

Ospringe conservation area character appraisal

(Extract from report to Planning Committee 09.09.04 – Agenda item 1.3 Annex B)

Introduction and historical background

1. Ospringe is situated on the southern edge of Faversham. It consists of linear development running east-west along Ospringe Street (which has grown up along the London-Canterbury road) and a line of more informally structured development running north-south along Water Lane (on the line of a shallow chalk valley).

2. Historically, Ospringe developed as a distinctly separate place from Faversham town. However, the outward spread of the town in the second half of the C20 has now resulted in the smaller settlement becoming joined to its larger neighbour. Nevertheless, the very separate development of the two places has been such that Ospringe still retains a strongly distinctive and special character quite different from that of the much larger town.

3. Archaeological evidence suggests that in Roman times there was a minor settlement or posting station, called Durolevum, close to Judd Hill (just under a kilometre to the west of present day Ospringe) that extended east and west along Watling Street (ie. the present day London-Canterbury Road). Despite many finds of coins and pottery, however, no Roman structures other than the road itself have been recorded. Recent excavations confirmed the alignment hereabouts of the original Watling Street to be just a few metres south of the existing road.

4. Ospringe was a prominent place in Saxon times, at which time the settlement was probably focused on the church and manor house (later known as Queen Court). The Domesday book of 1086 recorded the population as then being approximately half that of neighbouring Faversham.

5. In medieval times the London to Canterbury Road was a principal route from the capital to the continent, in this case via the ports of Sandwich and Dover. After 1220, pilgrims journeying to the Shrine of St Thomas a Becket further increased the numbers of people travelling along the road; one of their overnight stays on the route from London was possibly here at Ospringe (and Chaucer, in his Canterbury Tales, describes how as the pilgrims were nearing Ospringe the Wife of Bath commenced her story).

6. The Hospital of Blessed Mary of Ospringe was founded, or more probably re-founded, in 1234 by King Henry III to care for the sick, the aged, travellers and pilgrims. A royal suite provided accommodation for kings and queens travelling to and from the continent. Known from its earliest days as Maison Dieu it was situated on the north side of Watling Street, and although nothing remains above ground of the hospital's main structure there are the C13 remnants of buildings on the south side of the road (on either side of Water Lane) which are thought to have been houses for the secular chantry priests. Archaeological excavations in 1977 and 1990 showed the main building complex to have been large and imposing; fragments of stone revealed by that work are now exposed within the curtilage of Waterstone Place.

The nailbourne

7. In past times an intermittent stream or nailbourne ran north along the Whitehill (Water Lane) valley, past Ospringe church and Queen Court Farm, and crossing

Ospringe Street where Water Lane joins from the south. The stream then flowed on north, eventually feeding into the head of Faversham creek. From the corner of Mutton Lane the water ran north along the Water Lane carriageway, flooding it whenever the nailbourne was flowing. It then disappeared underground just short of Ospringe Street and reappeared in a natural channel on the other side of the main road. This crossing point of the stream with Ospringe Street might be said to mark the present-day centre point of the settlement.

8. At the end of the C18 Edward Hasted described the stream as then turning a waterwheel at a mill near Queen Court, which processed madder. A later OS plan shows a corn mill positioned opposite Bridge Cottage with a large mill pond extending south to Mutton Lane. Even into the second half of the C20 there was still a good depth of water flowing along Water Lane, although by then the mill pond had disappeared. Watery meadows were at one time present along the bottom of the valley alongside Water Lane and willow trees grew beside the edge of the stream (one specimen still survives close to the Old Vicarage). By the end of the C20, however, the stream had permanently dried probably due to water abstraction from nearby boreholes. The little red brick bridge in Vicarage Lane spanning the dry stream-bed now serves as a ghostly reminder of this once picturesque watercourse. It seems that when the nailbourne stopped flowing a part of the 'specialness' of Ospringe vanished forever, so wherever occasional fragments of nailbourne evidence still survive they are of special interest.

9. Queen Court Farm, just south of Mutton Lane, takes its name from the manor of Queen Court which was once the property of successive queens of England. In 1080 the manor of Queen Court belonged to Odo, a half brother of William of Normandy.

Ospringe Street

10. Development along the main street through Ospringe (ie. the London-Canterbury Road but here called Ospringe Street) now consists largely of C18 and C19 brick-built town houses and cottages set rather tightly along both sides of a now heavily trafficked road. Among them, however, are a number of older survivals including timber-framed houses (such as the C16 hall house at nos. 35-39) and the Maison Dieu buildings; these record the very much earlier origins of the place. With few gaps in the frontage and with most of the buildings set directly onto the edges of the footways the resulting environment has a relatively enclosed development form which is rather hard-looking in appearance.

11. Until recently Ospringe Street contained a good scattering of shops and public houses serving both the local community and travellers using the road. Today, however, there is just a single shop and just one public house in an otherwise residential environment. The ever present stream of traffic in the narrow main street now makes it a place that is seemingly to be passed through as quickly as possible, and where any thought of stopping is no longer to be lightly contemplated.

12. Approaching from either direction, the London-Canterbury Road drops quite sharply down into Ospringe. The eastern edge of the settlement, excluding The Mount, is rather abruptly, but attractively, defined by small brick, and occasionally weatherboarded, cottages on either side of the road. Approaching from the west, however, C20 housing has been grafted onto the edge of the older development form (much of which only indirectly addresses the main road). It is not until the vicinity of the public car park, therefore, that the street takes firm shape; from here frontage development creates a clearly defined, closely-knit, traditional, 'village' street form with buildings arranged purposefully along both edges of the road.

13. It is, therefore, the groups of C18 and C19 houses set out along the road that give this part of Ospringe its strong physical form and structure, linking together to give the entire street a strongly cohesive feel. This well-defined sense of order is broken only once, where development fronting a modern service road causes small domestic back gardens to break through into the road frontage and to create an unwelcome gap unsuitably edged with panelled fencing.

14. The centre point of Ospringe Street is marked by the two surviving fragments of the Maison Dieu hospital, both now incorporated into later C16 structures. The shape of the main road still reflects this long-standing history by gently kinking and narrowing as it squeezes past the two buildings, with Water Lane emerging tentatively from the south through a narrow gap between the two structures. The original, undercroft sections of both buildings are built of flint (obtained nearby from the chalk of the North Downs) and stone, whereas the later upper storeys are timber-framed. The eastern portion (circa 1255) rather remarkably still forms part of a dwelling and is consequently one of Faversham's oldest places of human habitation. Here the knapped flints are cut more or less to shape and coursed, and openings are finished with ashlar stone. The western building, now used as a small museum and thought to date from the very early C14, is rather rougher-looking in appearance, consisting of coarse and inferior ragstone ashlar and uncut flints; this lesser quality is thought to reflect the hospital's financial troubles at the time. The building alongside to the south, itself timber-framed and C16 in origin, was once an integral part of the Maison Dieu but C20 alterations have converted it into a separate entity.

15. The sole surviving shop in Ospringe Street, a traditional butcher's, is situated close by on the opposite side of the road. The shop itself is a C19 yellow brick building but the adjoining house dates from the early C18 (or even the late C17); uneven brick courses on the front elevation, although now painted, illustrate the considerable age of the building. A few doors along the road to the east lies the cosy-looking Ship Inn public house, an C18 brick building with small bar fronts, colourful vertical tile hanging, Kent peg-tiled roof, and a summer-smothering of colourful flower baskets. Both the shop and the public house are important for being the last remaining fragments of a mix of activities that once characterised this part of Ospringe; the Ship Inn is the only survivor now from the days when Ospringe Street was a place of coaching inns, resting places and overnight stops for travellers journeying along the main road to and from London.

16. College House is notable for its prominent position on the south side of Ospringe Street where it neatly terminates the view south from Ospringe Road. Its deep, late C18 porch supported on Tuscan columns projects out over the public footway where a large york stone slab is bedded into the pavement beneath; this feature is a notable point of visual incident in the street scene.

17. Standing a little apart from the tightly-knit development of Ospringe Street is The Mount, a large C18 house now converted to flats. Strategically positioned at the top of the short hill out of Ospringe, it is highly prominent in the view to the east with its large clay-tiled roofs, ranges of dormer windows and large chimney stacks punctuating the skyline. A little further round to the south, on the crest of the same rise, the mature trees around Ospringe Place play a similarly important role in defining the eastern 'edge' to Ospringe, forming an attractive green background to the settlement in the view from the west. The front boundary to The Mount is marked by a mellow red brick retaining wall (enlivened with a scattering of blue headers) which rises in places to a height of some 2.5 metres; the brick courses are neatly aligned with the pronounced gradient of the hill and the battered profile to the brickwork (in places falling in at the base and bellying out towards the top) has an

attractive sculptural appearance. This substantial run of brickwork, along with the red brick boundary wall adjoining to the west, plays an important role in the street scene on the hill into and out of Ospringe.

18. Ospringe Street is, therefore, a place of traditional buildings arranged in a gently snaking linear form along the main road. In the view across the settlement from the hill to the east the jumbled peg-tiled roofs, red and yellow brick chimney stacks and clusters of clay chimney pots are a defining feature. From here the road to London can be seen threading its way through the huddle of Ospringe's buildings and then resuming its direct Roman alignment straight on up towards Judd Hill and its sweep of parkland trees. It is in this overview of Ospringe that the special Kentish character of both the built environment and its setting is particularly apparent.

19. Down in the main street itself, however, traffic is an ever-present intrusion, aggravated by its containment within a rather tightly enclosed environment. At the narrow point in Ospringe Street the dour-looking front elevation of the Maison Dieu building stands uncomfortably close to the passing vehicles, and a length of battered pedestrian guard railing along the front seems to symbolise the traffic-wearied circumstances that for the time being prevail in the street.

20. Ospringe Street's role as a strategic traffic route means that the paving surfaces are modern and functional. Nevertheless, the highway environment remains for the most part pleasantly uncluttered and free of awkward engineering contrivances, with gently sweeping kerb-lines that *echo* the 'organic' shape of the frontage development.

21. Greenery along the main road through Ospringe is thinly scattered, finding its way into the street mostly from adjoining plots (such as the opportunistic horse chestnut tree alongside the butcher's shop). This paucity of greenery reinforces the striking contrast between the rather urban-like environment of Ospringe Street and the countryside around. However, the trees in the landscape beyond the settlement (to both the east and west) play an important role in the wider setting and from a number of vantage points within Ospringe Street they contribute an attractive sense of enclosure to the built environment.

Water Lane

22. Development along Water Lane is, by contrast, rather more open in appearance and more informally structured; its defining feature is the manner in which it embraces the transition in character from 'urban' to 'rural'.

23. It is the several groups of little cottages along the western side of Water Lane which are crucial to the underlying structure and visual coherence of the built environment hereabouts. Set at intervals along the road (the intervening gaps now mostly infilled with later development) each group is quite small in scale, and positioned more or less on the edge of the footway or carriageway. Dawsons Row (the southernmost and built in red brick) dates from the early C19 whilst the two groups at the northern end are late C19 (one in red and one in yellow brick); the group of four, timber-framed cottages in the middle is, by contrast, considerably older. The pair of C16 Thatched Cottages adjoining Dawsons Row is exceptional for being weatherboarded and also for being thatched (although apparently now with water reed rather than the more authentic, long straw).

24. The yellow brick village school lies opposite Mutton Lane, with a schoolhouse alongside (now used as classrooms) but with a hotchpotch of modern buildings at the back. The 1851 wall plaque (with its inscription 'hearken unto me and I will teach you

the fear of the Lord') says much about the school's C19 origins and the philosophy of its Victorian founders. The small, macadam-paved school-yard at the front of the building is enclosed in traditional fashion by a hoop-topped railing running across the front of the site.

25. The opposite side of Water Lane, as far south as Mutton Lane, is by contrast largely comprised of rather commonplace bungalows and houses built in the second half of the C20, although C19 Holly Cottage is a notable exception; these C20 dwellings replaced a run of earlier buildings that were more appropriately positioned on the edge of the footway. This side of the lane is consequently rather undistinguished in appearance and fails to respond to the form and character of older development elsewhere along Water Lane.

26. South of Mutton Lane the environment turns distinctly rural in character with fields breaking through into the street frontage. Queen Court (just beyond Mutton Lane) is a large working farm complex where a prominent array of concrete-framed animal shelters and farm buildings now sits alongside the C15 farmhouse. Until 1982 the farm supplied hops to the Shepherd Neame brewery in Faversham but the fields around are now predominantly arable and parts of the farmyard appear to be rather sparingly used.

27. The old peg-tiled farmhouse at Queen Court is a fine example of Kentish vernacular building, being a timber-framed wealden house with projecting two-storey bays on either side of a central hall once open to the roof. The original part of the building has exposed, close-studded timbers whilst the later C17 work, which includes an extension to the rear, is in red brick (although parts are now painted). The front garden is attractively enclosed by an old, lichen-encrusted brick wall with a line of severely pollarded lime trees behind.

28. Two timber-framed, aisled barns are still present on the western and southern edges of the otherwise modern farmyard; both have weatherboarded sides set onto brick bases and both, unusually, are still in agricultural use. The larger, partially obscured barn has a lofty, steeply pitched roof that was originally thatched but is now covered with corrugated iron. The smaller barn is set directly onto the roadside verge and is consequently the more prominent in the view along Water Lane; it has an undulating roof covering of Kent peg tiles, large wooden cart doors facing onto the lane, and black weatherboarding (parts of which have a delightfully crusty finish from the many past applications of tar). The rustic and functional nature of both these farm buildings plays a crucial role in the by-now rural character of the lane. By contrast, the C18 timber-framed carthouse opposite has (since the 1990s) been converted into two dwellings; here the 'domesticated' appearance of the resulting building and the suburban treatment of the associated curtilages have together caused much of the original agricultural character to be lost.

29. The flint and ragstone St Peter and St Paul's church more or less marks the southern end of Ospringe. It is a landmark building and yet its position on the edge of the settlement, largely surrounded by fields, is such that the church appears to stand just a little apart from the community that it serves. Its present day appearance results from a far-reaching scheme of remodelling started in 1858, which transformed the once-simple medieval church and its C18 interior; the Victorian appearance of the prominent, saddlebacked tower now seems just a little at odds with its rural surroundings. The neatly presented graveyard is dotted with large yew trees, and appropriately enclosed by a precise-looking flint boundary wall, crisply detailed with stone plinths and copings. A diminutive bier house, faced with flintwork, is discreetly positioned on the other side of the Water Lane, and perhaps dates from the Victorian

re-working of the church. The Old Vicarage, a C15 hall house now clad with painted brick and mathematical tiles and enlarged with later C17 and C18 additions, lies just around the corner to the south, where encircling trees and shrubs successfully tie the house into the landscape and round off the southern edge of the settlement. The associated C17 timber framed and weatherboarded stables and the C18 coachhouse are attractively sited on the edge of the public highway.

30. Water Lane is relatively free of heavy through traffic and *it* is consequently a quieter place than Ospringe Street. The junction between the two roads, tightly squashed between the Maison Dieu buildings, is a place with a strong sense of history and yet a few metres to the south the highway environment is relatively suburban in character: the macadam-surfaced carriageway widens, the footways and the concrete kerbs are modern looking and of a standard design, and the front gardens abutting the lane sometimes lack any convincing sense of overall cohesion. Elements of this 'suburban' character extend even further south, with a muddle of overhead wires being present in the vicinity of Queen Court farm and a part of the triangular green in front of the church now being edged just a little too precisely with concrete road kerbs. Water Lane, beyond Mutton Lane, turns markedly rural in character with arable and grazing fields breaking through into the frontage and where open views of the valley setting are possible.

31. The western slope of the Water Lane valley is relatively shallow and open in character (often with large arable fields but also including the large area of allotments), whereas the eastern side is rather sharper in profile with smaller parcels of land sometimes interspersed with the remnants of an older pattern of small fields, hedgerows, woodland and orchards. Four pairs of matching, yellow brick houses in Mount View occupy a prominent position on the top edge of the valley slope. Beyond Vicarage Lane the valley landform, in the view to the south-east, becomes noticeably more pronounced. This fine grained pattern of uses set out along the line of the valley contrasts sharply with the landscape of open fields beyond; this pattern is therefore of historical interest and the resulting sense of physical containment provided by woodlands and hedgerows is important to the character and setting of Water Lane. South of the Old Vicarage a newly planted area of trees at Longmeadow follows the longitudinal grain of the valley.

32. The road edges abutting the arable and grazing fields are for the most part marked by lengths of hedgerow and soft verges, but in a number of instances these hedgerows are thin and gappy and in need of concerted management to promote their rejuvenation. The entrance to the Queen Court farmyard, shrouded by corrugated iron, is a decidedly utilitarian affair and detracts from the frontage to the farm.

33. Mutton Lane and Vicarage Lane, both turnings off Water Lane to the east, climb the slope on the eastern side of the nailbourne valley. Overhanging trees and hedgerows accentuate their narrow, winding form and reinforce their distinctly rural character. They also help to define the sense of valley enclosure in the view from Water Lane. An old farm building (formerly with attached oasthouse roundels) is strategically positioned on rising ground at the junction of Mutton Lane with Vicarage Lane. Although somewhat neglected and apparently unused, the yellow brick ground floor and weatherboarding above are characteristically Kentish in appearance and the first floor loading door, loading beam and pulley wheel provide evidence of its earlier function. This unassuming building, comfortably settled into the slope of the valley, continues to make an important contribution to the rural scene.