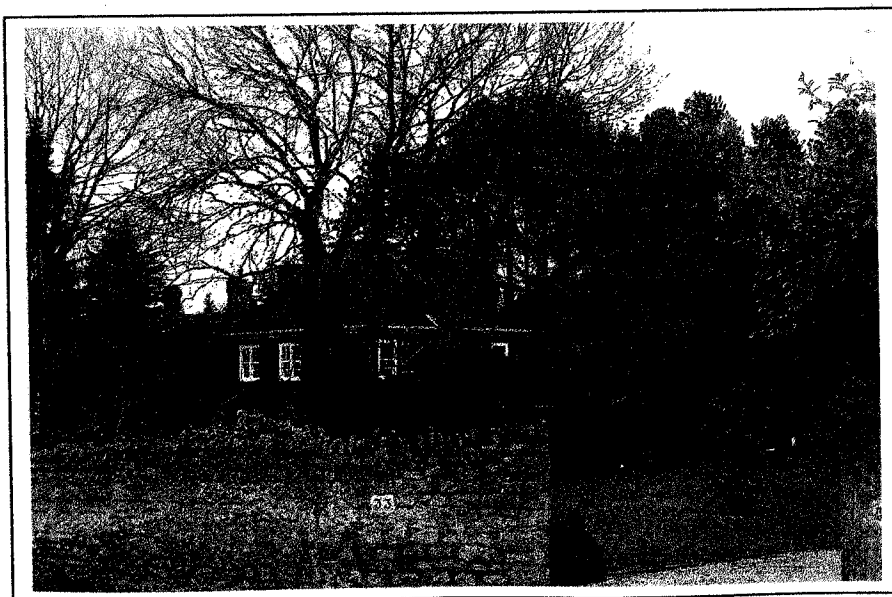
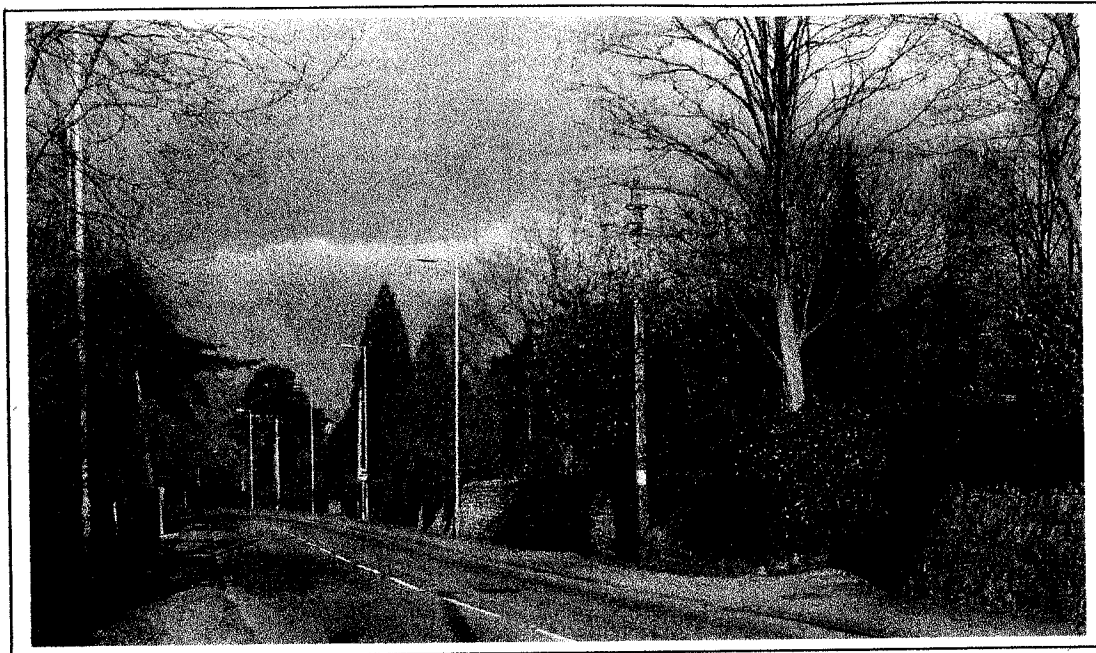


**Proposal for a Conservation Area**

**The lower slopes of Cumnor Hill and Third Acre Rise**

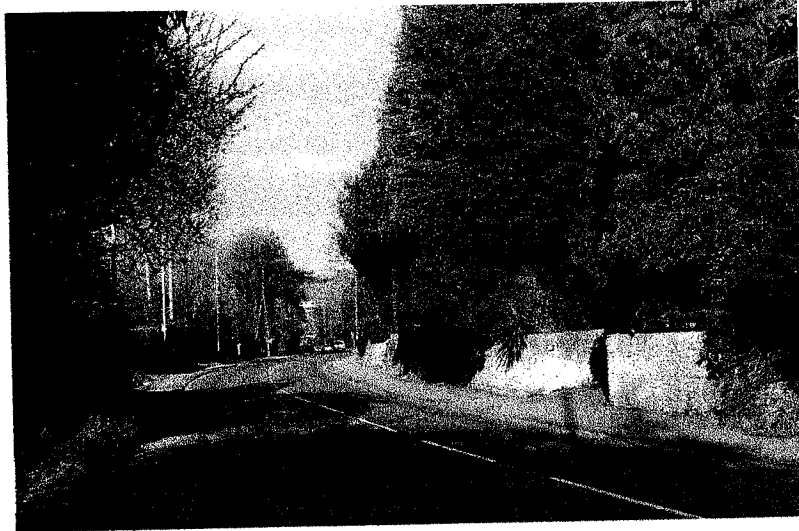
**In the Parish of Cumnor**



*April 2007*

## **Introduction**

The proposed Conservation Area covers the lower part of Cumnor Hill and Third Acre Rise as shown on the plan at pages 4 and 5. The area is predominantly one of large Edwardian, 1920s and 1930s housing, with a distinctive spacious character. The houses are generally sited in extensive gardens with many trees, often hidden from the road, and with the original layout undisturbed. On Cumnor Hill, the street scene is largely enclosed by high stone walls, hedges, or trees, and the houses set behind long front gardens. Third Acre Rise is a rare surviving 1930s development on plots of



1/3 acre. The whole area has, to date, managed to escape most of the damage caused by redevelopment and intensification and has a special character and appearance which it is desirable to protect, preserve and enhance.

## **History and types of buildings**

Set at the foot of Matthew Arnold's "green-muffled hills", the proposed conservation area lies in an area of outstanding landscape value. Facing north, the sloping fields and ancient woodland were, for many centuries, given to mixed farming. Development did not begin until the early 20th century, when the

Earl of Abingdon and other landowners began to sell plots for building. "More new villas here", wrote Oxford photographer Henry Taunt, in 1912, in his Rambles with Matthew Arnold.

Cumnor Hill then began to acquire its distinctive sylvan character, as substantial Edwardian villas rose in large, wooded plots. Also distinctive was the homogenous community of middle-class businessmen and their families, as successful Oxford tradesmen and artisans sought an attractive environment here as an alternative to North Oxford.

In 1930, the Regional Survey of Oxfordshire (Earl of Mayo et al) expressed concern at Oxford's urban growth. "In the best residential areas", the Survey observed, "building should be restricted to one house to a minimum of three acres". Cumnor Hill was described as one of the best residential areas and it broadly met their criteria. The Survey regarded the southern slopes of Wytham/Seacourt Hill, facing Cumnor Hill, as "by far the most beautiful and dramatic site in the Oxford area". Development on Cumnor Hill should not detract from that landscape.



*33, Cumnor Hill*

*Proposal for a Conservation Area*

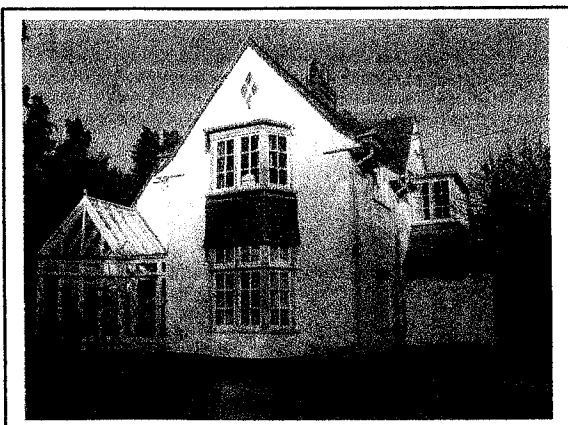
*Lower slopes of Cumnor Hill and Third Acre Rise*

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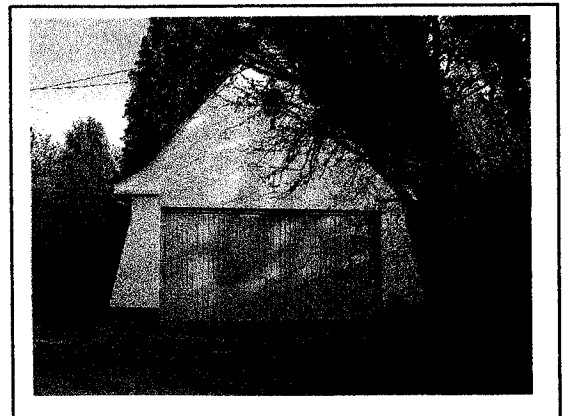
1900 -1914. The Earl of Abingdon, the main land-owner in the area, began to sell plots on lower Cumnor Hill for building in the first decade of the twentieth century. By this time the Victorian suburbs of north, south, and east Oxford had been largely completed, but there was pressure for further development. Cumnor Hill afforded an elevated location, in the favoured west of the City, with fresher air, countryside, and open views, yet close to the City Centre. The intention from the beginning was that the houses would be substantial and sited in large plots, and covenants were imposed to ensure this.

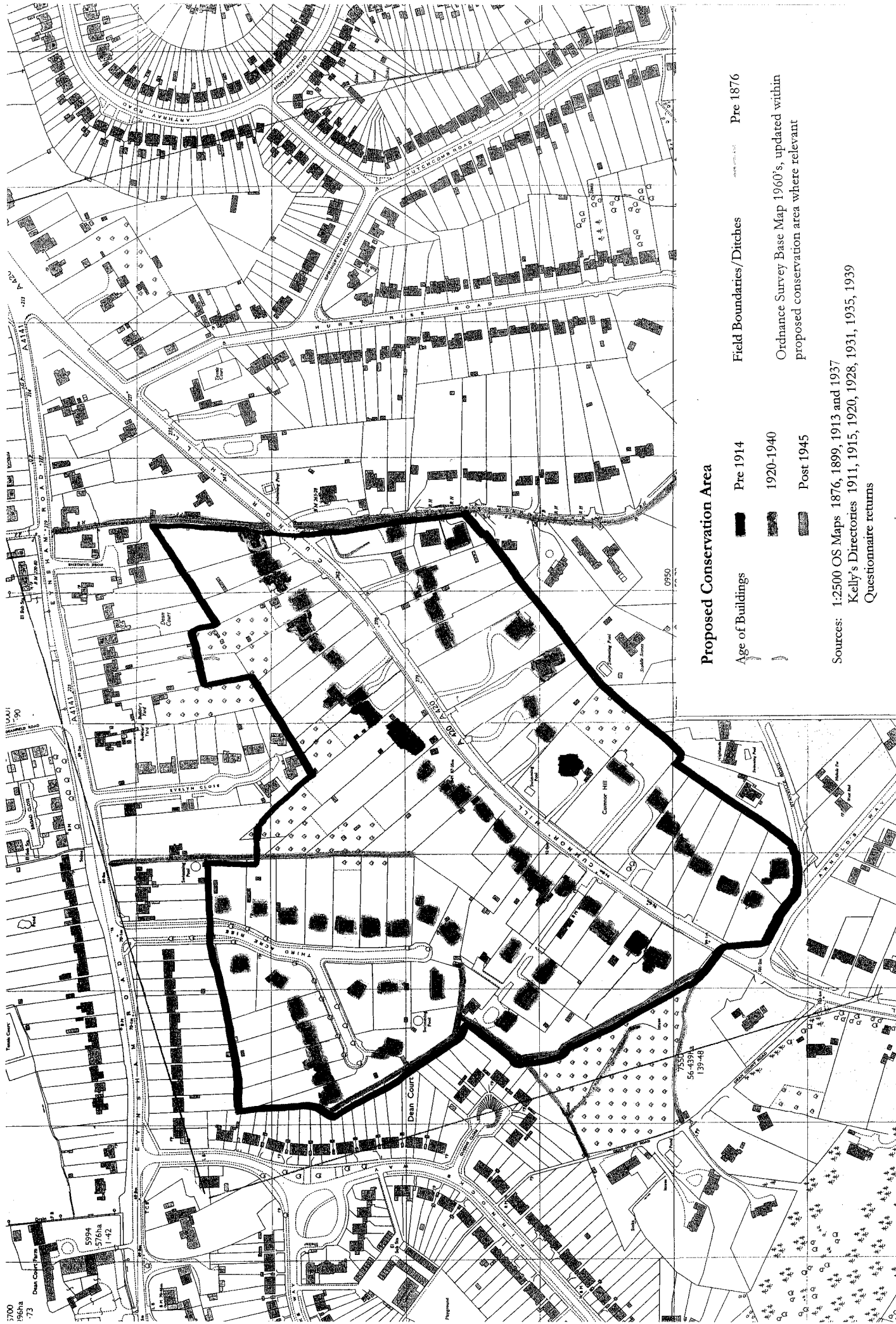
There are six houses within the proposed Conservation Area which date from before the First World War. These Edwardian houses were influenced either by the Victorian villa, such as no.64, or by the Arts and Crafts movement, such as no.32 dating from 1910. A nearby house of the same period, no. 28, (*see photograph on page 7*) is a distinctive and impressive design, thought to be by a Swiss architect. No.43, formerly called "Stanville", was built in 1913: designed by Harry Smith, it shows the distinct influence of CFA Voysey. Harry Smith's most well-known building is now the Oxford Crown and County Court in St. Aldates, Oxford.

*32, Cumnor Hill*



*43, Cumnor Hill*





**Proposed Conservation Area**

- Age of Buildings
  - Pre 1914
  - 1920-1940
  - Post 1945
- Field Boundaries/Ditches
- Pre 1876

Ordnance Survey Base Map 1960's, updated within proposed conservation area where relevant

Sources: 1:2500 OS Maps 1876, 1899, 1913 and 1937  
 Kelly's Directories 1911, 1915, 1920, 1928, 1931, 1935, 1939  
 Questionnaire returns

5700  
 1964ha  
 73

5994  
 576ha  
 142

7531  
 56.439ha  
 139-48

Lower slopes of Cumnor Hill and Third Acre Rise

1920s and 30s. After the First World War, development continued throughout the 1920s and 30s. The majority of the houses in the proposed area date from this inter-war period. On Cumnor Hill the architectural styles of these houses generally reflect the Vernacular Revival which was popular at the time, with brick or rough-rendered walls and clay-tiled roofs, but in Third Acre Rise a number of the houses were designed in the International or Modernist Style. Dating



36, Cumnor Hill

from the late 1930s these houses, with flat roofs, horizontally-barrred metal-framed windows, white-painted smooth-rendered walls, and with extensive use of concrete in their construction, contrast markedly with the more traditional housing of the inter-war period. Of these houses, No. 8 (*see below*) has not been extended and has retained its original plan form.



Post-war. The proposed area also has a few later houses, from the 1950s and 60s, of varied styles generally typical of the period. These are also sited on large plots and do not detract from the overall attractive character of the area.

Topography and open spaces

The topography of the area plays a large part in its character. The land slopes markedly from the south east to the north west (i.e. across Cumnor Hill), and from the south west to the north east (i.e. down the Hill). Most of the houses on the upper, south-east, side of Cumnor Hill are sited well back on their plots in elevated positions enjoying distant views, with long and well-treed front gardens. A number of these houses (*the odd numbers*) have retaining banks or stone walls on their frontages to the road, with dense tree or hedge screening, and these form important elements in the street scene. On the north-west side of Cumnor Hill the houses (*with the even numbers*) are generally at a lower level than the



road, with long back gardens which fall away to the north west. Frontage screening with hedges and trees is also a feature, but open views towards Wytham Woods can be seen in places, adding to the road's attractive character. Third Acre Rise is at a lower level than the houses on Cumnor Hill, but also slopes from south to north and this contributes to its visual character. On both Cumnor Hill and Third Acre Rise the roads have sinuous curves which contain views and add interest and variety to the streetscape.

30, Cumnor Hill

## *Proposal for a Conservation Area*

### *Lower slopes of Cumnor Hill and Third Acre Rise*

Throughout the area, the large gardens contain many trees, hedges, and other planting which gives a distinctive spacious and "green" setting for the houses and the suburb. The many trees in particular are a vital part of the area's character. The large gardens provide a rich habitat for wild-life, with badgers, foxes, deer, and many birds, and the long gardens on the north-west side of Cumnor Hill form an important wild-life corridor. A recent independent ornithological survey (2007) has shown that there is an above average population of threatened species of birds in the proposed conservation area.

### **English Heritage advice**

The importance of twentieth-century architecture and suburbs is recognised by English Heritage in the documents it has produced on Conservation Area Appraisals, the Modern House and Housing Selection Guide, and the Suburban and Country Houses Selection Guide. The following are quotes from these documents.

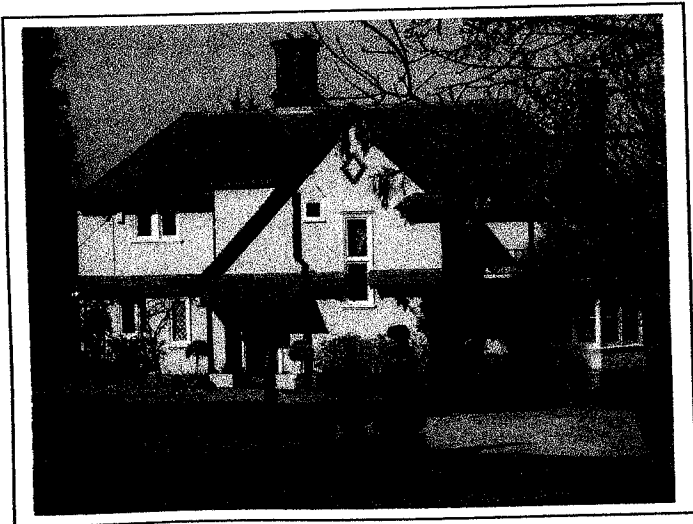
"The twentieth century is often the most under-valued and vulnerable period of building and it will be important.....to recognise the contribution made by twentieth-century buildings, regardless of their style (many of which are currently being reviewed)."

"Domestic architecture of the twentieth century can claim particular significance. Houses and housing developments of the period rank among the masterpieces of English architecture."

"In addition to the great names (of the Arts and Crafts movement) there were many local architects who designed exceptional buildings that make a distinctive contribution to Edwardian towns and suburbs."

"Given the redevelopment pressures on (twentieth-century) detached houses, this area of the built environment is particularly under threat. Their architectural quality was not always fully appreciated when many of the lists - especially in the south east - were prepared in the 1970s and early 1980s."

"Houses built outside of town centres share certain characteristics. They can take advantage of more spacious ground plots and be laid out with more freedom.....they can possess a repose and a detachment that makes for special architectural interest....."



28, Cumnor Hill



29, Cumnor Hill

"The Vernacular Revival could be used to good effect on smaller houses; the simple roughcast type was widely used in garden suburbs in the early twentieth century and the best preserved merit listing."

"Greater respect is now accorded to the suburban house."

“Suburban houses in particular are now subject to enormous pressures that include both conversion (into flats or offices), and that of new development in the gardens or grounds, sometimes calling for the demolition of the original house. The latter is particularly significant because, where they remain substantially intact, suburban houses show not only great architectural ingenuity and invention in terms of style, materials and plan form, they were often carefully designed in relation to their garden, street layout and neighbouring plots. Setting may be an important factor in assessing their special interest.”

“For enclaves of (twentieth century) housing, Conservation Area designation may sometimes be a more appropriate response than the listing of individual houses....”

Most recently (during the preparation of this document) English Heritage has issued two publications on the dangers facing suburbs in the face of increasing pressures for change. These documents - The Heritage of Historic Suburbs and Suburbs and the Historic Environment (March 2007) - emphasise the importance of many pre and inter-war suburban housing developments and the need for local authorities to protect their character. They say;

“A number of demographic trends, changes to national planning policies and housing market conditions have combined to mean that relatively spacious, low density suburban areas (the archetypal leafy suburbs) are coming under increasing development pressure. As a result, successive waves of new development, together with small-scale incremental change, is in places gradually putting local character and distinctiveness at risk. Failure to address specific suburban issues on the part of local planning authorities could mean that many suburbs soon reach a tipping point beyond which it will be extremely difficult to bring about a renaissance.”

“Given their relatively spacious nature and low density, certain suburbs have been identified by local authorities as being suitable for infill development. This is not a new phenomenon, but current levels of change against a background of higher acceptable densities increases the potential for local distinctiveness and historically significant features to be lost.”

“Where the assessment of the authority’s historic suburbs indicates that a neighbourhood is of significant historic or architectural interest, the local authority should give consideration to designation as a conservation area. This step will not prevent modernisation or updating of buildings within the conservation area, but will help ensure that new development or alterations respect and respond to their surroundings.”

## **Conclusion**

The proposed Conservation Area has managed to retain its distinctive early and mid-twentieth century character as a low density suburb of Oxford, with large individual houses, a number of which are significant in their architecture and setting. **Pressures for conversion and intensification have so far been resisted, but there is concern that the area’s qualities are not sufficiently recognised by the planning authority, and that the character of the area will be lost over the next few years unless immediate action is taken.** Conservation Area status would give recognition to the importance of protecting and enhancing the area’s unique history, architecture and visual quality and we would urge the Vale of White Horse Council to designate the area.

## **Acknowledgements**

District Councillors Harry Dickinson and Derek Rawson have initiated this proposal in response to concerns expressed by their constituents about recent development proposals in the proposed conservation area. They formed a working group with the support of, and including representatives from, Cumnor Parish Council and the information included in this proposal was obtained from a questionnaire sent to 71 households in the proposed area in February 2007, 46 of which were returned (with all but 3 in favour of the proposal). A wider consultation has also taken place through an article in the February edition of Cumnor Parish News. The working group considered this information along with its own research and special thanks are due to Richard Whitlock and John Hanson for writing the text and to Peter Bowell, Janet Craven and Dr Philip Hawtin for their interest and support.