

**REPORT OF THE HEAD OF PLANNING AND POLICY
TO THE PLANNING COMMITTEE
5TH MARCH 1998
(FOR DECISION)**

CONSERVATION AREA CHARACTER APPRAISAL : AUDLEM

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 A Conservation Area is an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.
- 1.2 The Borough of Crewe and Nantwich currently has 20 conservation areas half of which were designated prior to the formation of the Borough Council in 1974. Information relating to these is dated and is therefore inadequate in terms of current requirements to identify and understand the specialness of an area.
- 1.3 It is important to understand why a particular conservation area has been designated. Current Government advice places great emphasis on having a comprehensive and robust understanding of what constitutes an area's special character or interest. This understanding is important for both local plan and development control purposes and for the contribution it can make towards the formulation of proposals for the preservation and enhancement of the character or appearance of the area.
- 1.4 Character appraisals or assessments are a tool for helping to understand the special interest of a conservation area and pro-actively managing that interest. It is intended that eventually each conservation area within the Borough will have its own character appraisal statement.
- 1.5 This appraisal looks at Audlem and is intended to provide a framework which will form a basis for the direction and management of the Borough Council's approach to the Conservation Area. It seeks to identify those components of the Conservation Area which make up its character.
- 1.6 Although this appraisal looks at the conservation area in some detail, it is not and cannot be at this stage comprehensive. Therefore the omission of any particular building, feature or space should not be taken to mean that it is of no interest. To reiterate, the appraisal is a starting point.

2.0 CONSULTATION

- 2.1 It is intended that the character appraisal should form the basis of consultation with local residents and the Parish Council. The support of people within the Conservation Area is vital to a successful pro-active management strategy aimed at reinforcing an area's special character.
- 2.2 In particular the introduction of Article 4 (II) Directions under the 1990 Town and Country Planning Acts must have been subject to appropriate consultation.

3.0 EXISTING DESIGNATION

- 3.1 The Audlem Conservation Area reached its present form through the original designation of December 1969 and a subsequent amendment (enlarging it) in January 1981. Unlike many of the early Conservation Area designations the accompanying report for the initial designation made greater reference to the townscape qualities of Audlem. Indeed it referred to "the few outstanding buildings". Since then however other buildings have come to be recognised for their architectural and historic contribution. Nonetheless Audlem's particular townscape is its chief asset.
- 3.2 In 1981 various amendments were made to the conservation area boundary which generally reflected a concern with the importance of peripheral areas that formed a part of the setting of the conservation area. For example the wooded site of the former vicarage was included.
- 3.3 From the outset the presence of the Shropshire Union Canal has played some part in the Audlem Conservation Area even though it might be seen as having a significantly different character. Again the importance of the canal and the value of things associated with it such as locks, mile-posts and canal cottages has increased.
- 3.4 The existing designated area therefore is broadly based and includes areas of distinct and differing character. Whilst 'townscape' was an element identified as being of importance to the character of the Conservation Area the meaning of the term was not perhaps as broadly defined as it is today. To illustrate this Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 : Planning and the Historic Environment states at paragraph 4.2 that:

"It is the quality and interest of areas, rather than that of individual buildings, which should be the prime consideration in identifying conservations areas. There has been increasing recognition in recent years that our experience of a historic area depends on much more than the quality of individual buildings - on the historic layout of property boundaries and thoroughfares; on particular mix of uses; on characteristic materials; on appropriate scaling and detailing of contemporary buildings; on the quality of advertisements, shop fronts, street furniture and hard and soft surfaces; on vistas along streets and between buildings; and on the extent to which traffic intrudes and limits pedestrian use of spaces between buildings. Conservation Area designation should be seen as the means of recognising the importance of all these factors, of ensuring that conservation policy addresses the quality of townscape in its broadest sense as well as the protection of individual buildings."

4.0 CHARACTER APPRAISAL

- 4.1 Boundary
- 4.1.1 The present boundary to the Conservation Area is drawn around one extensive area which includes two distinctly differing characteristics: the 'urban' core and the section which is focused upon the canal. The building dominated element represents, by and large the village which had grown slowly and in piecemeal fashion before pressure for housing development led to a significant growth in the scale and pattern of the settlement. Even the

arrival of the canal in the 1820's did not bring such huge expansion to the settlement. Whereas the original conservation area boundary largely followed the edge of the settlement as it existed at that time, today the boundary follows a line hemmed in by new development. This is particularly so to the south, south-west and north-east of the core settlement. To the south east and north east the boundary is still flanked by undeveloped land which links to the open countryside and forms an essential bit of the setting of the Conservation Area.

4.1.2 Because of development which has occurred since the first designation there are some areas where the boundary no longer follows a logical path. In other instances the boundary does not follow an identifiable line and cuts through common curtilages.

4.1.3 The critical feature however seems to be the inclusion of two characteristically different areas within one designated area. In doing this the canal part might not get full recognition.

4.2 General setting

4.2.1 Audlem is situated at the southern apex of the Cheshire Plain, near to the Cheshire/Shropshire Border. It is almost equidistant between the towns of Nantwich and Market Drayton on the north/south axis and Whitchurch to the west. The village is built around the convergence of two major roads - the A525 Wrexham to Stoke and the A529 Nantwich to Market Drayton. Winding their way into the centre they meet at the Market Square forming the focal point of the village. Dominated by the fine 14th Century church of St James, this area was until the late 19th Century used for a weekly market, granted to the village some 500 years earlier.

4.2.2 The generally undulating nature of the surrounding countryside affords the occasional distant glimpse of the tower of St James; however the conservation area is situated at a point where levels flatten and the high ground upon which the Church sits becomes dominant. Because of the surrounding land form arrival into the historic core is almost unexpected.

4.2.3 The general setting of Audlem creates a framework for an interesting historic core which has produced a dynamic townscape.

4.3 Townscape

4.3.1 The townscape of Audlem is one of its principal assets. The curving form of the three principal roads which meet at the Market Square gives rise to many interesting views and vistas. Stafford Street in particular adds to the townscape merit of Audlem as not only does it curve abruptly but it also has a gradient. This gives it a relatively low position allowing St James' to loom over it.

4.3.2 The curving principal roads allow the buildings defining them to close views, subsequently to open up again creating aspects of surprise and anticipation. The dominating, elevated position of St James' the Great enhances these qualities and offers a constant contrast between it and the closely-knit groups of properties densely packed together which surround it.

- 4.3.3 A secondary system of narrow lanes squeezing between buildings adds further to the townscape quality of Audlem. These too are identified by forms which create and close views and vistas; buildings alongside them defining their particular character. These routes and spaces provide a more intimate townscape character on a smaller scale. Their value however is considerable in that they define the growth and limits of the historic core of Audlem.
- 4.3.4 The hub of these spaces is the triangular market place where a more restful state is created due to its proportions and the scale of buildings surrounding it. Here however the Church of St James is most exposed and commands the space almost like a castle.
- 4.3.5 Throughout, an interesting contrast exists between the densely packed groups of buildings and pockets of open space whether large gardens or larger plots associated with other buildings of a non-residential use. The connection with the open countryside is always hinted at despite the 'urban' townscape characteristics which the dense historic core displays.
- 4.3.6 In contrast is the softer and slower character of the canal which cuts across Shropshire Street. Due to its closeness to the settlement an interesting 'townscape' has developed here which relies on the combination of the various activities formerly associated with the canal and the particular buildings and structures needed to accommodate them. Whilst buildings and structures are present however a fundamentally different character can be identified.
- 4.3.7 The 'townscape' character of each element of the conservation area is well defined and presents a strong image which is legible and distinct; local identity is very strong.

4.4 Architectural Character

The architectural character of Audlem is rich and diverse with many interesting buildings of contrasting form, scale and usage. Furthermore there exists a broad span of time in terms of architectural development, although the predominant buildings in terms of numbers would appear to be from the early nineteenth century. A number of principal buildings exist which enrich the architectural character of Audlem and these include the churches, the Grammar School and the Georgian buildings which occur intermittently at various locations along with The Buttermarket.

- 4.4.2 These buildings except The Buttermarket are of a scale which is in complete contrast to the many domestic scale cottages which surround the Church of St James. Mostly two storey these cottages are plain and symmetrical, forming strong 'edges' to the back of pavement. Their regular fenestration and interesting roof line (often parallel to the road) provide a cohesive architectural style.
- 4.4.3 Plot form and shape varies from the regular long thin plots to the more varied and random plot sizes. This gives rise to architectural diversity and also helps to create sub-character in the differing parts of the conservation area.
- 4.4.4 There is generally a rich balance between domestic vernacular, commercial and institutional type buildings of a traditional nature. However in an area adjacent to the canal has developed an area of mixed uses which has given

rise to a number of buildings of a much more modern (and often temporary) appearance which although not of architectural quality forms a link between the differing architecture of the canal and the historic village core.

- 4.4.5 In addition to specific buildings there are a few high-quality traditional shop fronts which complement greatly the buildings to which they are attached. Their detailing, colour and proportions enhance rather than detract from the Conservation Area.
- 4.4.6 Further individual buildings of traditional appearance also make a significant contribution to the Architectural richness of Audlem and they tend to be located randomly throughout the settlement at points where they act as 'marker' buildings. This seems to have developed as an important part of the architectural character of Audlem.
- 4.5 Building Materials
 - 4.5.1 The building materials most commonly used and which characterise the conservation area are red/brown brick and dark blue plain clay tiles or Welsh slate. However the use of sandstone as either a principal material or for dressings is such that it also makes a contribution to the palette of materials used. This limited range forms the bulk of buildings within the conservation area although painted render contributes via a limited number of buildings. These are randomly located and create no identifiable pattern.
 - 4.5.2 Boundaries to properties represent a strong visual element with the conservation area and tend to be constructed from the range of materials identified above. However the overall range becomes extended by the formation of metal railings (along Cheshire Street in particular) and the limited use of terracotta copings and finials to certain other buildings also on Cheshire Street. These extend the identity within the conservation area and form memorable elements among the built form.
 - 4.5.3 It is mostly the vertical surfaces which form the range of building materials; however there are limited instances where the floorspace becomes an important contributor. At vehicular cross-over points the use of setts extending to the rear of properties adds to the traditional character of the historic core; these are essential parts of the overall range of materials and identity of the settlement.
 - 4.5.4 Whilst buildings and structures within the canal corridor display the use of the predominant materials already noted others also contribute. In particular the range of traditional floorscape materials is extended by using clay paviors at a number of locations along the canal embankment. These recall and reflect the industrial/commercial atmosphere and activity that once existed along the canal and its immediate surroundings.
- 4.6 Natural Elements
 - 4.6.1 Audlem Conservation Area on first impression presents an urban, building - dominated image with its densely packed group of buildings. There is a gradual awareness however that an extensive network of trees provides a softening backdrop and a noticeable canopy of mature deciduous trees exists in the background throughout the conservation area.

- 4.6.2 These trees provide a context for the randomly placed set-pieces where trees dominate and have a significant presence within the streetscene. Groups of trees, formal and informal, and individual species provide a foil within the built frontages and enrich the townscape through their presence. The Chapel of Rest frontage provides an important set-piece which enhances the view of the buildings yet also has a strong public identity. A single mature tree in Shropshire Street occupies a pivotal role as a marker to and from the Church of St James. The sharp curve of Stafford Street is accentuated by mature trees on the northern edge of the bend. Generally trees which can be identified as not being a part of the backdrop identified above perform a strong individual townscape role. It is a characteristic of the conservation areas that trees perform this role.
- 4.6.3 There are areas towards the edges of the conservation area where trees have a strong linking role with the open countryside beyond and help to define the settlement.
- 4.6.4 Open countryside pushes at the eastern and western edges of the settlement providing a clear edge to the conservation area and preserving the former condition of immediate contact with open countryside. The importance of this to the conservation area is heightened by the housing development which has blurred the edge definition to the north and south with suburban development.
- 4.6.5 Within the settlement core the open nature of varied garden plots behind or to the side of buildings creates a link with the nearby open countryside. It is these spaces which contain some of the backdrop tree cover. The value of these undeveloped plots to the character of the conservation area is as important as the development defining the principle routes within the historic core.
- 4.6.6 As a natural element the knoll upon which the Church of St James sits provides a central open space at the meeting of the principle routes and sits in contrast to the huddled buildings around and below it. The quality of this natural space is enhanced by the tranquillity that the Church gives to it.
- 4.6.7 Water is a strong feature not only because of the presence of the canal which contributes its own particular character but also the brook which forms a minor water course defining the south-eastern boundary of the historic core. It is also a seam between the settlement and the adjacent rolling countryside. It is both audible and visible along the secondary routes which run parallel to it and forms an integral element of the settlement fringe at this location.
- 4.7 Land Use
- 4.7.1 A diversity of land-uses characterise the historic core of the settlement leading to a lively mix of activities and particular building forms. This mix of uses has stemmed from and been maintained by the commercial evolution of Audlem as a market centre. Similarly the social role of the settlement has given rise to a demand for building types (on a suitable scale) often found in larger centres of population.
- 4.7.2 Although the role and importance of Audlem has evolved the legacy of its earlier existence has left a street pattern and architectural character of historic importance. The relic medieval plot pattern has led to a historic

layout which incorporates later development. This richness of form through evolved land use is a strong characteristic of Audlem's historic core.

4.7.3 Outside of the historic settlement core and characterised by a former single land-use the canal has nonetheless generated a similarly diverse mix of building types; these reflect a former land-use associated with the canal activity. The combination of buildings and structures (including machinery) alongside the waterway has created an area of distinct identify and character unrelated to that of the historic settlement core. It is architecturally and historically important in its own right because of what gave rise to it.

4.8 Negative Elements

4.8.1 These can be viewed either as 'opportunity sites', potential enhancements or clues to future development. Within the Audlem Conservation Area it is important that the strong distinctive elements identified above are protected, and/or reproduced as the opportunity presents itself.

4.8.2 A major impact upon the character of the conservation area is the volume and type of vehicular traffic which negotiates the routes through the settlement core. The narrow and winding roads particularly near to the Church of St James give rise to particular difficulties which detract from the historic 'feel' in this location.

4.8.3 The concentrated area of commercial activity between the canal and Combermere Arms public house whilst vital in terms of its vitality and activity has perhaps begun to undermine the visual, architectural and historic qualities generally identifiable throughout the Conservation Area.

4.8.4 Some new buildings and residential extensions have not always resulted in development which is compatible with the character and appearance of the conservation area. Equally the importance of detail and materials in continuing the established character of the conservation area ought to be recognised. Regrettably these developments along with the exercise of permitted development rights have begun to adversely affect the conservation area.

4.8.5 The telephone exchange appears as a particularly incompatible element within the conservation area and serves perhaps to demonstrate the extreme consequences of the above. There is however a concern with more apparently less damaging development whose adverse impact is cumulative.

5.0 ENHANCEMENT OPPORTUNITIES

5.1 Review of the Conservation Area Boundary

5.1.1 The character and appearance of Audlem warrants its designation as a conservation area although the present boundary should be revised to exclude areas which are not special; rationalised where it presently cuts through plots instead of following property boundaries and amended to include open areas identified for development which could have an impact on the setting of the settlement core i.e. Churchfields. (See plan 1).

- 5.1.1 The opportunity also exists to redefine the conservation area by splitting and extending the canal designation from that of the settlement. The two parts have distinctive characters of their own and opportunities within each are different. The proposed revision to the canal element is shown on plan 3. This extended conservation area includes further lock sequences; canal activity associated with boat moorings and a number of canal structures. There exists an architectural and historical connection between this further area of canal and the small section already designated.
- 5.2 Article 4(11) Direction
- 5.2.1 Permitted development can have a significant visual impact on both the traditional appearance of buildings and the overall ambience of the Conservation Area. It should be brought within planning control by the establishment of an Article 4(11) direction whereby specified permitted development rights are withdrawn.
- 5.2.2 Doors, windows and roof coverings for example are important to maintain an appropriate appearance which is in accordance with the identified character of both buildings and the Conservation Area. At present it would be possible to change these elements without requiring planning permission (unless of course the building is listed); therefore a comprehensive scheme for Article 4 (II) controls is suggested for consultation purposes. This is attached as Appendix I.
- 5.3 Traffic
- 5.3.1 In conjunction with the Highway Authority the Borough Council should explore measures to lessen the impact of traffic nuisance and domination through both traffic management/calming measures and highway signage rationalisation. It is understood that the Highway Authority has allocated resources for traffic management measures.
- 5.4 Development
- 5.4.1 Proposals for new development should take into account the dominant building and plot characteristics which give Audlem its unique identity. This should include materials and curtilage definition especially.
- 5.5 Signage
- 5.5.1 The quality and number of signs can have a significant impact on the appearance of a conservation area which has a strong commercial element. In some locations these factors are beginning to detract from the area's quality and the use of powers under the advertisement regulations could help to retrieve this situation. The 'Shroppie Flay' in particular is beginning to appear out of keeping due to its signage. A comprehensive programme should be devised to address this aspect.

6.0 CONCLUSION

- 6.1 The above represents a starting point for consultation purposes. The character appraisal should inform development control decisions, establish

desired enhancement opportunities and provide a basis for Article 4(11) controls.

RECOMMENDATION

The Committee is asked to **RESOLVE -**

That the Character Appraisal of Audlem Conservation Area with the suggestions for enhancement and Article 4 (II) controls be approved for the purposes of consultation with local residents and the Audlem Parish Council.

Contact Officers: P J Booth Tel: 537473

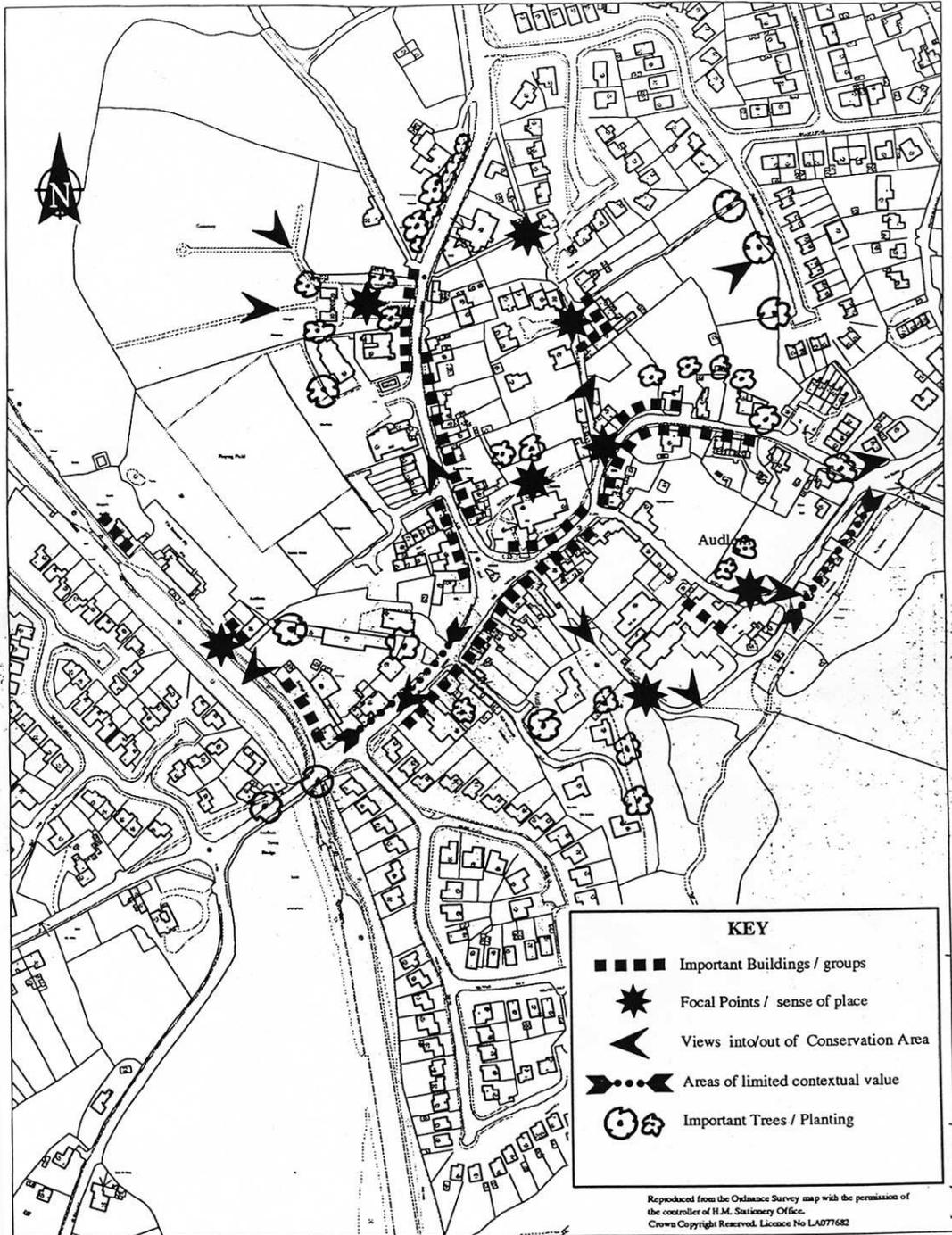
Background documents:

Civic Amenities Act 1967 Conservation Area 15 Audlem; Nantwich Rural District
Cheshire County Council Sites and Ancient Monuments Record



AUDLEM PLAN 1
Conservation Area and Listed Buildings

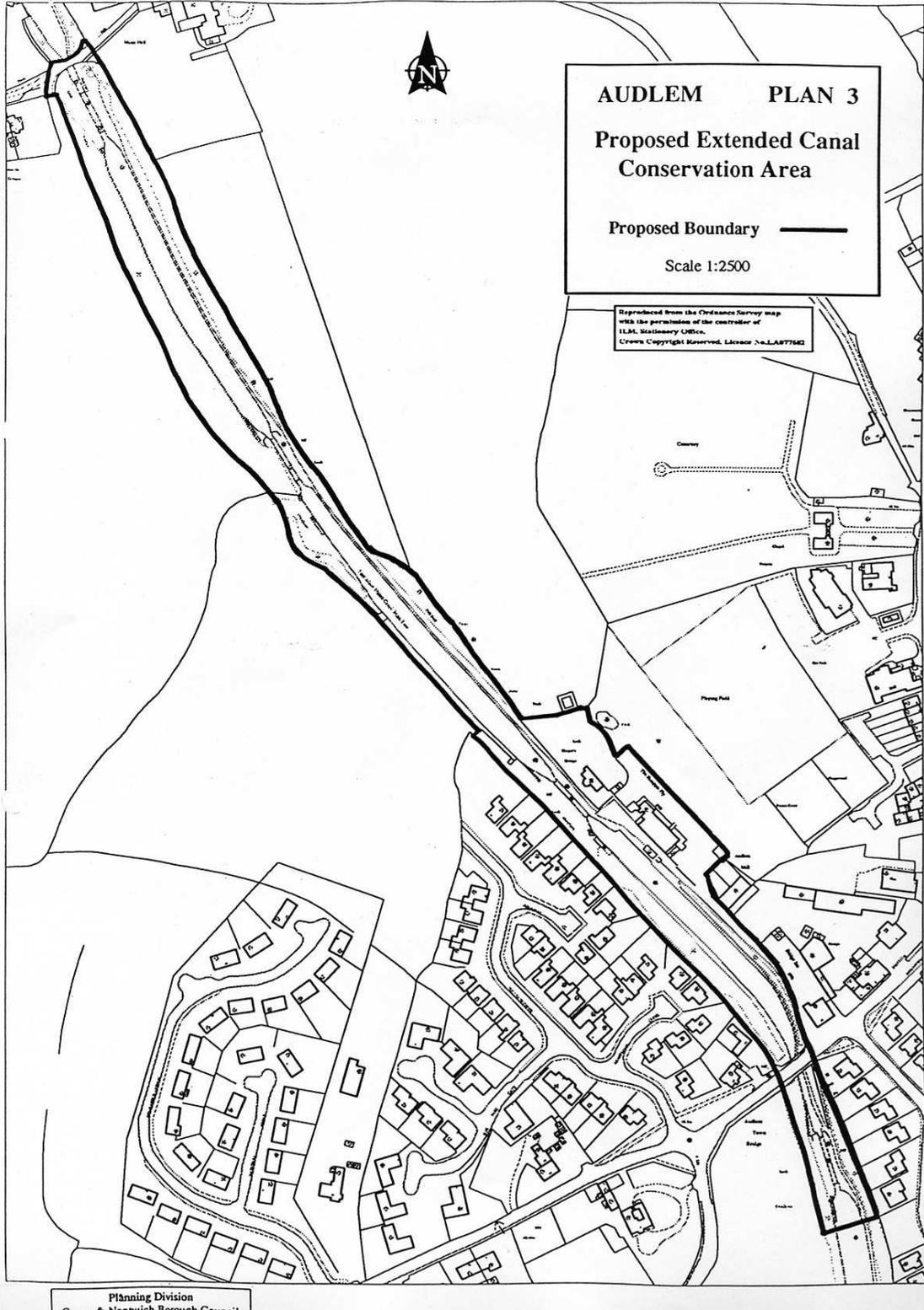
Planning Division
 Crewe & Nantwich Borough Council
 D. Cook Head of Planning & Policy



AUDLEM PLAN 2

Summary Principal Visual Elements

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**THE TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING
(GENERAL PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT) ORDER 1995**

Where the development would front a highway, a waterway or open space:-

1. The enlargement, improvement or other alteration of a dwellinghouse.
2. The alteration of a dwellinghouse roof.
3. The erection of a porch outside any external door of a dwellinghouse.
4. The building within the curtilage of a dwelling of a building, enclosure, swimming or other pool, which is incidental to the enjoyment of the dwelling.
5. The creation of a hardstanding within a dwellinghouse curtilage.
6. The installation or replacement of a satellite dish on a dwelling or within its curtilage.
7. The erection or removal of a chimney on a dwellinghouse.
8. The erection or removal of a gate, wall, fence or other means of enclosure.
9. The painting of a dwellinghouse, or any curtilage building.