

PROPOSED ALEXANDRA ROAD CONSERVATION AREA, READING



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Proposed Alexandra Road Conservation Area

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Proposed Alexandra Road Conservation Area

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 The purpose of this document

This report follows the general guidance on 'conservation area appraisals' as set out in English Heritage's document "Conservation Area Appraisals". It describes the special architectural and historic interest of the Alexandra Road area and provides a detailed analysis of its character and appearance, concluding that designation as a conservation area is clearly justified. This report, or appraisal, is intended to provide a sound basis, defensible on appeal, for development plan policies and development control decisions and also forms the basis for further work on design guidance and enhancement proposals.

2.0 LOCATION OF THE PROPOSED ALEXANDRA ROAD CONSERVATION AREA

2.1 Location, topography and setting

The proposed conservation area is about 1 km south-east of the town's main shopping centre. It is located between London Road and the Reading University Whiteknights Campus and lies wholly within Redlands Ward.

The proposed conservation area is on land that is rising gently southward from the River Kennet. There is therefore a slight upward gradient along Alexandra Road, almost imperceptible at the northern end, becoming an obvious incline at the southern end beyond the Addington Road junction.

3.0 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROPOSED ALEXANDRA ROAD CONSERVATION AREA

3.1 History

Reading is named after the Readingas, Saxon followers of Reada, 'the Red', who settled in the spit of land in the fork of the Thames and Kennet in the 6th century. At the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086, Reading belonged to the king and included a small borough and two manors. Reading Abbey was founded by Henry I in 1121. The abbey dominated the town and became one of the richest religious houses in England making Reading a wealthy place, and a centre of religion and pilgrimage.

Wool and leather were Reading's principal trades in the 16th and early 17th centuries, making good use of the town's road and river links. In the 18th

century Reading was an important market and coaching town; new industries developed, notably brewing, iron-founding and brick and tile making.

Early 19th century maps show the town had hardly extended beyond its medieval core but a fast town expansion was stimulated by the development of new transport links. The Kennet and Avon Canal was opened in 1810 bringing London and Bristol, two major sea ports, into direct communication by water. Of much greater significance, however, was the construction of the Great Western Railway which reached the town in 1840. The coming of the railway resulted in a rapid growth of major industries, notably Huntley & Palmers and Suttons Seeds, which provided work for a rapidly increasing population.

Between 1850 and 1900 the population of the Borough more than trebled from 21,456 to 72,217 and the housing stock increased accordingly. The Alexandra Road area, within the Redlands Estate, was part of the post-railway late 19th century expansion of the town during which period large numbers of houses were built and growing civic pride was celebrated in the building of Reading's Town Hall (1875), the Concert Hall (1882), and the Museum and Library (1883-4). Reading Grammar School in Erleigh Road, whose grounds border the proposed conservation area, was built between 1865-71, to the designs of Alfred Waterhouse, a local resident of Reading from 1868. The middle-class Alexandra Road area, untouched by commerce and industry, was designed to be more spacious and leafy than the artisans' terraces which lie further east.

Alexandra Road is named after Princess Alexandra who was married in 1863 to Queen Victoria's eldest son, Edward, later becoming Queen Alexandra when he came to the throne as Edward VII in 1901. She was the daughter of King Kristian IX of Denmark, hence Denmark Road, and was a popular figure, endearing herself to the British people through her charity work.

The history of two buildings in the area, St Luke's Church, Erleigh Road and the 'Nurses Home', 25 Erleigh Road, is of note: The first St Luke's Church, the 'Iron Church', was built in 1878 on the site of what are now nos. 27, 29 and 31 Erleigh Road. The growth of the population of the Redlands Estate meant that a more permanent church was soon needed. Work began on a new St Luke's in 1882 to a design by Piers St Aubyn of London. The entire building is in red brick, crowned by a 'sanctus' bell turret. The adjacent church hall was built in 1910. Both church and hall are grade II listed.

An incised plaque on the gable of no. 25 Erleigh Road says 'Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute for Nurses. Founded 1897'. The origins of the Queen's Institute lie in the fund raising organised among 'the women of England' for an offering to Queen Victoria on the occasion of her Golden Jubilee in 1887. After the commission of a set of jewellery, there remained £70,000, and the Queen chose to use the money to support district nursing. The Reading branch of the Institute was founded on 5 November 1897 with premises in Erleigh Road, not far from the Royal Berkshire Hospital. Its object was to

provide domiciliary nursing care for the sick poor of Reading. Today the building is occupied by the Berkshire Healthcare NHS Trust.

4.0 THE CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE OF THE PROPOSED ALEXANDRA CONSERVATION AREA

4.1 Special interest

The special interest of the proposed conservation area is:

- 19th century street pattern;
- Cohesive architectural development of the late 19th century with a wealth of period detail;
- Alexandra Road, notable for its avenue of trees and Victorian buildings on either side;
- Denmark Road, notable for late 19th century dwellings and boundary treatment;
- Distinctive local details notably lengths of historic stone kerbs and gulleys, two old post boxes and street name signs;
- Front boundaries defined by brick walls, iron railings and evergreen hedges;
- St Luke's Church, grade II;
- Front gardens that contribute to leafy views along the area's streets;
- Avenues of trees and notable specimen garden trees;

4.2 Uses and activities

Historically, the proposed conservation area was an area of detached and semi-detached houses alongside two residential streets, Denmark Road and Alexandra Road. In Erleigh Road, the Victorian church and church hall remain in their intended use and a former late 19th century nurse's institute (no. 35 Erleigh Road) is now used as offices for the West Berkshire NHS Trust.

Today the area remains primarily residential but a proportion of the large houses have been converted to flats, e.g. nos. 34 and 63 Alexandra Road. Residential use has been discontinued in several buildings in Alexandra Road, accommodating instead an orthodontic surgery, a doctors' surgery, a mosque, a Buddhist centre, a day nursery, a guest house and a residential home for the elderly.

The area has a generally quiet residential atmosphere disturbed only by local traffic. Addington Road lies on a main bus route. Because of the area's proximity to the town centre and West Berkshire Hospital, the streets are used for visitors' day time parking. Traffic and parking is less busy in the evenings and at weekends. Traffic is calmed by road humps and cushions. The southern end of Alexandra Road is a 20 mph zone.

4.3 Historic development of street pattern

The focus and 'spine' of the proposed conservation area is Alexandra Road. The First Edition O.S. map of 1877 shows Alexandra Road as a tree lined avenue, as yet undeveloped, proceeding south from London Road, crossing Erleigh Road (laid out in the 1860s) at an angle and crossing Addington Road at right angles. Denmark Road is not shown on this map. The straightness of both Alexandra Road and Addington Road and their formal intersection show that these roads, and of course Denmark Road, were planned 19th century roads, part of the post-railway expansion and development of Reading. Erleigh Road has a slight bend, suggesting that it follows an earlier route.

By the time of the 1899 O.S. map, the area had been almost fully developed with detached and semi-detached houses on either side of the main roads and St. Luke's Church (1882) on the corner of Erleigh Road and Donnington Road. With the exception of road narrowing at the Addington Road/Alexandra Road junction, which has unfortunately obliterated some of the area's historic stone kerbs, the historic street pattern is unaltered.

4.4 Building form, height and plot sizes

The prevalent building form is the detached house, or villa, and the semi-detached house. Two storeys is the norm but some houses rise to three storeys and whilst many have attics (historically for maids and servants), very few have habitable basements. Houses are set back from the pavement behind small front gardens to a uniform building line bounded by wall, railings or hedge. The properties in Alexandra Road are set back more than those in Denmark Road, with wider spaces between buildings. All of the properties have back gardens, generally bounded by low brick walls; the gardens of nos. 1-29 odd (east side) and nos. 28-46 even (west side) are noticeably longer than gardens elsewhere in the proposed conservation area.

There are no instances of backland development. The historic form of development, with detached and semi-detached houses set back from the road, with hidden gardens behind, should be maintained.

4.5 Architectural and historic character

The proposed conservation area is notable for its cohesive late 19th century architectural character and contains 40 detached houses, 26 pairs of semi-detached houses and a church – all built during the last quarter of the 19th century. Two buildings with date stones, St Luke's Church (1882) and no. 81 Alexandra Road (1894) roughly define the limits of the period of building. There are only 10 instances of 20th century development in the proposed conservation area: the 1930s three storey extension to the former Nurses Home (rear of 25 Erleigh Road); nos. 1a, 4, 12, 18/20, 63a, 83 Alexandra Road and nos. 26-29 Denmark Road (which are late 20th century infill); Marlow Court which is a modern development on the site of a 19th century house; and a large modern two storey extension to the rear of 17 Erleigh Road. The very small proportion of new development in the proposed

conservation area and the loss of only one significant historic building help to explain why the proposed conservation area has retained its special architectural and historic character and appearance.

Detached and semi-detached houses were one of the defining features of Victorian middle class suburbs where wealthy professionals could find privacy and independence, and accommodate large families and servants. However, by the end of the 19th century there was a reaction against the pointed arches and rich embellishments of the High Victorian Gothic style and a move towards a more 'aesthetic' style emphasising craftsmanship and beauty, influenced by the writings of John Ruskin and William Morris. Classical and Italianate motifs were beginning to give way to 'vernacular' features such as tile hanging, 'honest' red brick (as opposed to the 'disguise' of stucco), steeply pitched roofs and large chimney stacks.

Houses in the proposed Alexandra Road Conservation Area exemplify the elements which characterised late 19th century urban housing in southern England. Bay windows, gables, multi-coloured (polychromatic) brickwork, large porches (or doors within deeply recessed porches), bargeboards, timber sash windows and tall chimney stacks proliferate. The following is a list of typical late 19th century architectural details with examples from the proposed conservation area (the examples given are not unique – most of the features are present throughout the area):

- Tall brick stacks with clay pots (nos. 45/47 and 57/59 Alexandra Road);
- Overhanging eaves supported on scrolled brackets, (nos. 26 and 37/39 Alexandra Road);
- String courses in contrasting brick delineating the different storeys (nos. 65/67 Alexandra Road);
- Large single storey rustic porches (nos. 32-34 Alexandra Road);
- Contrasting brick to highlight quoins (nos. 5 and 21 Alexandra Road);
- Pointed arches and a faintly ecclesiastical feel (nos. 21 and 23 Erleigh Road);
- Ornamental clay and terracotta ridge tiles and finials (nos. 5 Alexandra Road and nos. 23/25 Denmark Road);
- Two storey bay windows (nos. 6/8 and 13 Alexandra Road);
- Decorated bargeboards (nos. 13 and 41/43 Alexandra Road);
- Terracotta decoration (nos. 6/8 Alexandra Road);
- Single storey flat roofed bays with decorated parapet (nos. 17/19 Alexandra Road);
- Polychromatic brickwork (no. 65/67, and 41/43 Alexandra Road);
- Front door recessed in deep porch (nos. 13 Alexandra Road and 27/29 Erleigh Road);
- Red clay tile hanging in gable (nos. 77/79 and 36-44 Alexandra Road);

Whilst most buildings have an individual design, there are also instances of duplicate house designs, each group presumably built by the same builder e.g. nos. 30 to 46 (even) Alexandra Road, nos. 69/71 and 73/75 Alexandra Road, nos. 7, 9 and 11 Addington Road and nos. 21 and 23 Erleigh Road.

These houses exemplify late 19th century building practices where a variety of builders were responsible for single houses or groups of houses on the same street.

4.6 Listed buildings

There are two listed buildings in the Alexandra Road Conservation Area, St Luke's Church and St Luke's Church Hall, both grade II.

4.7 Buildings of Townscape Merit

A large number of unlisted buildings have been noted on the Townscape Appraisal map as being "Buildings of Townscape Merit".

Buildings identified as having "townscape merit" will vary, but commonly they will be good examples of relatively unaltered historic buildings where their style, detailing and building materials provides the streetscape with interest and variety. Most importantly, they make a positive contribution to the special interest of a conservation area.

Buildings of Townscape Merit help create a conservation area's distinctive and interesting historic townscape. As recommended in Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning and the Historic Environment, the general presumption should be in favour of retaining buildings which make a positive contribution to the character or appearance of a conservation area. Any proposals for the demolition of a Building of Townscape Merit in the proposed Alexandra Road Conservation Area will need to be supported by a Justification Statement, similar to that required for the demolition of a listed building.

4.8 Building materials

Brick was a popular building material at the end of the 19th century and the ready availability of different coloured bricks provided the opportunity for the lively polychromatic brickwork found throughout Reading. The town had several brickworks, the most notable being S & E Collier Ltd at Water Road and Elgar Road and two brick works in Tilehurst area. These provided the red, grey and yellow bricks which are the most prevalent building material found in the proposed conservation area.

Stone is uncommon. The church, which one might expect to be built in stone, is built entirely with red brick proposed conservation area, built in finely jointed ashlar stone under a Welsh slate roof.

Tile hanging is common, especially on upper floors within gables. Sometimes a decorative pattern is created from alternate bands of plain and rounded (fishscale) tiles, as at no.14 Erleigh Road. Externally rendered or stuccoed walls were not popular at the time and are not present in the proposed conservation area but no. 14 Erleigh Road has a roughcast upper floor, often found in Arts and Crafts buildings.

Welsh slate and red clay tile are the prevalent roofing materials. Original windows are white painted timber. Sash windows prevail but later buildings such as nos. 14 and 16 Erleigh Road have tall casements with bold timber transoms. Sashes have single large panes, sometimes divided in half. There is also a notable proportion of sash windows where the bottom sash has a single pane and the top sash is divided into 6 small panes (no. 81 Alexandra Road, nos. 17, 19, 21 Denmark Street) or a more intricate pattern (no. 5 Alexandra Road, nos. 27/29 and 31/33 Erleigh Road). Where original timber windows have been replaced with uPVC (no. 46 Alexandra Road), there is a noticeable loss of historic character due to the differences in proportions and section sizes.

4.9 Focal points and views

The area is relatively flat and there is no special focal point. St Luke's Church is a focus for a short length of Erleigh Road but cannot be seen from other public parts of the proposed conservation area. Buildings in Alexandra Road have a uniform height and no single building stands out but those buildings with a corner site such as nos. 25 Erleigh Road and 27/29 Erleigh Road are prominent in the streetscene. Looking north, and downhill, from the top of Alexandra Road, there are more expansive views of the surrounding area. There are glimpses of the turrets and gables of Reading School through the hedge on Erleigh Road and through gaps in the frontage of the middle section of Alexandra Road.

4.10 Townscape

1. Alexandra Road.

Alexandra Road is characterised by large Victorian dwellings set back from the pavement. Large rear gardens and wide gaps between buildings add to the road's spacious atmosphere. Mature trees on the roadside edge of wide pavements line the road.

London Road to Erleigh Road: The east side of this length contains a fine collection of late 19th century houses displaying a varied selection of typical late 19th century building materials, house design and architectural detail. A similar architectural ensemble on the west side is diluted by four 20th century infill buildings.

Erleigh Road to Addington Road: This middle section, away from the noise of London Road contains plainer, less decoratively detailed houses. Nos. 30 - 46 (even) are a row of almost identical dwellings. The junction with Addington Road is less busy and quieter than the Erleigh Road junction where traffic is alerted to the junction by means of illuminated bollards and additional signage.

Addington Road to Lydford Road: Proceeding southwards, the street rises and bends as it approaches Upper Redlands Road. There is a 20 mph speed

limit. There is 19th century development on the east side only and an open character arising from the lack of development of the west side.

2. Denmark Road

Denmark Road runs from London Road parallel with Alexandra Road, Donnington Road and Blenheim Road but turns sharply southwards to join Erleigh Road at a right angled junction where there is a wide band of cobble stones in the highway. The effect of Denmark Road's 'dog leg', together with the absence of roadside trees and narrow front gardens, gives the area a more enclosed, recognisably urban character than can be found in the wider, tree-lined Alexandra Road. Houses are generally smaller (two storey is the norm), closer together and less ostentatiously decorated than those in Alexandra Road.

The relatively narrow depth of front gardens has resulted in the creation of only a few off-road parking spaces and the retention of much original boundary treatment. Because development at the northern end of the road is modern (and therefore not included in the proposed conservation area) and because the southern end of the road contains two modern developments, the historic character and appearance is confined to the central row of houses containing nos. 7- 25 (east) and nos. 2-16 (west). Both modern developments at the south end of the street are out of keeping with the prevalent historic character of the core of Denmark Road but historic appearance returns at the approach to the junction where the gables and tall chimney stacks of two 19th century buildings (nos. 17 and 19 Erleigh Road) overlook the road and there is a hedge, iron railings and an old red and blue brick wall.

3. Erleigh Road

Erleigh Road is lined with lime trees. Proceeding eastwards, it has a slight bend towards north such that St Luke's Church, prominent in the section east of Alexandra Road, is not visible from the environs of the Denmark Road junction. In addition, properties west of Alexandra Road are set further back, with a greater abundance of front garden greenery than properties east of Alexandra Road and the road has an added openness arising from the extensive grounds of Reading School opposite (not in the proposed conservation area). Overall, this gives the western length of Erleigh Road a less urban atmosphere than the length, east of Alexandra Road, which features two pairs of three-storey semi-detached houses (nos. 27/29 and 31/33) and the imposing roadside presence of St Luke's Church and church hall.

4. Addington Road

Only a very short length of Addington Road, on either side of the Alexandra Road junction, lies within the proposed conservation area. To the east, the proposed conservation area includes the gardens and roadside boundary walls of nos. 61 and 63 Alexandra Road. Beyond this, eastwards, there is a marked change in character arising from the introduction of terraced housing

and a uniform two storey building height. To the west of the junction, on the north side, there are three almost identical houses (nos. 7, 9 and 11 Addington Road) each with a pair of ground floor bay windows beside a central Gothic arched doorway. No. 11 is attached to no.13 which has a similar design but has a double gable and single bay window facing Addington Road. Because of their similarity and relatively unaltered facades, they form an attractive group that makes a strong contribution to the proposed conservation area's architectural quality.

4.11 Trees

Trees are a particularly special feature of this urban area. Alexandra Road is lined on each side with an avenue of lime trees planted in the pavement beside the roadside stone kerb and these make a major contribution to the area's special character and sense of identity. Though some have been felled, a number of young replacement trees have recently been planted. Trees in Addington Road and Erleigh Road also add to the area's well tree'd character.

The following garden trees are of special note: a cedar at 83a Alexandra Road, two birches at no. 26 Alexandra Road, two yews at the entrance to no. 17 Erleigh Road, five limes at the rear of no. 17 Erleigh Road and a beech at nos. 27/29 Alexandra Road.

The most significant street and garden trees are marked on the Townscape Appraisal map. In such a well tree'd area, it has not been possible to identify every notable tree and lack of a specific reference does not imply that it must not be of value.

4.12 Open space

The area contains no significant public open space but most properties have rear gardens, not generally visible to the public, but important in that they provide a setting to the buildings and reinforce the spacious, green character of parts of the proposed conservation area. No. 5 Alexandra Road has a large garden, including land to the side (south) behind an old brick wall, which provides a setting for this large Victorian property. Historically, properties had a small private front garden enclosed behind railings or hedge, or both. Whilst many still survive, there is a trend to turn front gardens into car parking areas. This gives the property a much more visible frontage but the loss of historic railings, walls or hedges is regrettable. Larger parking areas are notable at no. 35 Erleigh Road, no. 31 Alexandra Road (surgery) and the rear of no. 17 Erleigh Road.

4.13 Floorscape

The proposed conservation area's pavements are generally tarmac. The northern end of Alexandra Road is paved with large concrete paving slabs. However, 19th century natural stone kerbs and gullies remain, adding to the area's special historic interest.

The northern end of Alexandra Road has narrow (c.80 mm) grooved kerbstones with wider stone gullies. South of Erleigh Road, Alexandra Road's kerbstones are much wider and longer (c. 300 mm x 1.5 m) with individual kerbstones cut to form a rounded corner to make provision for access. Good examples are a wide break in the kerb outside no. 33 and a narrow break outside no. 35.

In Erleigh Road, Denmark Road and Addington Road kerbstones are narrower (c 80 mm x 300 mm) with small stone gulley stones.

4.14 Local detail

Brick boundary walls and iron railings and gates are a particular feature of the area. Good examples of walls are the low red brick walls around nos. 61 and 63 Alexandra Road, the former pierced with cruciform openings, the latter with lancets. The walls of no. 19 Erleigh Road (facing Denmark Road) and no. 5 Alexandra Road are constructed with red brick with recessed panels of blue brick. The tall red brick wall opposite nos. 63 to 83 Alexandra Road formed the boundary of a former nursery and is another special feature of the upper part of Alexandra Road.

Brick gate piers are notable in Denmark Road. The brick gate piers of no. 81 Alexandra Road have a stone panel with the house name TREVERE incised into the stone. Railings, often on low brick walls, are characteristic of the area, sometimes supplemented with a privet hedge. Nos. 19 and 29 Erleigh Road have good examples of Victorian iron railings and gates.

There is an Edward VII red post box opposite no. 61 Alexandra Road, a wall mounted King George box outside no. 25 Denmark Road and two old 'Alexandra Road' street name signs, one in the boundary wall of no. 13 Addington Road, the other in the boundary wall of 25 Erleigh Road. These contribute to and add to the area's distinct local identity.

4.15 Negative features

- Twentieth century infill;
- Loss of gardens and front boundaries to create car parking;
- Poor quality concrete paving slabs in northern end of Alexandra Road;
- Intrusive car parking (north end of Alexandra Road);
- Loss of roadside trees;
- Graffiti;
- Marlow Court is a regrettable modern intrusion in a prominent corner location;
- Overhead telephone wires;
- Loss of original front doors and windows to modern replacements;
- Loss of chimney stacks and chimney pots;
- Wheelie bins, large and small, on pavements;
- Inappropriate post and rail fence at 17 Erleigh Road;

- Road narrowing at Addington Road intersection and resulting loss of historic stone kerbs.

5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Designation

Designate the area marked on the Townscape Appraisal map as the “Alexandra Road Conservation Area”. This is slightly different from the draft conservation area boundary drawn up by Reading Borough Council, as detailed below.

5.2 Boundary changes to the draft conservation area boundary

The following amendments to the draft boundary are recommended:

- (i) Delete no. 83 Alexandra Road. This is a modern property out of character with the rest of the proposed conservation area and with a modern building in the rear garden.
- (ii) Delete Henley Court, Alexandra Road. This is a modern development out of character with the proposed conservation area.
- (iii) Add the red brick boundary wall running along west side of Alexandra Road and south side of Addington Road. This is a late 19th century wall that contributes to the character of the area.
- (iv) Add south side of Erleigh Road so that the trees and historic kerbs on both sides of the road are included in the proposed conservation area.

5.2 Article 4 Direction

Certain minor works and alterations to unlisted buildings in use as family dwellings can be carried out without planning permission from the Council. Development of this kind is called “Permitted Development” and falls into various classes which are listed in the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995. These minor alterations can cumulatively have an adverse effect on the character and appearance of a conservation area. Powers exist to the Council to withdraw some of these permitted development rights in the interests of preserving and enhancing the character and appearance of the conservation area.

In the proposed Alexandra Road Conservation Area there is an unusually high survival of original detailing in many of the unlisted family houses such as the finely detailed timber windows, porches, timber doors, patterned brickwork and slate roofs, which all make a significant contribution to the individual character of buildings in the area. It is therefore proposed that permitted development rights are withdrawn for some of the unlisted family dwelling houses in the proposed Alexandra Road Conservation Area. This will ensure the preservation of unique architectural features and traditional materials by requiring an application for planning permission before carrying out certain alterations.

The kinds of work which it is proposed to control include:

- The installation of new windows and doors to the principal elevations;
- Alterations to the roof, including changing the roof materials and installing rooflights;
- Building a porch;
- The erection of sheds and other outbuildings;
- Creating an access onto the road;
- Building a hard standing;
- The erection or alteration of gates, fences or walls;
- Painting the exterior of a building.

The buildings which are proposed for this additional form of control are:

- All of the family houses in the proposed Alexandra Road Conservation Area

It is proposed that the restrictions will only relate to development visible from a public highway (this includes a footpath). It will not affect commercial or educational buildings, or residential property which is in use as flats (i.e. in “multiple occupation”), which are already controlled more rigorously as they have far fewer permitted development rights than family houses.