

Some notes on Great Somerford boundaries and Conservation Areas

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1. General

These notes are intended to supply NWDC officers some background and where possible, historic details of the boundaries and features of the village of Great Somerford to help them in the task of proposing changes in the coverage of the GS Conservation Area and possibly in redefining its boundary. It is worth noting that the survey carried out for the draft Village Design Statement / Conservation Area Statement, respondents rated older buildings and fields in and around the village as the most important features of Great Somerford. The 'open' nature of the village created by the existence of reasonable size fields and paddocks interspersed with the housing is readily seen in the aerial picture supplied to NWDC with the draft VDS/CAS. The draft VDS/CAS contains a table on page 29 giving the listed buildings in GS. The VDS Areas Map shows the location of listed buildings and also other buildings considered by the committee to be of some merit and worth protecting.

2. Old Station, including road bridge arches

The history of the railway running from Malmesbury to Dauntsey is well covered by the book 'The Malmesbury Branch' by Mike Fenton, ISBN 0 906867 88 6, 1990. Much of the following is derived from this reference, page numbers in parentheses.

(P32) Originally the station at Great Somerford was called 'Somerford' and was still unfinished when the Malmesbury to Dauntsey line opened in December 1877. Soon the embankment at Somerford station was widened to allow a goods siding to be laid. This 'goods facility' addition to the station opened in January 1879.

(P42) The Station House, built to house the station master and his family was originally a single storey construction. This accommodation soon became too cramped, so in 1893 the GWR added another storey to provide two more bedrooms.

(P50) The opening of the first stage of a direct line to South Wales in January 1903 going from Wootton Bassett to Badminton brought a station to Little Somerford. The name of 'Somerford' station was changed to 'Great Somerford' to avoid confusion. The opening of the new main line caused a reduction in the traffic at Great Somerford station which downsized by shedding a porter.

(P62) Many cost saving measures were introduced, but in May 1922 Great Somerford was downgraded to become 'Great Somerford Halt', which it remained for the next 11 years.

(P64) The Malmesbury Coal Company had a coal dump at Great Somerford.

(P72) The Malmesbury branch line could not compete with the better services offered by the main line at Little Somerford and increasing road transport, and the branch closed in July 1933.

(P90) Copy of the 1900 25inch OS map showing Great Somerford station, approaches, sidings, embankments etc.

(P91) Pictures of original GS road bridge.

(P94) Somerford Station in 1922.

(P95) Picture of level crossing, Station House, Seven foot bridge.

(P96) Seven foot bridge, 1930.

(P97) Old bridge showing strengthening tie bars. New concrete bridge, early 1930s and Station House.

(P98) Great Somerford Halt, ca1930.

(P221) Great Somerford Halt, 1932. Also, detailed map of track, station, signal box.

In view of the above potted history, it would seem that there is some merit in considering the railway complex as a candidate for inclusion in the GS Conservation Area. The 'complex' consists of:

- a) The remains of the old road, now a ditch on the eastern side of the current road. (colloquially known as 'the low road' under the seven foot bridge)
- b) The approach road to the station and sidings.
- c) The arches originally supporting the road up to the station and siding and the northern part of the road after the level crossing. (colloquially 'the high level road')
- d) The Old Station House.
- e) The embankment for the sidings and branch line.
- f) Perhaps the arches further NW along the line providing field-to-field access for farming purposes.

In the case of c), the arches now support the south western verge adjoining the current road and do not penetrate through to the north eastern side of the road.

On the 1991 designation map, the CA is shown with the north eastern boundary running on the far side of the 'Dismantled Railway' to the eastern side of the old road to Little Somerford which would have passed under the track by the 'seven foot bridge'. This currently offers CA protection to the old railway track adjoining Brook Farm land, but does not continue this protection to the old station complex.

A more logical boundary for the CA would be to continue the line in a north westerly direction from the river to beyond the end of the old station, maybe to the arch under the old track bed and to return to the eastern edge of the 'Show Field' forming a CA phalanx running NW following the track. Nb. Some of this area is in the parish of Little Somerford.

3. The Great Somerford Free Gardens

Acts of Inclosure use the term 'allotment' to mean the award of the ownership of defined areas of common land to local land-owners, increasing their wealth at the expense of the poor who lost their rights to a share of the common arable and grazing pastures. The modern meaning of the word stems from the Great Somerford Act and the work of the Reverend Stephen Demainbray, Rector of Broad Somerford (as the village was then officially called).

Through Demainbray's insistence the Great Somerford Inclosure Act of 1806 gave some protection to the cottagers and poorer residents of the village. Each cottager was given an allotment of a ½ acre of land, usually but not always attached to his cottage. [Another Inclosure in 1819 increased this to 2 acres or more if the land was poor.]

In addition an area of 8 acres was defined as land to be held by the 'Rector, churchwardens and overseers' for the benefit of the poor of the village. Individual holdings were to be allotted annually on Easter Tuesday, in proportion to the number of children in each family. The 8 acres comprised two sites; one within the village was just over 6 acres [6 acres 0 roods 13 perches, with 40 perches to a rood and 4 roods to an acre], the other of nearly 2 acres [1-3-27] was at Seagry Heath

This was the first time that any such provision had been made, but the concept spread quickly, partially at least due to the efforts of Demainbray who arranged for similar terms to be included in later Inclosure Acts in the area. By 1823 it was said that many counties throughout England, and particularly in the South and West, could 'claim to have allotments in every parish'.

The copy of the official enclosure record in the Wiltshire & Swindon Records Office (dated 1809) includes a map to which all the awards are referenced. This shows clearly that the boundaries of the Free Gardens correspond exactly to the area within the village allocated for the benefit of the poor. The allotment at Seagry Heath seems to have passed into private ownership (details not yet discovered).

The historic significance of the Free Gardens and the physical continuity of their boundaries combined with the value of this amenity to the village argue strongly for their inclusion in the CA.

3.1 Relics of the Inclosures Act

Whatever changes of ownership have occurred since, many of the field boundaries described, and in some cases established, by the Act are clearly visible in Great Somerford today.

Many of the allotments to individual cottagers are easily identifiable on the 1809 map, including the houses in Dauntsey Road to the east of Fourways Store, and Longacres in Hollow Street. The latter comprised two allotments to the cottager who occupied one of them, and appears to align precisely to the current boundaries.

The Rectory field and all the land to the east and south between Dauntsey Road and the parish boundaries was allotted to the Rector in different ways. The Rectory field, Glebelands and the pasture behind were allotted simply 'to the Rector'. Some 25 acres to the east and south of Glebelands became 'Glebe' and the remainder was to be the Rector's 'for Tythes'. There was also a 1 acre gravel pit at Dauntsey End to be the Rector's 'for the repair of public and private roads'.

4. Hollow Street, Old School, Long Acre

Hollow Street contains some of the oldest buildings in GS. Some of these are within the current CA, but there are some surprising omissions. The old school, still with its school bell, and its associated and attached school house are notable examples. Investigation into the history of the school at WRO showed it having been built on land forming part of the 'St Mary Lands Estate' granted by letters patent by Queen Elizabeth I in September 1574 to 'John Herbert, of London, gent.' (Ref. Wiltshire Archaeological & Natural History Magazine, Vol. XXXI, 1900-1901, pp 283 et seq.) The land passed through several hands, some disputed until in 1827, it was resolved to demolish the greater part of the dwelling house which was 'in a dangerous and ruinous state and erect on the premises a good and substantial house, large enough for receiving the Sunday and weekly parish school'. The 'house' was completed before the end of 1828. Since then, the proceeds of 'St Mary Lands' have been used for the benefit of the village school. The building has been enlarged on several occasions since, particularly in 1850 and in 1870 when the Education Acts came into force. This building, now a private residence, represents an early example of a village school run by the Church.

There is a chapter written on the history of the school in Portia Hobbs' book 'Somerford Magna' ISBN 0 950 7937 0 1, 1982. Portia Hobbs was the school mistress from 1946 to 1982 when the school moved to new premises in Dauntsey

Road. Curiously, there appears on page 93 of 'The Malmesbury Branch' reference an excellent picture of the village school and schoolhouse also showing the cottages modified in the 1970s to form the current house called 'Long Acre'.

Immediately past the school there was a group of four cottages, no doubt occupied by workers, built on a patch of land known as 'Long Acre'. This patch is referred to in the Inclosure Awards of 1809. The cottages were purchased privately around 1974 and were converted into a single four bedroom dwelling which was named 'Long Acre'.

On the opposite side of the road from Long Acre are a line of terraced worker's cottages which have now been converted into two houses.

The last house along Hollow Street (No. 30) is a stone built cottage, again probably for a land worker. This cottage is remote from the main body of the village and stands at right angles to the road.

A logical boundary for the CA would be to extend the line from Riverside to include the houses on west Hollow Street and then turn south to join the CA covering the Shipton's Lane/ West Street area.

5. Avenue of trees

There is a fine avenue of horse chestnut trees extending northwards from the Sutton Benger road to the Manor where it currently terminates. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this 'avenue' may have continued across West Street at the sharp bend and bounded the footpath known as 'Quack Quacks' (sometime formerly 'Cray Crofts') running in a north easterly direction to cross Top Street and onwards to The Mount and the Church. Mrs Jean Hopkins, author of the booklet 'A Glimpse of Great Somerford' states that the trees were planted in the 1890s to 'protect visitors walking from the Manor to the Church'.

This 'evidence' was investigated at WRO using old maps and yielded the following:

1. Inclosure Award map 1809 – No avenue of trees to The Manor is shown. This map does not show trees as its purpose was to define field boundaries.
2. OS map 1886 – No avenue shown.
3. OS map 1900 – Avenue to The Manor is clearly marked, and continues to Top Street. Land to the east of Top Street is shown as wooded, but there does not appear to be any distinct avenue delineated.
4. OS map 1923 – As OS 1900.

The horse chestnut trees bounding Quack Quacks, which did form an avenue along the footpath, were felled in May 1989 for safety reasons. They were replaced by lime and cherry saplings which will take some years to reach maturity.

Considering the information from the OS maps, it would therefore seem that there is no support for the anecdotal evidence claiming that the 'avenue' extended beyond Top Street towards the Church. Inspection of the aerial photo contained in the VDS report clearly shows the trees forming the avenue to The Manor, and the four remaining mature horse chestnut trees lining Quack Quacks footpath. No trees remain on this line beyond the end of Manor Park housing.

