# Chapter 6: Understanding context

# 6.  Understanding context

## The aims of this chapter

- To explain what is meant by 'context.'
- To provide a process to assess the context of proposed development.
- To refer to other techniques available to assess context of development sites.
- To provide guidance on how to appraise the constraints and opportunities of a development site in order to inform design.

## This chapter should be read in conjunction with:

- Local Distinctiveness – Chapter 3.
- Understanding Significance – Chapter 4.
- Designing New Development – Chapter 7.
- Examples of Best Practice – Appendix L.

*"Developments should respond to local character and history, and reflect the identity of local surroundings and materials, whilst not discouraging appropriate innovations".*

*National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).*

## Introduction

6.1    The term "context" is used by planners, building and landscape designers to mean the physical built or natural environment within which a site or building exists or will exist.

6.2    Assessing context for future development looks beyond the individual heritage assets to the understanding of the overall character of the whole area. This understanding will inform design, and should secure good quality and well-designed and sustainable places.

6.3    It is important that this process is seen as an opportunity to understand the potential of the environment.  Whilst certain features may constrain development, understanding the values and how an area can be enhanced is an important element of place shaping.

## Process

6.4    There are a range of techniques for assessing context.  The appraisal should be appropriate to the complexity of the proposed development and its immediate environment.  For example, a simple analysis of nearby buildings, spaces and landscape would normally suffice for the development of a single building on a small infill site.  However, a large urban development incorporating multiple buildings, private and public open space would require an in-depth study of all aspects of the urban environment, including, for example, the qualities of the public realm, predominant use of different areas and how people move through the town or city, in addition to the analysis of adjacent buildings, spaces and landscape treatment.

6.5 One technique for assessing the context for a complex development was given in useful guidance entitled, 'By Design – Urban design in the planning system: towards better practice,' (By Design). This document has been archived, but the guidance has not been fully replaced by national Planning Practice Guidance, and consequently some guidance in the document remains useful.

6.6 The document provides advice on how to prepare a 'Context Appraisal', which is a detailed analysis of the features of an area (including past and present land uses, built and natural environment, and social and physical characteristics) which serve as a basis for an urban design framework, development brief or design guide.

6.7 'By Design' sets a list of urban design objectives, which are discussed in this SPD within Chapter 7, entitled 'Designing New Development'. Architects, Urban Designers and Planners commonly use these design objectives, and it is particularly helpful to use the subjects as pointers to understand complex urban context:

1. What is the character of the area?
   Does it have its own identity?

2. What is the extent of continuity and degree of enclosure?
   How are public and private spaces distinguished?

3. What is the quality of the public realm?
   Are there attractive and successful outdoor areas?

4. Is there ease of movement?
   Is the place easy to get to and move through?

5. Does the built environment provide legibility?
   Does the place have a clear image and is it easy to understand?

6. Does the built environment provide adaptabilty?
   Can the place change easily?

7. Is there diversity?
   Is there variety and choice?

## Understanding Context Checklist

6.8 As an alternative, the following checklist can be used by agents, developers and owners to provide sufficient information to inform the design of new development. Professional agents, such as architects, are trained to readily understand context, so this checklist is not an inflexible requirement, but can be used by all as an aide mémoire.

6.9 Not all the questions on this list of considerations are applicable to every type of development, and particularly not for minor developments. More information on domestic development can be found within the council's supplementary planning document (SPD), entitled 'House Extensions and Garages Design Guide.' Additionally, for modest new housing development, more information can be found within the council's supplementary design guide (SPG), entitled 'Residential Design Guide'. This information can be found on the Local Planning Guidance page of the council's website.

6.10 **1. Layout**
   a) Does topography affect the settlement? Or in a rural location, how does topography affect the site?

   b) Does topography impact on orientation of buildings?

   c) Is there a water course that impacts on settlement pattern?

   d) How do other communications including railways or canals impact?

   e) Historically, what impacts on the layout of the area?

   f) What are the plot or field sizes?

   g) How are the buildings positioned in the plots?

   h) What is the regularity and density of street pattern?

   i) Is there a hierarchy of roads?

   j) How do the scale and density of buildings relate to the street width?

   k) What is the size and frequency of open space?

   l) Are there key open spaces?

   m) How are spaces used?

   n) Are there passages and courts?

   o) Are there strategic pedestrian routes that impact on the site?

Location Plan of redundant farm showing complex grain of village:

- Numerous farmsteads in village, some converted or redeveloped as residential;

- Modest houses and rows set at back edge of pavement;

- Terraces and a few modest houses set behind small front gardens;

- Larger houses set in generous grounds and country house in extensive grounds;

- Greens at the junction of roads;

- Field provide important gaps between buildings and offer views out of the village core;

- Parkland to the west of the village;

- Land rises to the northeast.
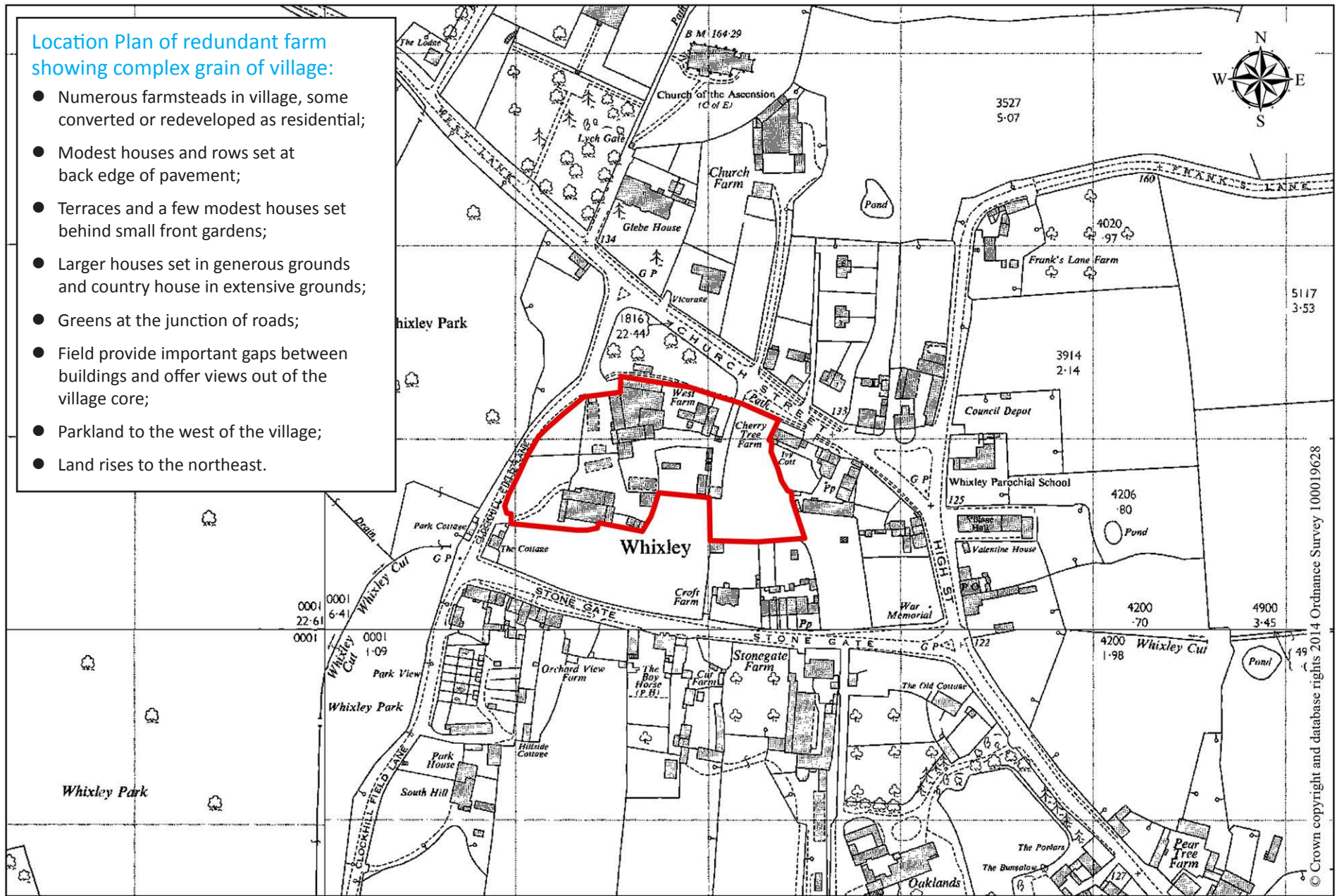
6.11 **2. Spaces** (gaps between buildings, streets, gardens etc.)

  a) Are the spaces formal?

  b) How are spaces enclosed?

  c) What is the alignment and spacing of surrounding buildings?

  d) Are gaps open, narrow, winding, or straight?

  e) Are spaces in shadow?

  f) How are spaces used?

  g) What paving or other surfaces are used?

  h) What street furniture is there?



*Topography has influenced width of Allhallowgate; houses set well back from steep bank to left. Typical of Ripon, houses to the right are against pavement. (Set back of single storey gable of hall adds to its unique appearance).*

6.12 **3. Views**

  a) Are views within the confines of the settlement?

  b) Are they long, short, intimate, glimpsed?

  c) Are they channelled or wide?

  d) Are there focal points, a building or landscape feature?

  e) Does the topography affect the view?

  f) What is the streetscape and roofscape?

  g) What are the views out of the settlement or site?

  h) How do views change as one moves through spaces?



*Vista up Town Street in Grafton stopped by three storey house.*



*View of the rural village of Healey illustrating importance of uninterrupted view of church.*

6.13 **4. Buildings**

a) How do buildings contribute to the spatial character?

b) What types of buildings are in the area, what are their uses?

c) Are there buildings that result from particular activities, or historic or existing land ownerships?

d) Is there uniformity of scale and size, material, style or is there a high degree of variation?

e) How are properties arranged, are they in rows, terraces, detached buildings?

f) How are the buildings orientated?

g) What scale and size are buildings?

h) What is the form of buildings, their plan form and roof shapes?

i) What is their frontage to the street, eaves or gable on?

j) What are the roofing and walling materials?

k) How are materials used, are there any local building techniques?

l) What are the size, shape, number and arrangement of openings in buildings?

m) What are the principal building features, including windows, doors and chimneys?

n) What are the architectural styles, or particular features?

o) Are there any atypical buildings, and how do they differ from others?



*Robust gritstone buildings of Middlesmoor; two storey houses of rectangular plan form; unbroken dual pitched roofs finished in slate (Welsh or stone slate); chimneys at ridge ends; small window to wall ratio, deep set reveals to windows.*

*Chapel at Middlesmoor is of same materials as housing, but does not reflect same characteristics as the houses.*



*House at Whixley; simple dual pitched roof to two storey house, but materials and details very different to the stone houses of Middlesmoor.*

6.14 **5. Landscape Features**

a) In a rural location, what are the characteristics of the landscape?

b) Is there scenic value?

c) What is the contribution of trees to the character of settlement?

d) Are trees in woodlands, groups, avenues or just incidental?

e) Are the trees deciduous or coniferous?

f) Do the trees have dense foliage or large canopies that cast shade/dappled light or filter views?

g) What is the contribution of other greenery to the character of settlement?

h) Are there grass verges, hedges, ornamental garden plants?

i) Are there water features, rivers, becks, ponds, fountains etc.?

j) Is there wildlife value?

k) What are the hard surfaces?

l) Are there changes in level, and how are they dealt with?

m) What are boundary treatments, including gates?

n) What street furniture, including lights, is there?



*Mature trees and stone boundary walls contribute significantly to the environmental quality of Ramsgill. Typical of rural villages, roads are bitmac, there are no pavements or kerbed edges to green.*



*Stone setts laid across slope, gutter formed of setts laid down slope, random stone blocks forming kerb to grass verge.*

6.15  **6. Ambience** (or less tangible characteristics)

a) Is birdsong audible?

b) Is the area tranquil?

c) Is the impact of traffic or industrial noise significant?

d) Are there dark corners that create feelings of insecurity?

e) Are there smells, such as perfume of flowers, or unpleasant pollutants?

f) How do the seasons affect the place?

g) How does the change from daylight to night affect its character?



*Little shadow from the trees in early spring, but the daffodils and blossom add hugely to the attractiveness of the scene.*

6.16  It is important to understand that built form density is not the same as housing density. To illustrate; a number of small apartments will have considerably less built form density than the same number of large houses. Certain sites will be in a tight urban context, where dwelling density should

be high in order that the massing of new buildings and small spaces between reflect the existing "tight grain", whereas other sites in suburban areas should have low built density and buildings well-spaced to reflect "loose grain".



*High density development on Stonebridgegate in Ripon.*



*Whilst external treatment does not reflect local distinctiveness, the low density 20th century development reflects low density development at the edge of a village.*

## Available Information

6.17    Contextual information is available for a number of settlements, including the Conservation Area Appraisals produced by Harrogate Borough Council, which summarise the chief characteristics of the settlements, and Village Design Statements prepared by local communities, which are held on the council's website.  A list of these documents, together with links, can be found within Appendices H and J.

6.18    Conservation Management Plans are important tools for managing area assets such as the World Heritage Site, Knaresborough Castle and Hackfall Gardens.  These are often held on the authors' websites.

6.19    Harrogate Borough Council has a Landscape Character Appraisal (LCA) for the countryside areas of the district, which is held on the council's website.  Each character area is described in the document and it should be noted that sites may be affected by more than one area.  The LCA can be found at: harrogate.gov.uk/plan/Pages/Landscape-Character-Assessment

6.20    The council has identified certain areas that could contribute to green infrastructure objectives.  These can be found within the separate guidance document at: harrogate.gov.uk/plan/Pages/GI-Guide

6.21    North Yorkshire County Council has carried out a Historic Landscape Characterisation (HLC), which describes historic land character types, summarises how landscape has changed and focuses on how past landscape is perceived in the present.  It is important to understand how the wider landscape contributes to historic assets.  One important example is the ritual landscape surrounding Thornborough Henges.  More information on the HLC can be found within the environment section of the county council's website.  Historic maps, and maps that show highways and public rights of way are held on the county council's website in the maps section at northyorks.gov.uk

6.22    Information on nationally designated assets, including listed buildings and scheduled ancient monuments, is held on the National Heritage List for England (held at list.english-heritage.org.uk/).

6.23    The county council maintain the Historic Environment Record (HER) and local archives hold considerable historic information.  Refer to the environment section at northyorks.gov.uk

6.24    Also local libraries are a useful resource, they hold local history books, newspapers, old photographs and also books on local architecture, for example the Buildings of England (Pevsner) series.

## Summarising Context

6.25    The purpose of the study of context is to inform design of development on a particular site.  The appraisal may be long and/or complex and hence it is important to sum up the general character of the place in a few sentences.  It can be useful to reflect on what makes this place different from others.  Then, take stock of the characteristics that contribute strongly to local character.  It is these characteristics that should be reflected in the design of new development.

6.26    An example of a summary:
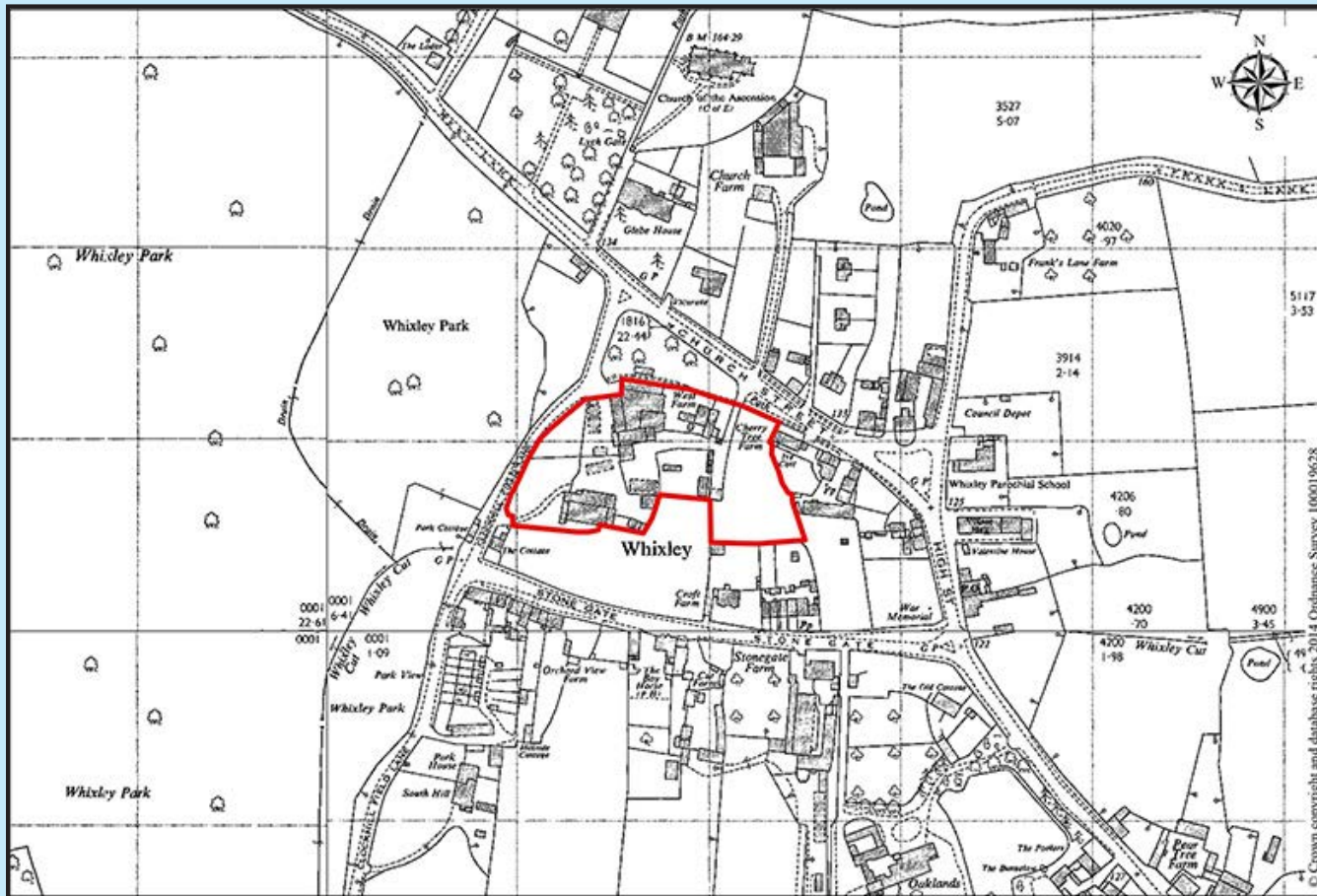


**Layout and Spaces:**
Historic farmsteads and fields contribute strongly to village character.

Grain is complex; built form density varies; groups of buildings are close set, other buildings are in generous grounds.

Building groups are of two types; farmsteads incorporating yards, and houses clustered randomly.

**Views:**
Views to west shortened due to topography, and views to east of village provide open aspect across landscape.

Buildings to north have backdrop of trees.

Within village, views are across small fields and also there are intimate glimpsed views between buildings.

**Buildings:**
Farm buildings and outbuildings of simple plan form up to two storeys in height, brick and cobble walls and pantile roofs.

Houses simple dual pitched form of two storeys with eaves facing street, many with lower rear extensions or single storey lean-to at side, brick or rendered walls and pantile or Welsh slate roofs.

Few semi-detached houses, most are rows, terraces and detached.

Features; chimneys, sliding sash (vertical and horizontal) windows, very few dormers.

**Landscape Features:**
Large mature tree groups and single parkland trees.

Grass verges, some banked, and greens at road junctions.

Cobble and brick boundary walls, some railings on low walls.

**Ambience:**
Quiet rural village, working farms create some noise and smells, but generally not to nuisance level.
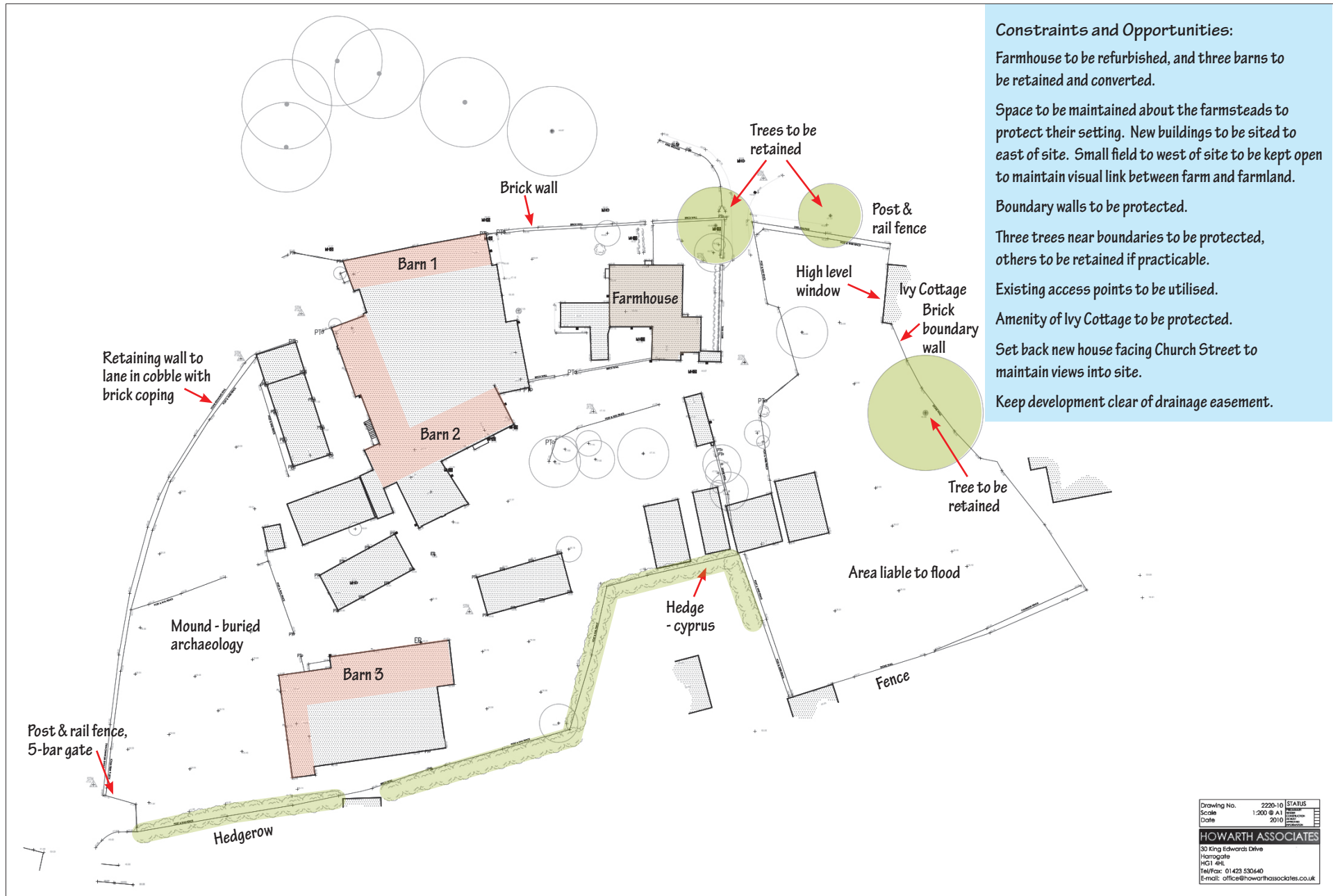
## Site Appraisal

6.27    The study of the general context of a development site must be accompanied with a detailed appraisal of the site and its immediate environs.

6.28    Consideration should be given to any existing buildings on the site as to whether they contribute to the historic, urban or landscape environment and as such are non-designated heritage assets (more information can be found within Chapter 5, entitled 'Selection Criteria for Non-Designated Heritage Assets') and should be retained, or whether the buildings or appearance of the site are detrimental to the quality of the area such that redevelopment would be an enhancement.

6.29    Research should be carried out to ascertain if there are any designations (world heritage site, listed buildings, scheduled ancient monuments, historic parks and gardens and battlefields) or planning restrictions, covenants, easements or known ground instability. Consideration should be given to heritage assets (designated or not) and their setting. More information can be found within the following areas of this document: Chapter 2 – 'Identifying the Setting of Heritage Assets'; Chapter 5 – 'Selection Criteria for Non-Designated Heritage Assets'; Appendix C –'Designation Types'.

6.30    A measured site survey should be carried out to include the following features on, or immediately adjacent to, the site: ground levels, existing accesses, existing buildings, trees, drains or sewer positions, water courses or other water features, overhead wires, walls, fences or hedges.

6.31    Additionally those features immediately around the site, which may be impacted by development, should be surveyed. These include:

a)  The setting of the site;

b)  Neighbouring buildings (scale and form, materials, principle features and style, orientation and position of windows);

c)  Adjacent spaces, public and private;

d)  Trees nearby;

e)  Road classification and position of nearby junctions;

f)  Public and private rights of way;

g)  Water courses;

h)  Important views;

i)  Setting of heritage assets.

## Identifying Opportunities and Constraints

6.32    Analysis of constraints and opportunities must draw on the assessment of the site itself and its environmental context, and additionally the planning context.

6.33    Where the development proposals are complex, or there are particular environmental issues, the consideration of constraints may require a series of studies; or opportunities such as improving routes through an urban environment might be shown on plans covering a large area.

6.34    In all cases, a plan of the site extended to include its immediate context is particularly useful and should be annotated to show: important or landmark buildings, important trees, hedges, walls, spaces, and views, which should be protected. Any unseen constraints, such as easements across the site or known archaeological features, should be shown. Also particular opportunities, such as linking pedestrian or cycle routes across the site, should be considered. This type of plan assists in designing the layout of a site.



*View to farmhouse from Church Lane.*

**Constraints and Opportunities:**

Farmhouse to be refurbished, and three barns to be retained and converted.

Space to be maintained about the farmsteads to protect their setting. New buildings to be sited to east of site. Small field to west of site to be kept open to maintain visual link between farm and farmland.

Boundary walls to be protected.

Three trees near boundaries to be protected, others to be retained if practicable.

Existing access points to be utilised.

Amenity of Ivy Cottage to be protected.

Set back new house facing Church Street to maintain views into site.

Keep development clear of drainage easement.

Labels on drawing:

- Trees to be retained
- Brick wall
- Post & rail fence
- High level window
- Ivy Cottage Brick boundary wall
- Retaining wall to lane in cobble with brick coping
- Barn 1
- Farmhouse
- Barn 2
- Tree to be retained
- Area liable to flood
- Mound - buried archaeology
- Hedge - cyprus
- Barn 3
- Fence
- Post & rail fence, 5-bar gate
- Hedgerow

Drawing No. 2220-10
Scale 1:200 @ A1
Date 2010
STATUS

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6.35 The identification of opportunities and constraints flows naturally from the site appraisal and contextual study. Some examples:

a) Local buildings may be generally of two storeys, but in certain locations there are buildings that are three storeys high. Is it appropriate on a particular site then to erect three storey or even taller buildings?

*The contextual analysis might show that taller buildings are located either in prominent corner locations, or facing open space. If the site were on a corner plot or situated at the end of an important vista therefore a building of three storeys, or possibly a little higher, would be appropriate in those locations.*

b) The majority of local buildings are of brick and some are rendered, but civic buildings are of stone, so which material is appropriate for the proposed building, which is for business use incorporating shops and offices?

*The nearby town hall exhibits high quality dressed and carved stonework, its appearance clearly illustrates the building's function. Whilst a new building of stone would not be incongruous, a building of that size in stone might detract from the historic town hall, and hence brick would allow the new building to be better assimilated into the street scene. Stone*



*Highly decorative town hall in context of more modest stone and brick buildings.*

*details, for example to stall risers and pilasters between shopfronts and to upper floors string courses and lintels would serve to reflect the quality of building the owners aspire to.*

c) All domestic properties, other than small cottages on the high street, have small front gardens, so should the houses on the site have front gardens?

*If the site were quite large and sited on the junction of high street and a trunk road, a small terrace on the high street next to existing buildings might be set at the back edge of the pavement. Alternatively they should be set back behind a walled front garden. A courtyard development in the centre of the site would not incorporate front gardens in order to better reflect historic courts in the town.*

d) The historic buildings of the village are separated from the site by poorly designed housing of the 1970s that do not reflect local building tradition, their windows have horizontal emphasis rather than vertical, walls are of buff coloured brick with rendered panels rather than stone walls, and roofs are finished with grey concrete profiled tiles rather than slate. Should they, in the context of the site, be considered locally distinct and set the precedent for the new development?

*If the 1970s houses are very limited in number and there are historic buildings nearby, it could be appropriate to refer only to the traditional buildings of the village to inform design. However, if the site were on the fringe of the settlement, separated from the historic core by a 1970s housing estate, the use of traditional forms and natural materials would reflect rural vernacular and assist in the assimilation of the buildings at the sensitive rural edge, however in most cases the building style should be contemporary thus illustrating the development of the village, rather than copying historic building styles.*

e) How can a developer decide what dwelling density can be accommodated on a site?

*The contextual study of the settlement will note the proximity of existing buildings to the street, their massing and scale of space between them; this is often referred to as the "grain". This assessment will show the scale of built form density that is appropriate.*

**Further Reading:**

• See Appendix B – Bibliography.