
**Assessment of the
Kingston Hill
Local Area of Special Character**

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1. Introduction

The Conservation Studio was commissioned by Kingston Borough Council in November 2001 to survey the Kingston Hill Local Area of Special Character (LASC) in order to determine whether it has the degree of special interest that would warrant designation as a conservation area.

This report concludes:

- that there is a strong case for designating a new conservation area;
- that the area of special interest could include the whole of the existing LASC and link to other proposals for a Kingston Vale Conservation Area;
- that it should also include the whole of the Kingston University campus at Coombe Hurst and Kenry House; and
- that the new designation should be called the Kingston Hill Conservation Area.

2. Legislative background

A conservation area is '*an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*' (Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990). The immediate effects of designation are the requirement for Conservation Area Consent, where demolition of unlisted buildings is proposed, and the requirement for six weeks notice of work to trees (felling lopping or topping).

In making decisions on future development within a conservation area, the Council must '*pay attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the area*' (Section 72 of the Act). This should ensure that harmful change is not allowed, but some changes, normally not requiring planning permission (known as permitted development rights) can continue to erode the special interest of the conservation area. These rights, which apply to single family houses, can be controlled by the serving of an Article 4 Direction, enabling the Council to require a planning application for minor alterations such as replacement windows and doors.

Government policy is set out in Planning Policy Guidance Note No.15 (PPG15 – Planning and the Historic Environment). On demolition, this states, '*The general presumption should be in favour of retaining buildings which make a positive contribution to the character or appearance of a conservation area.*' This appraisal identifies those buildings that make a positive contribution.

3. Local policy

3.1 Designation

The list of LASCs is published in the Unitary Development Plan (UDP). Kingston Hill is one of 19 areas listed in the Plan adopted in March 1998.

The area is also included in one of the Borough's two Strategic Areas of Special Character designated in the UDP in order to protect the semi-rural character of Richmond Park to the northwest. The whole of Richmond Park is included in the English Heritage Register of Historic Parks and Gardens at Grade I.

3.2 Unitary Development Plan

The Plan commits the Borough to safeguarding the townscape of LASCs through encouragement and development control. Where areas are formally designated as conservation areas, the Plan further commits the Borough to safeguarding their character by resisting the loss of buildings, trees and other features that make a positive contribution, and by promoting high standards of design in new development.

The UDP also includes a list of Buildings of Townscape Merit, on which are Aranmor, Coombe Hurst, Kenry House and the former stables to Kenry House, the Kingston Law School, Holmwood and the lodge to Holmwood. All these buildings are among those identified in this assessment as making a positive contribution to the character of the area.

4. Location and setting

Kingston Hill leads northeast from the centre of Kingston-upon-Thames. As it dips towards the Beverley Brook, it becomes Kingston Vale and, at Robin Hood Gate, the road joins the Kingston By-pass (A3) leading to Roehampton and Wandsworth.

The area for consideration is in the northeast of the Borough. To the northwest is Richmond Park and to the east are Coombe Park, the Coombe Hill Golf Course and the campus of Kingston University. To the south are Coombe Wood Golf Course and the immediate suburbs of Kingston.

At its highest, in the south of the LASC, Kingston Hill reaches a height of about 54 metres. From the University it falls dramatically some 32 metres to Dorich House at the northeast end.

5. History and development

While Neolithic and Bronze Age finds have indicated early settlement of the area, Kingston Hill has always been better known as a busy road. From the Middle Ages it was on the strategic route from London to

Portsmouth and it formed part of the direct link between the City and Hampton Court, which became a royal palace from the 16th century. Thus the line was established well before Charles I enclosed Richmond Park with the wall of 1637.

This was an area of large minor estates established in the late 18th and early 19th century. Coombe Park was acquired in 1837 by the Duke of Cambridge, a cousin of Queen Victoria, and this began a period of royal patronage, particularly at Kingston Vale, and also a process of progressive sub-division. As a result, the mid-19th century saw a succession of large houses on diminishing plots from Kenry House and Kingston Hill Place to Harewood, Holmwood and Galsworthy House. The latter was the birthplace of John Galsworthy who used the area as a setting for the Forsythe Saga. Florence Nightingale was another local figure who came to the area to stay with her aunt at Coombe Hurst.

The gradual intensification of development was encouraged by road improvements in the 19th century, which eased the gradient of the hill with a cutting near the summit and an embankment below. This brought the City within an hour's drive by horse-drawn carriage and, subsequently, less by car. Development was not, however, fuelled by the railway age, which rather passed over Kingston in favour of Surbiton. Instead, road traffic increased greatly and Kingston was one of the earliest towns to have a by-pass, which was opened in 1927 by Stanley Baldwin.

The effect was to ease the pressure on Kingston Hill by removing traffic and opening other areas to development, such as the Robin Hood Estate. Despite further infilling, Kingston Hill has retained its low-density character.

In the 1960s, Coombe Hurst and Kenry House became the nucleus of Kingston Polytechnic. This campus has since grown into a modern university with the addition of many further buildings, some of estimable distinction. The buildings have been deliberately placed close together in order to allow space and tree cover to relate to the surrounding landscape.

6. Character and appearance

6.1 Activity and uses

Kingston Hill is very much an early suburb. It is unsurprising, therefore, that, with the exception of St Anne's Church, virtually all the buildings in the area are residential or part of the University. The busy main road, which used to be a lifeline between the Capital and its Navy, now carries through traffic, and visitors to the University as well as catering for local needs.

6.2 Building materials

Walls tend to be of brick. Generally, this is a yellow/brown brick with red brick dressings, although the later buildings tend to be entirely red brick sometimes with partial tile-hanging. Grander houses, such as Coombe Hurst and Kingston Hill Place, are finished in stucco to imitate the higher status of stone.

The 19th century buildings generally have slate roofs, but there was clearly a return to clay tiles in the early 20th century and, indeed, there are red pantiles on St Anne's Church. Windows are mostly timber sashes and casements although some later buildings have steel frames. At the University, recent buildings have combined traditional brickwork with modern steel and glass walling and metal roofs.

6.3 Architectural styles

The earlier houses tend to use classical, and particularly Italianate, styles well suited to the use of stucco. In the later 19th century, however, there was a shift towards more eclectic tastes with Gothic, Dutch, eastern European and old English influences. In the 20th century there has been more reliance on functional building although the remarkable Dorich House is said to be influenced by German Expressionism.

Certainly, there is not a Kingston Hill style, the buildings being very much the products of individual tastes.

6.4 Listed buildings

There are just two listed houses in the area: the mid-19th century Galsworthy House and Dorich House of 1936. In addition, there is the boundary wall to Richmond Park and an 18th century retaining wall to the rear of Kenry House. All are Grade II.

6.5 Other significant buildings

Most of the larger houses dating from before the 1930s are recorded on the plan as buildings that make a positive contribution to the character of the area. In addition, there are the lodges to Holmwood and Kenry House, and the new terraces in the grounds of Kingston Hill House, where particular effort has been made to complement the qualities of the area.

On the University campus, the two original houses are clearly significant, as are the former stables to Kenry House. Less obvious, perhaps, are the qualities of the 1960s Walkden Hall, the 1980s de Lisa Hall, the recent Sir Frank Lampl Building and even the modern multistorey carpark.

7. Area analysis

7.1 Description

The narrow strip between the main road and the boundary wall to Richmond Park has a few less interesting properties in the southwest either side of the white-rendered Gothic of Aranmor. Then the exuberant Galsworthy House in self-coloured stucco has unusual paired upper windows under arched hoods that rise through the deep bracketed eaves. This former home of the author is now a nursing home with additional wings to either side built in sympathetic style.

Beyond, sited close to the road is Fairlight, a Victorian re-working of 16th century details with hood mouldings and heavily carved bargeboards. A new house with Dutch gables follows and then a group of steeply gabled houses set back behind extensive lawns.

St Anne's Roman Catholic Church was built in 1960 by F G Broadbent. The brick gable facing the street has red brick quoins and an incised arch enclosing a single large upper window and the classical doorway below. The roof is pantiled and there is a short tower to the side. Its elevated position is emphasised by a wide sweep of stone steps flanked by low brick walls and two evergreen trees.

As the plot sizes increase, St Aubyns and Holmwood are two particularly large Gothic brick houses set back in trees, the latter with its own gatelodge. Kingston Hill Place is larger still, standing on higher ground as the road begins to descend in a slight cutting. The house is classical stucco, but recent terraces built in the grounds are of reverential brick.

The cutting is dramatic. High banks on either side are clad with trees blanking out any sense of urban development. On the descent, the road turns slightly to the left opening views across Richmond Park to Roehampton. The cutting then changes into an embankment giving views over the Robin Hood Estate and across Wimbledon Common.

From Kingston Hill Place, the north side continues with Cedar Close, a development of four 1970s houses facing a dramatic weeping ash tree. Then there is a group of houses at Dorincourt and Harewood set back from the road. These include Dutch gables, an almost Russian tiered cupola and a tower with a timber-framed bellcote. Three developments of 1980s, 1920s and 1970s houses follow before the extraordinary brick Dorich House designed in 1936 by the sculptor Dora Gordine. It is three storeys with large lunette windows, but as the road has levelled onto an embankment, much of the house is below the road.

On the southeast side of the road the land also falls away so that the 1930s housing of the Robin Hood Estate is largely unseen. There are, however, important trees on the bank leading down to the gardens of

Ullswater Crescent. As the road climbs Kingston Hill, the estate gives way to a dramatic swathe of woodland that screens the University campus. Here the surviving parts of an older order can be discerned: the Lodge, the Gothic stucco of Kenry House, embedded in extensions of the 1950s, and a fine stable court. Now, the tightly knit group of buildings provides a history of architecture from the mid-19th to the late 20th centuries. This importantly allows space around the periphery for the site to be seen in a landscape context.

Finally, within a separate part of this landscape is Coombe Hurst, an early 19th century Italianate house where Florence Nightingale used to stay with her aunt. It is now the Music School for the University with a modern studio building behind. The complex also includes Coombehurst Court, an almost featureless L-shaped building fronting the road, and next to it a brick and boarded lodge.

In addition to a wide variety of buildings, the area is memorable for its dense planting, soft boundaries, changes in level and views over Richmond Park and Wimbledon Common.

7.2 Negative factors

The three buildings of Warren Gate detract from the norm of accomplished architecture in the area, as do the three houses on the other side of Aranmor. The 1960s lodge to Coombe Hurst is also unfortunate. Otherwise, the only negative structures are temporary buildings within the University complex including the Business School and a large Nissen building to the north of the School of Education.

7.3 Neutral buildings

In this context, neutral buildings are those which do not actually harm the character, but an area made up exclusively of such buildings would not warrant designation as a conservation area. They include buildings that have historical origins but have been severely altered, such as The Russets, and more recent buildings of indifferent design, such as those at Cedar Close or Robinwood Place, where the quality of landscape is more important than the architecture.

7.4 Alterations

The main departures from original detailing can be seen in replacement doors and windows, as at Coombehurst Court and in uncomfortably high replacement boundary treatments. The erosion of character caused by the cumulative effect of small-scale changes can be controlled by the introduction of an Article 4 direction.

7.5 New development

The Council is already committed to resisting the demolition of significant buildings in LASCs and conservation areas, and securing a

high quality of design where redevelopment is accepted. The effects of this can be seen in the grounds of Kingston Hill Place and at the University.

7.6 Public realm

Although Kingston Hill suffers high levels of traffic, the public areas are very important in Kingston Vale. There is a good deal of granite kerbing to the highway, but the pavements are tarmac and there are historically inappropriate herringbone blocks to several private drives. Property boundaries are also vulnerable as demands for security erode the softer semi-rural edges formed by hedges and timber fences.

A major factor in the character of Kingston Hill is the high density of trees, many of specimen quality. There are further glimpses between buildings of the trees in Richmond Park and, indeed, views along the road are often entirely of woodland to the total exclusion of buildings. However, the rural illusion is swept away by over-zealous white-lining of the carriageway.

8. Conclusions

8.1 Conservation

Kingston Hill has the distinct arcadian character of a well-to-do early Victorian suburb. Its consistent high quality of building from the early 19th century to the late 20th century, together with outstanding trees and other landscape elements, have the qualities of special interest that justify designation as a conservation area.

It is important to consider what may be achieved by the designation of a conservation area for Kingston Hill. Immediate benefits will ensure a future for the trees that contribute strongly to the local character and will enable even greater care to be taken over any new development.

In the longer term, the erosion of character through minor alterations can be controlled through planning policy and the use of an Article 4 direction. Efforts can also be directed at improvements to the public realm, notably the quality of pavements, street furniture and signage.

8.2 Boundary review

The proposed boundary includes the whole of the Local Area of Special Character, although it is debatable whether the landscape interest at the southwest end is sufficiently strong to justify the inclusion of the largely indifferent buildings beyond Galsworthy House. At the University, the LASC boundary appears to be rather arbitrary and it is proposed that the whole of the campus should be included in recognition of the quality of its open space and planting, and of many of its buildings.

The southeast side of Kingston Hill has not been included in the proposed conservation area. Although some special qualities survive in properties, such as Bennett House and Prospect Cottage, and in the treed landscape, there is also a large new development at Coombe Martin. Generally, the southeast side is considered to relate more to the separate character of Coombe Park.

This assessment should be read together with that for Kingston Vale. If both are accepted, they will provide continuous protection for two areas of distinct character united by the historic route that gave them their origins. It is suggested that this area should be called the Kingston Hill Conservation Area.