

## THAXTED – September 2009

### Introduction.

In 2007 the Council carried out assessments of some of the historic settlements within the district as part of the background study work on the Uttlesford Local Development Framework. The settlements studied were along the M11 and A120 corridors where there was expected to be greatest development pressure and Thaxted was not included in this initial list. Responses to the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) which the Council has recently completed has shown that there could be significant development pressure in Thaxted and this Character Assessment has now be done as an addition to the previous list. It has been done following the same methodology and practise.

Thaxted is one of the finest examples of a small market town in the East of England. It is of the highest environmental quality with numerous historic buildings of quality, attracting many visitors. Probably the three most famous and best recognised buildings are the church of St John the Baptist dating from the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Windmill built in 1804 and the 15<sup>th</sup> century Guildhall The latter building was selected to illustrate the cover of 'Buildings of England, Essex, by Nikolaus Pevsner, recognised as being the author of the finest reference books of their type.

Pevsner refers to the fact that Thaxted in the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries was one of the most prosperous towns in Essex competing in business importance with Saffron Walden for example. The manufacture of cutlery was important during the late C14I when over a third of the adult male population was thus employed. The Guild Hall was built for the Thaxted cutlers who used it as a meeting place until the decline of this industry in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

It is worth noting that during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, The Manse on Town Street became the home of Gustav Holst where he composed 'The Planets' suit, his most celebrated work. At this time Holst noted that it was *'the most peaceful place for composing.'*

This character assessment evaluates the environmental capacity of the town to accommodate future growth by

- Summarising its general character.
- Describing the historic core and its relationship with the built up area of Thaxted as a whole.
- Summarising the general function the landscape performs in relation to the built up area and the historic core, particularly on the approach roads,

- which are the areas most susceptible to development pressures and in relation to the larger open spaces within the settlement.
- Analysing the quality and function of these landscapes.
  - Summarising in broad terms the effect of development and whether it would diminish, improve or have little or no effect on the sense of place and local distinctiveness of the settlement.

### **General character.**

Thaxted is set astride the B184, about half way between Saffron Walden and Great Dunmow and is a focal point in the local rural road network. In this respect the density of traffic on the narrow country roads, making journeys to and from the larger centres of employment and the airport is most noticeable. There is a small shopping area, an active market and a primary school. Thaxted is recognised as being an important local centre and as such is identified as a key rural settlement in the Uttlesford Local Plan, adopted in 2005. The population is currently about 2,600.

The village is situated on the eastern slopes of the Chelmer Valley. The northern and south eastern parts of the village lie on relatively high ground. The lower areas, centred on Park Street, The Tanyard and Copthall Lane lie in the tributary valley of of the Cripsey Brook. Thaxted is surrounded by attractive open undulating countryside generally in intensive agricultural use. Most is classified as being of Grade 2 quality, apart from some low lying areas alongside the river Chelmer.

As set out above Thaxted is one of the finest examples of a small market town in the East of England whose high environmental quality are well recognised. The central historic core, that is described below, is surrounded and abutted by several distinct areas of 20<sup>th</sup> century development accessed by Weaverhead Lane, land to the north west of Newbiggen Street and land either side of Bardfield Road. There is clear visual demarcation between these areas and the historic core which is a designated Conservation Area.

Thaxted's greatest locational disadvantage is its position in relation to Stansted Airport, lying as it does immediately below the flight approach path where the presence of aircraft in the sky is a constant reminder of the Third London Airport. Most of the community falls within the 57 Leq contour. In this respect Government advice considers whilst that noise levels at this category need not be a determining factor in granting planning permission, such noise levels are not desirable.

## **The historic core and its relationship with the built up area of the town as a whole.**

The dominant aspect of historic Thaxted is the spire of the magnificent church that reaches a height of 181 feet. It dominates not only the historic core but it is visible from many of the approach roads and is therefore particularly important in this respect. Pevsner describes it thus '*The church lies high up, at the N end of the town, visible as a climax from everywhere*'. Whist acknowledging there are few other buildings to be remembered singly Pevsner summarises by saying '*the town as a whole is very perfect, chiefly because there is truly not one house in it that would appear violently out of place. All is in scale, nothing too high or too ostentatious, mostly white, cream, pink plastering or exposed timber framing*'.

Praise indeed. Pevsner's words were first printed in 1954 since which time much new development has occurred, some of it displaying mediocre or poor design qualities. Notwithstanding this, it is generally good testament to the planning process to be able to reflect that the historic qualities as described by Pevsner half a century earlier, remain largely intact today.

There are about 170 individually listed buildings in the main part of Thaxted, (excluding the outlying greens such as Bardfield End Green, Boyton End, Cutler's Green, Monk Street, Richmond's Green and Stanbrook). The great majority are located in the designated conservation area. 7 are listed Grade 1 including the Church, the Guildhall, Clarence House and numbers 1-4 Stoney Lane. There are also 7 buildings listed grade II\*, including the Windmill and The Manse. The majority of listed buildings (25%) are from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries are well represented (17%) as are the 16<sup>th</sup> century (17%), the 18<sup>th</sup> century (20%) and the 19<sup>th</sup> century (21%).

Expressed in percentage terms the historic core of the town centre as defined by the designated Conservation Area, represents about 43% of the built up part of the town.



**Figure 1 - The Guildhall, heart of the Historic Core**

The historic core is compact and largely unaltered. For the most part there is an abrupt transition between historic core and modern developments constructed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the latter developments follow design principles set out in the 'Essex Design Guide', achieving a mixed success rate.

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 whose characteristics are discussed in comment relating to Sector 5 below.

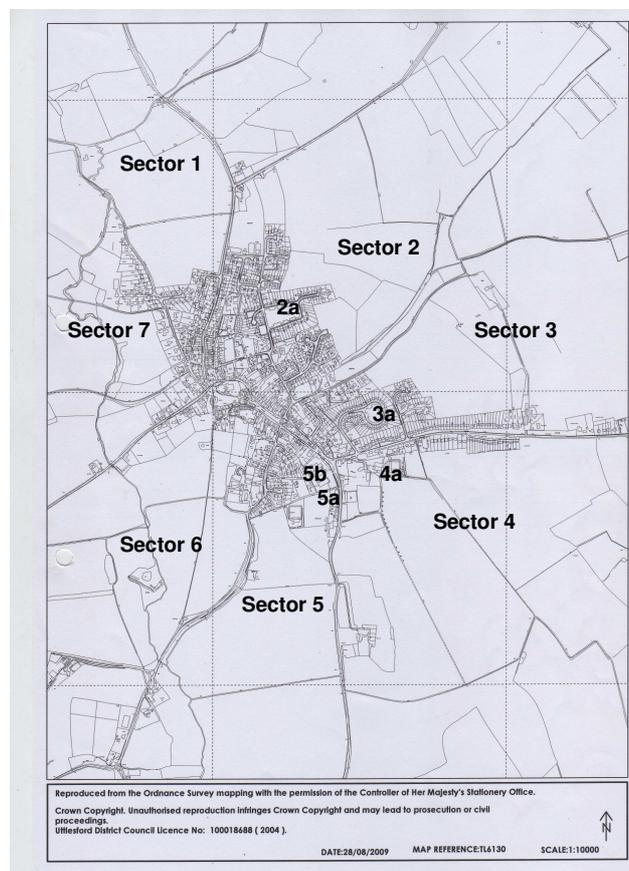
The roofscape of the historic core is noteworthy where the juxtaposition of different shapes and angles, heights and materials of tile, slate and thatch and chimneys of varying styles, makes an important contribution to the street scenes. The varied street levels add to the general interest. The yellows, pinks, oranges, blues and greens are colours in which the predominant render finish to historic buildings, are frequently painted.

Throughout the conservation area there are trees in abundance, some of which have been made subject to Tree Preservation Orders. The churchyard is an important environmental and historic space, setting off the magnificent church with open space to the front and trees to the rear providing a backcloth. Some important boundary walls exist, including the Grade 1 wall to Clarence House. Walls are generally of brick construction although a few are constructed of flint.

The spatial dimensions of street widths and the overall relationship of buildings to urban spaces, combined with their varied characteristics, both historic and architectural makes for an historic environment of the highest quality.

Thus the architectural and historic importance of the historic core and the dominance of its church spire remain vitally important visual characteristics that must be taken into account and respected by any new development proposed.

**The quality and general function of landscapes in and adjacent to the town by Sector and a broad statement as to the effect of development in each Sector.**



**Sector 1. Land between Watling Lane and Bellrope Gardens, including the B184 approach from Saffron Walden and Boyton Mill Place (formerly Fox and Pheasant PH ).**

*Quality of Landscape.* The landscape is generally open arable farmland consisting of large fields. Land is steeply undulating on the B184 approach from Saffron Walden with glimpses of the church spire between gaps of a strong hedge roadside boundary. Closer to the edge of the settlement a hedge defines the B184 on its western boundary. Here the land is open arable and slopes down

to the valley bottom. There are prominent views of the church spire which dominates the local scene. Viewed from Watling Lane the same land rises steeply to the village edge where views of the church spire once again dominate

Boyton Mill Place to the east of the B184 is a two storey building of limited quality that was extensively extended in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its bulk visually distracts from this approach. The last use was an hotel and it is now currently disused. Glimpses of the church spire are apparent when viewed through its curtilage on the Sampford Road. Between Boyton Mill Place and the edge of the built up area are located playing fields and an associated pavilion of poor architectural quality. The open nature of this site provides views of the church spire which is highly visible from these closer locations. Several public footpaths traverse part of this sector.

*General function of landscape.* The landscape in this location performs the function of clearly defining and containing the extent of the built form. It is accessible to the public via public footpaths and the parish playing fields. Important views of the church spire are provided from a number of publicly accessible locations.



**Figure 2 - Sector 1 from Watling Lane**

*Broad statement of the effect of development.* Development on Sector 1 land would not impact directly on the historic core due to the presence of the modern existing housing separating the two areas. However development, dependant on its exact location, would have detrimental impacts on views of the church spire, the dominant landmark building in Thaxted, thus diminishing the sense of place and local distinctiveness. Another principal effect of development would be to extend the village into open arable farmland.

**Sector 2. Land between Bellrope Gardens and Copthall Lane, including the Sampford Road approach and open space at Weaverhead Close (2a).**

*Quality of Landscape.* Viewed from Sampford Road this extensive tract of open arable countryside is defined at the settlement edge by hedges and trees above which the scene is dominated by the church spire, visible in the distance.



**Figure 3 - Bellrope Meadow from Sampford Road**

The northern edge of Copthall Lane that forms the southern boundary of this sector is a narrow country lane providing access to a vehicular and plant store currently owned by J. F. Knight. The arable field pattern between the lane and hedges and trees running parallel to it is small scale and linear and differs in character from the more open agricultural land encountered elsewhere.



**Figure 4 - Copthall Lane looking west**

In the centre of this Sector and adjacent to the western edge of the built up area there are two areas of former agricultural land that have matured into scrubland characterised by young self set trees and other vegetation that are rapidly colonising the two areas. One notice proclaims that land to the east of Wedow Road is owned by Endurance Estates whilst the other tract to the south east of The Mead and Guelph's Lane is owned by Essex County Council who advise that *'persons entering this land and using it do so with the permission of Essex County Council...'* Both areas form part of the open countryside and if left undisturbed will shortly provide distinctive environmental and ecological habitats.



**Figure 5 - Land east of Wedow Road, owned by Endurance Estates**

The extensive open space at Weaverhead Close, owned by the District Council, rises gently from Weaverhead Lane. Its open nature forms the only useful area of open space in this area of 20<sup>th</sup> century developments. Mature trees define its edges and additional planting would further enhance this space that is properly defined in the adopted Local Plan as being a 'Protected Open Space of Environmental Value'.



**Figure 6 - Open Space at Weaverhead Close**

Several public footpaths give access to parts of this sector and one to the north of Copthall Lane seems to be particularly well used.

*General function of landscape.* The landscape in this location performs the function of clearly defining and containing the extent of the built form. It is accessible to the public via public footpaths. The open space at Weaverhead Close provides publicly available open space and an extensive open play area within a relatively dense residential sector of Thaxted characterised by a number of late 20<sup>th</sup> century residential estates without similar open space provision.

*Broad statement of the effect of development.* Development on Sector 2 land would not impact directly on the historic core due to the presence of the modern development separating the two areas. Development to the south of Sampford Road would have detrimental impacts on views of the church spire, the dominant landmark building in Thaxted thus diminishing the sense of place and local distinctiveness in this location. Development off Copthall Lane would result in unacceptable changes and the destruction of a narrow country lane and a small scale linear agricultural landscape. Another principal effect of development would be to extend the village into open arable farmland. In the case of land to the east of Wedow Road, The Mead and Guelph's Lane, development would intrude beyond clearly defined limits into maturing scrubland. It would represent a

significant gain if these areas could become formally designated and available for open space and properly managed.

### **Sector 3. Land between Copthall Lane and Bardfield Road and open space at Magdalen Green (3a).**

*Quality of Landscape.* Land to the south side of Copthall Lane is arable and open. The lane is particularly attractive as it approaches the existing built up area with steep banks and overhanging trees and hedges providing a particularly attractive rural environment. Land in this location rises quite steeply to meet 20<sup>th</sup> century development at Barnards Field.



**Figure 7 - Barnards Field from Copthall Lane**

Sector 3 on its southern edge is defined by mid 20<sup>th</sup> century housing at Bardfield Road and is of no particular architectural merit. At the edge of the existing Development Limits the prominent church spire comes into view whilst the Windmill in full sail is prominent when viewed from closer in.

Magdalen Green, a grass sward with single mature tree, is of limited visual environmental quality despite its formal designation in the local Plan to the contrary. Nevertheless it performs an important function of providing a recreation area, open in character, in a residential sector where no similar facility exists. The area could be considerably enhanced by additional tree planting.



**Figure 8 - Magdalen Green**

*General function of landscape.* The landscape in this location, as so frequently is the case, performs the function of clearly defining and containing the extent of the built form. Important views of the church spire and Windmill are provided from selected locations.

*Broad statement of the effect of development.* . Development on Sector 3 land would not impact directly on the historic core due to the presence of the modern existing housing separating the two areas. The principal effect of development would be to extend the village into open arable farmland. Development off Copthall Lane would be seriously detrimental to the particularly attractive rural characteristics of this part of the Sector.

**Sector 4. Land between Bardfield Road and Dunmow Road, including parking/storage area and buildings to rear of the Fire Station (4a).**

*Quality of Landscape.* Land to the south west of Bardfield Road is very open and undulating agricultural land with long extensive open views over the countryside.



**Figure 9 - View west from Bardfield Road**

Approaching the junction of Bardfield Road with the B184, there is a modern Fire station next to which is located a visitor coach park. To the rear of the coach park separate tracks provide access to Claypits Farmhouse, a grade 11 listed building within the Conservation area. Nearby but beyond the Conservation Area is a complex of small scale barns, some of which appear to be currently used as storage and other low key commercial activities. Other parts of the site are used as car parking for Molecular Products (site 5a) and timber processing. It is understood that Molecular Products are moving in 2010 so the compound used by them for car parking here will become redundant after this date. On the eastern boundary is situated a large scale agricultural storage building and grain silos. The whole is an accumulation of buildings in mixed condition. From examination of a late 19<sup>th</sup> century map of the area it would seem that the storage buildings closer to the Grade 11 listed property 'Claypits Farmhouse, a mid 15<sup>th</sup> century open Hall House, are probably 19<sup>th</sup> century remnants of previous agricultural buildings forming part of Claypits Farm. These are small scale, with horizontal wooden boarding and roofs of tin or asbestos. Unfortunately internal access could not be obtained when surveying.



**Figure 10 - Buildings at Claypits Farm**

Land between Dunmow Road and the Claypits Farm complex consists of tennis courts, pasture and paddocks, some of which lie within the Conservation Area.

A number of public footpaths traverse parts of this sector.

*General function of landscape.* The landscape in this location, as elsewhere, performs the function of clearly defining and containing the extent of the built form. It is accessible to the public via a number of public footpaths. The barns at Claypits Farm are remnants of a former more intensive agricultural complex. For the most part their relatively small scale and traditional appearance is harmonious with the nearby listed building and edge of the Conservation Area.

*Broad statement of the effect of development.* Development on Sector 4 land beyond existing Development limits would not impact directly on the historic core due to the presence of the modern existing housing separating the two areas. The principal effect of development here would be to extend the village into open arable farmland.

However development or redevelopment at Claypits Farm complex would have an impact. As noted above the small scale of the existing barns are generally harmonious with the nearby listed building and the edge of the Conservation area. Redevelopment of this area could be successfully achieved but only if such proposals were small scale and restricted to the existing footprint of the original area and excluding the eastern part of the site (timber processing, agricultural storage and grain silos). Redevelopment should be in the form of a single storey courtyard constructed of timber with horizontal weatherboarding and slate roof to reflect the 19<sup>th</sup> century agricultural complex that once existed. If this course is pursued a design brief should be produced and decisions reached as to whether or not some of the existing fabric should be retained. Two storey

detached housing would be entirely inappropriate here. A new access directly onto the Bardfield Road would be an advantage but not essential.

**Sector 5. Dunmow Road to Park Street, including the chemical works, Molecular Products, Mill End (5a) and the Murco Garage site(5b).**

*Quality of Landscape.* The approach from Great Dunmow is characterised by open undulating countryside in which the church spire dominates in some locations. The approach from Park Lane is similarly characterised by undulating open countryside. There is a very clear distinctive break between open countryside and the edge of the settlement to the south east of Park Street. Public footpaths skirt the edges of this sector.



**Figure 11 - East side of Park Street at village edge**

Sector 5a is the site of Molecular Products at Mill End whose modern and relatively large industrial buildings with their shallow pitched roofs, outdoor storage and extensive parking, seriously detracts from the local environment and nearby listed buildings. It is understood that the company intends moving in 2010. The adopted Local Plan states that '*The existing chemical works site will be safeguarded from redevelopment or change of use to other land uses*'

There are three listed buildings within the curtilage fronting the site, one with pyramidal roof dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and two others, linear in appearance from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. These buildings are much altered, particularly internally.



**Figure 12 - Molecular chemical site**

Sector 5b is the nearby Murco Garage whose bright colours and signage appear particularly disruptive when viewed against the backdrop of the church spire.



**Figure 13 - Murco Garage site**

*General function of landscape.* The landscape in this location contains the southern approach to the settlement and clearly defines and contains the extent of the built form. It is accessible to the public via public footpaths in places. The Molecular and Murco sites seriously detract from the historic core.

*Broad statement of the effect of development.* Development on Sector 5 land beyond existing Development limits would impact on the southern extent of the

historic core due to its proximity in this approach. Additionally the effect of development here would be to extend the village into open arable farmland.

However, properly designed redevelopment would provide real environmental and visual improvements to both the Molecular chemical and Murco garage sites.

A design brief was prepared in 1997 for the Molecular site that considered a predominately residential redevelopment (excluding detached dwellings) based around a courtyard design solution, restoring, repairing and converting the existing listed buildings to flats and/or other uses. The stated design objective set out in this brief was *'to create a new linear street to the rear of the site'*. This sketch which is considered to still be relevant and appropriate, is included at Appendix 1.

A decision relating to the future use of the site will need to be made balancing the need to retain local employment as against securing a real environmental gain. Whether new development is residential or commercial, narrow span buildings with steep roofs with traditional render or weatherboard wall finishes, sympathetic in scale form and materials to the historic town and existing listed buildings will be necessary to provide the correct architectural solution.

With the current owners vacating the site next year, the reality could be that the existing inappropriate buildings will remain if the site continues to be safeguarded from redevelopment or change of use, as currently stated in the existing adopted plan.

As set out above the Murco site is visually disruptive. However its value and importance as a local service provider is well recognised. Whilst redevelopment in the short term is not promoted by this assessment, should the present enterprise prove uneconomically viable in the future, redevelopment with new buildings fronting the street would provide a significant visual improvement. A short term improvement would be secured by removing/rationalising existing signage, should such an opportunity arise through the planning process.

In summary the importance of both these sites in terms of local employment and services is recognised. However both are detrimental to the high environmental and historic qualities of this part of Thaxted whose redevelopment would secure real environmental improvements in this most sensitive of locations.

In the circumstances the author's view on balance is that sensitive redevelopment, principally residential in line with the principles as set out above is the only realistic means of securing real visual improvements on this important location that lies within the Conservation Area and forms part of the historic core

## **Sector 6. Park Street to Bolford Street.**

*Quality of Landscape.* The landscape is generally open arable farmland. The Park Street approach is undulating rising agricultural land providing exceptional views of the church and windmill both from further afield and particularly at the edge of the village when viewed from the access to Park Farm and The Stables.



**Figure 14 - Parish spire from Bolford Street**

The Bolford Street approach is particularly attractive with its tree and hedge lined edges providing views across undulating countryside. The church spire dominates the approach view and its presence increases as the built up edge is reached. There is a very clearly defined edge to the settlement in the valley bottom. Several public footpaths traverse parts of this sector.

*General function of landscape.* The general function of the landscape in this Sector is to contain the south western edge of the settlement and designated Conservation Area and provide splendid view points from the several footpaths that cross the area.

*Broad statement of the effect of development.* . Development on Sector 6 land beyond existing Development limits would detrimentally impact on the western parts of the historic core due to its proximity in this location and would, dependant on its precise location, be highly damaging to key views of the church and windmill. Additionally the effect of development here would be to extend the village into open farmland.

## Sector 7. Bolford Street to B184



**Figure 15 - Parish spire from valley bottom**

*Quality of Landscape.* The landscape is remote farmland rising from the valley bottom to the clearly defined edge of the north western part of Thaxted. There are prominent views of the church spire from some locations. Several public footpaths and bridleways traverse parts of this sector.

*General function of landscape.* The landscape in this location performs the function of clearly defining and containing the extent of the built form. It is accessible to the public via public footpaths. Important views of the church spire are provided from a number of publicly accessible locations, particularly from within the Chelmer valley accessed from Watling Lane.

*Broad statement of the effect of development.* Development on Sector 1 land would impact on the historic core at Bolford Street, where, dependant on precise location, important views of the church could be compromised. The principal effect of development would be to extend the village into remote farmland in the Chelmer Valley.

## **Overall summary.**

The historic core is of considerable historic and architectural importance for the reasons expressed. In these respects its greatest assets are the church, the windmill and the guildhall. Development on many of the approach roads would be inappropriate as views of the church spire and/or the windmill would be compromised.

It is considered that appropriate redevelopment of the Molecular Products site (Sector 5a) would positively and significantly improve the sense of place and local distinctiveness by removing existing development that has a seriously detrimental effect on the southern part of the historic core. Although the importance of the site in providing local employment and services is recognised, it is considered the only practical means of achieving much needed visual improvements would be to redevelop it, principally for residential use. Appendix 1 below and supporting text above, illustrates how this could be properly achieved.

Similarly, sensitive and small scale residential redevelopment of part of the Claypits Farm complex (Sector 4a) as described above is considered appropriate.

In relation to Sectors 4,5, 6 and 7 the conclusion reached is that development (except at 4a and 5a) would have a detrimental impact on parts of the historic core. Development on the approach roads of all sectors would extend development into the open countryside beyond clearly defined limits, diminishing the sense of place and local distinctiveness of the settlement.

Additionally the environment of the whole community is detrimentally affected by regular and frequent flights of aircraft landing at Stansted airport. This combined with the limitations of the rural road network, are additional reasons that make Thaxted inappropriate for large scale development.

