

Conservation areas at risk

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A few years ago an English Heritage report highlighted the damage to the historic (and, indeed, non-historic) environment from the clutter of road signs, railings, lighting poles and other 'street furniture', with over-designed projects intended to improve road safety and traffic flow and usually succeeding in neither aim. Now another report portrays 'conservation areas at risk', demonstrating that the same problems of inappropriate development, insidious change and well-intentioned but intrusive and ugly improvements are rapidly eroding their character.

The concept of conservation areas, much discussed in the 1950s and early '60s, was finally enshrined in legislation in 1967. Since then over 9300 have been designated in England, a major element in the strategy of townscape and landscape protection. Among the popular misconceptions about their legal and planning circumstances is that all buildings in a conservation area are listed or otherwise protected. That is definitely not the case, and would perhaps be unworkable if it were, but its absence of means that insidious change—so much easier to control if a building is listed—is all too possible.

Another assumption about conservation areas is that they are invariably 'quaint' or 'pretty'. Though many are, it is not their primary aim. Hundreds are manifestly not chocolate-boxy. There are numerous ones whose merit derives from their industrial and transport heritage, with surviving buildings of industrial archaeology importance. The list includes council estates and 1930s suburbia, mining villages and city centres, relict rural communities embedded in urban sprawl, and classic examples of Victorian terraced housing.

The report gives a list of the main problems which conservation areas may suffer. Inappropriate plastic doors and windows are found in 83% of areas, poor-quality roads and pavements in 60%, intrusive street clutter in 45%, and ugly traffic calming measures in 36%. In 43% front gardens, walls and hedges have

been levelled and removed to make way for parking space, and in 38% satellite dishes are prominent visual intrusions. Others unsympathetic building extensions, unsightly advertising, alterations to roofs and chimneys, and the neglect of green spaces.

One significance of the report is that it shows the uneven nature of the problem. In many local authorities the protection of conservation areas is taken seriously, through a combination of close adherence to planning strategies and careful promotion of the positive benefits of maintaining their character. But a disturbingly long list of others highlights those which have, apparently, failed to maintain at least some of their conservation areas, both in statutory terms and in the wider sense of what is desirable

The list is surprising. For example, sixteen CAs in Stockport are identified as 'at risk', but only one in Oldham—why should two relatively similar authorities, geographically close to each other, seemingly be so divergent. In Winchester district 24 CAs are listed, in Bath & North East Somerset 19 (significantly, perhaps, none of them in Bath itself), and in West Dorset 23. Is this a function of the fact that these areas simply have so many conservation areas, or because of different interpretations of the assessment criteria, or an accurate reflection of the situation. English Heritage has a well-tryed approach of naming and shaming in reports such as these—its 'buildings at risk' registers are familiar—and this list is very valuable. It grabs the headlines. But is it as objective and systematic as we might expect? Nevertheless, the importance of drawing public and media attention to the insidious and creeping erosion of quality in many conservation areas cannot be overstated. This report is timely and, though doubtless controversial, its conclusions are deeply disturbing.

For more information and to read the press release and detailed listing, see <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/server/show/ConWebDoc.16634>