PART ONE: GENERAL

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Arrangement of this Assessment

This assessment is arranged in four parts, as follows:

- Part One provides a general description of the West Wimbledon Conservation Area, its context, history, character, details of its designation and particularly relevant policies in the Borough’s Unitary Development Plan;
- Part Two, which takes up the great majority of the assessment, provides an analytical description of the Conservation Area with the use of maps and photographs, including features of particular significance, arranged under 33 Sub Areas some of which are divided into two or three parts, and suggests ways in which the Conservation Area might be further enhanced;
- Part Three provides a statistical analysis of the positive or negative architectural and historical contribution which each building and Sub Area makes to the Conservation area, and assesses the quality of most of the major developments which have occurred within the Conservation Area since the 1950s; and
- Part Four indicates those properties which have been added to or excluded from the Conservation Area, and recommends buildings to be added to the statutory and local lists of buildings of special architectural and historic interest, and parts of the Conservation Area which would benefit from greater planning control through the use of Article 4 Directions.

Location

As its name implies, Wimbledon West Conservation Area – or West Wimbledon Conservation Area as it became known - is situated immediately to the west of The Village, the historic centre of Wimbledon, in the borough of Merton, South London.

Orientation and Topography

The central spine of the main section of the conservation area, Ridgway, runs approximately east-west and forms part of one of the historic routes from London to the south-west. The general orientation of the Ridgway, and of the Conservation Area as a whole is actually aligned somewhat north-east to south-west, but since two of the roads which edge the north-west and north-east parts of the Conservation Area are named West Side Common and Southside Common, the historic convention that these and adjoining roads are oriented north-south etc is maintained in this Assessment.

The Ridgway runs from east to west along the top of a major escarpment. To the north an extensive area of flat land reaches across Wimbledon Common towards Kingston, but to the south the land falls away dramatically into the Wandle valley. The gradient is at its steepest at the eastern end, south of Wimbledon Village, and levels off towards the west, along Copse Hill. At about the time of the Black Death this escarpment was known as "The Wild Land".

Extent

West Wimbledon Conservation Area is one of the largest in the Borough, covering about 103 hectares. It stretches from Wimbledon Village westwards for about 1,500 metres as far as Copse Hill and Cottenham Park, and for nearly 2,000 metres from its south-eastern boundary along Worple Road to Caesar's Camp, on Wimbledon Common, in the north-west. It varies substantially in character - the area to the north-west, around Cannizaro Park, being quite different in layout and density from the predominantly residential section situated between Southside Common and Worple Road.

Geology
The northern section of the Conservation Area forms part of a region of well drained light gravel soil about 45 metres above sea level extending over Wimbledon Common and beyond, where natural springs attracted early settlers. Although not particularly suitable for farming, the area proved ideal for grazing animals, while south of the Ridgway, on the slopes above Worple Road, the exposed London clay was suitable for arable farming.

These natural advantages, together with the extensive views to the south-east, made the area not only an appropriate home for early man, but in more recent times an attractive and desirable place for important and wealthy families to locate their estates.

The village of Wimbledon became a desirable place in which to live because the subsoil is rapidly draining gravel. Before the days of damp proof courses this was an important asset to a building. It is to the gravel soil therefore and its breezy upland position that Wimbledon owes its heritage of so many seventeenth and eighteenth century buildings. [Myson & Berry 1972 p.16]

Archaeology

There is evidence that west Wimbledon and its environs has been settled in one form or another since before the Roman invasion, and the area now covered by the Conservation Area extends over two Archaeological Priority Zones, Wimbledon Village and Wimbledon Common, which are important for their settlement patterns and prehistoric landscapes. The latter Zone has revealed evidence of human settlement since the end of the last Ice Age, and the area has been populated, if sparsely, since Neolithic times. Evidence of Stone Age habitation includes the discovery on the Common of over 3,000 stone flakes for tool making dating from about 100,000 years ago [Ecology Handbook 29, p.7]. During the Bronze Age (c.2000 to 600 BC) a chain of hill forts was constructed to help protect the important trade routes along the Thames Valley. One of these, immediately west of the conservation area, is now known as Caesar's Camp.

Because of the protected status of Wimbledon Common and Cannizaro Park, and the density of development elsewhere in the Conservation Area, there has been relatively little archaeological excavation, and evidence of early occupation is limited to a few Mesolithic stone knives, a Neolithic flinthead and a bronze axe. But these stray or casual finds demonstrate evidence of possible buried remains covering the whole prehistoric period.

History

The name Wimbledon is thought to derive from the Anglo Saxon “dun”, meaning hill, added to a proper name, and the battle of Wibbandune is thought to have occurred at Wimbledon, in which the first Christian monarch, Ethelbert, was defeated in 568 AD attempting to capture the area now occupied by the county of Surrey [Ecology Handbook 29, pp.7-8]. Wimbledon is not mentioned in the Doomsday Book of 1086 because at the time it formed part of the Archbishop of Canterbury's manor of Mortlake, but from the tenth century onwards the settlement of "Wunemannedun" began to appear in written records. The name of “Wimeldon”, “Wimmeldun” or “Wywildone” occurs in thirteenth century records, but this may not have referred so much to a coherent village as to a collection of scattered settlements or farms, spread along the valley and over the plateau. [Milward 1989 p.8]

It is thanks to Henry VIII's rejection of Catholicism that Wimbledon was first recognised as a desirable residential area. As part of his separation from the Church of Rome, the king took over the Rectory in 1536 and leased it to his courtiers, the most important to settle in Wimbledon being Sir William Cecil, and by building the first of Wimbledon's great manor houses in 1588, his son, Thomas, turned the small and rather isolated village into a fashionable retreat for wealthy Londoners.

Another important contributory factor was the area's convenience to central London. By 1780 the “Wimbledon Machine”, a public short-stage coach, travelled from the Rose and Crown in Wimbledon Village to Charing Cross every Monday, Wednesday and Friday in two hours, and eighty years later Mr Boustead of Cannizaro House would regularly drive in his hansom cab
to Trafalgar Square in only 50 minutes. [Milward 1989 p.43 & undated p.17]. The arrival of the railways in the 1830s made access to central London even more convenient for those working in the City and the West End.

The increasingly large number of middle class professionals settling in the Wimbledon Area were able to unite effectively against Lord Spencer’s efforts to enclose the Common by guiding The Wimbledon and Putney Commons 1871 Act through Parliament. According to the Norman-Smiths, Not only did the 1871 Act buy the Common, and in effect also, the manor, out of feudalism; by preserving its amenities, it made it suitable for desirable bourgeois development [p.16]

Population

Little information exists as to the population of Wimbledon before the eighteenth century. The population of 200 or so residents in Wimbledon in the 1330s fell away dramatically during the plague years of 1348 to 1450, when only half the land appears to have been cultivated. According to a survey of 1617 there were then 45 "tenements" in the village and round the Common, which suggests that the total population was then about 225. An improved standard of living up to the end of the century resulted in an increase to about 550, but it fell back to 500 or so due to smallpox and other epidemics between 1700 and 1750 [Hawtin 2000 p.66].

From 1750 the population grew steadily, largely due to workers attracted to the area in the hope of finding work in the large houses around the Common, there being no "middle class" in Wimbledon in the eighteenth century [Hawtin 2000 p.85]. A "Sketch of the Town of Wimbledon" of 1776 indicates that the population had doubled in the previous 16 years, and by the 1801 census it had increased to nearly 1,600. During the first half of the nineteenth century the numbers climbed slowly, reaching 2,195, in 316 dwellings, by 1831, but in the next thirty years it rose to over 4,600. By 1871 it was over 9,000 and ten years later it was almost 16,000. It had grown to over 20,000 by 1891, by the turn of the century it had reached 41,630, and ten years after that it had gone up to almost 55,000. [Milward 2000 p.66, Hawtin p.157-8].

Character

Wimbledon has many of the qualities of a “garden Suburb”, bit it was not planned as a single design. It grew gradually over a long period, around a scattered village on the edge of a high common, and over the landscaped park of a vanished great house. Its buildings are predominantly Victorian and Edwardian rather than of earlier periods; their quality however is excellent, and the character of the area is enhanced by its many fine trees and gardens and the 1300 acres of Wimbledon Common. [p.1, VicSoc report 1973]

The area west of Wimbledon Village is predominantly in residential use with a few commercial buildings along the Ridgway. The grid of streets is interspersed by educational buildings such as King’s College, Wimbledon College and the Ursuline Convent, whose substantial grounds and playing fields contribute significantly to the sylvan character of the area.

While most of the housing developments were purely speculative and have always been privately owned, several groups of “social” housing were built, including schemes of good suitable dwellings for the working classes at a moderate rent [Hawtin 1973] by the local Cottage Improvement Society in an area adjoining Denmark Road, then known as South Road.

The character of the residential areas has largely been determined by the way in which increased population densities have been achieved through parcelling up the larger estates into more modest residential sites. Further increases in residential densities have been achieved through the further division of these plots, the replacement of modest with larger houses, and the conversion of period property into flats, residential homes and sheltered
accommodation. With the ever increasing desirability of the Wimbledon area, some of the historic houses have been converted back into individual family homes.

The various periods of construction have resulted in a diverse range of architectural styles, such as Gothic, Dutch, Queen Anne, Arts and Crafts, Georgian, modern and various revival styles. A substantial proportion of these houses are now either statutorily listed as of Special Architectural and Historic Interest or included in the Borough Council’s Local List.

Prevalent building materials include walls of brick and smooth or rough cast render with stone detailing or plaster mouldings, and roofs of Welsh slate and plain clay roof tiles. The use of stone masonry is mainly limited to church buildings, particularly Christ Church, Copse Hill, in coarse rubble work, and the Church of the Sacred Heart, Edge Hill, which is built of knapped flint with stone dressings.

Protection

A movement to protect Wimbledon against undesirable change started just over a century ago when Richardson Evans, a journalist, campaigned for the need to protect and improve the grace, dignity and picturesque amenities of the area. In 1902 he wrote to several eminent residents suggesting establishing a local conservation society, and early the following year they formed the John Evelyn Club to safeguard the amenities of the district, to promote an interest in local history and wild life and to preserve objects of historical and natural interest. The Club, which was renamed the Wimbledon Society in 1982, has always had its own premises at the corner of Lingfield Road and the Ridgway, and has played a significant part in the protection of the Wimbledon area over the past hundred years. [Milward, 2003]

Traffic

Like many other parts of the Borough, West Wimbledon suffers from considerable traffic congestion and this is having a seriously detrimental effect on the character of the Conservation Area. Most of the roads are lined both sides by parked cars and many of the front gardens have been paved over to provide parking areas, as is shown in the Sub Area maps. Some paved areas are so extensive as to have a detrimental effect on the streetscape and to infringe policies in the Unitary Development Plan. The Ridgway, being a Local Distributor Road, suffers particularly badly from through traffic and, although the roads nearest Wimbledon Village are subject to parking restrictions and to one-way circulation, most of the others except the cul-de-sacs also suffer to a varying degree, even though they are designated as merely Local Access Roads.

There is no simple or obvious solution, and this Assessment recommends that a traffic survey be undertaken as the first phase of a detailed investigation be carried out to find possible solutions, such as speed bumps, more on-way street, greater parking restrictions or even road closures.

1.2 DESIGNATION OF THE CONSERVATION AREA

Context

West Wimbledon Conservation Area (CA) is one of several which have been designated to help protect Wimbledon’s character. Wimbledon Village CA covers the historic core, Wimbledon Hill Road CA includes some of the historic areas to east of the Village and, as their names indicate, North and West Wimbledon and Wimbledon Broadway CAs cover the residential extensions of the Village to the north and west and part of Wimbledon town centre. Further west, a smaller conservation areas have been designated to protect the character of Copse Hill, Drax Avenue, Dunmore Road, Durham Road, Lampton Road, Westcombe Avenue and Wool Road and their environs. An obvious omission appears to be Wimbledon Common itself but, since the Common is protected under other legislation, conservation area protection has proved unnecessary.
The Process Of Designation

West Wimbledon Conservation Area was formerly part of The Merton (Wimbledon) Conservation Area designated by the Greater London Council as an “Area of Special Architectural Interest” which extended over areas bordering Wimbledon Common and its approach roads. Following a recommendation on 29 March 1968 by the Borough Surveyor, a conservation area was then designated which covered two separate parts of Wimbledon. One took in the area around Wimbledon High Street, and the other stretched from the Crooked Billet to North View, including Camp Road, West Side Common and Cannizaro Park [English Heritage: Conservation Areas in London and the South East].

The 1968 designation largely reflected the historic importance of the two disparate parts of the original conservation area, Wimbledon Village forming the core of the original historic settlement, and the other containing both the historic Park and many of Wimbledon’s most important historic buildings.

The then John Evelyn Society campaigned to have the conservation area extended. It undertook a survey of the buildings of the wider area, including the Ridgway, the slopes between the Ridgway and Worple Road, and other parts of West Wimbledon, and in 1973, with the support of six other local amenity groups and the Victorian Society, it presented a report (the “VicSoc Report”) to the Council recommending a considerable increase in the extent of designation to protect the best examples of local Victorian and Edwardian architecture [Plaistow, 2003].

Map of the original and extended Conservation Areas

As a result of the greater protection to Conservation Areas provided under the 1974 Town and Country Amenity Act, a report was submitted to the Council’s Development and Planning Committee on 17 June 1976 recommending that the two separate parts of the Conservation Area be extended. It stated that:

*In recent years much redevelopment of large Victorian and Edwardian houses has occurred in West and North Wimbledon. In some cases the character of whole streets has been*
Council policies had proved to be inadequate in controlling development in West Wimbledon, resulting in the loss of appeals against planning refusal for new development, and stronger policies, such as conservation area designation, were needed. So, after consultations between the Council, the Greater London Council, the Department of the Environment and the Civic Trust, and with considerable public support, the area was extended in September 1976 and designated as the Wimbledon Conservation Area. As well as the village itself, it covered residential areas to both the north and west of the Village, and was by far the largest conservation area in the Borough. In recommending the extension of the conservation area, the 1976 report explained that this part of Wimbledon is:

*included amongst the best half dozen or so areas outside Central London with regard to exceptionally high amenity and architectural and historic interest. In addition to pockets of Georgian cottages, the locality is particularly valuable in that it possesses a cohesive and extensive area, which represents a high point of Victorian and Edwardian domestic architecture. A substantial number of houses and in many cases whole streets exhibit this quality, in some cases sufficiently so to merit inclusion in the list of Special Architectural or Historic Interest. In some instances, the architecture is amongst the finest in the Borough, representing valuable examples of the various styles of domestic architecture in fashion at the turn of the century.* [para. 3]

The character of a large part of west Wimbledon derived from such factors as the architectural merit of individual buildings and their relationship with each other, and the quality of the streets, the mature trees and the large well planted gardens.

*These various factors are interrelated and indivisible and substantial changes in these factors will tend to dilute the character of the whole area.*

Since the area as a whole is varied in nature and was considered not to hold together as a cohesive unit with its own unique character, it was divided into three separate conservation areas in February 1987, named Wimbledon North, Wimbledon Village and Wimbledon West. [Development Committee Report, 4/12/1986]

The Wimbledon Society produced a series of environmental assessments of eight of the roads in the West Wimbledon Conservation Area which have proved particularly useful in the production of this Assessment. They comprise Denmark Avenue, Denmark Road, Edge Hill, The Grange, Hillside, Spencer Hill, Thornton Hill, and Thornton Road.

The Boundary

The 1987 report explained that

*In order to achieve a cohesive, continuous and convenient boundary it has been necessary to include some aesthetically inferior development and pockets of recent development, the exclusion of which would have fragmented the area and made it difficult to administer. In addition there are small groups of buildings outside but in close proximity to the proposed area, meriting inclusion but which are only weakly connected to comparable buildings, the best procedure for those isolated elements is by listing and tree preservation orders.*

The boundary excluded some parts recommended by the GLC and the VicSoc Report, such as the southern part of Arterberry Road, but included others, such as the northern end and The Drive, and since 1987 there have been several minor extensions to the boundary to take in the following properties:

- June 1987: 1-15 Edge Hill.
- July 1988: houses in Pepys Road, Durrington Park Road and Durringtron Avenue, and between Conway Road and Arterberry Road.
- May 1990: 1-4 and 17-19 Crescent Road.
One of the purposes of this Character Assessment has been to look again at these boundaries in the light of further development and changing attitudes to historic buildings over the past 25 years or so, and as a result the Conservation Area has been further adjusted. Details are given in Part Four.

The process of determining the boundary of a Conservation Area, selecting those areas worth including in the conservation area and those which are not quite of sufficient architectural or historic interest to justify inclusion, can be a major task. In the case of the West Wimbledon Conservation Area, the east, north-west and northern boundaries are clearly defined by those of other conservation areas (Wimbledon Village and Wool Road Conservation Areas) or areas of quite different character which are protected in different ways (Wimbledon Common). But in the south-west and south the change of character is far more gradual, and it is mainly here that adjustments have been made. The southern boundary runs roughly parallel to Worple Road, and a major consideration in determining the alignment has been to decide where the character changes so much from the outstanding architectural and historic quality of the northern part of the Conservation Area to areas of less distinction and the more mundane character of the Worple Road area.

Despite its present lack of architectural quality, Worple Road is in fact of considerable historic interest. The name Worple derives from the sixteenth century "Warvelle", a "common way" or public right of way, and the road has been known variously as Warpell Way, Middle Worple Lane and Upper Worple. It was originally no more than a cart track which petered out at what is now the south end of The Downs, but during the 1870s much of it was developed by Richard Thornton and the Revd. John Brackenbury with substantial detached houses and generous front gardens, the western part being completed by about 1891. The gardens were first shorted to make way for the tram service from Wimbledon to Kingston in 1907 and, as its role as a major communication route increased, most of the houses were replaced by modern development. [Milward 1989, pp.173-4 & 177].

Many of the houses on both the northern side of Worple Road and at the southern end of the roads which lead into it have been converted to or been replaced by flats and offices, so that its architectural interest has been largely destroyed. Therefore, far from attempting to protect its present character, measures are required to discourage development from further eroding the integrity of those parts of the Conservation Area which adjoin it and whose setting could be adversely affected by unsympathetic development. It is with this objective in mind that the boundary of this part of the Conservation Area has been considered.

1.3 THE CONSERVATION AREA CHARACTER ASSESSMENT

The Purpose of Character Assessments

In its report of 25 May 1995 the Borough's Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC) considered the feasibility of preparing character assessments for all the Borough's conservation areas, based on the recommendations of the Government's Planning Policy Guidance Note 15, which suggests that the definition of an area's special interest should derive from an assessment of the elements that contribute to it.

Character assessments set out the specific characteristics which merit the area’s designation, and they provide a tool which helps the Council to assess the impact of development proposals on the conservation areas’ character and appearance. They also provide a guide for property owners and developers when designing new development or considering alterations to buildings in conservation area by explaining the context to which any new development will need to relate.

The character studies on which the Borough of Merton's original conservation area designations were based were regarded by the CAAC as somewhat rudimentary, and it was agreed that the character assessments should provide a more detailed descriptive analysis. In view of the likely length of such documents, the CAAC agreed at its meeting of 14 November 1996 that character assessments should be prepared in two stages, the first being
a general overview which would be available to the public, and the second a more detailed working tool for use within the Council, but accessible to members of the public and developers.

Because of the size and complexity of the West Wimbledon Conservation area, and the need to justify various recommendations concerning its boundary, it was regarded as more appropriate in this case to carry out the more detailed assessment first, and to then produce five briefer Design Guides for public distribution, each of which cover different parts of the Conservation Area.

The West Wimbledon Character Assessment

This Assessment provides an analysis of the Area’s special character by considering the conservation area as a whole, investigating its origins and development through an analysis of information gathered from publications, historic maps, archaeological records and other sources. It includes consideration of the area’s topography, urban development and building types and styles, based on research and site inspections. Although it is a detailed Assessment, it is not intended to be exhaustive, and failure to consider any particular building, feature or space should not be taken to imply that it is assumed to be of no interest.

As part of the analysis, the Assessment also reviews the boundaries in the light of recent physical alterations to the area and changes in attitudes about the benefits of conservation, recommending the removal of parts of the Conservation Area whose character has been eroded, and the addition of areas which are now regarded as of sufficient architectural or historic interest.

The information is used to help identify thirty-three Sub Areas of indigenous character, both within and adjoining the Conservation Area. Each Sub Area has then been analysed in more detail through site visits and an examination of historic archives and contemporary records relating to groups or individual buildings and their surroundings, including:

- The way in which each sub-area has changed over time;
- An assessment of local topography, such as views, landmarks, urban features and streetscape character;
- Natural features and their importance;
- Building characteristics, such as age, density and historic importance of individual or groups of buildings; and
- Elements which contribute to or detract from the character or appearance of each Sub-Area.

With the exception of a few open spaces, such as Cannizaro Park, the informal public open space adjoining the Crooked Billet, and the playing fields to the two major schools in the area, West Wimbledon Conservation Area is basically urban in character. Its character therefore depends more than anything else on the quality of its buildings and their preservation and enhancement. This Assessment therefore concentrates on the quality of the buildings in the Conservation Area, the extent to which their character and their setting may have been eroded by unsuitable extensions or alterations, and the degree to which these changes have affected the character of each Sub Area.

This analysis has then used to assess how much the Sub Area contributes to the Conservation Area. If it makes little contribution, or detracts from the Area’s overall character, the Assessment explains why it has been excluded in whole or in part. A similar exercise has been used to determine if Sub Areas adjoining the Conservation Area are worth including.

The character of some parts of the Conservation Area has been eroded by the piecemeal removal or alteration of features of architectural or historic interest and, where appropriate, Article 4 Directions have been recommended to help resist this process of erosion.