

SULGRAVE CONSERVATION AREA – CHARACTER STATEMENT

INTRODUCTION

Sulgrave is approximately 10 kilometres (6.5 miles) north east of Banbury in undulating sparsely populated countryside to the west of the District. It is a compact, attractive village with a population of just over 400, located near the headwaters of the River Tove on a site which slopes very gently downwards from south west to north east. The original Conservation Area was designated in 1969 and covered the part of the village around the Manor. This was extended in 1981 to embrace most of the settlement.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Archaeological excavations between 1960 and 1970 revealed that there was a settlement of early Britons in Saxon times at the place called Soulgrieve. The grassy mound to the west of the Parish Church known as Castle Hill was the site of a timber hall owned by two Saxon nobles dating from the late 10th century. In the early 11th century the hall was altered and repaired and a stone building was erected to the north. During the Norman Conquest one of William's knights took over the site and further modifications were made to the buildings and surrounding ramparts. The present ringwork is said to date from the early 12th century but by the middle of that century the whole site was abandoned. In the Domesday Book of 1086 there is reference to a single manor with a recorded population of 27.

There are no village maps earlier than the 19th century in existence, but it is thought that the village began around Castle Hill where there is evidence of a later manorial complex of dwellings in its south side. The settlement may then have grown along a single street, the line of Magpie and Manor Roads where traces of settlements have been found north of Spinners Cottages and on the south side of Manor Road adjoining the present Manor.

There are a number of well-preserved ridge-and-furrow patterns of early cultivation around the village. The common fields of Sulgrave were enclosed by a 1767 Act of Parliament. By 1801 there was a record of 414 people living in the parish, close to the present village population. In the 19th century Sulgrave did not experience the same growth as other villages nearer to main roads and railways, still remaining an essentially agricultural community. Today the village survives with a Parish Church, a Wesleyan Chapel (1863) and one public house. The tiny Reading Room on Magpie Road, a listed early 18th century building, was once a charity school for poor boys in the village, but now no village school survives. In the latter part of the 20th century a number of modern houses have been built on infill plots within the Conservation Area which have used natural or reconstructed stone but in general have not had a negative effect on the character of the area.

THE CHARACTER STATEMENT

Sulgrave has developed around a street pattern forming a long rectangle with a cross link (School Street) approximately one third of the way along its length. The smaller area in the rectangle defined by this cross link is dominated by the grade II* listed Parish Church of St James and the adjacent Castle Hill, a scheduled ancient monument. A large part of the greater rectangle east of the cross link is dominated by Sulgrave Manor, a grade I Tudor manor house.

The approach to Sulgrave from the west is across open, elevated country with a glimpse of rooftops and the church tower between the trees. The road drops gently towards the village entrance and start of the Conservation Area with the attractive thatched Dial House on the left, a fine example of a 17th century long house with a range of stone and slated barns alongside. Across the road the Old Vicarage can be glimpsed amongst tall trees, a large limestone building also with 17th century origins but remodelled and enlarged in the mid 19th century, said to be the work of the famous Victorian church architect G. E. Street. The narrow route of Park Lane forks off to the right just past the Old Vicarage in front of a large triangular green dominated by two magnificent copper beech trees, under which is located the grade II listed village stocks. The original stocks were taken down in 1850 and stored by the village carpenter at the time, only to be rediscovered in 1933 and reconstructed using some of the original timber and metalwork.

St James' Church sits within a long narrow churchyard which borders Church Street to the south and is linked to Magpie Road in the north by a fine avenue of yew trees. The building, in coursed limestone rubble and squared stone, dates from the 13th century but has a number of 16th and 19th century alterations. Within the base of the tower there is a small doorway with a triangular stone head, said to have been removed from the earlier Saxon church, which was located north west of the present village. Inside the present church there is a small brass wallplate commemorating the death in 1584 of Lawrence Washington, the original owner of Sulgrave Manor and his wife Amy, ancestors of the American President, George Washington. The plate includes the family coat of arms based on two stripes and three stars, said to be the inspiration for the American flag. The west side of the churchyard is largely bordered by the impressive medieval grassed mound of Castle Hill, encircled on its other side by a number of modern detached houses built mainly in reconstructed stone. Immediately south of Castle Hill there is a small triangle of rough pasture bounded on two sides by sunken lanes (Park Lane and Church Street), thought to be sited on the original outer bailey to the castle. Fragments of stone walling, now grassed over, have been found within this pasture area, considered to be part of a later manorial complex of buildings. As Park Lane curves to meet the end of Church Street around the triangle of pasture, there are views on the south side of the lane briefly to open countryside. In Church Street this more open character disappears, with houses close together on the south edge of the road as it

swings round to join School Street. This group includes the former Post Office and the former Six Bells public house.

The staggered junction of Church Street, School Lane and Little Street is dominated by four listed 18th century houses. The red brick Old Bakehouse, the only one of the four not in limestone, forms a prominent visual stop to the southern approach into the village along Helmdon Road in conjunction with the abutting Threeways house with its sundial above the doorway. Facing each other on the opposite corners are The Corner House and Eagle House, both with high stone boundary walls which are also listed and create imposing edges to the streetscape. School Lane is only a short cross link to the long rectangle of the Conservation Area and at its opposite end broadens out at the T junction with Magpie and Manor Roads where a small triangular green with an apple tree relieves the large area of tarmac. To the west of the T junction Magpie Road is lined with modern houses on both sides of no particular character, but both sides do have substantial grass verges which form a pleasant visual link with the large village green at the junction with Park Lane.

Manor Road runs eastwards from the School Lane T junction and follows a gentle downhill course towards the entrance to the Manor House. It has a number of historic and listed buildings along its north side, mostly built close to the pavement, including the late 17th century Hill Farmhouse and the 18th century Star Inn public house. There are again a number of lengths of grass verges on Manor Road which add to its attraction. At the far end of the road facing the Manor there is a row of particularly striking thatched limestone houses with long front gardens, all grade II listed. Half of the south side of Manor Road is occupied by mainly modern houses, apart from the listed Yew Tree House. These are built in limestone or reconstructed stone, set back in mature gardens from the road edge and generally do not distract too much from the historic character of the street scene. The other half of this side of the road has a strong hedgerow line which forms the boundary of the Manor grounds and the adjoining open pasture.

Sulgrave Manor has many visitors from home and overseas all year round. It is a grade I listed building in coursed pale limestone rubble with a fine stone slate roof set back from the surrounding roads in its own modest grounds with a small formal garden on its south east side. Originally belonging to the medieval Priory of St Andrew in Northampton, the Manor was surrendered to the Crown in 1539 and sold by Henry VIII to Lawrence Washington, a wool stapler and mayor of Northampton, who built the present house between about 1540 and 1560. The family lived in the Manor until it was sold in 1659 after Colonel John Washington (the great-grandfather of George) had left England to take up land in Virginia. By the late 18th century the building had become a farm and the wing to the west of the two storey porch was demolished. In the 1920s this section was carefully rebuilt and restoration and remodelling of other features in the house were carried out, including work to the former brewhouse on the north side and the laying out of the formal garden to the south. By this time the Manor had been presented by a body of British Subscribers to the Peoples of Great Britain and the United

States of America, in celebration of the Hundred Years Peace between the two nations and as a memorial to the first American president, George Washington. In the late 1990s a new Visitors Centre in matching stone was built to the west of the house and at the same time the Brewhouse was converted to an Educational Centre.

The large open pasture area to the west of the Manor provides an attractive setting to the latter and sets it apart from most of the rest of the village. The area slopes gently northwards from Little Street to Manor Road and contains some fine groups of mature trees. A public footpath traversing the pasture links the two roads and crosses an area where sites of older houses have been traced facing onto Manor Road.

Little Street abuts two sides of the Manor grounds and the southern side of the adjoining open pasture area. From its junction with Helmdon Road at Eagles House it drops down between 18th and 19th century cottages on either side with a few modern infill houses. Shortly its character changes significantly where the road narrows between a high hedgerow on the north side and substantial stone boundary walls to the south. This side of the road is dominated by two substantial properties, the Victorian Sulgrave House with its hipped slated roof and large tree-filled garden, and at a bend in the road the 17th century thatched Rectory Farm. The road along this stretch has an enclosed intimate atmosphere but as it swings northwards beyond the farm there are views eastwards into open countryside.

In conclusion, Sulgrave is a relatively compact village which has mercifully escaped the intrusion of large modern housing estates which have affected so many villages in the District. It has a fine selection of 17th and 18th century houses, a quarter of all the buildings in the Conservation Area being listed. A pale local limestone is the predominant walling material with a small amount of ironstone and the most common roofing material is Welsh blue black slate, although there are some notable examples of thatch and stone slates. There are only a handful of Victorian red brick buildings but a few examples of red brick dressings around openings in stone walls, as in Manor Cottages. Stone boundary walls and grass verges play an important part in the streetscape throughout the village and the two large open pasture areas beside the Manor and Church respectively provide an attractive contrast to the built environment around them.

South Northamptonshire Council June 2004