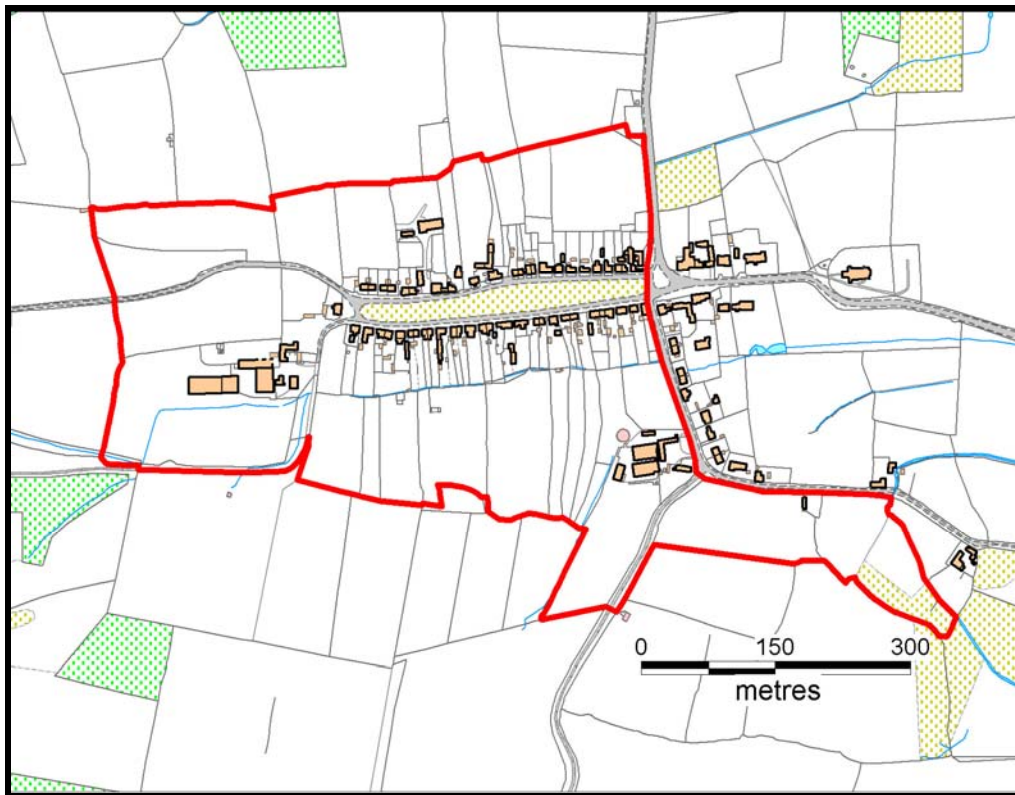


East Witton, Wensleydale – Conservation Area Character Appraisal

Designated – 27 November 2001



© Crown copyright, Yorkshire Dales NPA, Licence No. 100023740 2007

1.0 Introduction

This character appraisal has been prepared as part of the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority's Conservation Area Strategy. It was prepared in collaboration with the local community at an initial Conservation Area Workshop meeting with residents held in the village on 21st February 2001 and a second meeting on 11 July 2001 held to agree the content of the appraisal.

2.0 The Location & Setting of the Village

East Witton is located on a wide shelf of reasonably flat ground approximately 40 metres above the widening valley and flood plain associated with the confluence of the Rivers Ure and Cover, 1 kilometre to the north. A short way to the south of the village, the terrain begins to steepen considerably as it rises up Witton Banks to the tree lined brow of Witton Fell, which sits some 220 metres above the village at a distance of 1.2 kilometres to the south west.

This topographical setting allows for a series of attractive, slightly elevated views out from the village over a mainly pastoral landscape to the north, while the hills and woodland to the south offers a memorable and distinctive backcloth to the settlement form.

The busy A6108 road from Masham and Ripon skirts the eastern edge of the village on its way to Middleham, approximately 2.5 kilometres to the north west, and the market town of Leyburn, 5.5 kilometres to the north west. The Yorkshire Dales National Park boundary also

passes through the eastern edge of the village and the part of the settlement immediately east of this line is excluded from the National Park. This small area outside the National Park was designated as a conservation area by Richmondshire District Council in 1995.

3.0 The Geological & Geomorphologic Context

Geology and glacial activity have had a significant impact on the landform of the area and this makes a fundamental contribution to the character and appearance of the settlement not only because of the way this affects the setting of the village but also because the local geology contributes to a more or less unified range of building materials.

The local rocks all date to the Upper Carboniferous period and consist entirely of sandstones, mudstones, limestones and gritstones from the Namurian rocks of the millstone grit facies which are known collectively as the Askrigg Block. All these rocks are present around East Witton. The village itself is located on an exposed limestone shelf, part of what geologists call the Pendleian system while to the south, Witton Fell consists of a sequence of sand and gritstones formed as part of the Arnsbergian system.

The area has also been subject to extensive glaciation and to the north the gentle slope down to Cover Bridge consists of drift deposits of boulder clay and glacial till merging into river terraces associated with the course of the River Ure. The narrow, shallow valleys immediately to the north and south east of the village were formed as glacial melt water channels.

In terms of economic geology the area to the north possesses tills and alluvium of moderate quality, which provide decent soils for agricultural needs. The flanks of Witton Fell have been and continue to be quarried on a small scale basis for construction sandstone and quality free stone for carving. Coal from the 1m thick Woogill seam outcrops in the area and was worked from short adits in Coverdale in earlier centuries but workings near to East Witton are not known. No economically workable lead veins are recorded in this area as they are in parts of Wensleydale and Swaledale although flourite ore occurs at Braithwaite Mine a short way to the west.

4.0 The Historic Origins & Development of the Village

Nearby place name and earthwork evidence suggests that the area was settled by Pre-historic, Anglian and Danish peoples. The place name 'Witton' or 'Wutton' probably means the '*farm in the wood*' and is almost certainly Saxon in origin and this might well indicate that a settlement was yet to be established here before the time of the Norman Conquest.

However, deliberately planned village layouts, such as East Witton, where houses are laid out around a large, formal village green, are sometimes found to have been associated with the resettlement of the Pennine uplands following the Norman 'Harrying of the North' in the 1070's. This could have been the case at East Witton for it is known that the village originally possessed a Twelfth Century 'Norman' church which records show pre dated the establishment of Jervaulx Abbey in 1145-50. This church, recorded in a papal letter of 1291 as 'St Elisius in Wutton' was, however, located away from today's village at Low Thorpe, 600 metres to the south east. It was demolished in 1809. It is quite possible that this Norman church was the focus for an original settlement in the late 11th or early 12th century.

It is far more probable that the planned layout of today's village results from a deliberate attempt by the monks of nearby Jervaulx Abbey to establish a market and cattle fair on their land in the form of a large 'market green', a charter for which was finally granted in 1307. This may well have led to the slow depopulation of the settled area around Low Thorpe

during the mediaeval period although, because of the church site, it was never completely abandoned and a scatter of houses still survives there today.

Despite the support of Jervaulx Abbey, East Witton faced stiff competition as a market town from the establishment of a market at nearby Middleham in 1389. The siting of this later market, within the shadow and security of the medieval castle, may have inhibited the growth of East Witton as a viable town during the medieval period, although its market certainly continued in some form until at least 1563, when a severe outbreak of plague is recorded in the village, which led to the market's removal to nearby Ulshaw Bridge.

Although the impression formed from the main road junction is that the green forms a cul-de-sac headed by Town End Farm in fact Braithwaite Lane branches out from the north west corner and follows the line of an ancient route connecting Jervaulx Abbey with Coverham Abbey to the west.

Jervaulx Abbey undoubtedly had a significant influence on the village's historic development and the monks are known to have been operating a fulling mill and corn mill at East Witton at the time of the dissolution. These strong links were maintained following the award of the monastic estate by King James 1 to Edward Bruce in 1603. Bruce was a forbear of the Earl of Ailesbury whose family continued to own the majority of the land and buildings in and around the village until well into the Twentieth Century.

A map prepared in 1627 by William Senior reveals that the form of the main part of the village has survived almost unchanged to the present day. However, almost all of the houses around the green were demolished and rebuilt, in almost exactly their same positions, by the Earl of Ailesbury, during the period 1795 and 1820. A number of houses at the head of the green were replaced by Town End Farm and some of the routes leading out of the village were probably modified at that time.

The village has been subject to hardly any 20th century development and, as a result of the continuing influence of the Jervaulx Estate and the generally sound management of residents, there has been very little harmful impact made on the 19th century cottages during the modern period.

5.0 The Architectural & Historical Interest of the Village's Buildings and other Structures

East Witton is practically unique in the Yorkshire Dales for having a planned village that was almost entirely rebuilt by a single landowner over a relatively short period of time. This action was significant not only as a great philanthropic gesture on the part of the Earl of Ailesbury, for the new cottages would have incorporated what was then the latest in modern layout and functional utility, but also for the creative attention to detail which was brought to the buildings in the new village and which resulted in a settlement of great architectural merit and tremendous visual character. Thus, while the village was conceived as a harmonious whole, with each cottage being similar in materials, form and scale, each was designed to differ from the majority of its neighbours in subtle and modest details. This has created a village with a very unique appearance that is further enhanced by being based upon the historic planned arrangement of the earlier settlement form.

Those houses that are located around the green consist mainly of detached and paired cottages, predominantly of two storeys but generally quite low in form. Almost all of the houses were originally a single unit deep, although a sizeable number now have lean-to extensions on their rear elevations. The majority have balanced or symmetrical elevations and doors are mostly placed centrally or towards the gable ends where they often flank symmetrical groups of windows. All of the cottages facing the green have chimneys located on the ridgeline, usually at one or both gable ends, but occasionally in the centre of the

roof. Where original chimney stacks survive, these are mainly constructed of good quality ashlar stone with water tabling courses, although some chimneys have been rebuilt, or inserted in the mid 20th century using reconstituted stone.

Almost all of the cottages around the green have front elevations constructed from superior quality light orange/brown coloured local sandstone or grit stone, cut square and laid to regular courses. The ends of the buildings are usually less conspicuous publicly and here more random stonework is often utilised. There is evidence, principally on houses on the south side of the green, of which Number 10 is the best surviving example, to suggest that these walls may have once had thin surface coats of uneven render applied to give additional weather protection. While a few buildings have some roughly squared limestone incorporated into a more random stone mix, only one house, Number 41 on the north side of the green, is entirely constructed from limestone rubble and even this house has sandstone door and window surrounds. Quoins are either stressed or unstressed with little regular pattern being discernible. Many of the cottages have large cut stone lintels and sills, often finished with pecked tooling and occasionally in a herringbone pattern. Good examples include Numbers 23/24, 39/40, and number 42. Stone water tabling to the verges and shaped stone kneelers also feature on approx. one third of properties. It is suspected that almost all of the cottages were originally constructed with roofs of locally quarried grey/brown stone slates laid in diminishing courses. Although these still survive on the majority of cottages, welsh blue and purple/blue true slates have been used during the re-roofing of almost a quarter of the cottages during the 19th and 20th centuries. A small number of houses now have roofs covered with dark coloured artificial tiles.

Cottages Nos. 10 and 42 are well preserved examples of the Earl's original work. No. 10 has a stone slate roof over coursed rubble stonework, with end stacks, well-tooled ashlar lintels to windows and door surrounds. The ground floor windows consist of a 16 paned sash window alongside a 20th century segmental bow window of 16 panes, while above, a pair of original 16 pane Yorkshire sliding sash windows still survive. No. 42 also has heavily tooled lintels together with ashlar quoins, a central doorway and Yorkshire sliding sashes. In the right hand gable is a chamfered window surround from the 18th century and this suggests that the cottage may have been subject to a refronting during the 19th century rather than a complete rebuilding.

Of slightly later date No. 23 has thick, square section, hood moulds with plain returns, large gutter brackets, 16 pained sash windows and a somewhat ill proportioned pedimented canopy to the front door. Its roof is of welsh slates, while the front elevation possesses a 20th century pebbledash finish. No. 48 is a similar structure but with an unrendered frontage consisting of good quality sandstone blocks. Both buildings are of architectural interest.

More atypical are the two farmhouses that now face the green. Town End Farm, now the only building situated along the narrow west end of the green, has stressed quoins, 16 pane sash windows, and a later welsh slate roof. Grange Farmhouse is a taller, more handsome building, with a central six panel door under an overlight, an ashlar surround with parallel tooling, while on the ground and first floors 20 pane, unequally hung sash windows are provided. Above these is a half storey attic containing a pair of blind openings painted to match. A smaller service wing has been added to the east end. Both buildings are Listed Grade II.

Nos. 35/36 and No. 37 are more unusual in form. The former are a pair of symmetrical, two storey cottages of distinctly horizontal emphasis. Built in different phases the design of these buildings result from alterations to an earlier building, rather than any substantial early 19th century rebuilding. The front incorporates openings of various periods and some unusual scoring is visible in the stonework of Number 36. No. 37 is the only single storey

cottage facing the green. It apparently once had two doorways and part of the building may have been used as a bakery, or forge. These two structures distinguish themselves from their neighbours and add richness to the character of the village.

Two more public buildings also face onto the green. No.13 forms the middle of a three-unit terrace. Once the village reading room and later used for billiards it retains a six-panel door together with a timber door case with decorative dentils and scrolled brackets in its asymmetrical frontage. On the north side of the green, the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel of 1882 has a blue slate roof, sandstone finials, rusticated ashlar stonework and quoins together with wide lancet windows. A steep roof form and stone porch together with the wrought iron gate and railings distinguish the building from its more vernacular inspired neighbours. Both buildings make a positive contribution to the special interest of the settlement.

At the northern entrance to the village, is the Grade II listed Old Holly Tree, a former Coaching Inn now set back from the main road behind an open grassy area but once directly fronting the old road into the village from the north. It appears to possess a much-altered late 17th century 'T' shaped plan, a stone slate roof with an unusual low gabled central roof flanked by thin, laterally placed, chimney stacks and traditional roughcast walls.

The houses situated on the lane to Lowthorpe offer a different character and appearance. The largely undistinguished row of mainly modern houses and bungalows along the east side of the lane are outside of the Yorkshire Dales National Park boundary, but the farm group at Lowthorpe Farm provides the key visual focus in this area. The attractive farm yard complex is dominated by roofs covered in orange pantiles, a material more often associated with the vernacular tradition of the Vale of York which finds its western extremity in the area of East Witton. The Grade II listed farm-house itself is constructed of two, one bay builds, the right hand part being earlier, the present form probably resulting from an early 19th century remodelling. To the north west, a handsome large rubble stone barn with ashlar quoins and segmental arched threshing doorway is dated by a plaque to 1891. The farm group is partly surrounded by more modern farm buildings but because of their horizontal emphasis and discrete placement these do not cause undue harm to its pleasant location amongst small enclosed fields.

Tilsey Folly is a field barn 500m to the south of the village that incorporates Gothic quatrefoils and other decorative features that may well have been brought from Jervaulx Abbey. Because of Foot and Mouth disease restrictions, access to inspect the appearance and condition of this important building was not possible during the fieldwork carried out for this appraisal. Other farm buildings and outbuildings in the village tend to be arranged laterally along the narrow tofts which run out from the rear of the houses facing the green and the more significant ranges behind Grange Farmhouse and Number 29 have a combination of functions and roofs mostly of orange pantiles and/or true slates.

With over 20% of the buildings in the village being included on the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural and Historic Interest, East Witton possesses one of the highest ratios found in the National Park. This indicates the tremendous significance of the village in architectural terms. All of the buildings which are included on the Statutory List are detailed in an Annex at the end of this character appraisal. Those buildings identified as having particular local significance and which are thought to make a positive contribution to the special character and appearance of the village are also shown on the Annex to this appraisal.

Some buildings have been subject to minor alterations to their door and window fittings and this has eroded some of the special architectural interest of the village. Numbers 15/17, 24, 29, 39/40 now possess poorly proportioned modern casement style windows; Number 41

has PVCu window fittings; and Number 53 has ungainly, modern, flat roofed bays and mock sash windows. Despite these piecemeal alterations none of the buildings have been identified as major detractors to the streetscape and even the public housing, at the north west corner of the green, are considered to be fairly neutral in terms of their impact on the special interest of the village.

6.0 The special character and Appearance of the Village and the Significance of the Public and Private Open Spaces

East Witton possesses one of the most well defined and attractive village forms in the whole of the Pennine uplands. The regularly spaced houses of similar character and scale are arranged along two sides of a gently sloping, elongated market green. Rigid formality is avoided through slight variations in the building lines – gently curving on the south side and more sinuous on the north side - which, together with the rising topography, create a deeply affecting composition. The formality of this green is further softened by the presence of attractive groups of mature and younger trees situated along the central east-west axis of the green.

The north and south sides of the green are also differentiated by the open gravel and part grassed verge along the southern side, while the greater length of the northern side is provided with white painted fencing, of various designs, enclosing small front gardens. This contrast is given further emphasis by the provision of scrubs and rose bushes in many of the gardens while ivy and other creepers are becoming a noticeable feature on houses on both sides of the green.

Trees play a major part in defining the special interest of the village. Their presence in distinct groups of mature and younger trees on the village green is of tremendous importance to the visual appearance and character of the area. All of the trees on the village green are protected by a Tree Preservation Order (TPO No 44 (East Witton) 1966). Other important groups or individual trees are visible amongst the farmland to the north and south of the village where they occur either as remnants of former field enclosures or as larger shelter clumps. Also of great significance to the special character of the village are the mature trees which line the narrowing edge of the green as it peters out towards the church. Although these are outside the National Park boundary they are still an important aspect of the vista out of the village to the east.

Trees and large shrubs also enclose many of the rear gardens to many properties, especially on the south side, and this creates enclosed spaces that are extremely private in nature. Views into these rear gardens are few but such spaces nevertheless make a highly significant contribution to the distinctive character of the village. The presence of this luxuriant vegetation helps to bring the natural quality of the surrounding farmland right up to the edge of the main built form of the village.

Also significant to the perceived character and the appearance of the village is the immediate and wider setting. The pattern of the long, narrow toft field boundaries to the north and south has been somewhat rationalised in the 20th century, but their partial survival is a particularly important aspect of the historic character of the village. These landscape features are particularly noticeable when the village is viewed from the north where an attractive narrow valley is formed beyond the gentle scarp which bounds the garths and gardens of the north row of houses. The setting of the village to the south is greatly enriched by the larch and pine fringed brow of Witton Fell and its bracken covered lower slopes, which provide an attractive and distinctive background to the settlement.

A greatly contrasting character is revealed along the lane to Low Thorpe. More open in appearance, with fields predominating, the built form is much more sporadic with the farm

group at Low Thorpe Farm providing the key visual focus. A linear group of largely undistinguished modern houses follows the eastern road edge here, but gaps between these buildings allow for occasional views towards the distinctive gothic form of the Church of St. John the Evangelist to the north east. Although outside the National Park boundary, the visual interest provided by this elegant but restrained Church, at the narrow eastern edge of the built up area, is a key component of the village's special interest. The delightful vista available from the main green was created by deliberate planning and reveals the careful attention to detail that was required in arranging building forms to create special compositional effects.

Other important viewpoints are identified on the attached character appraisal map that accompanies this character appraisal.