An aerial photograph of Pirton Village, showing a mix of residential buildings, green fields, and a central church. The village is surrounded by lush greenery and rolling hills. The text is overlaid on the upper half of the image.

PIRTON VILLAGE

Character Assessment

Pirton Neighbourhood Development Plan

October 2016

CONTENTS:

1.	Introduction, Background and Context	1
1.1	About this document	1
2.	History and Evolution of Pirton	1
2.1	The Village Today.....	3
3.	Heritage Assets	4
4.	Landscape Character of Pirton	7
5.	Village Settlement Character of Pirton.....	10
5.1	Overarching Character.....	10
5.2	Topography.....	10
5.3	Layout and spacing	10
5.4	Open spaces.....	11
5.5	Gardens, Trees and Natural Features.....	13
5.6	Roads, Routes and Connections	14
5.7	Streetscape	16
5.8	Views within the Village	18
5.9	Hedges and Trees and Flora	20
5.10	Mammals.....	20
5.11	Amphibians.....	20
5.12	Birds.....	20
5.13	Butterflies and Moths.....	20
6.	Design	21
6.1	Buildings Overview	21
6.2	Building Typologies and Styles	21
7.	Appendix 1: List of Important Views in Pirton Village and Parish	25
8.	Appendix 2: Heritage - Archaeology and History	29
8.1	Heritage Assets - Most Significant Archaeological Assets	33
8.2	Hertfordshire County Council Historic Environment Record Designated Archaeological Alert Areas..	34
8.3	Historic Environment Record Data for the Parish of Pirton - Hertfordshire County Council	37
8.4	National Heritage List for England – Pirton, Hertfordshire – Listed Buildings and Scheduled Monuments:	41
8.5	Pirton non-listed important buildings of LOCAL INTEREST	44
8.6	Heritage Policies That Influence Character	44
9.	Appendix 3: The Landscape Setting.....	46
9.1	Landscape Policies that Influence Character.....	48
10.	Appendix 4: Wildlife	50
10.1	Habitat.....	50

10.2	Wildlife Policies That Influence Character.....	52
10.3	Protected Species in Pirton.....	52
10.4	List of Species in Pirton.....	53
10.5	Wildlife Policies and Legislation	68
11.	Appendix 5: Buildings and Design.....	68
11.1	Design that Supports Pirton Character.....	71
12.	APPENDIX 6: Pirton Street Character	72

1. INTRODUCTION, BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT



Fig. 1: Aerial Photograph of Pirton Village

1.1 About this document

This document, prepared by the Pirton Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, and supported by Pirton Parish Council, provides an overview of the character and key qualities that define the village of Pirton. It has been produced as one part of a larger project – the Pirton Neighbourhood Development Plan.

Once adopted, the Neighbourhood Plan will be used by the North Hertfordshire District Council when considering planning applications which are submitted within the Parish area. This Character Assessment supports the design and character policies progressed within the Neighbourhood Plan, and will help to ensure that development proposals are designed in a manner which is complimentary to and reinforce the distinct and special character of Pirton.

2. HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF PIRTON

Pirton, whose name is first recorded in the Domesday Book of AD 1086 as Peritone, meaning ‘pear tree farm’, lies at the eastern end of the Chiltern Hills, a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and is on the Icknield Way, an ancient trade route that now is popular with walkers, cyclists and horse riders. Today the village has a triangular plan bounded by Priors Hill and Hitchin Road, Walnut Tree Road, Royal Oak Lane, Holwell Road, West Lane, and Shillington Road. Within the area now defined by these roads, but also at times beyond these boundaries, the village plan has developed. The pattern of its layout and shape has changed over the centuries, as the village economy and population alternately prospered, declined, then revived over the past about fourteen hundred years of its history.

In simple terms, modern Pirton comprises a large open area in the south-east, known as the Bury and Toot Hill, which was the site of a Medieval motte and bailey castle and an area of streets and houses, now

surviving as earthworks, finally abandoned in the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries. To the north and west exists a larger area of houses and farms, dating from the Medieval period through to the present day. There is another open area on the hill spur east of Priors Hill, with Shillington Road and, beyond, Rectory Farm and Manor to the north, while Burge End Lane with its scattered houses and farms forms a northwards extension out of the compact triangular village plan. The arrangement of roads, open spaces and buildings, and the particular way the village has developed down the centuries gives Pirton a special and unique character.

Pirton has a long history and place in the landscape, including Neolithic (4000-2500 BC) burial mounds, known as barrows or tumuli, like Knocking Knoll, and Bronze Age (2500-750 BC) barrows, such as at Tingley Wood Plantation and on Priors Hill (where the mounds have been ploughed away leaving only the surrounding ring-ditches), sited on the high ground where they would have been viewed from contemporary settlements on the lower ground by the spring-lines. Later, a late Iron Age (150 BC – 43 AD), Roman (43 – 410 AD), sub-Roman (410 – c.500 AD), early Saxon (c.500-650AD), to middle Saxon (c.650 – 850 AD) settlement developed along the north end of Dane Field by the Driftway to Shillington. In the area of the present day village, there were a number of scattered Romano-British farmsteads, for example, near the Recreation Field, on the Bury, in Pollards Way, and alongside the stream between Rectory Farm and Burge End and Hammonds Farms.

In the early pagan Saxon period (5th – 6th century AD), a cemetery was located on the ridge forming the parish boundary between Pirton and Shillington, overlooking Dane Field, and recent archaeological work on the spur of land on the east side of Priors Hill has revealed a rare enclosed, probably high status, early-middle Saxon settlement, perhaps originating c. 500 AD, and continuing into the tenth century. In May 2016 this was designated as a Scheduled Monument.

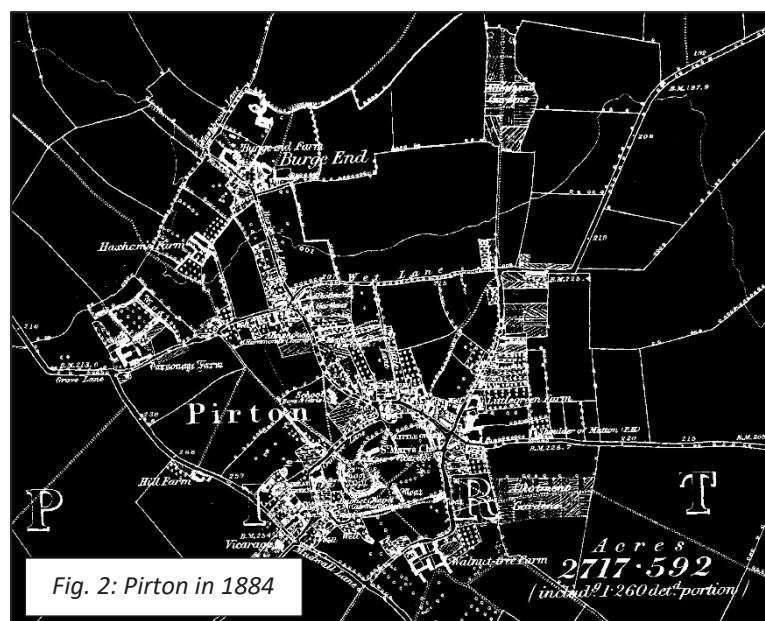
During the same period, Pirton is a very rare recorded example in an English village of the establishment of a pioneering early Christian community, with a 8/9th century AD middle Saxon timber church and associated graveyard to the south, together with surrounding timber domestic halls, excavated by archaeologists in the mid-1990s behind the Fox Public House, at what is now Coleman's Close. Occupation of the site continued into the fourteenth century, although the church and its graveyard seem to have been abandoned in the tenth century, to be replaced by present day St. Mary's parish church on Great Bury.

The timber motte and bailey castle surviving as earthworks at Toot Hill, meaning 'look-out hill', and the Bury are thought to have been constructed in the Anarchy period during the civil war between King Stephen and Queen Matilda (1135-54). Its eastern bailey encloses the parish church of St. Mary, which probably dates from the 10th/11th century.

From the late Saxon period to the mid 14th century, the village had a nucleated plan, as it does now.

Archaeological test pitting throughout the village area since 2007 has demonstrated that Pirton was very badly affected by the 1349 Black Death and subsequent outbreaks of this bubonic plague. By the beginning of the 15th century the population had reduced by a catastrophic 76%. It took several centuries for it to recover and as it did the layout and character of the village changed. There were small cultivated fields, paddocks, orchards, and vegetable plots between clusters of farms and cottages, called Ends and Greens, all linked by tracks.

In the 1086 Domesday Book, Pirton is recorded with one of the highest



populations in a Hertfordshire village, perhaps nearly 500 inhabitants. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Pirton seems to have had a scattered and low-density occupation throughout the area of the present village. The population gradually recovered through the 17th and 18th centuries, by 1801 there were again around 500 inhabitants, and then expanded rapidly and considerably in the 19th and 20th centuries.

New houses were built in the later 19th century, mostly terraces of the characteristic Arlesley White brick (made from local gault clay), a number of which are spread throughout the village, but some much larger Victorian houses were also built, for example, Pirton Court and Pirton Hall.

Between 1920 and 1955 municipal housing estates of Davis Crescent, Danefield Road and Pollards Way were built to house the expanding population. The village hall, which was built in 1930, still provides an excellent, well-used and much-loved facility for groups, functions and other activities.

Between 1965 and 1990 a large modern estate of 68 private houses was constructed as four separate developments at Cromwell Way and Bunyan Close on former farm orchards. In addition, between 1965 and 1990 there were 6 individual houses built as infill development in these two roads.

The last large infill development of 17 houses was at Coleman's Close in the late 1990s on a pasture field to the rear of The Fox public house. In 2006 12 dwellings were completed at Elm Tree Farm Close, off Hambridge Way.

These small and large infill developments in the second half of the 20th century on former open spaces, farmyards, fields and orchards within the village altered its historic character to a significant extent, changing it from the Post-Medieval dispersed poly-focal settlement pattern of Greens and Ends linked by lanes into the compact nucleated village it is today. A number of smaller developments, many comprising single dwellings, continue to be built in large gardens and small open areas. Over the last few decades, many small houses in the village have been extended, turning them into larger dwellings, a process which continues today.

In 2015 construction was completed of 11 affordable, shared ownership and social houses at Baulk Gardens, on the north side of Pollards Way, promoted by the Parish Council as an exception site outside the village development boundary.

2.1 The Village Today

Today Pirton is a village of approximately 1300 people with more than 520 dwellings, on the edge of the slopes of the Chiltern Hills and on the edge of the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) situated in North Hertfordshire on the border with Bedfordshire. Much of the village is designated as a Conservation Area and there are 55 Listed Buildings and 4 Scheduled Monuments. The B655 between Hitchin and Barton-le-Clay is the nearest main road and the nearest junction is 2 miles away. The village is

situated 35 miles north of London and is close to equidistant between the A1 and M1. Pirton is also within 4 miles of the railway station at Hitchin which has an excellent high-speed train service to London as well as being within 10 miles of Luton Airport and Luton Parkway railway station and about 30 miles from Stansted airport.



Fig. 3: View down the High Street

Pirton is therefore, a desirable place to live, not only due to its accessibility to London, major roads, rail links and airports, but also due to its quiet, rural setting in the countryside. Pirton has a number of open and recreational spaces; a range of facilities including a primary school and village shop and post office; and the community hosts clubs and associations to cater for a wide range of interests from walking group to amateur dramatics.

The population of Pirton is diverse. There are people of all ages, backgrounds and occupations with many children and older residents. Both lifelong residents of the village and newer arrivals participate in community activities. This diversity contributes greatly to the vitality of the village.

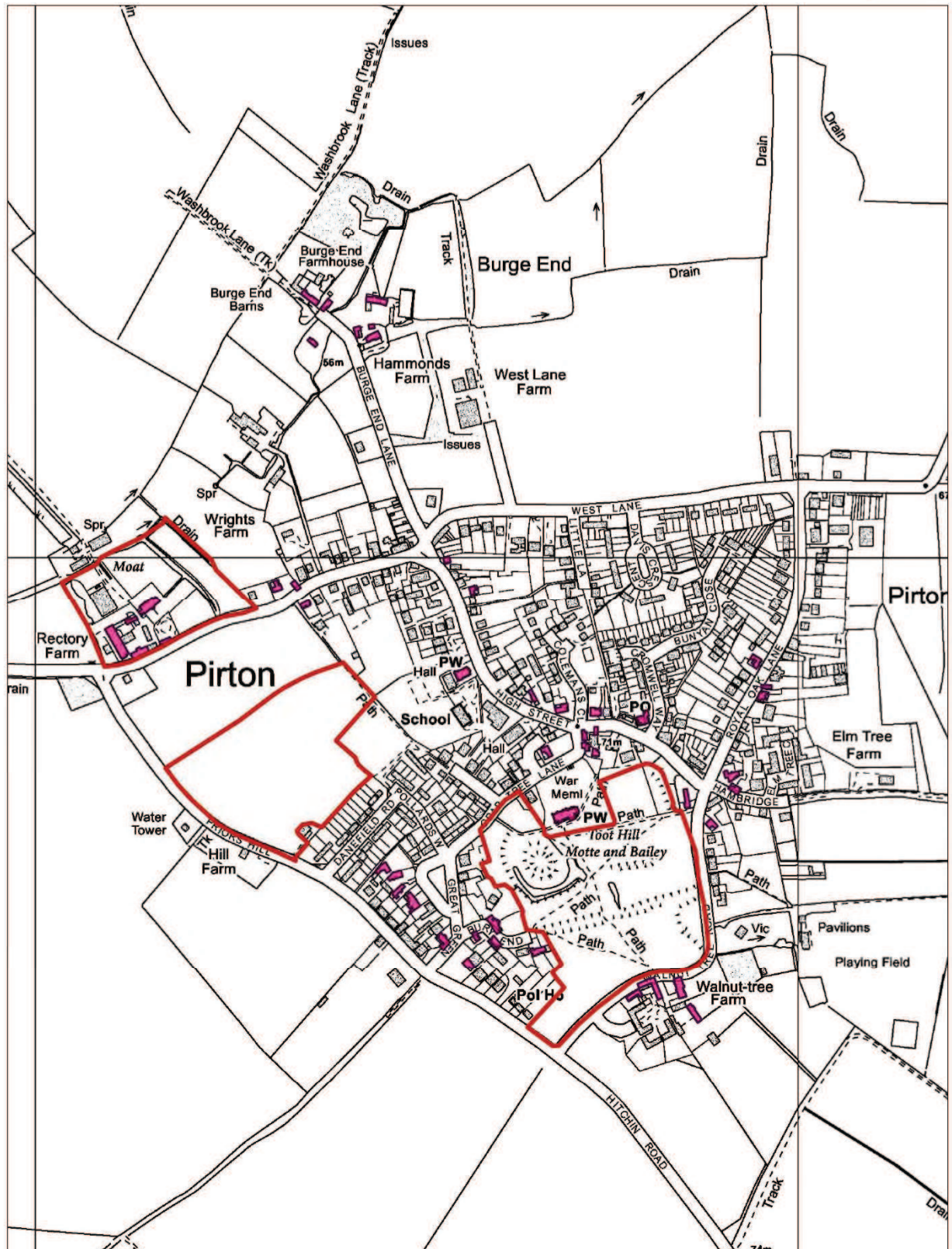
3. HERITAGE ASSETS

Pirton has a particularly rich heritage of historic buildings and archaeological monuments and sites, including many of regional or national importance. These contribute significantly to the character of the village and make it one of the most historically important settlements in the region. Recent historical research carried out by the Pirton Local History Group, and significant archaeological work, including a community project in being since 2007, in conjunction with Cambridge and Lincoln Universities and the North Hertfordshire Archaeological Society, has vastly increased the knowledge and understanding of the development of Pirton. A more detailed account of the results of this work can be found at Appendix 2.

Pirton is especially noted for its medieval (AD1066-1500) monuments. The most famous and well-known is the Scheduled motte and bailey castle, known as 'Toot Hill' (meaning "look out"). This comprises a large earth mound (the motte) with a water-filled moat and two outer, defence areas (the baileys), and is thought to have been constructed in the Anarchy period during the civil war between King Stephen and Queen Matilda (1135-54). The Grade 1 Listed parish church of St. Mary, which dates from the 10/11th century, also lies within one of the castle baileys.

To the south-east of the castle and church is a large grassed area known as 'The Bury', containing the earthwork remains of former houses and streets. Both the Castle and the Bury are nationally important and are designated as a Scheduled Monument, as is the newly-discovered early/middle Saxon settlement on Priors Hill. Pirton village also contains Scheduled medieval moated sites at Rectory Manor and Pirton Grange. There are well-preserved earthwork remains of medieval "ridge and furrow" ploughing in two fields bisected by Shillington Road at Rectory Farm, and other settlement earthworks between Rectory Manor and Burge End Farm, including the remains of moated sites, and in other fields that surround the village, such as Maltings Close, which are described in more detail in the next section.

Pirton also has a large number of important historic buildings, 55 of which are Listed (See Fig. 4). At least three former manor houses lie within the village, Rectory Farm, Hammonds Farm and Docwra Manor. A Grade II* Listed 16th century tithe barn also lies at Rectory Farm. A group of fine medieval and Tudor timber-framed buildings are found on Great Green and at Burge End. 'Three Gables' in Bury End was originally a medieval hall house with cross wings. Given this abundance of Listed buildings, much of the village is designated as a Conservation Area (See Fig. 5).



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Fig. 4: Map of Listed buildings in Pirton

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Pirton Neighbourhood Development Plan



Village Conservation Area



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Fig. 5: Map Pirton Conservation Area

4. LANDSCAPE CHARACTER OF PIRTON

Pirton today is a compact, nucleated village, triangular in shape, contrasting with many neighbouring villages in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, where they tend to be either ribbon developments, like Arlesey, or poly-focal, with separated Greens and Ends linked by streets, such as neighbouring Shillington. Until recent decades, Pirton had a similar layout to the latter.

The village is surrounded by open countryside in its parish: north-west to Shillington village, north to the Stondon, north-east to Holwell village, east to Ickleford village, south to Hitchin parish, south-west to Offley parish, while immediately to the west, within a stone's throw, is the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Pirton nestles comfortably in the middle of this landscape and is located on a spring-line at the foot of the chalk escarpment of the Chiltern Hills. The countryside merges seamlessly into the village and vice versa and plays an important part in shaping the village's character.

A network of footpaths and bridleways, such as the Driftway, Hambridge Way and Wood Lane, through this open countryside links Pirton to surrounding villages and the town of Hitchin. These afford a unique view of the village as a green, wooded area, concealing many of the houses and other buildings. Aerial views of the village clearly show its isolation and its green and wooded spaces.

The large arable fields to the west, some in excess of 40 ha, contribute to the character of the village and its setting as they sweep up from the village into the Chiltern Hills. These fields lead up to broad-leaved woodland, sometimes ancient, such as Tingley Wood, important and invaluable for wildlife and biodiversity. This area is part of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Fig. 6: View from Wood Lane



Fig. 7: Birds-eye view of Pirton, showing the wider landscape

The views from the village at Priors Hill and from the Hitchin Road to the west are amongst the most stunning in the County. The 180-degree panorama over Bedfordshire to the north is spectacular. Equally, the view down from the Chilterns AONB, e.g. High Down, Tingley Wood and Knocking Knoll area to Priors Hill and the village is very impressive. Looking up to Priors Hill from the Shillington Road and from the Driftway, the trackway to Apsley End, one sees the tower of St. Mary's church and few houses on the skyline, as most are hidden by trees and hedges.



Fig. 8: View of Pirton from High Down



Fig. 9: View of Pirton from Shillington Road

Looking from the large, green open space of the Bury, on the south-east edge of the village, which physically merges the countryside into the heart of the village, the ancient woods of Highdown line the horizon, where frequently buzzards and red kites can be seen soaring on the thermals that develop on the hillside. These areas provide the village with open views to the countryside. Looking from these directions, the village can be seen only partly since the hedges and trees obscure many of the buildings.

The eastern edge of the village is partly bounded by small grass fields. The views from this area, notably from Walnut Tree Road, the Recreation Field, Hambridge Way, and Holwell Turn, are panoramic ones of undulating arable fields across to Wilbury Hill, the Letchworth ridge, and the Weston Hills beyond. To the south-west, the Chilterns scarp with Highdown and Tingley Wood make a striking view.

Looking to the right as one enters the village on the Holwell Road, the scattering of houses and farm buildings on Burge End Lane are barely visible since they are mostly hidden by trees, except for the barn in

West Lane. Likewise, ahead only a few dwellings are partly visible due to trees and hedges and a slight dip in the land hiding others.

There are three main approaches to the village of Pirton. One is described above coming from Holwell. The most frequently used is the C23 from the Hexton Road through to Pirton and Shillington.

Travelling towards Pirton on the C23 from the hill at Punch's Cross on the Icknield Way, glimpses of the village are gained as the long, straight road gently undulates. The first impression from this direction is of a leafy rural village, the church tower alone standing out from the surrounding mature broad-leaved and conifer trees. Even when within a couple of hundred metres, the village houses remain largely hidden from view.

Following the loss of elms due to disease, and beech trees to storm damage, a great deal of tree planting has been carried out in the village over many years. Small copses, garden trees and mature chestnuts, limes and sycamores once again mask the village housing to the south.

Entering Pirton from the direction of Shillington, there is a panoramic view of the Chiltern Hills AONB – wooded valleys and steep majestic hillsides. Nearing Pirton from this north direction, one sees on either side of the Shillington Road, the Grove Lane ridge and furrow fields. On the north-western edge of the village are two grass fields which still show well-preserved Medieval 'ridge and furrow' earthworks, remnants of the strip system of arable farming. Numerous narrow strips together formed a single large open field. The field is now enclosed by hedges and is bisected by the Pirton to Shillington road. The ridge and furrow can be seen most clearly in low-angled sunlight, especially from the air or higher ground. Some of the first buildings seen are classic Hertfordshire black-boarded farm conversions and new sympathetic houses, at Rectory Farm, together with its 16th century tithe barn.

For further details of the most important views into and out of Pirton see Appendix 1 of this document, and for a more detailed Landscape Assessment, see Appendix 3.

5. VILLAGE SETTLEMENT CHARACTER OF PIRTON

5.1 Overarching Character



The settlement of Pirton is triangular in shape and is substantially contained within and along three relatively minor routes; Holwell Road – West Lane – Shillington Road to the north; Priors Hill – Hitchin Road north to south-east; and Royal Oak Lane – Walnut Tree Road north to south-west. Within the area now defined by these roads, but also at times beyond these boundaries, the village plan has developed. The pattern of its layout and shape has changed over the centuries. Within this relatively small area, in-fill has also taken place. The result is that, with the exception of a number of estate developments, the buildings in any view are extremely diverse, both in age and style.

5.2 Topography

The village lies in an area which slopes irregularly down from southwest to northeast, with the Chilterns, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, rising above the southwest. Not being in flat terrain increases the visibility of the countryside from within the village at both the upper and lower ends.

5.3 Layout and spacing

Historically, the village would have been a very low-density environment. Over the years, however, densities have increased due to construction on open sites and infill developments. Notwithstanding this, the design of individual developments seems to have been, on the whole, successful in retaining a village character. One feature of this character is that all of the housing, traditional and modern, is of a maximum of two storeys in height. The only exceptions to this are a traditional cottage and a house extension, both of which, although of three storeys, have the height of a typical two-storey building.

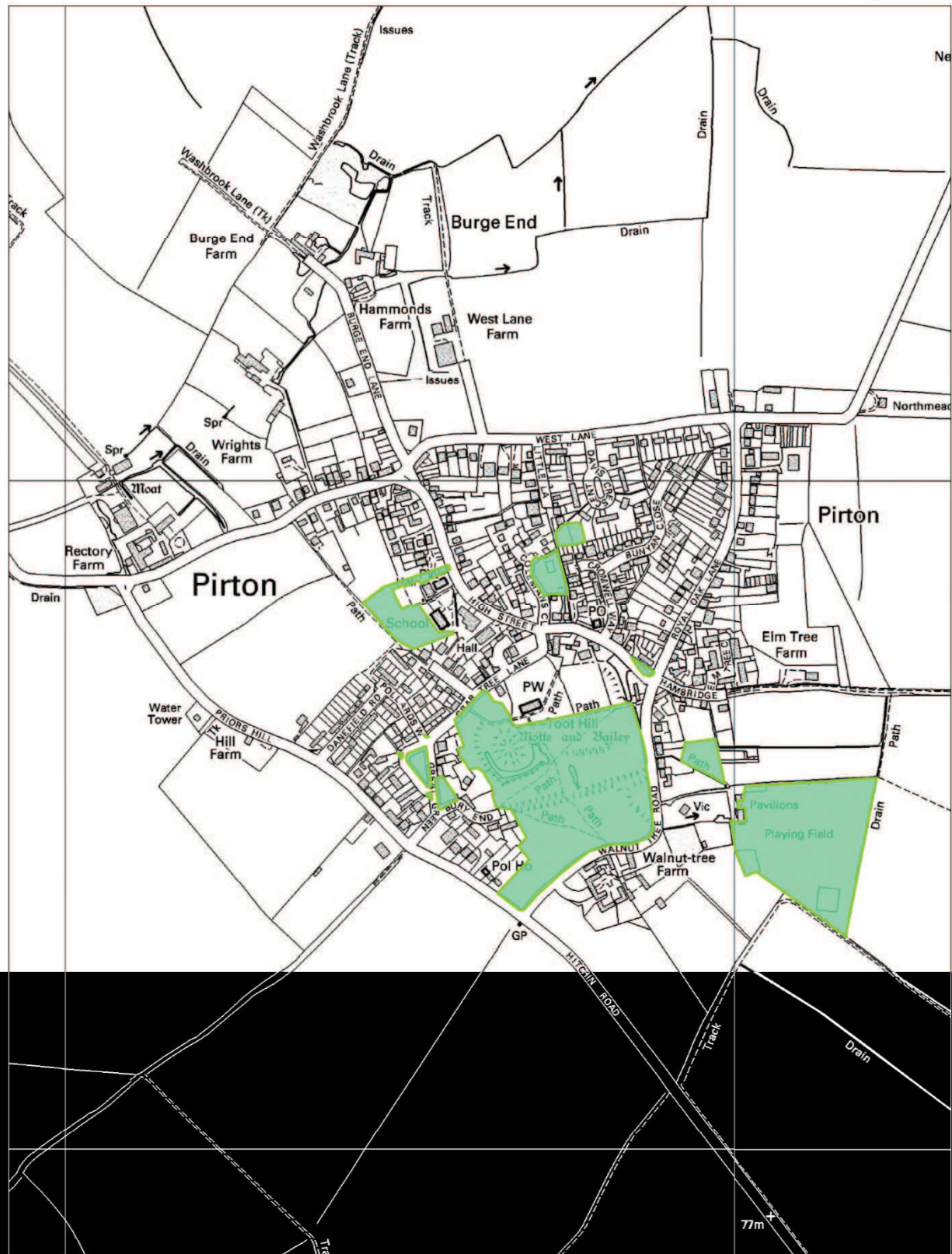
The amount of space interspersed between buildings and groups of buildings does vary across the village, however the majority of properties are either detached or semi-detached, and many enjoy generous residential curtilages with front and back gardens. Most properties in the village, both traditional and modern, sit in their own grounds, separated by open space, and are generally set back from the road.

Overall therefore, the village has a quite an open feel, with regular breaks in development allowing glimpses through to other parts of the village and beyond. This spacing is clearly shown by the below figure-ground map of the village, which highlights the grain of the village layout and the frequent spacing between buildings.

5.4 Open spaces

The village benefits from many impressive and important open spaces, each of which positively contributes to the village's character. Significant open spaces include:

- 5.4.1** The Scheduled Monument of The Bury with the earthwork remains of the Motte and Bailey Castle. The Scheduled area includes a large area behind the Motte and Bailey pub (See Fig. 4.)
- 5.4.2** Great Green, Village Green and the open and play space on Middle Green in Coleman's Close, the most recent development, where open space has been incorporated in keeping with village character (See Fig. 11).
- 5.4.3** Pirton Vicarage Nature Area, Blacksmith's Pond, the Recreation Ground, and certain areas named as allotments, are further substantial open areas.
- 5.4.4** The recreation ground and Middle Green in Coleman's Close provide for the play space needs of the village. Pirton School has substantial playing fields.



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Fig. 11: Village open spaces

5.5 Gardens, Trees and Natural Features

The green and open character of Pirton (See Fig. 11) is further strengthened by the fact that many of the properties in the village have large green gardens, which open to the road. Throughout the village there are also many generous verges, notably at Little Green, and greenswards, even in more recent development areas. There are then various smaller, sometimes 'overgrown' areas, often containing poor quality specimens, yet still contributing to greenness, and providing valuable natural habitats.



Fig. 12: Private gardens provide green character with a great variety of trees

There are numerous hedges and paths providing green routes, shelter and potential sustenance for wildlife. They consist of a good range of shrubby species and often support a number of flowering plants at their base, all providing a variety of nesting and feeding opportunities for a wide range of animals, insects and birds.

The Parish Council has undertaken a number of successful tree-planting schemes within the village and this, along with the retention of existing trees, should enhance the village's green character.

Many private gardens within Pirton support a variety of trees and other planting, all of which add to the green and leafy character of the village.



Fig. 13: Dane field

There are a number of ponds within the village, particularly in the area around St Mary's Church. The most prominent example is Blacksmith's pond, but others appear on The Bury itself, and the remains of the mediaeval moat retain substantial water that provides valuable habitat for mammals, amphibians and insects and which complement the character of this part of the village.

Fig 14: Rookery at St Mary's Church



Fig 15: Trees along the Churchyard path



Fig 16: Photos of Blacksmith's Pond



5.6 Roads, Routes and Connections

All three approach roads to the village are narrow and winding in character. Within the village there are three main routes across the triangle: High Street, and the route across Great Green and down Crabtree Lane linking into High Street; and Walnut Tree Road and Royal Oak Lane, again linking with High Street. These thoroughfares are also generally serpentine rather than straight.

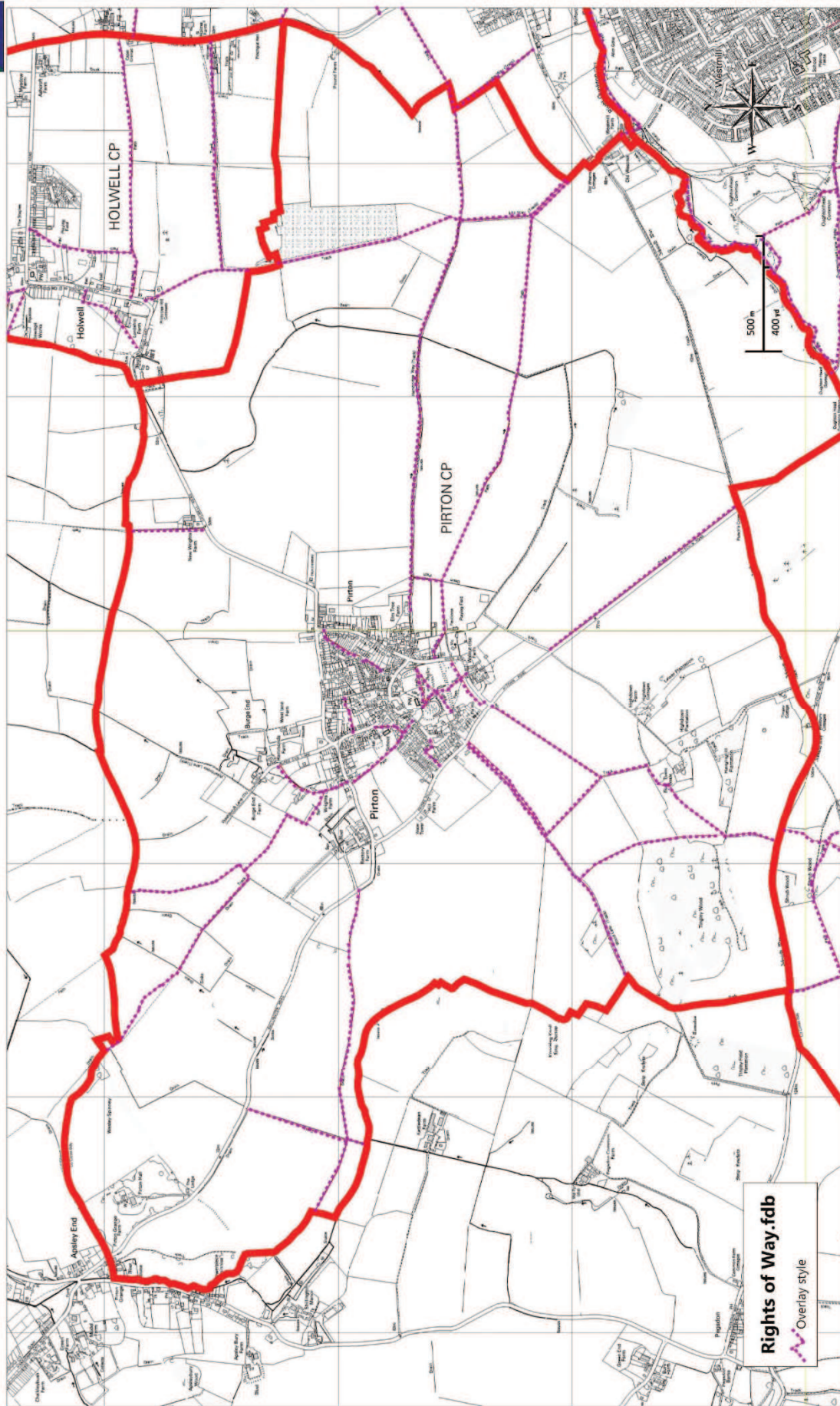
Roads in the village are generally narrow. Where there are footpaths, these are also usually narrow and often only run along one side of the road.

A particular characteristic, arising from the triangular shape, is the unusually high number of cul-de-sacs. Thus there are large areas of the village where there is no through traffic at all, providing a quieter and safer environment for residents and children.

Main village thoroughfares and footpath surfaces are tarmac. Some cul-de-sac roads are of modular type surfaces such as woven block paving.

Within Pirton, green footpaths thread across the village providing a major supplement to pedestrian access. These contribute to the pedestrian-friendly nature of this village in that a cul-de-sac is seldom a dead end for a pedestrian, with footpaths ensuring connectivity with other parts of the village. The paths are integral to the character of Pirton, making it a very walkable village and helping to enhance the sense of community.

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Fig 17 Map of footpaths



Figs. 18 and 19 Roads showing typical layout & width



5.7 Streetscape

The styles of street furniture (lamps, road names, road markings, bus shelters, notice boards, etc.) are mostly unobtrusive and traditional. The internal village signs are small in format. There is a range of streetlamp styles, but swan-necks are preferred by residents. The level of lighting is generally low and considered, by most villagers, appropriate to the village setting.

In recent developments at Baulk gardens, and at the recreation ground, dark sky friendly lighting has been introduced. This is a feature that I encouraged to preserve the rural feel of the village and respect its setting next to the Chilterns AONB.

Pirton has an elegant and moving War Memorial outside of St Mary's Churchyard. The Pirton Parish Council has introduced natural wood bench seating. Pirton has two special post boxes; one outside of the Post Office has two openings, one marked GR and one VR; while on Great Green the postbox is set into a wall.



Fig. 20: High Street post box



Fig. 21: Great Green post box