



Rother District Council

CONSERVATION + DESIGN ADVICE

Conservation Area Appraisal : Robertsbridge + Northbridge Street





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Approved by Cabinet
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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Definition of Conservation Areas

Conservation Areas are defined in the Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as:-

“areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance” (section 69 (1)(a)).

It is the responsibility of individual Local Planning Authorities to designate and review Conservation Areas, using local criteria to determine and assess their special qualities and local distinctiveness. Once designated, Local Planning Authorities have a duty:-

“to formulate and publish from time to time proposals for the preservation and enhancement of Conservation Areas and submit them for consideration to a public meeting in the area to which they relate” (section 72)

and

“in exercising their planning powers, to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the Conservation Area” (section 72)

Conservation Area status also places a statutory control, with certain exemptions, over demolition, works to trees and advertisement display.

1.2 Purpose of Appraisals

A Conservation Area Appraisal is a written and pictorial assessment of the special interest, character and appearance of a particular Conservation Area.

Adopted by the Council, an Appraisal serves as a basis for both the formulation and evaluation of Development Plan policies and as a material consideration in the making of development control decisions, also providing additional and specific support at appeal stage for such decisions. It can also heighten private sector awareness of the special character of place to help inform the planning and design choices of private and commercial owners.

The Appraisal itself is a factual and objective analysis, which seeks to enable the sustaining of the wider qualities of distinctiveness of place by defining and protecting those physical elements that contribute to the special character. It should be noted, however, that the Appraisal is not intended to be comprehensive, and that the omission of any particular building, feature or space should not be taken to imply that it is of no interest.

Additionally, an Appraisal can include management proposals to ensure the preservation or enhancement of an area by means of policies, action points, design guidance and site-specific design statements where appropriate.

In accordance with the aforementioned legislation, this Appraisal represents a review of the existing designated Conservation Area for Robertsbridge, taking into account the changes in the legislative, social and environmental context since the Conservation Area was first designated in 1986.

2.0 Robertsbridge Conservation Area

Robertsbridge Conservation Area was designated in 1986 by Rother District Council.

2.1 Description

Robertsbridge is a large historic village in the parish of Salehurst & Robertsbridge. The historic High Street runs north/south and forms the heart of the village, comprising a mix of commercial and residential properties. Off the High Street runs a staggered crossroads; to the east extends Fair Lane, a historic lane predominantly residential in use, and now a no-through road for vehicles. Meanwhile to the west runs Station Road, with a mixture of leisure, commercial and residential uses nearer the village core, and becoming more residential in character beyond the railway line. The existing designated Conservation Area comprises the area covered by the settlement as it existed by the late 15th Century, plus the more relatively recently developed area around Station Road, the whole area totalling some 6.6 hectares.

The western boundary of the Conservation Area abuts the historic curtilages and follows the course of the Darwell stream as it previously ran. Within this area are important clues to former uses and the positioning of boundaries portray where a former stream ran to provide clean water for the dwellings fronting the High Street.

The northern boundary includes the two listed buildings on the northern extremities of the village, one of them being the former toll house.

The eastern boundary of the Conservation Area north of Fair Lane follows the curtilages of properties that had mostly been established by the end of the 19th Century or earlier. The boundary then extends eastwards to include historic buildings in Fair Lane, then runs south west along the public footpath that forms a natural edge to this part of the village, before heading at right angles behind Grove Hall, following an earlier boundary that is no longer visible on the ground.

On the southern side the boundary abuts an elevated open piece of ground before crossing George Hill and heading in a northerly direction whilst adhering to an earlier boundary of The George public house. The boundary then heads westwards along with the ancient track that is Pipers Lane, eventually resuming its line with the Darwell stream.

To the north of Robertsbridge itself, on the north side of the River Rother lie the imposing buildings of Robertsbridge Mill, now disused, and the historic settlement of Northbridge Street, comprising principally of linear development. This separate parcel of land is also designated as Conservation Area. Robertsbridge and Northbridge Street are linked by a causeway over the low-lying pasture land of the floodplain, and whilst they are discrete settlements of development, they both evolved as areas of habitation at a similar time in the 14th Century.

2.2 Location & Geographical Context

The village of Robertsbridge is situated within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty some 12 miles north of Bexhill and 11 miles north-west of Hastings.

It is set amongst a wholly rural landscape, at the divide of what is generally considered to be the landscape character areas of the Lower Rother valley and the Upper Rother Valley.

The original settlement is positioned on the gently sloping valley side and descends to the valley floor of the River Rother. Like many settlements, it developed at a point of convergence of the river and a number of streams; the Darwell stream flows through Robertsbridge dividing the original settlement from the twentieth century developments and the railway to the west. It should be noted that the River Rother was navigable to this point until the mid 14th Century. The surrounding landscape is dominated by the broad valley of the River Rother and its tributaries. It is at this point in the valley that the predominantly wooded area of the Upper Valley gives way to a more open landscape dominated by pasture and arable land.

There is a clear relationship between geological structure and the topography in this area, with the more elevated areas being more resistant to weathering and erosion. The sub-soil is made up of the much faulted strata of the Hastings Beds, which comprise Tunbridge Wells sand, Wadhurst clay and Ashdown sands and provide the base materials for much of the building materials used for the original settlement of Robertsbridge along with the abundance of timber available in so much of the High Weald.

In the 19th Century the two separate railway lines that utilised the valley floor stopped at Robertsbridge; the Southern Railway linking Hastings with London and the Kent and Sussex railway (now disused). Communications continue to be strong with the present day village lying on the route of the Hastings to London railway, with a busy Station, and the Hastings to London A21 Trunk road, which by-passes the village to the east.



2.3 Historical Development

Robertsbridge has formed the principal community within the Salehurst & Robertsbridge Parish from at least the 14th century.

Originating as a planned settlement by Robertsbridge Abbey, the township appears to have been founded in 1210 when the Cistercian Abbey in Sussex moved to its new location at Elham, further down the valley, leaving a chapel on the original site where the war memorial now stands. A church existed at the settlement of Salehurst at the time of Domesday but Robertsbridge was not mentioned at this time.

What is known is that a new bridge was built over the river at the area now known as The Clappers, following which areas of habitation grew up on its southern and northern sides of the river, the northern part being the settlement we know today as Northbridge Street, and the southern part being Robertsbridge.

Early Robertsbridge appears to have experienced three periods of growth and one of recession. The most significant and probably the earliest period of growth took place in the 13th century to the west of the High Street and bounded on its western boundary by a stream. These were long, narrow 'burghage' plots with a developed frontage onto the high street and agricultural land to the rear.

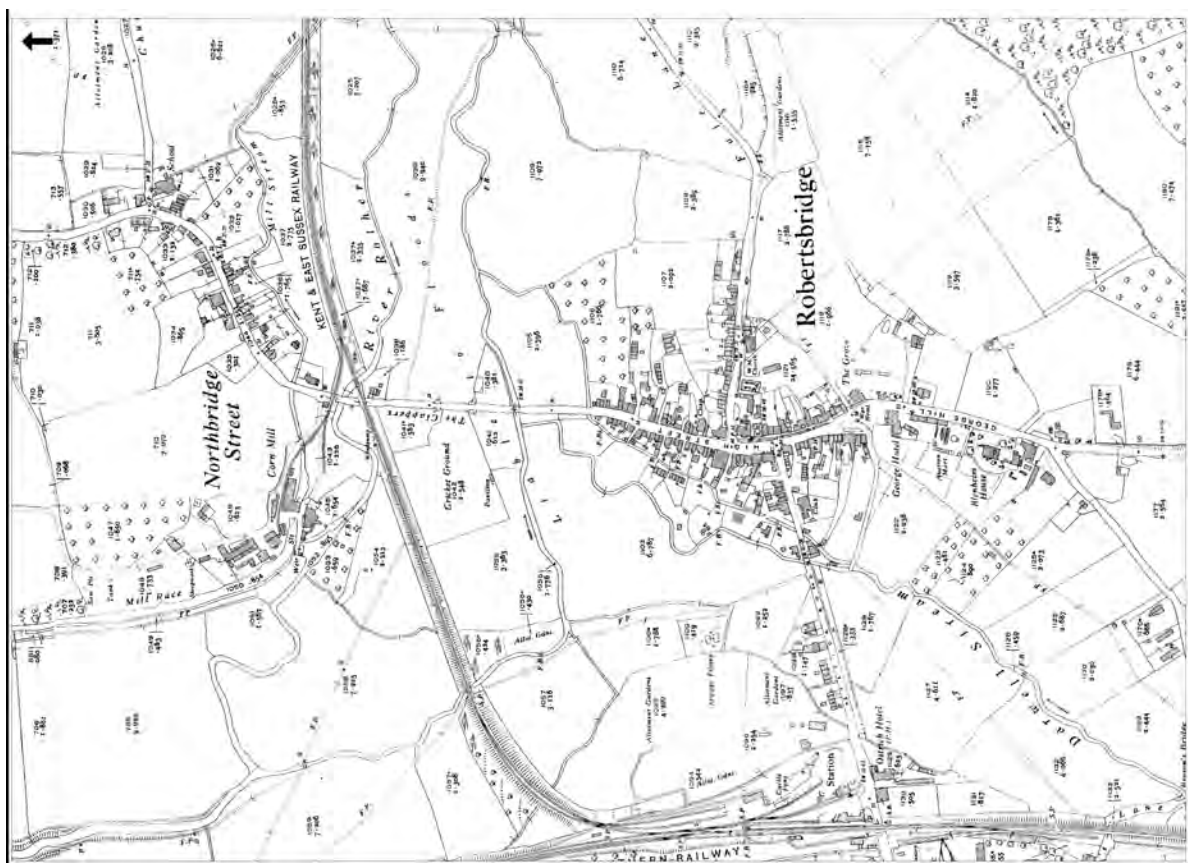
The next phase took place in the early 14th century on the eastern side of the High Street and along the northern side of Fair Lane. These plots were shorter than the earlier ones. Fair Lane (previously known as East Street) is a historic lane to the east of the High Street, which originally gave access to the Abbey prior to its dissolution. It is so named due to the annual fair that was held in an adjacent field from the mid 13th Century until the middle of the 20th Century, and which, together with tenant documentation from this period, indicates Robertsbridge's status as a prosperous early medieval township, and a flourishing manufacturing and trading centre.

A series of plots having large frontages at the northern expansion of the town mark the third period of early expansion. In this area there is only one existing building of pre 1500 date, Rosebank, a late 14th century house set well back from the road. It originally formed the dwelling of a farmstead but in the late 15th century the farm became swamped by the northward growth of the settlement. The quality of the surviving medieval buildings in Northbridge Street, together with tithe records, suggest that commercial activity and prosperity here was equal to that of Robertsbridge.

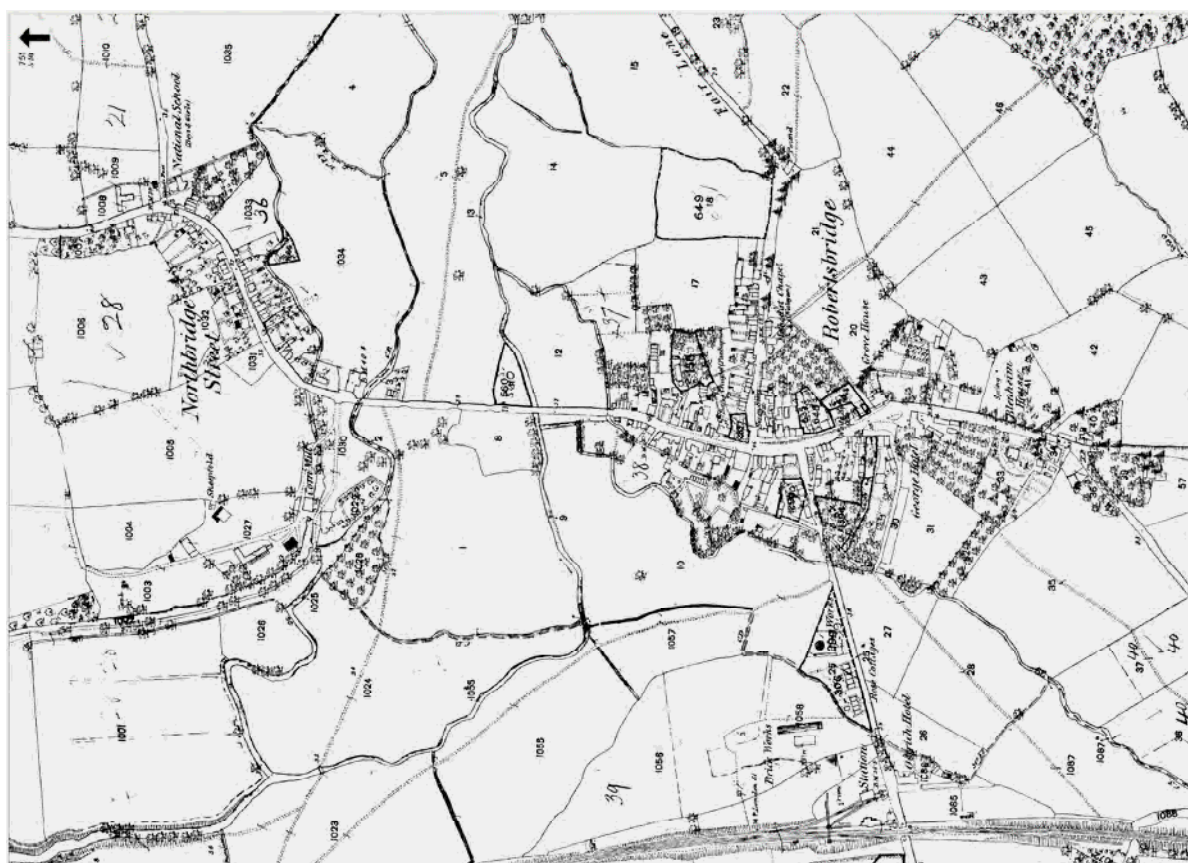
In the early mid 17th century five houses were demolished at the southern end of the settlement on the eastern side of George Hill to provide land for the farmstead 'The Grove'. Today it is open fields and no visible evidence remains of the former habitation of this part of the village, although aerial photography suggests that the land is concealing some evidence of its former use by the way in which vegetation grows upon the soil currently.

From the 18th century onwards, Robertsbridge, like many other towns and villages in England faced a large increase in population. At this time many of the existing buildings were sub-divided, and more simple terraces inserted into intervening spaces. As time went on cottages and terraces were erected within the bounds of the 17th century town up until the end of the 19th century. It was the 18th and 19th century infilling that created the tightly packed street scene that we see in the High Street today.

Later, in 1851, the Southern Railway opened the Hastings to London railway at Robertsbridge. and later at the end of the 19th Century the Rother Valley Light Railway provided access into Kent. This was an influence for an increase in the population of the village and prompted the gradual development of land to the west of the original settlement, and this has continued to the present day.



Early 20th Century Map of Robertsbridge



Mid 19th Century Map of Robertsbridge

3.0 Character Appraisal

3.1 Setting of the Village

Unlike many other settlements within the High Weald that have been located on ridge tops, the original settlement of Robertsbridge is located on a valley side with its northern extremities on the valley floor. This has resulted in a village set against a backdrop of a river landscape, with some of the village having a direct relationship with the tributary that flows into the river.

This low-lying expanse of green fields, pasture and playing fields is a key part of the setting of Robertsbridge village, as well as providing a clear distinction between that settlement and that of Northbridge Street and the Mill.

A by-pass forming part of the A21 trunk road lies to the east, so now the village is protected from passing traffic, and only silhouettes of the built form can be glimpsed over the flood plain behind sparse areas of trees and shrubs. This geography means that within the village there is a pervading sense of enclosure, with the occasional glimpse of a distant wooded ridge which discloses its rural setting. The village presents a largely 'introverted' character, with much of the built fabric hidden from view until entrance into the settlement.

3.2 Approaches to the village

The primarily linear form of the Robertsbridge village means that there are two prime approaches to the village; from the north and from the south. This is supplemented by the approach from Station Road, from the west.

Approaching the settlement from the north, over the causeway that rests on the floodplain, and the series of bridges known as 'the Clappers', the village takes on the characteristic of an island rising out of the landscape. Trees and shrubs frame an almost 'gated' beginning of the High Street where a shortened view is presented due to the bend in the road. The urban form here is mainly tightly packed and abutting the pavement giving a strong sense of arrival into the core of the village. To the west, the electricity sub-station represents a discordant element on the low-lying landscape here.

Approaching the village from the south, from George Hill, the elevation of the land at this point gives the perspective of the village being hidden from view and sheltered by the surrounding ridges. One such ridge, running east to west, provides a dramatic and defining backdrop to the settlement. The land falls steeply away here, down into the High Street proper. The rear elevation of The George public house, protruding into the sight-line, is striking, with its mixture of bricks, tiles and roofscapes giving a sense of arrival into the historic core of the settlement.



View over the low-lying pasture land



View northwards over the clappers to Northbridge Street



Approach to Robertsbridge from north, over the Clappers



Approach from south



Approach from south on George Hill

On the Station Road approach, from the west, the flood plain provides a green edge to the historic core of the village and the ‘pinched’ highway as it rises over the stream, creates a gate effect suggesting a strong sense of arrival at the historic core of the settlement. The eye is drawn up the straight road past the relatively urban villas to the white painted weatherboarded buildings of the High Street here, which gives strong visual termination but also a sense of the architectural character ahead.



Approach from west, along Station Road



Approach from west, nearing High Street

3.3 Streetscape Character Analysis

The historic area of Robertsbridge consists largely of the extent of the village as it existed by the mid 16th century. The densely-packed High Street, with its strong building line, is actually composed a large number of distinct, individual buildings, which have been sub-divided and infilled over the centuries, to create the tightly-knit built form we see today. There are many surviving medieval buildings, as well as property boundaries and street layouts, all clearly legible in the present village.

Although the village is compact, there are four distinct character areas within the settlement of Robertsbridge, and one within Northbridge Street, as identified in Annex 3 '*Character Map of Robertsbridge & Northbridge Street Conservation Area*'.

Northern section of the High Street - Character Area 1

This area comprises the developed frontage of the bulk of the High Street, and is the commercial heart of the settlement, with many existing shops as well as visual evidence exists of former shop units. The built form and the commercial and vehicular activity create an almost urban character to the place, though enriched with the historic architecture.

The topography of this area creates a stepped, staircase effect on the buildings on the west side of the High Street. Roof profiles mirror the slope of the ground upon which they are built. The roofslopes, punctuated with chimneystacks are mainly tiled with impressively steep pitches of 50° and steeper. The change in the roof heights is not so noticeable on the east side of the High Street as the buildings here are positioned on the inside of a gentle bend in the road.

The buildings at the lower, northern end of the High Street are relatively domestic in scale, usually two storeys with relatively low eaves, though the effect is a strong one of a funnelling enclosure.

As one proceeds up the hill, southwards, the buildings become grander in stature and more imposing in scale, with a number of three storey buildings. The funnelling effect continues, though the slight widening of the street by this point helps avoid any sense of oppressiveness created by this dense scale of building, though the topographical effect is heightened by the higher ground on the eastern side of the High Street.

Even with the presence of the by-pass, the High Street has a high degree of through traffic, which compound the urban and busy commercial feel of the place already created by the built form. Meanwhile on-street car parking on the western side of the High Street clutters the character of the street scene and the setting of the historic buildings.



At the northernmost part of the village, a recent terrace of properties has tried to imitate the character of an adjacent 19th century terrace. However, though not unattractive, the absence of attention to detail in eaves height and elevational articulation, particularly window recess, together with the inclusion of a large dormer window, show how difficult it is to respond appropriately to historic character and detailing.



Southern Section of High Street - Character Area 2

The higher ground at the most southerly section of the High Street presents a mixture of domestic architectural styles, and feels open and spacious in character, since in front of the imposing George Inn (to the north) the building line widens out and the public realm opens out to form a triangular open green. At this point too is an elevated area of open space, with the War Memorial and an adjacent tree acting as a focal point for long views up the hill from the north.



A curious feature is that a number of buildings to the west of this green are at a lower level of the area of grass and shrubs, indeed the first floor windows of some of the properties are at street level at this point.



A further significant feature in this area is the elevated pavement and buildings on the eastern side of the street, separated from the roadway by deep, sloping grassed banks. The character here is marred only by the modern style telephone box and the cluttering effect of modern highways signage.



Although this is part of a High Street location, it has a predominantly peaceful residential character, with little in the way of commercial activity.

There are various architectural styles and materials such as weatherboarding, painted stucco and brickwork, but all are harmonious with one another. A discordant element in the street scene is the rendered, flat roofed extension to the terrace opposite the green, which, though historic, protrudes obtrusively in front of the strong building line.



To the east of the George Inn, across the road and south of the primary school, lies an open space, containing informal grouping of farm buildings, including a late 17th century threshing barn with an attached 18th century cartshed which are listed Grade II. The barn, farm track and adjacent lane are readily visible from the public highway and are a reminder of the historical, agricultural association of the village and are important in contributing to the rural ambiance of this part of the settlement. It is proposed to extend the boundary of the Conservation Area to include this area.



At the southernmost part of the built street, a modern terrace built in the vernacular style sits against the

backdrop of the southern elevation of the George Inn. The wooden boundary treatments and their setting back from the pavement behind small front gardens presents a suburban character to the southern edge of the Conservation Area.

Looking northwards from the War Memorial, the High Street falls steeply away down to its commercial core.

Fair Lane - Character Area 3

Fair Lane runs perpendicular off the High Street. The eye is drawn eastwards up the hill and round the gentle curve of the road. The proximity of the dwellings to the pavement and narrow width of the road gives the lane a strong sense of enclosure. Its character as a quiet lane is defined by its residential nature, the absence of commercial properties and the absence of through traffic. However, here again on-street parking detracts from the setting of the buildings.

The bulk of the built form lies on the northern side of the road, again with a strong building line, with large medieval houses subdivided into terraces of three or four dwellings. Some have small areas for planting, although many properties abut the pavement, and again some of the buildings are accessed up steps. As the lane extends eastwards, the buildings become increasingly modest and domestic in scale and character, and at the eastern end of the lane, a number of architecturally interesting and historic buildings on the northern side, which themselves form part of the long view along the lane, and form a natural 'full stop' to the historic character of the lane.

On the south side of the road buildings are far more sporadic, there is no defined building line, and at the western end of the lane is a wide verge with trees and shrubs. Although not individually of note, collectively the vegetation, together with the absence of a pavement on the southern side, gives the lane a semi-rural character.

On the south side of the Lane is a curious small historic building purported to have been used as a village jail. Although much changed, it is an interesting structure and important in that it is evidence of the historical social functioning of the settlement.

Station Road - Character Area 4

Station Road runs perpendicular of the High Street in a westerly direction. It lacks the coherent pattern of development which is so strong in the rest of the village centre, and on views out westwards there appears to be a severe disintegration of the built form.



The part of Station Road within the Conservation Area has neither the density nor the volume of historic buildings of the rest of the village centre. However, there is an interesting run of early Victorian villas to the north of the road, somewhat formal and urban in character, and continuing the architectural theme set by the imposing No.51 on the corner of the High Street and Station Road.

A large area on the southern side of the road is used as the village car park resulting in a 'flat' or 'dead' area architecturally, with particularly poor quality public realm treatment. However the absence of buildings does provide an opening through which to view the rear of the properties on the southern end of the High Street; a prominent, attractive assortment of historic roofscapes.

To the west, at the pinch-point of the old bridge over the Darwell Stream, lies the old Brewery building, a legacy of the industry's dependency on water supply.

Northbridge Street – Character Area 5

North of the settlement, separated from the main core of Robertsbridge itself by the linked bridges over the River Rother and flood plain, lies Robertsbridge Mill, and the adjacent Northbridge Street, a principally linear form of development of medieval origins, settled at a similar time as the High Street in Robertsbridge and the Mill. There has been a Mill here since the 14th Century although the current brick building is late 19th century in origin. Though not listed, it is of considerable intrinsic architectural and historic interest, and is a highly visual and tangible reminder of the village's industrial heritage. Also of interest and historic value on the site is a former oasthouse, and a Grade II listed storebuilding.

In Northbridge Street itself lie a cluster of historic buildings of various vernacular architectural styles and materials. The architectural and historic significance of a number of the medieval buildings in this area are fully detailed in '*An Architectural History of Northbridge and Salehurst Villages*' by *The Rape of Hastings Architectural Survey*. There is a strong building line on both sides of the road, though buildings are domestic in scale, two storeys with low eaves, and the character is far less urban than in the main village of Robertsbridge. Buildings typically have small planted areas to the front, softening the appearance.

As one travels east, towards the modern road inserted to link the settlement to the A21 by-pass, the eye is drawn round the curve in the historic road northwards, framed by a series of white-weatherboarded buildings, until the view is terminated by rural informal woodland.



3.4 Architectural & Archaeological Value

The density, together with the compact and harmonious grouping of the historic buildings in the Conservation Area, allied with their antiquity, are important elements in the overall character of the area. Little has been done to dilute the historic integrity of many of the buildings and therefore the historic character of the street scene remains relatively intact. In addition there are many individual buildings of architectural and historic value which give a special richness to the overall street scene in particular to the whole length of the High Street and Fair Lane.

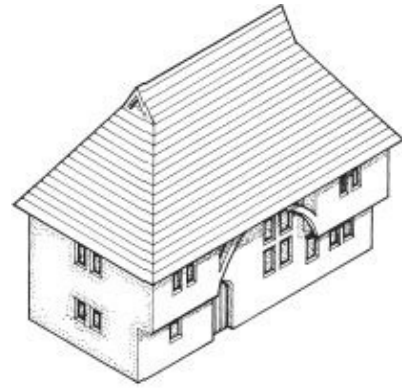
One of the striking features of Robertsbridge is that it has a number of medieval ‘Wealden’ Hall Houses. The characteristic feature of a such a house is that it originally had a central bay of an open hall the full height of the structure with a two storey bay on each side of the hall. The upper floors of the end-bays project on jetties on the front elevation. Whilst many of the external elements of this building type have been lost through adaptation and re-facing in response to fashions and need over the centuries, it is still externally recognisable in a number of buildings, in particular Rosebank and Seven Stars Inn. These two buildings remain whole, whereas many other Hall Houses have been subdivided and can only readily be identified as such through internal and archaeological observation and investigation.

The importance of many of the historic buildings in the village is recognised by their inclusion in the Statutory Lists of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. Of particular note are Rosebank and the Seven Stars Inn in Robertsbridge High Street, and the building now split into Monk’s Cottage, Olde Monk’s House, Friars Cottage and Old Timbers in Northbridge Street, all listed Grade II*

Later Victorian development has taken place in the rear hinterlands of some of the original plots, usually terraces of 4 or 5 properties accessed by passageways off the High Street.

Annex 3 to this Appraisal, ‘*Character Map of Robertsbridge & Northbridge Street Conservation Area*’ highlights the Listed Buildings within the Conservation Area as well as those additional buildings which it is felt play a particularly strong role in informing the character of the street scene and the wider area, identified as key un-listed buildings.

The coverage of the medieval village is designated an East Sussex County Council Archaeologically Sensitive Area. It includes land that has since reverted to farmland, on the south side of the village off George Hill, and incorporates the area of land originally used for the fairs in Fair Lane.



3.5 Materials & Architectural Detail

Many of the historic buildings in Robertsbridge are timber framed. The building materials visible on the buildings within the Conservation Area are generally homogenous in character, locally sourced materials creating a palette of tile hanging, weatherboarding, exposed timber framing, painted brickwork at ground or first floor level with the majority of roofing being steep slopes covered with handmade clay tiles, though occasional areas of slate roofing are found in outbuildings or later Victorian buildings and terraces.

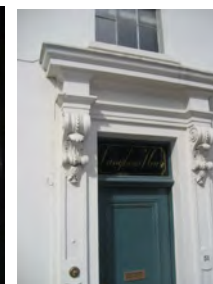
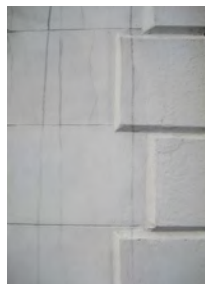
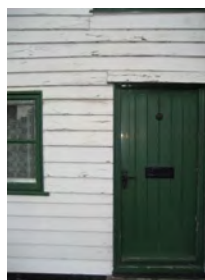
There are a range of wall framing styles, mostly braced panelling, with a few examples of close vertical studding. Though many exposed timber-framed buildings remain, many of the fronts have been altered over time, with weatherboarding or tiled cladding, but the effect is a rich array of textures that complement one another. Where infilling between the original wide plots occurred, buildings of a later period are more formal in design, with rendered elevations.

Just as there are a variety of building materials and designs reflecting the period that buildings were constructed, so there are a variety of window and door types throughout the High Street, almost all of timber construction, but a few historic metal windows remain, and casement windows are more common than sashes again reflecting the age and style of the buildings.

Door canopies, where they exist, on more residential properties of Fair Lane and Northbridge Street, are usually simply lead-covered timber projections.

Dormer windows exist in some of the roof spaces but they are in the minority, and the majority of steep, tiled roofs are visible in their full, uninterrupted glory. Many of these have warped over time adding to the 'organic' character of the buildings. The vast chimneystacks protruding from many of these sweeping roofslopes identify the original individual houses, as well as giving definition to the skyline and a pleasing rhythm in the streetscene.

The few later historic buildings are more formal in materials and detailing, with render and ashlar elevations, moulded door cases and window pediments, and sliding sash timber windows.



3.6 Shopfronts & Advertisements

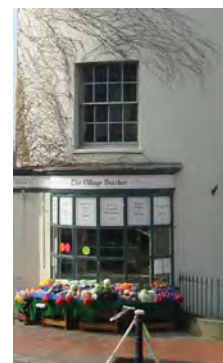
The centre of Robertsbridge has a high number of commercial and retail premises, though fewer shops than it has had previously, and shop fronts are an important feature of the street scene, concentrated in the main in the middle and lower High Street. The rhythm of glazed openings along the High Street appear harmonious, and provide activity and interest to the streetscene.

There are a variety of sizes and styles of historic shopfronts, some obviously 'inserted' shopfronts dating from the late 19th century with historic blind boxes and detailing, others very domestic in scale, comprising of the historic fenestration and doorways from when the building was a dwellinghouse, and with limited signage on small panels of even on the glass itself.

Just as there are relatively few shops in Robertsbridge, so too there are relatively few advertisements. The majority of those that are present are hand painted fascia boards with little or no illumination. The small scale of signage helps not to clutter historic elevations, or detract from their architectural fabric and character. Corporate branding is exercised with restraint on signage, which helps such advertisements integrate into the scale and character of the street scene.

However there are exceptions to this; a convenience food shop in the centre of the High Street has a modern shopfront with the majority of the frontage glazed and an electronic door. Additionally, its large lettering illuminated by five bulbous and protruding metal lights are in stark contrast to the surroundings. Occupying a prominent position, the eye is drawn to it as a discordant feature in the street scene. Similarly a restaurant at the northern end of the High Street has a bulky fascia sign in a modern material that appears too large for the building and covers the historic timber framing.

There are also a number of former historic shopfronts that remain as part of the elevation of some of the dwellings in the village, giving the clue that at one time Robertsbridge had a thriving commercial centre.



Poorly proportioned and designed signage



Former Shopfronts

3.7 Boundary Treatments

In much of the High Street, almost all of the buildings are positioned tight against the pavement and so there are few opportunities for private boundary treatments. However, at Tudor House a dense yew hedge provides a significant stretch of green. At the southern end of the High Street, where the buildings become set back and have an opportunity to personalise space, there is a mixture of small cottage gardens bounded by low brick walls and railings, while the green area around the War Memorial serves to merge the distinction between public and private space at those properties on the western side of the High Street here. The Victorian villas in High Street and Station Road use a distinct form of railing as befits their more urban architectural style. The pub car park to The George is bounded by modern and simple post and chain which is unobtrusive and ensures uninterrupted long views of this imposing building from the north. However, tall, modern close-boarded fence panels that bound a development west of the pub present an obstructive and suburban element in this part of the village, closing off views beyond.

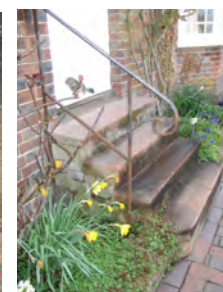
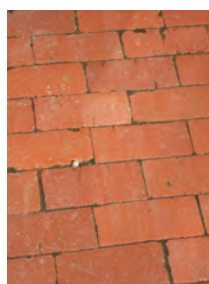
In Fair Lane, the distinction between pavement and property is softened by private planting. Here too, a variety of materials are used on low boundary edges such as railing, brick, but all are domestic and rural in scale and allow good visual appreciation of the buildings beyond. Meanwhile in Northbridge Street there are again low garden walls, fences and railings, though one high close-boarded fence to the east of No.30 is an unusually and unfortunate blank face to the street.

3.8 Public Realm - Paving treatments & Lighting

The majority of the pavement in the High Street is laid with good historic red-brick paving with stone kerbs. There are some areas that have unfortunately been replaced with a poorer quality brick but overall the effect is of a characterful historic pavement, somewhat urban in feel, and which contributes positively to the distinct local identity of the core of the village. The raised pavement on the east side of the High Street has already been highlighted as a significant feature, though the quality here is let down by ugly utilitarian handrails to the steps leading to this pavement, in some state of disrepair.

An additional significant feature is the presence of stepped accesses up to front doors, largely a function of the topography of the place. Many of these have no handrailing, though others have successfully incorporated unobtrusive traditional rails.

The absence of street-lighting in Fair Lane helps to reinforce the rural character here, while elsewhere in the village the limited lighting is uncoordinated in style, and, together with the modern highway signage and telephone box, serves to cumulatively appear as clutter disrupting the



integrity of the historic street scene. The mixture of kerbstone materials in Station Road particularly, adds to a lack of cohesion in the public realm and the streetscene.

3.9 Permeability

Characteristic of much of the Conservation Area is the existence of passageways and paths that lead off the main thoroughfares. Some are shortcuts to other parts of the village, some provide access to dwellings or to commercial or private outbuildings and garages, while others have a more rural character and provide a link to gardens or countryside beyond. They draw the eye from the built street, into the hinterland of the village, and form part of the special character of the street scene.

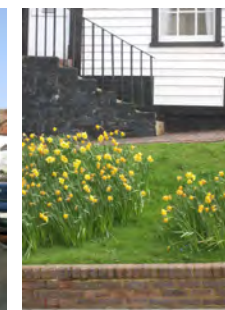
3.10 Landscape Features

The primary open spaces for the settlement, that is the play park and playing field, lie to the north, outside the boundary of the Conservation Area, along with the low-lying pasture land which forms the key landscape feature for the setting of both Robertsbridge and Northbridge Street. The groups of mature deciduous trees on the north west side of the Conservation Area, set against the level ground of the flood plain provide a natural screen and a definable edge to Robertsbridge.

Once in the interior of the Conservation Area the topography and tight-knit built form of the settlement means that there are few opportunities for the wider landscape to be 'brought in' through gaps in the otherwise built up frontage.

There are also few landscape features within the Conservation Area, owing to the overall lack of open space readily visible from public vantage points. However, the southernmost part of the area is softened with the elevated and open ground to the south of Grove House, and the 'green' adjacent to the war memorial. A further key area of green is the wide, grassed banked verges of the eastern side of this part of the High Street. Pipers Lane is tree and hedge lined in parts and bounded on both sides by gardens, which create a semi-rural character despite its central location, while in Fair Lane on the southern side of the Lane are a number of rambling and overgrown shrubs and trees. Although not individually of note, these contribute to the more rural character of the Lane which is in stark contrast to the more urban adjacent High Street, with its tight building line to the pavement. A number of small, planted areas to the front of buildings at the southern end of the High Street and in Fair Lane and Northbridge Street adds to the more rural character here.

Particularly notable areas of trees in the Conservation Area have been identified on Annex 3. However the lack of reference to any specific tree or group does not mean that these have no value.



4.0 Conservation Area Management

Conservation Area status is by no means intended to imply prohibition of development, and Conservation Area Management is therefore largely the management of change, to ensure that local distinctiveness and the special character of place are respected and responded to in a positive manner.

4.1 Development Plan Policies

The primary means by which the Council ensures the preservation or enhancement of the character of the Conservation Area is through policies in the Development Plan, which comprises the South East Plan (adopted May 2009) and the Rother District Local Plan (adopted 2006). These policies generally seek to ensure that, in the granting of any planning permissions, the special character and appearance of the area will be maintained.

The South East Plan (adopted May 2009) outlines its strategic aim in this respect in Chapter 12: Management of the Built Environment. Of particular relevance are the following policies:

POLICY BE1: MANAGEMENT FOR AN URBAN RENAISSANCE

Local authorities and their partners will use opportunities associated with new development to help provide significant improvements to the built environment. They will:

... v. promote and support design solutions relevant to context and which build upon local character and distinctiveness and sense of place, including the sensitive reuse of redundant or under-used historic buildings...

POLICY BE5: VILLAGE MANAGEMENT

In preparing local development documents (LDDs), local planning authorities should positively plan to meet the defined local needs of their rural communities for small scale affordable housing, business and service development, taking account of changing patterns of agriculture, economic diversification, and continued viability of local services. LDDs should define their approach to development in villages based on the functions performed, their accessibility, the need to protect or extend key local services and the capacity of the built form and landscape setting of the village. All new development should be subject to rigorous design and sustainability criteria so that the distinctive character of the village is not damaged. To assist this, local planning authorities should encourage community-led local assessments of need and action planning to inform decision making processes.

POLICY BE6: MANAGEMENT OF THE HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

When developing and implementing plans and strategies, local authorities and other bodies will adopt policies and support proposals which protect, conserve and, where appropriate, enhance the historic environment and the contribution it makes to local and regional distinctiveness and sense of place. The region's internationally and nationally designated historic assets should receive the highest level of protection. Proposals that make sensitive use of historic assets through regeneration, particularly where these bring redundant or under-used buildings and areas into appropriate use should be encouraged.

The Rother District Local Plan (adopted 2006) contains the following advice on Design & Respecting Local Character:

5.18 Rother District is fortunate in the legacy that exists in terms of the quality of the built environment. Towns and villages have grown up over time and display a special relationship with their surroundings. The pattern, form and appearance and use of buildings and spaces are peculiar to each location and contribute to the unique sense of place and cultural identity.

5.19 Good design should respect the character of its setting, whether urban or rural, and can make a positive contribution to reinforcing local distinctiveness. This should still allow room for imaginative design solutions that respond sensitively to the site and setting. Particular care needs to be taken to ensure that developments do not create an alien, cramped appearance or, in some locations such as rural settings, an equally inappropriate suburban

appearance. Where an area has a well-defined and distinctive character, particular care should be taken to maintain it.

The Plan also contains the following policy of which section viii relates to development affecting Conservation Areas:

- Policy GD1** All development should meet the following criteria:
- (i) it meets the needs of future occupiers, including providing appropriate amenities;
 - (ii) it is in keeping with and does not unreasonably harm the amenities of adjoining properties;
 - (iii) it provides for adequate and safe access by all modes of transport, including appropriate parking provision;
 - (iv) it respects and does not detract from the character and appearance of the locality;
 - (v) it is compatible with the conservation of the natural beauty of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
 - (vi) it respects the topography, important views to and from the site and retains site features that contribute to the character or amenities of the area;
 - (vii) it protects habitats of ecological value and incorporates, wherever practicable, features that enhance the ecological value of the site, with particular regard to wildlife refuges or corridors, or fully compensates for any necessary loss;
 - (viii) it does not prejudice the character, appearance or setting of heritage features, notably scheduled ancient monuments and sites of archaeological importance, listed buildings, conservation areas, registered historic parks and gardens, the registered battlefield at Battle, or other buildings and spaces of historic importance;
 - (ix) the infrastructure and facilities necessary to serve the development are available, or suitable provision is made as part of the development, in accordance with Policy GD2;
 - (x) it provides adequate and appropriate means for foul and surface water drainage, with suitable alleviation and mitigation measures where necessary;
 - (xi) it is compatible with deterring crime, including maximising opportunities for natural surveillance of public places;
 - (xii) it promotes the efficient use of energy and water through the layout and design of buildings.

The Plan also contains the following policy which relates specifically to land at Grove Farm, some of which falls within the Conservation Area:

Policy VL7 Land at Grove Farm, Robertsbridge, as shown on the Proposals Map, is allocated for housing development. The development land amounts to some 0.9 hectares. Access would be from George Hill.

Proposals will be permitted where:-

- (i) at least 30 dwellings are provided to include housing for the elderly with 40% of the dwellings to be 'affordable'.
- (ii) access is provided to George Hill, together with developer contributions, improved access arrangements for pedestrians and cyclists to Robertsbridge Station;
- (iii) developer contributions are made to provide for a childrens play area on land adjacent to the housing allocation;
- (iv) developer contributions are made towards educational needs at Robertsbridge Community College;
- (v) field investigations, in respect of the area of archaeological interest, are undertaken before planning permission is granted;
- (vi) a planting scheme to provide a tree belt 30 metres in width immediately to the east of the housing allocation and children's play area, as indicated on Inset Map 30, is carried out at the time of the development to provide screening on the higher land between the housing and the Robertsbridge bypass.

4.2 Design Guidance

The Rother District Council Planning Handbook contains generic design advice which recognises that the inherent underlying character and visual qualities of the District as a whole should not be spoiled by inappropriate development, and highlights the need for good design and appropriate materials. It specifically contains guidance on *A Guide to Householder Development* as well as generic guidance on Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas.

4.3 Highways and the Public Realm

Whilst over-arching responsibility for works to the highway and public realm lies with the County Council, the District Council is actively engaged in a number of initiatives aimed at improving the quality of the Conservation Area.

Meanwhile at a more detailed level, the Council is in the process of adopting the guidance manual 'Streets for All – South East' published jointly by English Heritage and the Department for Transport, which seeks to promote good practice in the designing and maintaining of the public realm, with particular reference to the historic environment, and addresses issues including street surfaces, highways lighting, signage, furniture and street clutter.

Alongside this, East Sussex County Council are currently preparing a Highways Handbook to set out standards for designing and maintaining highways and the public realm.

4.4 Archaeology

Whilst over-arching responsibility for archaeology lies with the County Council, the District Council liaises with the County Archaeologist on policy formulation and planning applications. The aim of the County-designated Archaeological Sensitive Area (ASA) in Robertsbridge is to act as a planning tool to ensure that archaeological evidence (including below ground remains and above ground structures and features) is fully considered during the planning process. The County Council may consider designating a further ASA for Northbridge Street and The Clappers in the future.

Annex 1 – Location Plan of Robertsbridge

