

Dear Thatcham Town Council,

WEST BERKSHIRE CONSERVATION AREAS

It has recently come to the attention of the Newbury Society that West Berkshire's Conservation Areas are not properly protected. This has two main causes: a) 51 of the 53 Conservation Areas do not have the Conservation Area Appraisal which is needed to put effective protection into practice and b) West Berkshire Council does not have the comprehensive documentation which accompanied the designation of each conservation area, and over 20 years from 1998 made no attempt to acquire it.

For a) even West Berkshire Council's own website has said for years that the council has "a duty" to create Conservation Area Appraisals, and it has offered the reassurance that a programme to create them is under way, which it is not.

I have been involved with various groups which have been pushing for action over the years, including heritage groups associated with Newbury Town Council. I recently rediscovered emails from West Berkshire Council in 2006 (*sic*), saying that action could be expected shortly in relation to Conservation Area Appraisals. Recent communication with Bryan Lyttle, Planning and Transport Policy Manager at West Berkshire Council shows that the council is going backwards, and will be working on a "prioritisation methodology" for Conservation Area Appraisals, rather than Appraisals themselves. In the meantime, planning applications continue to be submitted for these areas.

For b), from its designation, each conservation area and extension of conservation area should be accompanied by four basic pieces of information:

1. The text of the public notice issued at the time.
2. A written description of the boundaries of the conservation area.
3. A detailed map showing the boundaries of the conservation area.
4. A written description/ justification for the designation of the area as a conservation area.

As we understand it, the conservation area in Thatcham town centre was designated in 1980 (public notice NWN July 24, 1980), and has not been extended since. We also understand that the eastern end of the Kennet and Avon Canal Newbury (East) conservation area (public notice NWN May 12, 1983) extends east of Hambridge Road, into the parish of Thatcham. West Berkshire Council has fragmented and incomplete documentation for the Newbury conservation areas (which it has only begun to address this year), and we would expect the same to apply for Thatcham.

We are aware that councils, including West Berkshire Council, are short of resources. With this in mind, earlier this year the Newbury Society made the specific offer to work with West Berkshire Council on the creation of Appraisals for two conservation areas, Kennet and Avon Canal Newbury (East) and Kennet and Avon Canal Newbury (West), where we feel we have the skills to make a contribution to a professional standard. We received a negative response, for reasons which are still unclear.

We are seeking like-minded organisations on this issue. Newbury Town Council and the West Berkshire Heritage Forum are two organisations which are now involved in seeking a solution.

I do hope that you agree that this is a matter of serious concern, and (after your own enquiries) Thatcham Town Council will give consideration to ways in which pressure can be brought to bear on West Berkshire Council to take action on behalf of Thatcham and the wider area. Appraisals are documents which can have a real influence on the planning process, and actively defend local heritage.

Yours,

David Peacock
Chair, the Newbury Society.