

Spinney Hill Park Conservation Area Character Statement

CONSULTATION DRAFT

This is a consultation draft of the proposed character statement for Spinney Hill Park Conservation Area. Comments are welcome and should be sent to David Trubshaw, Building Conservation Officer, Urban Design Group, Environment, Regeneration & Development Department, Leicester City Council, New Walk Centre, Leicester, LE1 6ZG, telephone 252 7217, or E-mail trubd001@leicester.gov.uk.

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 A conservation area is defined as *an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*¹. There are 23 conservation areas in Leicester which contain the best of the older parts of the city. Each conservation area is distinctive and contains qualities which help to give the city an overall character of its own. The City Council designates conservation areas, after consulting local people, under powers contained in national planning legislation and in accordance with advice from central government.

1.2 The Council has a duty to preserve and enhance the character and appearance of conservation areas and the purpose of this statement is to identify the factors which make the Spinney Hill Conservation Area an area of special architectural and historic interest. It is not the purpose of a conservation area to prevent change but to manage change in the light of the existing character of the area. The statement will enable the Council to ensure that, when considering planning applications within the conservation area, the development will help to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the area.

1.3 Looking after and improving the quality of conservation areas can bring real benefits to the people who live and work there. An attractive environment also helps to maintain property values. However, for a conservation area to be successful, both residents and property owners must play their part. The Council will continue to strive to improve the environment of conservation areas whenever the opportunity presents itself and when resources are available and will encourage others to do likewise.

1.4 The Spinney Hill Park Conservation Area was designated in October 1982. In order to preserve the special character of the houses in the area from unsympathetic alterations, an Article 4 Direction was declared in January 1983. The effect of this has been to require planning permission for alterations to houses, such as the installation of replacement windows, doors or re-roofing.

2.0 Location and landform

2.1 Spinney Hill Park Conservation Area is located three kilometres to the east of Leicester city centre and comprises an area of approximately 20 hectares bounded by Mere Road, St Saviour's Road, East Park Road and Park Vale Road. The boundary of the Conservation Area is shown on map 1.

2.2 The topography of the area is influenced by the underlying rock formation, which has created a ridge and vale running north to south, resulting in steeply sloping streets not typical of Leicester as a whole. Two of the roads in the area, Mere Road and St Saviour's Road, follow the line of curving farm tracks and contrast with the straight grid pattern of the surrounding area.

¹Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 section 69

3.0 Archaeology, history and development

3.1 Spinney Hill Park lies within the former parish of Evington and was not absorbed into Leicester until 1892. The archaeology of the area is poorly understood and there are only two known historic sites. Evington Mill, a medieval windmill, was located at the junction of Mere Road and Buxton Street, whilst immediately east of East Park Road and either side of Gwendolen Road lies the site of a substantial moated platform. The moat is likely to have enclosed a manor house or similar building from the 13th or 14th century and is commemorated in the name of Moat Road; the last trace of it as an earthwork feature was recorded in the 1940s to the rear of buildings south of Gwendolen Road. There are, however, records of a small number of prehistoric flint artefacts found in the area, including Neolithic and Early Bronze Age arrowheads. The limited information on the archaeology of the area reflects the lack of investigation that has been undertaken although, on the basis of comparison with other areas of the city, it is likely that unrecognised buried remains survive from the prehistoric to the more recent past.

3.2 Until the late 1880s, the area was largely countryside, although the map of 1886 (map 2) shows that there were clay and lime pits in the area, making bricks and mortar for the growing town. However, towards the end of the 19th century, Leicester was expanding rapidly outwards as a result of prosperity based on thriving hosiery, boot and shoe and light engineering industries. To the west of Spinney Hill Park, South Highfields had developed earlier in the 19th century as a middle-class suburb, but its popularity declined from the 1880s onwards as Stoneygate was opened-up for development. As a consequence, land values in Highfields declined and, as development edged its way eastwards, small back-of-pavement terraced houses were built. Market forces encouraged the building of similar dense terraced streets, workshops and factories across Leicester to standards specified in the Corporation's bye-laws, but with few amenities in the form of parks or open spaces. In the early 1880s, the Corporation took the initiative by buying land to create three public parks – Abbey Park in 1882, Spinney Hill Park in 1886 and Western Park in 1887.

3.3 Spinney Hill Park was laid out on the site of an existing spinney and was formally opened on 24th August 1886, complete with fountain and bandstand. When opened, the 36-acre park was already endowed with many mature trees planted by the previous landowner, Colonel Burnaby, who sold the land to the Corporation for £18,000 with a proviso that the area, “be set apart as a public park or recreation ground and not at any future period would be turned into building plots or worked for minerals; trees were to remain, as far as possible”. As originally laid out, the park included a cricket pitch, bowling green, tennis courts, separate boys and girls playgrounds and a tea pavilion. The existing Evington Brook was diverted and converted into a series of cascades. Extensive planting was carried out and a woodland walk provided, with two “carriage drives” formed on the western and southern sides. The park lodge and refreshment pavilion was built in a Domestic revival style by Stockdale Harrison, a well-known local architect. The lodge remains, although the pavilion burnt down in the 1970s.

3.4 The opening of the park immediately raised the status of this part of Highfields. The four streets bounding Spinney Hill Park, St Saviour's Road, East Park Road, Mere Road and Park Vale Road, offered the most attractive residential sites in the neighbourhood and were developed with substantial sized houses for middle-class professional and business people.

3.5 There had been a limited amount of building to the north of the park (around St Saviour's Road/Mere Road junction) before 1880. However, the first houses to be built following the laying-out of the park were nos. 164 to 194 St Saviour's Road, built by Arthur Wakerley, an important local politician, architect and developer, in 1887 and this terrace set the standard for the development of the area. The remaining properties along St Saviour's Road were built between 1890 and 1900, although development was not completed until 1910 with the building of nos. 220-248. Mere Road and East Park Road were largely completed in the years between 1890 and 1895, although some infill semi-detached housing was built along East Park Road in the 1930s. Park Vale Road was the last of the streets to be completed, with the majority of the properties dating from between 1910 and 1920.

3.6 The role of Arthur Wakerley in the development of the area is significant. In the 1880s, Wakerley bought land in North Evington, to the north of Spinney Hill Park, with the aim of developing a complete working class community. Although only part of Wakerley's planned suburb is within the Conservation Area, his impact on the growth of the area was considerable. He formed a Freehold House Society to enable working people to purchase their own homes and provided public buildings such as a police and fire station, a church and a market hall. Wakerley also built factories, notably along St Saviour's Road, and houses for managers to encourage manufacturers into the district.

3.7 Recently, the proposed location of a police station within Spinney Hill Park, planning permission for which was granted in 2001, has been controversial.

4.0 Prevailing uses

4.1 The predominant use of properties within the area remains as single family houses. However, along East Park Road, a number of the larger properties have been converted into flats, whilst there are also a number of commercial uses, notably shops and a petrol filling station. There are several places of worship within the Conservation Area, notably St Stephen's Church on St Saviours Road, the Evangelical Church on Mere Road and Wesley Hall on Hartington Road.

4.2 The centrepiece of the Conservation Area is, however, Spinney Hill Park. The park covers an area of 15 hectares (36 acres) and is particularly important for recreational and cultural events as there is no other local area of public open space. There are several play areas within the park, an adventure playground, four tennis courts, a bowling green, a crazy golf course, football pitches and a cricket all-weather practice pitch.

5.0 Architectural character

The inclusion of buildings in this section is selective and is intended to illustrate the range of building types, styles and materials in the conservation area. If a building is not included, this should not be taken to indicate that it does not make a significant contribution to the character of the conservation area.

5.1 The value of the area lies in its especially attractive visual quality rather than its historical importance. Although no buildings in the area are listed as being of special architectural or historic interest, there are a number of properties of note which help to create the distinctive character of the area.

5.2 Houses were built to a variety of designs but many reflect the Domestic vernacular revival or “cottage” architecture typical of the Arts and Crafts movement of the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Recurring themes that are evident include combinations of sham timber framing, tile hanging, tall ribbed chimneys, steeply pitched half-timbered gables and attractive timber details such as porches and balconies with turned wooden balusters, projecting bays and dormer windows. A unifying feature throughout the area is the rich use of decoration.

5.3 The houses were built by a number of separate developers either as individual properties or in small groups of similar design and include many decorative features and details unique to the area. Each street facing Spinney Hill Park, however, has its own character.

5.4 Mere Road is a particularly attractive winding road following the line of a country lane, with mature lime trees broken at regular intervals by streets of terraced houses. The houses have been individually designed to be in harmony with each other whilst retaining their individuality through imaginative combinations of decorative details deriving from the late nineteenth century vernacular revival. Architects made the most of cramped sites by building elegant two and three-storey houses with bay windows in groups of between three to seven properties. Each group is orientated at a different angle, partly because of the winding road but also because the large bay windows were positioned to maximise the view across the park and to catch the sun. Roof lines are varied with steeply pitched gables and tall ribbed chimneys set on jettied, half-timbered upper storeys. Rectangular, canted and semi-circular bay windows are a feature.

5.5 Corner sites on Mere Road have been carefully exploited, taking the eye around the corner by articulating the sides of the houses with gables, carved brickwork and tall projecting chimney-breasts corbelled out from the ground or first floors. The corner houses have become focal points as well as providing the transition in scale to the smaller terraced houses in the side streets.

5.6 The north side of St Saviour’s Road contains several groups of fine houses in planned terraces built to a single design with single and two-storey bay windows, dormer windows with pediments or stone finials, timber porches, balconies and coved eaves. Park Terrace, nos.164-194, was sympathetically restored by the East Midlands Housing Association in the 1980s; the terrace of substantial three-

storey houses, each named after characters in Greek mythology, sweeps down the slope from Mere Road. Although the windows have been replaced, timber frames were used to retain the character. The terrace between nos. 220 and 248 St Saviour's Road is also interesting, with ground floor bay windows having stained glass top-lights, timber curved pediments to first floor windows and curved dormer roofs. Rendering of the first floor and the use of plain red roof tiles further unify the terrace.

5.7 East Park Road contains a number of interesting properties of varying styles, although many have been unsympathetically altered. St Stephen's Church was built in Gothic-style to a design by Stockdale Harrison between 1897 and 1903. Of the residential properties, the curved brick gables to nos. 170 to 176 are distinctive, although they have lost their original stone pinnacles. The terrace of large houses between nos. 200 to 214 East Park Road are in the Domestic revival style, while the distinctive gabled properties between 216 and 234 were built by Arthur Wakerley in 1910 for managers of local factories; each house is L-shaped and although built in a terrace, appear to be semi-detached. East Park Road was completed in the 1930s with the building of several semi-detached houses.

5.8 Park Vale Road is a quiet residential street and was the last road to be laid-out in the Conservation Area. Many of the houses are in uniform terraced groups. It was originally intended that the houses would back onto the park. However, this provoked a public outcry such that the street was re-planned to enable houses to face the park. Development commenced at the Mere Road end at the beginning of the twentieth century, although the majority of the houses were built in the years between 1910 and 1920. The property at the corner of Mere Road is particularly prominent, featuring a stone bay, half-timbered gables and multi-pane windows and is built in the Domestic revival style.

5.9 As with other properties in the area, the retention of original doors with stained glass panels and timber sash windows is an important feature of houses along Park Vale Road. The terrace between nos. 5 and 27 features ground floor bay windows with prominent dormers providing visual unity. Nos. 35 to 43 and 47 to 65 Park Vale Road form two distinctive groups, with "tall-boy" chimney pots, central doorways with stained glass panels and house names within fanlights beneath timber canopies.

6.0 Key unlisted buildings

6.1 Although no buildings within the Conservation Area are statutorily listed as being of architectural or historical importance, there are a number of buildings which contribute to the appearance and character of the area.

6.2 Some of the most important are the larger public buildings which were built on corner sites and offer pleasing distant views and contrasting architectural styles. Notable examples are the Evangelical Free Church (1892) on Mere Road

and the Wesley Hall and School (1896 and 1902) on Hartington Road, designed by nationally known architects Drapers and Walters and combining Art Nouveau, Vernacular Revival and baroque detailing. Other important buildings are Spinney Hill Park Lodge, designed in a Tudor vernacular revival style and St Stephen's Church, which acts as a landmark at the corner of East Park Road and St Saviour's Road.

6.3 The former Imperial Hotel at the junction of St Saviour's Road and Mere Road dates from 1881 and was originally topped by a cupola; the tower is a prominent landmark in the area. The hotel was built by Joseph Hallam but is often credited as being built as a temperance hotel by Arthur Wakerley.

7.0 Townscape

7.1 *Townscape* refers to the way in which views open and close through an area, to changes in levels, visual contrasts and linkages and the rhythm and pattern in the street scene. These elements give an area individuality and character.

7.2 Within the Spinney Hill Park Conservation Area, the townscape quality is strongly influenced by the proximity to the park, the quality of the buildings and the change in level of the streets. One of the strongest elements is formed by the steep gradient along St Saviour's Road, which together with the curve in the road and the way the houses step down the hill, creates an attractive view. The townscape value of the distinctive groups of houses is particularly important, notably the group known as Park Terrace (164 to 194 St Saviour's Road) and the unified terrace of houses between 220 and 248 St Saviour's Road, where the road levels out.

7.3 The curve in the building line and the mature trees on Mere Road also create an attractive townscape. The houses are generally large and built to individual designs and are stepped back to create interesting shapes and spaces. Views into Spinney Hill Park and across the park from the higher ground on Mere Road towards Evington are important.

8.0 Building materials

8.1 The predominant building material throughout the conservation area is the orange/red Leicester brick that was also used throughout much of the city in the late nineteenth century. The facing bricks are usually of high quality. Render was sometimes used for decoration at first floor level. Roofs are generally of Welsh slate, although a limited amount of plain red clay tiles were also used. However, there are variations in materials and interesting details on doors and windows which define the quality of the area.

8.2 Rectangular, canted and semi-circular bay windows, often with sham timber framing, are an important feature. Windows traditionally are timber vertical sliding sash, sometimes with small upper panes of leaded and coloured glass. Other important decorative features are tile hanging, brick cornices, balconies and

porches with attractive carved brackets and balusters. The original front doors were normally wooden panelled, with some of the upper panels in attractive cut or stained glass. In order to protect the character and appearance of the area, new buildings, alterations and extensions to properties should use traditional materials.

8.3 Virtually all of the houses in the Conservation Area have front gardens and the front boundary is an important feature in the streetscene. The traditional boundary is a low brick wall and railings. A number of boundary walls were removed or damaged over time and many have been rebuilt with grant assistance under City Council environmental improvement schemes. Other boundaries include timber fences and railings, whilst privet hedges are found in front of some properties.

9.0 Open space and trees

9.1 Spinney Hill Park has largely retained the essence of its original design and is a good example of a Victorian local park of the late 19th century. It has a well-established tree population with many mature specimens over one hundred years old, although much of the original Victorian planting, notably of evergreens, has been lost. Many of the trees are formally planted along the main paths, producing avenues of London plane and lime. There are also several notable beech, oak, and horse chestnut trees in the park, and other large, mature trees include sycamore, Lombardy poplar, hybrid black poplar, willow and ash. There are several areas of copse planting and a wildlife area, established in 1986. The lodge, bowling green, fountain and gates on Mere Road and Park Vale Road are important remaining historic features, although the adventure playground is an intrusive feature.

9.2 To the west of the park, there is a line of mature lime trees along one side of Mere Road. Further south on Mere Road, between Derwent Street and Earl Howe Street, there are limes on both sides of the road; these trees are subject to pollarding on a three year cycle to limit their size due to their proximity to houses. There are other heavily pollarded limes in the front gardens of the properties at 216 to 234 East Park Road and two mature plane trees in a small triangular area of land on Shelborne Street.

9.3 Responsibility for street trees lies with the City Council and future management and replacement programmes are essential elements in conserving the character of the area. Strategies and management plans are being developed for street trees throughout the city and this will help to maintain the distinctive character of the area by ensuring that street trees are kept in good condition and any diseased or dying trees are replaced at the earliest opportunity.

9.4 The dense pattern of development in the Conservation Area severely restricts the opportunity to establish trees of significant size within gardens and the many fine trees that stand in the park are a great asset to the wider area.

10.0 Lighting and street furniture

10.1 Most of the street lighting in the area is on either concrete or steel columns. Cast iron bollards have been installed in the pavement in places to prevent cars encroaching.

10.2 Road surfaces in the area are tarmac with concrete paving slabs for pavements. Traffic calming measures comprising road humps and narrowing of the highway have been introduced on St Saviour's Road, Mere Road and Park Vale Road.

11.0 Loss of Character

11.1 Although not widespread, the greatest erosion of character that has occurred in the Conservation Area has been the replacement of original features such as windows and doors. This is particularly the case along East Park Road. Many of the replacements are in uPVC or aluminium and do not reflect the fine detail of the originals. Some of these replacements have taken place despite the Article 4 Direction that was declared in 1983 in order to try to preserve the important architectural details which make a significant contribution to the special character and appearance of the area.

11.2 Several of the shops on East Park Road are in poor condition and their appearance is detrimental to that of the area. There have also been a considerable number of alterations to properties on East Park Road that have not always been sympathetic to the appearance of the buildings or area. In addition, the high volume of traffic along East Park Road is detrimental to the character of the Conservation Area.

11.3 The historic fabric of Spinney Hill Park has begun to degrade with the footpaths, railings, brook and planting requiring restoration. As a consequence, the Council has submitted a bid for Heritage Lottery Funding to restore the park to largely its original condition.

12.0 Preserving the Character

12.1 The special character of the Spinney Hill area mainly derives from the quality of the individual buildings and decorative features such as timber sash windows, stained glass and timber doors. Widespread replacement or loss of such features would do great harm to the appearance and character of the area. For this reason, the City Council declared an Article 4 Direction on properties in the area in 1983, soon after the designation of the Conservation Area. The Direction means that planning permission is required for alterations which affect the external appearance of houses in the Conservation Area, such as:

- extensions;
- new windows or doors;
- re-roofing or alterations to chimneys and ridge tiles;

- erection of porches;
- covering gardens in concrete or tarmac or taking-down garden walls or fences to make car parking spaces;
- erection of gates, fences or walls;
- covering walls by rendering or painting the brickwork, cladding walls with stone, artificial stone timber, plastic or tiles.

12.2 Despite pressure to alter properties and a number of breaches of planning control, the Article 4 Direction has been successful in safeguarding the appearance and character of the area and it is not proposed that the Direction be revoked.

12.3 Repair and restoration work should always try to retain the original appearance of the building and be in materials to match the originals. The use of uPVC to replace original timber for windows, particularly on elevations facing the street, will not normally be permitted; uPVC windows are unlikely to match the detail or craftsmanship of the original timber windows. Wherever possible, existing window frames should be repaired rather than replaced. Where a roof has to be re-laid, the original slates should be re-used, supplemented with second-hand slates. Artificial slates should not be used, as their shiny, regular appearance is out of keeping with the area. Slates should not be coated with bitumen or plastic coatings as this will not only look unattractive but can cause roof timbers to rot due to lack of ventilation and will also prevent the salvage and possible re-use of slates.

12.4 Conservation area designation also means that consent must be obtained from the Council to demolish all but the smallest buildings (such as outbuildings) and may also be needed to demolish parts of buildings, such as chimney stacks or front boundary walls. There are also tighter restrictions on installing satellite dishes within conservation areas than elsewhere. The Council accepts that it would be unreasonable to oppose their installation altogether, but normally requires that dishes and antennae are placed on the rear of buildings so as to have the least possible effect on the character and appearance of the conservation area.

13.0 Conservation Area boundary

13.1 The Council is required to periodically review the boundaries of conservation areas and to consider cancellation of designation where part of an area no longer possesses the special interest, which led to its original designation.

13.2 As part of the survey for this character statement, the boundaries of the Conservation Area have been re-assessed. It is considered, however, that the Spinney Hill Park Conservation Area remains an area of special architectural and historic interest and continues to justify its special status. It is not therefore proposed to revise the boundary.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: List of Properties within Spinney Hill Park Conservation Area

Asfordby Street – No. 1

Ashbourne Street – Nos. 63 & 70

Baggrave Street – No. 1

Berners Street – Nos. 147 & 154

Buxton Street - No.81

Cork Street – No.2

Dale Street – No.77

Darley Street – Nos. 69 & 74

Derwent Street – Nos. 71 & 68

Diseworth Street – Nos. 55 & 57

Donnington Street – No. 65

Dronfield Street – Nos. 1 & 2

Earl Howe Street – No. 132

East Park Road – St Stephen's Church, Nos. 123, 168-176, petrol station, 188-238, 264-280, 284-294

Fairfield Street – No.1

Gwendolen Road – No.2

Halstead Street – Nos.1 & 2

Hartington Road – No.76 (Wesley Hall)

Mere Road - Nos.91-119, 123-181, Evangelical Free Church, 183, 189-215, Imperial Hotel, 126-152, 166-182

Moat Road No. 1

Nottingham Road No.1

Spinney Hill Park – The Lodge

Park Vale Road – Nos1-71

St Saviour's Road – Nos.148-248

Shelbourne Street – Nos. 1, 5-11

Worthington Street - No.78

All buildings are covered by an Article 4 Direction except the following:

East Park Road: St Stephen's Church & petrol filling station;

Hartington Road: Wesley Hall & School;

Mere Road: Former Imperial Hotel, Nos.175-181 & Evangelical Church.

Appendix 2: Listed Buildings

There are no listed buildings within the Conservation Area.