

THAXTED DESIGN STATEMENT

preserving the high standards of architecture and town planning

‘There is no town in north Essex
and very few in England – to equal in
beauty, compactness and juxtaposition
of Medieval and Georgian architecture,
the town of Thaxted’

The treasured words of the renowned poet and author, Sir John Betjamen

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The background design for the inside cover is taken from an ancient document from the reign of Charles II displayed in the Thaxted Guildhall Council Chamber. It is one of numerous documents from the archives of Thaxted's long standing charities.

INTRODUCTION

“Uttlesford District Council is committed to the empowerment of local communities and is keen to encourage all Parish Councils to produce Parish Plans and to support parishes who wish to produce Village Design Statements (VDS).”

In 2007, a small ad hoc committee was set up to look at the possibility of developing a town plan, the initiative having come from the Thaxted Parish Council and the Thaxted Society. Following discussions with Chris Hobbs of the Essex Rural Community Council, it was decided that this should take the form of a VDS.

A VDS provides a description of the existing character and main design features of the designated area. It then sets out the views of local people on how the area might be developed, in the form of supplementary planning advice. If adopted by the local council, in this case Uttlesford, local views will then become a material consideration in the determination of planning applications.

The ad hoc committee organised an exhibition at the Guildhall in September 2008. This covered a range of character and design features in Thaxted town and the surrounding parish. Visitors were asked to comment on their likes, dislikes and feelings about future development. A well attended event produced more than 200 suggestions. These were analysed and published in the Autumn edition of the ‘Thaxted Bulletin’, a journal that is sent to every house in the parish.

Visitors were also asked to volunteer in order to form a fully constituted committee to drive the Thaxted Design Statement forward. Using the analysis from the exhibition, a questionnaire was prepared and sent

to every house in the parish during May 2009. The responses were once more analysed and published in the Autumn 2009 edition of the ‘Thaxted Bulletin’.

Thereafter, the Design Statement was drawn up and discussed with representatives from the Rural Community Council and the planning department of Uttlesford Council. The revised document was then presented to and accepted by the Parish Council and the Thaxted Society before being published in this form.



Chapter One: A BRIEF HISTORY OF THAXTED



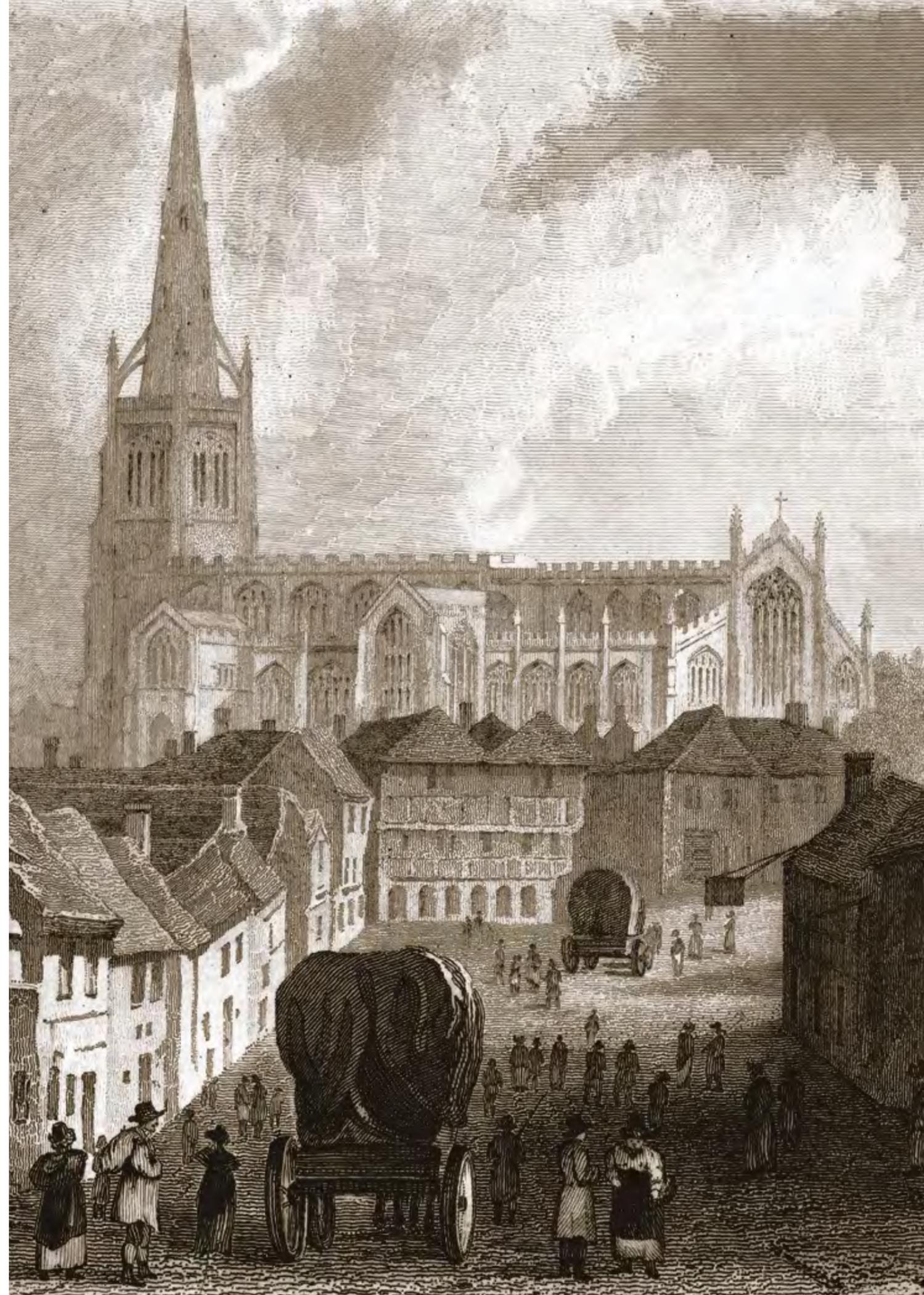
“There is no town in north Essex - and very few in England - to equal in beauty, compactness and juxtaposition of Medieval and Georgian architecture, the town of Thaxted.”
Sir John Betjamen

Thus Thaxted is described; a remarkable little town situated in rolling countryside above the river Chelmer. The town's origins are obscure. A Roman road did run through what is now Thaxted and remains from the period have been found. It is therefore possible that a Romano-British settlement existed locally. Anglo-Saxons certainly settled the site. The name Thaxted is derived from old English and means “a place of thatch”. The Domesday Book of 1086 offers further testimony, listing 55 villagers, 24 smallholders and sixteen slaves.

During the Middle Ages the town became prosperous. In the 14th century Thaxted was well known for its cutlery industry. Later wool became the local staple. The resulting wealth, and connections with the ecclesiastical college of Clare, paid for the fine parish church built between 1340 and 1520. It also accounted for the very distinctive Guildhall, circa 1470, part market hall, part lock-up, part council chamber. This economic success led to Philip and Mary granting a formal charter in 1556 giving the town borough status with mayor and corporation.

*‘Thaxted has everything,
it’s the Queen of Essex
with her Church as its Crown.
Its tall steeple proudly stands out
over the surrounding fields
and the town streets all seem to
bend in its direction over
ancient cobbles and
past timber-framed houses’*

Simon Jenkins, author and journalist



Beyond Thaxted's centre, but within the parish boundaries, today's hamlets evolved. There are notable Medieval or Tudor houses at Richmonds Green, Yardleys, Bardfield End, Cutlers Green and Boyton End. There are ancient barns, some now converted to houses. The Butcher's Arms at Bardfield End, together with the Oak at Cutlers Green, once offered succour to the locals.

The parish's most important manor house, Horham Hall, is some two miles from the town. Recognised as one of the finest pre-Reformation homes in Essex, the house was built by Sir John Cutte, under-treasurer of England in 1505. Queen Elizabeth I stayed at the hall in 1571 and again in 1578, when she received an envoy from a suitor, the Duke of Anjou, seeking her hand in marriage.

Thaxted's distinctive street pattern began to emerge in the 13th century. At the time there was a great manor house situated on the south side of Town Street. Part of its gatehouse still exists in 25 Town Street. Beyond it were parklands, hence Park Farm. By the early 15th century, houses stretched along Town Street and into Stoney Lane. They were extended further in the late 15th and 16th centuries along Watling and Newbiggen streets. By 1607, when Thaxted was visited by the antiquarian William Camden, it had taken on its present layout and much of its visual appeal. Camden noted "*Thaxted, a little mercate towne seated very pleasantly upon an high rising hill*".

Centuries of adaptation followed. Frontages were upgraded and became increasingly classical in form. Tile and slate largely replaced thatch. Usage changed. Number 48 Newbiggen Street began life as a guildhall, became the home of the local grammar school until 1711, and then became a workhouse subsequently reverting to private use. The school moved to today's Guildhall where it continued until 1878.

There was little new building. The one major exception was Clarence House, a fine Queen Anne building from 1715. Not until the 19th century was there perceptible change. A great fire led to the reconstruction of cottages along Bolford Street. Terraces appeared along Mill End. Victorian brick built residences dotted the town. A new school was built in 1879. Even so, as late as the 1920s, Thaxted retained its medieval shape and form.

Agriculture had traditionally sustained the people of the parish, at times very poorly. Six windmills ground Thaxted's corn, one of which, John Webb's tower mill (1804), remains. The town's several charities (some dating from the 13th century), Yardleys, Hunts and others, contributed to the people's welfare as well as providing funding for highways, bridges and the church.



From top left: Horham Hall, long acknowledged as one of the finest pre-Reformation brick houses in Essex, became the third subject of the renowned English artist William Henry Bartlett during his visit to Thaxted in the late eighteenth twenties. This fine engraving, along with his classic view of Thaxted Church and Guildhall seen on the previous page, are part of the Guildhall's fine art collection.

Thaxted's finest historic Grade One listed fifteenth century timbered houses featuring the legendary Dick Turpin's Cottage in the centre.

Clarence House, built in the early eighteenth century became the town's largest private dwelling house. Now considered one of the finest examples of Queen Anne architecture in the area, it is admired for its fine proportions with special interest in its Queen Anne doorway.

Oil painting by W.Wontner-Smith of Thaxted's Grade II listed brick tower John Webb Windmill circa 1880 is taken from the Guildhall's art collection. The windmill represents the pinnacle of mill design from the nineteenth century.

Top right: Exquisite watercolour by local artist, Simon Ritchie captures the peaceful tranquillity of Thaxted's unique medieval Guildhall and Market Cross as they stand astride the market square.

Swirling folk dancers taken in the Swan Hotel courtyard circa 1950.

Early sepia photograph features the boys and girls of Thaxted Council School, circa 1900.

Far right: Commemorative plaque sited on the former Thaxted home of celebrated British composer Gustav Holst.



Matters began to change in 1870, or thereabouts. Mr George Lee established his boiled sweet manufacturing company (on the site of the current Molecular Products works). It lasted a hundred years and employed a significant number of local people. In 1913 the railway arrived, well nearly; the station was located a mile away from the town centre. Nevertheless it opened up and enriched the local economy right up to its closure in 1952.

Change also affected religion. Anglicanism was initially complemented by nonconformity. An Independent Meeting house was set up in the 17th century. It subsequently became the Congregational Chapel and is now the United Reformed Church. A Baptist Chapel was built in the early 19th century and, at one time, there was a Friends' Meeting House. In 1942 a Catholic place of worship was established and from 1946, or thereabouts, the Exclusive Brethren began to establish themselves.

The early 20th century brought Thaxted something approaching national prominence. In 1910, the Countess of Warwick (of Easton Lodge) appointed Conrad Noel vicar of Thaxted. Noel was a Christian Socialist. He supported the Bolshevik Revolution and the struggle for Irish Independence. The Red Flag and the Irish tricolour flew in the church. In 1921, attempts by Cambridge undergraduates to remove them led to riots in "*the battle of the flags*". The newspapers were full of it. Questions were even asked in parliament. Less controversially, Noel and his wife Miriam introduced Morris and country dancing to the town. Both activities continue to thrive.

During the First World War, the composer Gustav Holst came to live in the town. Noel struck up a friendship with him. As a result, Holst led the choir and played the organ. Thaxted, he said, was "*the most peaceful place for composing*". Whilst living here he completed his suite '*The Planets*'. The main theme of the '*Jupiter*' movement was later transposed as '*Thaxted*' to the hymn '*I vow to thee my country*'. Holst's influence on the town endures in the form of the annual music festival.

Wars, economic change and social development have impacted on Thaxted and, from the mid-20th century, increasingly made it part of the mainstream. Population increase has led the need for new houses and the town has become integrated into the wider economy. Nevertheless, Thaxted retains its ancient charm. It is still a lovely place to live and boasts a wealth of community spirit.





'The use of colour wash in Thaxted is spectacular'...

A quotation by the notable architectural historian, the late Alex Clifton-Taylor

Chapter Two: THAXTED TODAY

The Thaxted we see today is still, at heart, a late medieval market town. Its axis lies along the B184 Great Dunmow to Saffron Walden Road. Behind the frontages of Newbiggen Street and Town Street lie traditional back lanes. Spurs radiate into Park Street and Bolford Street with a further cluster of buildings, some very ancient, around the church.

The town's appearance reflects continuous evolution in form and function over the past 500 years. Until the late 1940s it was shaped almost entirely from within. Much in evidence is the evolving Essex vernacular (the local building style). Buildings are overwhelmingly half timbered, of local oak and elm, with rendered frontages under peg tiled, slated or thatched roofs. Continuous improvement culminated in the 18th century when frontages, particularly in Town Street, were re-fashioned in neo-classical form, occasionally in brick but more often by the fitting of new doors and sashes. More recently the traditional ochred render has been transformed by colour wash. This led a notable architectural historian, the late Alec Clifton-Taylor, to declare of Newbiggen Street, "the use of colour wash here is spectacular... Applied colour has turned it into what is, in my view, one of the prettiest streets in the country." ('The Pattern of English Building')

The importance of the ancient core is not in doubt. There are 170 listed buildings including seven that are Grade I (in Stoney Lane and Watling Street) and a further seven that are listed Grade II*. Importance does not always equate with charm, but fortunately for Thaxted the two come together with pleasing results. Building is high density. 'Walls' of houses follow the natural contour from Town Street, through Watling Street and into Newbiggen Street. Buildings sit low in the landscape and exhibit a wide variety of form and material. Roof heights vary, as do pitches. Chimney stacks, of every age and variety, abound. Pevsner in his 'Buildings of England' sums up as follows. "The town as a whole is very perfect because there is truly not one house that is violently out of place. All is in scale. Nothing is too high or ostentatious." A recent Uttlesford Council character assessment of the town makes the same point: "Thaxted is one of the finest examples of a small market town in the East of England. It is of the highest environmental quality."

The focal point of Thaxted is the 14th century church. It dominates the landscape and acts as a magnet for the town's streets which, as Simon Jenkins says in 'England's Thousand Best Churches', "bend in its direction." Four particular vistas are of note. One is over fields from the Debden Road. This takes in Bolford Street, the church and the windmill. Another is from Mill End over the roofs of Town Street to the medieval Guildhall with church and treescape in the background. The third is from the Dunmow Road looking over rolling countryside towards the church and windmill. The fourth is at the entrance of Park Street where church and windmill can be seen against a foreground of half timbered houses and ancient barns.

As we have seen, Thaxted evolved as a market town with a broad main street to house the stalls and an open market under the Guildhall. It retains its weekly market together with a lively retail sector mostly in Town Street. The 20th century brought a growing service sector, mostly housed within the core. Tourism has also become an important economic activity with benefits to shops, restaurants and public houses. There is an information centre on Town Street with the focus of tourist interest being the Guildhall, the church and the windmill. All are open, thanks to volunteers, at weekends throughout the summer.

Commercial development has been less successful. Small scale enterprises have been lost from Mill End and Weaverhead Lane. The industrial/commercial land at Bellrope Meadow has, in practice, become private housing. This leaves only one large functioning enterprise, the Molecular Products site at Mill End, but even this is due to close in 2010.

Lack of economic self-sufficiency coupled with the personal transport revolution has led to a trend, apparent since the late 1940s, for Thaxted to become a largely dormitory town, albeit one which has retained much of its communal feeling.

Post-war growth is reflected in substantial housing development. This has taken three forms. There is some infill within the core. Linear development has taken place at Copthall Lane, Newbiggen Street and most particularly 1930s ribbon development along the Bardfield Road. Finally, estates of houses have been created post-war to the north east of the town centre forming an arc between Newbiggen Street, Town Street and the Bardfield Road.

In 1966, the distinguished architect Donald Insall was asked by Essex County Council to report on the state of Thaxted and its future development. In his subsequent report he applied three criteria. First, new buildings needed to be in scale, they

should not be over-assertive. Second, good building materials should be used, allowing modern housing to age as gracefully as the historic core. Finally, he warned of the importance of siting. Thaxted was “a town of close knit building frontages”. Planners should reflect this in new developments, avoiding over-spacing. Failure to apply these rules would result in a sense of “isolation and conflict”. Two subsequent reports from Uttlesford District Council, ‘Landscape Character’ and ‘Settlement Character Assessment’ together with the results of the recent parish questionnaire have further underlined the importance of these principles.

If we apply Insall’s criteria to Thaxted 45 years on there are mixed results. Infill has worked relatively well in the Tanyard and along Weaverhead Lane. The entrance to Park Street is a good blend of modern homes, converted barns, 19th century buildings and late medieval farm houses. The mistake of the former Barclays Bank, which was built out of scale, has not been repeated and there has been imaginative re-use, as dwellings, of the organ works in Orange Street. Ribbon development along Copthall Lane is visually pleasing because it is not juxtaposed with ancient buildings. The same cannot be said of Newbiggen Street where, as traditional meets modern, scale and over-spacing has created visual conflict. The estates to the east side of the town centre include some very pleasant developments which incline towards the suburban in scale. However, with the exception of Weaverhead Close, there is no obvious focus and in places houses lack individuality.

The local ‘Historic Settlement Character Assessment’ makes the same point. Though much of the new development “is a good testament to the planning process, some display(s) mediocre or poor design qualities.” It illustrates the point in a number of ways. “There is an abrupt transition between the historic core and modern developments.” The recreation ground pavilion building is of “poor architectural quality.”

‘The town as a whole is very perfect, because there is truly not one house that is violently out of place. All is in scale’

Taken from Pevsner’s ‘Buildings of England’



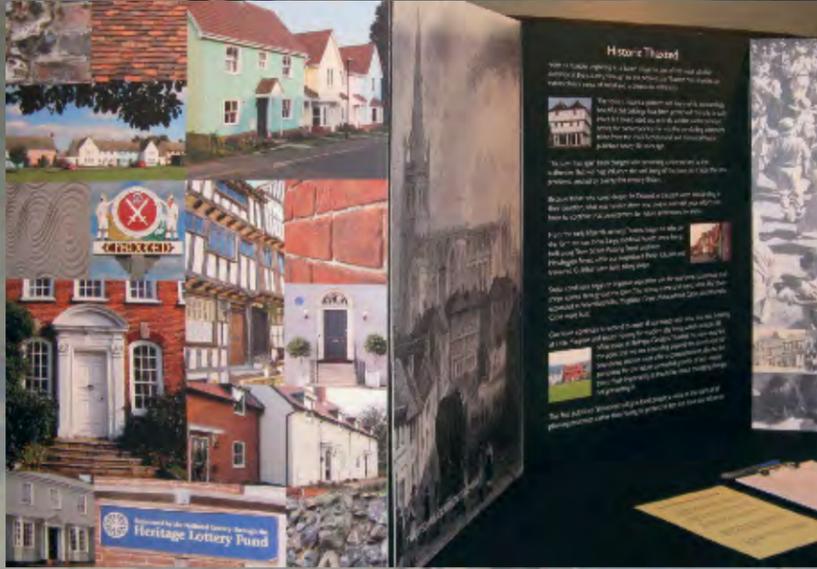
Late 20th century estates lack “open space provision.” “There are two sites on the edge of the historic core that detract from its unique qualities. These are the chemical works of Molecular and the adjacent Murco garage.”

Town growth has emphasised the need for open or green spaces. Thaxted is well blessed in this respect. There is a well established recreation ground in Newbiggen Street. Nicely planned gardens are found in Margaret Street. Opposite is a walled garden, part of Clarence House, occasionally open to the public. There are large grassed areas at Weaverhead Close and Magdalen Green. Finally, there is the space around the Windmill. Questionnaire analysis has shown the value of these assets and has also emphasised the importance of the range of footpaths that run into the immediate countryside.

A recent district council analysis of the immediate environment, ‘The Landscape Character of the Uttlesford District’ offers further contextual information. The land surrounding the town (largely Grade II) is glacial till. It reflects pre-18th century agricultural practices with irregular fields and small wooded areas, some of which go back to the Middle Ages. Intensive farming initially had the effect of denuding ancient field boundaries, with a consequent effect on wildlife. More recently, the efforts of local farmers have seen a renaissance of the hedgerows, to the benefit of the landscape as a whole. Tree conservation, however, remains an issue both in the town and the countryside beyond. Over intrusive building is also a problem and has resonance in Newbiggen Street and Watling Lane.

Thaxted’s residents are willing to embrace change. However, they also want to preserve existing assets and traditions. The sections which follow reflect the views of local inhabitants on how this might be achieved.





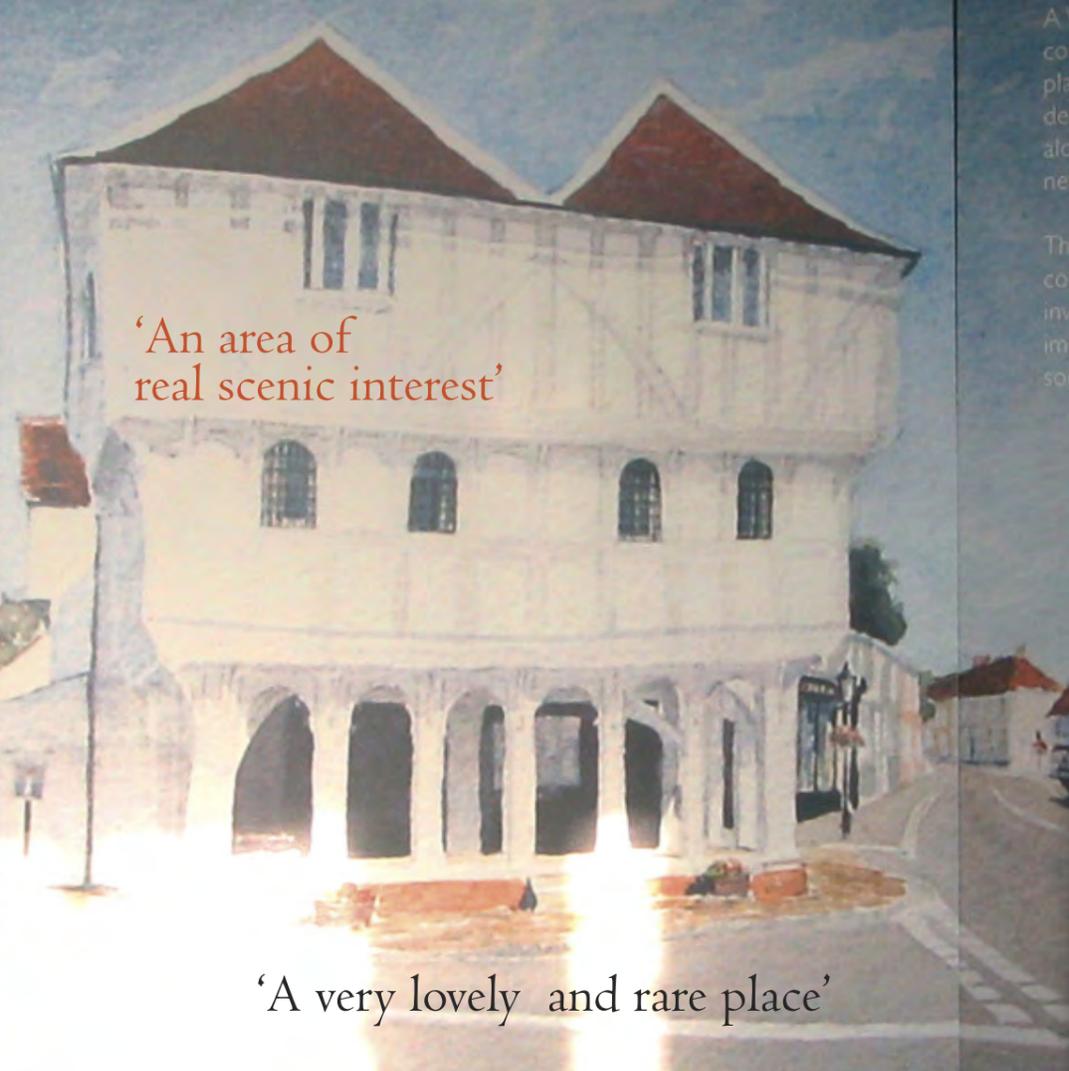
THAXTED VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

‘Everything is perfect as it is’

‘An area of real scenic interest’

‘We love the windmill and church illuminated at night’

**THAXTED
DESIGN
STATEMENT
EXHIBITION**
PLEASE VIEW IN
CLOCKWISE DIRECTION



‘A very lovely and rare place’

‘Thaxted is a place where many of the old traditions are kept’

Written responses from the Guildhall exhibition

DESIGN STATEMENT

We've all inherited a beautiful medieval town - now let us strive to protect it!

A Village Design Statement for Thaxted will contribute much to our plans for the future and help influence the way the council...



Chapter 3: A GUIDE TO THE FUTURE: THE VIEWS OF LOCAL RESIDENTS

In September 2008 an exhibition was held at the Guildhall where visitors were asked about their views on Thaxted and invited to comment on what they felt was important about every aspect of its environment.

In April 2009 every household in Thaxted was given the opportunity to fill in a 'Design Statement Questionnaire'. Its structure was determined by nearly 250 responses to the exhibition. The questionnaire was completed by almost 10% of households in the parish. Most of those responding had lived in the area for a considerable time, 21 years was the average. Their responses are summarised below.

NOTE: Questionnaire scores inserted in the text were all measured on a 1-5 scale, with 1 as the most important and 5 the least.

Life in Thaxted

When residents were asked what they liked about living in the town and its surrounding villages, they came up with the following:

First, there was a strong sense of community (2). Next, there was easy access to a range of services (2). There was a sense of safety and security about the area (2.2). Aesthetics mattered: The architectural heritage of the town was of great importance (2.2). The 'green' environment was also a factor, stressing the importance of conservation, energy saving, open spaces and access to the countryside (2).

When we probed further and asked about the issues currently and potentially affecting the town a number of very distinctive issues emerged.

Community

At the exhibition, good opinions of the town predominated. There was thought to be an excellent mix of people. The existence of a range of community groups added vibrancy. The market was a meeting place as well as a retail experience. There was bad as well as good. Dog owners were not always popular. There was too much litter in the town. Signage was excessive and needed to be rationalised.

A safe and secure place to live

A sense of community closely links with feelings of security. Residents rated Thaxted as a safe place to live (2.2). Certainly there were concerns: Lack of police presence was an issue, often for older people. "We pay for a visible presence" one contributor wrote. Some young people also reported worries. One said he would feel better if his place of worship was outside the town. Another felt that street lighting in Newbiggen Street was inadequate and led to feelings of insecurity (this was a theme in responses to the questionnaire). There was little support for one respondent who bemoaned frequent "outbreaks of hooliganism." There was a more general concern that town expansion might, in part, come at the expense of stability (there were several comments along these lines). Thus, small scale developments, single new houses or small

clusters received support, scoring 1.9 and 2.5 respectively. Larger clusters and estates were widely disliked. Larger clusters scored 3.5 and estates generated real hostility, scoring 4.5.

Local shops and services

Over 90% of the sample made use of local shops and services on a regular basis. There was strong written support for the retention of the existing retail outlets, a range of suggestions about how they might be supplemented and a fear of the possible impact of the big supermarket chains (a clear issue at the Guildhall exhibition).



The Friday market was a popular feature with younger people in particular wishing to see its opening hours extended, better to fit their lifestyles perhaps. Where issues arose they revolved around the need for more specialist providers. These ranged from DIY to banking, with the need for a cash point available 24 hours.

'I love the fact that I can do 90% of my shopping in Thaxted without using my car'

The retention of local services was considered vital. Health services, the post office, restaurants, pubs and community facilities were all thought an important part of the mix. Some, however, lamented the lack of an NHS dentistry option. The local primary school was highly valued and had a very positive reputation. One person wrote, "We must ensure that local children always have places available for them at the primary school."



'Thaxted has an excellent selection of shops which cover most of our needs'



More detailed questions revealed the importance of and satisfaction with the fire service. The police presence was also valued though many felt that its profile might be enhanced. *"We rarely see a police officer"* one resident wrote. The subject of traffic wardens provoked a mixed response. Some wished they would go away, *"Autocratic traffic wardens from Saffron Walden shipped in in pairs"* as one person put it. Others wished to give them real powers to deal with parking problems, *"Traffic wardens should be present to prevent people parking outside Green's the butchers."*, *"Cars and vans parked on yellow lines cause trouble and their owners need to be fined more."* (Questionnaire response).

'We must ensure that local children always have places available for them at the primary school'

Community resources were also valued. A separate questionnaire sponsored by the Parish Council pointed to the importance of improving community provision through a new hall. It was a view reflected in comments at the Guildhall exhibition and strongly supported in the questionnaire.

Clarance House was a particular source of local pride. Its library services were popular and on the evidence of the young people's survey, used extensively.

Sources of local employment

The need for more sources of local employment, not least for environmental reasons, was strongly felt (Tourism was one factor mentioned in relation to this). The provision of more light industry scored 1.5. Young people, however, were pessimistic about such possibilities in the future. Though 78% of them said they would like to stay in the local area, only 12% saw the possibility of local work experience against 40% who felt it was a near impossibility. This is clearly an important finding, demonstrated by the loss of light industrial land as a result of the Bellrope development and compounded by the reluctant decision of Molecular Products to move its base to Harlow. The recent 'Historic Settlement Character Assessment' (2009) notes the problem but offers little in terms of possible solutions. This should be regarded as a key issue especially in light of the emphasis given to sustainable economic growth in the 'East of England Plan' (2008).

'Large lorries and coaches are always mounting the pavement...'



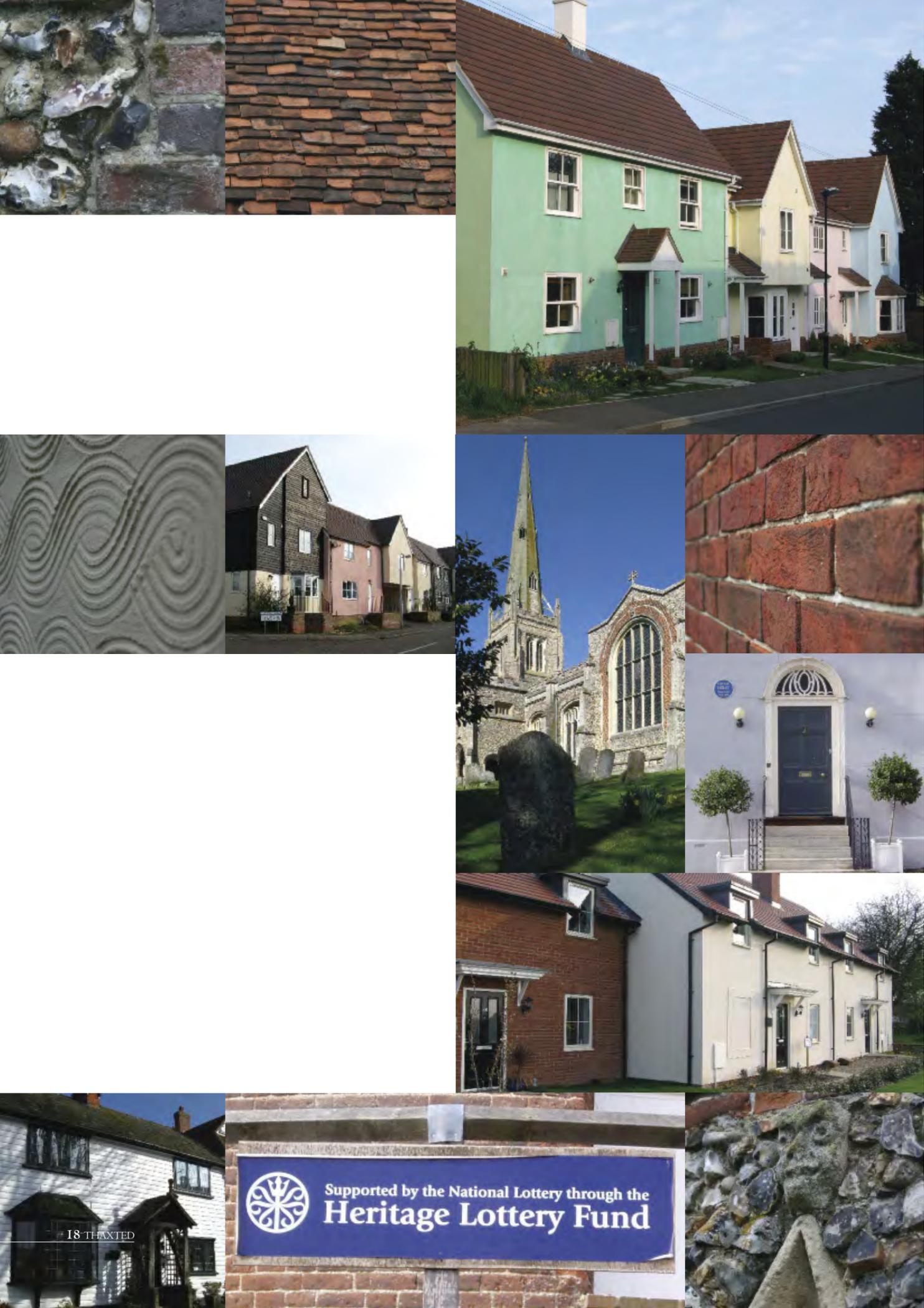
Transport and the environment

"We cannot push prams down the street with cars parked where they are". "On the whole drivers are considerate but some through traffic exceeds safety limits". "The main problem is speed in excess of 30 mph going OUT of Thaxted". "Large lorries and coaches are always mounting the pavement in the Tanyard". "There should be a 50 mph speed limit between Thaxted and Wimbish". "A crossing in Market Street would make things safer". "There is a particular problem of safety outside the primary school [due to parent parking at start and end of lessons]". "I would love to see the eastern side of Town Street paved in the same way as the west. It would be safer and less unsightly" (Questionnaire responses). "The density of traffic on the narrow country roads is most noticeable". (Thaxted Settlement Character Assessment)

The use of the car as a primary mode of transport was apparent throughout the questionnaire. Over 90% of residents supported provision for free parking. Street parking on the

other hand was seen as a problem, as was traffic congestion. Both produced extensive and strong responses. Large lorries on cramped roads were a particular cause of concern with many people favouring a 20 mph speed limit in the central area. Pedestrian safety was deemed unsatisfactory by many. Parking was over-restricted and some respondents argued that diagonal parking in Town Street might help. Public transport got mixed reviews. Older people living in Thaxted thought there was good provision. Younger people and those in outlying villages were less supportive. In the second case, closer inspection revealed the issue to be lack of access. The link to Bishop's Stortford was seen as problematic. It took over an hour to cover 12 miles.

The airport provoked a very strong response. Noise and nuisance were the key issues though there were some who saw it as an amenity not to be abused lightly.



Historic Thaxted

“Do not be afraid of modern design. As long as it is of good quality it will be an asset”. “It is not necessary to copy medieval styles” (Comments from the Guildhall exhibition). “We cannot live in the past” (Questionnaire response).

Thaxted’s historic core, the importance of its preservation through listing and the additional support provided by the conservation area were all strongly affirmed, especially by those living in the town. A very high proportion of respondents reacted to a series of questions about character features with strong support for the Essex vernacular with its chimney-scapes, thatched or peg-tiled roofs, pargetting, weather boarding, traditional brick work, Georgian style windows and wooden doors. The importance of retaining these features was emphasised by the lack of support for concrete tiles, uPVC and Velux windows.

The support for character features extended beyond the houses themselves to their boundaries. Local people really liked brick and flint walls (1.3), mixed hedges (1.6), brick walls (1.8) and formal hedges (1.8). The near ubiquitous larch lap and close board fencing was less popular (2.7) and *leylandii* actively disliked. *“I hate the site of overgrown*

conifers forming boundaries,” wrote one resident. This might give out an interesting message to the local authority, residents and developers.

The love of character features was also apparent in the advice given by residents on the matter of extensions. 96% said such developments should be in keeping with and complement the street scene. 92% said they should be sympathetic in scale, design and materials. 76% said extensions should complement existing properties and roof lines. This extended to shop fronts which 97% said should retain their character.

The Guildhall exhibition provided a view of development beyond the core. There was no need to create ‘pretend’ medieval buildings. People seemed content with modern styles but stressed the importance of using sympathetic materials, render, peg tiles, wooden windows and doors, clap boarding and the rest (a view endorsed by the recent ‘Historic Character Assessment’, p16, para 3). There was also a feeling that new building should be on a sympathetic scale. It should not be *“too conspicuous”*. At the other extreme there was some concern about *“sad buildings”*, old buildings that were in a state of decay. The house next to the Star and the old Chinese restaurant were mentioned several times.

‘Do not be afraid of modern design. As long as it is of good quality it will be an asset’



Green issues and the environment

Green issues scored well. Indeed, the importance of access to green spaces and woodland produced one of the highest scores in the entire questionnaire, 1.1 on a 99% response. The town's green spaces also figured significantly, but when asked whether there should be more, the response was broadly neutral (2.8).

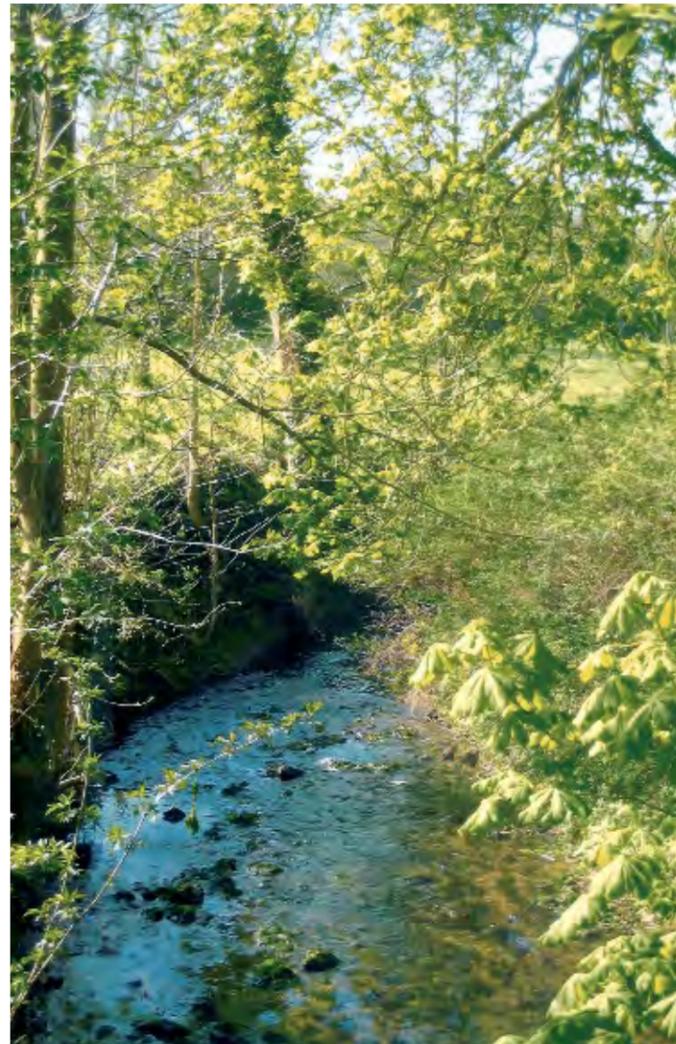
As we have seen earlier, there were other significant messages about green features, notably the strong support for hedges as boundaries. Conservation and habitat features were not specifically raised, but the plethora of local groups stressing the importance of tree conservation, footpath provision, butterfly habitats and the needs of the local bird and small mammal populations speak for themselves.

'There should not be blanket disapproval of solar panels inside the conservation area and blanket approval outside. All should be considered sympathetically on their merits'

We did look at energy needs. The Uttlesford area is a high emitter of carbon dioxide. In part this reflects the influence of the airport. It is also explained by the large number of older properties which, as a result of their construction, are poorly insulated. Local people are plainly supportive of conservation. Recycling scored highly both as an issue and in terms of the local authority's response. Micro-generation, too, was considered an issue of great importance, scoring 1.6 with a 93% response. What to do about it proved more problematic: Promoting energy efficiency proved less popular with only 53% showing support. Wind turbines were not seen as the answer with only 39% for, 41% against and 20% unsure. Solar panels proved much more popular (68% for, 20% against and 12% unsure). Respondents noted that the latter were less intrusive and should be used more extensively, subject to environmental considerations. This is a significant finding. Currently it is difficult to obtain

planning permission for solar panels in the conservation area. This disadvantages residents of thermally inefficient old houses, denying them the means of producing some of their own power via green initiatives.

Several people, responding to the questionnaire, raised the issue of green collection. There was wide support for the intentions that lay behind it, however, many felt that improvements could be made in collecting items for recycling. This response typified many, *"I dislike wheelie bins. When they are left out on non-collection days they are a real eye-sore."*



'I dislike wheelie bins. When they are left out on non-collection days they are a real eye-sore'





The future of Thaxted

There was concern about the ways in which Thaxted might be developed in the future. The lack of local sources of employment was high on the agenda and clearly needs to be considered. There were also strong feelings about future housing development. Residents of Thaxted preferred new housing to be within town limits (2.1), (*“Defining and containing”* as it is described in the ‘Settlement Character Assessment’). Extension beyond scored 3.5. Similarly, expansion within the surrounding parish scored 2.6. As we have seen, local residents were strongly opposed to the development of estates and significant housing clusters, preferring infill and smaller developments.

There was strong support for first time buyer homes (1.9), family houses (2) and accommodation for the elderly (2). So-called executive housing, however, took a pasting, 94% of residents showed their dislike with a score of 3.8.

Traffic issues loomed large. The Guildhall exhibition brought out the issue of congestion and pollution on the through road, largely put down to heavy lorries. There does seem to have been a significant rise in the number of such lorries coming through the town, possibly as a result of Sat Nav usage. The sharp bend outside the Swan Hotel formed one focal point, the junction of Dunmow Road and Bardfield Road provided another. Several of the photographs on display in the Guildhall showed just how dangerous these areas could be, particularly so at the Swan where there is the additional hazard of three side-streets running off the bend. Some respondents called for the introduction of weight limits on the major roads. Others wanted a lower speed limit. Either way they wanted heavy lorries out of the town.

Speed was another issue. It came up again and again at the Guildhall exhibition. The new 30 mph sign in Newbiggen Street was praised but many wanted the limit further reduced to 20 mph in the historic core. A crossing in Town Street was considered particularly important.

More than one respondent noted that speed was an issue for traffic *leaving* the town. Drivers were not subject to the same reminders as, say, those who passed the electronic sign at the entrance to Newbiggen Street.

At the Guildhall exhibition the importance of sympathetic planning was a real theme. A green infra-structure plan was mentioned more than once. There was also the feeling that some individuals and property companies had got away with unsightly developments. The need for future restraint was of considerable importance. Equally, the questionnaire responses emphasised the importance of preserving the historic core and preventing it from being swamped by the *“significant development pressures”* that are identified in recent Uttlesford Council position papers.



‘Traffic issues loomed large. The Guildhall exhibition brought out the issue of congestion and pollution on the through road, largely put down to heavy lorries’



Chapter Four: THAXTED - GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

The 'Historic Settlement Character Assessment' (SCA) for Thaxted makes it clear that there could be "significant development pressure" on the town. The 'Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment' (SHLAA) identifies a ring of sites around Thaxted that might be used for additional housing. On the face of it this poses a threat to what the SCA describes as "one of the finest examples of a small market town in the East of England", a place of the "highest environmental quality".

An exhibition and subsequent questionnaire have clarified local opinion on these issues and provoked a clear response from local people which leads to the following planning advice and recommendations.

THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

The historic core/conservation area: this area runs along the BI84 from Newbiggen Street to Mill End. It takes in existing branch roads and includes the area around the church which is of the highest environmental quality. Housing is largely half timbered ranging from 15th century double jettied houses in Stoney Lane to 19th and 20th century infill at either end of the main road.

The benefits of listing are recognised and fully supported. Any new build or alteration to an existing building should be in sympathy with the built environment and make use of appropriate materials.

There is a small number of neglected buildings in Mill End. They are an eye-sore and the owners should be encouraged to carry out improvements with, if necessary, the involvement of the planning authority.

- Signage, especially in Town Street should be rationalised.
- Sympathetic consideration should be given to residents wishing to incorporate renewable technology (notably solar panels) into the conservation area housing stock where its impact can be concealed.
- Where planning applications involve boundaries, care should be taken to ensure that a range of alternatives are considered. Local people favour brick or flint walling and mixed hedges (which can now be acquired in 'instant' form). These provide a more acceptable alternative to the ubiquitous lap larch fencing.
- Consideration should be given to paving the northern side of Town Street to bring it up to the standard of the southern side.
- Pedestrian access along Newbiggen Street is often seriously hindered by pavement parking. Bolford Street, too, can become badly congested as a result of poor parking. Further consideration needs to be given to these issues.

‘Thaxted is one of the finest examples of a small market town in the East of England and is of the highest environmental quality’

Historic Settlement Character Assessment of Uttlesford

‘Park Street consists of a mix of half timbered buildings, attractive barn conversions, 19th century infill and modern housing, most sympathetic in size and materials’



- Parking on the Tanyard and the lower part of Weaverhead Lane has become a real problem. Consideration should be given to imposing further parking restrictions and improving enforcement (parking on double yellow lines and pavement parking).
- An active programme of tree maintenance and planting should be considered, especially in relation to the area around the church where the existing trees are reaching the end of their lifetimes.

Town entrances: the maintenance of the approaches to the town is considered particularly important by residents. This has led to a series of recommendations.

Park Street: Park Street consists of a mix of half timbered buildings, attractive barn conversions, 19th century infill and modern housing, most sympathetic in size and materials.

Any new build or conversion should be in sympathy with the existing environment. Brickwork, in particular, should accord with the local vernacular (soft red) to avoid dissonance.

Care should be taken to preserve the “exceptional views” of church and windmill. Consequently, further development should be restricted so the entrance may remain “confined and contained” [SHLAA].

Bolford Street: this is an area of real sensitivity, forming the most picturesque entrance to the town with fine views of church and windmill. It currently consists of cottages and houses dating from the 16th to the 19th century with some 20th century infill. There is one large building, the United Reformed Church, which is set back to the north of the entrance.

Applications for new build in this area should be subject to the most vigorous scrutiny. Currently the entrance is defined and contained, sitting comfortably in the landscape.

Alterations to existing buildings should be sympathetic in scale and appearance so as to preserve harmony.

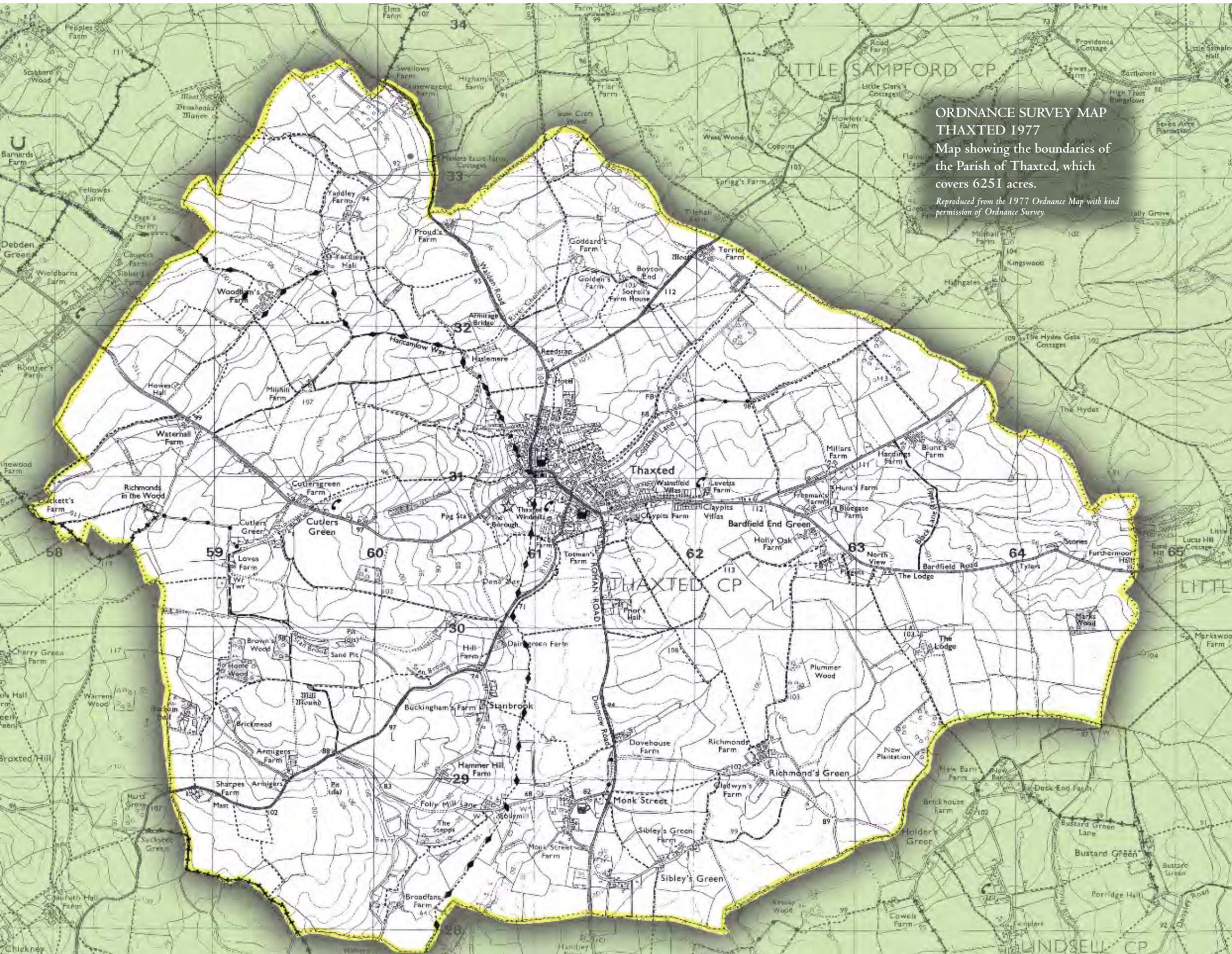
Boundary walls/fences, subject to future planning permission, should enhance the environment and be carefully considered.

Newbiggen Street: the entrance to Newbiggen Street consists largely of modern housing, mostly 20th century but with the recent addition of the Little Maypole. To the west there are views of open, rolling countryside. To the east there are playing fields.

Consideration should be given to screening the north side of the Little Maypole development with trees in order to define and soften the town entrance.

The open arable land to the west of the B184 should be retained as it provides access to the Chelmer Valley and provides good views across to the church.

The Bardfield Road: this is ribbon development comprising largely early/mid 20th century housing set well back from both sides of the road. There is some later infill to the north of the road in Magdalen Green and Barnards Field.



The possibility of developing an avenue of trees along the Bardfield Road should be considered. This would soften the approach and provide an attractive focus.

No further building should take place between Bardfield Road and Cophall Lane. Cophall Lane gives pedestrians access to the countryside, providing attractive rural views. With this in mind, thought should be given to a tree screen behind the Barnards Field development.

The Eastern/North-Eastern Area: this comprises Weaverhead Lane, Wedow Road, Brook View, Weaverhead Close, the Mead and Guelphs Lane. This is an area largely made up of 20th century housing with some 21st century infill. Weaverhead Close is an attractive area of mid-20th century houses surrounding a large green. The remainder is made up of late 20th century residential estates some abutting farm land, some facing the playing fields. The area is defined to the east by open agricultural land and maturing scrub land, to the north is the new Bellrope Meadow Estate.

Whilst accepting that the county council land may need to be developed, consideration should be given to the retention of at least some of the scrub land to the east of Brook View so as to provide green access, a tree screen and a wildlife area.

Any new housing should be limited to infill or small clusters. There is strong local opposition to the construction of further estates. Provision for green space as a focus should be considered.

Current town limits should be as far as possible respected.

Housing should be to scale, reflect the local vernacular so far as materials are concerned and be of good design. Attention to boundary fencing should reflect the views previously expressed.

Surrounding villages and hamlets: questionnaire returns indicate less support for development in these areas. It is therefore recommended that requests along these lines be considered with great care, that is, very limited development in the parish outside of Thaxted town boundaries.

[Note: the supplementary planning advice is in accord with the provisions of Uttlesford Local Plan (2005) [ULP] see Thaxted Inset, Gen2 & 6, Policies H3, 7-11, IC 2&3, RS2, Env15]

COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY

The 2005 'Uttlesford Local Plan' stressed the importance of local employment and the safeguarding of commercial sites. Since that time, Thaxted's principal employers, Molecular Products, successors to companies that have occupied the site for more than a hundred years, are moving to Harlow. Despite its strong desire to stay in Thaxted, the company was offered no support in its endeavours to find an alternative site after expansion at Mill End was opposed by local residents. Similarly, Cowell and Cooper, local employers since the 1940s, have moved to Haverhill following a similar, futile effort to find a local site. As a consequence, something like one hundred local jobs have been lost. There is now significant concern, especially amongst the young, at the loss of employment opportunities.

Urgent consideration needs to be given to the needs of local employment in the Thaxted area on economic grounds and on grounds of sustainability. There is a feeling that we have been overlooked.

Existing sites should be re-evaluated for commercial potential.

There are precedents for light industrial developments outside the town limits and serious consideration should be given to such a site for Thaxted in the hope that it will encourage new commercial users.

Further consideration should be given, where applicable, to the conversion for commercial use of redundant farm buildings within the parish as at Claypits, Bardfield Road (light industrial), Buckingham Farm Stanbrook (children's nursery), and Woodhams Farm, Cutlers Green (agricultural machinery).

[Note: the supplementary planning advice is in accord with the ULP see pp 5&7, Policy E2, E4&5, for homeworking section 4.16, built environment 5.1, Env policies 1-3, 7-9, RS 2 and Thaxted Inset]



'Pedestrian access along Newbiggen Street is often seriously hindered by pavement parking'

be given to further measures possibly including speed limit marks on the road.

Weight limits should be placed on the B184, save for delivery and for local farm traffic.

Existing car parks should remain free to use. This would avoid further on street parking, help pedestrians and meet the needs of visitors.

More effective speeding and parking enforcement measures should be considered.

Tourism: this is an important and growing source of income with Thaxted prominent on the local tourist trail. Road congestion and the presence of oversized lorries does not help. There is therefore scope for a broad strategy relating to tourism in the three key towns, Saffron Walden, Thaxted and Great Dunmow. Part of that strategy is laid out above.

The maintenance of a broad range of services: the questionnaire offers strong support for the continuation of key local services, the school, the post office, the fire brigade and the doctors' surgery. Scope exists for NHS dentistry. Public transport provision can also be improved through a more direct service to Bishop's Stortford. Amongst concerns are the lack of a more consistent police presence and lack of traffic management and parking enforcement. Finally, residents hope that the town will at some stage get a larger hall for sporting and recreational purposes.

Retail: this is an important issue for residents. There is currently a good range of shops, restaurants and licensed premises which should, as far as possible, remain. Gaps in provision remain and applications for new retail provision should be sympathetically received. Residents also hope that an easily available cash machine will be provided in Town Street.

[The issues raised above are in accord with the ULP, see 5.1, 3.5(access), 3.7, Gen 1, 6 & 8, 3.18, Env 11, RS 2&3]

APPENDIX I: OTHER ISSUES RAISED

The Airport: overhead noise is a source of real concern to residents. There is strong questionnaire support for the stand being taken by the district and county councils on limiting airport expansion.

Traffic & Parking: the SCA notes of Thaxted, "the density of traffic on narrow country roads, making journeys to and from the larger centres of employment and the airport, is most noticeable." Local people concur with these sentiments. There is too much traffic coming through Thaxted too fast. The sharp turn at the Swan public house is particularly dangerous, especially for passing lorries which appear to be using the B184 as a short cut. The whole issue

will be further exacerbated by the suggestion that Sainsbury's vehicles should be routed through the town, out of hours, en route to Saffron Walden. A strategy for dealing with the problem is urgently needed and will require close liaison between parish, district and county councils. Recommendations are as follows.

Consideration should be given to further traffic calming measures including a 20 mph speed limit extending from Mill End through Town Street and Watling Street.

Speeding enforcement remains a problem, particularly for traffic leaving the town via Newbiggen Street. Consideration should therefore

THAXTED DESIGN STATEMENT

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We've all inherited a beautiful medieval town



- now let us strive to protect it!