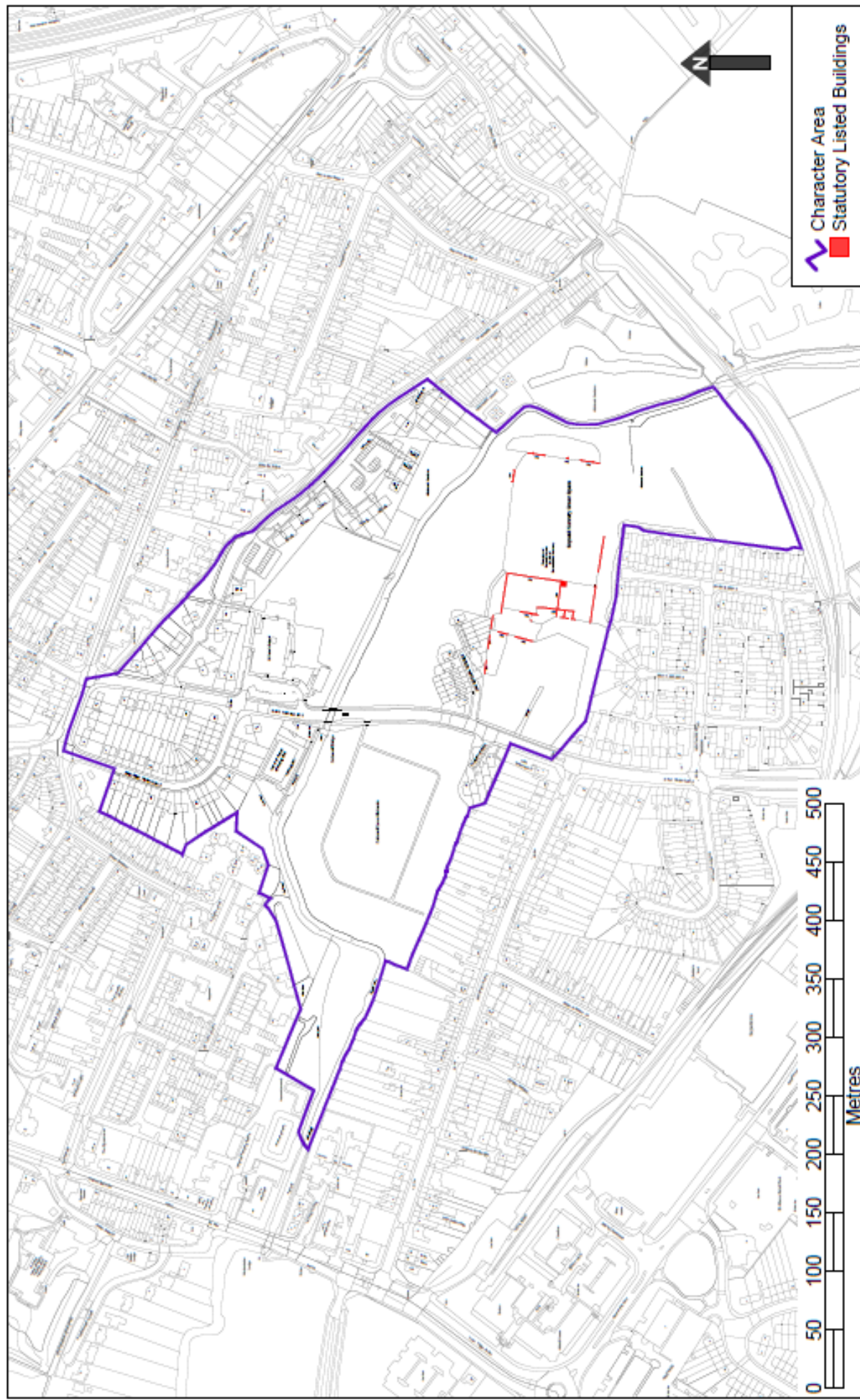


***Character Area 4e***  
***Sopwell Nunnery Ruins***







#### AREA 4E: SOPWELL NUNNERY RUINS

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## Area 4e: Sopwell Nunnery Ruins

*Cottonmill Crescent, Cottonmill Lane (part), Nunnery Stables, Old Sopwell Gardens and Riverside Road (part).*

### Scheduled Monuments

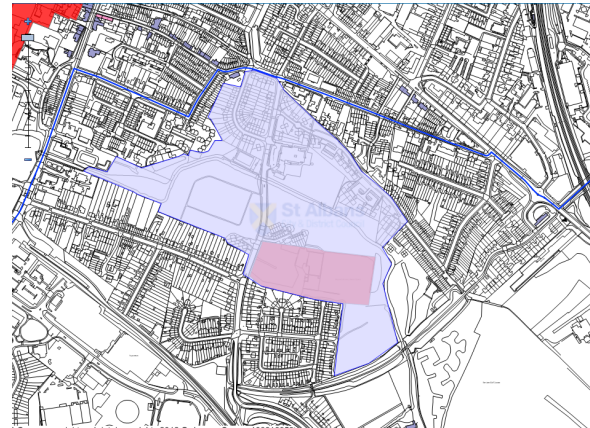
Sopwell Nunnery Ruins, number 38

### Listed Buildings

Sopwell Nunnery Ruins (Grade II)

### Locally Listed Buildings<sup>1</sup>

None



OS map showing the extent of the scheduled monument. The approximate character area is coloured light blue and the scheduled monument is in red (in the centre). The red area in the top left corner is part of the Abbey scheduled monument.



*These ruins are grade II listed and part of a scheduled ancient monument. The building was built on the site of the nunnery but was actually a house built for Richard Lee following the Dissolution of the Monasteries. Lee both altered the existing buildings and built new ones, so it is unclear whether the remains are of his new house or whether earlier fabric survives.*

<sup>1</sup> Hertfordshire Gardens Trust: Local list: St Albans Sopwell Nunnery.



## Area 4e: Sopwell Nunnery Ruins

### Character Summary

This character area is located to the south east of the main city centre. It is a low density residential area confined to a few smaller developments dating from the 1930s, 1970s and 1980s. To the west and north the character area merges with the higher density earlier residential area of St Albans, covered in Character Areas 4d and 7a. The history of this character area and of the wider town is represented by the Scheduled Ancient Monument/Listed Building of

Sopwell Nunnery Ruins, which is a dominant and key feature of the character area. The ruins are set within an expansive recreation area, which also contains the River Ver, another important feature. Due to the large proportion of open areas, such as the allotments and recreation ground, the prevalent character is one of landscape, with the unique and important Sopwell Nunnery Ruins dominating and intermittent small residential developments.



*The area is a low density residential area but it merges with the higher density earlier residential area to the north and west.*



*The green spaces of the recreation area, allotments and school playing field are an important aspect of the area's character.*



*The Sopwell Nunnery Ruins are a key feature of the area.*



*There are small groups of C20 development.*

## Area 4e: Sopwell Nunnery Ruins

### History and Buildings

The dominant building of this character area, and the one with most historic significance, is Sopwell Nunnery Ruins. The visible structure is the remains of a C16 house, built on the site of the former priory, which was founded in 1140 by Geoffrey de Gorham, Abbot of St. Albans, for nuns of the Abbey. The house was built for Richard Lee (1513-1575) whose connection with Sopwell began when he was appointed bailiff and farmer of the Priory circa 1534 and in 1535 as 'visitor' of the monasteries. As a close adviser to Henry VIII, he was in a position to exploit the Dissolution of the Monasteries; accordingly Sopwell Priory was closed in 1537. In 1544 he was appointed 'Surveyor of the Kings Works' and in 1549 he began altering Sopwell, including the diversion of London Road away from his house, and calling his new house 'Lee Hall'; between 1558 and 1567 the redesign of Lee Hall continued. On Lee's death in 1575 the property passed to his eldest daughter Mary (or Maud) Coningsby, eventually the property was sold to Sir Harbottle Grimston in 1669, and in 1673 the family used material from Lee Hall in the construction of their house at Gorhambury.

An estate plan of around 1650 shows the north front of the house, probably in its last major incarnation. Despite the loss of material in 1673, something of the building still survived in 1698, as payment was made to a glazier for maintenance work at Sopwell. Representations of the building in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries show a ruin, but there are indications of limited habitation as late as 1793. Indeed, one out-building was in use until the 1960s as a motorcycle repair shop and metal scrap yard. Only the ruins of one wing and parts of the Great Hall now survive, along with part of the boundary wall and a possible gatehouse. These remains most probably date from Lee's second development of the site, although it could be that parts of the earlier building were retained during this development and, therefore, that some earlier structure and material survive today. A management plan is in place and the present condition of the ruins due to this continual maintenance is fair to good. The ruins are constructed of flint, brick,

Tottenhoe clunch and stone, with some unfortunate 1960s/1970s concrete repairs. The ruins contain a certain level of visible detail, for example quoining, moulded hoods, fireplaces, a chimney and oriel windows, but it is the setting of the ruins, as described below, as well as the monument itself which is central to the area's character.



*Benjamin Hare map of 1634 showing the house and surrounding land.*



*The house was built of flint, brick, Tottenhoe clunch and stone.*



*A postcard from between 1901-14 showing Sopwell ruins with the Abbey in the background. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.*



## Area 4e: Sopwell Nunnery Ruins

### History and Buildings contd.

The character area's next phase of development was in the Edwardian period, represented today by the swimming pool, built and opened in 1905. Located on the western side of Cottonmill Lane, the old municipal pool is an interesting building, which hides its function from the street scene. It is a single storey brick and tiled building; behind this façade, changing huts are arranged around the pool.

Once again development was sporadic, as it was not until the 1930s that Cottonmill Crescent was developed on earlier allotments north of the swimming pool (on an area called Bing's Orchard crossed by the borough boundary and the old road to London in medieval times). These semi-detached dwellings are set in large plots in a semi circular plan with plain grey pebbledash façades and are uniform along the street frontage. Opposite, a small cul-de-sac, originally called Cottonmill Close, was later joined to Riverside Road in the 1980s. It is a smaller development of a similar appearance and layout to Cottonmill Crescent and of the same period. South of the pool and the river is a vast open area of allotments which add to the landscape quality of the area. From this position on Cottonmill Lane, there is a fine view of the Cathedral tower, as it sits on higher land, which is an impressive and positive feature on this road.

On the opposite side of the road is St Peter's



*Cottonmill Crescent is very uniform in appearance and is spatially linked with the higher density residential areas nearby.*

School, an unfortunate 1970s pre-fabricated structure which is at least set back from the road. The western end of Riverside Road is included in this character area, with the eastern end covered in Character Area 7d. The western side is made up of a series of early 1970s blocks of flats that are constructed of steel, concrete and brick on large square ground plans and therefore insensitive to their landscape and architectural setting, particularly as they are weathering badly. Unfortunately, the poor quality of architecture continues on two more recent 1980s cul de sac developments: Nunnery Stables and Old Sopwell Gardens. Nunnery Stables is a small group of staggered houses, which, although rather dull, are at least in muted colours and are located on the eastern side of the road, away from the ruins. Old Sopwell Gardens is a larger development which is timber clad; it is unfortunately looking rather dated now and the very dark black stain of the timber does not blend with the landscape surroundings as one might expect timber boarding to do. This is further emphasised with the rather monotonous facades and the bulky porches. Furthermore, in its lack of containment within the built up area, and particularly given its proximity to the recreation area and the ruins, the development impacts negatively on the surrounding landscape quality.



*The 1980s cul de sac developments are architecturally poor but Nunnery Close, seen here from the recreation area, is at least over the other side of the road from the ruins.*

## Area 4e: Sopwell Nunnery Ruins

### Public Realm

The allotments to the west of Cottonmill Lane and south of the River Ver benefit the character area and allow views of the Abbey. The character area is dominated by the recreation area, designated as Metropolitan Green Belt and awarded the Green Flag award. It is divided into two parts: the area that surrounds the ruins and the area to the north of Old Sopwell Gardens, with a thick band of trees dividing the two.

The first part is the most visible from Cottonmill Lane; this is a positive feature because it means that the ruins, enhanced by the landscape setting, make an impact on the street scene. Behind the ruins are some allotments, these are well screened, both by the ruins themselves but also by vegetation, although from within the area they make a positive contribution. The development of Old Sopwell Gardens is fortunately screened from the ruins by a thick band of trees.

The second part of the recreation area and school playing fields lie north of Old Sopwell Gardens and to the south of Riverside Road. This part of the recreation area is quite well secluded by trees, which serve to screen Riverside Road but unfortunately not Old Sopwell Gardens. The River Ver, which runs through this part of the recreation area, is not often seen elsewhere in the conservation area, but is a reminder of one of the reasons for historic settlement in this area.



*Old Sopwell Gardens is fortunately screened by a thick band of trees from the ruins.*



*The allotments contribute positively when within the area.*



*The ruins' open setting means they impact on the streetscene.*



*The River Ver runs through this area and acts as a reminder of the reasons for historic settlement here.*



## Area 4e: Sopwell Nunnery Ruins

### Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

#### Positive

- ✓ The imposing, historically and architecturally interesting Sopwell Nunnery Ruins.
- ✓ Sopwell Nunnery Green Space with green flag accreditation.
- ✓ The amount of landscaping and vegetation within the character area, including the allotments, and the sense of openness that this provides despite the residential function of the area.
- ✓ The recreation area, allotments and the green spaces provide a valued amenity for the community. For example, there are walks along the River Ver, and the disused railway line (known as the Alban Way) affords magnificent views of the Abbey. There are a number of links between the river and Alban Way and these paths link this area to the edges of the District and beyond.
- ✓ The views of the Abbey that can be seen from within the area.



*Views of the Abbey from within the area are afforded by the open space of the allotments west of Cottonmill Lane.*

#### Neutral

- Cottonmill Crescent and the western end of Riverside Road (formerly Cottonmill Close) because both are uniform in design, of their time and located at the northern end of the character area, far away enough from the ruins and close enough to the built up areas of Old London Road to be associated with the latter.



## Area 4e: Sopwell Nunnery Ruins

### Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

#### Negative

- ✖ The part of Riverside Road in this character area and the small recent developments of Old Sopwell Gardens and Nunnery Stables are more negative areas. Although they are small developments, insensitive design and materials have marred the setting of the ruins and similar schemes should be avoided in the future. The saving grace is the band of trees which mostly screen the developments from the recreation area and ruins and as such allow this public area to retain a pleasant peaceful atmosphere.



*Old Sopwell Gardens has an insensitive design and materials.*



*St Peter's School is also architecturally poor.*

#### Scope for Change

- Improvements to the recreation area and ruins through security and interpretation would enhance and protect these assets.
- The Sopwell Nunnery Green Space Management Group (comprising representatives from District and County Councils, and the local Allotments and Wildlife Associations) meets periodically to consider changes such as opening up the monument, reinforcing the pathways around the green space and along the river, and work to the river to encourage bio-diversity, especially kingfishers and voles.
- Above-all further built encroachment on the important Sopwell Ruins and their setting should be avoided.

