

HIGH WYCOMBE CONSERVATION AREA

The Rye Area Study 7

This document forms part of a larger conservation appraisal for High Wycombe and should be read in conjunction with the master document which gives development control guidelines.

1 LOCATION AND LANDSCAPE SETTING

The Rye is the green space located to the south east of the town centre. There are just over 29 hectares stretching from Wendover Way in the west to Keep Hill Road in the east. Its northern boundary skirts the London Road as far as Rye Mill before dipping behind the built up area of the road until it meets Bassetsbury Manor. The southern limits of The Rye extend to just beyond The Dyke at the lower edge of Warren Wood. Although the whole of the green space is generally referred to as The Rye, in fact the eastern part, outside the historic Borough Boundary, is Holywell Mead. This continuation of The Rye was purchased by the Borough Council in 1937. Pound Mead, and My Ladys Mead have been incorporated into this area and the watercress beds filled in.

Location and population

The Rye is situated to the immediate south of London Road, east of the town centre. It has always been an open space, long being the common land where the burgesses of the town grazed their cattle and as such has no residential population.

General character, plan form and landscape context

As The Rye is a green open space there are few buildings and those that are included were not planned in conjunction with each other. The buildings are a completely ad-hoc series of developments but which have similarities that reflect the local style of the area.

The key landscape context is provided by the wooded hills to the south of The Rye - these provide a backdrop to the open space and



enclose the valley bottom, and well as being key in longer range views across the rye fro the slopes to the north. The Rye is bounded, north and south, by water courses. The Wye flows to the north; it previously fed the earlier Pann, Rye and Bassetsbury Mills. To the south, The Dyke has provided the resource for boating and fishing before feeding into the Back Stream that was used for Marsh Green Mill. In between the water courses is a wide stretch of grass accommodating football pitches, tennis courts, a playground and a swimming pool.

2 HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT AND ARCHAEOLOGY

Origins and historic development

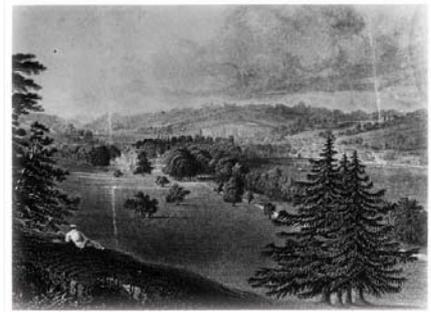
The Rye has always been green open space, used by the townsfolk as common pasturage and for holding special events. The name comes from *atte reye* or *at ther eye* meaning island. The High Wycombe Society have produced an informative document of the area entitled *The Rye, A Priceless Possession*, which gives a detailed history of the area.

The Romans built a villa and bath house on The Rye in the second half of the second century AD, which was excavated in 1724, 1860 and again in 1930. Mosaic floors, the oldest known so far for a Romano-British villa that can be reliably dated, were found but have been hidden by the building of the open air swimming pool buildings over them. The Roman buildings were sited, it is thought, to be close to a spring in the centre of The Rye. Full details of the excavation can be found in *Records of Buckinghamshire Vol XVI, Pt 4 (1959) pp227-57* by BR Hartley.

The spring or well was probably called either *Holliwell* or *Holywell* and fed into a round basin (and is also referred to sometimes as *Round Basin well*), flowing from there through watercress beds and into the *Back Stream* at *Marsh Green*. It is thought that well worshipping was common at this site, and that water from this well was used by *St Wulfstan*, Saxon Bishop of *Worcester*, who has long been associated with *High Wycombe*. Pilgrimage to the site continued well into the 12th century until it was banned by *Bishop Hugh of Lincoln*.

The old municipal boundary runs across *The Rye*, the old spring marking where the boundary crossed towards *Rye Mill*. The custom of beating the bounds which followed the extent of the parish would use this as one point to stop and bump young boys on their heads. There were many other points along the route where this happened. A wand would be used to beat the line of the boundary in between the boundary markers.

Under the Manorial and Feudal systems, the Rye was the common pasturage of the town. When the Borough was incorporated the burgesses were each entitled to depasture two cows and a heifer during daylight hours. *Pann* and *Bridge Mills* had the right of grazing for



Engraved view of Wycombe Abbey and The Rye, circa 1847.



Cattle grazing on the Rye, 1929.



Model railway on The Rye, April 1952.

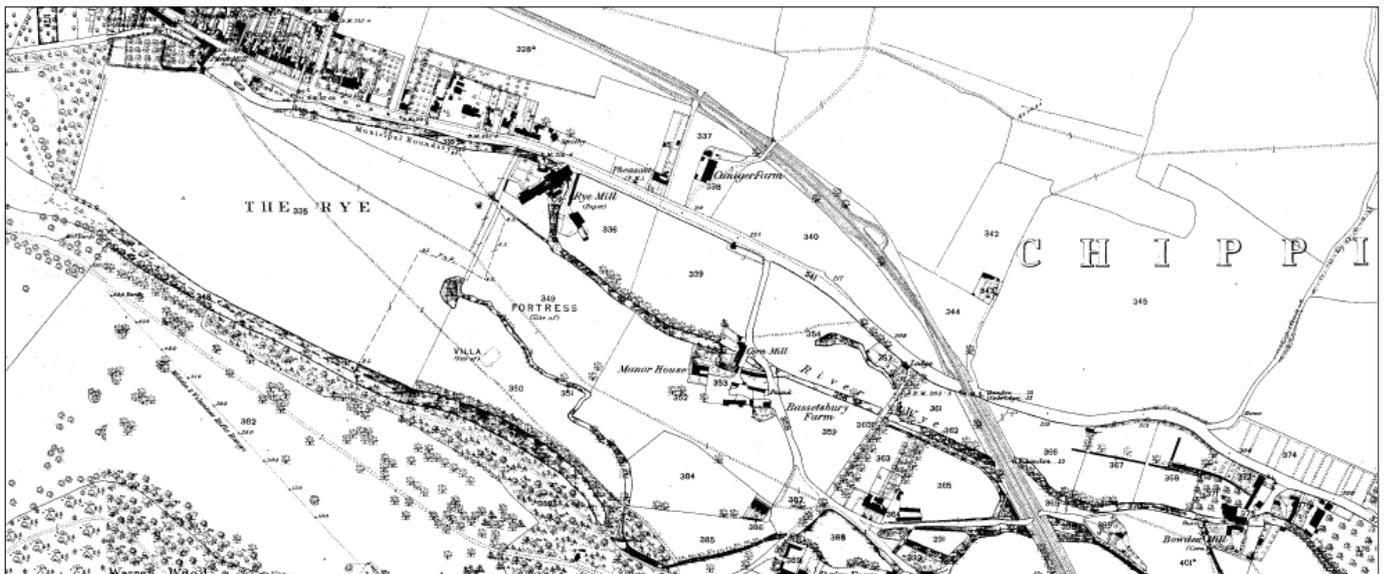


Mosaic floor of Roman villa, May 1932.



Open air swimming pool about 1955.

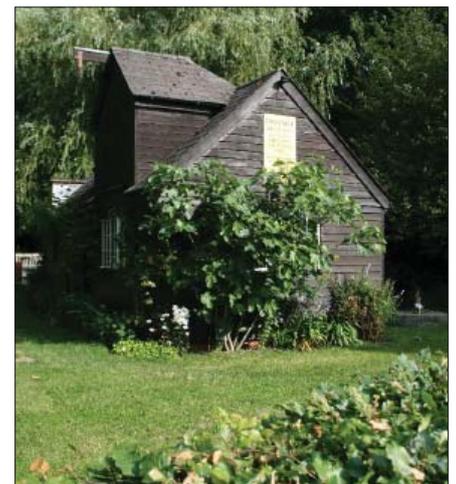
All historic photographs courtesy of SWOP, Bucks County Council and the Bucks Free Press



a horse. In 1551, when the Hospital of St John became the Grammar School, the School Master also received grazing privileges.

1876 map showing The Rye, and undeveloped areas of London Road

By the 19th century there was a Hayward who supervised the use of the pasture by those entitled to it, who lived in a cottage on the site of the municipal planting across from the Trinity Chapel on London Road. The rights to pasture cattle ended in the late 1920's probably due to the decrease in the numbers of individuals owning farm animals and the increase in motorised traffic which would be a hazard to cattle on their way to and from The Rye. There was also an increased demand for recreational use of the Rye.



View of Pann Mill from footpath and, below, the restored mill wheel.

In the Middle Ages some of the meetings to pass By Laws and other Common Council affairs took place on the Rye, and were known as "law days". During the civil war the Rye saw a skirmish between Parliamentary forces, billeted in the town, and the Royalist troops led by Lord Wentworth. The royalists were routed with the loss of 900 men.

The Rye was on occasion used to raise a gibbet for public hangings.

Mills

Milling has long been associated with this stretch of the River Wye. There are several mill sites around The Rye beginning with Pann (or Pannells) Mill in the north west corner of the present open space. This mill was one of six in High Wycombe mentioned in the Domesday Book. In the reign of Henry II the Mill was given to the French knight Roger de Panil for aid rendering in the Crusades, from whom the Mill derives its name. It survived as a working corn mill until 1967 and was demolished in 1971. The mill machinery has been restored and housed in a small timber and brick building by the High Wycombe Society. This is open to the public for milling days several times a year.

Rye Mill, at 33 London Road, was famed for its high quality paper for most of its history, being described as a "Highly Distinguished Paper



Mill" in 1852 when it was up for sale. However, the mill has since been demolished and the site is not part of the conservation area. Its name lives on as the VW garage on London Road.

The third mill is Bassetsbury Mill which had always been a corn mill. It is located at the eastern of The Rye and is included within the High Wycombe Conservation Area as a separate sub area appraisal.

To the south of The Rye is The Dyke, an artificial watercourse, which is used as a boating lake and under which the old main road to London is thought to run. The Dyke belonged originally to Loakes Manor (what is now Wycombe Abbey) and The Dyke is thought to have been created as an ornamental feature by Lancelot (Capability) Brown in the 18th century. It was given to the town in memory of Lord Carrington's son and heir, Viscount Wendover, after his death in the First World War

Archeology

The area is obviously of great archaeological interest, and it is believed that there may be further unexcavated remains under the swimming pool buildings.

Historic maps

1883, 1876, 1895 OS, 1925

3 SPATIAL ANALYSIS

The character and inter-relationship of spaces within the area

The Rye has always retained the character of a pasture, a wide open space with cropped grass, originally for cattle but equally suitable in more recent times for football and other recreational activities. Any trees are swept to the edges of the space, creating a sense of enclosure which is heightened by the surrounding topography. Two avenues of trees line routes towards the former open air swimming pool and Rye Centre.

It provides a pleasant backdrop for the houses that line the London Road, providing a rural feel close to the town centre.

Important views and vistas

There are sweeping, long distance views in all directions across The Rye. Towards the London Road it helps to create a green and open setting for the historic buildings to the north of the road and to the east the sward creates a peaceful foreground from which to view the ancient buildings of Bassetsbury Manor.

The view into The Rye from Warren Wood Hill takes in the expanse of the



View along The Dyke.



The Wye.

View of the old Health Centre as it is today as a nursery.



green space and the reverse view enforces the rural feel with the wooded hillside masking the modern residential developments on the hill.

4 ANALYSIS OF CHARACTER

Activity and landuse

This space has always been used for recreation and special events. In modern times The Rye hosts a Motor Show, fairs, mill open days and various other events as well as weekend football matches, a children's playground and boating on The Dyke in the summer.



Holywell Mead Swimming Pool. currently unused and on the market. Its utilitarian lines echo 1930s architecture.

Architectural and historical quality of buildings and the contribution they make to the special interest of the area

Both of the buildings on The Rye are built in local red brick. The Holywell Mead Swimming Pool is of low construction with a flat roofed central bay, which visually “tucks” the building into the hillside behind it.. The wings to either side are set back and hide low pitched roofs behind parapets. By the Borough Architect, and dating from 1957, it has a modernist look popular 2 decades previously, its clean lines enhanced by the symmetrical series of northern doors. The building is currently vacant but a new operator is due to reopen the building as a part of a “Holywell Mead Leisure Complex” in 2012.

The old Health Centre is now a nursery and backs onto the busy London Road. It has Arts and Crafts references, particularly in the steeply pitched roofs and swept eaves. The central block has glazed sections to either side of the entrance, in the interests of light and hygiene, and a clerestorey. To either side protruding wings of greater height face over The Rye. The building is an attractive early 20th



Heron fishing in The Dyke.

View across The Rye towards Wycombe Abbey.



Rye Gardens, site of the former Haywards Cottage.

century addition to The Rye, mostly screened from long range views by the tree cover in this part of the open space.

The only other building of note on The Rye is the former Environment Centre, next to the former swimming pool. This is a recent renovation and is pitched roofed with a pink render setting off a central section of timber cladding. This is also currently vacant, but has been leased to the same company who have taken over ownership of Holywell Mead Swimming Pool and is to be converted into an all-year-round health and fitness suite, which is due to open in 2012.

Key unlisted buildings

None of the buildings on The Rye are listed. The former open air swimming pool originally opened in 1911 although the buildings surrounding it were built in the 1950's, while the Borough Health Clinic was built earlier, in 1938.

Local details

All the buildings on The Rye demonstrate a utilitarian appearance evocative of the early 20th century. The local details are mainly exhibited in the materials used in their construction, although there are echoes of both modernist and Arts and Crafts styling.

Prevalent and traditional building materials

Local red brick is the prevalent building material on The Rye with few embellishments or unnecessary decoration.

Contribution made by the natural environment

The managed natural environment is the essence of The Rye. The maintenance of the open green space that was the common pasture just outside the town has now become a vital natural resource within the urban development of High Wycombe, providing a relaxing area away from the pressures of daily life. In July 2008, The Rye's status as a green space was recognised by being awarded the Green Flag Award for the second year in a row.

The extent of loss, problems and pressures

Any space within a town will be under pressure to be developed. The Rye has long been considered sacrosanct by the local population, and change has been greatly resisted in the past. The Rye has actually increased in size over the years rather than had development nibbling away at the edges.



New playground under construction by Wendover Way.



Swan on the Dyke. The Dyke is known for its large swan population.



The Rye

Area 7 Study Appraisal



KEY



- Listed Buildings
- Buildings of interest/designed or civic buildings
- Local List
- Green Space
- River
- Railings
- Views
- Sub area Boundary
- Trees and tree groups
- Hedges
- Conservation Area boundary

For illustrative purposes only; not to scale