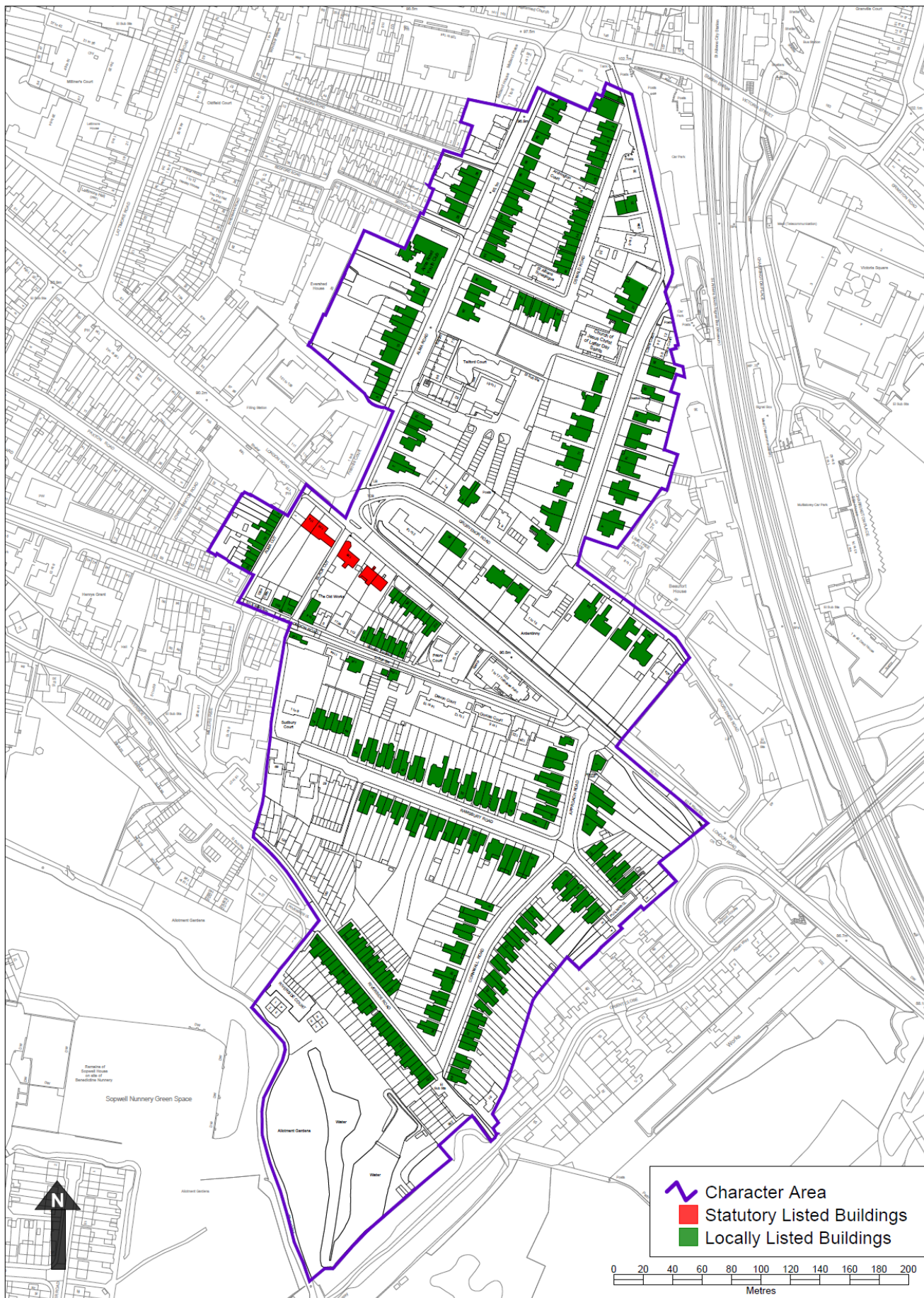


***Character Area 7d
Alma Road and
Priory Park***





AREA 7D: ALMA ROAD AND PRIORY PARK

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Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

Alma Cut, Alma Road, Approach Road, Black Cut, Cornwall Road, Grosvenor Road, London Road (part), Old London Road (part), Oswald Road, Pullman Close, Ramsbury Road, Ridgmont Road, Riverside Road (part).

Scheduled Monuments

None.

Listed Buildings

London Road

174, 176, 178, 180 & 182, (Grade II).

Locally Listed Buildings

Alma Cut

Evens: 2-20.

Alma Road

Odds: 3-11(incl), 13-23 (incl), 25, 27, Former School, 29-39 (incl).

Evens: 2-12 (incl), 28-70 (incl).

Approach Road

Odds: 1-9 (incl).

Evens: 2-18 (incl).

Black Cut

Odds: 1 & 3 (The Old Works).

Cornwall Road

Odds: 1 (includes 1a,) 3-49 (incl).

Grosvenor Road

Odds: 3 & 5.

Evens: 20, 22, 26, 28, 34-40 (incl) – including old terracotta ruins.

London Road

Evens: 184-202.

Old London Road

Odds: 109-111, 1-8 (cons) Winton Terrace.

Evens: 114-118 (incl).

Oswald Road

Odds: 49-59 (incl).

Evens: 2-16 (incl), 24-44 (incl).

Ramsbury Road

Odds: 1-13 (incl), 15-53 (incl).

Evens: 2-16 (incl), 16a-54 (incl), 66-76 (incl).

Ridgmont Road

Odds: 1-19 (incl), 23-31 (incl), 33a and 35 (r/o Horn Reborn PH in Area 7c).

Evens: 4-20 (incl), 22, 24&26.

Riverside Road

Odds: 151-177 (incl).

Evens: 168-222 (incl).



Nos. 180-182 London Road (grade II listed).



Nos. 1-7 Ridgmont Road (locally listed).



Nos. 5-13 Ramsbury Road (locally listed).

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

Character Summary

This area lies east of the city centre and west of the Midland railway line and the long disused Great Northern railway line. It is bisected by London Road, cut in the late C18 to bypass the Old London Road, long before most of this area was developed. London Road runs east to west (see Area 5a) and is a busy major route into the City from the south east, flanked in the main by commercial premises interspersed with residential properties. Alma Road is the main north-south road, predominantly residential but with some commercial uses.

Topographical features include an overall slope southwards from Victoria Street down towards the River Ver and a slope westwards up towards the city centre. On the east side of the character area, Grosvenor Road and Ridgmont Road are raised on a bank above Alma Road and London Road, where there was an iron works in the C19 (as shown on the 1880s map). Immediately west of the former Great Northern Railway station and depot site (Area 6b), Cornwall Road is a steep hill running southwards down to Riverside Road, with Ramsbury Road branching east and west at the top of the hill. Formerly a short cul de sac called Longmire Road, Riverside Road is now a long residential road running parallel with the river, at the boundary with Sopwell Nunnery Ruins to the south. It was extended westwards with C20 development to join with Cottonmill Lane so that its east and west ends are different in age and character. The western end has been included in Area 4e.

Old London Road is the most ancient route in the character area. A narrow undulating road which slopes up westwards towards the city centre, it is separated from Ramsbury Road and the land to the south by a bank which slopes up to the south believed to relate to the creation of the route in the C16. On the north side properties are slightly set up above the road.

Development in this character area started in the early C19 along and between Old London Road and London Road. Facing London Road, several fine detached and semi-detached pairs of listed houses have survived from the Regency period. In contrast, Old London Road and Alma Cut, which links London Road to Old London Road, has a variety of diminutive terraces on tiny plots.

In this character area, many of the roads were constructed or built up because of the railway, and this area still contains prime commuter housing: residential properties of various styles and dates, built in proximity to the transport links. There is a mixed character overall: mainly residential with a slight industrial edge particularly to the north. This is derived from the area's history of iron works which were replaced by factories and latterly offices and the proximity to the railway and the more commercial area which lies immediately alongside the railway line.



Residential buildings in this area range from Regency villas (above left) to diminutive terraces (above right).

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

History and Buildings

The road into St. Albans from the southeast originally cut through priory land to the south (Area 4e) but, post Dissolution, in the C16, this was unacceptable to the new owner and so it was diverted northwards along what is now Old London Road. From archaeological evidence it appears to have been separated from land to the south by a wall which has been identified in excavation further east of the site.

Old London Road was replaced as the main route into the City from the south east by the new London Road which was cut in 1794 and was part of a major coaching route from London. There was a toll gate at the junction of the two roads. The area between London Road and Old London Road started to be built up first but as late as 1835 most of this character area north and south of those roads was still fields. The Great Northern Railway to Hatfield accessed from a new station below London Road opened in 1865 and was extended a year later to the Abbey station. Then in 1868 the Midland Grand Railway arrived in St. Albans. This clearly influenced the further building of housing for Victorians commuting to London. By the late 1880s most of the roads in the north of the character area were constructed and many of the plots were built on. However, the area south of Old London Road was still open fields, and roads such as Ramsbury Road, Cornwall Road and Longmire Road (later Riverside Road), were constructed around the turn of the century.

Alma Road, one of the key roads of the character area, was one of the first to be built upon, although building continued for some years and resulted in the mixed style seen today. On the western side there are some fine pre-Victorian and Victorian villas of varying heights and styles. The c.1880 infant school, on the corner of Alma Road and Bedford Road, although of a similar period to the other buildings, breaks the residential theme of the character area as well as the more classical style of the road as it is highly gothic in persuasion, with polychrome detailing and pointed arched windows. This style is also reflected in a pair of adjacent locally listed build-

ings, highly decorative, with polychromatic brick detail around the arches of the windows. To the northern end, the historic vein is broken by a sympathetic modern development of houses, built in the rear garden of the former Midland P.H. On the eastern side of the road, there are also some fine locally listed buildings; towards the north these are three storey buildings, with change to lower terraces to the south. Breaking this grain is Telford Court, dating from the 1960s and built on the site of a timber yard, it is one of the few tower blocks in St Albans and, although it is set back from Alma Road, it still dominates the area because of its height. In front there are some flats of the same period forming an L-shape at the base of the tower, which, although of three squat storeys, are aggressively modern in style and materials (using a pale grey brick plinth) and unfortunately close to the pavement edge and prominent.



Pair of locally listed houses on Alma Road (nos.29+31) with polychromatic brick detailing and gothic arched windows.



The former infant school on Alma Road (locally listed) breaks the residential character of the road and displays gothic fea-

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

History and Buildings contd.

Oswald Road leads uphill and east off Alma Road, past no. 34, an attractively detailed corner building which faces onto both roads. Oswald Road consists of modest terraced houses arranged along an L-shaped road; at least some probably built for railway workers. Nos. 2-6 already appear on the 1880s map. In spite of their small scale, most have good detailing. Most have a ground floor bay with dentilled eaves and many, most strikingly nos. 49-59, have contrasting bands of brickwork. Together with their plainer neighbours, these more modest homes cumulatively compose a good historic street scene.

The northern end of Oswald Road links to Ridgmont Road where there is a fine Regency villa (no. 33a). The original main line station stood opposite, at the top end of Ridgmont Road (then called Station Road), but is now a car park. Its historic use is marked by the Victorian station master's house (no. 31), now well restored including its pretty fret work. In the 1880s, this house sat in the large triangular plot which occupied the corner which has since been infilled. Due to the proximity of the railway, both Ridgmont Road and Grosvenor Road were built up with very large commuter houses. This is most evident today on the southern end of Ridgmont Road and in Grosvenor Road, where there are some fine grand villas with terracotta detailing. On the western side of Ridgmont Road, some houses of a similar period have suffered from more changes such as rendering. Aside from a modern church at the northern end, Ridgmont Road has a very suburban feeling due to the lack of through traffic, its elevated position above the busier Alma Road, and its street trees. Grosvenor Road, although dating from the same period, in contrast has fewer surviving villas and the street scene is rather spoilt by unsympathetic modern development. This includes some three storey flats built with uncharacteristic materials, modern bricks and flat roofs, although their gardens and trees do contribute. An interesting feature of the south side of Grosvenor Road is that houses have architectural garden fronts facing over London Road whilst their plainer service elevations face Grosvenor Road.

Closing the vista southwards from Alma Road is a significant group of listed Regency buildings on the south side of London Road (nos. 174 -182), dating from not long after the road was cut in the late C18 and set in plots commensurate with their status. Nos. 174/176 London Road is a rather unique building within this area as, although symmetrical and classical, it utilises gothic detailing, for example in the tracery windows and pointed arched door and window frames, flint walls and a zig-zag roof form. These listed buildings are reached by a flight of steps and are therefore particularly grand additions to the street scene. No. 178 London Road is classical design, in stucco, with a hipped slate roof and a Victorian addition on the front. Nos. 180 and 182 London Road are a similar but taller pair of three storey, elegant, large, listed, stucco, classical villas. All of these listed buildings have been attributed to George Smith, the architect of the St Albans Town Hall. To the east, a long, two storey terrace of locally listed, early C19 cottages is set back on a high bank and from the west partly screened with some shrubs and hedging. They are brick buildings (the majority have unfortunately been rendered or painted) with slate roofs and sliding sash windows and they complement their classical Regency neighbours.



Oswald Road is predominantly terraces, some probably built for railway workers, but with good detailing.

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

History and Buildings contd.

Old London Road dates from the C16. It is narrow and the houses are of mixed style which gives it an informal historic character and good views of the Cathedral add to its ambience. The pattern of development on the south side appears to have been constrained by the bank between Old London Road and what were fields to the south. The line of the bank is visible on the 1880s map from the Great Northern station south of London Road along the eastern end of Old London Road and is still evident with the marked change in ground level between Old London Road and Ramsbury Road on raised ground to the south. Two Victorian houses on the south side (1858) are thus wide fronted and in wide plots with side gardens and a modern version has been slotted in between in the 1990s.

Old London Road has some finely proportioned Victorian and earlier cottages and small scale villas, and there are modern developments intermittently on both sides (for the most part neutral in their effect on the conservation area), most notably Millers Rise on the south side (see Area 5a), where an estate of houses and flats have replaced commercial sites (Cereals Research Station). The eastern end of Old London Road is dominated by modern flat developments, Dorcas Court early 1960s and Devon Court early 1970s on the south side, which had remained undeveloped into the mid C20, and Priory Court redevelopment on the north. The latter, designed in 1959 by local architect Keith Roberts, is on an interesting modern three legged plan, but is dominant because of its greater (five storey) height and yellow brick and its base is dominated by car parking. The other two blocks, being three storeys and set back, are more reticent, although their car parking is also a negative feature of the street scene. Devon Court's flat roof is out of character, but trees along the frontage partly screen it. At the tip of Old London Road where it meets London Road, and on the junction with Approach Road, is a modern development dating from the 1990s called Tollhouse Point, which replaced a very large and aggressive building built with and similar to Priory Court

but including a mid C20 garage, workshop and car showroom with several floors of accommodation. Sadly for such a prominent position, this replacement building is also rather unsympathetic, in terms of its materials, design and massing. Its name is a reminder of the historic function of London Road as a toll road and of the tollgate which stood at the junction of London Road and Old London Road, but was removed around 1890. Charges were abolished in 1871, when coach traffic had been reduced significantly by the growth of the railways and toll gates cost more to run than they earned¹.

Two short roads at the eastern end of London Road - Black Cut and Alma Cut - connect Old London Road with London Road. Black Cut has no frontage buildings, except at the southern end where the Old Works has incorporated a modern development, sympathetic in scale and form. Otherwise, it is dominated by brick and flint walls. Alma Cut is more built up with a row of small early Victorian terraces but it also has more greenery. From Alma Cut, Miller's Rise on the opposite side of Old London Road is well screened by trees and is only visible at close quarters.



Devon Court: an early 1970s development on Old London Road.



*The mid C20 building now replaced by Tollhouse Point.
Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.*

¹ www.stalbansmuseum.org.uk

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

History and Buildings contd.

The houses on Approach Road are two storeys, but their height is exaggerated because they are set up from street level behind short front gardens with retaining walls. They are all fine Edwardian villas, with red brick and terracotta detailing; largely unchanged, they present a uniform and grand street scene. On the northern corner on the west side is a small finely detailed lodge (no. 2), with terracotta panels, and a very tall and elaborate gate post marks one side of the entrance way. This building links well with the style of the housing on the rest of Approach Road in terms of the terracotta detailing.

This road leads to Cornwall Road built c.1910, which descends downhill towards the river and curves to the west. It has a good unbroken street frontage, still entirely representative of its date, with modest semi-detached houses on the west and east in a variety of Edwardian styles. Some pairs are grouped into terraces on the east and there is an occasional detached house. Red brick predominates but some houses have been painted. No. 5, which is slightly grander and detached, has terracotta panels. On the west, the building line is consistent and the ridges step down the hill but the styles vary from taller pairs with double height bays on a gabled front to lower and wider pairs with joined lean to open porches with brackets and casement windows. On the east side, long narrow gardens run back to the former railway site (from where the backs of the houses are visible). To make the most of the topography, most pairs are arranged in a staggered pattern, particularly noticeable in uphill views where the blank side elevations are visible. Styles are very consistent, each has a ground floor bay, doorways are recessed and there are short front gardens with low walls. Paths are blue brick



The two storey houses on Approach Road are set up above street level behind small front gardens.



Houses on Approach Road display terracotta detailing.



No.2 Approach Road is a finely detailed lodge.



Cornwall Road clearly shows its Edwardian date.

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

History and Buildings contd.

Ramsbury Road runs both eastwards and westwards as culs de sac from the junction of Cornwall Road and Approach Road. The short eastern section has a greater mixture of buildings, with many of the historic buildings marred by unsympathetic changes. Not evident from the junction of Ramsbury Road and Cornwall Road is Pullman Close. Set back at the eastern end and built together with Orient Close but at a higher level (see Area 6b), from here there are views to the east over the old station site and beyond. The longer western section of Ramsbury Road is more uniform in style with more in common stylistically with Approach Road and again on the north side houses are set up above the road. Most houses are semi-detached, have prominent gables and bays and short front gardens with low walls. At the western end is a terrace of six cottage style houses with good joinery details, although rather altered: they are arranged in three pairs and well set back from the remainder behind longer front gardens. Also at the western end, on the south side, there is a later C20 modern terrace and three detached suburban style houses with a very large tree on the frontage. Previously, two detached, double fronted, C19 buildings had sat in very large plots running south right down to a footpath running west from Longmire Road, grounds which until the late C20 were otherwise undeveloped. On the north, at the end of the road, also in a plot previously occupied by a single building, Sudbury Court is a modern block of flats, set back from the historic building line so that it does not intrude into the general street scene except from close quarters and its appearance is further softened by trees when in leaf. Paths are blue brick.

Cornwall Road leads to Riverside Road, which has turn of the century, uniform, terraced houses backing onto a watercress bed at the eastern end. The stone headers to the windows and doors to the southern group have moulded patterns in the corners, setting them apart from anything else in St Albans. Whilst both sets of buildings are three storeys, from street level this feature is only apparent on the northern side, whereas the southern group's lower storey is

built into the bank to the rear. These long terraces give a very strong sense of enclosure. To the west, beyond these historic terraces the road changes character and opens out. Included in this character area on the north is a long staggered terrace of three storey town houses with front gardens from 1965. Beyond on the north are some later C20 blocks of flats and on the south a group of two-storey semi-detached 1960s houses in a suburban arrangement (both included in Area 4e).



The houses on the north side of the western end of Ramsbury Road are also set up above street level and are quite uniform.



Riverside Road terraces have stone headers with moulded patterns.



1960s town houses on Riverside Road.

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

Materials and Details

The prevalent material in this area is brick, both red brick which has been applied to much terraced housing, and orange brick used in the larger commuter housing, both typical of the period. Brighter and lighter bricks, for example yellow and pale stock bricks, transported via the railway, are also in evidence and have been more frequently used on the villas, such as those on Alma Road and also for detail and in some of the terraces, for example on Oswald Road. Some stucco and rendering is used, for example in Alma Road, Old London Road, and on three listed Regency buildings on London Road. The buildings have either tiled or slate roofs depending on the age, style and scale of the structure. Historically windows would have white painted timber and, although many of these survive, street scenes for the most part display a mixture of historic windows and modern replacements. Although the primary style is classical, Gothic detailing can be seen, for example on the school and some houses on Alma Road as well as on the flint house at nos. 174/176 London Road. There are some appealing terracotta details, particularly on some buildings on the west side of Ridgmont Road, along Approach Road and in Ramsbury Road, but they can be noticed throughout, sometimes used modestly but in other cases flamboyantly. There are fine historic iron railings on some buildings, for example nos. 180 and 182 London Road, which may have originated from the iron works previously located nearby. Twentieth century buildings often break away from the dominant material of brick in the use of concrete and pre-cast steel for most of the 1960s and some 1970s buildings, often with flat roofs. Whilst more recent developments use brick and have pitched roofs, this is sometimes a browner brick and a profiled concrete tile. Some recent ad hoc alterations include rendering or painting of brick, and changes to fenestration and roof tiles and their replacement with untraditional materials has broken the continuity of the streetscape. Cumulatively this can be seen to start to lead to the disintegration of the character of the streets.



Brick is the most prevalent material with different colours being used to create patterns, for example in Oswald Road.



Stucco and rendering are also used, as seen above on some of the Regency buildings on London Road.



The predominant style is classical but there are also examples of gothic detailing and features.

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

Public Realm

Although there are no designated green spaces, parts of the character area benefit from trees in the public realm, which function as screening. This is particularly evident with the thick trees along London Road which effectively screen the rear of Grosvenor Road on the bank behind. There are also several mature trees on Ridgmont Road, which add to the quality of this road as described above, and at its northern end serve to screen the small station car park. Most houses in this character area have private garden spaces and the trees within these spaces make a significant contribution to the character of the area. Some of these, particularly in the southern part of the character area, impact on public areas, for example the gardens to properties in London Road are seen from Black Cut and the gardens of buildings in Grosvenor Road impact on Telford Court. A footpath links Old London Road and Ramsbury Road following and maintaining the field boundary and the trees along this line, evident from the 1880s OS map. These close the vista westwards along Ramsbury Road.

The public realm is mostly confined to the road's paving and street furniture. Most of the areas are paved in the traditional St Albans blue pavements, although in parts of Riverside Road and at the eastern end of Old London Road tarmac has been used, and in Alma Road there is concrete block paving. Historic street furniture is sadly lacking and modern street furniture has a negative effect on the character of the area. In particular on the junction of London Road and Black Cut there is some cluttering of street signage, which unfortunately impacts on the view of some of the listed buildings which front onto London Road, in particular no. 176. A small triangular grassed area at the junction of Grosvenor Road, Alma Road and London Road, although small, as a convenient and visible public space, has become home to a motley collection of street furniture – two seats, a post box, telephone kiosk, litter bin and junction box. This group could be enhanced with planting.



Ridgmont Road has a number of mature trees which add to its character.



Footpath from Old London Road to Ramsbury Road maintains an historic field boundary.



Street furniture has collected in a triangular grassed space next to the junction of London Road, Grosvenor Road and Alma Road.

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

Positive

- ✓ The listed and locally listed buildings which represent the development of the area and exhibit a good range of materials and well-executed detailing are thus representative of the craftsmanship skills of the C19 in brickwork, joinery, stone, terracotta, and tile hanging.
- ✓ The very fine group of listed Regency buildings on London Road and their open settings.
- ✓ Fine and elegant Victorian villas on Alma Road, Ridgmont Road, and Grosvenor Road built with traditional materials and with pleasing architectural detailing.
- ✓ Plainer Victorian terraces in Oswald Road, Alma Cut, and Winton Terrace/Old London Road and London Road, some in red brick and some in yellow brick, but some with patterned brickwork.
- ✓ Attractive and distinctive three storey Victorian terraces built into the hillside in Riverside Road with patterns on window & headers and detailed headstones above doors.
- ✓ Late Victorian and early Edwardian areas of semi-detached houses, such as the well-finished Edwardian semis with square bays on Ramsbury Road and Approach Road, with terracotta decoration and their smaller counterparts in Cornwall Road and Oswald Road.
- ✓ Well detailed, non-residential buildings and those connected to non-residential uses which illustrate the social development of the area, such as the Infants School in Alma Road (1880) and the Stationmaster's House in Ridgmont Road.
- ✓ Buildings from the industrial history of the area such as the Old Works in Old London Road.
- ✓ Old London Road as a very historic route.
- ✓ Landscaping to the garden areas which provides an appropriate setting for the buildings and which contributes so much to the area and the street scene. For example, of particular note is the extensive greenery and mature landscaping in views at the rear of the houses on the north and south sides of London Road.
- ✓ Ridgmont Road and Grosvenor Road are quiet & spaciouly planned areas with lots of vegetation and the street trees in Ridgmont Road contribute significantly to its character.
- ✓ The views of the Abbey that can be seen from within the area, for example from Old London Road.
- ✓ The River Ver and the open spaces at the rear of Riverside Road and links from the eastern end of Riverside Road to the Alban Way, the river, Sopwell Nunnery Ruins and the Watercress Beds.



Well-detailed buildings connected to non-residential functions, like the Stationmaster's house, illustrate the social development of the area.



The detailing and range of materials used, such as terracotta decorative panels, demonstrate the craft skills of C19.

Area 7d: Alma Road and Priory Park

Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

Neutral

- Some modern, medium scale, flatted development such as Dorcas Court, Devon Court and Sudbury Court, which, although not impinging on the wider street scene or area due to materials or siting, is not traditional in scale, grain or style and therefore not sympathetic with nearby historic properties.
- Some modern infill which is of appropriate scale and sympathetic in materials, often set back behind the historic building line and sometimes landscaped.

Negative

- ✖ The physical and psychological barrier which London Road creates between the north and south parts of this character area due to the high volume of traffic and highway paraphernalia.
- ✖ Traffic using Alma Road which is one of the main north-south routes.
- ✖ Parked cars, particularly in the narrow streets.
- ✖ Loss of front garden areas to on-plot parking, particularly prevalent in Alma Road.
- ✖ The tall modern housing developments, such as Priory Court and Telford Court and Tollhouse Point which are out of scale with the area and dominate the adjacent Victorian buildings.



Parked cars in narrow streets have a negative impact on the character of the area. Tall modern housing developments, such as Telford Court seen here in the background, are out of scale.



Alma Road is a busy north-south route and many of the front gardens have been lost to on plot parking.

Scope for Change

- Improvements to the landscaping on the railway bank.
- Highways improvements to reduce the barrier effect of London Road and to give greater permeability between the north and south sides of the area.
- Buildings which are locally listed can easily disintegrate into neutral or even negative features if their individual character and charm is eroded by incremental changes and additions, as has happened for example on the eastern section of Ramsbury Road.
- It is important that the residential character remains dominant in this area.
- Tall buildings should not set the benchmark for new development. It is clear they do not fit into the scale of the area and are over dominant. If these sites were to be redeveloped, a far better integration and enhancement should be possible.
- The character area would generally benefit from more greenery and for this reason amenity trees including those on London Road and street trees in Ridgmont Road should be retained.

