Conserving the Historic Environment in the UK
: The Cambridge Case

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I  Challenges to the Historic Environment of Cambridge

In 2009 the University of Cambridge celebrated the 800th anniversary of its foundation. The city of Cambridge is even older. From its Roman foothold on a hill to the north of a meander in the river Cam, the tiny settlement has spread over two millennia to become the internationally renowned city of today. From its medieval core within that river meander, Cambridge developed into a market and university town with numerous religious houses. By 1600, the town had a population of about 5,000 and had acquired the built form and economic functions that were to characterise it for the next three centuries. By 1900 its population had grown to just over 9,000 but by 2000 it had increased enormously to just over 100,000. It is planned to increase even further, to almost 150,000 by 2021. Today, Cambridge is a major shopping and service centre for a region with half a million people; it has 23,000 students at its two universities; it has burgeoning research-based industries and high-tech companies; it has a medical campus centred on a hospital employing 9,000 people and receiving about 9,000 visits from the public each day; and it attracts 4 million tourists each year. About 186,000 vehicles enter the city every day. All of these activities place heavy pressures upon the city's historic environment, especially on the narrow streets of medieval origin in the city's central core where many college and university buildings are located.

In combination, population growth and economic vibrancy are transforming Cambridge more rapidly today that at any time previously. But today's rapid and radical developments pose a threat to the historic fabric of the city, they present a challenge to the legacy of its built form, to its essential character as a market and university city. Cambridge has a rich architectural heritage. Its oldest college buildings (the Hall and Buttery at Peterhouse) date from the end of the thirteenth century (Fig. 1), its oldest church buildings (the Chancel, Nave and West Tower of St Bene't's) date from the first half of the eleventh century (Fig. 2). In addition to numerous college, university and religious buildings, Cambridge also possesses many secular structures of
considerable historical merit, such as the castle motte (11th c), the old Addenbrooke’s Hospital (1740), the railway station (1845), the Guildhall (1936–37), almshouses, bridges and milestones, and individual dwelling houses of dates ranging from the medieval to the modern period. Conserving Cambridge’s historic environment for tomorrow’s generations to enjoy is a major challenge for its town planners. It is also a major opportunity to demonstrate how the best built–form that survives today from the past can be protected and even enhanced for the future. Measures to conserve the historic environment of Cambridge have to be implemented within a framework of national and regional planning policies. I will first consider Cambridge within that general framework and then examine policies and issues that are specific to the city.

II Principles and Policies of Conservation: The National and Regional Contexts

Both the theory and the practice of conservation in Britain have evolved considerably during the last thirty years. There has been a growing awareness of the rapidity with which England’s landscape heritage has become increasingly endangered as a cultural species and of the consequent need to provide better frameworks for protecting and sustaining it.

A significant development in the UK was the creation of English Heritage, an independent organisation which from 1984 became the main advisory body to government taking over that role from the Department of the Environment and various other advisory bodies. Building upon the heritage planning provisions in the Civic Amenities Act 1967 and the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, English Heritage has established the benchmark definition of

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Figure 1. Peterhouse Hall and Buttery (Kitchen).
conservation and a set of principles on which to base conservation practice. Conservation is defined by English Heritage as ‘the process of managing change to a significant place in its setting in ways that will best sustain its heritage values, while recognising opportunities to reveal or reinforce those values for present and future generations’. English Heritage has promoted a comprehensive framework for the sustainable management of the historic environment based on six key principles:

1. The historic environment is a shared resource
2. Everyone should be able to participate in sustaining the historic environment
3. Understanding the significance of places is vital
4. Significant places should be managed to sustain their values
5. Decisions about change must be reasonable, transparent and consistent
6. Documenting and learning from decisions are essential.

Sustainable management of the historic environment is seen as embracing both preservation and enhancement. English Heritage has argued powerfully that while the historic environment is constantly changing each part of it represents a finite resource: ‘If it is not sustained, not only
are its heritage values eroded or lost, but so is its potential to give distinctiveness, meaning and quality to the places in which people live, and provide people with a sense of continuity and a source of identity. The historic environment is a social and economic asset and a cultural resource for learning and enjoyment.

English Heritage offers guidance to all concerned with historic environments, including developers, property owners, amenity groups and the general public, but its views are especially influential in national, regional and local government circles. Significantly, its opinions underpinned the British government’s radical re-writing of its guidance on conservation, published in 1994 as Planning Policy Guidance Note 15: Planning and the Historic Environment. This provides a powerful statement of the role played by the planning system in the identification, protection and enhancement of historic buildings, conservation areas and all other elements of the historic environment (such as parks, gardens and battlefields). It provides detailed policy advice to local authorities about how the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 adds considerably to the powers given to them by the normal development control (i.e. planning) process. For example, it provides specific criteria for assessing proposals to demolish buildings of historic interest and value (especially buildings previously so identified and consequently Listed). PPG 15 also sees conservation and sustainable economic growth as complementary objectives: it argues that conservation can itself play a part in promoting economic prosperity by ensuring that an area offers attractive living and working conditions and by encouraging inward investment, tourism and the leisure sector. Thus conservation protects the past but with the future in mind. First published fifteen years ago, PPG 15 is currently being revised and will be accompanied by a Historic Environment Planning Practice Guide providing more detail on ways the principles in the revised PPS can be applied.

The principles and policies enunciated by English Heritage and by central government are embedded in the work of regional and local planning authorities. Development in and around Cambridge is embraced by the regional spatial strategy for the East of England. The recently-published revision of that strategy includes a policy on the historic environment: ‘In their plans, policies, programmes and proposals local planning authorities and other agencies should identify, protect, conserve and, where appropriate, enhance the historic environment of the region, its archaeology, historic buildings, places and landscapes, including historic parks and gardens and those features and sites (and their settings) especially significant in the East of England’. The strategy explicitly identifies the historic city of Cambridge as being of special interest. All that the East of England Plan does, however, is to repeat advice and guidance provided by the national government and by English Heritage. Its policy does not add further value. And it is not the regional but the local authority that has to assess planning applications and to implement conservation principles and policies.

III Local Policies: The Cambridge Local Plan 2006

The day-to-day responsibility for conservation in Cambridge lies with the City Council whose principles and policies are set out in the Cambridge Local Plan adopted in July 2006. The general objective of the Council is to ensure that the unique qualities of Cambridge and the character of its built-up and open areas are safeguarded and maintained for the future. The Local Plan therefore sets out policies for protecting both the ‘natural’ environment—its green spaces, trees
and biodiversity—and the built environment. In this paper, I am only considering a component of the latter, the cultural or historical environment, taking in turn each of its four main elements as recognised in planning legislation.

**Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Remains**

Cambridge Local Plan Policy 4/9 states: ‘Planning applications for developments affecting Scheduled Ancient Monuments or other important archaeological remains and their settings have to be accompanied by a full assessment of the nature and importance of the remains and the impact of the proposals on them. When the remains or their settings are deemed to be of national importance, they have to be preserved *in situ* and development damaging them is not permitted. In other cases, development is permitted where archaeological deposits are being left undisturbed or the impacts of development are mitigated to an acceptable level and detailed arrangements for the recording, publication and archiving and/or display of and access to any artefacts are secured’.

Information on the archaeology of the historic core of Cambridge is held in an Urban Archaeological Database. Where the likelihood of archaeological remains exists, a project brief must normally be prepared by the County Council and endorsed by the City Council. The developer is then required to employ an archaeological consultant to carry out a thorough investigation based on that brief prior to start of the development. Any findings have to be properly recorded and the information disseminated.

**Listed Buildings**

A Listed Building is a building or structure of special architectural or historic interest that has been included on a list approved by the government’s Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. Listed Buildings include a range of structures, from the remains of Roman buildings to offices and housing built in the 1970s, from lampposts to castles. There are about 500,000 Listed Buildings in Britain, in three categories: Grade I buildings are of exceptional interest (only about 2% of listed buildings are in this category); Grade II buildings are of particular importance, (about 4% of listed buildings are in this category); Grade III buildings are of special interest (94% of listed buildings are covered by this Grade). When a building is listed, all of the building itself, anything fixed to it, and also most buildings and structures in its grounds are part of the listed building. The inside as well as the outside of a building is listed. Cambridge has over 1500 Listed Buildings.

Cambridge Local Plan Policy 4/10 states: ‘Developments affecting Listed Buildings and their settings, including changes of use, are not permitted unless:

(a) it is demonstrated that there is a clear understanding of the building’s importance in the national and Cambridge context including an assessment of which external and internal features and aspects of its setting are important to the building’s special interest; and

(b) the proposed works will not harm any aspects of the building’s special interest or the impacts can be mitigated to an acceptable level for example by being easily reversible; or

(c) where there will be an impact on the building’s special interest, this is the least damaging of the potential options and there are clear benefits for the structure, interest or use of the building or a wider public benefit; and

(d) features being altered will be reused and/or properly recorded prior to alteration.’

The policy statement continues:
'The demolition of Listed Buildings is not permitted unless:
(a) the building is structurally unsound for reasons other than deliberate damage or neglect; or
(b) it cannot continue in its current use and there are no viable alternative uses; and
(c) wider public benefits will accrue from redevelopment.'

Planning permission is required for demolition of all or part of a listed building (including buildings and structures in the curtilage), for alterations (including internal works) which affect the character of the building, for extensions, and for repairs which involve replacing important parts of the building’s fabric, or using different materials (such as replacing a slate roof with tiles).

When a building is listed, all of the building itself, anything fixed to it, and also most buildings and structures in its grounds are part of the listed building. The inside as well as the outside of a building is listed. When a building is listed, it is an offence to carry out works to the building which affect its architectural or historic interest without the approval of the City Council. An offending developer could be liable to prosecution, and be made to rectify what has been done. The maximum penalty could include imprisonment and unlimited fines. If a Listed Building is deliberately neglected by its owner, s/he could be compelled by the City Council to carry out repairs. In extreme circumstances, the Council is able to compulsorily purchase a neglected Listed Building.

Buildings of Local Interest

In addition to the Listed Buildings, there exists a non-statutory listing of buildings considered to be important to the locality or to Cambridge’s history and architectural development.

Cambridge Local Plan Policy 4/12 states: ‘Although not statutorily listed, Buildings of Local Interest merit protection from development that adversely affects them. The demolition of such a building is only permitted if the building is demonstrably incapable of beneficial use or reuse or there are clear public benefits arising from redevelopment.’

There are more than 1,000 buildings in Cambridge which, although unlikely to meet the criteria for national statutory listing, are nevertheless important to the locality or the city’s history. Guidance on the approach to be adopted when considering works to such buildings, and the criteria by which buildings would be added to the list in future, were agreed by the City Council in 2005.

Conservation Areas

The City Council is required by law to identify areas which have “special architectural or historic interest” that makes them worth protecting and improving. Such areas are called Conservation Areas and they are drawn up by the Council with the help of local people. What makes a Conservation Area special may be a mixture of the buildings, spaces, trees and many other features.

Cambridge Local Plan Policy 4/11 states: ‘Developments within, or which affect the setting of or impact on views into and out of Conservation Areas, are only permitted if:
(a) they retain buildings, spaces, gardens, trees, hedges, boundaries and other site features which contribute positively to the character or appearance of the area;
(b) the design of any new building or the alteration of an existing one preserves or enhances the
character or appearance of the Conservation Area by faithfully reflecting its context or providing a successful contrast with it; and
(c) a new or intensified use will not lead to traffic generation or other impacts which would adversely affect the Area’s character.

The special character of Conservation Areas means that development in them is more strictly controlled than in other areas:

- **New buildings** and the spaces around them must preserve or improve the character of the area. The siting, scale, height, form, details and building materials must all be carefully chosen. Permission must be sought to demolish any building larger than 115 cubic metres in size; a fence, wall or railing higher than 1 metre where it adjoins a road, footpath or open space or 2 metres elsewhere; or more than 10% or 500 cubic metres of an industrial building. **Alterations to houses** are controlled. Permission is needed to build an extension larger than 50 cubic metres or 10% of the original house size; to clad the outside of a house; to add to or alter a roof; to erect a building larger than 10 cubic metres in size in the grounds of a house; or to put a satellite dish on the chimney or roof slope facing a road, path or open space or a building which is higher than 15 metres. Permission is also required for to fell or do any works on most trees.

Cambridge had ten Conservation Areas at the beginning of 2009, but a further one was approved in March. The Central Conservation Area is the largest and oldest such area in Cambridge. It covers the historic core of the city, open spaces including the college backs, Jesus Green, Midsummer Common and the Botanic Garden, and the housing areas west of the railway line. The Central Conservation Area was designated on 25 February 1969 and has since been extended on a number of occasions. Because of its large size and its wealth of buildings of historic and architectural interest, it has been divided into a number of areas of which the largest is the Historic Core Area, a detailed appraisal of which was undertaken street-by-street and completed in 2006. This remarkable work identifies the key townscape characteristics of the central core of Cambridge, considers the pressures affecting the core area and how they might best be managed, provides a framework for assessing planning applications, and identifies sites and buildings capable of redevelopment and areas with the potential for environmental enhancement.

## IV Champions of Cambridge’s Historic Environment

Clearly, key players in the conservation of Cambridge’s historic environment are the City Council’s planning officers (and especially its conservation officers) whose duty it is to implement its policies. In addition, the Council appoints one of its own councillors as its Historic Environment Champion whose duty it is to raise awareness of the city’s historic environment, to be a strong advocate on the City Council for the historic environment, and to give a corporate lead in the successful resolution of the conflicting interests that often arise in relation to the management of the city’s historic environment.

As a City Councillor, I have been the Historic Environment Champion for Cambridge since May 2008. Even before that, and since May 2002, I have been on the city’s Planning Committee and thus closely involved with its historic environment. While a local politician, I have viewed myself as an applied historical geographer embracing not only the past but also the present and
future, a practical role that I advocated many years ago. In this capacity I have become acutely aware of some of the basic tensions inherent within the conservation of historic environments. Let me give just two examples. First, for centuries many, perhaps most, buildings used local materials and employed a limited range of architectural styles and techniques, thereby producing relatively harmonious townsapes. Today, a much wider palette of materials and techniques is available—old materials from distant locations and new materials and techniques from dramatic innovations—so that contrasts within a townscape can be as readily produced as continuities. Secondly, today's architects often seek to break with the past, to build stunning monuments to themselves or their clients. Similarly, many local politicians in promising their electorates a better future devalue the present and denigrate the past.

To the efforts of official guardians of Cambridge's historic environment are added significantly those of the Cambridge Preservation Society. Founded in 1928, this voluntary association aims to protect the character, amenities, historic buildings and setting of Cambridge and its surroundings. It does so by working to protect the city's green spaces and nearby countryside, by funding the rescue of historic buildings (such as the Leper Chapel at Barnwell and houses in Orchard Street), and by promoting good urban design by participating constructively in the development of planning briefs and in the assessment of planning applications.

In addition, of course, architects and developers, local residents associations and enthusiastic and informed individuals also contribute to the debate about how best to protect and enhance Cambridge's historic environment for future generations to enjoy. Historic environments are contested landscapes, fought over by different interest groups whether they are in modern industrial cities like Birmingham or in ancient university-market towns like Cambridge.

V  A Case Study: Designating a New Conservation Area

Forty years after the designation of Cambridge's first Conservation Area in the city centre, a new suburban Conservation Area has been designated this year (2009). It covers the De Freville estate, a residential area within walking distance of the City Centre that remains as it was built in the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth. The area was laid out on a grid plan that was characteristic of the development style for Victorian residential suburbs. The leafy avenues of street trees in the eastern part of the area reflect the larger plot sizes and more affluent dwellings set out here. Within the area, there is a range of dwelling types with narrow streets and small mid 19th century terraced workers' cottages to the west. To the east, the later development of the De Freville Estate and subsequently of some adjacent roads present more substantial dwellings of the suburban villa type that were typical for their day and aimed at the middle classes who could afford to move out of the rather crowded conditions to be found in the city itself in the late 19th century. The estate is characterized by having avenues of trees along the main streets. Each neighbourhood within the Conservation Area has a strong architectural integrity reflecting the period in which it was first developed.

The proposal to designate the De Freville Estate as a Conservation Area was first mooted by a group of local residents. With advice from the City Council's Conservation Team, they undertook some landscape analysis and produced a document setting out their views on what constitutes the essential characteristics of the area and how it might be protected and improved. The Council built upon the community-based initiative. The document produced by local residents
was forwarded to a team of professional landscape historians who carried out additional research and prepared a Conservation Area Appraisal for the Estate (Fig. 3). That Appraisal provided an historical and spatial analysis of three sets of roads (neighbourhoods) in the Area, identifying its key historical and architectural characteristics. For each of the three neighbourhoods, the Appraisal set out its perceived weaknesses and strengths from a conservationist point of view and itemized how each area might be enhanced. The Appraisal document was then put out to consultation, both to some public agencies as statutory consultees and to members of the public as interested individuals.

English Heritage (East of England Region) agreed that the area displays a coherent architectural identity and meets fully the criteria for designation, especially with a high percentage of the estate's original features still in place. It suggested some changes to the proposed boundary of the area, to remove from it some properties not of sufficient interest to merit inclusion. It also made some detailed comments, for example, noting the almost universal use of Welsh roofing slate reflecting the estate's construction after the coming of the railway to Cambridge in the mid-nineteenth century. The Cambridge Preservation Society also fully supported the proposed designation. Both English Heritage and the Cambridge Preservation Society emphasized the need to prevent the conversion of front gardens into off-street parking areas. This issue will be addressed by planning officers requiring traditional boundary treatments to properties to be maintained.

Public opinion about the proposal was divided. Of the 196 submissions made by members of the public, 101 (51.5%) supported it and 95 (48.5%) opposed it. Those in favour of the Appraisal considered that it captured accurately the character of the area and many argued that the
proposed boundary should be extended in a few places to incorporate additional properties and roads. Those opposing the proposal did so because they were fearful of the additional bureaucracy that they associated with Conservation Area designation. Many argued that the restrictions imposed by designation were an unreasonable infringement of an individual’s right to make changes to his/her own property. Some argued that the proposal had been driven by a small and unrepresentative section of the local community. Others argued that the cost of establishing a new Conservation Area for residents of a few neighbourhoods could not be justified because that cost would have to be met as a charge upon all of the city’s Council Tax payers. Still others objected to the additional costs that would fall upon local residents by their having to pay fees whenever submitting applications to the Planning Department to make changes to their properties.

As a result of the comments submitted, the draft Appraisal was amended by the City Council’s Conservation Team to take them into account. The revised Appraisal was then discussed and approved by the Council’s Environment Scrutiny Committee (comprised of nine elected City Councillors) on 3 March 2009. The Council’s Executive Councillor for Climate Change and Growth then endorsed the Appraisal and designation of the De Freville Conservation Area.

VI An Historic Environment Strategy for Cambridge

Until recently, Cambridge City Council’s approach to the historic environment has been mainly tactical and piecemeal. It has included specific policies in its Local Plan 2006, the Listing of individual buildings, the designation of Conservation Areas, and the development of Conservation Plans for complex historic properties such as college and university buildings and significant open spaces. Cambridge, like many but by no means all English cities, has been slow in articulating its heritage policy. As in some other cities, the non-strategic and essentially incremental proliferation of its conservation areas is in need of review and the boundaries of some of its conservation areas need to be re-appraised. One of its conservation areas—Trumpington, in the south of the city—has been recognised by the City Council and by English Heritage as being “at risk” from the very substantial residential developments being planned in the city’s southern fringe.

But the Council has now decided to produce a strategic historic environment assessment for the city as a whole. This will include an overview of the significance of Cambridge’s historic environment and of its vulnerability to the pressures being imposed on it by population growth, economic development and climate change. A strategy is being prepared in order to manage changes to the landscape of the city while protecting and enhancing its internationally renowned historic character. Such a strategy, to be devised with considerable public consultation, will enable the Council to prioritise its objectives for the historic environment and to determine the most effective measures for achieving them.

It is unlikely that the strategy will include making a case to UNESCO for World Heritage status for Cambridge, despite the fact that a very strong case could be made based on its legacies of historic buildings (both individual structures and collections of buildings) and of its open spaces and of the culture, ideas, discoveries and innovations associated with its having been the seat of an internationally distinguished university for 800 years (Fig. 4). That case is not expected to be made, for three reasons. First, seeking World Heritage status is normally aimed at creating a
greater sense of local pride and civic awareness and at attracting more tourists. There is, quite honestly, no need for any further such self-promotion for Cambridge. Secondly, preparing and submitting a case to UNESCO would put additional pressure upon the already stretched and clearly limited resources of the City Council’s conservation officers. Their first priority must be to pursue measures to protect Cambridge’s precious historic environment from the immense and increasing pressures being placed on it by population growth and economic development. Thirdly, Cambridge is a dynamic, vibrant, city that has thrived, and continues to thrive, on change as much as upon continuity. Its life is based not only upon legacies from the past but also upon hopes for the future.

Notes

1) This paper is a revised and extended version of a presentation made to the 14th International Conference of Historical Geographers held at Kyoto University, Japan, 23–27 August 2009.


Conserving the Historic Environment in the UK: The Cambridge Case

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Population growth and economic development are transforming the built-form of the city of Cambridge more swiftly today than at any time in its two thousand years' history. These rapid and radical developments pose serious threats to the historic environment of this ancient market and university city. The built form of Cambridge is an architectural palimpsest not only of numerous religious and university buildings dating from the medieval period onwards but also of significant secular structures from the early modern and modern periods. This paper assesses the conservation principles that underpin efforts to protect and enhance Cambridge's diverse and rich historic environment. It considers critically the national, the regional and, most especially, the local planning policies which constitute the framework within which conservation measures have to be practised. It examines the roles of key players, both public and private, in the conservation of Cambridge's historic environment and specifically considers the designation of a new Conservation Area. Finally, it argues that while the development of an historic environment strategy for Cambridge is necessary that strategy cannot be expected to include submission of a claim for inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List.