

WIRKSWORTH CHARACTER STATEMENT

Wirksworth lies in the centre of Derbyshire and in fact in the centre of England - it's very 'navel' as D H Lawrence described it when he lived here for a year. His description suggests the way the town nestles in the head of the Ecclesbourne Valley. Landform is an important determinant of the character of the town, as is the geology beneath. It is this which has determined landform as well as the town's vernacular architecture and its historic occupations.

The north-south line of the River Ecclesbourne demarcates the boundary of two stone types. On the west side is hard Carboniferous limestone, which was mined for lead and quarried for building and burnt for quicklime. Its thin soil supported pastoral farming and the underlying stone provides the material for the dry stone field boundary walls. On the east lies softer gritstone which is overlaid with soils which could better support grain crops. The field boundaries on this side of the valley are more generally hedges. Here in the Middle Ages were two of the town's common 'fields', some strips of which got enclosed early on, as can be seen by the extreme narrowness of some fields today.

The weight of history lies heavy on Wirksworth. The area was occupied by the Romans and its lead deposits mined by them. Its Anglo Saxon past is evidenced by the name Eccles (place of Christian mission) bourne (spring or brook). A precious relic from this period is an elaborate carved coffin lid found under the church floor. The circular shape of the churchyard may also stem from this time. The Barmote Court has settled lead mining disputes for over 700 years and still sits here in its own court house. The town's 17th century buildings suggest this was a time of relative wealth, with the expansion of building in the town centre encroaching into the town's once much bigger market place. The 18th century saw a widespread re-building and general consolidation of the town centre. Towards its end it also brought the introduction of water powered cotton spinning mills. Industrialisation continued through the 19th century with the development of steam powered weaving mills, which specialised in the manufacture of narrow fabrics. The 20th century saw growth in the importance of quarrying but economic decline in other areas of employment, which continued up to the 1980s when an intensive programme of conservation led regeneration projects arrested decline by revealing the town's unrecognised and undervalued assets.

The inhabitants of Wirksworth up to and including the 20th century were a very settled, and even perhaps insular, social group – a community whose forebears had lived a very hard life mining, farming and latterly quarrying. Mechanisation of quarrying in the early 20th century reduced the numbers of workers in that industry and also created extreme environmental problems, because of damage to property caused by blasting and air pollution. This was a major contribution to a severe depression in property values, particularly to property near Dale Quarry. This, plus an expectation of general improvements to living standards, led to the relocation of people from the old town to new

houses built along new roads laid out to the south of the town, where the Ecclesbourne Valley opens out to more level ground.

Discovery of the charms of the old town by people attracted to its special character began in the 1960s and was accelerated by the regeneration project of the 1980s. Relatively low property prices were an incentive to outsiders buying property in the old town. The development of a new housing estate on the south west edge of the town also attracted an influx of newcomers. The majority of these new residents commuted out of town to employment in Matlock, Derby and further afield. The more established residents also looked more and more to outside the town for work as millworking and quarrying contracted.

Dramatic hilly landform plus designation as a conservation area has helped the old town retain sharp edges to the west and east. Its dramatic and attractive landscape setting is one of town's greatest assets. However the once distinct satellite settlements of Miller's Green, Gorseley Bank, Wash Green, Bolehill and Middleton have been, or are becoming, absorbed into the general built up area, threatening their distinctiveness.

The old town's historic settlement layout is, in itself a major asset. Its character was determined by historic ways of life and these former ways of life are now 'fossilised' in the routes, scale and form of roads, a labyrinth of jitties and ginnels, odd forgotten corners, bigger urban spaces, ancient small quarries and a rich legacy of historic buildings and street paving made from stone won from those quarries. The town's roofscape is of particular importance because it is looked down upon from many viewpoints.

There are intriguing clues to the fact that before its economic decline the town had a number of mansion houses - evidenced by lengths of high boundary walls, lordly garden trees and abandoned coach houses and stable blocks. These now witness a time when the town had status as a county town with resident gentry.

Because the town became poor and remained poor with very low property values right up to the end of the 1970s, it escaped the low quality redevelopment which blighted so many towns in the 20th century. Its relative poverty also left a priceless legacy of intact historic building details. Wirksworth can claim to have more historic doors, windows, shopfronts and other building details than any other town in Derbyshire. It can make a similar claim for its historic floorscape. The survival of a relatively wide range of small shops, in a town which in terms of size is not much more than a village, is another important determinant of its character.

Wirksworth can also boast of the survival of a number of long established bodies and traditional community activities. The Anthony Gell comprehensive school is a successor to the grammar school set up in Elizabethan times and the Elizabethan almshouses in Church Walk still provide accommodation for elderly townspeople. The Barmote Court (described in the 13th century as being of great antiquity) still sits every year. The annual wells dressings happens in Whitsuntide, the clipping of the parish church on the Sunday nearest its patronal festival in September, the wakes fair in October, and of course the town's weekly Tuesday market, held since its charter was given by King Edward I in 1306, still gets set up in the Market Place each week . It might even be claimed that the successive election of Labour led town councils (within a predominantly Conservative part of the county) has become itself a tradition. It is perhaps too soon to claim tradition status for the annual arts festival, but this event has achieved a regional reputation and does much to promote the town and its special qualities. The revival of a passenger train service between Wirksworth and Duffield by a volunteer body is also doing much to promote the town as a visitor destination.

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