

# Conservation Area Appraisal

## The Cottage Homes Ditchling



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**Name of Conservation Area :** The Cottage Homes, Ditchling

**Date of Designation :** 23.3.94

## What is a Conservation Area?

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.” Such areas therefore represent a key part of the district’s cultural heritage.

## The Purpose of this Conservation Area Appraisal

Conservation Area Appraisals are considered by English Heritage to be vital to the conservation of these special areas. The content of this statement is based on the preferred approach set out in English Heritage’s publication Conservation Area Appraisals – Defining the Special Architecture or Historic Interest of Conservation Areas, English Heritage 1997.

The Council has a duty to pay special attention to preserving and enhancing the character and appearance of Conservation Areas in exercising its planning powers. This statement will therefore provide a consistent and sound basis upon which to determine planning applications. It will also help in defending appeals against refusals of planning applications, which could have a detrimental impact on the Conservation Area. This statement also identifies what contributes towards the character of the area and any negative features. This provides a useful base upon which to develop proposals for preservation and enhancement if the opportunity should arise through the planning system.

The preparation of the statement also enables local residents to participate in the identification of features, which are important to the special character of the area in which they live.

Visitors to the area also may find this statement provides interesting information about special and interesting local features.

## Objectives in Conservation Areas

There are tighter controls over cutting back or felling trees, demolition and alterations or building works in Conservation Areas. These are outlined in more detail in the leaflet “*Planning Controls in Conservation Areas*”. In Conservation Areas the District Council has various objectives such as seeking to preserve buildings that are historically important, securing design and use of materials that are sympathetic to the area and protecting important vegetation and spaces.

## Introduction

The Cottage Homes lie approximately 1 kilometre (half a mile) to the north of Ditchling village along the B 2112.

This is a small compact Conservation Area with clearly defined physical boundaries. It comprises a formal terrace of houses set in open spacious grounds bounded by established hedge and tree boundaries.

Although there is some scattered ribbon development in the locality, including a cul-de-sac of relatively modern houses along the southern boundary, the Conservation Area retains an isolated and open rural character.

## Origins and development of the Topographic Network

The cottages are owned by The Royal Cottage Homes for Watermen, a registered charity. The cottages were founded by gift of William Vokins, a Master Lighterman, in 1888. The charity owns almshouse cottages and land at Ditchling as well as almshouses at Hastings; the cottages are made available to retired Watermen and their widows. The Cottage Homes are an attractive example of 19th century urban philanthropy transposed into the depths of the English countryside.

## Archaeological Interest

There are no designated sites of archaeological interest or Scheduled Ancient Monuments within, or adjacent to, the Conservation Area.

## Buildings

The two-storey terrace of 12 houses is a dominant isolated building in a spacious countryside setting and is the only major building in Ditchling Cottage homes conservation area.

The Cottage Homes are very different from the Sussex vernacular.

The building has an institutional scale and appearance and an urban character in terms of scale, form and design detailing. The front elevation is formal with a bold symmetry. A large central gable is tile hung and features a curved pediment which is painted white with a decorative terracotta insert bearing the details and date of construction (see right):



*View of Ditchling Cottage Homes from the Lion Gate*



*Detail of the gable of the terrace with the date of construction and the benefactor*



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## Ditchling Cottage Conservation Area



The east and west wings are terminated with symmetrical stepped gables which are faced with tile hanging. The ends of both wings are faced with red brick and the east wing has tile-hanging at first floor level. There are also regular bay windows and porches at ground floor level and the overall impression is one of a strong sense of rhythm and balance.

The rear elevation has a much more informal and domestic character although the sense of rhythm is retained by regularly spaced two-storey projections enclosing small yard areas. Unlike the tile hung front elevation, the rear elevation is faced in red brick. The building has not been extended, or the form altered although some recent refurbishment, such as replacement double glazing, has taken place. The rear of the building with its series of small yards is very characteristic of Victorian terraced development in large urban centres such as London.

Notwithstanding that the terrace of almshouses is not on the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest, this building retains many original features and makes a crucial contribution to the character of this Conservation Area by reason of its scale, style and setting, as well as its social and historic interest. Indeed, it is the terrace of cottages and its setting that comprises this conservation area in its entirety.

## Character and hierarchy of spaces

The open spaces in the conservation area are well proportioned with both private and communal areas which provide an attractive setting for the building.

The communal lawn to the front of the building is formal in character with a gravel drive sweeping from the Lion Gate in the south western corner to the central gable feature on the front elevation. A flagpole stands in the centre of the lawn. This formal open space relates well to the formal, ordered front elevation of the building. This space is contained on the other three sides by natural hedge and tree screens.

The Lion Gate on the road frontage comprises stone piers topped with lions framing wrought iron gates. Just as the original inhabitants of the cottages left London for a more sedate rural life, so the Lion Gate itself is believed to have been moved from the capital and is believed to be one of the original gates to Covent Garden. Certainly the Lion Gate is older than the cottages themselves.

The narrower strip of open space along the rear of the building is subdivided into individual gardens and allotments for the cottages and has a domestic and informal character in contrast to the more formal space to the front. This rear space is contained to the north by an established hedge and tree belt which is important in screening the area from unsympathetic development, particularly the modern garden centre complex, to the north.

An important characteristic of this Conservation Area is the isolated rural setting of this imposing single building. This setting should be protected from encroachment by inappropriate ancillary or other development onto the grounds of Ditchling Cottage Homes.

## Building materials

The building is faced with red brick and tile hanging and has a clay tiled roof. This restrained palette of materials is in keeping with the simple but bold character of the building.

## Natural elements

The mature tree belts and substantial hedgerows around the boundaries of the site are very important in containing the space around the building and screening the Conservation Area from surrounding scattered development, thereby helping to retain its peaceful, tranquil character.

## Prevailing or former uses

The site is still used as retirement homes for Watermen and Lightermen, although some houses have been let out locally.

## Relationship between built form and natural environment

A crucial element of the character of the area is the unusual relationship between the urban building and its rural surroundings. Established tree and hedge belts along the northern and southern boundaries are important in providing visual separation from surrounding ribbon development, accentuating its spacious rural setting. There are long views over open countryside to the east and west from within the site.

The main view from outside the Conservation Area is through the Lion Gate at the south western corner of the site. This looks over the formal lawn to the main front elevation of the terrace.

## Potential Enhancements

The main value of this building is its scale, style and setting in open countryside. It is unfortunate that the windows have been replaced by UPVC frames. However, as they have been replaced uniformly and not in a piecemeal fashion the new windows do not significantly detract from the important elements of the character and appearance of the conservation area.

However, further ad-hoc alterations, particularly extensions or additions, would be likely to seriously erode the unity, rhythm and balance of the terrace which is so integral to the character of this conservation area.

The simplicity of the terrace of cottages set in formal grounds in a rural location has also been eroded by the encroachment of a parking area to the west and south-west of the terrace, which protrudes some way forward into the formal lawn. Whilst parking spaces are a part of modern day living requirements, this illustrates the effects of inappropriate ancillary development within the grounds of this imposing building. Opportunities to screen or reduce this area should be taken if they arise through the planning system.



*View of the terrace from the west*



*The Lion Gate which once stood at Covent Garden, London*

## Planning Policies

The **Adopted East Sussex and Brighton & Hove Structure Plan** [1991] contains broad policies which require the impact of proposed development on Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings to be given due consideration. This plan can be viewed at County Hall, St Anne's Crescent, Lewes.

Switchboard number: (01273) 481000.

Website : [www.eastsussexcc.gov.uk](http://www.eastsussexcc.gov.uk)

These policies are reflected in more specific detail in the **Adopted Lewes District Local Plan** [2003]. Chapter Eight of the plan specifically covers 'The Historic Environment' and these planning policies clearly outline the criteria that will be applied to development in, or affecting, a conservation area and the approval or refusal of any planning or conservation area application will be determined against them.

Anyone thinking of applying for consent within a conservation area is therefore strongly advised to consider these policies first. The Local Plan can be viewed at the offices at the below address or on the website at : [www.lewes.gov.uk/coun/planning/index.html](http://www.lewes.gov.uk/coun/planning/index.html)

Pre-application advice can also be obtained, free of charge, from Development Control Officers or the Conservation Officer.

### Further Information

For further information on this leaflet, please contact:

#### Policy and Projects Team

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This is one of a series of leaflets about the 35 Conservation Areas in the Lewes District. A full list can be obtained by contacting the above officers, or by visiting the Councils web site ([www.lewes.gov.uk](http://www.lewes.gov.uk)), or from Lewes Tourist Information Centre (TIC) High Street, Lewes and Seaford Tourist Information Centre (TIC) Clinton Place, Seaford.

Visitors can find out about walks and facilities in the area from Lewes and Seaford TIC's.

#### Lindsay Frost

Director of Planning & Environmental Services

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