

Character Area 7L Gombards and the Spencer Park Estate



Area 7L: Gombards and the Spencer Park Estate

Britton Avenue, Church Crescent, Etna Road, Folly Lane (part), Gombards, Russell Avenue, Selby Avenue, Stapley Road, Upton Avenue, Worley Road.

Scheduled Monuments

None.

Listed Buildings

Aboyne Lodge Primary School (Grade II)

Locally Listed Buildings

Britton Avenue

Odds: 1-19 (incl.).

Evens: 2.

Church Crescent

Former St Albans City Hospital Mid Herts Wing (St Albans Children's Centre) & building on road-side to north.

Evens: 28-34 (incl.).

Etna Road

Odds: 1-23 (incl.), 27.

Evens: 2-18 (incl.), 24-32 (incl.).

Gombards

Odds: 1, 5, 9, 11-17 (incl.).

Evens: 2-10 (incl.), 16-22 (incl.).

Russell Avenue

Odds: 5-23 (incl.).

Selby Avenue

Odds: 1-25 (incl.).

Evens: 2-24 (incl.), 28.

Stapley Road

"Aberfoyle" (Corner with Upton Avenue),

"Langford" (Corner with Upton Avenue).

Upton Avenue

Odds: 1, 3-11 (incl.).

Evens: 2-6 (incl.), 8-18 (incl.).

Worley Road

Odds: 1-25 (incl.), 29-43 (incl.).

Evens: 2-10 (incl.), 20-40 (incl.), 42-60 (incl.).



Houses on Etna Road (locally listed).



No. 1 Britton Avenue (on the corner) and houses on Russell Avenue (all locally listed).



Building alongside Former St Albans City Hospital Mid Herts Wing (St Albans Children's Centre) on Church Crescent (locally listed).

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Character Summary

This character area is to the north and west of the city centre. The Gombards and Spencer Park Estate Character Area lies to the south of Folly Lane and, for the most part, directly behind the long burgage plots of the properties on the west side of St Peter's Street.

The eastern boundary runs along Russell Avenue, includes Aboyne Lodge School, and follows the rear boundaries of the houses on Etna Road. The western boundary runs along the edge of the Victoria Playing Field, to the rear of the St Albans Children's Centre on Church Crescent. To the north, the boundary is the south side of Folly Lane, save for where there are houses facing on to Folly Lane, when the boundary follows their rear boundaries. To the south, the boundary encompasses the St Albans Children's Centre and then follows the rear boundaries of houses on the east side of Church Crescent and the south side of Worley Road, encompassing Gombards garage court and the Upton Avenue car park, and then following the rear boundaries of houses on Britton Avenue, including the corner houses on Russell Avenue (nos. 1 & 3). The Drovers Way car park is part of the adjoining character area.

At its eastern edge, this character area skirts the plateau of level ground where the City evolved. Aboyne Lodge School is at the most easterly edge and from here the land slopes down towards the Victoria Playing Field and onwards to the Ver valley in the west. Most of the streets within the area were plotted on a north-south axis, across the slope, to take advantage of level ground. Worley Road runs down the steep slope, running parallel to Folly Lane.

Although this area is primarily residential, there are two large institutional sites within the area. To the east, Aboyne Lodge is a post-war school built by Hertfordshire County Council as part of their celebrated, post-war Hertfordshire Schools building programme. It was built in reinforced concrete using an innovatory, modular, pre-cast building system. The school occupies a large site, but the single-storey buildings are very well screened from the surrounding area. Aboyne Lodge was added to the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest in 2010 and is now Grade II listed.



The character area is on the edge of the city centre plateau and falls steeply down the hill towards the Victoria Playing Field and the Ver Valley.



Aboyne Lodge School is one of the institutional sites in this predominantly residential area. It is grade II listed as an example of the post-war Hertfordshire Schools building programme.

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Character Summary

To the west of the area, on the western side of Church Crescent and abutting the Victoria Playing Field, is the St Albans Children's Centre, which occupies a building originally built as St Albans Hospital. This was the first, large, purpose-built hospital of St Albans, built in 1887 and predating the hospital buildings in Normandy Road. Although subsequently extended and added to, the late Victorian hospital retains its original character. It is a tall, two-storey, red brick building which addresses Verulam Road and is set in a relatively open site, surrounded by landscaped parking areas. Adjacent to the late Victorian hospital is Albany Lodge, a mental health centre, built in 1993. This is another large footprint building. Built of red brick with slate roofs, the building has an unusual cruciform plan form. The building is low, part two storey and part single storey, and is reasonably well-screened by mature hedging from Church Crescent and the surrounding area.

The townhouses, villas and cottages, which form the greatest part of this area, were

developed between 1870 and 1910. This was planned development, where land was plotted, and plots sold speculatively. Many of the earlier houses are individual, or sometimes paired designs, commissioned by the plot purchasers for their own occupation, or built by small-scale developers. These are good quality, Victorian town houses and villas, built for the burgeoning middle and merchant classes of St Albans. The character of the later development, the Edwardian 'Spencer Park Estate', is slightly more uniform, as developers took on larger numbers of plots on a more speculative basis. Although more modest, these are still well-detailed town houses, villas and cottages, on smaller plots with narrower frontages.

This area is an attractive and architecturally coherent part of St Albans' heritage of brick buildings, which is cohesive in terms of the regularity of plotting, the materials used and the richness of the architectural detailing of the era. Despite its proximity to the city centre, the area has retained a quiet, sometimes grand and somewhat elegant late Victorian and Edwardian character.



The area is primarily residential with larger, late Victorian houses (above left) and smaller, Edwardian houses (above right).

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Historical Development

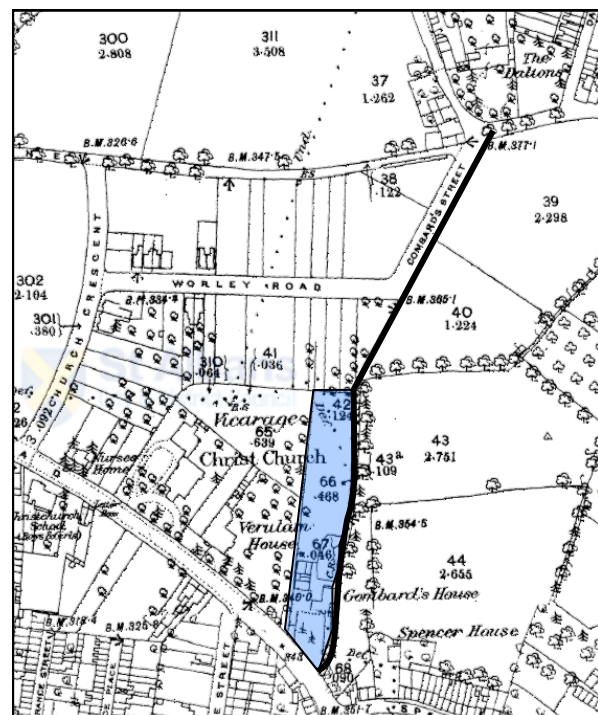
Until the C19, this area was open farmland behind the burgage plots of St Peter's Street and Dagnell Street. In the early C19, Folly Lane was cut to join Catherine Lane which, together with Branch Road, effectively joined the top of St Peter's Street to St Michael's and gave a means by which the city centre could be bypassed. In 1826, Verulam Road was cut, to bypass Fishpool Street. This character area lies between these two roads, which became the westerly routes from the city centre.

The farmland was in the ownership of a small number of landowners. Gombards field, a large meadow running from Folly Lane down to Verulam Road, was part of the land owned by Dalton House on Folly Lane. Verulam Road was cut across the bottom of Gombards Field. Much of the rest of the land once belonged to the Kentish family, who had owned The Mansion (nos. 1-3 St Peter's Street) and the land that lies behind The Mansion to the west.

An ancient footpath running from the Daltons (and points beyond to the north) through Gombards field and along the western boundary of the land belonging to the Kentish family and continuing through to Verulam Road can still be walked today. The street Gombards was cut on the line of this footpath and the remaining part is still a public footpath: Gombards Alley. In the early C18, a fine Regency House, Gombards House, was built on Verulam Road, to the west of Gombards Alley. The house was built within a long burgage plot which, until Verulam Road was cut, ran back from Dagnell Street. Gombards House was demolished in the mid C20, but the footprint of the burgage plot still remains, largely as a tree-lined, open space, used as a car park and garaging: Upton Avenue car park and Gombards garage court.



The area was open farmland until C19. This painting of Folly Lane looking towards the junction with Verulam Road, with cows grazing on what would become the Victoria Playing Field, shows the rural, agricultural nature of the area prior to development. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.



1880s OS map showing the area partially developed. The green line marks the position of the footpath that runs from The Daltons to Verulam Road, part of which is formed by Gombards. The area coloured blue is the burgage plot of Gombards House, now mostly car park and garage court. Note that the Spencer Park Estate area to the east is completely undeveloped.

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Historical Development (contd.)

In 1874, part of the old Gombards field, that part to the west of Gombards, was plotted and sold. Church Crescent, Worley Road and Gombards were cut and, for the most part, houses were developed on the new streets, although there were some exceptions to the residential use. The land to the west of Church Crescent, adjacent to Verulam Road, was acquired to build the St Albans Hospital, which had outgrown its small premises in Holywell Hill. The new hospital was built in 1887 with public subscriptions. In Church Crescent, Christ Church acquired the plots which were adjacent to the Church and Vicarage, and built a parish hall (nos. 10-12). On Worley Road, some plots were assembled, and a nursery was established on the north side, latterly becoming a small factory works and garaging.

The land to the east of Gombards was plotted and sold at a slightly later date. Etna Road and upper Worley Road were cut and built up. By the turn of the C20, these streets were substantially complete.

At the very end of the C19, the Kentish land was plotted and sold as the "Spencer Park Estate". Stapley Road, Upton Avenue, Selby Avenue, Russell Avenue and Britton Avenue were cut and built up in the first decade of the C20.

Aboyne Lodge School was completed in 1950. It was built as part of a highly significant schools building programme undertaken by Hertfordshire County Council, which revolutionised the way that schools were built and became known as The Hertfordshire System. This was one of fifty new schools built within eight years, a challenging project which was necessary to meet the post-war increase in the birth rate. The school was extended and altered in 1976, with the addition of a nursery department and an extra classroom.

During the second half of the C20, some small infill housing developments took place and many of the larger houses were sub-divided into flats. The scope for infill development was limited due to the comprehensive plotting of the area, but

most empty sites have now been developed. The most sizeable scheme was the 1977 residential development to the rear of Christ Church: Christ Church Close. Flats were built on the land surrounding the Vicarage, which was itself converted to flats and the Parish Hall was also converted for residential use. As part of the development, two-storey blocks of flats were built on Worley Road.

In 1993, part of the hospital site on Church Crescent was cleared. Positively, some later extensions to the original hospital building were removed, although some of the original outbuildings were also lost. Albany Lodge was built on the northern part of the site.



Former St Albans City Hospital Mid Herts Wing.



The upper part of Worley Road.

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Spatial Analysis

Church Crescent

The western side of Church Crescent is a single large site running between Verulam Road to the south and Folly Lane to the north. The site is bordered by the Victoria Playing Field to the west (the boundary of this character area). Mature trees and shrubs surround this site, which are particularly dense on the western boundary with the playing field, and on the boundaries with Verulam Road and Folly Lane. The entire site is in institutional use. A children's centre and nursery school, occupy the southern part of the site, utilising the Victorian hospital building, and a mental health unit was built on the northern part of the site in 1993.

The Victorian hospital building, which is locally listed, has been altered and extended but retains its original character. A long building, although shallow in plan, it addresses Verulam Road and presents a gable end to Church Crescent. Built in 1887 in the Queen Anne style, it is a tall, two-storey, red brick building with prominent feature gables to the front. The building is well detailed with large, vertical, multi-paned, decorative windows, tile hanging to the gables, and dormers with half timbering set into the high pitched, red clay tile roof. A small, single-storey, Edwardian lodge building on the roadside of Church Crescent is built of similar materials and is also locally listed.

Albany Lodge is a low, large footprint building with an unusual cruciform plan form. Although a modern building of different scale from the residential development which surrounds it, the general form, materials and landscaping enable it to blend into the surrounding area.

Landscaping is extremely important on this south side of Church Crescent. There is a reasonable amount of open space around these two large footprint buildings, with areas for car parking between the hospital building and Verulam Road and between the hospital building and the mental health unit. The potentially detrimental impact of the car parking is considerably softened by the hedge screen and by landscaping within the car park.



Landscaped car parking in front of hospital.



Albany Lodge



Victoria Playing Field borders this area and contributes to the public amenity of the area.

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Spatial Analysis contd.

On the eastern side of Church Crescent, development is entirely residential. These are individual houses, of differing designs, built in the last decades of the C19. Whilst this area was plotted in a regular fashion, with plots being wide and long, it appears that developers amalgamated and subdivided these spacious plots as suited them. Rather than building the grand detached houses which were originally envisaged, they built a variety of semi-detached and attached houses, commonly building a pair of houses within a single plot. There is therefore quite a variety in scale and height between the different houses. All are two-storey, although many have dormers and accommodation in the roof and most have cellars. All are set back from, and above, the line of the road with steps leading up to the front doors, enhancing the feeling of grandeur. The building line is well defined and front garden areas are small, with limited opportunities for planting, although a few houses have retained the original hedges behind the low brick boundary walls.

There is also variety in form, although all are clearly of the period. There are a few large semi-detached townhouses with a good level of detailing, but there are also many more simple and reasonably plain villas. The predominant material is red brick, although there are also a number of houses built with Luton Greys.

Notwithstanding the variety of scale, the continuity of building line, period, architectural style and materials gives an architectural coherence to this elegant crescent.

The gaps between the paired semi-detached houses at the southern end of Church Crescent, nos. 2-4, and 6-8, afford fine views of the campanile of Christ Church.



Houses in Church Crescent.



Most of the houses are in red brick, although some are in Luton Greys.



The gaps between nos. 2-4 and 6-8 Church Crescent give good views of the campanile of Christ Church.

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Spatial Analysis contd.

Worley Road

As in Church Crescent, spacious and regular residential plots were amalgamated and subdivided, giving a similar variety of housing. Coherence and continuity are established through adherence to the building line, and similarity in architectural style and materials. Most of the houses in this street are two storey, many with dormers and accommodation in the roof space. Houses are predominantly late Victorian, built in the last decades of the C19, of red brick and rich in detail; tile hung or half timbered front gables, bay windows, ornate timber porch detailing and decorative, brick detailing, sometimes polychromatic, are common features. The architectural coherence of these Victorian houses forms the essential character of the street.

There are a small number of Edwardian additions, and those that are pebbledashed (nos. 18 & 19-23) are somewhat at odds with the prevailing red brick.

The architectural continuity of Worley Road is slightly compromised by a few late C20 developments. Some of the original plots were not built on, but were amalgamated for commercial use. At the beginning of the C20, there were a number of nurseries with large greenhouses in this area, some commercial and some in the large grounds of Verulam House. In the latter half of the C20 these sites have been developed. As a consequence, there is some modern infill development in Worley Road which is of variable quality; Penny Court, the terrace of houses nos. 7a-11, and the development at Christchurch Close are the later developments in this street. With the exception of Penny Court, these buildings do adhere to the building line, but none of these developments are in keeping with the surrounding development; materials and fenestration are not well thought out.

Worley Road slopes steeply down towards Church Crescent and, although there are a variety of heights, generally the roof ridges are set down with the slope of the road. The three-storey villas at nos. 20-22, set above the road

level with semi-basement and steps up to the front door and the neighbouring two-storey villas at nos. 24-26 are the exception.



The houses in Worley Road are generally well-detailed.



Penny Court does not adhere to the building line.

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Spatial Analysis (contd.)

Gombards

Gombards was plotted, sold and built up at the turn of the C20. Most of the houses built in this street took advantage of the wide and spacious plots and some of the most substantial houses were built in this street. Although slightly later in date, these houses have the same qualities of the late Victorian houses in Church Crescent and Worley Road and are individually designed and equally rich in architectural detailing. Houses are two storey, but most have some accommodation in the roof space facilitated by dormers in the roof slope, and most have cellars.

On the east side, the houses are, with one detached exception, large semi-detached houses. Nos. 2-18 were designed by local architect Percival Blow. These houses are on higher ground and steps up to the front doors add to the impression of grandeur. Set back behind small front gardens, the predominant boundary treatment is now low brick walls with railings, which have replaced the low close boarded fences and hedges which are likely to have been the original treatment.

There is a gap to the south of no. 16, and nos. 12-14 are missing from the street numbering. The greenery of this side garden area does contribute to the amenity of the street and, although views through this gap are not exceptional, it is an unusual and welcome respite within this urban street-scene.

On the west side, the houses are of a slightly more modest scale, being semi-detached and attached houses. A diminutive, 1980s infill development at no. 3, does not relate well to the scale of the original development in this street. At each end of the street are larger detached houses, on the original plotted corner sites. Although double aspect, these houses address the neighbouring streets, Folly Lane and Worley Road, more than they address Gombards. No. 17 is particularly interesting in its double aspect design, with two noticeable gables addressing the corner with Folly Lane, providing a landmark at the junction.

To the north, an important view of Dalton House, the fine Grade II listed, Georgian House, with classical symmetry, is framed by the buildings of Gombards.



The gap next to no.16 Gombards contributes to the amenity of the street.



No.17 Gombards has two noticeable gables that address the corner with Folly Lane, making it a landmark.

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Spatial Analysis (contd.)

(Upper) Worley Road & Etna Road

These streets were built up at the turn of the C20, the land to the east of Gombards Alley having been plotted and sold in 1897. Plots were narrower and more densely plotted than those to the west of Gombards Alley, and the housing is of a more modest scale as a result. These are good quality, two storey, Edwardian cottages and villas which, although these are largely individual designs, are mostly attached in short terraces. Mingled among this terraced development is the occasional narrow fronted detached house. Although the scale of these houses is reduced, they are still rich in architectural detailing.

Upper Worley Road is built up on one side only, the other side being the side returns of houses in Gombards and Etna Road. There are views through into the rear gardens and to the rear elevations of these houses, which would benefit from some hedge screening. To the north, a view of the fine prominent end gable of the Jubilee Centre closes the vista from Etna Road.

Aboyne Lodge School is on a large site which runs from the top of upper Worley Road eastwards to join the piecemeal industrial & commercial development on Drovers Way. The single storey, flat-roofed building nestles behind the rear gardens of houses on Etna Road and Stapley Road, and is well screened from the surrounding area, although limited views can be glimpsed from Adelaide Street and from Russell Avenue.

Aboyne Lodge is one of the earlier examples of the post war Hertfordshire School Building programme. Built in reinforced concrete using an innovative, pre-cast building system, the school's three linked buildings have a certain modular rhythm which reflects the system-built nature of the development. Prefabrication and a modular approach was seen as the only way to cope with the urgent demand for schools, given post war brick and bricklayer shortages. Traditional buildings were also thought too inflexible to cope with educationalists' new ideas. It is de-

scribed by Pevsner as "A gentle, unassuming building informally placed in spacious, well planted grounds. The projecting flat roofs may look dated now, and the concrete panels a little shabby, but this is an excellent place to appreciate the new post-war ideal for school buildings..." (The Buildings of England (Hertfordshire) 1977 revision). The site was previously an apple orchard, and the spacious site still retains some elements of this previous landscape.



The north side of upper Worley Road is not built up, instead just displaying the side returns of the houses on Gombards and Etna Road.



Aboyne Lodge School is well-screened from within the area.

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Spatial Analysis (contd.)

Stapley Road, Upton Avenue, Selby Avenue, Britton Avenue & Russell Avenue

These roads were plotted on a single parcel of land which was marketed as the 'Spencer Park Estate' in 1899. The area was planned development, with plots sold to speculative builders, who rapidly built the houses in the first decade of the C20. By the end of this decade, the area was substantially built up with well-detailed, predominantly red brick, cottages and villas. Upton Avenue and Russell Avenue contain a variety of individual, good quality Edwardian houses - detached, semi-detached and attached - these houses being individually commissioned. Selby Road and Britton Avenue are more uniform in house design, the development in these streets being undertaken by one or two developers. Most houses are two storey, although a few have accommodation within the roof space lit by dormers on the roof slopes. The architectural detailing is similar to the rest of this character area. Red brick remains the predominant material, but there is more pebbledash render introduced with this slightly later period of building.

There are no houses facing onto Stapley Road, a short street which joins upper Worley Road and Upton Avenue. Both sides comprise the side returns of houses in these two roads and, as a result, there are inactive frontages on both sides of the road; the majority of the boundary treatment is close-boarded fence. There are views between the houses into the rear gardens and to the rear elevations of these houses, and the corner houses have undertaken some rather piecemeal development to create parking areas and garaging.

Russell Avenue was drastically redeveloped during the 1960s when the east side of the road was demolished to make way for the Drover's Way multi-storey car park. The large scale, C20, urban building forms a hard edge to the city centre development which is in strong contrast to the Edwardian housing on the west side of the road. Although set back, with a landscaped area of grass and mature planting, the car park has the potential to dominate the street scene due to its

scale, materials and brutalist design. During the summer months the trees provide a good screen, but this screen is not apparent in the winter.

As the city centre has moved towards this residential area, the houses on Russell Avenue have taken on non-residential uses. The proliferation of doctor's and dental surgeries within Russell Avenue has caused this street to be informally referred to as 'Doctor's Row'. These non-residential uses often result in changes to the built fabric, and there is some evidence of insensitive changes which are not in keeping with the surrounding residential character. Care should be taken with further changes to ensure that the fine Edwardian residential character both of these buildings and of the area is not further eroded.



Drover's Way car park dominates Russell Avenue despite being set back behind planting.



Russell Avenue.

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Spatial Analysis contd.

Upton Avenue slopes gently down from Russell Avenue to the tree-lined car park which was formerly the site of Gombards House. Views from Upton Avenue to the east are towards Drover's Way car park. To the west, at the bottom of the hill, there are views of the mature trees which screen the car park. Although so very close to the city centre, surprisingly Upton Avenue has a quiet residential character. On the corner of Russell Avenue, the loss of greenery and the expanse of hard surfacing in the rear garden of no. 1 Upton Avenue (a doctor's surgery) for use as a car park, is regrettable.



Upton Avenue.

Selby Avenue is much more uniform in house design, underscored by the regularity of the housing plots. There is a defined rhythm to the street-scene and a good sense of enclosure to this short, straight street. Views out of the street are closed by development on Upton Avenue and Britton Avenue.



The plots on Selby Avenue are very regular.

The houses in Britton Avenue are also quite uniform in design. As in Upton Avenue, views to the east are towards Drover's Way car park, and to the west, there are views of the mature trees which screen the car park. Development is on the southern side of the road only, as the side returns of Selby Avenue and Russell Avenue are on the north side. Again, there is some rather piecemeal development in these rear gardens to create parking areas and garaging.

The remaining part of Britton Avenue, where the road drops to join Verulam Road, is bordered to the west by Gombards Alley and the historic flint wall which forms the boundary of the former site of Gombards House, which is now Gombards garage court. Although the garage court is poor and is a negative element in the conservation area, the garages are well-screened. The early C20 landscaping at this street edge, with its raised beds and mature planting, is high quality. Even more so because of the use of good quality traditional materials: brick, flint, and blue brick.



Gombards garage court is a negative aspect of the area but it is well-screened by mature trees.

Area 7L: Gombards and the Spencer Park Estate

Public Realm

This is predominantly an urban residential area, densely developed and with little green space. Most of the green space is within the gardens of houses but, where there are front gardens, these are small and, individually, can only make a limited contribution. For the most part, there is little greenery within these front garden areas and more planting could soften the urban character of the area. There are no public green spaces within the dense framework of the late C19/early C20 residential development. The open space of the Victoria Playing Field is outside this area, but close by. The trees and mature shrubs that border the Victoria Playing Field and the Upton Avenue car park and Gombards garage court are the largest, most visible areas of established planting within the area. There are few significant mature trees within the streetscape.

The historic brick and flint wall which borders the edge of Gombards Alley makes a positive contribution to character, as do the gates and railings.

For the most part, paving is concrete paving slabs and blacktop tarmac. There are small areas of historic paving and, most significantly, the paving of Gombards Alley is blue brick.

The area suffers a little from the traffic which is routed through the residential area. Aboyne Lodge School can only be accessed from the relatively narrow streets of this area and may be a traffic generator. More significantly, traffic from the city centre and, more specifically, Drovers Way car park, is directed in a one way system, through the area. Traffic calming measures are in place, but these highway additions, together with the additional necessary signage are not particularly sympathetic. Parking, as ever, is a problem. Throughout all of those streets, planned in the C19, street frontages are dominated by parked cars, and this does impact negatively on the character of the area.



Small front gardens, like these in Britton Avenue, can only make a limited contribution to softening the urban character of this area.



The brick and flint wall bordering Gombards Alley makes a positive contribution to the area's character. Image courtesy of St Albans Museums.

Area 7L: Gombards and the Spencer Park Estate

Positive & Negative Characteristics and Scope for Change

Positive

- ✓ Predominantly mid C19 to early C20 development with minimal later intervention.
- ✓ The architectural cohesion, good quality materials and good architectural detailing.
- ✓ Good quality, residential areas with a strong identity and distinctiveness.
- ✓ Quiet, residential areas close to the city centre.
- ✓ The well-detailed, Victorian hospital building.
- ✓ Aboyne Lodge School - notable Grade II listed building remains in community use.

Neutral

- Some later infill development: Christchurch Court.

Negative

- ✗ Traffic routed through the area from/to Drovers Way Car Park.
- ✗ Parking in the narrow streets.

Scope for Change

- Improvements to traffic management and parking.
- More planting and greenery to front gardens throughout the area.
- Unsympathetic changes to windows, doors and architectural details can easily erode the iteration and rhythm of the C19 frontages.
- Plot division and infilling could easily damage the original C19 street plan, the regularity of which is fundamental to the character of the area.