

Tonge conservation area character appraisal

(extract from report to Planning Committee 27.02.03 - Agenda item 1.1 Annex B)

Location

1. Tonge lies approximately 2.5 kilometres (1.5 miles) east of Sittingbourne town centre and close to the southern edge of the North Kent marshes. The settlement is comprised of a small group of buildings clustered alongside a mill pond formed at the northern end of a shallow valley leading to the marshes. Immediately alongside the pond are the remains of earthworks associated with Tonge 'castle'.

History

2. The full history of the defence works at Tonge is uncertain. The rectangular earthwork was once thought to be the remains of a motte and bailey castle. Partial excavation has revealed that the 'castle' consisted of two enlarged hills partly encircled by a deep moat, with one of the mounds having been used for habitation. Evidence of a Norman building was found, which had been replaced by a substantial hall and associated buildings. The habitation found here appears, therefore, to have been a moated medieval manor of the 12th to 13th centuries, and not a true castle. It is possible, of course, that defences of some sort were in place here in earlier times; the location would almost certainly have been important to the Saxons and Danes. It is said that Hengist built a castle at Tonge for the defence and maintenance of the surrounding area but there is little to substantiate this story.

3. By tradition Thomas a Becket's Spring, which is the main source of the stream feeding the mill pond, was the site of a leper hospital/pilgrim's hospice in medieval times.

4. The Domesday book, substantially completed in 1086, records a mill being then present at Tonge. The oldest of the buildings now standing, the Old Mill, dates from the mid eighteenth century.

5. The railway line, completed in 1858, introduced a substantial new physical structure into the Tonge environment.

Built environment

6. The surviving remains of Tonge 'castle' comprise earthworks standing some 7.5 metres (25 feet) above sea level. A deep wide ditch, now dry, is present on the north-east and north-west sides which defines a rectangular central area. The south-western and south-eastern sides of this area are now bounded by a large pond, which occupies the southern portion of the original defence works. The pond is thought to be of late medieval date; it was later apparently deepened and enlarged sometime around the 1830s, which is believed to account for the disappearance of the ditch on the southern side. Occupation of the castle site ceased in the late 13th century; the present-day bungalow might be said to be a resumption of the former residential use.

7. The mill pond is fed principally by a flow of fresh water from Thomas a Becket's spring situated approximately 0.5 kilometre to the south (close to the present day alignment of the A2). This, together with other smaller springs, maintains the water level in the pond through the winter, although the flow can cease during summer droughts. There are three tiny islands within the pond plus an area of geese pens; each of these is vegetated. The outflow of water passes beneath Church Road and is channelled via leets through the garden of the Old Mill; the water courses then link

back with the stream which passes on to the north. This supply of water was the reason for the development of the mills at Tonge, perhaps also the reason for the original habitation of the site; the presence of the stream is consequently of special historical importance to the small settlement.

8. The mill buildings stand at the eastern end of the pond and are the defining feature of Tonge. The older of the two mills stands on the east side of Church Road and together with the mill house was built in 1759. A later mill stands on the opposite side of the road and occupies a narrow plot of land between the edge of the pond and the highway; date plaques show it to have been built between 1837-1866. The juxtaposition of these two mills forces a distinctively narrowed bend into Church Road as it squeezes between the two buildings; the resulting pinch-point is an attractive and defining feature of the place.

9. The old mill, now converted into three dwellings, is timber-framed and clad with white weatherboarding on the upper floors but has distinctive red brickwork with grey headers on the ground floor. The site of the original water wheel remains visible and is consequently an important link with the past. The large roofs are covered with mellowed Kent peg tiles. This is a truly picturesque mill, and an outstanding survival of Kentish vernacular industrial building, despite its original use having long since ceased. The upper section of the building leans severely away from the road 'as if it were reeling back' (Newman, Buildings of England) which results in a splendidly striking appearance. An attractive walled garden, through which the mill leets run, adjoins the building on the north west side; this garden, at the same level as the mill building, is set several metres below the level of the road to accommodate the drop in the flow of water over the original mill wheel.

10. To the north-west of the old mill lies a group of structures set around a concrete paved yard. The principal building here is a barn thought to have been constructed circa 1822; it is set at the far end of the yard and is brick-built with a slate-covered roof. Both the date and the manner of construction of this threshing barn are similar to that of the later mill complex so it seems reasonable to conclude that it was probably used for storing and processing crops prior to milling. A number of other garages/store buildings are positioned around the yard, although for the most part they are modest in character and appearance. The barn has been used in recent times as a studio, but with relatively few external alterations having been made to it the building retains an appealingly authentic character. Former stables, now used as a design studio, stand on the south side of the yard and are set at right angles to the barn.

11. Around the corner from this yard stand Castle Cottages, a row of three, post-war houses built in yellow stock brick. These are modest in character, but their simplicity and straightforwardness is such that they are well suited to the rural location and their unaltered appearance is a welcome feature. By virtue of their location these houses are an integral part of the Tonge scene, especially in the important view from the south side of the pond.

12. The 'new' mill at Tonge, on the south west side of the road, is comprised of a number of individual buildings, and is mostly built in yellow stock bricks that were almost certainly manufactured in the nearby brickfields at Sittingbourne or Teynham. The first of these buildings was completed in 1837, and a second in 1866. Their design is essentially industrial in character; indeed the buildings might be said to be appropriately austere in appearance. This industrial character is reinforced by a free standing, 30m (100ft) high, tapering, square brick chimney which is a distinctive feature in its own right and a landmark in the local landscape. It also records the

historically important switch from water to steam as the motive power in the milling process, and is therefore an interesting commentary on the way in which a local business embraced change. The mill buildings, which latterly accommodated a bakery, are currently used for a variety of purposes including furniture and craft sales, offices and living accommodation. The survival of this industrial building, in such an attractive rural setting, is rather unusual in a Kentish context and consequently of special interest.

13. A modern bungalow, built in the 1970s, now stands within the confines of the castle earthworks and is very prominent in the view of Tonge from the south. It is, however, essentially suburban in character and somewhat at odds with the overall character of the area. The relatively informal treatment of the garden area sloping down towards the pond does nevertheless work rather well with the surroundings.

14. The view from within Tonge, looking to the south, is largely rural although housing development fronting the London Road (A2) can be seen in the distance.

Landscape

15. Tonge lies at the northern end of a shallow valley where it merges with the low-lying land immediately to the south of the North Kent marshes. The stream which feeds the mill pond follows the line of the valley, and over a relatively short distance it displays an attractive sequence of characters: at its source it is little more than a weed-filled ditch; subsequently it becomes a more distinct feature with scrubby stream-side vegetation, whilst at its lower end the course of the stream is marked by prominent areas of wet woodland, comprised for the most part of alder and willow. The completeness of the water-course, running from source to mill pond over such a short distance, is nicely expressed by the sequence of stream-side habitats, features of which are important in the local landscape.

16. The gentle slopes on either side of the stream contribute to the setting of the stream. The land on the western side is now in arable use and virtually devoid of features such as hedgerows and trees; the absence of these features has undoubtedly spoilt the intimacy of the valley. However, the eastern side of the valley remains more varied with, for example, a mix of hedgerows, trees and orchards still being present; this side consequently retains a more traditional appearance. The wider landscape around Tonge continues to be attractive and, despite a number of orchards having been grubbed out in recent years, it still remains Kentish in character.

17. Trees around the site of Tonge 'castle', on the higher ground, are prominent in the landscape and form a significant screen. Of particular note is a row of mature elms, which species is now very uncommon in Kent.

18. The railway embankment, aligned east-west along the northern edge of Tonge, is an important feature in the local landscape, especially where the banks are covered with tree growth. This embankment has, in effect, severed Tonge visually from the wide sweep of low lying land to the north including the marshes so that it now forms a well defined northern edge to the settlement. The trees now comprise an important background to Tonge when viewed from the south.

19. The land on the southern side of the pond has, by tradition, been accessible to the public for informal recreation such as picnicking and feeding the ducks. A somewhat larger area was opened to public access in the late 1990s, when a small vehicle parking area was also provided. A small area of new woodland, comprised of native species, has been planted to the south-east of the pond with orchard trees

alongside; new hedges have also been planted and an area of permanent pasture established. This work has undoubtedly increased the appeal of Tonge for informal recreation by local people.

The highway environment

20. Development in Tonge is clustered almost exclusively around Church Road which is in essence a country lane; north and south of the settlement it passes between fields and orchards where carriageway edges are characterised by grassy banks, hedgerows and soft verges. This traditional rural character is aptly reinforced at the junction with Scraps Hill by the survival of a traditional wooden finger-post direction sign. The road twists and turns through Tonge itself with delightful informality, most notably where it passes through the narrow gap between the two mills, where buildings are set perilously close to passing traffic; footways here are conspicuous by their absence.

21. Overhead wires radiating from a distribution pole in the public highway alongside the two mills are, however, an unwelcome intrusion into an environment of such very special quality.

Summary

22. Tonge comprises a small, but fascinating, cluster of buildings set around an attractive mill pond. The long history of settlement here is of special interest, although it has yet to be fully documented. The stream, which continues to feed the pond, is of special historical importance as it provided one of the essential prerequisites for early habitation of the site and also the power for the mills. The buildings now present in Tonge include rare and attractive examples of Kentish vernacular industrial architecture, which nicely illustrate the use of locally-sourced building materials such as brick, tile and weatherboarding, and also in later work Welsh slate which had then become widely available. Also recorded in these structures is the historically important change from water to steam power. The pond and its feeder stream are set within a relatively self-contained area of landscape which remains attractive despite some recent loss of orchards and hedgerows. The public access afforded to the area contributes to its appeal as a local amenity.

23. The area's long standing history and the grouping of Kentish buildings in a picturesque situation alongside an attractive mill pond within an unspoilt rural landscape, together results in an area of special architectural or historic interest.

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Tonge conservation area policies and proposals for continuing preservation and enhancement

(extract from report to Planning Committee 27.02.03 – Agenda item 1.1 Annex C)

Planning policy context:

Swale Borough Local Plan; adopted July 2000.

Supplementary Planning Guidance:

Listed buildings: a guide for owners and occupiers; adopted November 1993.

Conservation Areas; adopted April 1993.

The conservation of traditional farm buildings; adopted November 1993.

Designing an extension; adopted April 1993.

Repair and maintenance of, and improvements to, buildings, boundaries and other structures:

The palette of materials present in the built environment of Tonge is of central importance to the special character and local distinctiveness of the place; key materials in this regard include locally manufactured red and yellow stock bricks; Kent peg clay roofing tiles; Welsh roofing slates; and weatherboarding. The retention of these indigenous materials will be important in the continuing preservation and enhancement of the character of the place; the use of these materials is also likely to be preferred in any new works of improvement and alteration.

The industrial origins of the key buildings in Tonge are a special feature of the local character and local distinctiveness in the built environment. The retention of key elements of this working character will be important in the continuing preservation and enhancement of the character of the place.

Owners and occupiers will be encouraged to seek the highest possible standards in the repair, maintenance and improvement of all the buildings, boundaries and other structures that contribute to the special character of Tonge, and to employ traditional work practices and traditional materials wherever appropriate.

The Borough Council maintains a small budget for grant aid towards the repair, in appropriate cases, of buildings of special architectural or historic interest.

The management of the local landscape:

Features of special importance in the Tonge landscape include the stream, mill pond and leets and the associated water regime; the wet woodland area at the northern end of the stream comprising willow and alder, and the group of elm trees on the 'castle' site; the tree cover on the south side of the railway embankment; and the Country Park.

The successful retention and enhancement of each of these features will depend upon appropriate management measures. Management regimes for the mill pond and stream, the elm trees, the Country Park and the railway embankment are already in place and their implementation will play an important part in the preservation and enhancement of the character of the place. Other management measures which promote the well-being of the traditional rural landscape will be encouraged in appropriate instances, including the care of roadside verges.

Planting which contributes to the form and structure of the local environment in and around Tonge should normally be comprised of native species, although other species now assimilated into the Kentish rural scene may also be appropriate.

Six weeks notice must be given in writing to the Borough Council before any works are undertaken to trees within the conservation area.

The public highway:

The form and appearance of Church Road is crucial to the character and appearance of the conservation area and the sensitive treatment of the highway environment will therefore be important, including the retention of the informal character and shape of both the road and the carriageway areas; the retention of the soft edges, verges and roadside banks, and traditional street furniture; the choice of materials used, and the manner of their use; and the restrained use of signing and road markings.

Works to the public highway will be carried out in accordance with the guidelines prepared by the highway authority for works in conservation sensitive areas as set out in The Highway Management Reference Book produced by Kent County Council.

Wherever possible further clutter in the highway from the statutory companies will be avoided (eg. additional poles, overhead wires and cabinets).

Other enhancement measures:

Other possible enhancement measures include:

- i. the replacement of chain-link fencing around the Tonge Mill car park with an improved boundary treatment;
- ii. the replacement of the corrugated covering on the lean-to roof on the south side of Tonge Mill with a more traditional roofing material;
- iii. the replacement of the chain-link fence fronting Church Road which separates the pond from the road;
- iv. the undergrounding of overhead wires currently carried by the distribution pole opposite Tonge Mill.
- v. the refurbishment of the traditional, wooden finger post direction sign situated on the corner of Church Road with Scraps Hill.

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