

**CONSERVATION AREA
CHARACTER STATEMENT
FOR
SOPWELL**



July 2010



CONSERVATION AREA CHARACTER STATEMENT FOR SOPWELL

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Civic Amenities Act 1967 empowered local planning authorities to make provision for the preservation and enhancement of areas of architectural or historic interest by designating them as conservation areas.

1.2 Conservation should not be thought of solely as a process of preservation and an impediment to change. Designation of a conservation area represents an opportunity to formulate positive policies to improve and enhance its environmental quality and to ensure the successful integration of any development or redevelopment necessary for its continued success as a living and working community. The St Albans and District Local Plan Review (adopted November 1994) sets out the general principles which will be observed when dealing with applications for new development and redevelopment (Policy 85 – ‘Development in Conservation Areas’). The Local Plan will be replaced by the Local Development Framework in due course. This includes the Core strategy which is currently being prepared by the Council.

1.3 The aims of this Character Statement are to show the way in which the form of the conservation area has evolved and to assess its present character and appearance; to indicate the principles to be adopted in considering planning applications in the area; and to form a framework within which any detailed proposals may be formulated.

2.0 DESIGNATIONS

2.1 CONSERVATION AREA - The small group of buildings at Sopwell, adjacent to Sopwell House and New Barnes Mill, was designated as a conservation area on 30 April 1973 and extended in 2010 (see map).

2.2 STATUTORY LIST – Listed buildings are buildings included on a list of “Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest” compiled by central government. The Council is required by the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, when considering any application for listed building consent or planning permission which affects a listed building or its setting, “to have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting”. Applications will be assessed against District Plan historic buildings policies and government advice. There are three buildings within the conservation area which are statutory listed buildings, including Sopwell House a Grade II listed building. These are shown on the attached map. Outbuildings within the curtilage of listed buildings are normally protected under the main listing and are not separately indicated on the plan.

2.3 LOCAL LISTING - These are buildings which the Council feels make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area. The proposed locally listed buildings are shown on the attached map. It is not proposed to locally list any buildings which are statutorily listed or any of their outbuildings which are listed by virtue of being in their curtilage – it is considered that such buildings do contribute positively to the character of this conservation area, and that ‘double’ designation is not necessary (see map).

2.4 METROPOLITAN GREEN BELT – The whole of the Sopwell Conservation Area is covered by the Metropolitan Green Belt, which is subject to retained Policy 1 of the District Local Plan. This states that only very specific types of development will be acceptable and that it should integrate with the existing landscape. Siting, design and external appearance are particularly important and additional landscaping will normally be required. Significant harm to the ecological value of the countryside must be avoided.

3.0 LOCATION AND SETTING

3.1 Sopwell Conservation Area is situated adjacent to the River Ver on the south side of St Albans. It is sited to the north of the A414 dual carriageway, between St Albans and Hatfield, and surrounded in the main by flat agricultural land. The 1898 OS Map still shows Sopwell at some distance from the old town boundary. St Albans expanded to the south in the mid-twentieth century with more suburban housing including the area known as St Julian's. This development now adjoins the conservation area to the north.

3.2 Sopwell is situated at a crossing point of the River Ver, which at this point runs north south. The conservation area is largely bounded by agricultural land including water meadows to the west and woodland on the edge of the Verulam Golf Course to the south.

3.3 It is approached from the east by Cottonmill Lane lined with occasional trees and green verges that create a sense of enclosure and anticipation before reaching Sopwell, which is, until that point, virtually hidden from view. From the north the conservation area is also largely screened from long views by trees and modern housing.



View looking towards New Barnes Mill

3.4 The present grounds of Sopwell House Hotel occupy a significant part of the conservation area. Part of the former estate belonging to Sopwell House has for many years been in use as a golf course. Whilst the golf course is outside the conservation area the parkland and woodland fringe contributes greatly to its setting on the south eastern side.

4.0 HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

4.1 The River Ver would have been a natural highway for prehistoric peoples to access the higher ground. Sopwell is situated to the south of St Albans and the Roman settlement at Verulamium. It was probably farmland adjacent to the River Ver. No significant known remains exist from the Roman period or earlier however.

4.2 In the Saxon period it is possible that the landscape changed and became dominated by dispersed small settlements within a possibly rejuvenated woodland environment, before it was again opened up for agriculture. The River Ver was an important source of power and the mill site may well date back to Saxon times. There is certainly evidence from the Domesday Book for mills along the river.

4.3. New Barnes Mill was one of a number of mills situated on the River Ver which formerly belonged to St Albans Abbey. Originally named Cowley or Sopwell Mill as early as the twelfth century, it passed along with others to Sir Richard Lee in the sixteenth century following the dissolution of the monasteries. It remained in use as a flour mill until the last war when it became an engineering works and, more recently, has been converted into offices. The present building dates from the late nineteenth century.

4.4 Sir Richard Lee also acquired the site of Sopwell Nunnery to the northwest and converted part of the remains into a house. This became Sopwell Manor and the surrounding land was enclosed and turned into a deer park and gardens, requiring the realignment of the road to London, which ran by the nunnery, further to the north east. The remaining ruins of the nunnery still survive to the northwest in the conservation area.



Sopwell House

4.5 Sopwell House dates from at least the seventeenth century although it possibly incorporates an earlier building. Edward Strong, master mason for St Paul's Cathedral owned the building in the early eighteenth century possibly carrying out alterations. The house was again altered and enlarged in the early nineteenth century when the main part gained its present appearance. The rendered elevations and Regency detailing are typical of the 1800's. Humphrey Repton prepared plans for the park and may have designed the lodges. During the mid nineteenth century the house was lived in by Mrs Isabella Worley, who was a patron of several buildings in St Albans, and who carried out further extensions. Another distinguished resident was Prince Louis of Battenberg who brought up his four children here including the future Earl Mountbatten of Burma.

Subsequently the house passed to the Verulam family and was sold in 1969 to become firstly a residential home for the elderly and more recently an hotel.

4.6 A farm was situated between the mill and house. Although the present farmhouse is Victorian some of the adjacent barns date back to the seventeenth century and it is likely that the site is much older.

5.0 CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE

5.1 There are only a small number of buildings in the conservation area with a dispersed and informal layout and no strong building line or uniform roofline. Two of the buildings, Sopwell House Hotel and New Barnes Mill, are of substantial size however. The small settlement also contains a small pair of estate cottages in residential use and a number of prominent weather boarded former farm buildings.

5.2 The River Ver and adjacent mill stream and the rural landscape around Sopwell are visually very important. Much of the character of the conservation area is created by the combination of a few dominant buildings, all with a strong form and identity, and the informal layout and verdant setting. Although there are few buildings they show harmony of colour and texture by using traditional materials such as local red and purple brick and weatherboarding, creating pleasant visual relationships within the area. The hotel is however of contrasting, yet traditional, materials due to its original status.



The River Ver

5.3 The soft textural contrast of the trees to the buildings adds to the tranquil setting and enhances the sense of rural cohesion within the area. Significant trees are also located in the grounds of Sopwell House Hotel and to the rear of New Barnes Mill.

5.4 Most of the buildings adjacent to the mill are situated close to the road with hard standing or gravelled areas for parking. There are no boundary enclosures to speak of and no pavements. This tight relationship of buildings and narrow bridge creates the sense of enclosure at this point. Elsewhere in the conservation area boundary treatments are rural in character and largely simple fencing. One short section of flint

and brick wall survives along the footpath with a further altered section close to the mill stream. Both the bridge over the river and that next to the mill stream have attractive brick parapets.



Barn to south of New Barnes Mill

5.5 One group of buildings is located adjacent to Cottonmill Lane on the zig-zag bend to the south of the River Ver. This group is dominated by New Barnes Mill a three storey building dating from around 1900 with a substantial modern extension in a similar style. Although the building is no longer a working mill its siting adjacent to the River Ver does much to create the attractiveness of the area and its architecture clearly reflects its original use. Also in the north west of the conservation area are two residential properties, Dhobi Lodge and Laundry Cottage. They comprise a pair of estate cottages probably of late Victorian date with brick walls and tiled roofs. The windows are a mixture of casements and sashes. The cottages are set back from Cottonmill Lane but are visible from the public footpath (part of the Ver Colne Valley Walk) and from views outside the conservation area.

5.6 The second main group of buildings in the conservation area are those belonging to the former Sopwell Home Farm. Several including the farm house have been converted into further accommodation for the adjacent hotel. Opposite the mill is a substantial weather boarded barn of seventeenth century origin now in retail use. Although no longer in agricultural use these buildings make a major contribution to the character and appearance of the area.

5.7 Sopwell House Hotel dominates the conservation area to the south and is a key landmark building in this rural location. It sits at an angle to the road, so that it is not immediately noticeable on entering the hamlet from the north, but its striking architectural presence makes an important contribution to the conservation area. It is of contrasting traditional materials in keeping with its age, style, status and function, being faced in stucco with slate roofs behind a parapet. Some of the modern extensions are in brick.

6.0 LISTED BUILDINGS WITHIN THE CONSERVATION AREA

Sopwell House (Grade II listed building). Originally known as New Barnes, Sopwell House is an early eighteenth century manor house, which may have incorporated an earlier building on the site, which is now not visible; and was further altered and extended in the early nineteenth century. It is three storeys high and has eight windows on an irregular front, which has been broken forward in two left bays (the original building) and further forward in the sixth bay which contains the entrance. All the windows are recessed sashes with glazing bars in plain reveals, they are all segment headed, except for those on ground floor left of entrance which are round arched. It has a low pitched, slate roof concealed by a parapet and the whole frontage is stuccoed with bands below the parapet and at first and second floor levels. The round arched entrance has impost blocks and a keystone on which rests a thin cornice hood, which is also supported by lions' masks above wide, panelled, modified pilasters. A one-storey, two window extension to the right hand side of the front of the main building abuts on a large, set-back, stuccoed, round arch with architrave and keystone framed by an order, with paterae in spandrels, surmounted by cresting with paterae and garlands, and urn finial. A single storey lodge adjoins the arch to the right, balancing the extension to the left of the arch. There are further extensive modern extensions to the side and rear.

Barn to south of New Barnes Mill (Grade II listed building). This barn probably dates from the late seventeenth century with later alterations. It is a six bay wide, timber framed building with weatherboard cladding on a brick plinth and a plain tile roof. On the south-east side it has two gabled midstreys that on the right has had its doors replaced by weatherboard and windows. On the north-west side, one opposing cart entry has been infilled, and to the north-east gable there are large twentieth century sliding doors. The interior has impressive large-scantling timber framing with jowelled and unjowelled wall-posts, arched-braced to tie beams which support queen struts; clasped purlins, old rafters, no ridge-piece, and straight wind-braces. The wall-framing has mid-rail, arched braces, and wide-spaced studs.



Barn to south of New Barnes Mill

Barn and attached stable on east side of Sopwell Home Farm (Grade II listed building).

This barn and stable probably dates from the first half of the eighteenth century. It is a three-bay barn with central cart-entry and lower three-bay stable (probably formerly a cowhouse) on the left. It is timber-framed on brick plinths with weatherboard cladding and a plain tile roof. The right hand wall of the barn is constructed of a red-brown brick in Flemish bond and the brick gable wall has an eaves band and stepped gable to raised verge with brick-on-edge coping. The stable has a central stable door flanked by slatted windows, although most of the slats have been removed. The interior of the barn has a rear winnowing door (opposite the cart entry) which is boarded across. The frame has large scantling unjewelled posts with chamfered arch braces to the tie-beam, queen struts, clasped purlins, old rafters, a later plank ridge-piece; sole plate, mid-rails, replacement studs and diagonal braces; the brick wall shows the position of former braces. The stable building has posts with long arched braces to wall-plates and tie-beams; queen struts; clasped purlins and old rafters.



Barn and attached stable on east side of former Sopwell Home Farm

7.0 LOCALLY LISTED BUILDINGS WITHIN THE CONSERVATION AREA

The following unlisted buildings in Cottonmill Lane are considered together with the listed buildings to make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area and are termed 'locally listed'. The initial local list for Sopwell was prepared by the County Council in 1974. Most buildings built before 1900 which survive in anything like their original condition were included in the local list. Subsequently two of the farm buildings on the County's list have been transferred to the Statutory List.

New Barnes Mill. This was built around 1900. It is a dominant, three storey building with an attic storey in brick with a tiled roof, the siting and appearance of which does much to create the attractiveness of the area. The building reflects its previous uses and the history of the area and is of significant landmark quality.



New Barnes Mill

Former Sopwell Home Farm and outbuildings (now Sopwell Mews). The former farmhouse dates from the nineteenth century. To the south and east are two ranges of former farm buildings of largely nineteenth century date. The range to the east includes the eighteenth century listed barn and attached stable to the east of Sopwell Home Farm (see 6.0 above). The former farm has recently been acquired as an extension to Sopwell House Hotel and converted into ancillary use, with an area of car parking on the former farmyard to the west. The two ranges of outbuildings form an effective group setting for the two statutory listed barns, even in their converted state. The group still reflects the traditional functional former use of the area.



Sopwell Mews (former Sopwell Home Farm and outbuildings)

Dhobi Lodge and Laundry Cottage. A pair of two storey brick cottages of late nineteenth century date. Of typical estate cottage design and reflecting the gradual development of the area.

Two buildings to frontage of Cottonmill Lane. These comprise two modest but pleasing single storey brick buildings. The northernmost is built in red brick with an old tiled roof and may be of late eighteenth or early nineteenth century date. The other structure is built of Luton Grey brick typical of the late nineteenth century. Both functional structures reflect the functional character of the area.

Bridge over River Ver and parapet wall to millstream. The bridge is probably eighteenth or early nineteenth century construction with attractive brick parapets. The parapet wall to the millstream is late nineteenth century built in Luton grey brick.

Wall adjacent to footpath. A section of attractive flint wall with a brick coping formerly belonging to Sopwell Home Farm. A further altered section survives to the west.

8.0 SIGNIFICANT VIEWS

8.1 Much of the character of Sopwell Conservation Area comes from its enclosed rural situation surrounded by trees and farmland.

8.2 Important views into and from the conservation area are:

- The views of Sopwell House from the east approaching along Cottonmill Lane.
- The more intimate views of the mill and former farm buildings from Cottonmill Lane.
- The views of the conservation area from the Ver Colne Valley Walk and pastoral surroundings to the west.



Views towards the River Ver

9.0 TREES AND LANDSCAPE CHARACTERISTICS

9.1 The rural landscape and the significant mature trees and surviving hedges are major contributors to the conservation area's setting, character and appearance. Some of the historic boundaries still retain their hedgerows, which are also important wildlife habitats. The water meadow to the west creates a quintessential English rural scene, whilst there are a number of feature trees in the landscape which may be part of the original historic planned landscape of Sopwell House. There is some suggestion that Humphrey Repton the noted landscape gardener worked at Sopwell House. A "Red Book for New Barnes" was prepared but not all the proposals were carried out. The boundary includes all of the landscaped grounds to the south of the building and which contribute to its setting. No buildings are included although there are the remains of a walled kitchen garden in the extended area.

9.2 The boundaries and hedgerows of the conservation area mainly consist of native trees and shrubs. There is a visually important group of horse chestnut trees adjacent to the entrance to Sopwell House Hotel.

9.3 Most trees located in conservation areas are protected under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Six weeks prior written notice must be given to the local authority of any proposed surgery or felling. This period enables the Council to make a Tree Preservation Order if it considers that the proposal is unacceptable. The large beech tree adjacent to Sopwell Mews has a TPO.

10.0 PROPOSALS FOR ENHANCEMENT

10.1 To preserve or enhance the area's historic character and appearance, it is important that any development is of a high standard of design, sympathetic to its surroundings and the conservation area as a whole. It should not detract from the setting of nearby existing buildings, its form should have regard to the surroundings and the existing balance of buildings and landscape, and should be of good quality, normally built with traditional and natural materials.

10.2 Opportunities for enhancement include the retention and re-introduction of traditional materials and techniques of repair. uPVC windows and doors lack the finish and details of traditional joinery, they should be avoided and will not be acceptable for listed buildings, conversions or new development. Any new development or change of use should respect the grain, setting, scale, materials and use of existing development or land. However the area is situated in the Metropolitan Green Belt, and there are restrictions for development under this policy.

10.3 Apart from a short section of flint and brick boundary wall most boundary treatments comprise either simple country fencing or native hedging. These form an important part of the character of the conservation area and should be retained and enhanced whenever possible. The introduction of inappropriate boundary treatments would detract from this otherwise rural area and should be avoided. Planning permission is required for the erection of means of enclosure in the curtilage of listed buildings.



Brick and flint wall adjacent to Colne Ver Valley Walk.

10.4 Car parking occupies a significant part of the conservation area mainly for the former mill and Sopwell House Hotel. Recent extensions have been landscaped to attempt to minimise the impact. Any additional or replacement signage and street furniture needs to be appropriately designed so as to limit its impact on the rural ambience.

11.0 SUMMARY

It is the Council's policy to encourage the retention of those features which it is felt make the conservation area special; including historic buildings; their historic and architectural features, and their settings, historic brick walls, wooden fences, trees and hedges. Every effort should be made to maintain landscape features, and spaces between buildings and landscape.

STATUTORY LISTED BUILDINGS

COTTONMILL LANE

Barn to south of New Barnes Mill
Barn and attached stable on east side of Sopwell Home Farm.
Sopwell House (now Sopwell House Hotel)

LOCALLY LISTED BUILDINGS

COTTONMILL LANE

New Barnes Mill
Former Sopwell Home Farm and outbuildings (now Sopwell Mews)
Dhobi Lodge and Laundry Cottage
Two single storey buildings to road frontage opposite the mill
Bridge over River Ver and parapet wall to millstream
Flint and brick wall adjacent to footpath

OTHER SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Planning Policy Statement 5 Planning for the Historic Environment (March 2010)

St Albans District Local Plan Review 1994

Hertfordshire List of Buildings of Local Interest October 1973

Hertfordshire Statutory List St Albans 1971

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Historical information provided by Sopwell Residents Association

BIBLIOGRAPHY AND FURTHER READING

Victoria County History Hertfordshire Volume 2 1908

Pevsner Hertfordshire

Watermills of the London Countryside Kenneth Read 1989

Hertfordshire Gardens Trust Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of Local Importance in St Albans City and District

STATUS OF THE DOCUMENT

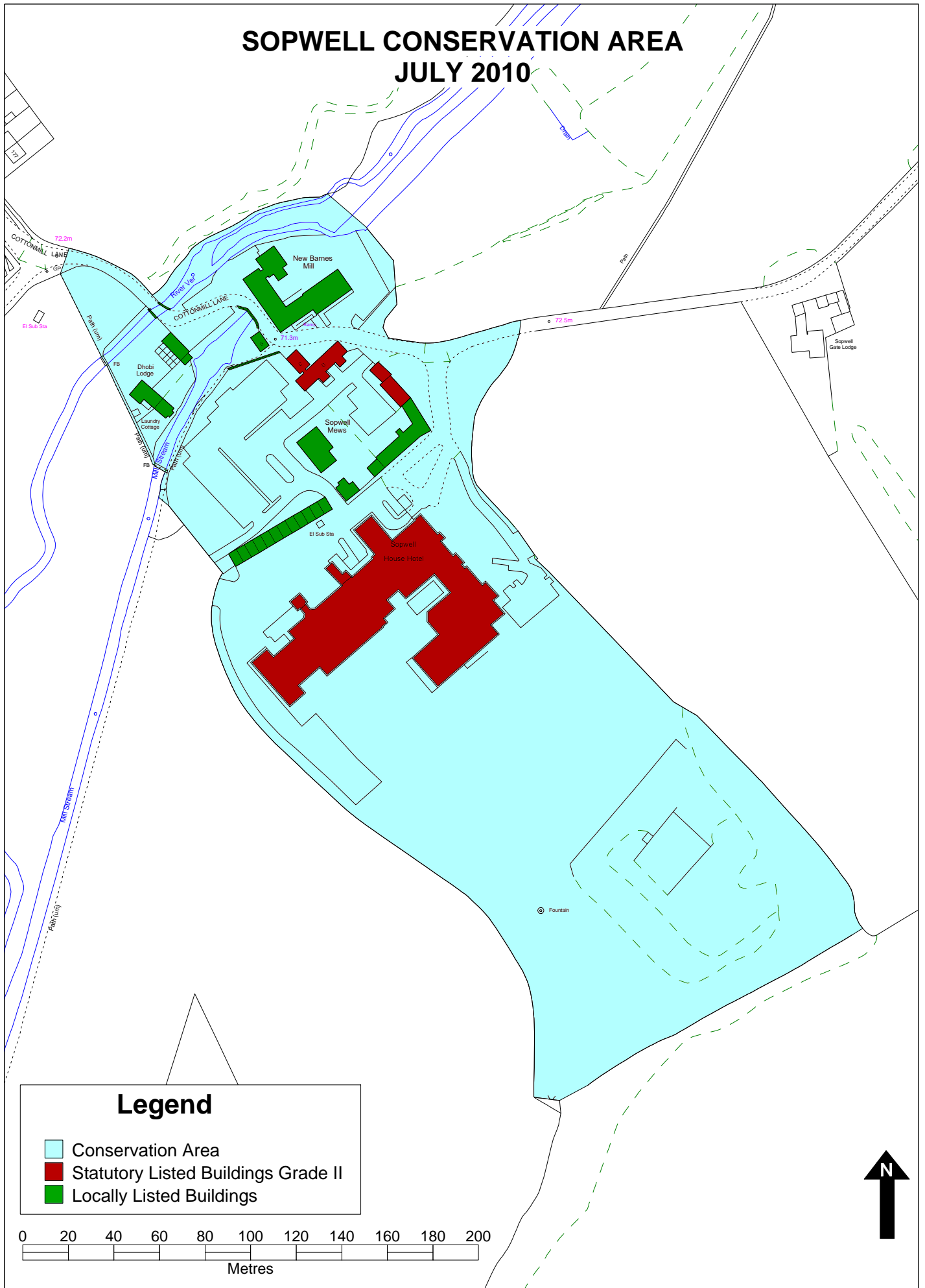
This document should be read together with saved Policy 85 of the St Albans City and District Local Plan Review 1994. It has been produced as part of DPR Project 9: Policy Statements – Conservation Areas and includes locally listed buildings.

The Planning and Conservation Portfolio Holder considered a report on the draft Sopwell Conservation Area Character Statement dated 29 June 2009 and resolved that the document should go to local consultation. Consultation took place from 3 August to 7 September 2009 with the following: local residents, businesses, Ward Councillors, Planning (Development Control) Committee South, and The Sopwell Residents Association.

As a result of this consultation comments were received and addressed and some alterations were made to the text as agreed by the Planning and Conservation Portfolio Holder on 23 July 2010. This amended version forms the Sopwell Conservation Area Character Statement July 2010.

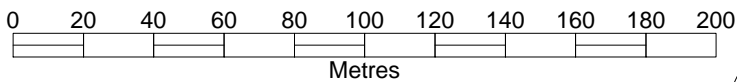
If further advice or guidance is required please contact the Department of Planning and Building Control, St Albans City and District Council, Council Offices, Civic Centre, St Albans, Herts, AL1 3JE. Tel. St Albans (01727) 866100.

SOPWELL CONSERVATION AREA JULY 2010



Legend

- Conservation Area
- Statutory Listed Buildings Grade II
- Locally Listed Buildings



For more information about these services please contact the Council at:

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