

Willaston in 1971



In 1971, a report was written about Willaston (*Conservation Stage 11 report, June 1971: Willaston, Neston Urban District, Cheshire County Council*). The population at the time was about 2,300 people. Quotes from the reports are in italics and photos are from the report. The village was described as follows:

Modern day Willaston is a very different village from its old agricultural self. It is now primarily a residential settlement, oriented to Birkenhead and Ellesmere Port, looking to industrial Merseyside for employment, shopping and leisure and no longer to the surrounding countryside.

Of the original farms in the village, only two now have an agricultural function. Although it continues to prosper, there is a surprising amount of dereliction, particularly amongst the older buildings around the green. This deterioration of the fabric of the village can be directly linked to the continuing decline of farming. As land was sold for housing and small units were absorbed into larger one, buildings fell out of use and decay inevitably set in. In many cases the farmhouse was still lived in, but little or no use could be made of the outbuildings, many of which have been demolished.

... Today many of the pressures for change come from outside the village and are beyond the control of the villagers themselves. If the character of the village is not to be eroded away completely by new demands, there must be forward thinking that can reconcile these new pressures with enhancement of the village's heritage.

Description of the Area

(1) The Green

The area around the Green was described as follows:

Of the buildings around the green, the Old Hall is still dominant, built of warm coloured sandstone. The black and white half timbered 'Old Red Lion' stands out boldly forming a very important element in the scene. The brick building occupied by the Midland Bank is also very attractive. A number of other 17th and 18th century buildings still stand, around the green but all of these have been spoiled in some way or another, by rendering or insensitive alterations and additions.



(2) Hadlow Road

Hadlow Road was described as follows:

The visitor approaching Willaston from the south would hardly be impressed by his first view of the village.

The wide road, concrete kerbs, the bungalows and the garage with its forecourt and

advertisements add up to give an impression of suburbia, rather than of a rural community.

The old station is intriguing and Rose Farm acts as a reminder of the old village, but a little further on the right there is a view into a characterless estate of houses and bungalows almost devoid of trees and designed with little concern for the particular quality of the village.



This nondescript quality continues until Ashtree Farm is reached. The old farmhouse, now thoroughly restored is important not only in its own right, but also as an element in the street picture.

The old barns at Ashtree also contribute to the enclosure of the street being built hard against the roadside. This quality

of enclosure has been lost in many parts of the village.



At this point, one is made aware of the dereliction around the centre of the village. Cherry Brow Farm stands empty and surrounded by ruined out-buildings and there are gaps where old cottages and farm buildings have disappeared.

It is only on reaching the picturesque Old Hall that a glimpse of real village character is obtained. There is a feeling of enclosure provided by the mellow sandstone walls and the trees, which frame an attractive view of the village green.



(3) Neston Road

Neston Road was described as follows:

Coming from Neston, the village is approached thorough pleasant open countryside.

The village straggles along Neston road with occasional old buildings set amongst nondescript development, with very little rural quality. Many of the old buildings have lost much of their character as a result of recent alterations and additions.

Here, modern development has opened up the road, its overall design, use of materials and lack of trees gives it a suburban quality.

In places however, it is possible to imagine what the old character of the road might have been. There are the old walls, hedges and trees, and a pleasant 19th century row of cottages. The road curves invitingly out of view past the chapel.

A little further on the illusion is lost again.

As the village centre is approached, the feeling of enclosure returns, with the barn, cottages and walls built close up to the roadside.



Several buildings detract from the view at this point, particularly the large buildings at the rear of Church Farm which are in need of screening, and the Church Hall with the wooden building adjacent to it.

The area in front of the church is potentially very attractive with overhanging trees, buildings close to the road, and glimpses of the Green. It is spoiled however by parked cars and through traffic.



(4) Hooton Road

Hooton Road was described as follows:



Hooton Road has been built up since the 1930's with large houses set in generous gardens. In many places the boundary walls are of old red sandstone, and hedges and trees have matured enclosing the road, making this a pleasant approach to the village.

A more recent development has opened out the road with wide grass verges and open visibility splays, old hedgerows and trees having been removed.



A little further on the sense of enclosure is regained. There is an interesting treatment of a small visibility splay. A low sandstone wall is retained beside the drive, the line of the splay being defined by a boarded fence – thus the minimum disturbance is caused to the continuity of the boundary.

The village centre is glimpsed through a frame of trees, the old barn behind the Nag's Head is important in 'stopping' the view.

At this point the wide road has destroyed what must once have been a pleasant enclosed space. However something of the character is retained by the old brick and sandstone walls, the charming little 'Wayside Cottage' and the barns of Acres Farm.





The road bends and twists between the Nag's Head and Old Hall Farm, turning what was once an interesting sequence of spaces and views, into a place of noise and danger.

(5) Medical Facilities

A new doctor's surgery opens four days a week ... no provision has yet been made for a dental service.

(6) 'Old People's Facilities'

There is a definite need in Willaston for housing for some of Willaston's older residents who are in one or other of the following situations:

- *They have been moved to Neston and are unhappy there;*
- *They are in substandard housing, or houses which are too large;*
- *They live too far from the village centre.*

An ideal location for 4 old persons flats would be Old Hall Farmhouse if it was suitably converted. Its situation adjacent to the Green would be perfectly satisfactory for old persons. Furthermore it is visually important within the conservation area and must be retained.

(7) Development

The major areas of development are adjoining the proposed by-pass, and an area of about 7 acres to the west of a new estate (Meadow Lane) off Neston Road. Development of the latter site is likely to commence this year.

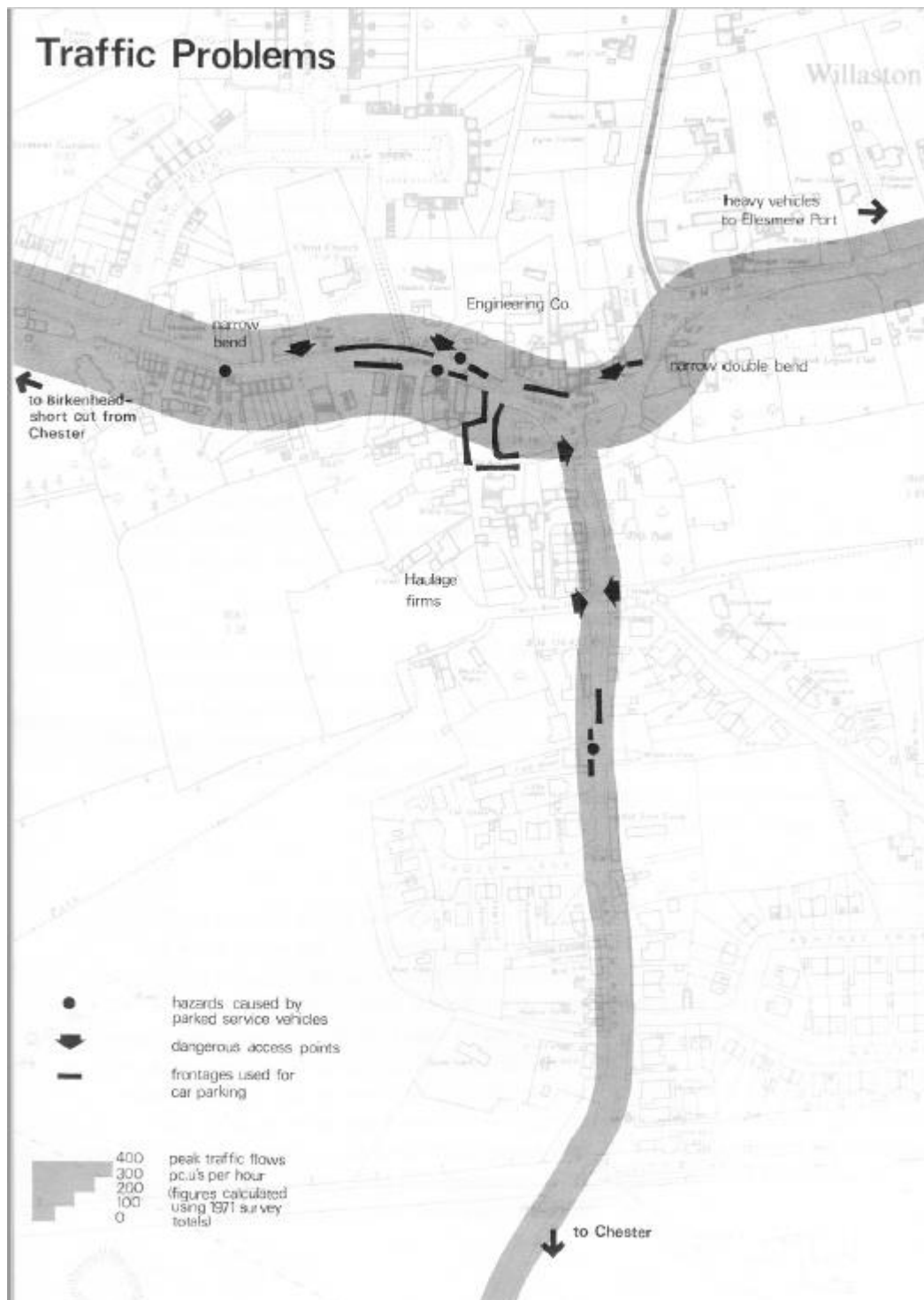
Completion of development on the by-pass is more difficult to forecast but it is unlikely that completions will occur before 1976. Total completion of the development within the village envelope will probably take more than 10 years.

Proposals for Improvements

(1) Traffic and Parking

The volume of through traffic is not excessive, in fact the position of the village between two major north-south traffic routes, is relatively quiet. Rather the

problems are mainly a legacy of its agricultural days; narrow winding roads passing close to buildings, bottlenecks, blind corners and dangerous junctions.



Car parking is perhaps the most urgent of the problems caused by local traffic. Upwards of 40 cars are parked in the village at peak periods adding to the difficulties of through traffic on Neston Road and spoiling the appearance of the village green.

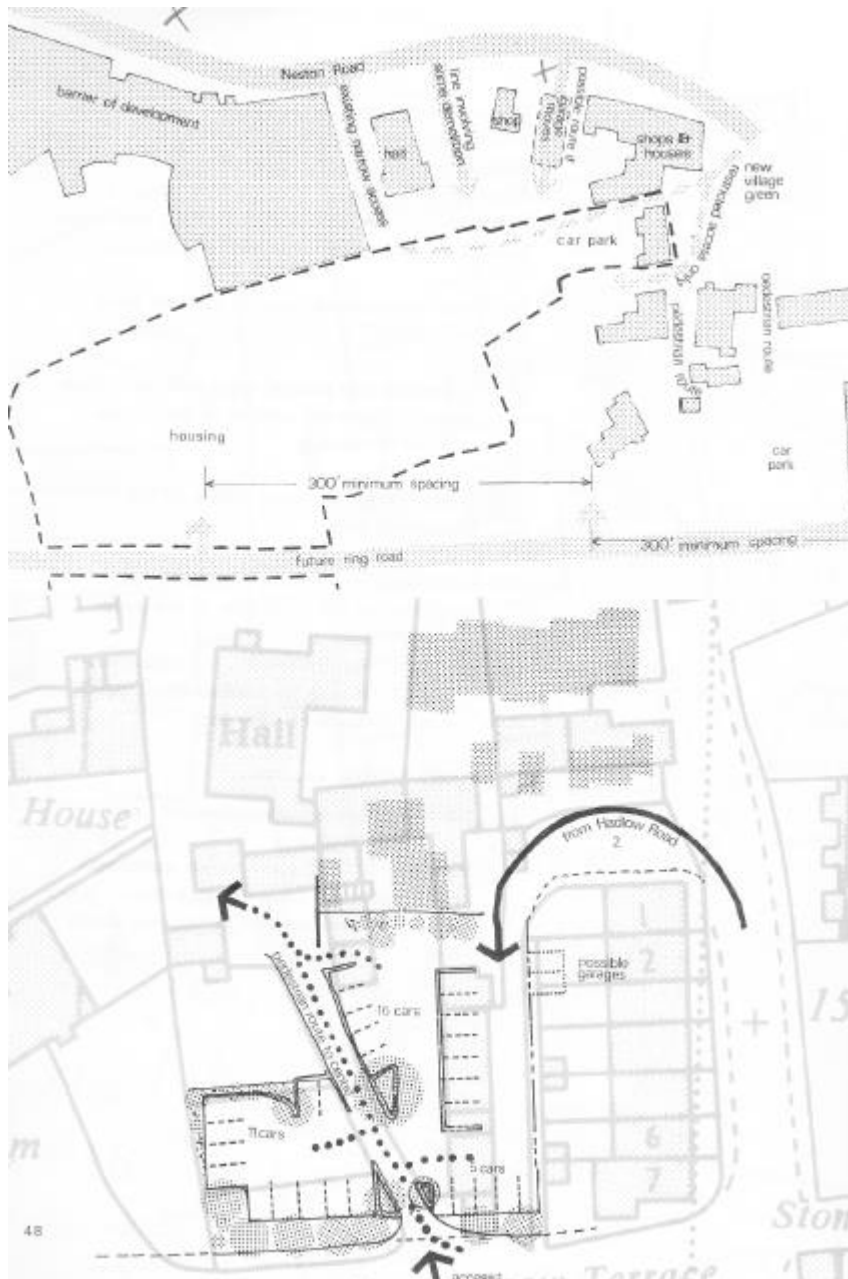
Service and delivery vehicles also give rise to difficulties when parked on traffic routes. The access to the Engineering Works beside the Nag's Head is most unsatisfactory as it involves a difficult manoeuvre at a blind corner on the main road.



Sites were proposed for car parks in the village in an area to the North of the green (behind the barber shop?). This was described as *a complex area of buildings at one time used for farming by now in a variety of uses and ownerships. Much of the site is derelict or only partly used.*

The idea was to remove parking from the Green entirely.





(2) Old Hall Farm



This site is particularly important to the future of the Conservation Area. The old maps ... show how the village used to consist of several clearly defined enclosed spaces ... these spaces were destroyed or spoilt as the old farm buildings disappeared one by one.

The village green has lacked enclosure on its eastern side since the Old Hall Farm buildings were demolished. As a result ... the open space is long and shapeless. There was also a pleasant space in front of the Nag's Head and beyond this again was a clear space to the side of the Nag's Head on Hooton Road.

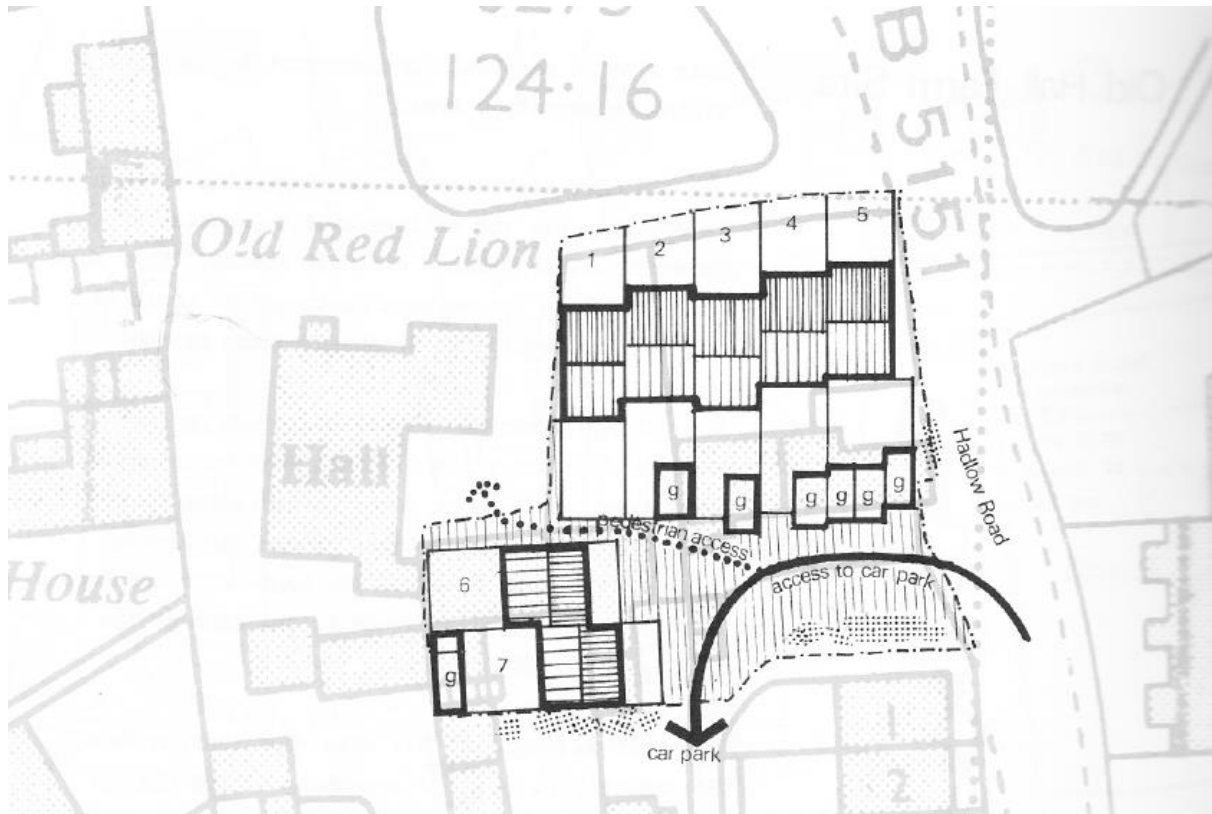
The redevelopment of this site represents a rare opportunity to recreate something of the old village character.

Old Hall Farm itself is a most important visual element and every effort should be made to retain it and convert it to extend its useful life as far as possible.



The detailed design of the houses should take account of the traditional character of the village, using materials, and forms which are in sympathy with the local vernacular, and the informality of the village, and which will look well alongside the Old Hall and Old Hall Farm.

(3) Smithy Cottages Site



This site is particularly important to the village, forming as it does the southern side of the Green.

The design of the site should be considered in conjunction with that of the proposed car park to the rear of Cherry Brow Terrace. It is likely that safety requirements would make it impossible to achieve vehicular access to the car park from the south, and for this reason the sketch scheme shows how access could be gained from Hadlow Road.

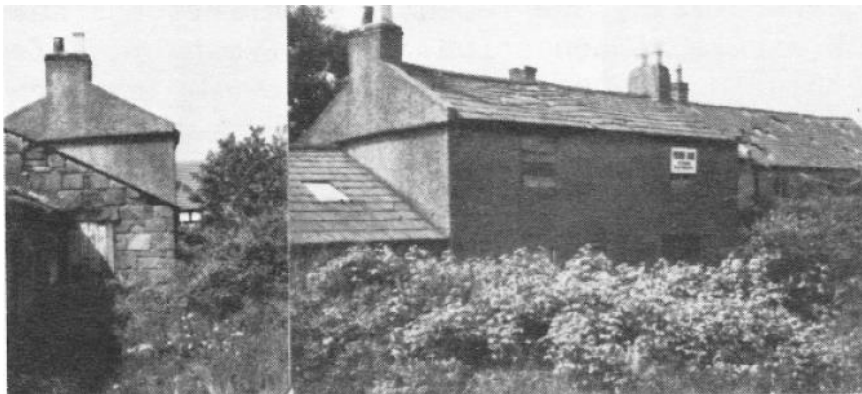
The architectural design of buildings on this site should achieve two main objectives:

- a. They should complete the enclosure of the green on its southern side.*

- b. *They should look well in the context of the existing historic buildings around the green, and relate to such very different buildings as the Old Hall at one end and the Village Hall at the other.*

The existing cottages on the site offer a clue as to how these objectives might be met. Their terraced form and height of two storeys gives the necessary sense of enclosure, and their simple shape and use of local materials helps them to blend with the surrounding buildings.

The detailed design of the scheme should also preserve two parts of the existing village character – the old sandstone wall beside the green and the attractive group of cottages behind the Village Hall which would lend interest to the pedestrian route between the car park and the Green.



Smithy Cottage

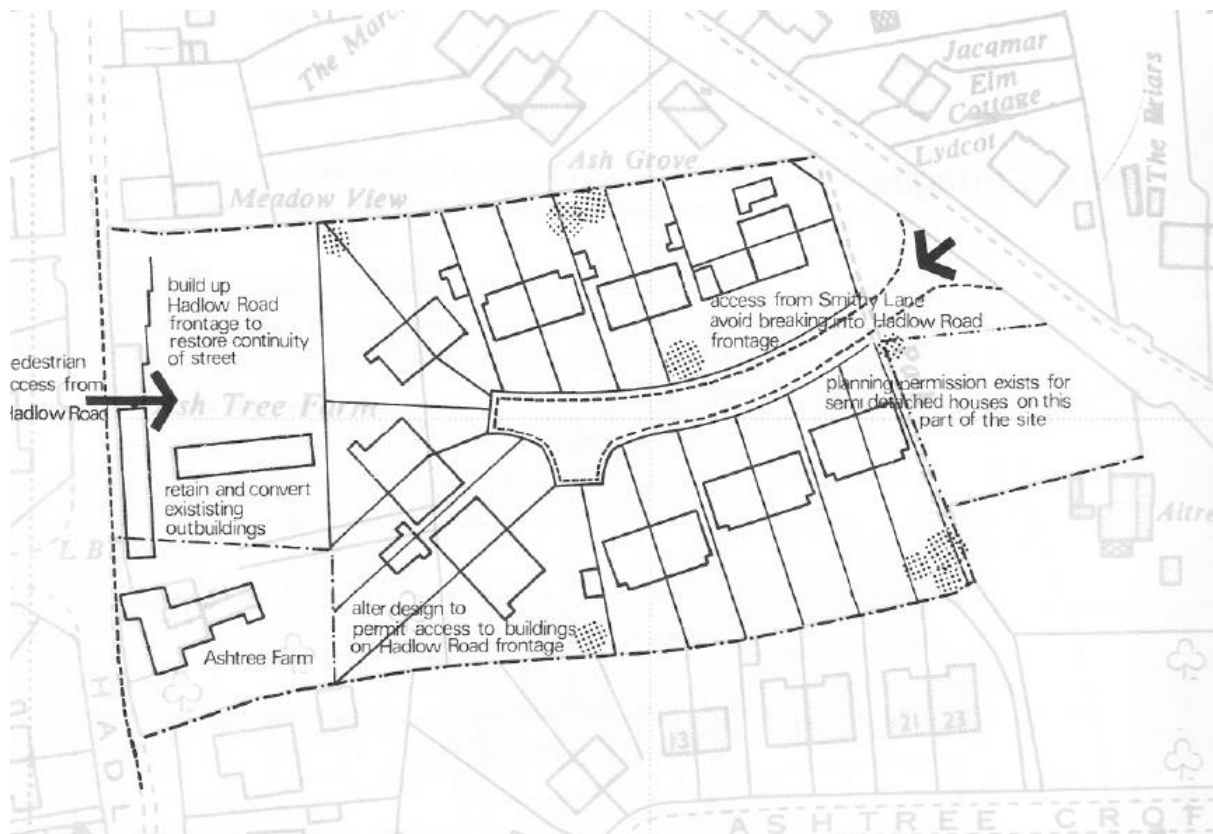
(4) Ashtree Farm Site

The importance of this site lies in its position beside one of the main routes into the village and the potential contribution it could make to the visual quality of Hadlow Road.

The design of the site should be considered in conjunction with that of the remainder of the land running back to Smithy Lane, where further residential development is proposed.

The sketch scheme drawn... illustrates some of the principles which should be adopted:

- a. *Access should be from the rear to avoid opening up the road frontage with visibility splays for vehicles.*
- b. *The existing outbuildings fronting Hadlow Road should be retained for their contribution to the street scene. They could be converted into a pair of extremely attractive patio houses the remaining semi-derelict buildings being converted into garages.*
- c. *The remainder of the Hadlow Road frontage could be taken up with 'town houses' completing the continuity and enclosure of the road.*



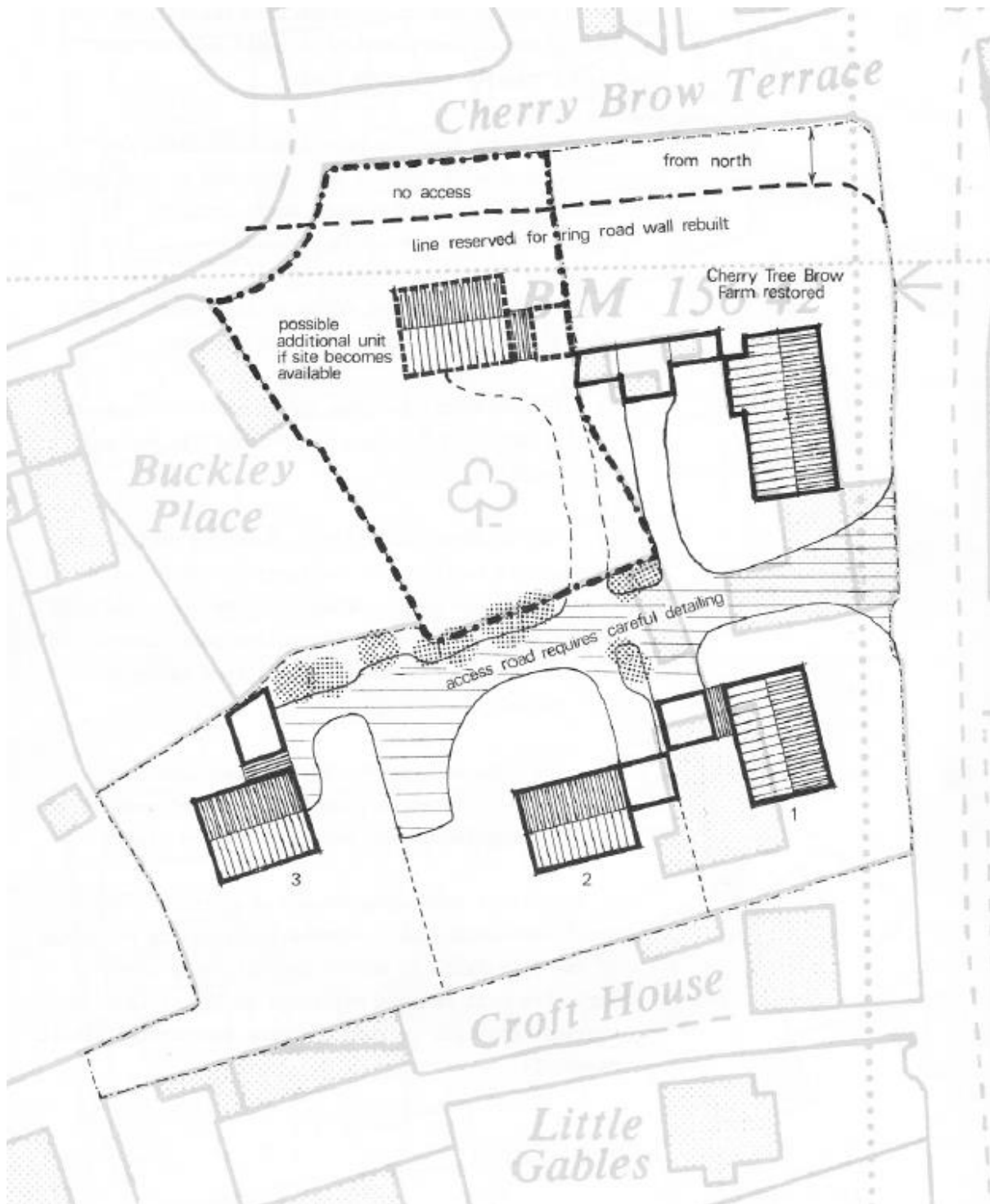
(5) Cherry Brow Farm site



The area around Cherry Brow Farm is important on two counts:

The site occupies a prominent position on Hadlow Road.

Cherry Brow Farm itself is a valuable part of the street scene, the condition of the building is deteriorating rapidly and by its inclusion in a development scheme its repair and conversion could become an economic proposition.



The sketch scheme shows one way in which the site might be developed. It shows the Farm House restored and modernised to provide either one or two dwellings and the remainder of the site used for large detached houses.

Alternatively, the remainder of the site could be used for other types of house, designed to reflect the scale and character of Cherry Brow Farm and maintain the continuity of Hadlow Road.

(6) The Green



The present green is unfortunately submerged under layers of tarmac, surrounded by chains, marred by a plethora of signs and ill considered detail.

If Willaston is to regain some of its former rural character the green should be subjected to special effort.

To this end three things must be taken into account:

- i) Vehicular traffic must be excluded from the green area.*
- ii) Any new development must enhance the form of the green.*
- iii) A programme of planting and landscaping must be undertaken.*

When the ring road is completed vehicular traffic can be removed from the green area.

The sketch scheme... shows how the planting of semi-mature trees can provide a pleasing edge to the south and east of the green. The addition of paving will enable easy access on foot to all parts of the village cnetre and the creation of small areas with seats will enable the scene to be enjoyed in comfort.

There are special problems with access to White House Farm, for while the Old Red Lion can some time in future be served from the rear, this is not possible with White House Farm. Access could be provided by the use of a special lockable bollard giving restricted access from Neston Road across specially reinforced paving.

However, when these problems have been overcome a pleasing, safe and green space will once more exist in the centre of Willaston.



The green today is peppered by a large number of small white posts supporting chains which do little to protect the grass but do cause considerable visual disturbance.



The unpleasant frontage to the Old Red Lion area and how this can be improved.



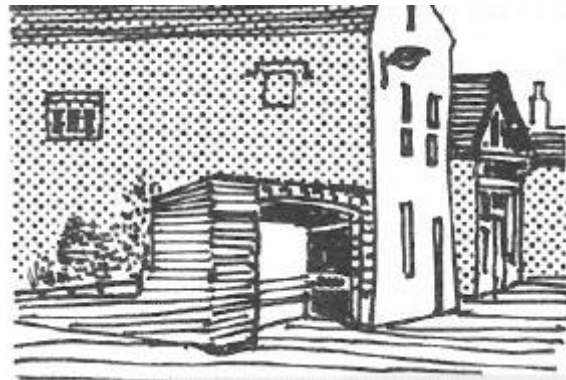
Careful detailing can be used to provide space around the village tree which will help the old and new to merge in harmony.



Recent discussion between the Planning Department and the Bank has resulted in the replacement of an unsympathetic sign (9) by a new, more pleasing one, similar to (10)



The final design of the bus shelter is to be agreed in discussions between the County Planning Department and the Urban District Council.



Commentary on Historical Buildings

(1) Ashtree Farm



1967

Ashtree Farm is an old timber framed building thought to date from the 15th century with later wings. Its stone outbuildings are listed at Grade III

In 1967 an application was made to develop the site for housing. This would have involved the demolition of the farm buildings which were already in a poor state of repair, probably because the landlord could not afford to pay for necessary maintenance out of a low yearly rental.

After discussions with the County Planning Department the developers were persuaded to offer the farmhouse for sale. Although two serious offers to purchase were made, the owners reverted to their original decision to demolish the buildings. However, negotiations were re-opened and the farmhouse was sold.

The new owner applied to the Council Council for a grant under the Local Authorities (Historical Buildings) Act 1962 and a grant of 25% of the estimated cost of restoration work was offered.

Unfortunately the new ownership of the farmhouse does not include all the outbuildings but only part of one. Although they are in a poor state of repair, it is hoped they can be retained as part of a housing scheme.



(2) The Old Red Lion



The Old Red Lion, formally a pair of cottages, is a timber framed building erected in 1631 by a member of the local Bennett family. It is Grade II listed building.



In 1928 it ceased to operate as a public house, however the tenants were allowed to remain in occupation. During the long tenancy a lack of maintenance resulted in a deterioration of the fabric.



In 1962 an application to demolish the building and erect new licenced premises was refused on account of its visual and historic importance within the village. In 1964 to ensure its preservation a Building Preservation Order was served. An appeal against the order was made but dismissed by the Ministry following a public inquiry. In spite of the Building Preservation Order no further action was taken to repair the building. As a result of public pressure investigations were renewed to try and resolve the problem. A detailed survey undertaken by the Planning Department in November 1970 revealed that although the building was in poor condition it was by no means beyond recovery. The owners agreed to look afresh into the possibility of restoring the building as a pub, and appointed an architect to prepare a report on restoration and renovation. Since then 'first-aid' repairs have been carried out and it is hoped that the Red Lion, reputed to be the Wirral's oldest pub, will be restored to what could be one of the most attractive pubs in Cheshire.

