



**SMETHWICK  
CONSERVATION AREA  
CHARACTER APPRAISAL:**

**AREA B:  
HIGH STREET AND  
CROCKETTS LANE**

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**Plan B: High Street and Crocketts Lane Study Area**



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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

**The 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act places a duty on every local planning authority to determine which parts of their area are areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance. Such areas can then be designated as conservation areas.**

**The Act also states that local planning authorities should, from time to time, review their existing conservation areas and formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of these conservation areas.**

**This report, which has been prepared in accordance with a brief set by Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council to consider possible conservation area designations within Smethwick, therefore consists of an appraisal of the established character and appearance of the area identified in Plan B of the brief.**

**The prime purpose of the report is to recommend whether or not any of the area shown on Plan B is of sufficient quality and interest to merit designation as a conservation area.**

**On the basis that it is recommended that a conservation area should be designated, the report is also intended to**

- Assist in defining what is of special architectural or historic importance**
- Give recommendations on features and characteristics that should be protected**

- **Identify possible areas for future enhancement within the designated area**
- **Provide guidance on the form, style and location of future change and development within the designated area.**

The report is divided into the following sections:

## **2.0 The History of the Area**

This covers the period from prehistory to the present day. It includes significant architectural history, important dates and references to people and events that have helped to shape the area as we see it today. As Smethwick is an area of almost exclusively Victorian and later development and character, this section focuses on the history of the area from c.1840 onwards.

## **3.0 The Established Character**

This is an assessment of the existing character of the area, including its topography, architectural styles, predominant building materials and natural or man-made features of local interest. This section also includes a reasoned justification and explanation for the suggested boundaries to the proposed conservation area.

## **4.0 Possible Areas for Enhancement**

These can range from major areas for environmental improvement, or in some cases redevelopment, to very minor works of repair and redecoration.

## **5.0 Bibliography**

This consists of the principal published sources consulted in the preparation of the report.

## **Plan of the Conservation Area**

This is a plan of the area that aims to identify the elements which contribute to its character and appearance. The plan shows the proposed conservation area boundary, listed buildings (buildings identified by DCMS as being of special architectural or historic interest), Scheduled Ancient Monuments and other buildings or structures of local note.

This latter group consists of buildings that play a part in establishing the character of the area but have not yet been considered to be of sufficient importance to meet the current criteria for listing. However, as government guidance contained in *PPG 15-Planning and the Historic Environment* (1994) makes clear, there is a presumption against the demolition of such buildings, particularly where they make a significant contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area.

In identifying buildings of local note on both the plan and in the text of the report, account has been taken of the recommendations for 'local listing' recently made by Richard Morriss as part of the Historic Landscape Characterisation Survey conducted by the Council, English Heritage and Urban Living. It should be emphasized, however, that while in the main the buildings identified as of local note in this report are the same that Morriss recommends for 'local listing' there are occasional differences. The plan does not include those buildings recommended for 'local listing' which fall outside the proposed conservation area.

'Important' trees are also identified. These are usually highly visible from public places and/or they contribute to the setting of a listed building, the street scene or a building of local note. Important open spaces are also marked on the plan, as these are a vital element in the character of an area. Character is defined not just by buildings, walls and trees, but also by the spaces between them. These contribute to the setting of buildings. Open spaces allow views around the area and they are often

an important element in telling the story of the historical development of a community.

Important unlisted walls and other forms of boundary enclosure, such as railings or hedges, are recognized. These are usually built of local materials and help to define spaces and frame views. Significant views into, out of and around the proposed conservation area are also identified for it should be appreciated that a conservation area's character does not necessarily end with a line drawn on a map. Often the character is closely associated with attractive views out to other areas, sometimes via gaps between buildings, along streets or across open spaces. Views within an area such as that to a church or other landmark buildings can also be particularly valuable.



## **2.0 THE HISTORY OF THE AREA**

- 2.1 Smethwick lies just to the west of Birmingham, within the Metropolitan Borough of Sandwell, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was a hamlet of the South Staffordshire village of Harborne; in 1695 it was described as a ‘discontinued village’ (*i.e.* a scattered village) strung out along the Birmingham-Dudley Road.
- 2.2 Smethwick established its own identity upon separation from the manor of Harborne in 1710, its first church, Smethwick Old Church, being opened in 1732. However, it was not until the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that the settlement saw significant development; this was linked to the provision of transport infrastructure, which then led to the location of manufacturing industry and engineering in the area.
- 2.3 The main road through Smethwick became part of the Birmingham, Dudley and Wolverhampton turnpike in 1760, probably stimulating growth in the High Street around the Blue Gates Inn. Yates’s 1775 map of Staffordshire shows ‘Smithwick,’ the canal and a few buildings dotted along the turnpike, including a reference to the ‘Blue Gate’.
- 2.4 The topography of the area influenced the pattern of land use with the higher land to the south and west falling away to the northeast, and it is along this lower ground in the north that the canals and railways run. The first of Birmingham’s canals, the Birmingham Old Main Line, was constructed through the northern part of Smethwick by James Brindley in 1768-69, and this had a dramatic effect on the area’s fortunes. The canal connected Birmingham with the coal, iron and mineral resources of Wednesbury and Bilston and was fundamental to the economic development of the area, quickly attracting industrial development to land along the canal corridor.
- 2.5 Manufacturing industry, particularly metalworking and engineering, played an important role in the settlement’s growth and development. The first works,

Smethwick Brasshouse, had been established by 1772 near the canal on Brasshouse Lane. In 1795, Boulton Watt & Sons acquired a piece of undeveloped land alongside the old Mainline Canal to the southeast of Rabone Lane on which they opened the Soho Foundry, the first purpose-built steam engine manufactory in the world. Chance's Glassworks, which became one of the largest glassworks in the country, producing glass for the Crystal Palace in 1851, was established in 1814 on land close to the Old Main Line Canal west of Spon Lane. In 1829-30 Telford's Mainline Canal adopted the (present) direct line and the old line became a series of loops off it. Soho Foundry Loop was one of these but in 1852 it was cut into two by new railway embankments, after which it was infilled and reduced to Soho Foundry Basin only. The line of the canal and the land beyond was acquired and the Mint built alongside the New Main Line in 1860.

- 2.6 The idea of lowering the summit on the Old Main Line Canal to ease traffic congestion on the canal had first been suggested by John Smeaton but, Smeaton himself had little involvement in this as he died in 1791 and the scheme was shelved for a while. By the 1820s, however, the growth of industry along the canal had rendered the traffic once more unmanageable and Thomas Telford was commissioned to build the New Main Line Canal, which ran parallel to the Old Main Line. This canal, opened in 1829-30, was wider and straighter, had towpaths to either side and encouraged the increase of industrial development in the area; this in turn led to an increase in Smethwick's population (from 1,097 in 1801 to 2,676 in 1831) and the growth of the New Village, an area of factories and workers' housing on the eastern side of the Birmingham-Dudley Road between Smethwick and Cape Hill.
- 2.7 Smethwick's engineering reputation continued to grow during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and it emerged as one of the country's leading centres for the manufacture of nuts, bolts and screws, local companies Watkins & Keen and Nettlefold & Chamberlain being among the leading manufacturers. The Birmingham Wagon Co. Ltd. came to Smethwick in 1864 and was one of the most important employers in the

town, and Richard Evered & Son (tube makers) came to the town in 1866. As a result of this industrial development the town's population grew rapidly during the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

2.8 In 1852, the Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Stour Valley Railway Line was opened through Smethwick, and the Stourbridge Extension Railway opened in 1867, linking Smethwick with Old Hill and providing a route between Birmingham and Stourbridge. The canals and railways (and associated structures) have left their mark on the landscape; several fine bridges were built to carry the railway lines across the canal cuttings, including the Galton Bridge to the north of Smethwick.

2.9 In 1894 a separate civil parish of Smethwick was created and, by 1899 the rapidly growing status of the town led to its becoming a municipal borough, being raised to county borough status in 1907; by this time the population had reached 54,539. The town continued to grow, reaching 84,406 in 1931 but then the population began to fall, as a result of a decline in the industrial prosperity of the area during the depression of the 1930s. The heavier industries continued to decline in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, although as late as the 1960s Smethwick was still one of the most densely populated urban areas in England (outside London). In 1966, the Borough of Smethwick was transferred from Staffordshire to Worcestershire to form part of the new borough of Warley but, after 1974, it became part of Sandwell Metropolitan Borough within the newly-created county of the West Midlands.

## 2.10 High Street, Crocketts Lane and Victoria Park

2.10.1 Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the main centre of population in Smethwick appears to have been Bearwood Hill (now Bearwood Road) at the junction of the Birmingham-Dudley Road and the road from Harborne. Cottages dating from at least the early 18<sup>th</sup>

century stood at the northern end of Cheshire Road, and early 19<sup>th</sup>-century cottages lay on the north side of Firs Lane.

2.10.2 The Red Cow Inn is first mentioned in a deed of 1706 and was one of the oldest buildings in the area, standing at Newlands Green. The inn, however, was demolished in 1930 and the present-day Red Cow Inn was built further north on High Street in 1936-7. The triangular area in which the original inn stood in the fork between the two main roads in the area, High Street and Bearwood Road, was then largely cleared of its remaining buildings and later planted as a public garden.

2.10.3 The Sow and Pigs public house (on the site of the present Park Hotel) existed by 1818 and appears on the tithe map of 1842. It stood to the south of the site of the earlier Red Cow Inn, and bull-baiting and cock-fighting were held on the open ground at Bearwood Road between the two pubs.

2.10.4 The 1842 tithe map shows that land to the east of Crockett's Lane as far as Bearwood Road was undeveloped at that time. The area between High Street, Cross Street and Crockett's Lane is shown as 'Smethwick New Village.' This had been developed in the 1820s and was predominantly an area of factories and workers' housing. There was still extensive agricultural land in the area in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century but, by the 1880s, much of it had been swallowed up by urban development. The 1885 Ordnance Survey shows development extending from the junction of High Street with Brasshouse Lane down to Crockett's Lane.

2.10.5 Victoria Park was laid out to the east of Bearwood Road in 1887-8 on 35½ acres around Pool Farm and was extended in 1894 when land near Crockett's Lane was added. The 1905 Ordnance Survey map shows the park containing tree-lined avenues and a bandstand.

2.10.6 In 1890, apart from the school buildings which are now part of Sandwell College, the area to the east of Crockett's Lane was still open land. The Baptist Church on Regent Street had been built by this time, as had the offices of the local School Board on the corner of High Street and Piddock Road. There was a ribbon of development along Bearwood Road, but otherwise the settlements of Smethwick and Cape Hill remained separate.

2.10.7 The district further west remained open countryside with several farms and large houses until the period between the wars. By 1921, land along Watery Lane and Cheshire Road had been developed for housing. Between 1955 and 1980 clearance and redevelopment of large areas of 'unfit' 19<sup>th</sup>-century housing took place, including on the west side of High Street in the area of Queens Close, James Close and Coopers Lane.

### **3.0 THE ESTABLISHED CHARACTER**

#### **3.1 Introduction and Overview**

- 3.1.1 The proposed conservation area has several varied and distinct characters, ranging from the bustle and vitality of the High Street, particularly the shopping area north of the Council House, to the large and generally quiet open spaces of Victoria Park. Another distinctive area is formed by the fine group of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century educational and 1930s civic buildings on Crocketts Lane and Piddock Road.
- 3.1.2 The initial impression formed by the area proposed for conservation area designation (and the surrounding area) is not particularly favourable. This is partly due to the fact that as an area of late Victorian, predominantly working class character, the area is not the sort that even now is generally thought worthy of protection through conservation area status.
- 3.1.3 Unlike many conservation areas, especially in rural areas, much of the area is not visually appealing and even in the context of other urban conservation areas within the Birmingham conurbation, this part of Smethwick lacks superficial attractiveness or the monumental industrial structures that can provide an immediately recognizable and specific character to a neighbourhood.
- 3.1.4 By contrast, the area has a modest and unassuming quality that reflects its historic development since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is also the case that much of the historic character of this part of Smethwick is overlain by a series of later alterations and patterns of development. Some of these need to be unravelled before the underlying historic character of the area and the story that this represents can be unravelled and appreciated.

3.1.5 As even within this comparatively small area, the character and appearance of the proposed conservation area is tremendously varied, it is proposed to deal with each area that makes up the proposed conservation area in turn.

### 3.2 Civic & Educational Buildings on Crocketts Lane/Piddock Road

3.2.1 Crocketts Lane runs due east from High Street and at its junction with Piddock Road contains a distinctive group of civic and educational buildings (**Plate 1**). It is the latter group that is the earliest and directly fronts Crocketts Lane. Pride of place goes to the large Edwardian baroque building, which was built in 1908-10 as a Technical School and is now the main reception building of the Smethwick campus of Sandwell College (**Plate 2**). It was designed by Frederick J Gill, a local architect who worked for the Smethwick School Board and its successor, the local Education Committee. It is notable for the quality of its decoration and the exuberance it adds to the street scene, its central domed cupola over the main entrance reminiscent of the detail on a Wren church. The building was added at Grade II to the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest in June 2004.

3.2.2 Despite the presence of the unattractive and utilitarian modern college buildings behind and directly to the west, which mask its long, carefully composed symmetrical west elevation that was clearly designed to be seen, this building makes an important contribution to the street scene.

3.2.3 Situated on a bend in the road, it also forms part of a group with the buildings of Crocketts Lane School immediately to the north-east. These comprise part of the large Central School complex, which by 1910 contained over 2,000 pupils in the infant, junior and higher grade schools. The surviving Victorian buildings, which represent a good example of Board School architecture, consist of one of the main classroom blocks and the main hall, built gable end onto the street. Both are built in a

gentle Gothic style with a mixture of pointed and segmental-headed windows and can be regarded as buildings of local note. The tile-hung bell turret on the hall is a distinctive local landmark.

3.2.4 These buildings and (for different reasons) the rather unfortunate 1960s public house and the bleak car park directly to its north on the opposite side of the road make a very obvious point at which to draw the boundary of the proposed conservation area.

3.2.5 It is also at this point that there is a good view from Crocketts Lane up Piddock Road (**Plate 3**), the late Edwardian terrace on the north side of which is set on the corner of the road and thus forms an important visual composition when viewed from or near the junction with Crocketts Lane. The great majority of the individual houses within the terrace, which is not shown on the 1905 Ordnance Survey map, have been much altered (including the loss of chimneystacks in several cases) and it is their impact as a whole rather than detail which is important here. There is also a worthwhile view from Piddock Road down towards the main Sandwell College building. The stone kerbs and the paved gutters along much of Piddock Road also contribute to its distinctiveness, while the trees between the Law Courts and Police Station help to soften its appearance.

3.2.6 The main elevation of the Law Courts faces Crocketts Lane (**Plate 4**). It is a solidly constructed building of 1931 constructed of red brick with ashlar dressings, which despite modern replacement windows and its machine pantiled roof (which is unlikely to be original) forms a commanding presence at the road junction. The low plinth wall in front, which also returns up Piddock Road, is original to the building and along with the high brick panelled wall along Crocketts Lane (**Plate 5**) is identified as an important boundary wall. It is unfortunate that the brickwork of the latter has been covered in vandal-proof paint, albeit that past experience presumably made this necessary.



3.2.7 The building immediately to the left of this wall is No.12, Crocketts Lane (**Plate 6**), which appears to have been built as a police house or office to the adjoining Police Station. The building is nicely detailed and its recently installed uPVC windows at least appear to be sliding sashes and are installed in the original openings. Stylistically similar to the main Police Station, it too is of local note and from the vehicular entrance alongside it the rear of the main building is clearly visible.

3.2.8 The main elevation of the Police Station is on Piddock Road (**Plate 7**) and is a distinguished composition of 1906, showing some similarities to the roughly contemporary Technical School and is possibly by the same architect. The building, which retains its original sash windows in moulded stone surrounds, has suffered few external alterations, a notable feature being the retention of the attractive railings in front of the main block. The modern box-like addition alongside it, however, is not nearly so attractive and is not helped either by its uPVC windows.

### 3.3 High Street from Piddock Road to Cheshire Road; Firs Lane

3.3.1 The corner of Piddock Road and High Street is defined by No.215, High Street (**Plate 8**). This is a tall building in High Victorian Gothic style, which is shown on the 1890 Ordnance Survey map of the area as the offices of the local School Board, set up in the 1870s, and forms a distinctive landmark in the street scene. Virtually all the (rather mechanical) decoration is confined to the front elevation, which is probably at least in part a result of Piddock Road being a post-1890 creation.

3.3.2 The modern Regency Court development on the north side of Piddock Road is excluded from the proposed conservation area. From No.215 southwards the quality of the built environment on both sides of High Street is disappointing. On the western side the trees on the banked verges help to screen the Coopers Lane flats from view (**Plate 9**) and form a natural boundary to the proposed conservation area.

To the east there is nothing of visual quality but this area also needs to be included within the proposed conservation area in order to make a coherent and meaningful link between the civic and educational buildings on Crocketts Lane/Piddock Road and the Victorian development further to the south on High Street.

- 3.3.3 This area of land includes the modern residential development along Brailsford Drive and the equally undistinguished modern buildings of Sandwell College. Certainly, the whole of this area is one for potential enhancement, which in the case of the college site may become a reality in the not too distant future.
- 3.3.4 The first building of any quality encountered to the south on High Street is Nos.236-240 on the west side (Smethwick Conservative Club) (**Plate 10**). This is a dignified mid-19<sup>th</sup> century building, originally a house, in a mildly Italianate style. Despite unsympathetic alterations to the rendered ground floor and its enclosure behind an unattractive rendered boundary wall with horizontal steel railing, the building makes a positive contribution to the street scene and retains much of its architectural detailing (including ornamental window surrounds) to the first floor. There is a much-altered stable block and coach house to the rear accessed off Arden Road.
- 3.3.5 Immediately south of Nos.236-40 is The Red Cow Public House (**Plate 11**), a 1930s 'road house' in a very weak and uninspired neo-Georgian style, which despite some similarities to the contemporary Blue Gates Inn further to the north (see report on Study Area A) is undoubtedly of inferior quality. The recessed position of the building in relation to the rest of High Street also tends to blow an unfortunate 'hole' in the street scene at this point, which is certainly not redeemed by the building's poor architectural quality.
- 3.3.6 To the south of The Red Cow Public House some semblance of the predominantly late Victorian character of this part of Smethwick High Street is regained in the terrace that makes up Nos.262-278 (**Plate 12**). None of the individual buildings is of

any real architectural quality, although Nos.262-4 at the northern end retain some original detailing on the first floor and the southern part of No.262 has a decent Victorian or Edwardian shop-front (**Plate 13**). Nos. 266-272 (currently occupied by the Smethwick Regeneration Partnership) are a modern rebuilding to a lower roof line and the taller Nos.274-8 at the southern end of the terrace are disfigured by insensitive window replacements to the upper floors and massive steel roller shutter blinds on the ground floor.

3.3.7 The eastern side of High Street has fared rather better than the western and from No.255 southwards to No.295 (immediately north of Victoria Avenue) there is an unbroken and continuous line of late Victorian buildings (**Plate 14**). There are several individual styles within this development and inevitably there are many inappropriate replacement windows on the first floor and a string of unsympathetic modern shop-fronts to the ground floor. Some minor pleasures remain, however, such as the brightly painted canted bays with their original sash windows above Viney's Opticians (**Plate 15**), the continuous decorative eaves corncicing and the round-arched carved floral motifs above the first-floor windows on a distinct sequence of properties towards the northern end of the terrace. It is, however, the overall scale, form and materials (predominantly red brick, some of it now painted, and slate roofs) of the terrace that is most important and helps to define the character of this part of High Street.

3.3.8 The commercial and retail core of the proposed conservation area forms a distinct contrast to the area immediately to the south of Victoria Avenue, which is characterised by The Council House (Council Offices) and the war memorial, both of which are Grade II listed buildings. The Council House (**Plate 16**) is a particularly impressive building and lends a quiet civic dignity to this part of the conservation area. It was built in 1905-7 by Frederick J Gill, the architect of the former Technical School and possibly the Police Station, but although clearly from the same stable is an altogether more accomplished design.

- 3.3.9 The building is 14 bays in length, consisting of a slightly projecting pedimented central section, topped by a distinctive bell and clock turret, linked to segmental-pedimented end sections, which also project slightly from the main wall plane. The materials are red brick and yellow terracotta, much of it treated like ashlar, the style Baroque.
- 3.3.10 The exuberance of the Council House finds its foil in the war memorial (**Plate 17**). This was erected in c.1920 and consists of a tapering granite column of square plan with re-entrant corners, raised on steps and splayed outwards at the base. Attached to the front, on a base with a curved front, is a bronze statue of a woman holding an olive branch and on the base is a plaque inscribed: "Wait but for the yield of all our toil and God shall not forget", with further bronze reliefs to the left and right.
- 3.3.11 The monument is set in a railed enclosure forming a half oval fringed by trees, of which that symmetrically placed to the rear and to either side at the front may form part of the original planting scheme.
- 3.3.12 Trees also form an important part of the setting of the Council House, particularly the long and formally planted row on the south side of the red brick wall bounding Victoria Avenue (**Plate 18**). This short no-through road leads to a late Victorian terrace (**Plate 19**), of which the house at the south-western end is either an addition or a total rebuild. This terrace was completely renovated a few years ago by a Housing Association and although all its doors and top-hung windows are modern replacements has a unified consistency, which extends to the picket fencing of the small front gardens. There is a view of the backs of the terrace on the east side of High Street from this point (**Plate 20**).
- 3.3.13 Less visually harmonious are the sprawling and brutal flat-roofed 1960s and 1970s additions to the rear of the Council House, to which they are somewhat

incongruously linked by an enclosed bridge at upper floor level. This is certainly an area where there is considerable potential for enhancement.

- 3.3.14 On the other side of the road from Victoria Avenue is No.280 High Street (Maben House), which occupies a prominent and important corner position at the junction with Firs Lane (**Plate 21**). Maben House is an attractive house of c.1900 (it is not shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1890 but appears on that for 1904), built of red brick with a slate roof, its most imposing features the richly carved timberwork of the wide entrance porch and the pierced decoration of the timber between the bargeboards of the projecting gable to the left, a detail that is repeated to the rear.
- 3.3.15 The building, which houses an Undertaker's, is very well maintained and the recently constructed wall and railings which enclose its garden and turn the corner from High Street to Firs Lane, although not historically 'correct' in their detailing, make a positive contribution to the street scene.
- 3.3.16 There is a good view of the Council House and the war memorial beyond from Firs Lane (**Plate 22**), while in this road the pair of rather plain late Victorian cottages to the north-east of the recently demolished Nos.128-130 Firs Lane could easily be reinstated to something closer to their original character by the reinstatement of appropriate doors and windows (**Plate 23**). The potential for the redevelopment of the site of Nos.128-130 is discussed below in Section 4.0.
- 3.3.17 Another significant feature of Firs Lane are the wall and gate piers that define the land at the rear of The Red Cow and the line of trees that run along the north-west boundary of this land (**Plates 23, 24**). Beyond the pair of cottages referred to above and a plain 1930s house on the corner, Firs Lane is bisected by Arden Road, which runs at an oblique angle back towards High Street and along the south-east side of which the proposed conservation area boundary would include the late Victorian

terrace at Nos.1-7 (odd) (**Plate 25**) and the gate piers defining a further entrance to The Red Cow (**Plate 26**).

3.3.18 Back on High Street and opposite the Council House is a small roughly triangular-shaped grassed area (**Plate 27**), which although simply the by-product of modern road safety improvements (the junction between High Street and Firs Lane having been realigned at this point) is fringed by trees which help to screen High Street from the 1980s development along the south-west side of Firs Lane and the north side of Watery Lane and thus provides a logical boundary to the proposed conservation area. There is also potential for environmental improvement within this area (see Section 4.0 below).

3.3.19 Immediately south of this piece of land is a mini-roundabout at the junction of High Street, Cheshire Road and Watery Lane. From here there is a good view along Cheshire Road (**Plate 28**), which although the road itself is not of sufficient quality to merit inclusion within the proposed conservation area helps to root the area proposed for designation within the context of the surrounding residential streets.

3.3.20 At the corner of Cheshire Road is No.248a High Street, built as a post office shortly after 1904 and still serving this function a century later (**Plate 28**). The building has been much altered (particularly on the ground floor) and is really only worth identifying as of local note for the clever way in which it utilises its narrow corner site. Directly adjoining the post office the remainder of No.248 (shops on the ground floor with flats above) is of value largely for its shop-fronts, which despite alteration retain their original pilastered divisions with segmental-pedimented caps substantially intact (**Plate 29**).

### 3.4 Victoria Park

- 3.4.1 Directly opposite the post office and immediately to the south of the war memorial is the entrance to Victoria Park. The park was created in 1887 to celebrate Queen Victoria's golden jubilee when it provided the largest single area of public open space within the borough, a function it continues to serve today.
- 3.4.2 The main entrance to the park is through a wide gateway flanked by panelled terracotta piers with ball finials adjoining Victoria Park Lodge, which was built at the same time as the park was opened (**Plate 30**). This is a well-preserved example of this building type and its playful use of mock timber framing and shaped brick chimneys adds to the recreational feel at the entrance to the park.
- 3.4.3 The lodge has recently been carefully repaired and converted to use as the Smethwick Heritage Centre and, like nearby Maben House, provides another example of the sensitive and good quality refurbishment of an older building, which along with its intrinsic architectural qualities and historical associations justifies identification as a building of local note.
- 3.4.4 The park is traversed by a network of tarmac paths (**Plates 31 and 32**), which makes the whole area accessible at all times of year. There are many fine trees, both individual specimens and clustered together in groups that add to the character and appearance of the space and there are extensive views across the park from various vantage points.
- 3.4.5 One of the most attractive parts of the park is the large pond in the north-west corner (**Plate 33**), a feature of the original park, which contains a small island in the middle (first shown on the 1921 map) and is surrounded by a public path on three sides, the path on the fourth side leading to the buildings of Sandwell College.

3.4.6 The central part of the park has a series of pavilions and clubhouses, none of which is of any merit and which were associated with the tennis courts and bowling green which formerly occupied this area. There are two children's play areas closer to the Victoria Park lodge entrance. The ground in the south-eastern part of the park is higher than the remainder and flattened to provide football pitches, trees in this area naturally being limited to the boundaries of the park where they provide an important screen to the road (High Street) and particularly to the residential development to the east.

3.4.7 It is proposed to exclude the small piece of open land in the far north-eastern corner of the park from the conservation area, as this is a modern extension to the park, which makes little contribution to its overall character. There are currently proposals to improve the quality of the park's environment as a place for leisure and recreation; these are discussed in Section 4.0 below.

### 3.5 High Street, from Cheshire Road to Edgbaston Road

3.5.1 Leaving the park at the Victoria Park Lodge entrance there is a good view of No.2 Bearwood Road (a former Edward Cheshire Nurses' home) and the terrace of Nos.4-32 Bearwood Road (it is at this point that High Street and Bearwood Road meet) diagonally opposite (**Plate 34**).

3.5.2 No.2 Bearwood Road (**Plate 35**) is a particularly fine structure and presents a delightfully eclectic and deliberately asymmetrical elevation to the street. It was built in 1903 (datestone on front elevation) and is constructed of red brick with much yellow terracotta embellishment, including to the porch and window surrounds, several of which are in bays. It is also one of the few buildings within the study area (Maben House and No.368 Cape Hill are among the others) where the rear elevation also remains substantially unaltered (**Plate 36**). Not surprisingly, this is much plainer



than the front but apart from a series of Velux rooflights and a rather unfortunate flue pipe, it is largely unspoilt and the yard alongside it (probably originally a garden) makes a logical point at which to draw the proposed conservation area boundary along Cheshire Road.

3.5.3 Nos.4-32 Bearwood Road (**Plates 37 and 38**) form a continuous terrace, which although it may well have been built in two distinct phases follows an overall pattern and was all constructed around 1900 (it does not appear on the 1890 Ordnance Survey map but is shown on the corresponding map of 1904). It is without doubt the best-preserved terrace within the study area and although there have inevitably been some door and window replacements these are fewer than usual and it retains much of its original integrity intact. The terrace is particularly notable for the clever use it makes of the gentle slope to the north, stepping down in stages from the south.

3.5.4 Original architectural details include the decorated eaves corncicing, continuous sill banding, the paired window surrounds on the first floor, the hipped bay windows on the ground floor and the steeply gabled canopied porches (several of them paired) over the front doors. The low brick wall with tiled coping defining the tiny front gardens is also original. The contrast that the terrace makes with the looming bulk of the tower block, Bearwood House, beyond pays testimony to their domestic scale and sympathetic form.

3.5.5 In front of the terrace a long and narrow triangular strip of land marks the divergence of High Street and Bearwood Road (**Plate 39**). Most of this is laid to grass and is well maintained with carefully planted trees and flowers. The area includes the remains of a former fountain, of which only the circular plinth remains as a feature in the planting scheme.

3.5.6 Immediately south of the triangular piece of land is the tarmac car park of The Park Hotel, a rather dreary space defined by concrete bollards and a harsh modern red

brick wall (**Plate 40**). The main elevations of the building are to the south (**Plate 41**) where it presents a basic L-plan to High Street and Newlands Green, the name now given to the road connecting High Street and Bearwood Road.

- 3.5.7 The building thus occupies an island, the busy and fast-moving traffic at this point tending to physically isolate it from its immediate surroundings. The building itself, which was built in c.1900, is a fine one and combines its red brick construction and exuberant terracotta detailing to good effect. Turning the corner as it does, it takes the opportunity to offer ‘show’ elevations to two sides, both being characterised by pedimented doorcases to the three entrances (the main one is to the middle at the splayed corner), semi-pilasters articulating the bay divisions, heavily defined floor banding and corncing and keystones to the window surrounds. The door and window joinery also survives remarkably intact and owing to its site the building forms a significant and prominent local landmark.
- 3.5.8 Directly opposite The Park Hotel is the Newlands Green Apartment Block (**Plate 42**), a four-storey early 1950s block of flats which is nevertheless important as an example of the type of social housing constructed by local authorities in the immediate pre- and post-war periods. Although predominantly ‘modernist’ in character the building has a hipped and spreading tiled roof with chimneystacks, which relieves its otherwise uncompromising form.
- 3.5.9 The block is particularly notable for the way in which it utilises its corner site. The entrance elevation to Newlands Green has a slightly concave camber with a wide elliptical arch leading to the central inner courtyard; the elevations to High Street and Bearwood Road are flat but these too are relieved by the way in which they project slightly from the ends of the entrance elevation and their evenly spaced second-floor balconies. All the windows have been replaced in uPVC but remain in their original symmetrically placed openings.

- 3.5.10 The High Street elevation of the Newlands Green Apartment Block directly overlooks Victoria Park, as does the adjoining late Victorian terrace of Nos.322-364 High Street, the northern continuation of which was presumably demolished to make way for the flats (**Plates 43** and **44**). The surviving terrace takes slightly different forms, as befitting the status of its original occupants, and was clearly built in phases, albeit at much the same time, as the dates 1884 to Ivy Cottage (No.350) and 1888 to both Park Villa and Park View (Nos.360 & 362) reveal. The block immediately south of Ivy Cottage is called Gladstone Terrace but is not dated.
- 3.5.11 Although it retains its basic original form and thus merits inclusion within the proposed conservation area, the terrace as a whole is too altered by window and door replacement and unsympathetic treatment of front boundaries to warrant identification as of local note. The three elaborately decorated overmantels to the doors of Park Villa and Park View are, however, especially worthy of note and help to enliven the street scene (**Plate 44**).
- 3.5.12 Immediately adjoining the southern end of the terrace is No.366 High Street, which stands on the corner with Edgbaston Road (**Plate 45**) and having recently been a surgery is now apparently again a house. It is of a distinctive High Victorian Gothic style with two steep gables flanking a short central section containing the front entrance. The doorway has a pointed arch with a trefoil to the overlight, a detail that is repeated in the adjoining window in the porch and the flanking bay windows projecting from the gables. These have exposed 'false' trusses to their apexes, which together with the decorated window surrounds of the pointed first-floor windows add to the overall Gothic feel.
- 3.5.13 As well as being of visual importance, the house is important as an introduction to the suburban middle-class housing characteristic of Edgbaston Road, which with its higher status dwellings and tree-lined pavements forms a marked contrast to the predominantly working-class housing found within the study area. While it is not

recommended that Edgbaston Road is included in the proposed conservation area at this time, there may be an opportunity to do this in the future and this option should be kept under review.

3.5.14 For the moment, however, there is a good reason simply to include No.366 within the proposed conservation area as visually it relates as much to High Street as it does to Edgbaston Road, a point emphasised by its orientation to take in views of the park opposite. The low brick walling with tile coping to the front of the building is an attractive feature within the street scene.

3.5.15 Much the same rationale applies to the proposed inclusion within the conservation area of the building on the opposite corner of Edgbaston Road, No.368 High Street (**Plate 46**). Now solicitors' offices, this was, like No.366, originally built as a house, although not until after 1905 as it does not appear on the map of this date.

3.5.16 Although there are a series of carved terracotta panels on the main elevations, which face both High Street and Edgbaston Road, the former of which itself curves sharply to the east at this point, much of No.368's detailing is quite plain and it is largely due to its corner turret that it stands out as a landmark building.

3.5.17 The tower is canted and has five plate-glass sash windows on both the ground and first floors, the latter of which commands a fine prospect of the park, and is capped by a parapeted top stage and a slate-hung spire with finial. The property is well maintained and the neatly trimmed privet hedge on top of the brick boundary wall enhances the street scene. There is a small former coach house to the rear accessed off Edgbaston Road, which along with the higher brick wall to the pavement in front forms a logical point to draw the proposed conservation area boundary (**Plate 47**).

3.5.18 While it is not proposed to include Edgbaston Road within the conservation area, there is a good view up the road from its junction with High Street (**Plate 48**). This

view is important in terms of the character and appearance of the proposed conservation area and its wider setting in the sense that, as with the view from High Street along Cheshire Road, it helps to relate the designated area to its surroundings.

3.5.19 The terrace (Nos.370-80 High Street) adjoining the eastern side of No.368 is slightly earlier than No.368, as it appears on the 1905 map although not on the 1890 map. Never of any real intrinsic interest, its appearance has been compromised by later alterations, while the paired villas of the 1880s at the east end of this terrace (the two surviving door overmantels and the datestone plaque are very similar to those on Park Villa and Park View- see paragraph 3.5.11) have been so disfigured by alteration that neither they nor the terrace justify inclusion within the conservation area (**Plate 49**).

3.5.20 It is therefore recommended that the boundary of the proposed conservation area be drawn across the main road in line with the east wall of No.368 High Street in order that it meets the park railings on the other side of the road. It would then run from there along the park boundary to the point just beyond the south-eastern entrance to the park where the park itself ends.

## **4.0 POSSIBLE AREAS FOR ENHANCEMENT**

### **4.1 Introduction and Overview**

4.1.1 There are many ways in which the character and appearance of the proposed conservation area could be enhanced. These range from minor works of repair or improvement to individual properties, through works of environmental improvement to schemes of redevelopment on certain ‘opportunity sites’. It should be emphasised that with the latter in particular, consideration of the issues involved is limited only to the effect that redevelopment would have on the character and appearance of the proposed conservation area and the setting of listed buildings. Other important planning issues, such as highway matters, effects on residential amenity, parking provision and other policy requirements are not considered here.

4.1.2 For ease of reference, suggestions for enhancement are considered area by area, following the sequence adopted in Section 3.0. Before looking at these, however, and to avoid unnecessary repetition a few general observations can be offered. First, parts of the area are generally rather scruffy and run down and, while any temptation towards ‘gentrification’ should be avoided as alien to the history and character of the area, much could be achieved simply by keeping parts of the area tidier and better maintained.

4.1.3 Secondly, the effects of traffic, as in most urban environments, are pervasive and in terms of the impact on the historic built environment are almost all harmful. The traditional Victorian street pattern of this part of Smethwick, most of which has survived substantially intact, was not designed for the car and therefore the appearance of many of the streets in the area is blighted by traffic (often moving faster than the speed restrictions allow) or by parked vehicles.

- 4.1.4 This is not an easy problem to address but in reality it probably has more impact on the character and appearance of the area than any other single factor. With the right approach, however, many of the features now sadly taken almost for granted in an urban context such as this could be substantially improved or, in some cases removed completely. These include ugly lighting columns, steel barriers at road edges (particularly on road junctions), poorly or unduly prominently sited traffic signs, yellow lines and bollards. The design quality of bus shelters and other items of street furniture could also, with a little imagination, be considerably improved.
- 4.1.5 Another very obvious and immediate enhancement of the area's built environment would be the laying underground of the many prominent telephone and electricity wires that disrupt the skyline. As would be expected, wires and cables of this sort can be found throughout the area and it is therefore only where they are especially intrusive, and the effects of laying them underground would be most beneficial, that this is referred to again.
- 4.1.6 The use of traditional materials and detailing can have considerable effect in enhancing a conservation area's character. The owners of historic and prominent properties are therefore encouraged to remove unsympathetic modern materials such as artificial roofing materials, aluminium and uPVC windows (of which there are all too many in the area) and plastic rainwater goods and to reinstate traditional materials such as natural Welsh slates, clay tiles (where the roof pitch is appropriate), painted softwood windows and cast-iron guttering.

## 4.2 Civic & Educational Buildings on Crocketts Lane/Piddock Road

- 4.2.1 Apart from the general improvements suggested above, the biggest enhancement that could be made to this area would be the sympathetic redevelopment of the modern buildings on the Smethwick campus of Sandwell College (**Plate 50**), which do

nothing for the setting of the Grade II listed former Technical School and the other historic buildings on the site. The historic buildings themselves would also benefit from some refurbishment.

4.2.2 Likewise, although it is excluded from the proposed conservation area, the appropriate redevelopment of the car park on the corner of Piddock Road and Crocketts Lane (**Plate 51**) with buildings that addressed the street scene in a meaningful and coherent way could be beneficial to the character and appearance of the area. In particular, a block of building on the corner that focused visual attention into rather than away from the proposed conservation area as at present could be a real improvement in townscape terms.

4.2.3 A more minor but still significant improvement could be the slight softening of the rather fortress-like appearance of the police compound on Piddock Road (**Plate 5**), perhaps by planting trees behind the existing brick wall.

#### 4.3 High Street from Piddock Road to Cheshire Road; Firs Lane

4.3.1 This area includes the commercial heart of the proposed conservation area and it is along the stretch from the Conservative Club to Maben House on the west side and the terrace of Nos.255-295 High Street on the east that efforts for enhancement should be most concentrated. Most of the area's shops are located in Nos.255-295 and although none of the individual buildings within this terrace has been identified as of local note, its overall form and appearance is critical to the character and appearance of the proposed conservation area. The success of these shops is also vital to the regeneration of the area as a whole.

4.3.2 In order that this important objective can be achieved the outward appearance of these shops and the general appearance of the street scene is absolutely critical. Steel



roller shutters and poorly designed shop-fronts do not inspire confidence in the quality of the area and while there will understandably be concerns about security, much could be achieved through the reinstatement of traditional shop-front design in these buildings.

- 4.3.3 In some cases, elements of traditional fascias probably survive behind later applied shop-fronts and these should certainly not be disregarded in any scheme of shop-front replacement, even if they serve only as a template for reinstatement. Another potential model for improvement is the surviving late Victorian shop-front to the southern shop-unit in No.262 on the west side of High Street (**Plate 13**). Likewise, the smaller number of shops on the west side of High Street should not be forgotten in efforts to improve the east side, as it is only by having a fully integrated High Street that the area can be properly regenerated.
- 4.3.4 Improvements to the pavement and road surfaces and making the area more pedestrian friendly, perhaps by a sympathetic and appropriate traffic calming scheme that enabled the removal of the steel barriers from the road edge and reduced or eliminated on-street parking, could play a key role in this.
- 4.3.5 Another possibility that could be considered is a scheme of appropriate hard or soft landscaping (or perhaps a combination of the two) within the forecourt of The Red Cow, as this would considerably enhance the setting of this building and the street scene as a whole. This recessed space also has the potential to serve as an occasional street market (**Plate 11**).
- 4.3.6 Away from the shopping area of High Street, there is potential for a comprehensive and much more sympathetic redevelopment of the 1960s and 1970s office buildings behind The Council House, while in Firs Lane care will need to be taken that the redevelopment of the site of the recently demolished Nos.128-130 (**Plate 52**) truly serves to ‘preserve or enhance’ the character of the area.

4.3.7 Finally, efforts should be made to ensure that the triangular piece of land to the north of the junction between Watery Lane and High Street (**Plate 27**) can be made into a truly attractive space, rather than remain somewhat neglected as at present. Perhaps a bench or two would help here.

4.3.8 The potentially attractive view northwards towards Maben House, and which includes the Council House on the right, from the traffic island where High Street and Bearwood Road begin to diverge could be improved by a more sympathetic treatment of the traffic island itself (**Plate 53**).

#### 4.4 Victoria Park

4.4.1 The steps needed to improve the quality and appearance of this important public open space are rather different to those recommended for the enhancement of the character and appearance of the remainder of the proposed conservation area. It is therefore sufficient here simply to endorse the aims and objectives of the *Smethwick Regeneration Strategy master plan* (2001) and *Unlocking the Potential of Local Centres Across the Smethwick & North-west Birmingham Areas* (2003) for the improvement of this area. It is anticipated that the inclusion of the park within the conservation area will assist the implementation of this programme.

#### 4.5 High Street, from Cheshire Road to Edgbaston Road

4.5.1 Other than the general improvements discussed in Section 4.1, there is relatively little scope for enhancement in this area. The car park to the rear of the Park Hotel is somewhat forlorn (**Plate 40**) and its appearance could be vastly improved by an

appropriate boundary treatment, although care would of course need to be taken to ensure that this did not impair visibility onto Bearwood Road.

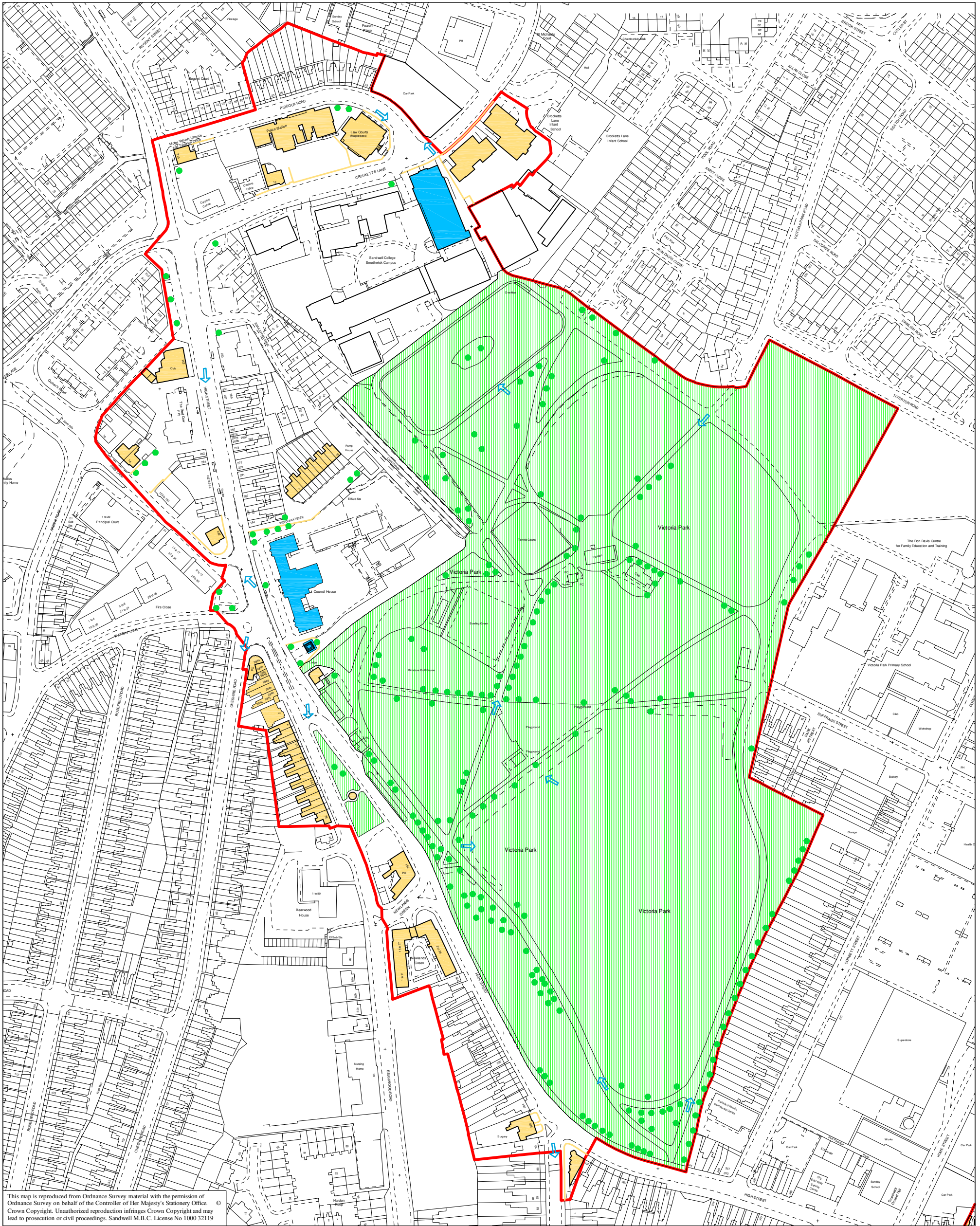
4.5.2 Elsewhere, the treatment of the front boundaries of Nos.322-364 High Street is particularly poor (**Plates 43 and 44**) and efforts should be directed towards both the reinstatement of walls and the use of correct materials where walls still exist. The roof of Nos.12-14 Bearwood Road (**Plate 38**) is in poor condition and should be repaired before serious damage occurs.

4.5.3 Indeed, it cannot be stressed too highly that individual property owners have an important part to play in the enhancement of the area, perhaps by considering a co-ordinated repainting scheme in co-operation with their neighbours or simply by taking extra care over the maintenance of their properties.

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- Proposed conservation area boundary
- Buildings of local note
- Listed buildings
- Important open space
- ↗ Significant views in / out / around
- Important trees
- Important walls

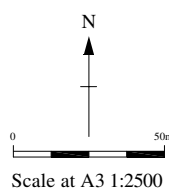






Plate 1: Educational buildings on Crocketts Lane



Plate 2: Former technical school, now the main reception building of the Smethwick campus of Sandwell College



Plate 3: View up Piddock Road from Crocketts Lane



Plate 4: Law Courts on corner of Piddock Road and Crocketts Lane





Plate 5: Boundary wall to rear of police station on Crocketts Lane



Plate 6: No. 12 Crocketts Lane



Plate 7: Police station on Piddock Road



Plate 8: No. 215 High Street, corner of Piddock Road





Plate 9: Coopers Lane flats screened by trees



Plate 10: Nos.236-240 High Street, west side (Smethwick Conservative Club)



Plate 11: The Red Cow public house, High Street



Plate 12: Nos. 262-278 High Street (west side)





Plate 13: Victorian/Edwardian shop-front, No. 262 High Street



Plate 14: Nos. 255-295 High Street (east side)



Plate 15: Canted bays above Viney's Opticians, Nos. 277-279 High Street (east side)



Plate 16: The Council House





Plate 17: The War Memorial



Plate 18: Trees between Victoria Avenue and the Council House



Plate 19: Victoria Avenue terrace



Plate 20: View from Victoria Avenue of the backs of the terrace on the east side of High Street





Plate 21: Maben House, No. 280 High Street (corner of Firs Lane)



Plate 22: View down Firs Lane towards the Council House and War Memorial



Plate 23: Late Victorian Cottages, Firs Lane (east side), with Red Cow gate pier in right foreground



Plate 24: Red Cow gate piers on Firs Lane





Plate 25: Late Victorian terrace on Arden Road (south side), with Red Cow gate piers in left background



Plate 26: The Red Cow gate piers on Arden Road



Plate 27: Area of landscaping at junction of Firs Lane, High Street and Watery Lane



Plate 28: View down Cheshire Road from junction with High Street, also showing No.248a High Street (the Post Office)





Plate 29: No 248 High Street, showing original pilastered divisions with segmental-pedimented caps



Plate 30: The entrance gate and Lodge, Victoria Park





Plate 31 Victoria Park, with High Street in the left background



Plate 32: Victoria Park, looking northeast from its southwestern boundary





Plate 33: The pond in Victoria Park, with college buildings to the left



Plate 34: No. 2 Bearwood Road (to the right) and the start of the terrace of Nos. 4-32 Bearwood Road





Plate 35: No. 2 Bearwood Road (the former Edward Cheshire Nurses' Home)



Plate 36: Rear elevation of No. 2 Bearwood Road





Plate 37: Nos. 4-32 Bearwood Road



Plate 38: Nos. 6-16 Bearwood Terrace



Plate 39: Grassed 'island' between High Street and Bearwood Road, looking southeast



Plate 40: Car park and north elevation of The Park Hotel





Plate 41: South elevation of The Park Hotel



Plate 42: Newlands Green apartment block, corner of Newlands Green and High Street



Plates 43 and 44: Nos. 322-364 High Street (the elaborate overmantels on the entrances to Park Villa and Park View can be seen to the left)





Plate 45: Corner of Edgbaston Road and High Street, showing No. 366, a former surgery, in the right centre of the picture



Plate 46: No. 368 High Street





Plate 47: No. 368 High Street, boundary wall and former coach house, Edgbaston Road



Plate 48: View up Edgbaston Road from High Street





Plate 49: The paired villas of the 1880s, at the east end of the terrace Nos.370-80 High Street, showing the extent of alterations to the front elevations



Plate 50: Modern Smethwick College buildings



Plate 51: The car park on the corner of Crocketts Lane and Piddock Road



Plate 52: Site of the now-demolished Nos. 128-130 Firs Lane





Plate 53: View northwest from close to where High Street and Bearwood Road begin to diverge