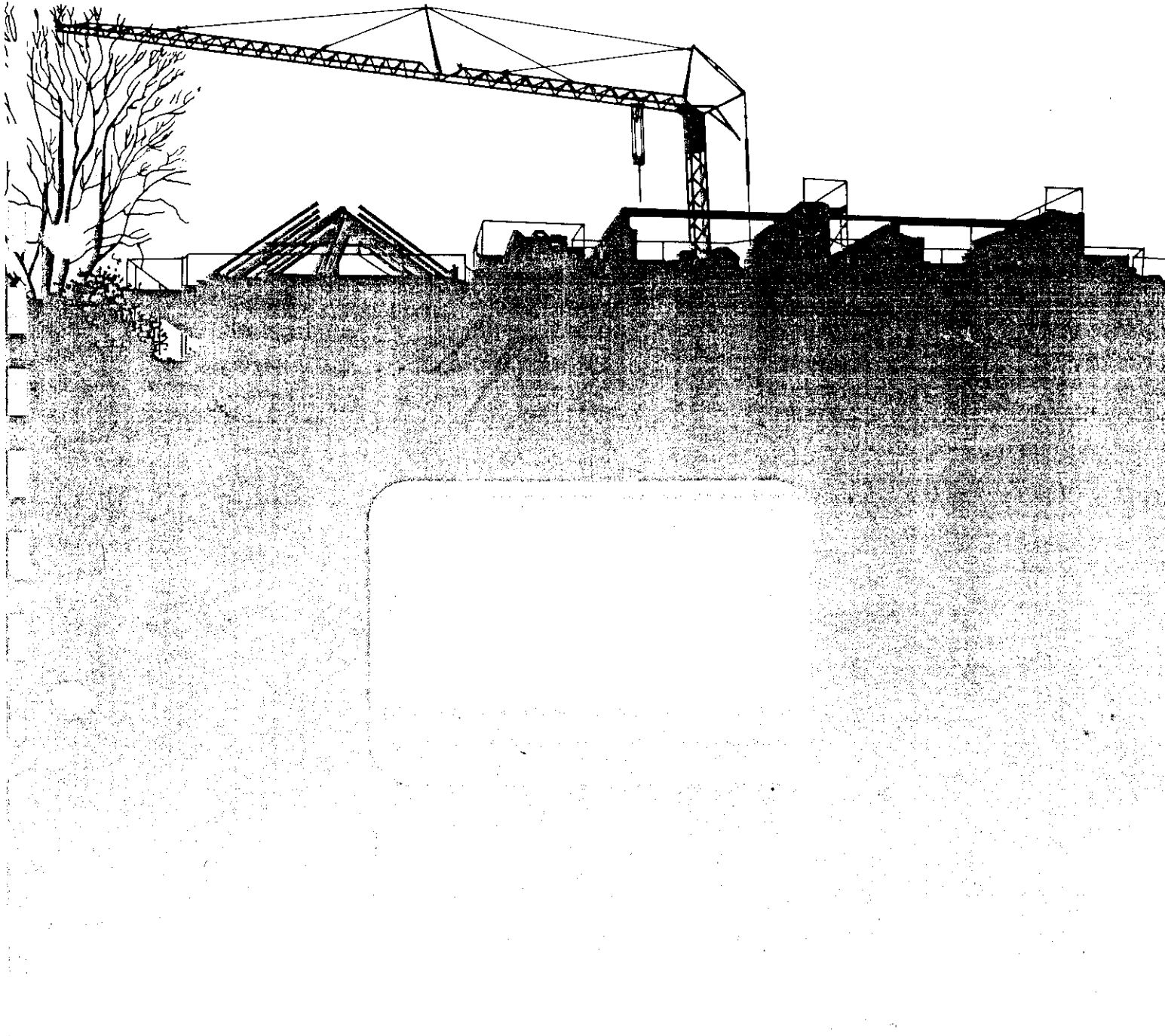


# Development —◆— Brief —◆—



NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Price



# North Hertfordshire District Council

## Planning Services

Approved by:  
Environment Committee - 9.3.95  
Full Council - 25.3.95

## River Hiz Development Guidelines

## **1.0 AIM OF THE DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES**

- 1.1 These Development Guidelines are concerned with the area of the River Hiz within Hitchin town centre where the river flows between Bridge Street and the junction of Nightingale Road/Grove Road. This is shown in the plan in Appendix 1. The river is a feature in the town that has affected the shape and character of the town and therefore the importance of a river within an historic town such as Hitchin cannot be over-estimated. At present the river provides a focal point which people use for recreation and valuable links for pedestrians between areas of the town. The District Council is aware that a number of sites in Hitchin town centre are likely to become available for re-development in the short to medium term (within 10 years) and considers that the integration of a publicly accessible corridor along the river is a key to both maintaining and enhancing the attractiveness of Hitchin town centre for shopping, business and recreational and residential purposes.
- 1.2 The Council wishes to guide development in the river's vicinity to provide a more pleasant urban feature making full use of this natural resource. This will provide a publicly accessible corridor along the river. The North Hertfordshire District Local Plan No. 2 (the Plan) has been adopted by the Council following the statutory process and includes within it several proposal sites within Hitchin town centre either around or over the line of the existing River Hiz. These guidelines are intended to amplify the statutory development plan and convey the desire of the Council to improve the quality of the built and natural environment. A proposed alteration to the Plan includes reference to them under para 5.3.2 which states that, "In order to facilitate the co-ordinated improvement of the area around the River Hiz the Council is preparing a development brief".

## **2.0 THE AREA OF THE GUIDELINES**

- 2.1 There are a number of important sites in the town centre near the river that will shape the future of Hitchin into and beyond the next century. The need for an overall approach is most important. This document will be used to guide developers and make development control decisions. However, outside this area there are other factors that need to be taken into consideration (e.g. quality and flow of water). The Council will seek to prevent activities taking place along other parts of the river which will affect aims of these guidelines. Further guidance on these areas may be produced.
- 2.2 These guidelines deal with (i) general issues that are relevant to the whole area and (ii) particular identified priority areas as shown in Appendix 2. The identified areas are defined on the basis of physical characteristics and particular problems/issues.

## **3.0 THE ROLE OF THE DISTRICT COUNCIL AND OTHER ORGANISATIONS**

- 3.1 Pursuant of the aims of these guidelines the role of the Council will:

(i) judge any planning application in the vicinity of the river against the general aims and objectives of the guidelines. Applications that do not meet these aims will be refused by the District Council as not conforming with supplementary planning guidance referred to in deposit alterations to the District Plan.

(ii) encourage developers of sites in the vicinity of the river to contribute towards the creation of the walkway outside their own site and/or to enhance any public open space or other public amenity in the area to the mutual benefit of both their development and the town centre as a whole.

(iii) encourage developments in accordance with these guidelines and other Policies and proposals in the Plan.

(iv) have regard to the aims of the guidelines in its decisions on highways/parks maintenance, and land in ownership decisions.

(v) encourage the involvement of local organisations, voluntary bodies, land owners

and developers in the maintenance and improvement of the river environment. This is seen as being of considerable importance to the implementation and long term maintenance of this important natural resource.

#### **4.0 PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS**

- 4.1 In the following sections general themes concerning development in the River Hiz area of Hitchin town centre are set out and key issues identified. These guidelines are not intended to be wholly prescriptive but any development should pay full regard to these aims to achieve a network of links and open spaces which will benefit both the town and the development surrounding the river.

#### **5.0 ACCESS**

- 5.1 The Government's planning policy guidance on transportation (PPG 13) - March 1994 has the general aim that there should be a reduction in the growth and length and number of motorised journeys, with local authorities encouraging alternative means of travel that have less environmental impact and hence reduce the reliance on the private car. Local authorities shall help to meet the commitments of the Government's sustainable development strategy. The Government recognises that such policies will also make a significant contribution to the goal of improving urban quality and vitality. In this regard many of the transport movements that we make every day are between our home and the town centre. If access by foot or by cycle to the town centre was made easier and a more pleasant experience then many more people would be encouraged to leave their car at home and walk and/or cycle into the town. A major deterrent is that many towns (including Hitchin) have a high level of car usage and busy roads and is therefore not particularly pleasant to walk or cycle into the town. A north-south route along the Hiz through the very centre of the historic town is an ideal opportunity to open a corridor of pedestrian or cycle transport which will be segregated from other forms of heavier, noisier and polluting traffic and provide a pleasant environment for people to access the town centre. For example, from the northern end of the proposed walkway (at the Grove Road/Nightingale Road junction) around 9000 people live within 5 minutes cycle ride and 7000 people live within 10 minutes walk.
- 5.2 It is proposed that all schemes for a "walkway" should be of sufficient width to provide an adequate shared surface for both pedestrians and cycles. In order to achieve this there should be a provision of a sympathetically designed surface of 3 metres wide (in some circumstances a slightly reduced width may be acceptable) with appropriate signage to warn both pedestrians and cyclists alike of the shared use. Any developments which take place in the vicinity of the river, be they private residential houses or shops or offices should provide adequate bicycle parking spaces and facilities in order to encourage people to use this mode of transport rather than a car. The walkway should be available for use at all times and should be safe for people to use (see Crime and Personal Safety). The long term aim is to provide a walkway and enhanced environment on both sides of the river however it is recognised that this may take a significant time to achieve. There should be continuity of design and 'sense of place' from one end to the other.
- 5.3 Some sections of the river have steep steps, narrow footpaths and edges that are not easily identifiable particularly to those with sight difficulties. The walkway should be a place that can be used by everyone. Redevelopment or enhancement proposals should reflect this aim.

#### **6.0 HITCHIN - "AN IMPORTANT CONSERVATION AREA"**

- 6.1 Hitchin town centre is a designated conservation area and identified in the recently adopted District Local Plan. The town centre has many important listed buildings. Policies 18 and 20 of the Plan relate to Listed Buildings and Conservation respectively. The listed buildings and conservation area boundaries are shown on map - Appendix 2.
- 6.2 Any proposals for both buildings and open spaces in the conservation area or near listed buildings must respect their style, character scale and materials and positively

preserve or enhance its character or appearance.

- 6.3 The design of the land surrounding the river will need to take account of landscape and urban design criteria. The materials for the walkway and street furniture should be sympathetic to their location and character of the town. In any development proposal buildings, and spaces between them, will need to reflect the materials used elsewhere in the town - traditional bricks and roof materials especially. Building heights are likely to be either two or three storey. Urban spaces will need to be positively planned to create a safe and attractive environment for people to use. It should be noted that a Bye-Law exists preventing new buildings or obstructive landscaping within 7 metres of the top of the bank of the watercourse.
- 6.4 One of the most important factors in the design of any enhancement or development proposal near to the river is the relationship between the pedestrian routes and the particular elements of a scheme. Situations which are unacceptable are access or service roads running alongside the walkway or the river, high blank walls that turn their back on the river and unsightly areas such as service or storage facilities. The character of the riverside walkway will depend very much on its location, for example - in the area adjoining St. Mary's Church it may be more appropriate to have wide open formal areas giving views of the Church where at certain points along the walkway because of the historic grain of the town it may be more important to preserve the particular features and in these areas the walkway may be relatively narrow. Above all, it should be usable and its design must make it desirable to use. This should consist of a combination of factors including both the design of the walkway but equally its relationship to surrounding uses and buildings.
- 6.5 High standards of hard and soft landscape design will be expected for the walkway and the area surrounding the river to create an attractive feature within the town. Planting should be of a high quality using predominantly native species. The design of the walkway and surrounding landscape/open areas should be such to withstand potential vandalism.

**Key areas where landscape design can be improved are:**  
**Russell's and Ransom's sites**  
**Portmill Lane**  
**Biggin Lane**

**The relationship to listed buildings (see map Appendix 2) such as the Biggin, St. Mary's Church and properties in Bancroft are of great importance and any proposals throughout this stretch of the river should have regard to the surrounding uses and buildings in accordance with Local Plan Policies 18 and 20.**

## **7.0 WILDLIFE**

- 7.1 Rivers offer wildlife habitats which should be protected and enhanced where possible, to maintain and enhance a diversity of plant and animal species. To this end, notwithstanding the necessity to consider certain parts of the river in isolation, it is necessary to have regard to the entirety of the river environment and the cumulative effect that a development, change the use of land or drainage decision may have elsewhere. In the past years the lack of bank maintenance and introduction of man-made banks has resulted in a far less natural environment for plants and animals to flourish. The Council will encourage the re-profiling of the margins of the river to allow the establishment of better vegetation and will encourage the use of indigenous tree and plant species in the re-planting of banks and surrounding areas.
- 7.2 The Council is undertaking an assessment of various important plant species that are thought to exist along the river with the aim of identifying some of the areas which are particularly sensitive.
- 7.3 It is already known that along particular stretches of the river there are rare species of plant life. In particular the southern part of the defined area hosts bryophytes. As part of any development/enhancement proposal a survey of existing species and statement regarding the impact of the scheme will be expected. Proposals that positively enhance the wildlife value of the river on surrounding land will be positively encouraged.

Proposals that have significant adverse impact on the local ecology will normally be refused in accordance with Local Plan Policy 14.

## **8.0 THE TYPE OF WALKWAY**

- 8.1 The Council will normally expect the provision of a surfaced area for pedestrians separated from any nearby roads. The width of separation and landscaping treatment should provide a quality environment for people to use and enjoy. In order to achieve a pedestrian/cycle link short term solutions may sometimes have to compromise some facets of these guidelines however a satisfactory long term route is the stated aim. In considering development proposals incorporating the walkway, its long term availability for use by the public will be expected.

## **9.0 CRIME AND PERSONAL SAFETY**

- 9.1 Good design, layout and lighting help reduce crime. Paragraph 14 of the Department of the Environment Circular 5/94 states that :

"One of the main reasons people give for shunning town centres at night is the fear about their security and safety: one of the main reasons for that fear is the fact that there are very few people about. Breaking that vicious circle is the key to bringing life back to town centres. It is often over-large single use developments which are sparsely populated at certain times of the day that are areas where crime flourishes."

- 9.2 In some areas of the riverside development it will be desirable to encourage a wide and varied range of uses (for example introducing evening activities and housing integrating into the town centre) which will help bring people into the town throughout the day will help reduce crime. The riverside walkway should provide appropriate lighting.
- 9.3 Prior to the formulation of development proposals it is important to contact the Local Crime Prevention Officer in North Hertfordshire and the development control planning officers at North Hertfordshire District Council. There is close liaison between Council and Police when specific applications are being considered.

Surveillance and personal safety considerations are of most important in areas which are not passed by traffic or viewed by existing residential properties.

## **10.0 ARCHAEOLOGY**

- 10.1 Historic remains and early settlements provide a rich history to Hitchin. The area covered by this development brief is within an archaeological area as defined in the Plan. Within such areas Policy 16 of the Plan is applicable. This is reproduced in its most up to date form (incorporating Proposed Alterations) as Appendix 3.

## **11.0 BRIDGES**

- 11.1 Clear span bridges should be provided where possible. Open bridge parapet walls are preferred as they cope with flood situations more readily.

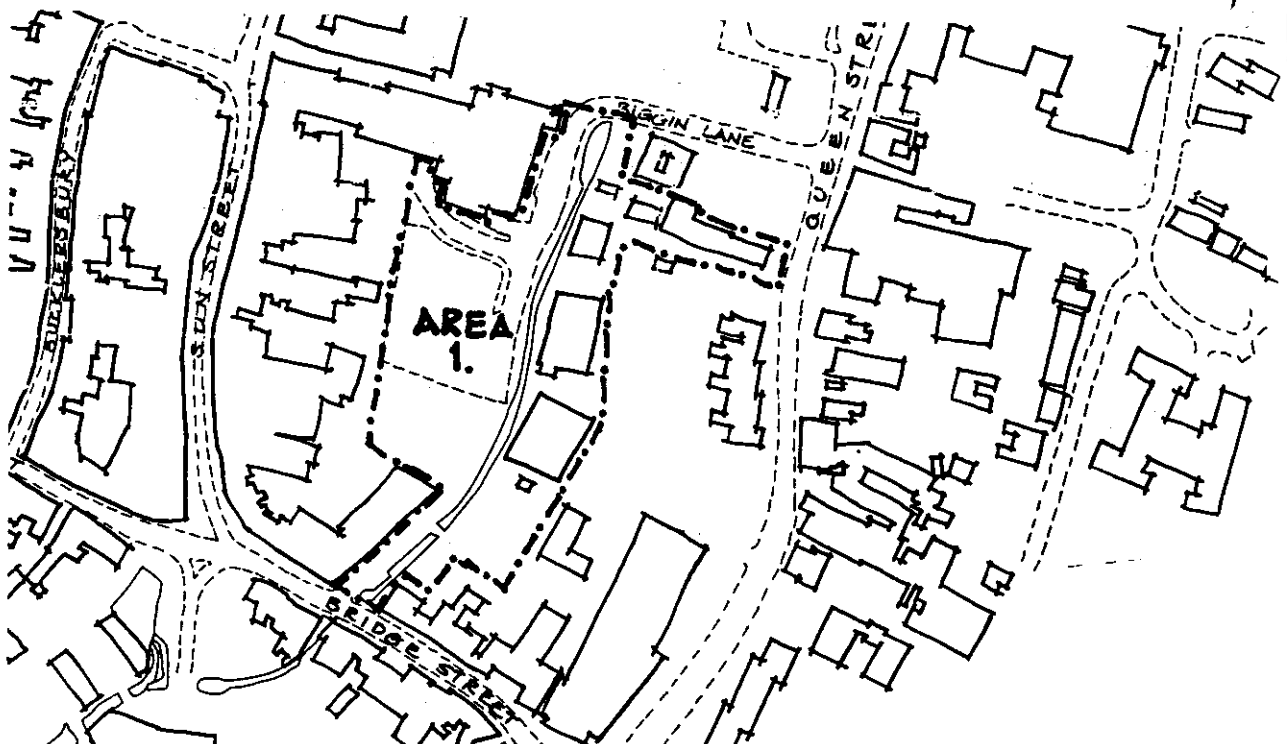
## 12.0 AREA BASED ISSUES

### 12.1 Introduction

12.1.1 This section sets out on an area by area basis particular issues to which regard should be had when any development or enhancement proposals are being considered. The areas are defined in plan attached as Appendix 2. The definition of these areas is not intended to be an indication of the Council's wish to see any of these particular sites redeveloped nor to suggest the boundaries which may limit any development proposals. Rather, they are used as a way of identifying the particular issues raised in different parts of the town.

### 12.2 Area 1 - Biggin Lane and the former Three Valleys Water Company site.

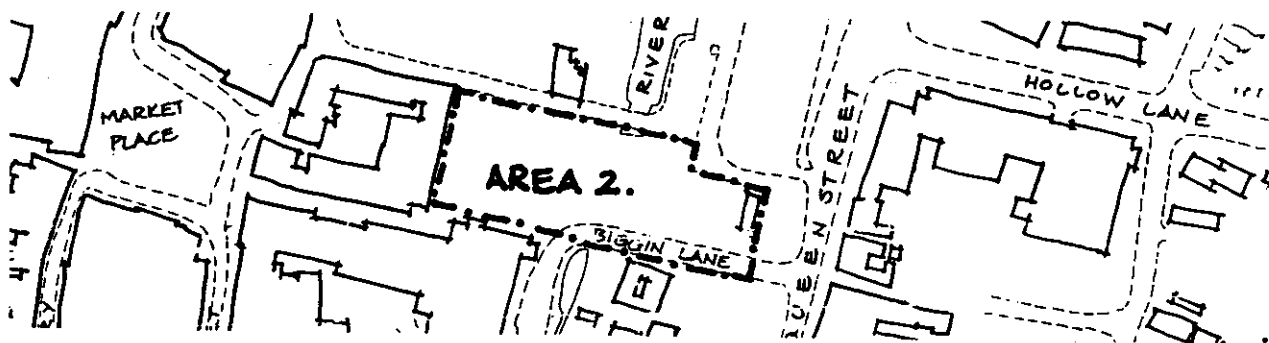
12.2.1 In this particular area one of the key criteria for any acceptable redevelopment will be the provision of a walkway through from Bridge Street to Biggin Lane. The Council is aware that the Three Valleys Water Company site is proposed for redevelopment and that the company currently has control over other land in the direction of Bridge Street. The Council therefore seek the provision of a continuous walkway on both sides of the river from Bridge Street northwards. At present there is an unattractive bridge which links the east and west sides of the river from Crown House to the car park to the rear of numbers 8/9 Bridge Street. It would be desirable for this bridge to be improved or replaced, with a design respecting the character of nearby listed buildings. Various concrete structures which project into the river along this stretch are unsightly and should be improved/removed where possible. Additionally, significant parts of the river bank have hard edges (e.g. concrete/brick) which are both unattractive and, in many instances, in need of maintenance. As part of any development proposals, the Council will expect these to be improved visually. This should not necessarily inhibit or alter the course of the river or its flow. Given the proximity of large shop units and their necessary operational needs e.g. waste disposal, skip and outside storage areas any developments concerning these properties should seek to provide a more attractive way of accommodating these unsightly features in the street scene with the introduction of better enclosed/screened areas. The bank on the west side of the river, particularly opposite the Lee Valley water company site, should also be improved with bank and landscaping works. A bridge adjacent to the historically important Biggin, or walkway on the same side as the Biggin should be carefully designed with regard to the listed building and improvements (e.g. railings, street furniture, landscaping) should be made to the weir area. This area could provide educational facilities for schools to involve pupils in practical river studies, with the provision of measuring equipment and an interpretation board.





## 12.3 Area 2 The Market

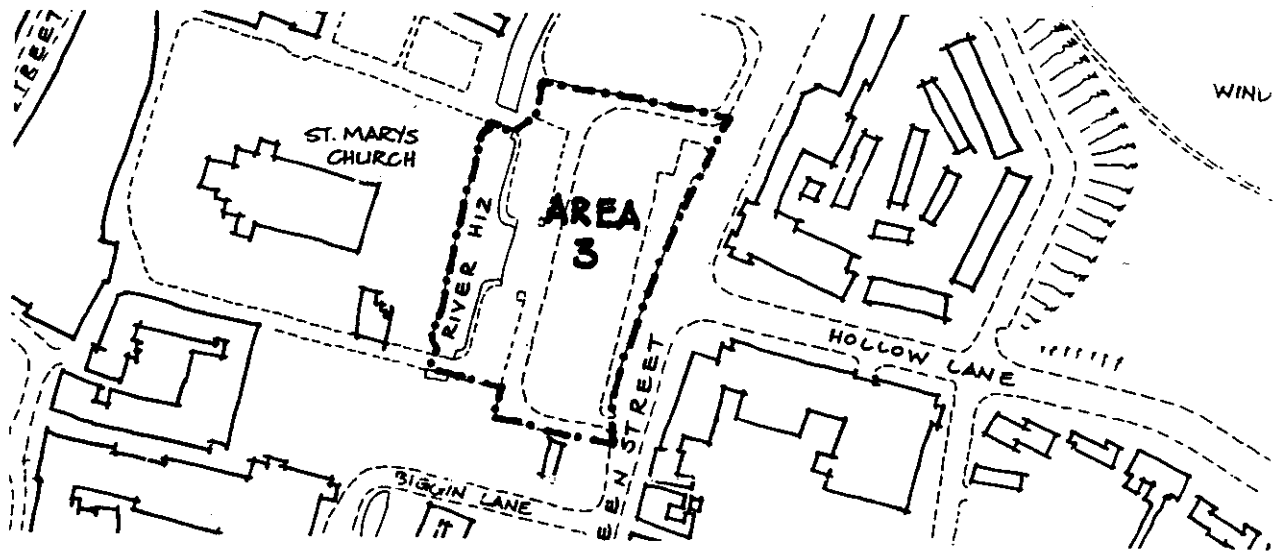
- 12.3.1 Hitchin market is an important element of Hitchin Town Centre and the Council is committed to the market's long term future in the town. In the future it may be beneficial for the town that the market area be improved in terms of physical appearance. The market may be enhanced by considering it as part of a wider area which may offer the opportunity to consider the locational arrangements of some of the stalls. With any enhancement proposal for the market area it is important that the presence of the River Hiz walkway is maintained with signage so that it can be followed or, if a larger scale development/enhancement programme is to take place in the vicinity of the existing market area, then the possibility of opening up the river should be considered. Such a feature should provide a pleasant environment for people to walk. Any development in the area should positively relate to the river, not provide high blank walls which give no interest to the river environment.



## 12.4 Area 3 St Mary's Square and Car Park

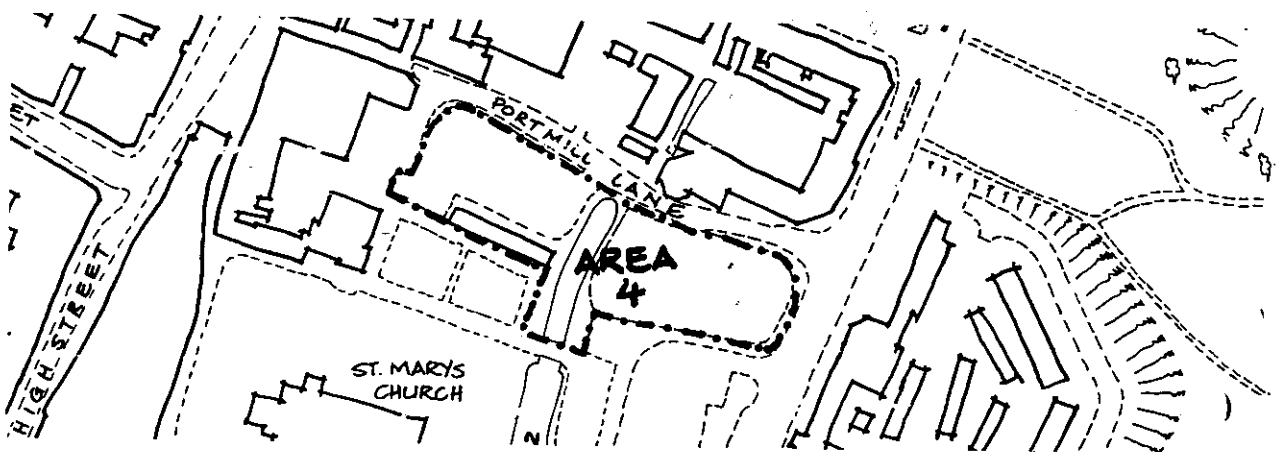
- 12.4.1 This is the most formal part of the River Hiz with a wide open expanse of river and views of the historically important St. Mary's Church. In the past the area on the other side of the river in the vicinity of St. Mary's Church was characterised by high density housing. However, in recent years, the car park and open views of the church have predominated. Whilst the current arrangement provides an open view of the church, particularly from Windmill Hill, the design of any enhancement/development proposals should carefully consider the acceptability of other arrangements. Considerable care, however, should be taken to ensure that any proposals accord with the historic grain and nature of the town centre. In the St. Mary's square area there are considerable opportunities for improving the environment around the river especially the quality of the paving. One of the main problems at present is that there are large areas of open pavement bordering directly onto the river which enables litter and larger objects e.g. shopping trolleys to be easily deposited in this slow moving section of water. Additionally there are fouling problems caused by large numbers of ducks/geese. Given that this stretch of water is very slow running it may be appropriate to consider measures to create either increased aeration or increased flow speeds.

The lawns within St. Mary's Churchyard provide a tranquil environment for people to sit and walk. It may be appropriate to provide more seating on the eastern side of the river to encourage more people to stay and enjoy this side of the river, not only use it as a pedestrian route. A further issue in respect of the eastern side of the river is that people with mobility difficulties have problems using this path due to the stepped arrangement in the centre of the open area. It is acknowledged that any improvements in this respect may involve significant capital expenditures and thus not be achieved in the short term however some provision has been made in the forward capital programme. The Council will encourage any development proposals in Area 2, 3 and 4 to provide an environment which everyone can easily use. Associated with any improvements with Hitchin Market it may be necessary to consider the appropriateness of the location of stalls in this area and make better provision for them.



## 12.5 Area 4 Portmill Lane Car Parks

12.5.1 Following safety improvements by the erection of railings it would be possible to achieve significant improvements to the appearance and quality of the surrounding area with additional soft landscaping. The eastern side the river is dominated by the car park. If there were any redevelopment proposals in this area it should provide more space to the river edge - perhaps a similar distance to that which exist currently at the south east corner where there is a large tree. The weir could provide a stronger and more pleasant visual feature to enhance this part of the town.

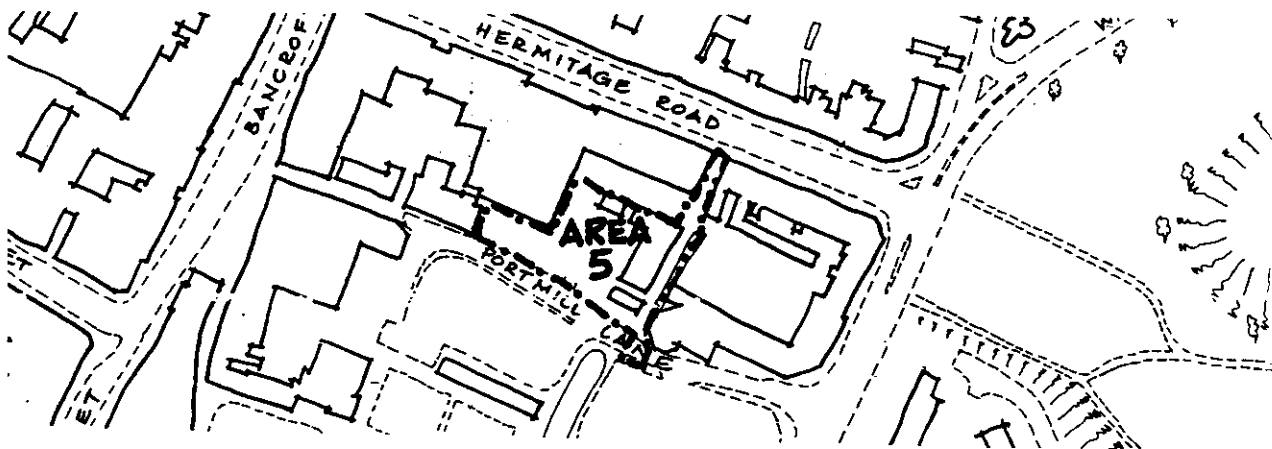


## 12.6 Area 5 Portmill Lane - Hermitage Road

12.6.1 This particular section of the river has an important pedestrian link between Portmill Lane and Hermitage Road. It is widely used by people who park close to the town centre and visit shops and is also a short cut for those people coming from further afield. An existing sorting office building turns its back on the river and includes a high, uninteresting, blank wall and a wire mesh fence. Similarly, the level of the river is considerably below that of the footpath and the high wall, on the eastern side, is unattractive. Should the Portmill sorting office site become available for redevelopment any scheme should not turn its back on the river but face it and provide an attractive environment for people to walk with, perhaps, shops or a cafe. Considerable intermediate improvements could be made in this area with the use of planting and street furniture. The roadway between 70 and 71 Hermitage Road could be enhanced to provide more attractive pedestrian links and an improved ramp arrangement.

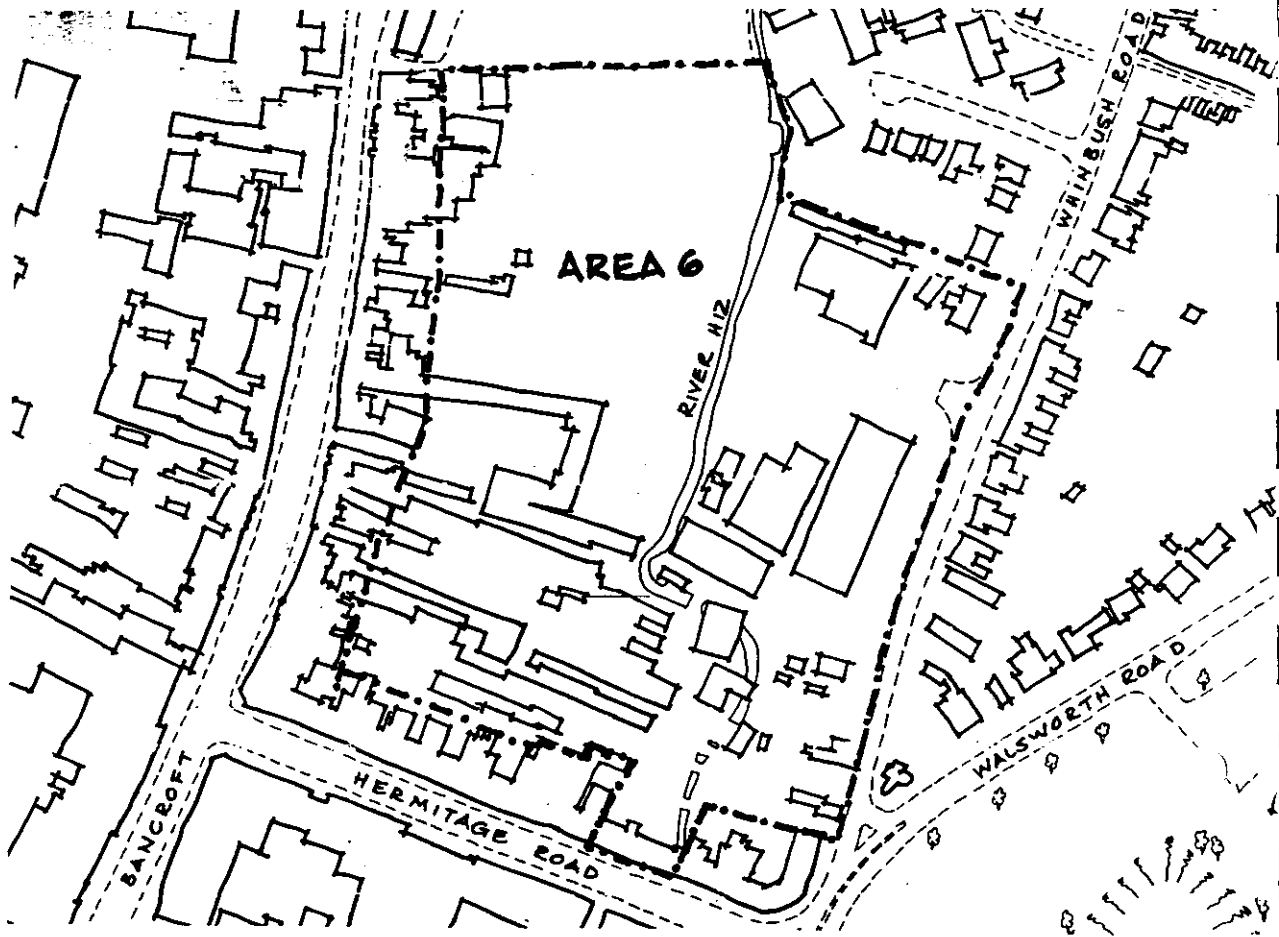
12.6.2 The development of north side of Hermitage Road in the 1930's took no account of the river and today obstructs the development of a continuous footpath that follows the watercourse. The introduction of a footpath and alley in the frontage when

opportunity allows will be highly desirable but this may be some years away. Instead access could be obtained from Bancroft (through an archway) or from the eastern end of Hermitage Road. Both of these routes should be encouraged and, when they become available be sign-posted by the developer with the agreement of the Council so that people were aware of the route they may take.



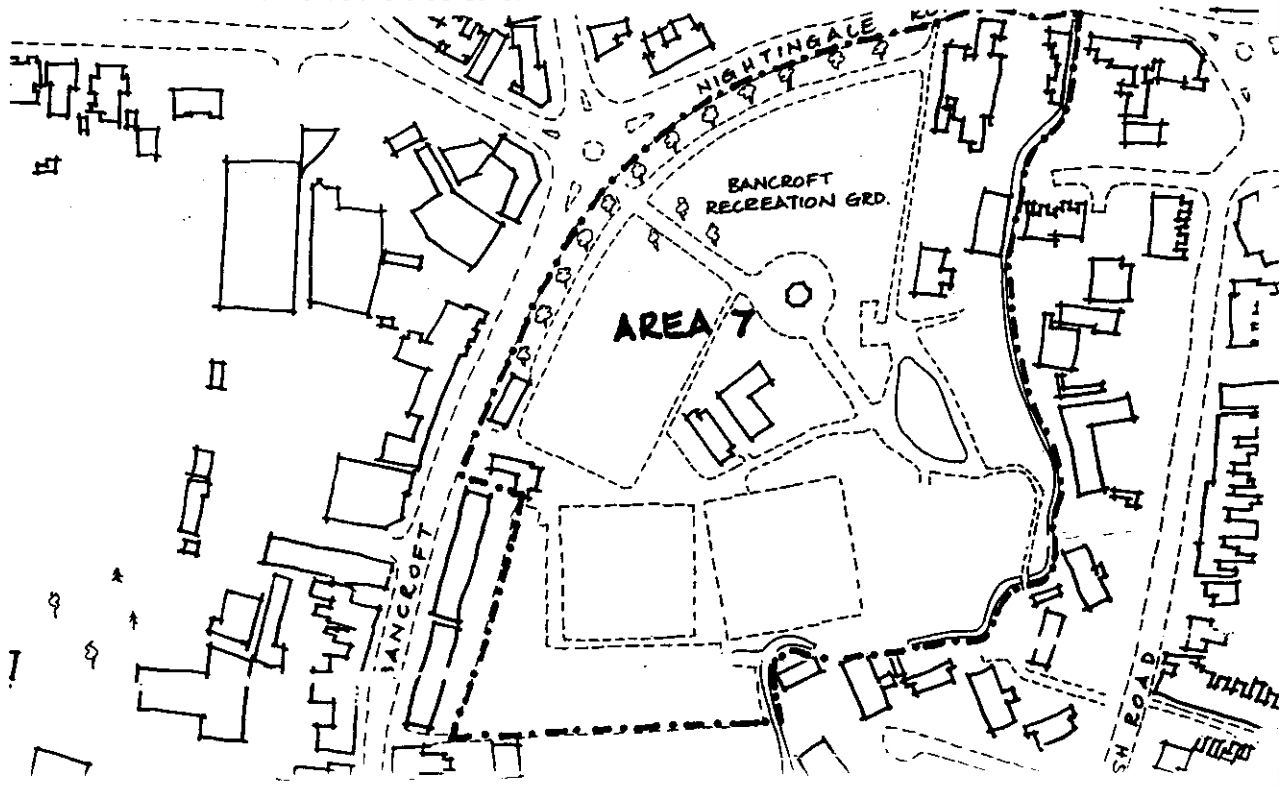
#### 12.7 Area 6 Land bounded by Hermitage Road, Whinbush Road and Bancroft

12.7.1 Over the past 5 years there have been a number of redevelopment proposals in this area which have included some or all of this river section. With such large developments proposed within an area so close to the town the Council is keen to see that opportunities to (i) enhance the quality of the water environment and banks and (ii) provide a pedestrian or bicycle link to the Bancroft recreation ground and beyond. In this particular area it will be important to develop a new urban feature and to extend public amenity area for Hitchin residents and visitors. The Hiz should provide the basis of a linear space with river side walkway which is largely open and has good quality landscaping. As in other areas the width of the walkway may vary but it should relate well to the uses which are proposed on particular sites and developments should provide a pleasant environment in which to use the walkway. Considerable flair in its design and the provision of amenity spaces should be shown. It should not simply be the provision of a minimum width footpath along the existing channelled stretch of water. It will also be important to consider the position and nature of all the weirs along this stretch of the river and perhaps make these features. The Council has approved a design brief for the Russell's and Ransoms sites. Whilst it is now apparent that these sites are unlikely to be developed together it is important to realise the opportunities that exist for developing a long term continuous walkway. In this respect the need to link any short term provisions to the existing street patterns of Bancroft and Whinbush Road should not be lost.



**12.8 Area 7 Bancroft Car Park and Bancroft Recreation Ground**

In order to provide the link to the Nightingale Road/Grove Road the Council will assess the opportunity for providing a walkway through its car park and into the recreation ground with the minimum disturbance to existing facilities but maintaining the essential features outlined in this brief. It may also be appropriate for any large scale development in Area 6 to contribute to, and facilitate the link to the recreation ground to the mutual benefit of both the development and the amenities of residents and visitors to Hitchin. If a link were provided from Grove Road through to the land to the south of the Bancroft car park this would allow easier and more pleasant access to much of the town centre for both pedestrians and cyclists. Consideration needs to be given to the requirements for the effective maintenance of the water based landscape within a public recreation ground, and the needs of children for play opportunities associated with water that are also safe.



**List of Appendices**

**Appendix 1 - Context Plan**

**Appendix 2 - Detail Plan (Designated Areas, Conservation Area, Listed Buildings)**

**Appendix 3 - Policy 16 (with Proposed Alterations)**



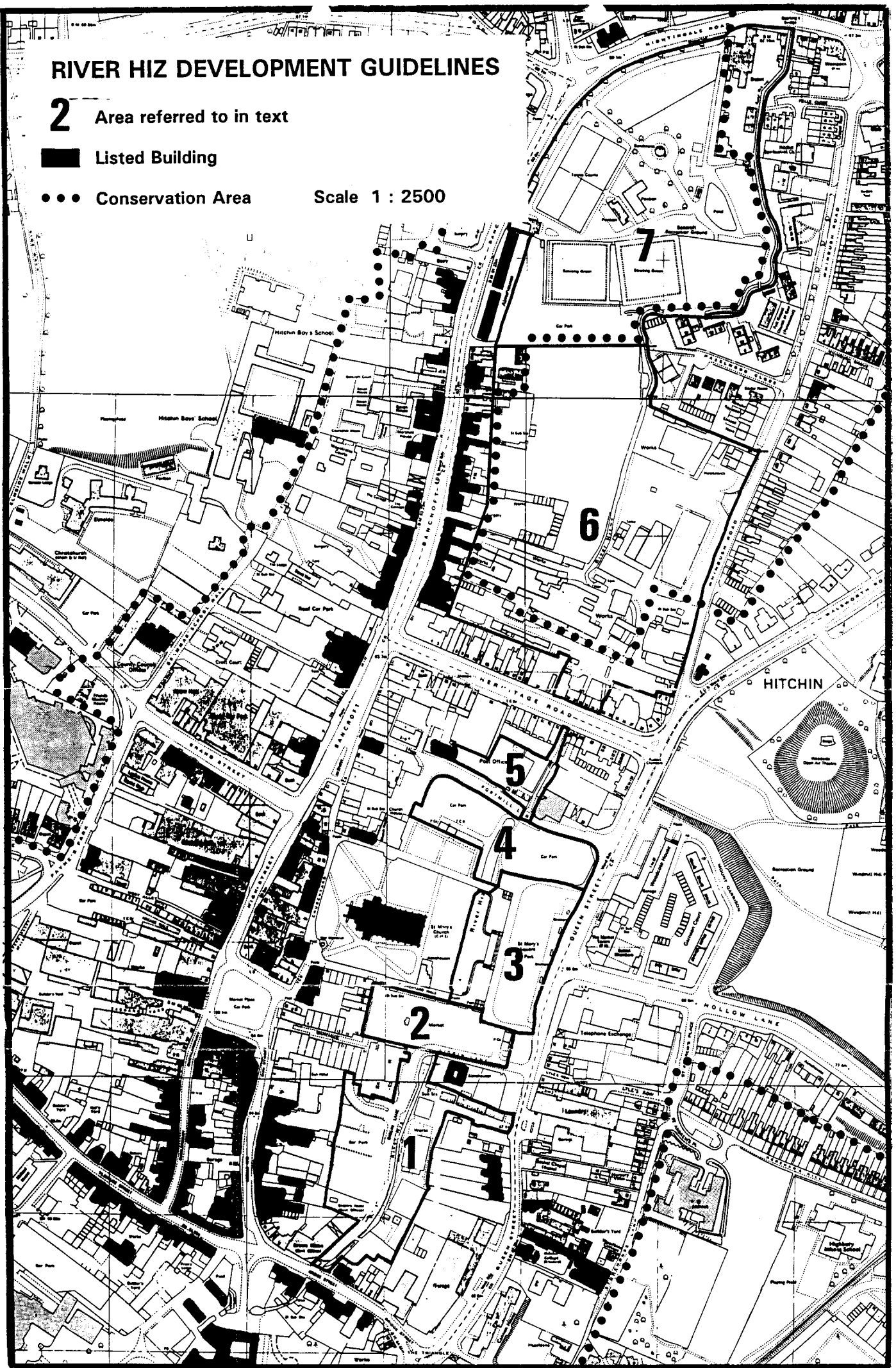
# RIVER HIZ DEVELOPMENT GUIDELINES

**2** Area referred to in text

■ Listed Building

●●● Conservation Area

Scale 1 : 2500







**Policy 16 - Areas of Archaeological Significance and Other Archaeological Areas**

***For Archaeological Areas, the Council may require a preliminary evaluation of any potential archaeological remains before deciding to permit or to refuse development proposals. For Areas of Archaeological Significance, a preliminary evaluation will be required as part of the application for development proposals which could disturb any possible archaeological remains. To assess the archaeological value of specific sites, the Council will seek expert advice. If the site is judged to be nationally important, and the remains should be left undisturbed, the Council will normally refuse development proposals which adversely affect the site or its setting.***

***On other sites, the Council may permit development proposals with conditions and/or a formal or informal agreement, depending on the archaeological value, to provide:***

- (i) an excavation before development; and/or***
- (ii) facilities and an agreed period of time for access to the site for an investigation and/or for 'observation' of the groundworks as development progresses by someone appointed by the Council; and/or***
- (iii) other measures as necessary; and/or***
- (iv) a contribution from the developer towards the funding of any relevant investigation.***

