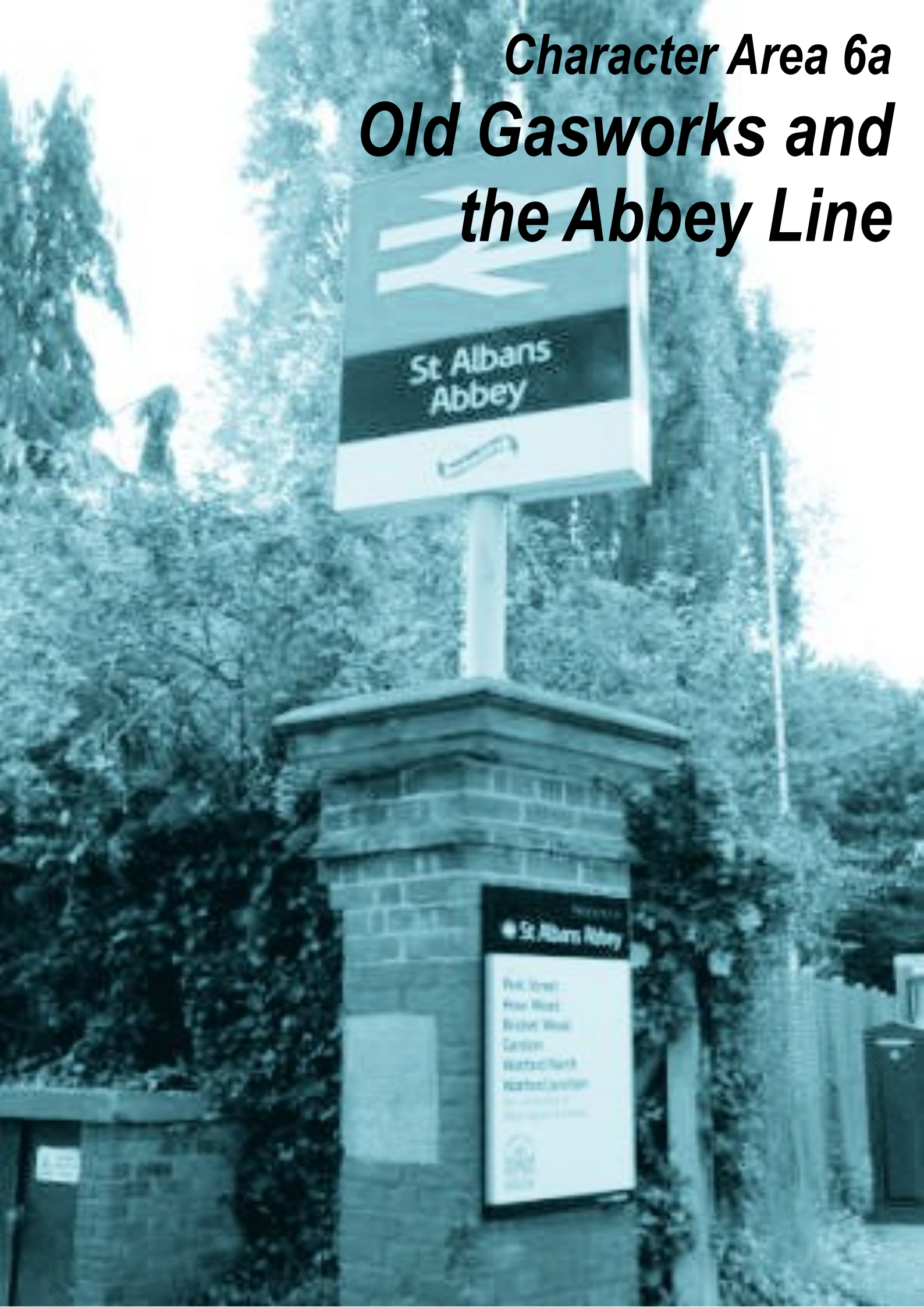
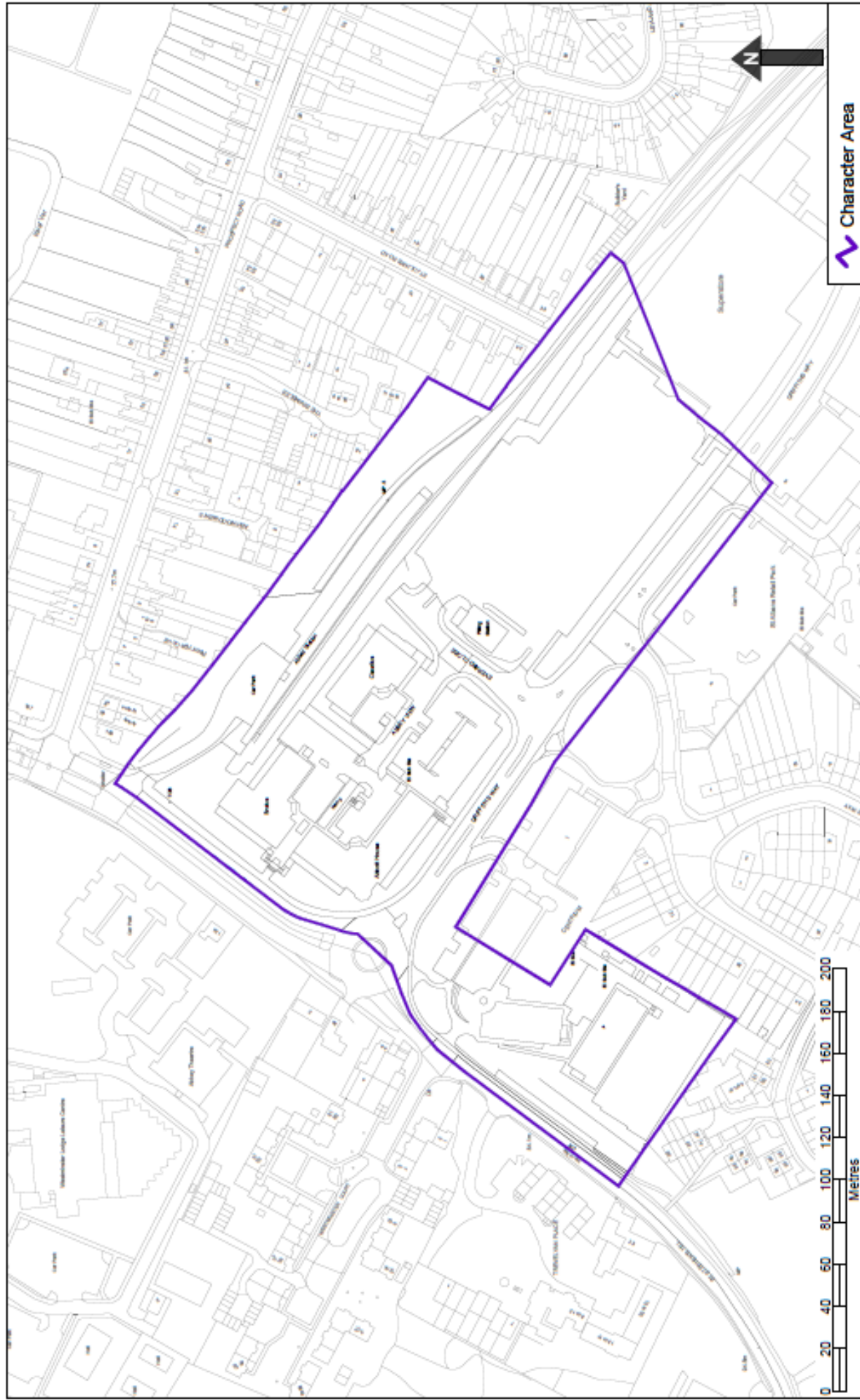


Character Area 6a Old Gasworks and the Abbey Line





Character Area

Area 6a: Old Gasworks and the Abbey Line

Abbey View, Everard Close, Holywell Hill (part), Griffiths Way (part).

Scheduled Monuments

None.

Locally Listed Buildings

None.

Listed Buildings

None.



A steam train at St Albans Abbey Station in May 1946 when there were 8 bays with numerous buildings at the station. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.



The old Gasworks prior to demolition and the redevelopment of the area as seen from the top of the Clock Tower. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.

Area 6a: Old Gasworks and the Abbey Line

Character Summary

This area is on the south eastern edge of the conservation area, to the east of Holywell Hill/St Stephen's Hill, the main ancient southern route out of the city. At its western edge, this character area includes the frontage of St Stephen's Hill as the ground starts to rise from the valley bottom.

This part of the conservation area is not designated for its existing character and it does not contain any historic buildings. Its importance lies in its location inside the historic medieval borough, (the boundary of which is marked by the southern and south eastern boundaries of the character area), together with the historic significance of the Abbey Line (along the north edge of the character area), to the historic development of St Albans and the adjacent residential area (see Area 7a). In addition, this area at the foot of Holywell Hill is within the setting of St Albans Abbey and the remainder of the conservation area. Views of the Abbey on the higher ground to the northwest are a particular feature of this character area.

Most of the remainder, not occupied by the railway, was formerly part of the St Albans Gasworks and has been substantially redeveloped in recent years and a revised road network has been created including a roundabout at the entrance. In addition, large scale, modern office developments dominate the east side of the Holywell Hill at this point, and, behind the office frontage, that part of the gasworks within the character area has been redeveloped as a retail park (St Albans Retail Park, Griffiths Way) and a supermarket and related petrol station, and has large expanses of associated surface parking. The environment is arranged for, and dominated by, the car and it would benefit from a more attractive and pedestrian friendly approach and more landscaping. Although there is some landscaping which is starting to mature, there is scope to increase this within the site.



The old gas works while still in use with a characteristic view of the Abbey in the background. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.

Area 6a: Old Gasworks and the Abbey Line

Historic Development

The medieval borough boundary is, for the most part, contained within the conservation area. However, on the southeast of the conservation area, the old boundary line has been taken for the edge of the conservation area. Here Tonman's Ditch followed a footpath called Green Lane, a few yards of which survive behind St Julian's Road. This path was obliterated when the General Gas Works developed the site south of the railway line in 1872.

In post-medieval times, the lower part of Holywell Hill, then on the outskirts of the city, was dominated by Holywell House and its extensive grounds.

Railway Station

The first railway came to the town in 1858, a branch line from the London and North Western Railway at Watford, terminating at St Albans Abbey Station at the foot of Holywell Hill. In 1865, another branch line, from the Great Northern Railway main line at Hatfield, was also brought to terminate at the station. Originally, there were plans to extend this railway line to Luton and Dunstable, but these plans never materialised, as the Midland Railway Company brought the main line through St Albans in 1867, developing the St Albans main line station in Victoria Street. The terminus was renamed St Albans Abbey Station in 1924 to avoid confusion.

From the mid C19 until the mid C20, the Abbey Station was a fully functioning station with two rail tracks, a ticket office, sidings, coal yard, cattle pens and a goods depot. In 1951, the Hatfield branch line was closed to passengers, maintaining a freight operation, and the Abbey line was severely rationalised in the 1960s. Tracks were ripped up, services cut, and buildings demolished; only a single platform and track remains, and some gate piers at entrance, the most minimal presence of a railway station. The Hatfield line closed altogether in 1969 and the track-way was converted to a cycle path, "The Alban Way", in the 1980s.



The St Albans-Hatfield branch line in 1867. The bridge is carrying the London Midland line, which was soon to open at the time. This branch line is now the Alban Way cycle path. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.



The Abbey Station c.1964 before the station building was demolished. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.



The Abbey Station as it is today: in single-bay, unmanned operation.

Area 6a: Old Gasworks and the Abbey Line

Historic Development contd.

Gasworks

A gasworks was sited at the foot of Holywell Hill, presumably taking advantage of the newly arrived railway line. It was certainly in existence by 1866 when local builder Christopher Miskin was employed to enlarge the retort house. By the turn of the century, the gas works occupied a very large site with some very substantial industrial buildings, railway sidings, cranes and gasometers running alongside the railway and behind a short row of cottages on Holywell Hill.

In the 1980s the Gasworks site was proposed for redevelopment and outline proposals were put together and approved for offices and retailing. Most of the site was cleared of buildings apart from two large gasometers. Unfortunately, the extent of contamination of the site was greater than anticipated which meant that the permitted office floorspace had to be undertaken within a

more restricted footprint, thus raising the height of the development above that originally envisaged to four storeys in part, with undercroft parking, which is approached by steps up from Holywell Hill. Nevertheless, attempts were made to introduce interest and detail to the building, particularly contrasting brick details and a corner clock tower, and a statue of a Roman centurion which was included in a landscaped area to the front of the building. The complex is called Abbey View and the blocks are Abbot House and Brutus on the frontage and Claudius at the rear. The road along the south side of the gasworks, Eywood Road marked the line of Eywood Lane, an ancient lane along the line of the borough boundary which became a modern street at the time of the First World War¹. This has been lost but the western end of Griffiths Way follows this line.



The gas works. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.



Abbey View's smaller footprint necessitated a taller building than originally planned.



The remains of the old gas works.



The area is very car-dominated despite the provision of undercroft parking at the Abbey View office development.

¹ Saint Albans Borough Boundary Eileen Roberts, 1980.

Area 6a: Old Gasworks and the Abbey Line

Historic Development contd.

Behind the offices, the retail element comprises a petrol station and supermarket (Sainsbury's) and a group of retail warehouses. Most of the supermarket, apart from the frontage, is outside the conservation area as are the buildings on the retail park. The scale and bulk of buildings in a retail park, together with the large scale advertising which is normally generated, and the predominance of car parking, makes them difficult to integrate into an historic area. This development is not attractive in appearance or character, but it has allowed such larger stores to be provided in an area accessible from many residential properties. However, the scale and roofscape of these large buildings and the amount of advertising has been carefully considered in order that the site provides an appropriate setting for the city and preserves views. Nevertheless, the wide and straight road layout, together with the large areas of tarmac and car parking, is clearly designed predominantly for car access and the area would benefit from a much more attractive and pedestrian friendly approach and more landscaping.

In the early 2000s when Mercers Chronometer Factory, located south of Eywood Road, was also redeveloped, the adjacent office development to the north was perceived as a benchmark for four storey height. However, here, at Centrium, the scale was kept to a minimum relying on glass and light materials, set back upper floors and curved roofs. The corner onto St Stephen's Hill was redacted and some of the parking was placed underground to enable landscaping to dominate more than had been the case on the site opposite. The western boundary to St Stephen's Hill also has an important tree belt screening the office and car park. The tree belt continues up the hill to the church (see Area 7b The Park & St Stephen's Hill).

Outside the conservation area to the south east of the character area is another group of trees separating Wilshire Avenue from the retail park which provides containment and an attractive backdrop for the area.



The area is dominated by the expanse of car park.



The Roman Centurion at Abbey View is a very apt and welcome piece of public art.



Centrium is also four storey like Abbey View, but its impact has been reduced through the design, choice of materials and use of landscaping.

Area 6a: Old Gasworks and the Abbey Line

Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

Positive

- ✓ Views of the City and particularly of the Abbey.
- ✓ The area has some trees but currently relies more on surrounding green swathes and trees. The area adjoins public open space at St Stephens. And Verulamium Park.
- ✓ Within this character area, the conservation area boundary follows the medieval borough boundary, so that land which was within the medieval borough is designated conservation area, acknowledging its historic and archaeological interest.
- ✓ The area is a prominent part of the setting of the Abbey.
- ✓ Surviving and identifiable historic routes such as Griffiths Way, which mirrors Eywood Road at its western end.
- ✓ Network of footpaths linking to the open spaces.
- ✓ Extensive use of red brick – give a strong sense of identity and cohesiveness.



There are important views of the city and Abbey from within the area.

Neutral

- The medieval borough boundary is not legible from Griffiths Way (Eywood Lane) north eastwards to Green Lane.

Area 6a: Old Gasworks and the Abbey Line

Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

Negative

- ✖ Car parking – this is an unfortunate but typical aspect of the retail park. Its appearance could be mitigated by further landscaping. Opportunities should be explored to improve its quality and reduce the visual impact when the area is redeveloped.
- ✖ Traffic dominates – the wide road separates north and south sides of Griffiths Way and the area would benefit from a more attractive and pedestrian friendly approach.
- ✖ Whilst necessary for direction and public safety, the large amount of traffic signage and large roundabout detracts from the character of the wider area. Opportunities should be explored to improve the quality and reduce the visual effect of these.
- ✖ Standard guardrails - opportunities for reduction and improvement of signage and use of better guardrails would be welcomed.

Scope for Change

- Improvements in landscaping could be made throughout.
- Improvement of pedestrian routes to and through this area.
- Any development or redevelopment in the area and land adjacent must take account of the need to enhance the appearance and character of the area. The retention and enhancement of landscaping and the height and positioning of any new buildings within the area or nearby are key points in avoiding adverse effects and preserving the setting of the Abbey and other historic assets.
- Opportunities should be taken to enhance the appearance of the area during any programmed highway works.
- Entrance to the Abbey Station could be improved while retaining and restoring the original gate piers.
- The medieval borough boundary is not identifiable on the ground but this might be addressed, for example by information boards or markers.



The entrance to the station could be improved.



The large roundabout and amount of traffic signage is a necessary but negative aspect of the area.

