



20. THE DOWNS CONSERVATION AREA

DESCRIPTION

- (1) The Conservation Area is dominated by the Downs, an expansive plateau of open parkland, defined by the Avon Gorge and Westbury Road to the west and east with the slopes of Clifton and Stoke Bishop to the south and north. This was bought up mainly by the Wills family and laid out for the people of Bristol in the Victorian period. It is now maintained by the City of Bristol. It divides



into six distinct areas. The first is a more intensely developed area of diverse terraces around Westbury Park and Downs Park. The second, the main plateau is short grass land with some low shrubs edged along principal roads by avenue trees. This generous open area is enclosed by substantial buildings predominantly villas and institutional buildings dating from the Victorian and Edwardian period.

- (2) To the south east, an area of old shallow quarry workings defines the edge to Clifton and Bridge Valley Road. This has a more enclosed character due to low lying scrub dotted with mature trees. The terraces and villas edging Clifton form an essential component to the setting of this part of the Downs.
- (3) To the south west, an open narrow ridge edging the Gorge rises gently through a landscaped promenade to the Iron Age Hill Fort terminated by the Observatory. The Gorge, a precipitous chasm edged by tree-clad cliffs, is spanned by Brunel's suspension bridge and forms a national landmark. Apart from the Portway at the base, the area remains unbuilt on with the open valley floor forming a pleasing contrast to the cliffs above.
- (4) To the north, the edge of Sneyd Park is lined with grand rubble stone Victorian Villas with mature frontages and boundary walls, while further along, an area of largely open space with substantial villas in extensive grounds has unfortunately been overlaid in recent years by small scale infill buildings. However, as its apex, St. Monica's, still retaining its original gardens forms a fitting termination to this, the north end of the Downs. Beyond St. Monica's, the high walls of rubble stone with trees behind enclose the road and define more private areas of open land leading to the village of Westbury-on-Trym.
- (5) Predominant materials in the area are characterised by the use of lias and pennant limestone rubble and render. Roofs, often visually dominant are of slate and tile. The elaborate boundary walls with their gate piers in ashlar stone, often with pierced arcading, are a feature of the area.

KEY ISSUES

Traffic and Movement

- (1) Westbury Road, a pleasant tree-lined avenue, is both a main vehicle and pedestrian route into the city from the north. Its congestion at peak hours and use by fast moving traffic at other periods downgrades its character and its attractiveness as a pedestrian route.
- (2) To the south, both Clifton Down and Upper Belgrave Road are commuter routes where problems of congestion at peak periods is compounded by on-street parking. This reduces the parkland aspect of this edge of the city.
- (3) At the junction at the top of Bridge Valley Road, the high quality of the environment created by the Promenade and the Downs is reduced by the visual intrusion of queuing traffic at peak periods.
- (4) The setting and approaches to the Brunel Suspension Bridge are marred by the queuing of commuters at peak periods and at weekends.
- (5) The Portway, running along the Avon Gorge, creates through its heavy use by vehicles both on weekdays and at weekends, a detrimental environment especially in respect of noise for use of the Gorge for recreation and leisure activities.

Land Use

- (6) Intensification of residential use within the landscaped gardens to the older dwelling houses has resulted in loss of the quality of the open landscaped edges to the Downs, especially to those areas at the north-west along Saville Road.



- (7) Conversion of single dwelling houses into flats has put pressure on converting parts of front or rear gardens as hardstanding for cars.

Townscape

- (8) There are many small buildings, kiosks, and items of street furniture of interest within the Conservation Area which need to be well maintained to be used and respected.
- (9) In recent years due to increased storm damage many fine trees have been lost. Consequently some key landscape features are in a more fragmented condition.
- (10) The quality and consistency of building materials in many localities edging the Downs gives a distinctive character which is very sensitive to change and replacement.
- (11) The loss of traditional boundary walls, piers and gates, to allow car parking in gardens downgrades the character of the period dwellings and their landscaped settings.

GENERAL ENHANCEMENT OBJECTIVES

- (1) An environmental traffic management scheme, including provision for cyclists, needs to be prepared in conjunction with the Highway Authority. This should address the issue of over use of the peripheral routes to the Downs and encourage more protected pedestrian and cyclist movement through the spaces.
- (2) As part of the Management Scheme, a study should be prepared investigating the possibility of restricting vehicular use of the principal roads at certain times such as weekends and bank holidays.
- (3) The effect of Park and Ride, in ameliorating over-intensive use by vehicles, especially at the Suspension Bridge should be assessed in conjunction with the Traffic Management scheme as set out in (1) above.
- (4) The Downs Edge and its related gardens is particularly sensitive as it makes a significant contribution to the expansive and sylvan quality of the space. Any car parking which intrudes by being visible from the Downs and its related footpaths will be resisted. In this case, the City Council's Conservation Handbook Principle P33 will be applied.
- (5) Where conversion of large dwellinghouses into flats results in a significant increase in car parking provision and acts detrimentally to the quality of the open landscaping in the Conservation Area, it will be resisted.
- (6) The intensification with residential use of landscaped gardens to older dwellinghouses will be resisted.
- (7) An audit of significant items of street furniture of historic interest needs to be prepared within the Conservation Area and their maintenance and repair should be encouraged on a regular basis.
- (8) A landscape management scheme needs to be prepared in conjunction with the Leisure Services Directorate to ensure the continuing well maintained open spaces and ensure re-establishment of any trees which have been lost or need replacing.
- (9) Particular groups of significant villas and large Victorian buildings rely for their effect on a range of quality materials, i.e. natural lias and pennant, rubble and dressed stone. This extends to their outbuildings and boundary walls. This character will be strengthened, maintained, and original features retained and repaired.