

# **Wem Town Design Statement**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of a Design Statement for Wem is to identify what is special and unique about the town and to ensure that any future development, in terms of both building and setting, maintains the identity of the town. This is especially important within the conservation area that covers the main central streets of the town. It must be the voice of Wemians and it is for the benefit of Wemians, both present and future. It was initiated by volunteers within the town with the aid of a questionnaire circulated to every household during 2013. The statement includes description and an analysis of the town and the feelings for its future that emerged from the questionnaire and from discussions with members of the public. It contains a brief history, notes on distinctive buildings, and what is regarded as desirable for the future of the built environment and the transport within the urban area. The statement is a public document. It is for:

LOCAL AUTHORITIES & PUBLIC BODIES  
HOUSEHOLDERS

ANY INDIVIDUAL OR COMPANY PROPOSING TO DEVELOP HERE

LOCAL COMMUNITY GROUPS

PLANNERS, DEVELOPERS, BUILDERS, ARCHITECTS, DESIGNERS, ENGINEERS

It will become part of Shropshire Council's planning guidelines and therefore will be seen by developers, who will be expected to have regard to its recommendations. It should also be helpful to householders within the town, so that any changes to their property that they may propose will be sympathetic to the existing environment in terms of windows, doors, brickwork etc. and to the aspirations expressed in this document.

## **The recommendations for development schemes**

1. There should be green open spaces in all housing developments. This should include trees and soft plantings
2. There is a need for paths for pedestrians, disabled vehicles, cyclists etc. between all housing areas and shops
3. The River Roden and its flood plain is of significance and should be preserved and enhanced
4. The colour, texture and use of materials for building exteriors and fittings in the historic centre of Wem should be in sympathy with existing buildings
5. New housing should harmonise with neighbouring buildings especially in terms of external building design

6. There should be strong controls to protect the buildings in the conservation area.
7. The main focus for shops should be in the High Street and immediate surrounds
8. There should be a restriction of heavy goods vehicles in the High Street during daylight hours
9. An integrated bus and rail service is essential for an expanding town
10. New facilities, especially those for the young and old, are vital if Wem is to grow

### **Modern-day Wem**

Wem has always been a place of nonconformity and this is also apparent in its buildings. It has largely escaped from the type of standardisation seen elsewhere. It is its 'own town' with a unique character, which needs to be maintained. As such, it should be able to develop in harmony with the past while welcoming new styles that help maintain its individuality.

### **Location**

Wem lies on a relatively level plain. Much of this area of North Shropshire is New Red Sandstone, overlain with Jurassic deposits, and forms a continuation of the Cheshire basin. The sandstone was laid down approximately 280m years ago when the area was a desert. More recent Jurassic deposits, laid down around 200m years ago, in part, overlie the sandstone. These contain some deposits of limestone and coal. The basin is bounded on the east by the Hodnet Fault, which runs roughly from Shrewsbury to Market Drayton. East of this fault the sandstone is thinner. In the north west of the county near Oswestry are outcrops of Carboniferous limestone and the coal measures, which were mined around St. Martins. There are several low lying areas in which peat has built up, e.g. Wem Moss. Wem itself has no mineral deposits that have ever been exploited. The clay however, has been used for brick making around Aston and Barkers Green and these bricks have been extensively used within the town.

The River Roden rises to the west of the town and flows eastwards. Much of the area along the river to the west of the mill is classed as 'of high flood risk' by the Environment Agency and over 83% of the residents believe this area should be preserved and enhanced. East of Aston, the river turns south through a deep gorge and eventually its waters flow into the River Severn. It was long harnessed to power the mills. Until the late C20<sup>th</sup>, these mills were major employers in the town, and the weir and mill buildings still exist. The weir was constructed in the 1940s in an area formerly occupied by the mill pool, and which was owned by the Ministry of Defence from that time until the 1970s. Its valley restricts the development of both building and transport to the west and south but it currently provides a valuable wildlife corridor.

Prior to the arrival of the railway in the 1850s, Wem was connected to surrounding market towns by a number of stagecoach routes. Several inns in the centre of town catered for passengers and horses. These lost their importance in the 1850s when the Crewe - Shrewsbury railway opened. The latter is still open, and gives Wem an advantage over towns such as Ellesmere and Market Drayton, which lost their rail links in the Beeching era. A bus service connects Wem to Whitchurch and Shrewsbury.

The town is a mixture of architectural styles from the mediaeval to the modern. Buildings in the old centre are largely timber-framed though this may not be apparent externally.

Nearly ninety buildings are listed Grade II. These are mainly concentrated around Chapel Street and Noble Street in the conservation area, though some are as far out as Aston Street and Soulton Road. The management of the conservation area could, at its most charitable, be described as 'light touch'. Despite this, there are numerous notable buildings still surviving, including the Old and New Halls, Sambrook Hall, Trentham House and Drawwell House, and others including those listed below:

Dial Cottage (High Street) – this black and white house was originally two cottages for coachmen. They stand close to what was the original entrance to a large residence and grounds known as The Grove.

The Church of St. Peter and St. Paul is situated at the junction of the High Street and Mill Street. Much of it is built of Grinshill Stone, though other stones, thought to be the remains of earlier churches are to be found. The earliest part of the present building is the tower, which dates from about 1350 and is thought to be the oldest building in Wem. The tower survived the Great Fire of Wem in 1677, which gutted the remainder of the Church, melted the bells and burnt off the roof. The Church was rebuilt in 1677 and again in 1811, when the church, which was almost in ruins, was demolished and rebuilt on the old foundations. In 1886 the building was extended towards Mill Street and the Chancel. The tower has a ring of eight bells. In 1552 there were two great bells and a Sanctus bell. Following the Fire of Wem five bells were cast and hung in 1679/80. These were recast and hung in 1768, and a further bell added in 1771. Two more bells were added in 1897 to celebrate Queen Victoria's 60th Jubilee.

Baptist Chapel (Chapel Street) is a two storey building constructed in 1775 and enlarged in 1854 with an ashlar front and pedimented gable with moulded coping. It has round-headed windows and detached Tuscan columns. It was originally a Congregationalist church but replaced the original Baptist Chapel in Market Street in 1991. The latter building is now a private house but is still notable for its patterned brickwork, twin gables and turret.

The Old Mill House (Eckford Park) dates from 1656 and is a half-timbered house, built for the puritan rector, Andrew Parsons who was fined and imprisoned for sedition.

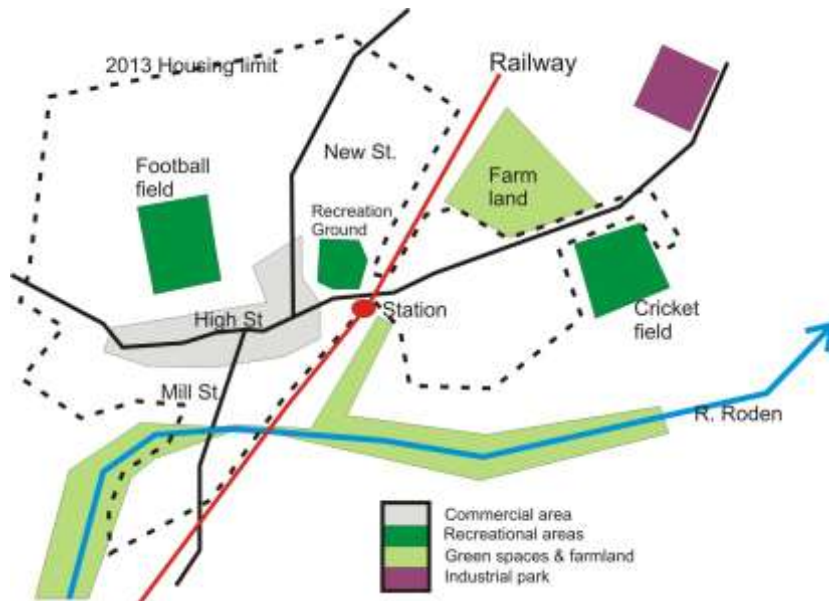
Astley House (Noble Street), named after Richards Astley, a surgeon, whose artist son John was a friend of Sir Joshua Reynolds. It has a vast brick chimney and an undulating double-hipped roof.

The Town Hall has a 1911 façade that has survived both fire and re-development. Such development maintains the pleasing street profile and is to be encouraged in other developments and re-developments.

### Facilities

Wem has clubs and facilities for most activities, currently suitable for a town of its size. New infrastructure will be needed as the town expands. Current residents identified such requirements as a new primary school, sports and youth facilities and a further medical centre.

## **Urban Structure**



The town is of a classical small urban model, with four roads meeting in the centre, allowing shoppers from the surrounding area to reach the shops. The shops also service the people who work in the businesses, and vice-versa.

Around the shopping centre are the main areas of housing, either in straight streets- as in the

classic industrial towns, or in avenues, cul-de-sacs etc. These have routes and communications both to the surrounding areas, and to the town centre. There are a number of recreation areas for the population.

### The Town Centre

Wem's town centre is based around the High Street and car park. It is a mix of businesses, mainly retail but some commercial; residential; leisure, including Wem Town Hall and various cafés and pubs, plus the parish church. As the population increases then new businesses should be encouraged within this area. There are sufficient properties to allow this without affecting this balance. The High Street boasts one of the largest proportions of independent retailers in the country and shopping there is an enjoyable experience. Ninety percent of residents interviewed wished the town centre to continue as the main retail and service area.

Wem is a delightful example of a small market town with integrity of building design within the centre, coupled with many attractive historic buildings. This attracts tourists and visitors- something that can be encouraged and expanded. Many townspeople commented on the design of these buildings, with 81% believing that the colour and texture of new buildings should be in sympathy with those already existing in their immediate vicinity and 82% believed that they should be modelled on the features of buildings in the town centre. The residents also believed with careful design, traditional buildings can co-exist with those of vernacular design.

The historic buildings outlined in the previous section are an important part of the town's character and should be conserved and enhanced- a move supported by 80% of the residents.

### The Peripherals of Wem

The ancient gateways and palisades of Wem, famous in the history of the civil war have long disappeared. No longer could *'the women of Wem and a few musketeers'* hold off the king's army! The town has expanded beyond its former boundaries but much of the

character has been retained. The approaches (gateways) to Wem are extremely attractive and welcoming, and still retain a clear break between the town and the countryside. Nearly 70% of residents believe that this feature is of importance to the town. In some of the housing and industrial developments on the edge of town, shielding is provided in many places by hedgerows or trees. 67% favoured efforts to encourage this softening of the impact of buildings at the gateways to the town.

### **New Developments**

New development is inevitable and should be welcomed but must consider existing design and infrastructure. Over 80% of residents interviewed believed that where new buildings are to be inserted, they should fit in with the existing style of streetscape. There was strong feeling within the town that *“Wem should ...encourage bright and innovative design and should add style to new buildings”* using *“mixed types of housing and materials pleasing to the eye”*. Choice of building materials is an important factor in any new construction, using products to enhance energy conservation, to reduce environmental damage and to fit in with existing styles and materials within the town. The colour of these materials is also important to soften the impact on surrounding area. There are success stories within Wem cited by residents. These include developments by the railway station and in Drawwell Walk.

Support for a green Wem is evident with 88% of respondents in favour of trees and soft plantings (*“...but not conifers!”*) to encourage wildlife and biodiversity. 92% favoured green open spaces being provided in all housing developments. Care needs to be taken with defining ‘green open spaces’. It was pointed out that hard planting might be more appropriate for the more densely populated parts of town but *“...on the fringes of town, new tree and shrub planting allied to the extension of footpaths would give a real boost to residents...”* A majority, 58% were in favour of the provision of mixed road verges, pavement on one side and grass on the other. The county Network Green study highlights the importance of the River Roden and the railway line as green corridors. *‘Wildlife corridors are key elements in the network greatly increasing the value of the areas that they link and unifying the landscape elements as well as being important areas in their own right’*

A number of comments highlighted the importance of hedgerows, green pathways and small ‘green areas’ for socialising. This could form the basis for wildlife corridors and recreational walks throughout the town. Wem is a town of narrow roads, footpaths, lanes and plots off the High Street that give it character. These should be retained in order to give coherence to the town and encourage non-motorised movement.

### **Communications and Transport**



*“Wem was not designed- it was a Saxon/Norman settlement on a useful river. It haphazardly developed through Tudor, Georgian and Victorian times.”* It is currently at the staggered junction of 4 ‘B’ class roads, all of which were largely developed in the C18<sup>th</sup> and were

just about wide enough for 2 stage coaches to pass en route to either Shrewsbury or Whitchurch after making use of the town's inns for refuelling and changing of horses. Many of these inns such as the 'The Castle' and 'The White Lion' survive with historic features still intact and with facades dating back hundreds of years- as illustrated in the C19<sup>th</sup>. photograph

### **Public Transport**

Wem benefits from having retained its railway while surrounding towns lost theirs in the 1960s. The station has a regular stopping service to Shrewsbury, Whitchurch and Crewe. Some express trains also stop in the early morning and evening for the benefit of commuters to Birmingham and Manchester. This is a facility that needs to be enhanced and encouraged as expansion continues.

Wem also has an hourly bus service in each direction on the Whitchurch to Shrewsbury route and a mini-bus service to local villages. Further bus services to Ellesmere and Market Drayton were suggested in order to enhance the public transport network.

The town bus service provides a regular daytime service to outlying estates and housing expansions should provide routes that will accommodate new routes and to link outlying parts of the town to the station - a feature regarded as important by 85% of questionnaire respondents.

### **"People before cars"**

Any development involving increased traffic will need to be accompanied by a traffic control system in order to restrict over-sized vehicles and delivery vans in the town during the hours when shoppers and visitors many use of the High Street shops. 84% of respondents to the questionnaire believed that there should be a restriction of heavy goods vehicles and tractor-hauled loads in the High Street during daylight hours.

The town has a network of footpaths between the town centre and housing areas that form potential routes for tourist trails. They could be enhanced to accommodate pedestrians, disabled vehicles, cyclists etc. and provide continuous walks around the town which might include the Town Hall, the Millennium Green, and the many of the attractive listed buildings. As an added bonus we have an attractive river- currently a haven for wildlife, whose banks which could form an additional walk.

Well signposted and maintained, these walks will provide safe links between all parts of the town and will encourage visitors to explore it and to make use of its varied shops and facilities.