



WEST OXFORDSHIRE
DISTRICT COUNCIL

Conservation Area Character Appraisal

Ramsden

What are Conservation Areas?

Conservation Areas are places of special architectural or historic interest, which have a particular character or appearance worthy of preservation or enhancement. Groups of buildings, walls, trees and hedges, open spaces, views, and the historic settlement patterns all combine to create an individual sense of place. It is this character, rather than individual buildings, that Conservation Area status seeks to protect. The first Conservation Areas in the District were identified in the late 1960s. Since then, there has been a rolling programme of designations. Recent Conservation Areas are designated under the provisions of Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Ramsden Conservation Area was designated in 1991, following a process of public consultation.

The purpose of this document

This Conservation Area Character Appraisal describes the main aspects of character or appearance which contribute to the special interest and quality of the area. This document is intended to complement the approved policies for Conservation Areas contained in the West Oxfordshire Local Plan. In Conservation Areas there are controls over the demolition and minor alterations of unlisted buildings, and on works to trees. Full details can be obtained from the Planning Service. The Preservation and Enhancement document for Ramsden accompanies this Character Appraisal and describes strategies for the future maintenance and improvement of Ramsden, as well as providing development advice and guidance on conversions, extensions and the design of new buildings within the Conservation Area.



Location and setting

The village of Ramsden lies close to the centre of the District, four miles north of Witney and 15 miles north-west of Oxford. With its hidden setting it retains a vestigial sense of the isolation and self-containment that has characterised the village for centuries.

In common with other villages in the area – such as Leaffield and Finstock – Ramsden has a strongly linear form. This is orientated along two axes. The first of these, comprising Lower End and High Street, runs roughly east to west, rising to a high point at Ramsden Heath north-west of the village. The second axis runs south-west to north-east and follows the route of the Roman highway Akeman Street to a high point at the top of Wilcote Lane.

The geology of the wider area is dominated by oolitic limestone, but its consistency is broken at Leaffield and Ramsden. Here localised cappings of Oxford clay and glacial drift mask the underlying limestone, giving rise to islands of poorer soil. Ramsden lies at this geological junction, with the better land lying to the east of the village. In this part of the Cotswolds, villages were often established at the junction between arable land and heath land: the former suitable for crop production and the latter only for grazing animals.



Historical development

Ramsden once lay deep within the forest of Wychwood (the 'den' of Ramsden is a corruption of 'dene', meaning wooded valley; while the 'Ram' prefix may derive from *hramsū*, or wild garlic: thus 'wild garlic valley'). Here, a small settlement grew up adjacent to Akeman Street, the Roman highway linking Cirencester with St. Albans. Although no remnants of the ancient forest remain within the Parish (with the possible exception of Easewell Copse), Ramsden remains largely hidden from view until the traveller is within the Conservation Area.

To the west and north-west of the village run stretches of the North Oxfordshire Grim's Ditch (a major Iron Age boundary earthwork, whose construction was probably motivated by political and economic, rather than military, concerns). Further west still, beside the farm road leading to Brize's Lodge, a round barrow hints at still earlier activity in the district, and there are clear traces of a Roman villa at Brize's Lodge itself.

From its inception Ramsden has essentially been a self-contained and self-supporting community heavily reliant on farming for its survival. Its earliest settlers were possibly itinerant herdsmen tending pigs in the forest (the name of one of the village's three original fields – 'Swinepits' – may allude to this).

From Saxon times Ramsden formed an isolated part of the Parish and Manor of Shipton-under-Wychwood. With its church lying some six miles away, attendance required a trek through the forest, and it seems that the occupants of Ramsden were spared many of the customary feudal dues perhaps owing to the village's remote location.

By 1272 the cleared land adjacent to Ramsden could no longer meet the needs of villagers. The *Forest Pleas* of that year record that permission was granted by the Countess of Gloucester to clear, or 'assart', 120 acres of Hulwerk wood on the south side of the village. By 1279 Ramsden's 37 tenants held parcels of land varying in area from half an acre to 15 acres, and the village entered a period of modest prosperity.

Sheep thrived on Ramsden's gentle slopes and the success of the wool trade, which bought such riches to the Cotswolds, spilt over into Ramsden. In spite of this, Ramsden remained a small, isolated and self-contained community, altering little over the next 400 years.

By 1609 the village comprised just 21 houses, with the adjacent land then under cultivation totalling some 509 acres. The 17th and 18th centuries were characterised by the building of the stone properties which are the principal feature of the village today.

By the end of the 18th century and the start of the 19th century the decline in the Cotswold sheep industry was being acutely felt at Ramsden, particularly by the village's weavers and allied craftspeople. Land began to pass into fewer hands and many freeholders were forced to become day labourers.

In the 19th century more of the forest was cleared, along with copses that had stood on heathland adjacent to the village. The Enclosure award of 1862 continued this pattern of landscape – and land ownership – alteration, with footpaths closed and fields reshaped. Several new roads were also laid (a significant high road, linking Witney to Charlbury, and crossing Ramsden Heath, appeared in 1800). A church made a belated appearance in the village in 1842.



Settlement pattern

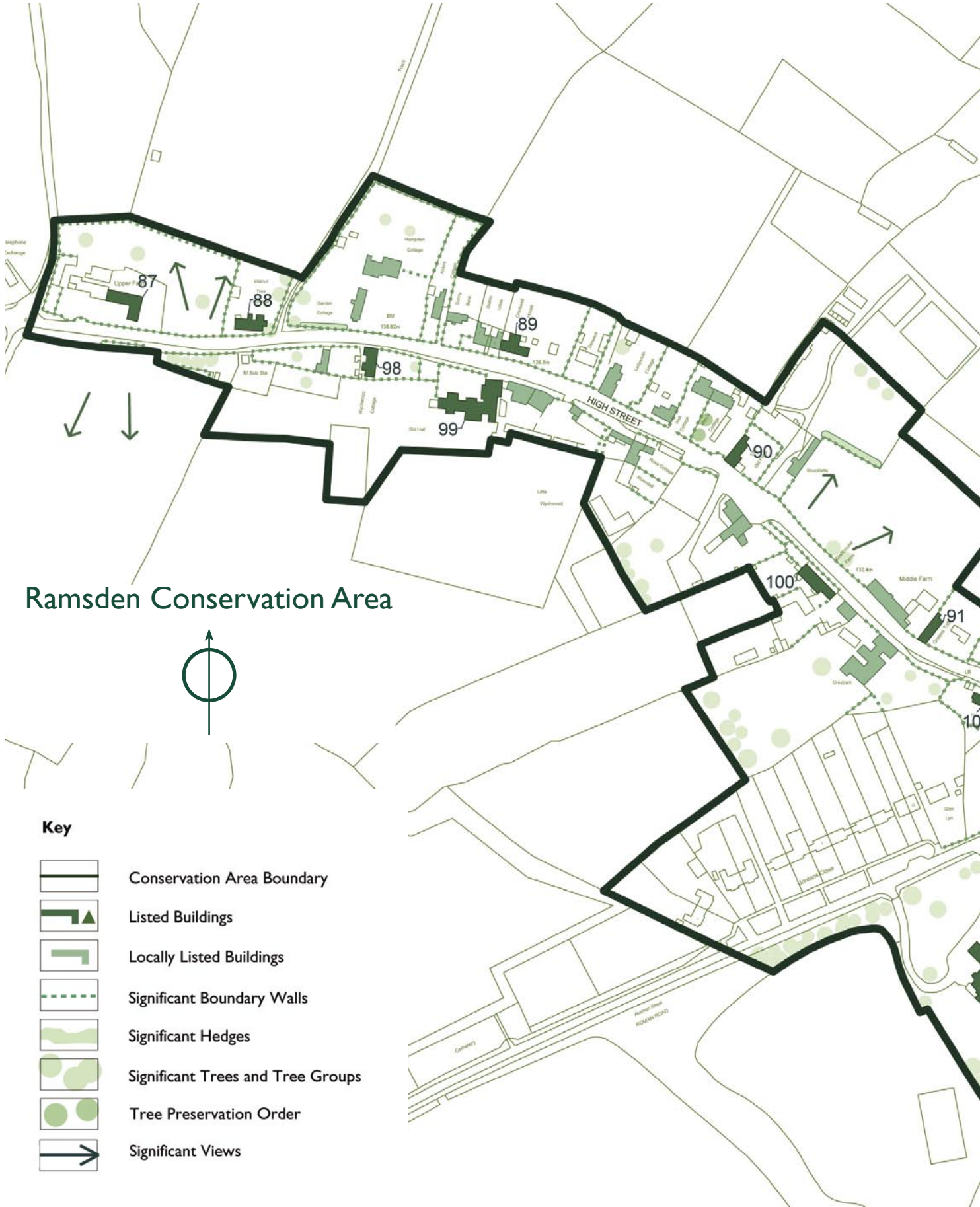
Ramsden's first settlers may have chosen a spot at the top of what is now Wilcote Lane (where the ground was drier than in the valley below) before extending the settlement down into that valley. As the community grew, the forest was gradually cleared back from the track to make way for houses and smallholdings. The principal cross-route, meanwhile, represented by today's Lower End and High Street (and running roughly east to west) probably began life as a simple track along a stream into the forest.

Despite more and more land being wrested from the forest as the settlement grew, the village houses and cottages tended to remain tight to the road. This strict linear pattern of occupation along two axes is a significant feature of the street scene and remains intact today, lending the village its distinctive 'Old English Street' articulation.

As well as proximity to a major trackway, the area benefited from a good water supply, forgiving contours and – from the high ground to the north and west – excellent views over the surrounding landscape. However, with its isolated location and its resistance to cultivation Ramsden could support only a finite number of souls willing, or able, to settle there. The general harshness of this obscure location deep within the forest, whose land had first to be cleared of trees and then coaxed patiently toward a degree of utility, must have been a major factor in keeping the numbers of its occupants down (the population has never risen above its 1861 level of 455 people).

On the whole, major development in the village has been limited to rebuilding as opposed to new building. During the 17th century the High Street in particular took on the attractive form recognisable today: a streetscape of humble cottages and small houses, some facing the road and others standing gable end on.

Today Ramsden remains conspicuously free of recent building. Only in Jordans Close and along Wilcote Lane are modest later developments to be found.





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Listed Buildings

There are 25 Listed structures of architectural or historic interest in the Conservation Area. Listed Buildings are classified in grades of relative importance.

Grade II* - particularly special and important buildings (4% of Listed Buildings)

18/99 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Wychwood Lodge (currently called 'Old Hall')

Grade II – Buildings of special interest

- 18/87 HIGH STREET (North-east side) Upper Farmhouse
- 18/88 HIGH STREET (North-east side) The Walnut Tree Cottage
- 18/89 HIGH STREET (North-east side) Crockwell House
- 18/90 HIGH STREET (North-east side) The Old Forge
- 18/91 HIGH STREET (North-east side) Greens Toft
- 18/92 HIGH STREET (North-east side) Ramsden Farmhouse
- 18/93 HIGH STREET (North-east side) Barn approx. 15m N of Ramsden Farmhouse
- 18/94 HIGH STREET (North-east side) Akeman Cottage
- 18/95 HIGH STREET (North-east side) The Royal Oak Public House
- 18/96 HIGH STREET (North-east side) Handcroft Farmhouse (Formerly listed as Handcroft Farmhouse and barn)
- 18/98 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Wychwood Cottage
- 18/100 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Nos. 1 and 2 Malthouse Farm
- 18/101 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Ivy House and Ivy Cottage
- 18/102 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Former Methodist Chapel
- 18/103 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Dore's Cottage
- 18/104 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Barn adjoining Dore's Cottage to NW
- 18/105 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Dunrobin
- 18/106 HIGH STREET (South-west side) Barn with stable and granary approx. 5m SE of Dunrobin
- 18/112 Church of St. James
- 18/113 Ramsden House
- 18/114 WILCOTE LANE (North-west side) Inglenook (currently called 'Wilcote Place')
- 18/115 WILCOTE LANE (North-west side) Nos. 4 and 5 and attached coach house (Formerly listed as 2 cottages N side of Wilcote Lane at its West End)
- 18/116 WILCOTE LANE (North-west side) The Grange
- 18/129 HIGH STREET (South-west side) K6 telephone kiosk (outside Ivy Cottage)

Note: The numbers indicate the unique identification number by which Listed Buildings are referenced



Architectural character and quality of buildings

The village buildings of Ramsden are generally of a humble and consistent vernacular style, well befitting the agricultural nature (and relative poverty) of the community down the centuries. The typical Ramsden house is a 17th-century cottage, set gable end on to the street and fronting a small plot of land. However, a handful of larger houses, accompanied by substantial barns, reflect the more prosperous days of the early 18th century. The village's early buildings are constructed from a pale grey or creamy limestone, most frequently employed in coursed rubble form, but occasionally as dressed stone. Even the village's later buildings, many of which use materials other than limestone, tend to follow the precedent set by the colour of this stone. Simple plan forms predominate; while roofs tend to be of stone slate, and windows of wooden casement type.

Historically, all of the materials needed for building have been found locally. Timber and wattle were taken from the forest; daub (comprising earth or dung mixed with grass or straw) was readily available; stone was quarried nearby, and straw for thatching came from the village's own fields. In this way the village buildings have always reflected the community's self-sufficiency.

The most significant building in Ramsden is arguably Old Hall (Listed as Wychwood Lodge) which stands on the south-west side of High Street. An impressive one-and-a-half storey farmhouse, it was built between 1600 and 1620, with later alterations. It is built of coursed limestone rubble with ashlar dressings, and has a number of notable decorative features, including dressed stone ridge stacks, parapeted gables with copings and finials, and fine mullion windows.

Two 19th-century buildings are also worthy of mention. The former vicarage (now Ramsden House), was designed by William Wilkinson in the Gothic Revival style. It was completed in 1862 and is the largest building in the village, having two-and-a-half storeys and a substantial and irregular plan form. The other is the church of St. James, built in 1872 by A W Blomfield. This structure is compact in size and modest Early English (Gothic) in style.

Boundary treatments

Ramsden features a range of boundary treatments, the most notable of which are its drystone walls and its hedgerows. The buildings of Ramsden are generally set close to the road, and stand either flush with the roadside itself or behind verges of varying depth (these verges are at their widest along High Street and Lower End). Less frequently, the houses stand further back still behind small gardens. Field boundaries comprise mainly hedgerows, often of great age and including hawthorn, hazel, field maple, holly and blackthorn; together with some mature trees (mainly oak, ash and crab apple). Roadside paths are generally conspicuous by their absence. High Street is noticeably incised (a factor perhaps indicating that the route follows the course of a stream).

Landscape, trees and views

Ramsden lies in an area of smoothly-rolling limestone uplands bounded by the Evenlode and Windrush valleys. This elevated landscape has an expansive character, affording long, sweeping views from its high ground. From the top end of Wilcote Lane the village appears to nestle in the hollow of its shallow valley.

Ramsden's is a landscape rich in tree species, with mature copses of oak and ash, together with cherry and specimen trees such as walnut, chestnut, Scots pine and willow. Elm was also once a significant local species, especially in the hedgerows. There are fine mature trees throughout the village and especially around Ramsden House. Old apple and plum trees stand as a reminder of the orchards that once provided food for villagers. Fields vary greatly in size, with those adjacent to the village being small in size and clearly demarcated by stretches of drystone walling or hedgerows.

Ramsden's loose-knit linear form has ensured that attractive views over the adjacent fields may be glimpsed between the houses and barns. The Conservation Area occupies a shallow valley, which means that there are no distant views from the road (though some of the houses and gardens enjoy views over open countryside).

*Hailey, Crawley, Curbridge and Cogges,
Witney Spinners and Ducklington dogs,
Finstock on the hill, Fawler down derry,
Beggarly Ramsden and lousy Charlbury.*

Local rhyme (date unknown)

West Oxfordshire District Council - Planning Service
Elmfield, New Yatt Road, Witney, Oxfordshire, OX28 1PB

General planning enquiries and application forms

01993 861683

List entries and grant enquiries

01993 861666

Trees and landscape enquiries

01993 861662

Architectural and technical enquiries

01993 861659

