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MURDOCH ROAD AREA, WOKINGHAM

Townscape Appraisal

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MURDOCH ROAD AREA, WOKINGHAM

Townscape Appraisal

INTRODUCTION

This appraisal of Murdoch Road and its environs was commissioned by the Wokingham Society in conjunction with Wokingham District Council. It was undertaken during and immediately after August 2003 and presented to the Society and the Council on 12 September 2003.

The brief required an assessment of the extent to which the area should be considered of special architectural or historic interest – with a consequent recommendation whether any of the locality is worthy of designation as a Conservation Area under planning legislation.

The methodology adopted follows guidance given by English Heritage in "Conservation Area Appraisals". As advised in that document the appraisal is not intended to be comprehensive and the omission of reference to any particular building, feature or space should not be taken to imply that it is of no interest.

1 *Location*

The study area is close to the centre of Wokingham, a medieval market town in the Royal County of Berkshire some 50 km west of central London. The expanding population is in the order of 30,000, having more than doubled in the past 25 years.

The town is set in attractive countryside characterised by a farmed landscape with as yet few indications of the problems affecting the agricultural industry.

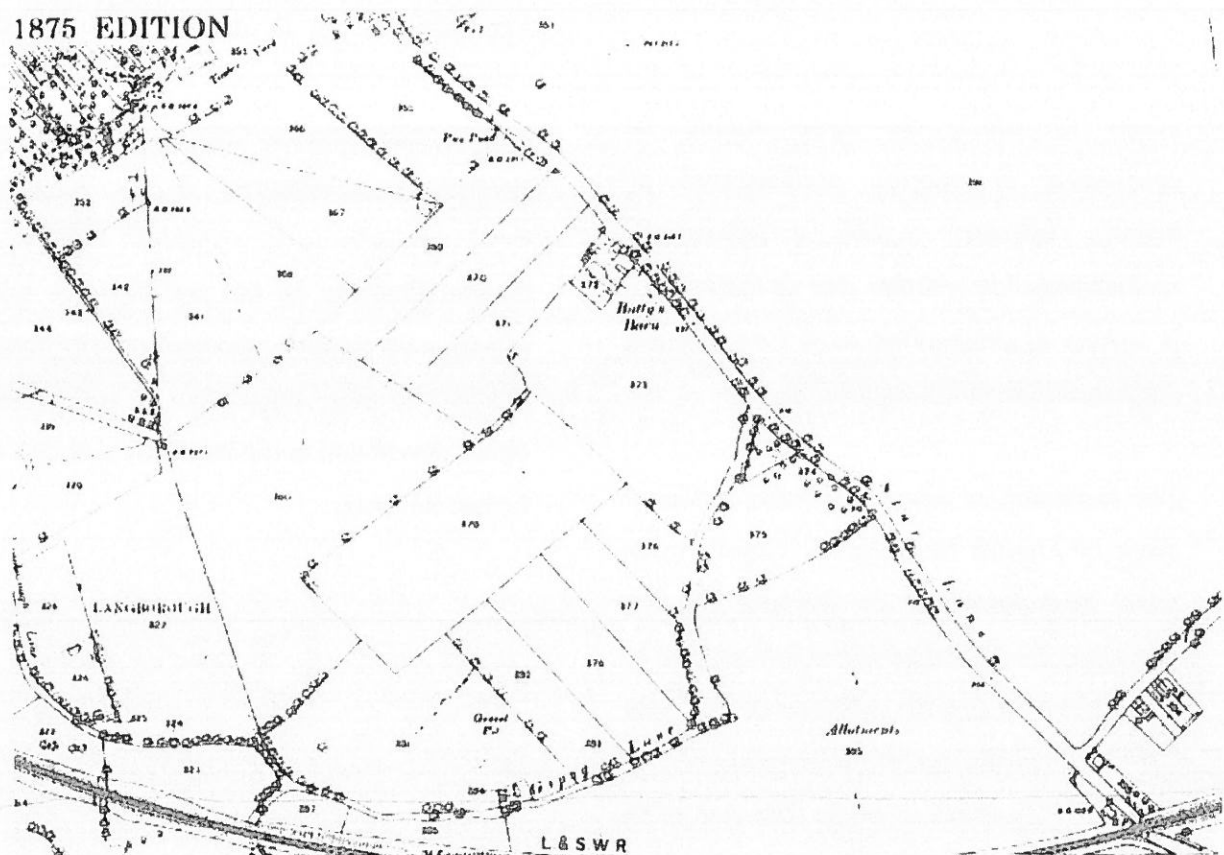
Communications by rail and road are good which, with relative proximity to Heathrow, makes the area attractive for commercial development and compounds the demand for further housing.

2 *Origins of the town and its development in the vicinity of the study area*

Wokingham gained status in the thirteenth century with the granting of a Market Charter in 1219, and a church was established where the Parish Church of All Saints now stands. The town's densely developed old core contains a great variety of predominantly interesting buildings of many periods lining the streets running away from the triangular market place. The present town hall of 1860 there replaces a Guildhall authorised by a Charter granted in 1612.

The ribbon of development and plots on the south-east side of the market place, and continuing along Peach Street and Denmark Street, formed an edge to one of the town's common fields, Langborough Field.

Its proximity to the market place would have been one factor explaining why growth of the old town was primarily to the north and west. Towards the southern side of the former common field the land falls away slightly towards Gipsy Lane and where the railway now runs.



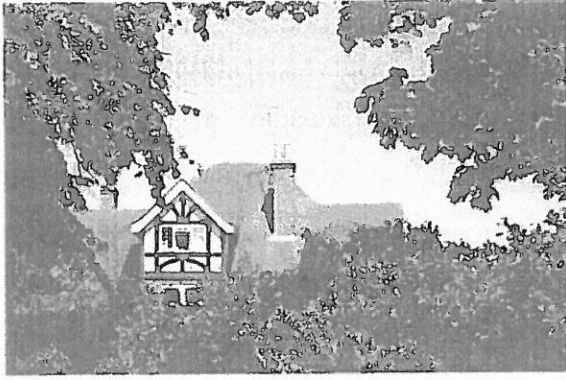
1875 OS of study area before development

Though the area being farmed in common may have shrunk considerably by the beginning of the nineteenth century the final enclosure of all this common field soon followed the Enclosures Act of 1813. By 1870 there was a timber yard behind the Peach Street properties, separated from Easthampstead Road (known formerly as both Star Lane and Bagshot Road) by a ribbon of very modest properties. Access to the yard seems to have been from Peach Street, along Luckley Path, a long-established pedestrian route from the town centre to the south, leading to Ludgrove, in earlier times the site of Tangle Farm. What is now Langborough Road appears on the 1875 Ordnance Survey, running as far as the path. This road was largely developed before 1899, by which time some of the houses on the south-west side of Langborough Walk, the footpath which has become Howard Road, had been erected. The assorted houses and semi-detached cottages there constitute a pleasant streetscape, despite some erosion of their original character, but do not display any architecturally distinctive features.

As the nineteenth century progressed most of the farmland on this edge of the town passed into the ownership of one family, some 45 acres of it east of Luckley Path being then known as Batty's Barn Farm. The farmstead

of this holding was at the north-east edge of the farm, beside Easthampstead Road. By this time residential development was creeping further along that road from Peach Street and unsurprisingly with the passing of one generation the remaining family members decided to sell the farm for development. In 1898 Batty's Barn Farm (and other land) was sold by auction, and the People's Investment Company came into the picture, buying about 45 of the 57 acres being auctioned. An auction notice of the day described Easthampstead Road as a "widened high road ... in a rapidly developing locality".

Easthampstead Road has been developed and redeveloped incrementally over a longer period than other roads nearby, with conventional mid- and late-twentieth century housing now predominating south-east of the undistinguished groups at nos 35-61 and around the entrance to Goodchild Road. No 63 and the Presentation Convent are the most striking of the older buildings. The latter, a dwelling house, designed by Joseph Morris but much extended, is set in well-wooded grounds. Neither however is a dominant feature of the road's townscape. The house and trees just south of the Murdoch Road junction however complement their surroundings in a particularly attractive way.



Denton Road and its assorted dwellings and other buildings had wholly displaced the timber yard and later sawmill by 1944, and continues to accommodate incremental change.

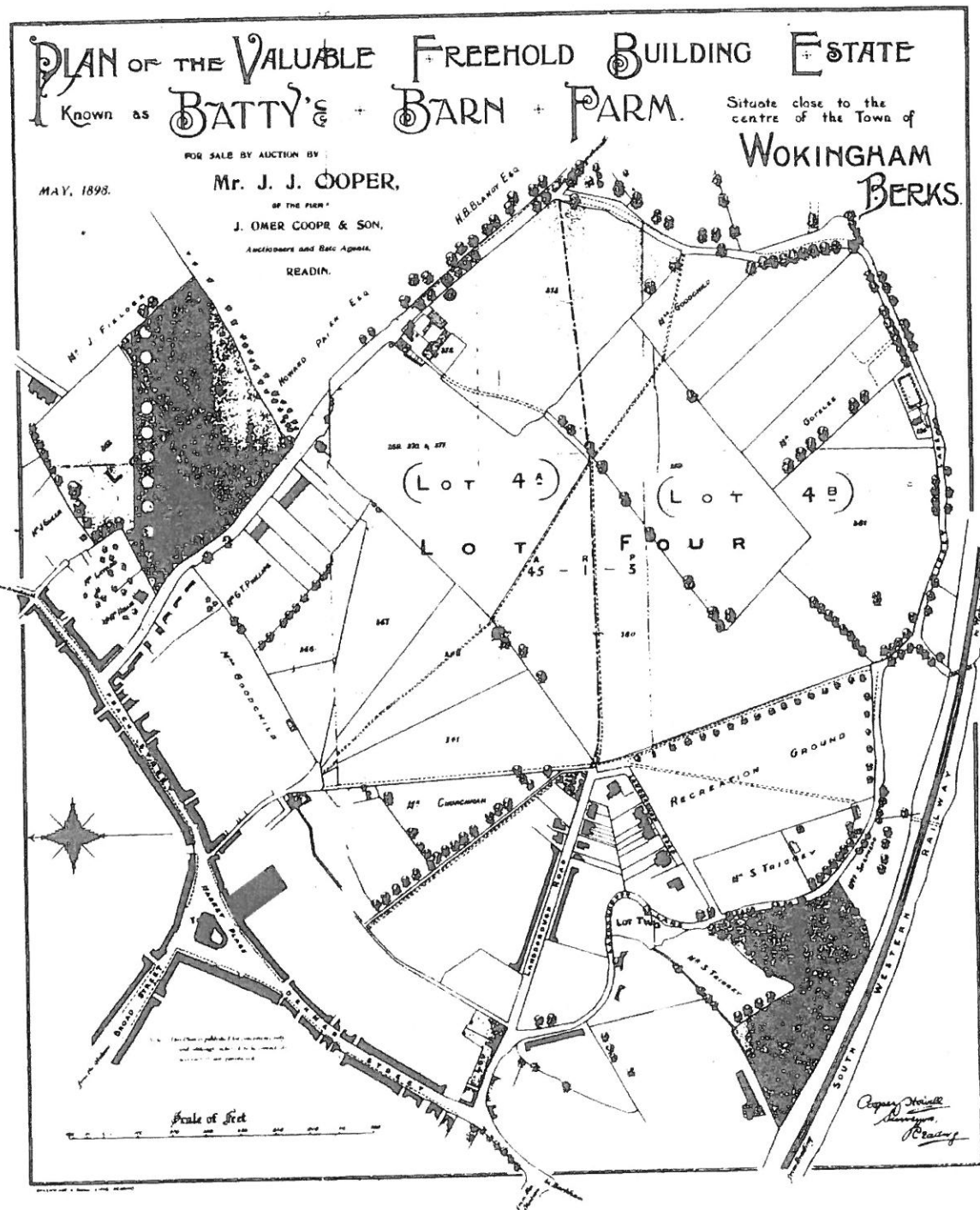
The railway line contains and defines the southern edge of the town, with much architecturally diverse suburban development in attractive gardens between it and the area acquired by the Peoples Investment Company. Though many of the post-war buildings between it and the railway are attractive it would not be right to say that the

area possesses either architectural or historic interest. Its most striking feature is the rural and informal character of Gipsy Lane itself, with the many trees near to it and elsewhere. The future of these characteristics can be amply managed by planning controls separate from conservation area considerations.

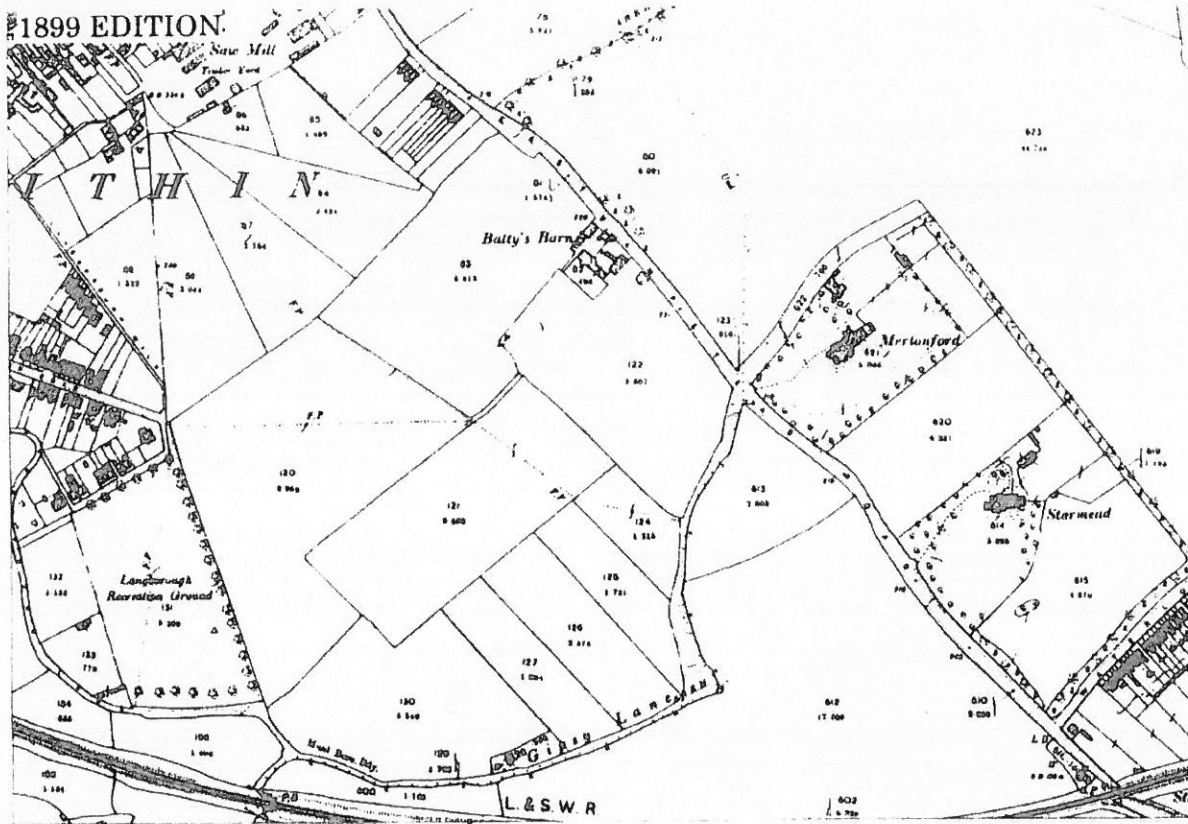
By contrast with this and the other nearby areas the development carried out by the Peoples Investment Company had a more distinctive character, making it worthy of appraisal as a potential conservation area. This, and the clear boundary line provided by Luckley Path, has led to the appraisal concentrating on the reasons for that contrast and seeking to identify specific aspects of the Company's promotion and management of their development which made it special.



Langborough Recreation Ground circa 1904



The auction plan of 1898



1899 OS showing town beginning to spread

3 Prevailing uses and the influences which are behind its layout and building types

The area was developed for residential use, and largely remains in use as family dwellings and apartments. Some of the buildings are care homes for different categories of people, there is a dental surgery, and Corpus Christi Church now interrupts the sequence of Sturges Road houses. A hall at the town end of Sturges Road is today used by the Salvation Army.

The genesis and initial evolution of the area owes much to a remarkable individual, Joseph Morris, and his family.

Joseph was born in 1836 and by 1858 was in practice as an architect whose first significant project (a small church in Highmoor, Oxfordshire) was under construction. On 1 January 1872 he was appointed County Surveyor of Bridges and Buildings for Berkshire. He had been articled to the previous Surveyor for East Berkshire, and he continued in the post for over 30 years.

This did not preclude, indeed may have required, his continuing in practice, and in 1875 he formed a partnership with Spencer Slingsby Stallwood, a High Churchman who was the Oxford Diocesan Surveyor of Ecclesiastical Dilapidations.

Their work included a very chaste classical design for new wings at the Royal Berkshire Hospital in Reading but he was equally adept at Victorian Gothic, employing exuberant forms and the inventive and liberal use of decoration.

The partnership was dissolved in 1886 not long after Joseph Morris had become involved in the Agapemone Church, a radical change in his religious convictions unlikely to have endeared him to the Diocesan authorities. It is recorded that in later years Smallwood would tap his head knowingly when Morris' name was mentioned.

In addition to designing public buildings (notably police stations in Bracknell, Thatcham, Wargrave and Wokingham) and supervising works to bridges and to the Assize Court he had his son Frank articled to him in 1888. Together they designed the considerable (and now listed) building erected by the Agapemone Church in Upper Clapton in 1893-96. This brought them in close contact with Walter Crane (who

designed the stained glass, executed by F S Sparrow) and other members of the Art Workers Guild.

Frank was by this time in partnership with his father. The two, and Joseph's daughter Violet who was also to become an architect in the practice, were thus closely linked to personalities at the forefront of the Arts and Crafts movement – and talented enough to absorb its influences readily as their work in the Murdoch Road area (and in Reading) was soon to show.

These influences were complemented by those flowing from Frank's cousin, Talwin Morris, who had been articled to Morris & Stallwood from 1882-85. He however had moved to Scotland where he enjoyed the company of artistic friends including Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Talwin became Art Manager for W M Blackie. His progressive work in book design has been admired, and it was he who introduced Blackie to Mackintosh, an action leading eventually to the creation of the renowned Hill House in Helensburgh. When Talwin died, in 1911, it was Mackintosh who designed his memorial.

The busy practice and his public appointment did not absorb all of Joseph Morris' energies. He with others in 1888 founded the People's Investment Company. The stated aims of the company were to

make a wide variety of investments so that losses incurred on hazardous schemes would be compensated by gains on others; what was defined at the time as an "Average Investment Company".

Purchasing and dealing in property, to be occupied preferentially by members or depositors, was the main intention. A further aim was to enable people to invest at a 3% to 4% rate of interest, which it was asserted would be a great boon to "*the thrifty among all classes*"; hence the name of the company.

Morris was very soon chairman of the Company and it is interesting to note that one of the other founders, F B Parfitt, was Chairman of Wokingham Borough's Drainage, Streets and New Buildings Committee when the Batty's Barn Farm area was being developed.

Violet was some seven years younger than Frank, being born in 1878, and was at least equally enthusiastic about practising architecture. It is unclear whether she was articled to Morris & Son, but by the turn of the century she was active and able as the houses in Murdoch and Sturges Roads attributed to her demonstrate. She has even been credited with the more substantial task of designing Wokingham Police Station, which was opened in 1905 – the year when

her father's declining health led him to resign as County Surveyor (at the age of 69).

The People's Investment Company had quickly busied itself with proposals for the roads necessary to serve the development of their land, concentrating their energies on backland which could be developed with private streets. Their application to the Borough Council to "construct and open up" Murdoch Road and Sturges Road was granted on 1 December 1898. These two roads largely followed existing public footways, and to the modest extent that the paths were to be closed up or diverted the Council accepted that the public interest would benefit.

In May the following year the Company's proposed construction of Crescent Road was approved and the Ordnance Survey soon showed the first two houses of their project erected on the south side of Sturges Road.

Why a straight street should have been called Crescent Road is a conundrum, but the derivation of the other two names is known. In 1898 Canon Edward Sturges received a presentation to mark his 25 years as Rector of All Saints Church, and it was Charles Townsend Murdoch who conducted the ceremony. The latter was MP for Reading, so perpetuation of their names may have

been thought to add 'tone' to the development.

When the Company divided their estate into 104 lots their management approach included two features which have proved important to the character and appearance of the area. The lots were subject to a covenant requiring either the erection of a single dwelling of value no less than £300 or a pair of dwellings of total value at least £500. Thus the Company promoted both quality and variety, and secured a more socially inclusive development than was often the case at the latter end of the twentieth century.

The further significant requirement was that the plots be enclosed by fences at least 5ft high at the rear and 3ft 6ins high at the front – a measure whose influence on the appearance of the area still persists.

The Morris family's designs (listed on page 11) are concentrated on the south side of Murdoch Road, that part of the estate furthest from the market place, with views over the then open countryside. These houses would have been for what might be described as "the carriage trade", and were wholly the creation of the Morris practice. The less privileged members of society were accommodated in a progressively denser

pattern of development, closer to the town centre.

Five surviving houses on the north side of Murdoch Road are also attributed to the Morrises, as are three in Sturges Road and the Convent in Easthampstead Road. Others erecting houses within the Company's estate generally sought, albeit with varying degrees of success, to draw on the fashionable architect-designed buildings. And it is reasonable to assume that as was usual with estate developments designs by others would have had to be approved by The People's Investment Company, whose chairman would not have been likely to accept designs falling far short of his aspirations or tending to devalue the project.

After his departure to the west country, followed by Violet, the momentum of the Company may have declined. In 1914 it entered into voluntary liquidation and by 1922 all its assets had been disposed of.





1912 OS in effect showing the extent of development achieved under the Company's direct management

4 Archaeological significance of the area

The old centre of the town is designated a site of archaeological interest, its boundary running along the rear boundaries of the former houses and gardens lining Rose Street, Market Place and Denmark Street. The town centre is also designated a conservation area, its boundary enclosing a slightly more extensive area south-east of those streets, much of the Victorian

development in Langborough Road, and a few buildings in Easthampstead Road including an Arts and Crafts influenced church hall. This (and the adjoining caretaker's dwelling) was designed by Joseph Morris' practice.

No archaeological significance of any part of Langborough Field has been identified, though it is believed a windmill was built in the vicinity circa 1662, and demolished in the 1770s.

Designs attributed to the Morris family

Joseph Morris (1836-1913) or Morris and Company

- **Easthampstead Road**

"Oehilton", now the Convent and much extended

- **Murdoch Road**

1 (1905) Considerably extended as a care home

5 (1905) A building of strong character which less radical extensions have respected

7, 8 and 11 (1906) Robust designs, with no.11 possibly by Violet

13 (1909) Extended without harm to essential character

17 (1906) ditto (albeit marred by new fenestration)

21 (1903) Extended without harm to essential character

25 (1901) and

27 (1906) Substantially extended with some loss of finesse

- **Sturges Road**

56 and 58 (1903 and 1904) A rich effect achieved by the use of clever yet uncomplicated brickwork details

- **Crescent Road**

18 An extended house whose original form and detail are obscured

Frank Morris (1871 - 1908)

23 Murdoch Road (1900) An initially modest building which has been altered and extended

7 South Drive (1909) A confident and ebullient work of considerable distinction

Violet Morris (1878 - 1958)

- **Murdoch Road**

4 A building of some visual delight in a setting more restricted than when it was built

22 Though altered the progressive design remains reminiscent of C F A Voysey or H Baillie Scott

30 (1899) An ebullient design showing confident handling of ornament, modelling and detail

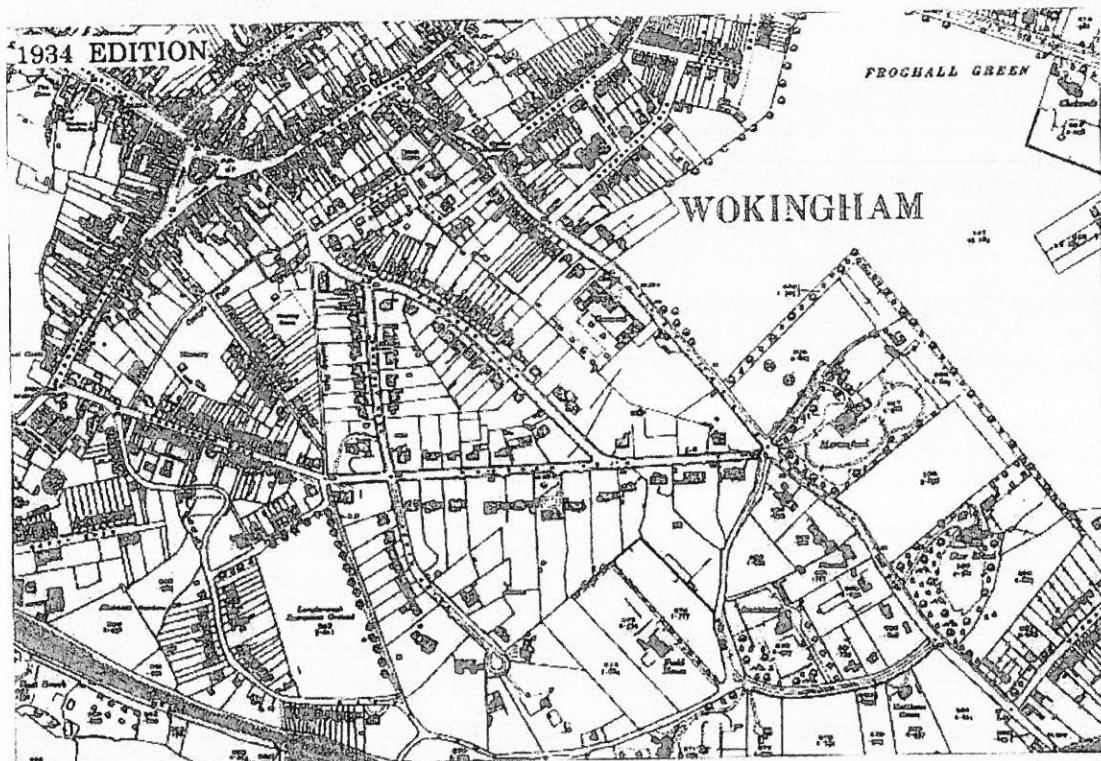
9 (1902) A more restrained design with less successful extensions

15 (1901) Of equal quality, but more respectfully altered

19 (1906) ditto

- **Sturges Road**

68 (1900) Quite conventional but confident and enlivened by innovative detailing of the chimney brickwork.



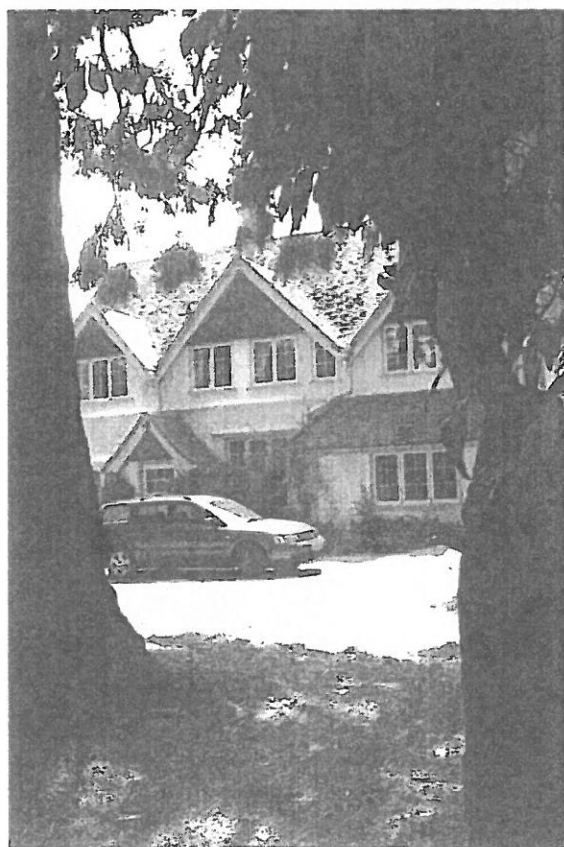
1934 OS showing the completed estate before the subdivision of plots began



Recent aerial view showing the importance of trees within the former estate

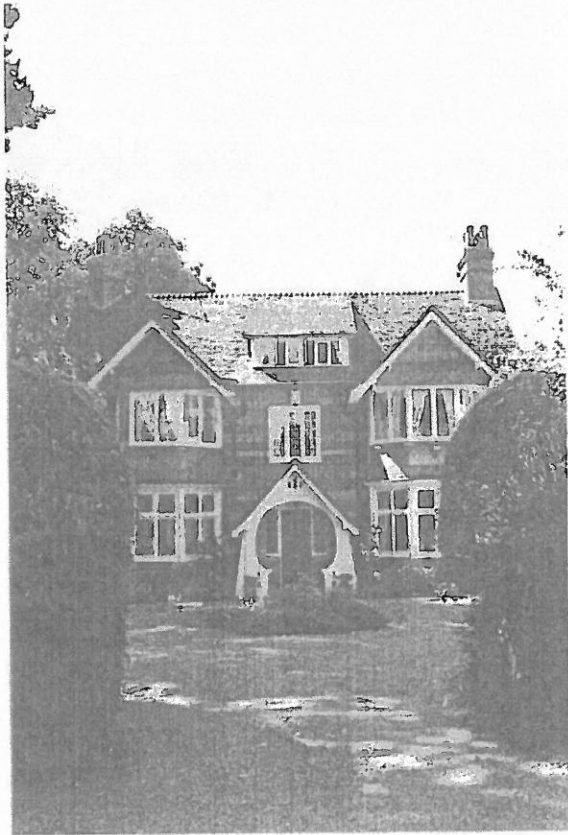
5 *The architectural qualities of the buildings*

The buildings with the greatest architectural quality are concentrated on the south side of Murdoch Road, and were built in a creative burst of less than a decade. These were all (with the exception of no 1A South Drive) Morris family designs, some being designs of especial integrity.



Same house circa 1917

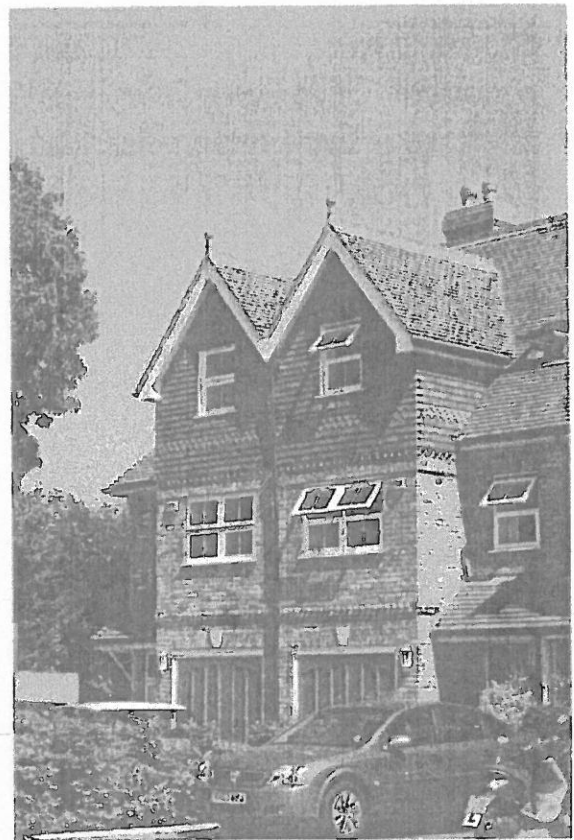




Prominent among these are no 7 South Drive (possibly by Frank Morris though built after his death), and nos 30 and 22 Murdoch Road – very different designs which if both correctly attributed to Violet Morris demonstrate her versatility. The confident handling of the modelling and detailing of no 7 South Drive is particularly striking. It contrasts with the less imaginative design of no 23 Murdock Road, also attributed to Frank Morris but built eight years before.



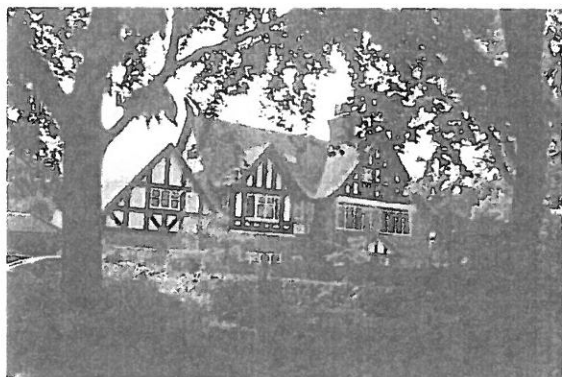
With the passage of time further dwellings were erected within some of the original gardens, and some properties were redeveloped. Initially designers saw little need to respect the prevalent character of the locality, and even the recent attempts to do so have achieved varying degrees of success.



6 *The contribution made by key unlisted buildings*



The architectural practice headed by Joseph Morris was of local note in Berkshire, and the surviving houses for which the practice was responsible make a positive impact on the architectural and historic qualities of the area. The significance of their work was compounded by Violet Morris having been one of the first women to become a chartered architect.



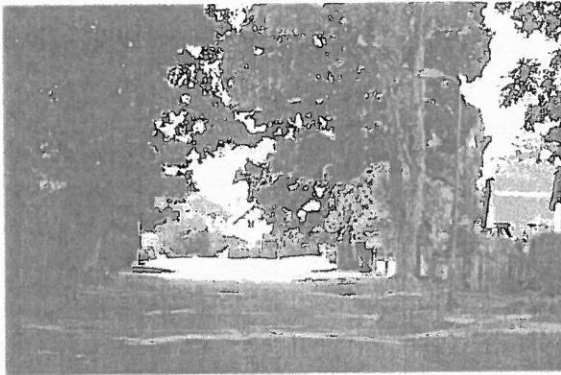
As is usual with dwelling houses these buildings have been changed and extended in varying degrees, not always with as much attention to their distinctive character as architectural historians might wish. But in most instances the original integrity and quality remains apparent.

This is especially so in the case of the house at no 7 South Drive. The bold and innovative handling of forms and detail reflects important aspects of social and cultural changes at the beginning of the twentieth century. The integrity of the design, in this writer's judgement, merits requesting the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to consider listing the building.

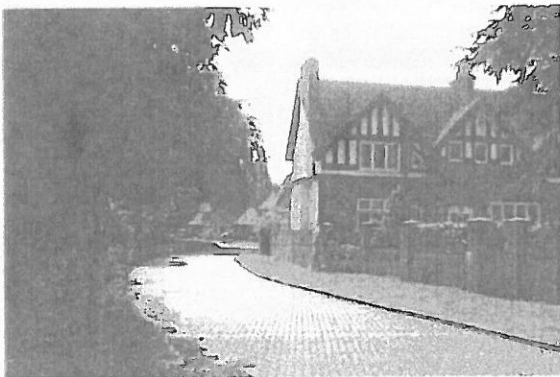
The high quality of the architectural design, decoration and craftsmanship remains obvious at other houses. Though altered the artistic interest of no 5 Murdoch Road, and of nos 11, 21 and 30, has not been destroyed. They too should be considered for listing.

7 *Spaces within the area*

The public highways are the spaces from which the character of the area is best appreciated. Murdoch Road is the grandest, a long straight carriageway offering views into and out of the area. The traffic flows along it compromise its residential character, as the demand for on-street parking is tending to do in Crescent Road and the town end of Sturges Road. South Drive, a private road, has an altogether different character.



The curve, the roadside trees, the generally unkerbed grass verges and the shrubbed "circle" at the end combine to create a picturesque and rustic character. The more formal design approach adopted for the new carriageway created at Purslane is less in harmony with the local ambiance.



The curve in Sturges Road, and its T-junction with Murdoch Road, ensures a pleasant perception of enclosure; and amplifies the impact of ornamental features of the houses on the outside of the curve. Though the same width, Crescent Road perhaps appears a little wider than Sturges Road, a consequence of its more regular layout.

Looking south down Crescent Road and South Drive, and east along Murdoch Road, the views are terminated by large trees. Other views out of the area are less notable, the view from Sturges Road of the richly modelled town hall roof being spoiled by poor quality townscape in the foreground. This calls for some imaginative development to enhance the urban fabric.

The view westwards out of Murdoch Road is through a utilitarian traffic calming feature.



If a similarly effective measure including some vegetation could be incorporated with

the planned improvement of the junction with Howard Road the streetscape would be enhanced. So it could be by redesign of the wide footway, incorporating a street tree, where Sturges Road joins Murdoch Road. At present the appearance of the road at these points compares unfavourably with the leafy green gateway to the area existing at its east end.

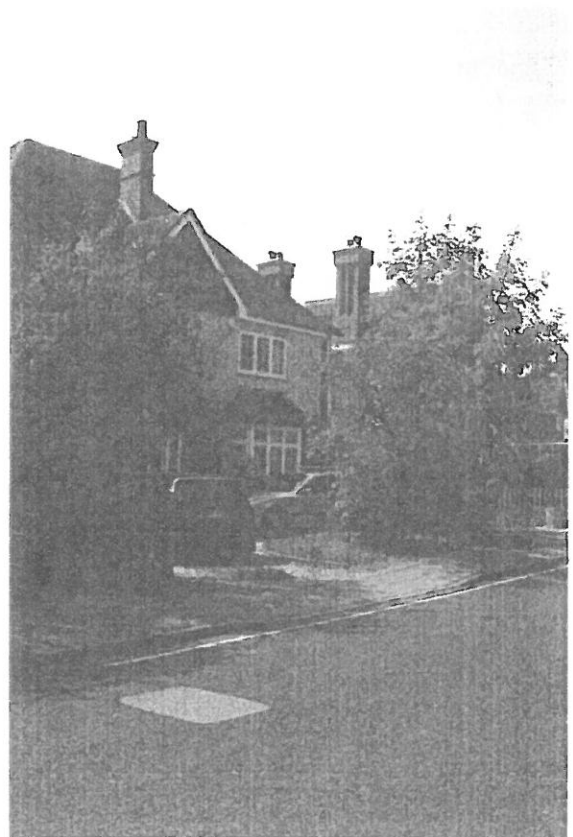


There are few if any public points from which rear gardens constitute a significant element of the townscape, but the front gardens are very important, more so than in many parts of the town. Their detailed treatment can make a significant contribution to the character and appearance of the area. Fences remain a key constituent of the local scene, as would have been the case a hundred years ago. Now there are also hedges and some walls, and more often than

not the gateways are open creating an attractive informal relationship between public street and private space. Many of the properties have vehicular areas surfaced



with gravel or hoggin, which is visually less assertive than the few instances of block paviers and of tarmac.

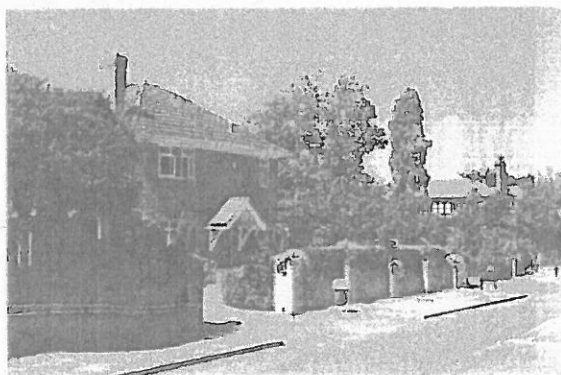




The openness of the parking areas at Corpus Christi Church and at the new houses on the site of no 4 Crescent Road detracts from the local scene – further planting or fences would be an enhancement.



Some inappropriately elaborate electronically operated metal gates hung on brick piers have been introduced in recent years, also detracting from the characteristics noted above. The previous preference for five-bar timber gates or the like produced for those who wished it a more sympathetic means of enclosing a forecourt.



8 *Prevalent building materials, textures and colours*

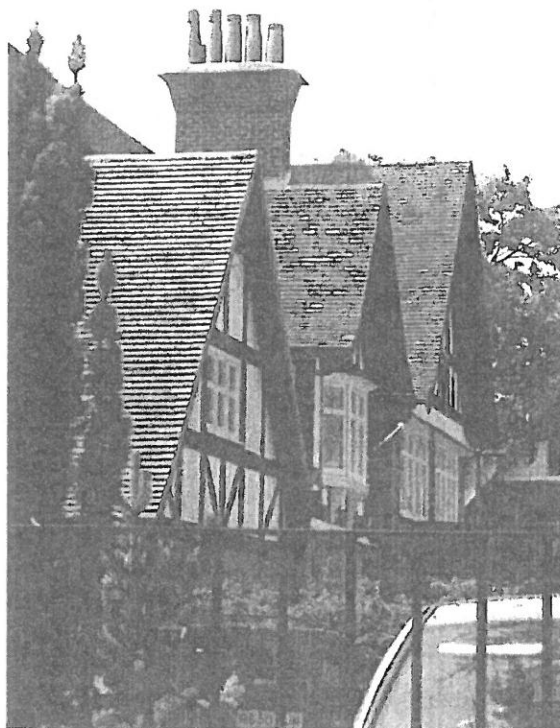
When built most of the houses in the area were roofed with locally made red plain clay tiles. This generally remains the case, with the tiles now mellowed to a darker brownish red. There are also some slated roofs and a few instances of incongruous concrete tiles.



Red brickwork and tile hanging, and roughcast colour-washed/white rendering, are the dominant walling materials. Visual interest in the brickwork is ensured in a variety of ways, using corbelled details, banding and panels of contrasting grey-blue brick, some instances of stone details, and projecting string courses. This is typical Arts and Crafts of the period, but not found

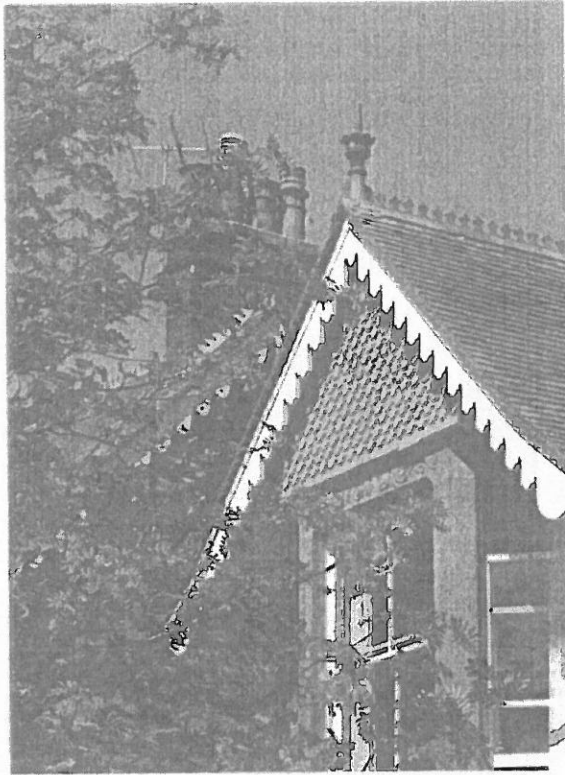
readily or so consistently elsewhere in Wokingham.

The string courses are variously used as relief on walls wholly of brick and as the delineation between ground floor brickwork and rendered areas above. Rendering also sometimes appears in gables alone, and within decorative half-timbering patterns.

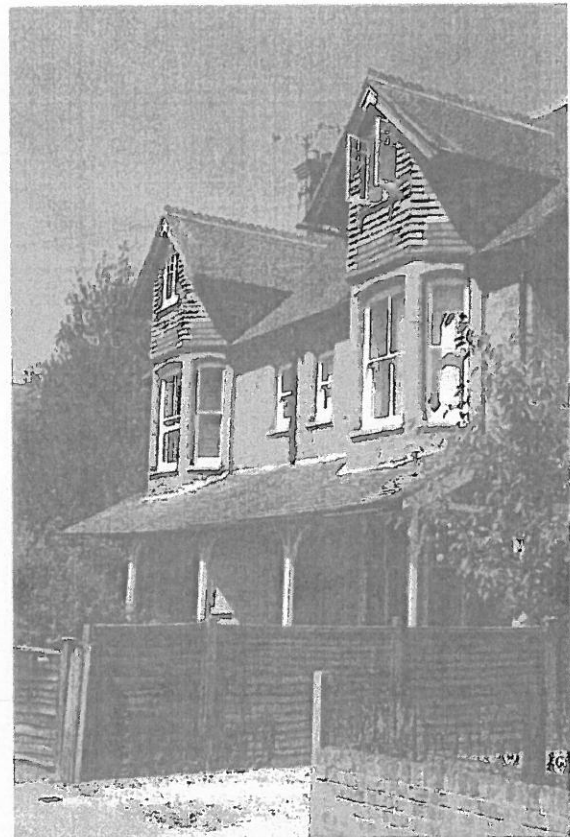
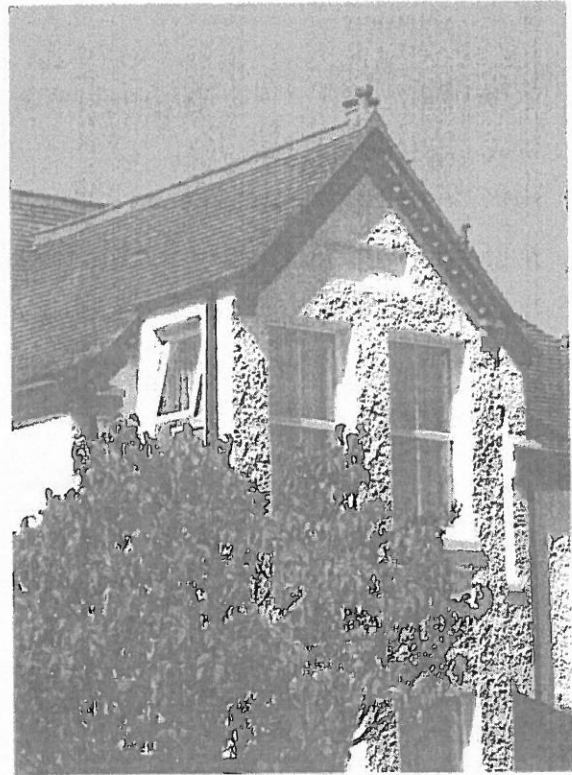


The half-timbering is almost always black, as are some of the barge and fascia boards. Where ornamental barge boards are employed, to best effect in Sturges Road, they are painted white as are almost all the joinery windows.

There is a rich diversity of window patterns, with sashes and casements (sometimes on the same building), some leaded lights, and instances of multi-pane upper sashes over single pane lower ones.



A large number of windows have been replaced with uPVC frames, no doubt in the belief that they will be “maintenance free”, though as English Heritage has pointed out there is as yet no evidence that they will last as long as carefully detailed and regularly decorated timber. Those which have unconventional opening mechanisms have a particularly unfortunate impact upon the character of the buildings.



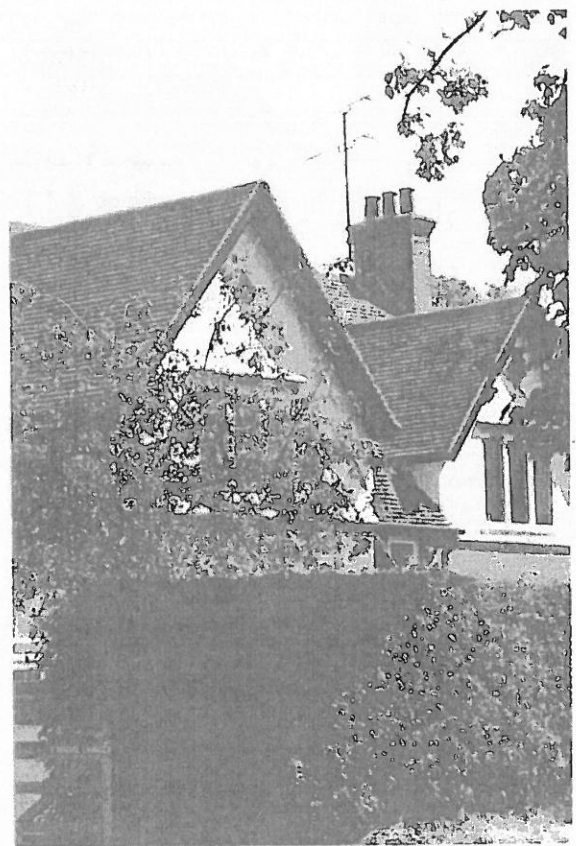
9 *Local details*

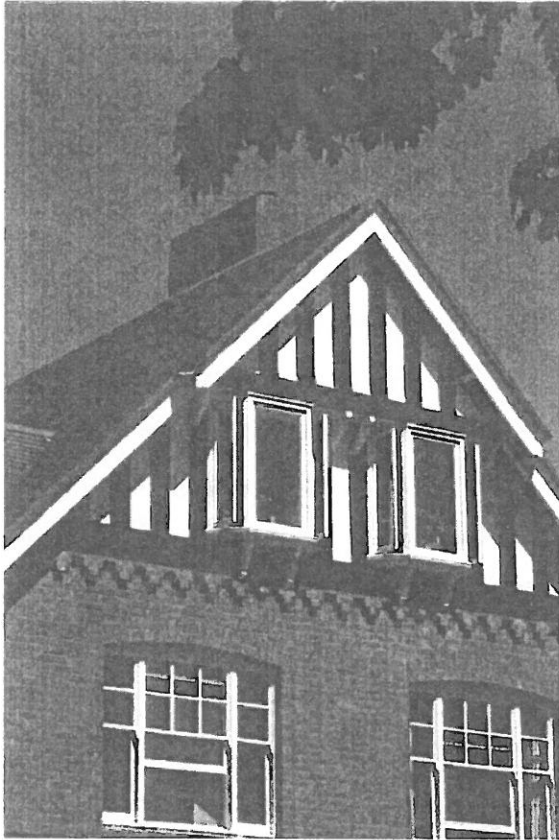
The use of timber brackets, in some instances where they are not functionally necessary, is a noticeable feature of the area. So too are bay windows (both square and canted), with a few eye-catching instances of small triangular bays adding richness to the modelling of a façade.





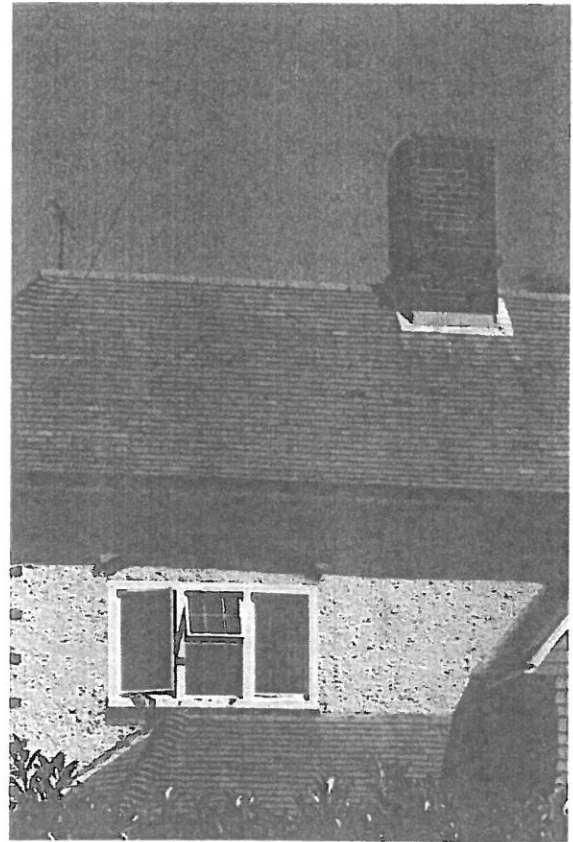
Gables of different sizes, often on the same building and sometimes set back to different degrees, are used to good effect to create a rich skyline. In a few instances, for example no 30 Murdoch Road, the top part of a gable projects beyond the lower part, a visually enriching device also seen in the Morris family's work in Reading. Generous overhanging eaves add to the character of many of the buildings.





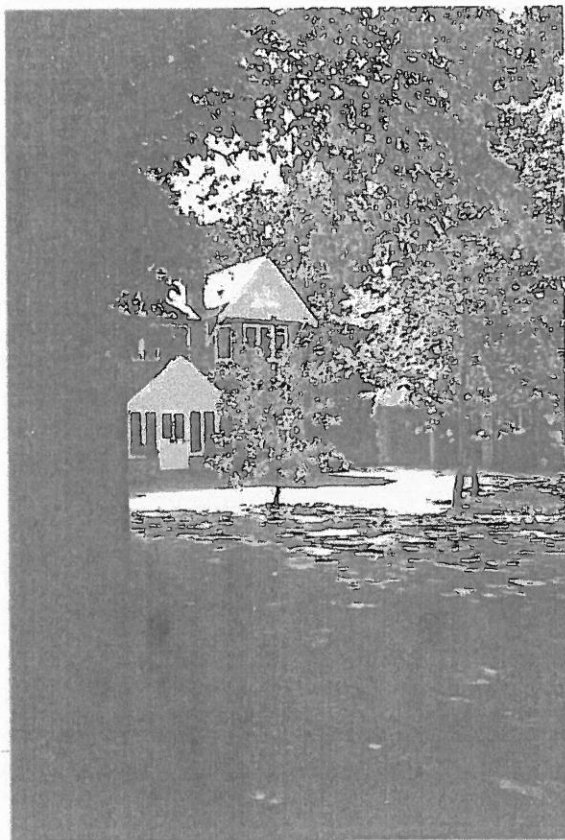
Wide spreading chimney caps and the occasional, almost playful, use of chimneys set diagonally have generally survived throughout the area.

Street lighting in the area is provided by modest-scale and slightly old-fashioned lamp posts, wholly suited to the streetscape. The telegraph poles, now largely tidied away from urban areas, do not seem out of place here. Two familiar red pillar boxes (one of Edward VII vintage) are more in keeping than some modern street signs.



10 *The role of trees and shrubs*

Murdoch Road has a leafy character which owes more to the numerous mature trees in the gardens (and on the roadside at the junction with Gipsy Lane) than to the hedges. This also applies to South Drive, but to a lesser extent in Sturges and Crescent Roads where the most important trees are in the garden of the corner property where they join (and at the other end of Sturges Road). Hedgerows and shrubs play a greater part in these two roads, and though in places off-street provision for motor cars must have displaced vegetation the leafiness suggestive of a garden suburb has survived.

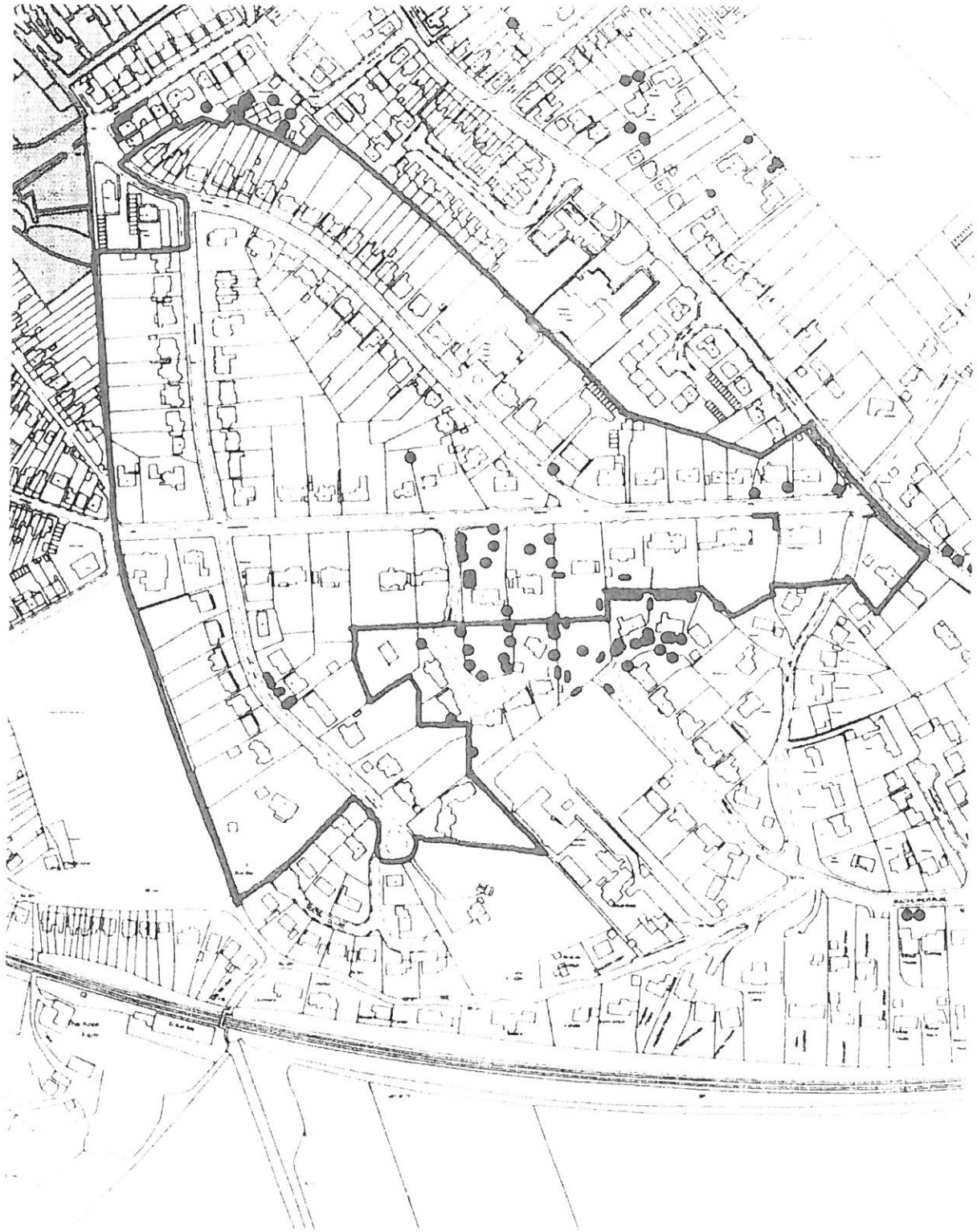


There are trees in the area which are subject to preservation orders made when prompted by development proposals rather than following an overall evaluation. These are indicated on the map opposite.

Among the other most important trees are the majestic conifers in front of nos 5 and 7 Murdoch Road and the three deciduous trees close to the west boundary of no 7. The conifer and copper beech in front of no 13 Murdoch Road are also impressive mature specimens.

Recent tree planting in that garden is an investment in the future character of the area which should be encouraged elsewhere.

Nos 16 and 18 Murdoch Road have smaller but important trees in their gardens and one at no 22 is a key feature at the road junction. The clump of protected trees east of no 25 may soon need selective thinning if any are to achieve their full potential. The protected tree growing outside the boundary of no 32 Murdoch Road, complemented by others in Gipsy Lane, and the small grass areas at the road junction there, form a pleasant green gateway to the area, albeit one accommodating a lot of street furniture at present.



*The area today, showing in dark tone the Town Centre Conservation Area and,
by large dots, trees subject to preservation orders*

scale 1:5000



Apart from those in the garden of no 2 Crescent Road none of the small trees there and in Sturges Road is of greater importance than any other – what matters is variety and continuous replacement as they age or become too big for their location. One garden is too small for the conifers on its front boundary, where a species with a lighter foliage would be much more effective as a townscape feature.



Sturges Road circa 1911

CONCLUSION

The Government has drawn attention to the importance of conservation areas being seen to justify their status and that the concept is not to be devalued by the designation of areas lacking any special interest. English Heritage's view is that only areas which are demonstrably of special architectural or historic interest in the local or regional context should be designated.

When evaluated against this advice it can be seen that the Murdoch Road area is of special historic interest as a planned development largely inspired by a former County Surveyor. Though increasingly coming under pressure for change the character of that scheme remains clear despite the vicissitudes undergone in the past century, and the buildings introduced in and adjoining the area recently.

The prevalent architectural quality of the buildings is more distinctive than that of most others in the surrounding areas. There is a consistency of period and style which has generally survived the changes made by succeeding owners in response to new aspirations and requirements.

The designers of the most striking buildings are known, and include one of the first women chartered architects in the country.

In the writer's judgement the properties within the bold line on the map at page 27 constitute an area of special architectural or historic interest the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance.

The recommendation therefore is that it should be designated a conservation area.

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12 September 2003

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