



Upwell

Conservation Area

Character Statement



UPWELL, sometimes called Well, is a long and populous village, adjoining Outwell, 6 miles S.E. of Wisbech, and 9 miles W. by S. of Downham, in the fens, where the old rivers Nene, Welney, and the Well Creek fall into the Wisbech canal.

WILLIAM WHITE 1845

Character Statement Designated: October 1977

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Introduction

A Conservation Area – “An area of special architectural or historic interest, the character of appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance”.

The conservation of the historic environment is part of our quality of life, helping to foster economic prosperity and providing an attractive environment in which to live or work. The Borough Council is committed to the protection and enhancement of West Norfolk's historic built environment and significant parts of it are designated as conservation areas.

Conservation areas were introduced by the 1967 Civic Amenities Act. Local Authorities were required to identify areas of special architectural or historic interest, whose character or appearance it is desirable to preserve or enhance, and to designate them as conservation areas. This duty is now part of the 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act which also requires the review of existing conservation areas and, where appropriate, the designation of new ones. The quality and interest of a conservation area depends upon a combination of factors including the relationship and architectural quality of buildings, materials, spaces, trees and other landscape features, together with views into and out of the area.

Upwell Conservation Area was designated in October 1977. The boundary was revised in 1992 and 2010. The current Conservation Area Statement was prepared in May 2001. This document highlights the special qualities which underpin the character of the conservation area, justifying its designation. It also seeks to increase awareness of those qualities so that where changes to the

environment occur, they do so in a sympathetic way without harm to the essential character of the area. This type of assessment has been encouraged by Government Advice and the Character Statement has been adopted by the Borough Council.

This character statement does not address enhancement proposals. Community led enhancement schemes will be considered as part of a separate process.

Setting and Location

Upwell is located at the far western extremity of the county and historically, until recently, along the boundary with Cambridgeshire. The setting is one of true Fenland landscape in that it is dominated by the presence of water either in the form of natural water courses (in this case the old course of the River Nene whose presence is the chief generating factor of the settlement) or man made features such as drainage channels, 'eaus', cuts, drains and dykes.



The River Great Ouse lies approximately 9.5 kilometres (6 miles) to the east and the River Nene the same distance to the north-west. The matrix of associated drainage features

is dramatic and so typical of this part of England. To the south is Popham's Eau, to the south-east is the Sixteen Foot Drain/Middle Level Drain, and 6.5 kilometres (4 miles) or so miles further beyond this is the Old Bedford River running parallel with the New Bedford River or Hundred Foot Drain. In between are a plethora of dykes and minor drainage channels all of which help to effectively drain this low lying area south of the Wash and which are an important historical feature of the area.

Upwell is surrounded by fen land. Stow Bardolph Fen to the east, Euximoor Fen to the south, Laddus Fen to the west and Marshland Fen to the north. It is an agricultural setting but one unique to this part of the country where the typical components are an unremitting flat landscape broken by the odd tree and hedgerow, isolated farmsteads and a few larger settlements, all connected by a system of roads, country lanes, tracks and droves. The whole assembly is however dominated by the 'big sky' which gives the area so much of its evocative character.

The communication system is dictated utterly by the route of water courses and their banks, which generate the complex road system around Upwell and its sister village Outwell to the north. A glance at the Ordnance Survey Map reveals this dramatically.



The settlement was based on a crossing over the River Nene which became the A1101, an important connecting route between Wisbech, 8 kilometres (5 miles) to the north, Littleport 21 kilometres (13 miles) and Ely 30 kilometres (18 miles) to the south.

In the wider context, the A1101 is a major connecting road linking to the east via the A47, the Midlands and the North via the A17 and the A1, and London and the South via the A10.

The major urban settlement to the east is Downham Market, approximately 13 kilometres (8 miles) away. But such is the barrier formed by the complex water management system to the south-east of Upwell that there is no direct route between the two - you have to go either via Outwell in the north or Lots Bridge in the South

March lies to the south-west but again another tortuous route has to be taken, either via minor roads to Friday Bridge 5.5 kilometres (3.5 miles) north and then south

on the B1011, or south on the B1098 to Bedlam Bridge, and afterwards westwards on the B1109.

Upwell's location and setting is therefore fascinating. It is a settlement based inextricably on the presence of water which also totally dominates and dictates the surrounding communication pattern with adjoining settlements.

In terms of solid geology, Upwell lies in the 'Upper Jurassic' area characterised in recent geological terms by marine and river alluvium as a result of marine incursion, which flooded the freshwater marshes with silty marine or estuarine clay. In soil landscape terms, Upwell lies in an area of marshland mostly reclaimed from the Wash in the 17th Century. The soils have a large water storage capacity and support the most extensive and intensively farmed arable land in the country.



Its immediate setting is also unique to the Fenland area. The major components are roads on either side of a water course with the built fabric in linear form along the roads although in a few instances land has been 'colonized' between the river and adjacent

lines of buildings. Generally the surrounding landscape comes right up to the edge of this thin band of settlement.

Origins and Historical Development

Upwell, translated as a 'settlement higher up the stream' (Old English 'upp'= up and 'well'= spring), is a large village of 32 hectares (80 acres) and a population of some 2,275. It is linked now, without break in development, with Outwell village lying to the north, the translated meaning of which could refer to a later settlement that sprang up outside the old village. The key factors relating to the origin of the settlement are the presence of water and the location of a river crossing. Upwell is a settlement located alongside the old course of the River Nene, in part also known as 'Well Creek'. The historic core is located at the Church Bridge river crossing and is almost certainly the site of the original settlement, the rivers dividing to the south, between the Old Nene and Old Croft rivers.

The village is also located in the area of marshland fen south of the Wash and is dominated by water which in earlier times was even more of a physical barrier. It was nevertheless an extremely fertile area and there is evidence of extensive Roman settlement in the locality, although signs of any settlement before this are virtually non-existent. The Old Fen Causeway, a Roman Road, lies just to the south of the village.

Navigable water meant the ability to trade and gave associated wealth and prosperity. Control of such trade was, post Norman Conquest, firmly held in the hands of the monasteries and in the 14th century there were no less than 16 religious houses in the

settlement. It was clearly an important religious centre, and ecclesiastical lordship was accompanied by prolonged measures to deal with the drainage problems of this Fenland area.

In medieval times, and in the 17th Century, away from the main riverbank, Upwell gradually gained in prosperity as the fenland drainage schemes became more effective. Agricultural and commercial activity blossomed and the settlement took advantage of its river and road links to larger urban centres. The height of this prosperity was probably reached in Georgian and Victorian times and reflects similar 'wealth orientated' building in King's Lynn, Wisbech and Downham Market. The historic built fabric of Upwell generally dates from these two periods as the original settlement burst southwards along each side of the river. A further vehicular river crossing was formed at Hall Bridge (now known as New Bridge) and, with a matrix of connecting droves and tracks coupled with ever more efficient drainage, communications and agricultural efficiency improved dramatically.



Religion always appears to have been an important part of the area and early settlement would have been based around

Church owned farmsteads and hamlets dotted around the Fens, always a sparsely populated part of the county. After the 1538 Dissolution, land ownership gradually changed and building plots in Upwell were slowly disposed of as either as 'tied' cottages, or for commercial and industrial use by trades and professions attached to agriculture and commerce. These two ingredients, the latter inextricably linked to water borne commercial activity, also generated a wealthy merchant class which in turn sustained associated professional classes and the local population who worked for them.

The form of the current settlement developed in Georgian and Victorian times, when the level of activity both economic and social generated almost a 'town' status rather than just a 'village'. The railway came in 1881 and although it ceased in 1929, very early in railway history, it encouraged yet further commerce and communication. As an indication of the prosperity and activity in Outwell and Upwell, the settlement was able to support its own tram service (a light railway for goods and passengers) until the 1950s.

The history of Upwell is closely related to that of Fenland drainage schemes. These gained pace in the 17th and 18th Centuries and enabled the further exploitation of the farming landscape but at the same time minimised the risk of devastation by flooding, always a problem in this low lying area.



This area is not one particularly characterised by large estates, although Upwell Hall provides the nearest semblance to one. It is more characterised historically by small holdings and farms, a pattern which has only recently changed due to the national trends in agriculture and its associated economic activity. Like many similar rural communities, Upwell is now host to a car borne society which generally travels to other areas for employment and leisure. Despite this loss of commercial activity the community is clearly a vital one, which is justly proud of its historic heritage.



Nonconformism spread rapidly in these agricultural areas and Upwell was no exception, with chapels located at either end and in the middle of the settlement.

'Town' status was thus justified over 'village' and, although much of the commercial activity has now gone, the historic fabric is still intact and the settlement is still an attractive place to live. The Old River, now thankfully restored after years of neglect, is only used by pleasure craft (generally long boats) but still forms a quintessentially important component of the settlement's character and is a part of the Middle Level drainage system in the Fens.



Character Overview

Upwell Conservation Area has a long, (almost 2500m or 2700 yards) and relatively sinuous form (around 200-300metres/yards wide) orientated in a north-east to south-west direction. It is a linear settlement which stretches from just north of St Peter's Church south-westwards along the Well Creek to the southern end of School Road.

The conservation area contains the building line on each side of the river and its unique character comes from the range of attractive

vistas which are provided as the river, and consequently the adjacent roads, twist subtly in a gentle arc. There is also a diversity in building types reflecting the historical development described above with several 'listed' architectural 'gems' and many important unlisted historic buildings which nevertheless contribute to the overall quality of the conservation area. Node points are provided by the two bridges although historically the northern (and oldest) one is the most important as this area contains the church and inn.

Landscape is also a key ingredient of the conservation area's character. Views out of the conservation area are dramatic, particularly to the south, and the regular gaps between the ranges of buildings are either filled with mature trees or hedgerows or give views out to the wider fen landscape beyond.



The sense of enclosure is at best flimsy in an area dominated by distant landscape and 'big skies' but there are significant pockets of mature landscape, particularly around Upwell Hall, which do give a sense of enclosure and intimacy so different from the landscape beyond.

Being an important trading settlement a wider than usual range of traditional building materials are displayed but it is the overall character provided by a linear river frontage settlement which is all important. These elements are described in more detail below.

Spaces and Buildings

The easiest way to describe the conservation area in detail is to begin at the northern 'node' point around Church Bridge, work southwards along St. Peters Road and School Road (western bank) and then to work northwards back to Church Bridge along Town Road.



Church Bridge is the probable basis for the settlement as it is the location for the original bridge over the river. This area, in a sense, represents the historic core of the settlement. The architectural 'jewel in the crown', St. Peter's Church, stands in all its magnificence to the north-east of the bridge. It is set back from the river bank behind Small Lode, a minor road running northward to join Low Road which then connects the eastern bank of Upwell with Outwell.



On this side of the river, the northern edge of the conservation area encompasses the important and dominant landscape buffer of Lode House, a modern residence. This building is located to the south of an 'island' site and has attractive mature landscape around virtually the whole of its perimeter.



There are two attractive 'lodge' type buildings located in the south-east corner with interconnecting screen wall. Also, there is a small attractive outbuilding to the north.



The conservation area boundary includes the important listed Welle Manor Hall, a former Rectory, (and interesting listed Tudor towers) which lies to the south-east of the church.

It is surrounded by a mature treed landscape with an enclosing screen wall to the east and south. An attractive and important screen wall also encloses the churchyard and contains some lovely iron gates opposite the north porch.

The pub, once presumably a coaching inn, is much altered. A very well designed car park has been formed further to the east incorporating good screen walls and adjoining outbuildings. This car park is also used in association with Village Hall, an interesting Victorian building lying on the south side of the road.



Crossing over Church Bridge, the conservation area encloses the ranges of fine historic buildings fronting Town Street, the long road fronting the river to the west. The northern conservation area boundary on this side of the river is located at the edge of these historic building ranges. Although other important buildings lie further to the north, the modern infill housing starts to dominate. Superb views of the landscape around Lode Lodge are afforded across the river at this point.

The ranges of historical buildings, some of them listed, form a picturesque grouping with views between to intimate gardens and courtyards. Some buildings have been 'marred' by modern insertions particularly at ground level (shop fronts) but overall, unity of character is maintained, and these buildings represent an immensely important component of the historic core.

Church Bridge itself is marred by a cacophony of street/road signage and other townscape elements, all of which could be rationalised and tidied up. The bench seating is poor and urgently needs upgrading and the lay-by opposite the pub also has an unkempt untidy feel. This whole area could be improved in townscape terms.

Return to Church Bridge and moving into **St. Peter's Road** which runs along the south-east bank. The character of the conservation area changes dramatically from the sense of enclosure and intimacy of the Church Bridge area. It is linear settlement and contains all the ingredients which give Upwell Conservation Area its unique character:- ranges of buildings of varying ages, set on a variety of building plots in a variety of ways (sometimes 'side on', sometimes 'end on', sometimes set back and sometimes on the street), the access road itself, the river with its grassed banks and with a repetition of this formula in full view on the opposite bank.



The spaces between these ranges of buildings are just as important. They have a variety of functions: access to a business yard behind the building line; containing landscape planting which gently punctuates the street line; affording dramatic views of the landscape beyond. Some of these sites have been subject to modern infill development as the commercial life of the town declined in the 20th Century.

St. Peters Road contains all these elements and, although the architecture is not quite as important as that on the north-west bank, it is the general assembly of components to form a long river frontage with subtle curves and interesting vistas in both directions which creates the special character.



There are no listed buildings here but there are several which are of 'townscape' significance. It is also encouraging to see some commercial use continuing e.g. Martins Produce Merchant and Harnwell Electrical in the old Salvation Hall. The village cemetery is also contained in this section of road and has an important landscape buffer surrounding it.

A second node is reached at **New Bridge** (also known as Hall Bridge) where St. Peter's Road becomes School Road. There is another public house on the south-east corner and a minor road (New Bridge Road) continues south-east from the bridge to connect with another track linking the 'backlands' of the area this side of the river.



The character of **School Road** contains all those components listed above and represents the line of major expansion of the settlement in Georgian/Victorian times. The character is however subtly different in that there is now little building on the western bank across the river and, as a consequence, even more dramatic views of the Fenland landscape stretching into the distance are afforded. In addition the east bank begins to widen out sufficiently to allow

the formation of small riverside gardens, or in one or two places actual buildings themselves between the river and the road.



The more significant buildings are located at the New Bridge end of School Road although virtually every range will have had some connections with the town's commercial past. There is still the odd commercial business run from these buildings although the area is now predominantly residential. Moving further southwards, the architectural character dissipates dramatically and almost every building has been marred by modern insertions in a most unattractive way. 'Townscape value' in such circumstances is marginal in purely visual terms, but the built fabric as a unity represents an important element of the town's historic past. The County Primary School is an important late Victorian building here. Turning to the western bank of the river, the southern section up to New Bridge contains only two properties, Bleak House and Tasmanian House.

Crossing over the river, **Town Street** proceeds in a north-west direction towards the Church and Church Bridge. There is an extremely high quality of townscape here.

Whilst all the components described above are present, the architectural quality is heightened by the presence of several fine listed buildings ranging from Upwell Hall itself and Hall Lodge, to The Crescent. The built frontage is in a sense akin to the river frontage at Wisbech and contains many delightful pieces of 'set piece' architecture.



There are also some extremely important non-listed historic buildings which have townscape value. The variety of views are as dramatic as those on the east bank, culminating in the revealing of the church further to the north. The spaces between the buildings and the landscape components are also vital to character, and range from the important mature landscape around Upwell Hall and the Methodist Church to the backdrop of mature trees to the rear gardens of the riverside properties, with several important connecting screen walls.

The conservation area boundary encompasses all these gardens which form a natural 'edge' between 'urbanism' and agricultural countryside beyond. The latter again comes right up to the curtilage of the properties to create a very dramatic transition 'edge' to the conservation area.

The arrangement of buildings on their plots and the size of building plots themselves contribute greatly to the attractiveness and variety of the street scene with a series of delightful groupings of built form resulting from ad hoc development over the decades. This 'patina' of age is very special to the character of Upwell Conservation Area.



In summary, Upwell Conservation Area, although essentially a linear settlement, is in fact more than this. It has a variety of spaces, each with its own special character related to the size and disposition of buildings on their plots, the spaces in between and the riverside landscape setting, which all contribute to its special and unique character.

Listed Buildings

There are 34 listed buildings within Upwell Conservation Area. The statutory list was revised in 1986 and there have been no further additions.

Grade I Buildings

- **Church of St. Peter, Small Lode.** 13th Century with 14th and 15th Century work. Restored 1836-38. Barnack stone

and clunch with leaded roofs. Three stage tower.

Grade II* Buildings



- **Welle Manor Hall, New Road.** Manor house; mid 14th Century, altered 1480, 17th Century and 20th Century. Brick with slate or plain tile roofs. North front three storeys.
- **Crescent House, Town Street.** House 1620-1640 with early 18th Century facade. Red brick with paler bricks, thick pointed to 18th Century facade. Parapetted roof of slate. Three storey.
- **2 Cottages, east of Lloyds Bank, Town Street.** 14th Century part of a medieval building of U plan and possibly a lodging or guest house. Now 2 cottages. Coursed Barnack with brick repairs. Pantile ridge.

Grade II Buildings

- **2 no. towers to Welle Manor Hall** Built 1480 in brick, octagonal.
- **60 no. headstones and memorials, St Peter's Churchyard.** All in limestone and dating from the 1720s and 30s.
- **Upwell Hall, Town Street.** House, mid 19th Century. Gault brick with low pitch,

hipped, slate roof and deep boarded eaves.



- **Hall Lodge, Town Street.** Mid 18th Century, local red brick with steeply pitched slate roof and end / ridge stacks.
- **Gates and Gate Piers, Upwell Hall.** Mid 18th century in wrought iron. Piers are cast iron with cast iron finials.
- **Crescent Cottage, Town Street.** Originally a pair of cottages, now one dwelling. Late 18th early 19th Century. Brown gault brick with yellow gault brick to side wall. Parapetted roof of slate, two storeys.
- **Gable End and West Wall to Work Shop (rear of Builders Merchants), Town Street.** Right hand rear range of medieval lodging, probably 14th Century.
- **Bridge House, Church Bridge.** House late 18th century. Red brick, rendered with steeply pitched roof, two storeys. Late 19th Century shop front.

- **Archway House and Homeleigh, Town Street.** House mid 18th Century. Yellow gault brick with red brick dentils. Original roof, parapetted but raised 19th Century now low pitch/pantiled.
- **Piermont House, Town Street.** House 1840. Gault brick with parapetted roof, two storeys.
- **White Lion Public House, Town Street.** Late 17th Century house. Front elevation and roof late 18th Century. Brown brick with mansard roof, pantiled, two storeys.

Important Unlisted Buildings

The character of Upwell Conservation Area is formed by many historic buildings which, although not listed, make a great contribution to townscape quality. These are shown on the map and are identified because of their design, use of traditional materials, massing, prominent position, the fact that their character is relatively intact, and because they often relate to other historic buildings nearby.



Wherever possible adjacent outbuildings have been subject to the same scrutiny as these structures can also be a vitally important reminder of the town's historic past.

Post War Development

Upwell, lying on a major communication route in difficult terrain, has been subject to much post war development. There have been several agents of this trend.

On the one hand there has been, and still is, continual pressure to provide housing, either on single plots or in groups such as Hall Bridge Road and Ransome Close. Similarly, new housing development has clustered around New Bridge Road, New Road, (the main A1101 road leading to Three Holes and Littleport) and to the north of Town Road such that Upwell and Outwell are now effectively one settlement. Individual dwellings have also been constructed on many infill housing sites between the ranges of historic buildings.

On the other hand the post war period has witnessed dramatic structural changes in our society, which has altered the whole commercial basis on which Upwell existed.

The changes in agricultural practice and the need for associated local industry and crafts, together with an immediately available workforce, has meant the erosion of the very basis of settlement.

A place the size of Upwell will always sustain a certain amount of commerce and industry, but it can never compare with, or generate the richness and vitality of the old agricultural trading community. The forces behind this trend are national and in a sense are a result of 'globalisation'.

These changes have in turn had a tremendous impact on the historic fabric, which has without exception been subject in some form or another to repair, refurbishment, alteration or extension. The drive for 'improvement' in the form of unsympathetic windows, doors, roofing and walling materials has almost totally eroded the unique character of the historic fabric south of New Bridge

Luckily the last decade of the 20th Century has seen a huge shift in our philosophy towards conservation and the sensitive repair of historic buildings and this has done so much to arrest this decay in traditional character.



Modern development has also meant the insertion of a modern services infrastructure and in visual terms this has resulted in obtrusive overhead wirescape, again to the detriment to the quality of the visual scene, particularly around Church Bridge.

Generally the early modern infill housing has been of undistinguished 'anywhere' design with scant respect for context or the use of local building materials. More recent schemes have however been more successful in terms of 'designing for context'.

It is encouraging to see the continuation of commercial activity, as it can only help the general vitality of the settlement. Upwell remains an attractive place to live. It also benefits from being near larger urban areas and its population has actually increased in recent years.



This conservation area is undoubtedly treasured by the community, as witnessed by the huge local effort injected into saving the waterway itself, which only a few decades ago was in a very sad state. It is now an important source of tourism in the area.

Traditional Materials

The character of Upwell Conservation Area owes a great deal to the use of local traditional materials in the construction of its historic buildings. These materials include:-

- Barnack limestone.
- Clunch (chalk).
- Pink/buff or cream local gault clay brickwork.
- Colourwashed masonry.
- Flint – generally random rubble.
- Welsh slate.
- Norfolk red/orange clay pantile.
- Clay plain (peg) tiles.



Archaeological Interest

There are no Scheduled Ancient Monuments in Upwell Conservation Area.

Detractors

The special quality of conservation areas can easily be eroded by seemingly minor alterations such as unsuitable replacement windows and doors, inappropriate materials or unsympathetic paintwork, removal of walls, railings, trees and hedges.

Upwell Conservation Area has all too many examples of the above detractors. Other significant items are listed as follows:-

- Prominent overhead wires, poles and other equipment.



- Poor/untidy townscape components at Church Bridge.
- Poor floorscape to layby near Church, Five Bells pub, area south of the Village Hall, and layby west of School Road.
- Poor landscaping and enclosure with too much reliance on evergreen species and modern walling / fencing materials.
- Undistinguished quality of modern housing lacking reference to context in terms of massing, siting and material specification.
- Poor design of shop fronts in an historically important context.

Conservation Objectives

Statement 1

The overall conservation objective is to protect and reinforce the established special character of Conservation Areas and their setting.

This will be achieved by:

- Encouraging the retention and maintenance of buildings which contribute to the overall character of each conservation area
- Ensuring that new development is sympathetic to the special qualities and character of each conservation area
- Protecting the setting of the conservation area from development which adversely affects views into or out of the area
- The retention, maintenance and locally appropriate new planting of trees
- Maintaining and enhancing local features and details which contribute towards an area's local distinctiveness
- Working with the community to prepare schemes of enhancement
- Encouraging the removal of detractors to the special character of each conservation area

Contacts and advice

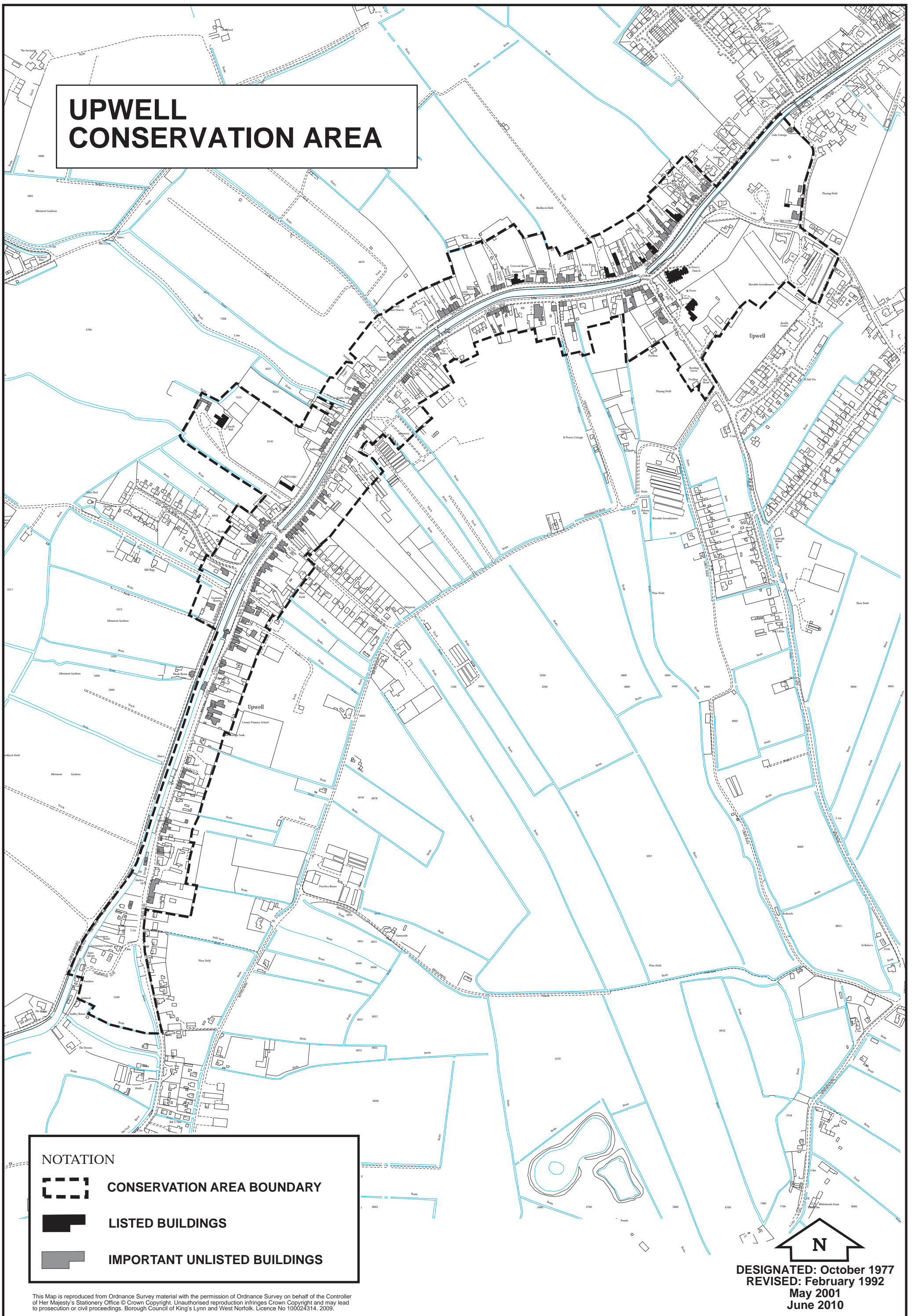
Within conservation areas, a number of special controls apply and it is advisable that anyone proposing to carry out new development, alteration, extensions, installations or demolition should seek advice from Development Services at an early stage. Special controls also apply to the trees and some may be subject to Tree Preservation Orders. Anyone wishing to carry out work to trees within a Conservation Area should therefore seek advice from Development Services.

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UPWELL CONSERVATION AREA



NOTATION

-  CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY
-  LISTED BUILDINGS
-  IMPORTANT UNLISTED BUILDINGS

DESIGNATED: October 1977
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