



**SMETHWICK
CONSERVATION AREA
CHARACTER APPRAISAL:**

AREA A

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APRIL 2005

Plan A: Smethwick Town Centre, High Street 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 A of the brief.

The prime purpose of the report is to recommend whether or not any of the area shown on Plan A 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 17th 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 18th 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 Hotel. 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 19th and early 20th 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 19th 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 20th 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 Smethwick High Street (North-Eastern End) and Surrounding Area

2.10.1 Yates's 1775 map of Staffordshire makes reference to the 'Blue Gate,' along the Birmingham, Dudley and Wolverhampton turnpike road (the High Street). The Blue

Gates Inn itself is first mentioned in a document of 1781 and appears to have taken its name from the tollgates which crossed the turnpike at this point. The present hotel on the site was built by the local brewers Mitchells & Butlers and opened in 1932. There was another tollgate further down the High Street by 1767, although the Toll House building currently in this location dates to 1818. Branching off either side of the turnpike road were generally narrow winding lanes with fields and farmlands between. The line of Stony Lane can also be traced on Yates's map.

2.10.2 From the late 18th century onwards, the area to the northeast of the High Street steadily became industrialised, with factories being built on either side of the Old Main Line Canal and, in the 1830s, the area to the north of Bearwood Hill (now Bearwood Road) (*i.e.* around Holy Trinity Church) became the new centre of Smethwick.

2.10.3 The 1842 tithe map shows development concentrated along Union Street and the area to the north, mainly alongside the canal, with little development to the south of High Street. By this time, however, there was a steelworks and rolling mills on the north bank of the canal to the east of Brasshouse Lane, which in fact had been set up on the site of the former brasshouse soon after the new Main Line canal had been opened (see paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6 above).

2.10.4 Holy Trinity Church was built in 1837-8 to meet the needs of the rapidly expanding population in this part of the town. Its churchyard was the main burial ground for the town until 1885, when there were calls for it to be closed 'for sanitary reasons.' The area around the church was laid out from the later 1830s and developed as a middle-class district. The Skoda showroom (formerly a bank) on the corner of South Road was originally a large detached house dating from this period. The houses became larger as they spread westwards and are characterised by heavy stucco decoration.

2.10.5 Rolfe Street existed by 1839 and by the mid-19th century it had become the commercial centre of Smethwick, lined with shops, works, business premises and numerous public houses. The railway followed the line of the Birmingham Canal and served a great number of works. Rolfe Street station was rebuilt in 1888-9 when the level crossing next to the station was replaced by a bridge. At the same time, the High Street end of Brasshouse Lane was blocked to vehicular traffic and a footbridge over the railway replaced the level crossing. The decline of this part of the High Street in the later 19th century is attributed to the closure of several works and the demolition of property in the late 1880s. Soho Street became the centre of the town c.1890 but was later superseded by Cape Hill.

2.10.6 There was still extensive agricultural land in the area in the mid-19th century but by the 1880s much of it had been swallowed up by urban development. The First Edition Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map of 1885 shows development south of the High Street around the junction with Brasshouse Lane and south and eastwards (as far as Crockett's Lane) along the New Main Line Canal.

2.10.7 The pattern of development and built form that we see today had largely been completed by 1921, including the area of terraced streets from St Alban's Road south to Dibble Road. In 1980, however, the whole of the northeast side of High Street was demolished to make way for the new dual carriageway, Tollhouse Way, the Toll House building being the only survivor on this side of the road.

3.0 THE ESTABLISHED CHARACTER

3.1 Introduction and Overview

- 3.1.1 The character of the proposed conservation area ranges from the shopping facilities on High Street and St Paul's Road to the slightly less bustling area at its southern end, which contains religious and public buildings, including the library, a Gurdwara and the distinctive area of Holy Trinity Church and its churchyard between Trinity Street and South Road.
- 3.1.2 The character of High Street within the proposed conservation area is compromised by the fact that only its southwestern side functions as such. Its northeast side - the area to the northeast of the proposed conservation area - is characterised by communications, including the railway, the Tollhouse Way dual carriageway and beyond these the Birmingham Canal. In fact, the northeast side of High Street was demolished in 1980 to make way for Tollhouse Way. The addition of this dual carriageway, although partially screened from High Street by a somewhat neglected and rather bleak area of landscaping and trees, physically has a deleterious effect on its character. In places the landscaping between the two is minimal, the chief division between Tollhouse Road and High Street being provided by steel railings and a narrow strip of grass and trees.
- 3.1.3 The surviving High Street area is, however, bustling and colourful, giving the locality a distinctive vibrancy which is enhanced by its multicultural character. Its chiefly late Victorian/Edwardian building stock is partly in use by the religious and commercial interests of the strong Indian community in Smethwick, as evidenced by the Sikh temples and Indian shops and food outlets along High Street. This gives the area its own particular character and atmosphere.

3.1.4 The proposed conservation area is considered in three separate sections which reflect the varying characters encountered even within this relatively short stretch of High Street. Differences between the sections from St Alban's Road to Stony Lane and from Stony Lane to Trinity Street are partly a reflection of the fact that the former was developed later than the latter, at the beginning of the 20th century. The Stony Lane to Trinity Street section had already been developed by the late 19th century. The section at the southern end of the proposed conservation area comprises the area around Holy Trinity Church and is considered separately, as it forms an area quite visually distinct from the other two.

3.2 St Paul's Road/High Street from St Alban's Road to Stony Lane

3.2.1 St Alban's Road runs southwest from High Street and is a residential street containing Edwardian brick-built terraced housing on its south-eastern side and 1920s housing on the northwest. Although the first six houses on the south-eastern side of the street (Plate 1) have been included within the proposed conservation area in order to help root the area proposed for designation within the context of its surrounding residential streets, they have been altered (along with much of the rest of the street) by the addition of artificial stone cladding, uPVC windows and porches and, as such, are not in themselves of great visual quality. The boundary of the proposed conservation area stops with No. 11, which still retains some of its original features, including window surrounds. The road also retains paved gutters and stone kerbing (Plate 2). The view southwest up St Alban's Road has some merit, presenting a wide, straight sweep of terraced houses as the street slopes gently up to the southwest (Plate 3).

3.2.2 On the corner of St Alban's Road and St Paul's Road is an early 20th-century building, now in use as the Gurdwara Bara Sang (Plates 4 & 5). It was opened in 1910 as a cinema and theatre to the design of George Bowden & Son of Smethwick.

By 1930 it was in use only as a cinema, which closed in 1957 and was then converted into shops in 1971. The three-storey building is considered to be of local note and has an impressive frontage to St Paul's Road, with a flamboyant five bay front, stuccoed and painted with a rusticated ground floor. The segmental pediments topping the two end bays provide a pleasing symmetry to the frontage, a symmetry which is continued on the second floor. Its St Alban's Road elevation comprises the plainer brick-faced auditorium, although it does retain lean-to shelters for the queuing public, which are a rare survival. This large building, with its prominent corner position, is certainly distinctive and provides a logical place to define the northern end of the proposed conservation area.

3.2.3 The proposed boundary is taken around the rear of the properties fronting onto St Paul's Road, which include a brick-built garage surmounted by a timber upper-storey workshop adjacent to the former cinema building and set back from the frontage; this is apparently disused. A smaller brick-built shed stands on the road frontage. To the south of this there is an unfortunate gap in the street frontage, created by an empty plot of waste ground, which leaves the former cinema building in a rather isolated position (Plate 6).

3.2.4 The rest of the street frontage between St Alban's Road and White Road is occupied by a terrace of five Edwardian shops (Plate 7); these are of two storeys plus attics and all demonstrate heavy alterations at ground-floor level, although remnants of original pilasters are still visible between the modern shop-fronts. None of the upper-storey windows are original, although those on the first floor retain their original window surrounds. The facades have been rendered and the gable end to the north has seen the addition of decorative brickwork. The terrace is of no particular architectural or visual merit, but it would be impractical to exclude it from the proposed conservation area, and it does form part of the period character of this area. It should also be noted that the large fruit and vegetable display outside Warley Supermarkets adds colour and vibrancy to this part of the High Street.

- 3.2.5 The views southwest up White Road (Plate 8) and Sabell Road have been noted as worthwhile for similar reasons to the view up St Alban's Road. These streets also exhibit some original kerbstones and gutter paving. None of the houses on White Road are included within the proposed boundary as many of the buildings have been altered and a representative sample of terraces dating from this period on St Alban's Road are recommended for inclusion.
- 3.2.6 Colourful traditional Indian painting has been added to the late Victorian façade of Nos.2-10 High Street, all of which save No.2 still retain their original sash windows and other detail (Plate 9). Adjacent to these are Nos.12-22 High Street (Plate 10), another terrace of shops. These are built in a different style to Nos.2-10; four of these retain their original sash windows on the attic storey and first-floor bay windows, and all of them retain decorative pilasters between the shop-fronts, which have been painted and are in good condition. Parts of the facades of two of the buildings have painted Indian motifs on the first floor. Despite the retention of some original features, the buildings are not of any particular quality. There is another colourful fruit and vegetable display outside Nos.12-14.
- 3.2.7 The first buildings of any real quality after the former cinema are Nos. 26-50 High Street (Plate 11). These, built in 1904, comprise a fine terrace of three-storey shops with living spaces above, which occupy the whole of the street frontage between its junctions with Sabell and Dibble Roads, presenting a unified and exuberant block. This makes a substantial contribution to the street scene, enhanced by the visually distinctive canted corners of the end houses, with their elaborate pediments topping the upper storey windows. Despite alterations to the ground floor, the symmetry of the original design has been retained. The houses are brick-built, with terracotta and timber embellishments, and retain many of their original windows; on the upper storey these are topped with elaborate bargeboards. These buildings are certainly worthy of being declared of local note.

- 3.2.8 To the rear of Nos. 26-50 High Street, on Sabell Road, the proposed boundary includes No.1, the first end terrace house on the south side of the street, which retains its ornamental window and door surrounds and decorated eaves corncicing (Plate 12). Unfortunately, the adjacent house has been rendered, obliterating its half of the ornamental surround over the shared rear passage entrance and also breaking the line of the sill banding, which is continued along a large section of this terrace. On the eastern side of No.1, a brick boundary wall with tiled capping butts onto the house frontage and extends outwards from it, sloping downwards as it returns along the frontage to a double wooden gate with ‘acorn’ newel posts, behind which there is a dilapidated timber-built shed, probably a yard or workshop area originally associated with the house. A modern flat-roofed building is sandwiched between this and the back of Nos. 26-50 High Street.
- 3.2.9 Also to the rear of Nos. 26-50, on the north side of Dibble Road, is a series of single-storey brick-built Edwardian outbuildings, possibly former workshops or outhouses which are separated by a narrow passage from the front yards of a terrace extending northwest at right-angles to the rest of the street (Plate 13). The proposed conservation area boundary has been drawn to include the workshops, but neither the terrace nor the corresponding terrace on the opposite side of the road, both of which have seen heavy alterations and, in the case of the former, the addition of modern walling and railings, are recommended for inclusion.
- 3.2.10 The corner of Dibble Road and High Street, and High Street itself, has seen some attempt at environmental improvement to the pavements (Plate 14), which despite the use of red and blue brick and decorative tile paving has failed to meet the quality of the traditional brick and cobbled ground surfaces found nearby. The stretch of High Street between Dibble Road and Stony Lane contains various groups of late Victorian/Edwardian brick-built terraced shops and houses of relatively little merit, all of which, as they are constructed in disparate styles, lack the visual coherence of

Nos. 26-50 High Street. However, despite heavy alterations to the shop fronts on the ground floors, they are integral to the late Victorian/Edwardian period character of High Street as a whole.

3.2.11 Nos.52-62 High Street comprise a terrace of six three-storey shops, all of which, except No.54, retain original sash windows on the top floor (Plate 15). The first floor bay windows are also original and decorative painted sill banding runs between the two upper storeys; this has been painted in a colour scheme which matches the painted window heads of the upper storeys and adds some integrity to the terrace as a whole. Again, the decorative pilasters on the ground floor are generally intact and have been brightly painted, although in varying colour schemes; part of one of the pilasters has been removed between Nos.56-58.

3.2.12 No.64 also has pilasters, despite being only a single-storey building; it may be that this represents the truncated remains of a formerly three-storey building matching the rest of the terrace, which was demolished apart from the retention of the original ground-floor façade, including decorative boarding surmounting the shop-front. The building to the south of it is of later date and appears to have been sandwiched between Victorian/Edwardian buildings in a plot possibly created by demolition. The terrace is not considered worthy of local note but is fairly attractive and has retained a degree of unity, presumably due to collaboration between the buildings' owners. The pilasters in particular and the shop-fronts in general are a feature of this part of the High Street and should be retained and maintained wherever possible.

3.2.13 Nos.66-68 (Plate 16) is a two-storey brick building, probably dating to the 1930s and which appears to have been built following partial demolition of the terrace to the north. It is slightly set back from the road frontage, the central of the five sash windows in the upper storey being topped by a small triangular stone pediment. Four smaller, blind openings are set above the windows. Its main entrance is at the northern end of the façade and is slightly recessed and topped by a semi-circular

pediment. Another entrance, at the southern end of the façade, is of reduced height and has a small square window above it, itself set partially into a stone band which crosses the façade between the two storeys. Two large openings in the centre of the façade are currently occupied by steel roller shutters. This building is probably broadly contemporary with the Blue Gates Hotel to the south but is of lesser quality and not considered to be of local note.

3.2.14 No.70 High Street (Plate 17) appears to be the lone survivor of a former terrace of two-storey plus attic shops and houses, with later buildings now to either side of it. The façade is of painted brick and of no particular merit, although it retains sash windows and appears well-maintained; the modern shop-front does nothing to enhance the quality of the building. To its south is an ugly, modern, brick-built two-storey Cash & Carry building (Plates 17 & 19). The ground floor has steel roller shutters along the entire front façade and part of the side elevation on Ford Street, the rest of the latter being plain brick. The upper storey comprises glass window panels along the entire façade. The appearance of the building is unattractive and showing signs of disrepair; unfortunately it is also on the corner with Ford Street and therefore fairly prominent in the street scene, despite being slightly set back from the frontage

3.2.15 On the opposite corner of Ford Street is The Red Fort Social Club, a two-storey late Victorian building with a modern extension to the rear. It is part of a short terrace with the adjoining bakery, the whole terrace appearing well-maintained (Plate 18). The windows of the social club have all been replaced and the shop-front of the bakery has been altered, although original window heads and sills are still present to both premises. The modern signage for the social club does not benefit the building's appearance, although this is not particularly prominent. These buildings represent the slightly earlier development of this section of the High Street before the area to the north was developed.

3.2.16 Adjoining the terrace is the Blue Gate Market building, which appears to be of similar date, although flat-roofed (? A truncation of the original roof structure) and with a heavily-altered façade at ground-floor level; it has been rendered and over-painted with Indian motifs at first-floor level (Plate 19). The paintwork and general condition of the building is poor and, despite the bright colouring, does not add much to the street scene in its current condition. This, and other buildings to the north which have been painted in a similar style, are, however, an important element of the particular character of this part of High Street and, if kept in a well-maintained state, would contribute more positively to it.

3.2.17 Nos.86-98 High Street comprise two different styles of terrace of late Victorian date (Plate 20). Nos.86-90 are of two-storey plus attic shops/houses, which have all seen alterations and which would all benefit from some maintenance work to their facades. Brightly-painted pilasters of varying design are partially visible but have been partly hidden by the modern shop-fronts. Nos.92-96 are three-storey buildings, Nos.94 and 98 retaining their original pairs of sashed windows with decorative semi-circular heads on the upper storey. No.96 retains wrought-ironwork above its first-floor bay window. Two pilasters remain partially visible and again these buildings would benefit from some smartening-up, particularly as their underlying qualities are still apparent below their existing poor condition. The shop-fronts of the whole terrace are very unsatisfactory with steel roller shutters dominating when the shops are shut..

3.2.18 The north-eastern boundary of the proposed conservation area runs along the northeast side of St Paul's Road and High Street, corresponding with the modern steel railings here until it reaches the Smethwick Cross Tollhouse (discussed below).

3.3 High Street from Stony Lane to Trinity Street

- 3.3.1 This part of High Street lacks some of the more coherent period character which is found north of Stony Lane (in particular the area north of Ford Street which was developed *en masse* during the early Edwardian period). This section instead contains an interesting mix of buildings of different periods and styles which, while missing the visual coherence of the buildings further north, nevertheless make a different kind of visual impact and includes several buildings of individual architectural merit.
- 3.3.2 The corner of High Street and Stony Lane is defined by the two-storey Blue Gates Hotel (Plate 21), a large 1932 ‘road house’ in a rather bland neo-Georgian style, which nevertheless has some nice touches, including grapes or hops carved into some of the keystones. Its rear elevations have survived with only a few alterations and the building, with its impressive frontage and the symmetry of its High Street and Stony Lane elevations, provides a distinctive corner landmark and a more impressive visual experience than The Red Cow further to the south, which was built in a similar style and is of similar date. On the High Street frontage and on the inn’s right, is a gate pier for the main car park entrance. The proposed conservation area boundary has been drawn around the rear curtilage of the inn and includes a section of blue-brick paving at the entranceway to the rear yard. Modern warehouse-style buildings behind the inn and other properties fronting High Street have been excluded from the proposed conservation area.
- 3.3.3 The gate pier of the Blue Gates Hotel stands on the boundary between the hotel and Smethwick Library (Plate 22). This was built as a Public Hall in 1866-7 to the design of H.R. Yeoville Thomason, the Birmingham architect who later designed the Museum & Art Gallery and Municipal Buildings in the city centre. It became a library in 1928. The main block is in a Ruskinian Gothic style, of brick with stone decoration, and has seen relatively little alteration. It reflects the aspirations of the

town in the second half of the 19th century and is considered to be of local note, making a strong and attractive contribution to the streetscape.

3.3.4 After the 1930s Blue Gates Hotel and the 19th-century Library are the more functional late 20th-century brick buildings which flank the entrance to the recently modernised Tollgate shopping centre. These three-storey flat-roofed buildings are not a particularly sensitive addition to the High Street, but are fairly inoffensive. The proposed boundary has been drawn along the rear of the Library and includes part of the area of the Tollgate shopping centre as, although the shopping centre is late 20th-century and not in itself worthy of inclusion, it is sandwiched between buildings considered to be of local note and it would be impractical to exclude it. The Tollgate centre itself has been quite cleverly modernised with the addition of Scandinavian-style pale timber cladding on the outside of otherwise drab and rather brutal 1970s/1980s shop units.

3.3.5 Some coherence is restored to the underlying character of the High Street at its junction with Brewery Street, both corners of which are occupied by early 20th-century purpose-built bank buildings, both in slightly different interpretations of Edwardian Baroque (Plate 23). Together, these two buildings are a visual reminder of the commercial prosperity of the town at this time and create a strong visual focus. The three-storey No. 116 High Street (occupied by Lloyds TSB) is of a flamboyant design, constructed of brick with much stone and terracotta decoration and a terrazzo plinth. The two-storey (plus attic) No. 120 High Street (occupied by HSBC) offers a more mechanical exercise in Edwardian Baroque with a French chateau influence. It has a rusticated stone ground floor and brick first floor with decorative rusticated stone. Both buildings have their main entrance on the corner, diagonally set and contained within corner ‘towers,’ enhancing the symbiosis of the pair.

3.3.6 Nos.122-126, a late 19th-/early 20th-century terrace of three shops stands between No.120 High Street and the Guru Nanak Gurdwara. These have been altered and their

windows have been replaced. The front elevation of the Gurdwara, with its ‘onion’ dome, is certainly impressive and dominates this section of High Street, although its aesthetic value is perhaps still difficult to judge because it is so new (Plate 24). However, whatever its architectural merits, there can be no denying that it forms an important component of the streetscape and for many motorists passing by on Tollhouse Way it is the one building, apart from the nearby church, that leaves a lasting impression of this part of Smethwick. If for this reason alone and the crucial role that it plays in the community, it is surely right to identify the building as of local note. The Gurdwara replaced a non-conformist chapel (which may still exist within it) in 1961, when it was said to be the largest Sikh temple in Europe.

3.3.7 Just south of the Gurdwara the line of the proposed conservation area runs along the rear of the former Prince’s Cinema on the High Street (now disused) (Plate 25). This building (built in 1930 to the design of H.G. Bradley) brings an interesting *Art Deco* look to this part of the street with its decorated first floor bay window set back into the façade below the original ‘Prince’s’ raised lettering and a small pediment. The main part of the façade is faced with glazed terracotta or faience. Attached to the right is a lower section, the ground floor of which has been altered and is now in use as a pharmacy. The planned mirror image section to the left was never built. The auditorium sits behind the frontage and retains its original windows and some internal fixtures and fittings.

3.3.8 Despite the compromised appearance of the building brought about by the alterations for the pharmacy, this building represents an almost intact 1930s cinema and although English Heritage has recently ruled that it does not merit inclusion on the Statutory List, it is most definitely a building of local note. This cinema, along with the other former cinema at the opposite end of the proposed conservation area, formed an important role in the earlier 20th-century social/recreational life of the town and, with the Blue Gates Hotel (of similar date), adds glimpses of another strand of the town’s story in post-Edwardian times.

3.3.9 Between the cinema and the Old Talbot public house is No.140 High Street, a heavily-altered late Victorian building, which does, however, retain decorative pilasters to either side of its recessed entrance. On the corner of Trinity Street, and further emphasising the eclectic nature of the buildings and mish-mash of different periods represented along this section of High Street, is the Old Talbot public house (Plate 26), which may date to as early as c.1800, although a date of c.1840 is just as likely; either date would make it one of the oldest surviving buildings in Smethwick. It stands on the corner of High Street and Trinity Street, its longer elevation on Trinity Street facing the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church. To the right of The Old Talbot, No.142 High Street (Right Homes) is part of the same building, although with a different usage and heavily altered. The early date of The Old Talbot means that despite alterations, it is worth identifying as of local note.

3.3.10 The northeastern boundary of the proposed conservation area has been drawn to include the Grade II listed Smethwick Cross Tollhouse which stands opposite the entrance to Stony Lane on High Street (Plate 27). This was built c.1820, the High Street forming part of the Birmingham, Wolverhampton and Dudley Turnpike between 1760 and 1876. It is in good condition externally and has a Smethwick Local History Society 'blue plaque' above the entrance. It also provides an indication of the importance of this route out of Birmingham in the late 18th and 19th centuries.

3.3.11 The proposed boundary also includes a building and wall to the southeast of the Tollhouse (Plates 27 and 28). The building is a single-storey brick-built structure with a gabled roof, separated from the High Street by a long stretch of brick wall, which has brick buttresses on the side facing Tollhouse Way. The 1890 Ordnance Survey map shows a building in this location and 'Goods Shed' is marked, which may refer to this building. Before Tollhouse Way was constructed, the building stood close to the original railway station and the wall would have formed the boundary between this yard and the High Street. These features have been made to appear out

of context by the creation of Tollhouse Way, but constitute surviving features associated with the railway and, as a group with the earlier Tollhouse, serve as reminders of the importance of the railway (and road transport) for Smethwick in the 19th century.

3.3.12 The proposed boundary includes the former railway yard wall, which provides effective screening from the dual carriageway in this location but which after this rather abruptly ends at what would have been the southeast corner of the railway yard. The proposed boundary is then continued to include the area of landscaping (which has as its centre piece the model of a Boulton and Watt Governor and associated seating areas) to the southeast. From here there is a good view up High Street, taking in the Old Talbot, the former Prince's cinema and the Gurdwara amongst other buildings in the foreground (Plate 29).

3.4 High Street/Trinity Street to South Road

3.4.1 The boundary of the proposed conservation area is drawn along the northwest side of the churchyard of the Grade II listed Holy Trinity Church and then runs down the centre of Churchill Street, returning along South Road. This incorporates the church and churchyard (and the lych gate at the entrance to the churchyard).

3.4.2 The original Holy Trinity Church, also known as North Harborne Church, was built in 1837 and was consecrated the following year to serve the growing population of north Smethwick. It was designed by Thomas Johnson of Lichfield on a cruciform plan and in the Early English style. Most of the church was rebuilt to a larger scale in 1887-89 to designs by Francis Bacon of Newbury, although the original tower and spire were retained. A rather dour but still impressive building, it occupies a commanding position on high ground towards the southwestern end of the

churchyard and there are significant views from High Street looking up to the church across the churchyard (Plate 30).

3.4.3 The land within the churchyard is built up at a higher level than the surrounding streets and is enclosed by a low, brick-built, stone-capped wall, which may have been taller at one time. This creates a curious effect, as if the churchyard is spilling over its boundaries, and in actual fact the wall may well have been lowered to prevent it being toppled by the weight of earth behind it. There are several mature trees within and along the borders of the churchyard, which make a positive contribution to the setting of the church. The pavement alongside the churchyard is laid with Victorian decorative pressed brick tiles and incorporates original kerbstones and paved guttering, which also help to set it in context (Plate 31). The churchyard might be enhanced by the restoration of the pathway up to the church from the High Street end of the churchyard marked on the 1890 Ordnance Survey map and still, somewhat curiously, shown on the modern map.

3.4.4 The churchyard, and the effective ‘square’ it creates, provides a peaceful contrast to the busy atmosphere of High Street to the northwest and constitutes the only significant large area of open space within the proposed conservation area, allowing for longer views to the north and northeast (Plate 32). It is unfortunate that the northwest and southwest sides of this ‘square’ are now developed with ugly modern buildings. The 1890 Ordnance Survey map shows that a Vicarage then stood set back from Churchill Road on the site of the current Social Security building (Plate 33), whose unattractiveness is not diminished by the three different and equally ugly builds which go to make it up. Also in 1890, school buildings lay on Trinity Street on the site of the equally unattractive Post Office (Plate 34). The design of the new building currently being constructed adjacent to the Old Talbot on Trinity Street (Plate 35) is not, it has to be said, an overly-sensitive addition to this street but its use of glass in the central part of its façade may give it some feeling of lightness not present in the solid and rather forbidding bulk of the Post Office.

- 3.4.5 The northeastern end of South Road has been included within the proposed conservation area because of the buildings which occupy the corner position at its junction with High Street (Plate 36). This former bank (now a car showroom), which actually occupies the corner, in part harks back to the two banks at the end of Brewery Lane and thus provides a sensible cut-off point for this section of the proposed conservation area. It is, however, only the ground floor, with its Baroque pediment over the entrance (which in turn opens onto the corner), which has any real resemblance to the other two banks. The original mid 19th-century building, which sits behind the early 20th-century ground-floor extension, was built as a large detached house with neo-classical framed windows, which was later converted to form part of the bank. The two distinct periods evident in the building as a whole give it particular interest and make it worthy of being considered as of local note.
- 3.4.6 This building, and the surviving two houses of an apparently truncated Victorian terrace which stand adjacent to it on South Road, help to enhance the setting of the church and churchyard as the chief surviving buildings contemporary with the church within the churchyard 'square.' The terraced houses, with their original plate-glass sash windows and drip moulds above windows and entrances, are almost unaltered externally and should also be identified as of local note.
- 3.4.7 Between Nos.16-18 South Road and the car park further to the northeast is the modern Sandwell Agency Services building (Plate 37), another rather ugly and purely functional building, which does nothing to enhance its surroundings. Nos.16-18 South Road, a late 19th-century terrace of three houses, now offices, have been heavily altered and on account of this and their separation from No. 1 by an unattractive modern office block and the car parking area of the car showroom have not been included within the conservation area.

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 Victorian/Edwardian High Street in this part of Smethwick is blighted by traffic and parked vehicles and particularly suffers from the proximity of the Tollhouse Way dual carriageway which runs parallel to it for most of its length.

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, 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 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.

4.1.6 This kind of treatment could be extended to the kerbs of the residential roads in the area, *i.e.* when kerbs are being repaired or replaced it would be preferable to replace them with stone kerbstones in keeping with surviving examples as in, for instance, St Alban's Road.

4.2 St Paul's Road/St Alban's Road to High Street/Stony Lane

4.2.1 Apart from the general improvements suggested above, the biggest enhancement that could be made to this area would be a reappraisal of the level of screening currently provided between St Paul's Road/High Street and the Tollhouse Way dual carriageway, particularly where St Paul's Road becomes High Street.

4.2.2 The triangular area of landscaping which currently runs alongside St Paul's Road is a larger area than that further to the south and, as such, provides a fairly effective

visual screen, an effect improved upon in the spring and summer when the deciduous trees planted there are in leaf (Plate 38). The trees also stand on an embankment which helps to improve the screening effect. However, southwest of the grassed embankment, the area is rather bleak and uninspiring, containing only a few young trees and a couple of benches along the edge of the embankment (Plate 39).

4.2.3 Although this area is not included within the proposed conservation area and might in fact benefit from comprehensive redevelopment, it does provide views into it and, in the absence of an appropriate redevelopment scheme, could in the interim be made more welcoming and visually appealing by the addition of more seating areas in the central part of the area and other features such as well-designed plant holders. Better-quality paving of the central floor surface could also be beneficial. Another area of street landscaping at the southern end of the proposed conservation area has had this kind of attention paid to it (with the addition of a water feature, benches and the Boulton & Watt Governor model) and this area would also repay similar treatment.

4.2.4 This landscaped area continues southeastwards along High Street, where it becomes no more than a narrow, flat strip of grass with trees planted at regular intervals along it (Plates 40 and 41). This strip of land is fenced on the High Street side by a c.1.0m high plain steel railing. This railing is both unattractive and intrusive, despite its relatively low height, and does nothing to make the High Street look welcoming. Although it obviously has a safety function and there needs to be a barrier of some kind here, it in fact serves to emphasise the existence of the dual carriageway. This boundary could be better treated with a more attractive and sensitively-designed and painted railing, preferably one which fits better with the Victorian nature of the majority of the buildings facing it. Increased levels of trees along the grass strip would also be desirable or possibly flower beds to give the area some colour and draw attention away from the dual carriageway. Again, although this area is not included within the proposed conservation area, any improvements made to it cannot help but be beneficial to the character and appearance of the area.

- 4.2.5 An unfortunate break in the streetscape is created by the undeveloped plot of land adjacent to the Gurdwara Bara Sang on the corner of St Alban's Road and St Paul's Road (Plate 6). Ownership of the plot has not been identified for this study, but if the land has in fact been earmarked for development, there is potential here for a scheme with appropriate and sensitive design, which could help to 'preserve or enhance' the character of the area.
- 4.2.6 Nos. 26-50 High Street, an important block of shops and houses, would repay improvements to outward appearance, as would many of the commercial buildings along the High Street, where the general appearance of the street scene is critical to the appearance of the area as a whole, particularly as it has a lot to contend with given the lack of buildings on the other side of the street. 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.
- 4.2.7 In some cases, elements of traditional fascias may 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.
- 4.2.8 A more specific improvement that could be made to this part of the High Street would be the demolition and appropriate redevelopment of the building currently occupied by Sohal's Nursery Cash & Carry on the corner of High Street and Ford Street (Plate 42); this is an unattractive building which unfortunately occupies a prominent corner position.

4.3 High Street/Stony Lane to High Street/Trinity Street

4.3.1 The main part of the façade of the former Prince's cinema, now disused, is showing some signs of neglect, particularly around the pediment and above the recessed bay window (Plate 43). The building could do with redecoration and, if possible, sensitive reuse, to show it off to its full effect; it is of a style not seen elsewhere within the proposed conservation area and could be restored to its former undoubtedly attractive appearance.

4.3.2 The former railway yard walling on the northeast side of the High Street adjacent to the Tollhouse would benefit from some cleaning-up of its recessed 'panels,' which appear to have suffered from bill-sticking in the past. This is obviously something which is difficult to control given the nature of the wall and its availability for this activity. The recessed panels were in fact used for the provision of artwork in a previous improvement scheme but this was not particularly successful and the project only lasted a few years. Perhaps a small information plaque (in the manner of that attached to the Tollhouse) with an explanation of the origin of both the wall and the former goods shed could help to explain their historic significance and set these features in some form of context, as they are currently somewhat isolated.

4.3.3 The general improvements to shop frontages outlined above would also apply to this stretch of the High Street.

4.4 High Street/Trinity Street to South Road

4.4.1 Holy Trinity Church and its churchyard are the dominant features at this end of the proposed conservation area and it is critical that they remain well-maintained. The churchyard currently looks a little unkempt, the pathways being partially overgrown (Plate 44), and the effect of the very low walling around it coupled with the large

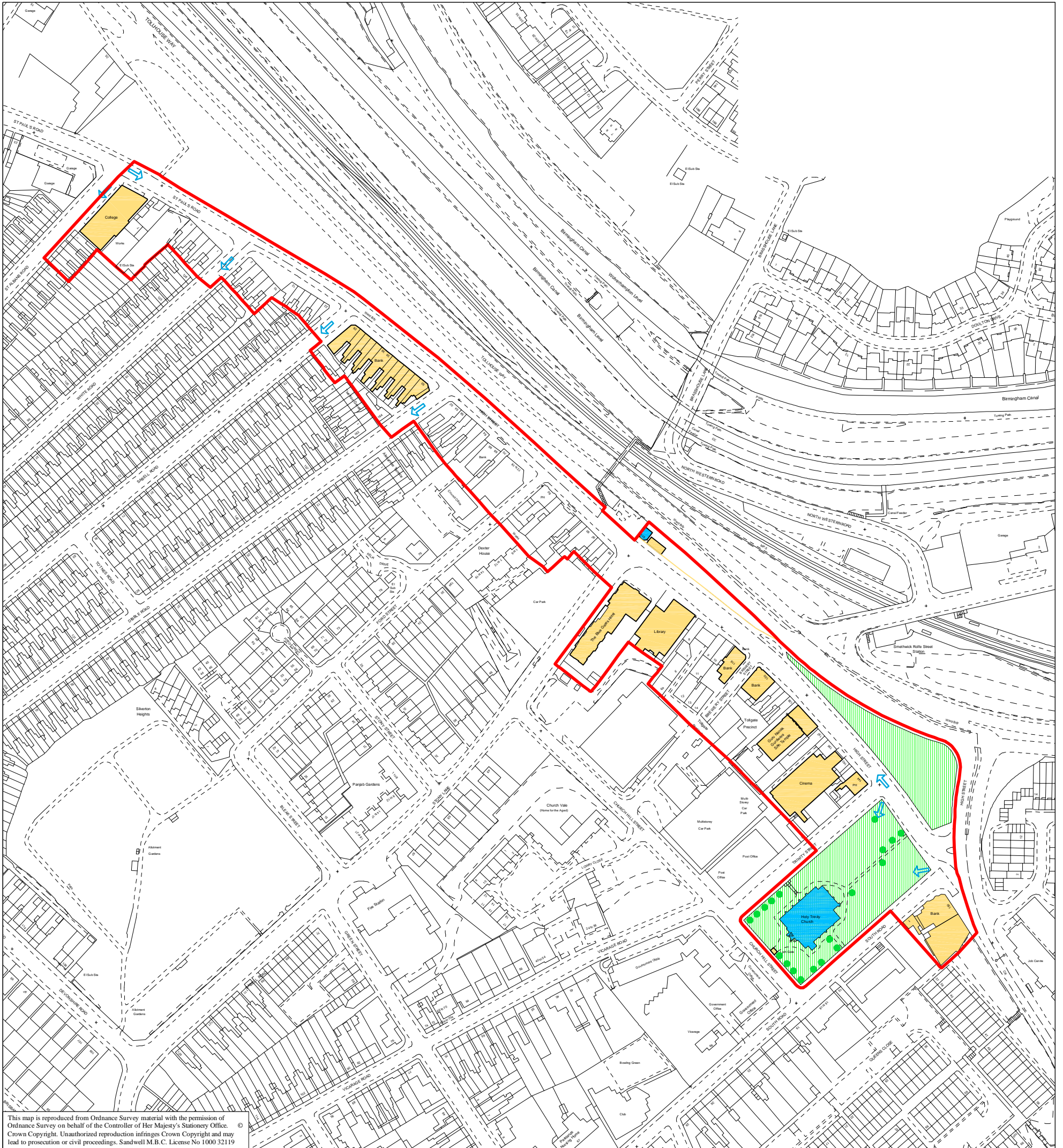
increase in height of the land within it gives it a rather peculiar aspect. The possibility that its boundary wall may once have been of greater height than at present might repay some research with a view to reinstating it, or instead possibly adding sensitively-designed railings to the existing wall. The existing low walling does, however, have the benefit of allowing unrestricted views from the High Street up towards the church . Any new boundary treatment would have to take this into account so as not to prevent views of the churchyard and church.

- 4.4.2 It might also be beneficial to restrict parking on the churchyard side of Trinity Street and to improve the boundary treatment of the properties on the opposite side of the road, which could do with some smartening-up. There would also be considerable benefit in continuing the traditional pressed brick tile paving to the pavement around the churchyard on Trinity Street, along Churchill Street and down South Road, especially as stone kerbing and cobbled gutters exist on the latter.
- 4.4.3 Consideration could also be given to a floodlighting scheme for the church, which could help to emphasise its architectural interest by making it visible at night and thus focusing attention on one of the visually most attractive parts of the proposed conservation area.
- 4.4.4 The car parking area of the car showroom at the north-eastern end of South Road might also benefit from a more sensitive boundary treatment.
- 4.4.5 Some of the modern buildings on Trinity Street and the section of Churchill Street opposite the churchyard, have potential for more sensitive redevelopment should the opportunity arise.

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

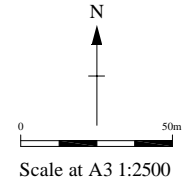




Plate 1: St. Alban's Road, southeastern side



Plate 2: Kerb detail on St. Alban's Road



Plate 3: St. Alban's Road, looking southwest



Plate 4: The Gurdwara Bara Sang, front elevation on High Street



Plate 5: The Gurdwara Bara Sang, elevation on St. Alban's Road, showing surviving shelters



Plate 6: Vacant plot adjacent to the Gurdwara Bara Sang, High Street



Plate 7: Terrace of shops between St. Alban's Road and White Road



Plate 8: White Road, looking southwest



Plate 9: Nos. 2-10 High Street



Plate 10: Nos. 12-22 High Street



Plate 11: Nos. 26-50 High Street



Plate 12: No. 1 Sabell Road



Plate 13: Workshop/garage buildings off north side of Dibble Road



Plate 14: Paving on corner of Dibble Road and High Street



Plate 15: Nos. 52-64 High Street



Plate 16: No.66-68 High Street (Kindergarten building)



Plate 17: No. 70 High Street



Plate 18: The Red Fort Social Club



Plate 19: The Blue Gates Market, between Nos. 86-90 High Street and The Red Fort



Plate 20: Nos. 86-98 High Street



Plate 21: The Blue Gates Hotel, High Street



Plate 22: Smethwick Library, High Street



Plate 23: The two banks on the corners of High Street and Brewery Street



Plate 24: The Guru Nanak Gurdwara, High Street



Plate 25: The former Prince's Cinema, High Street



Plate 26: The Old Talbot public house, corner of Trinity Street and High Street



Plate 27: The Toll House and former railway shed



Plate 28: Former railway yard wall, looking northwest along High Street



Plate 29: Boulton and Watt 'Governor' model, looking northwest along High Street



Plate 30



Plate 31: detail of paving and guttering on Trinity Street



Plate 32: View north from the churchyard



Plate 33: Social Security buildings on Churchill Road



Plate 34: Post Office building on Trinity Street



Plate 35: New building under construction on Trinity Street



Plate 36: Buildings on corner of South Road and High Street



Plate 37: Sandwell Agency Services building, South Road



Plate 38: Area of landscaping along St. Paul's Road at northern end of study area, looking northwest



Plate 39: Area of landscaping along St. Paul's Road at northern end of study area, looking southeast



Plate 40: landscaping between Tollhouse Way and High Street, looking northwest



Plate 41: Narrow strip of landscaping between Tollhouse Way and High Street, looking southeast



Plate 42: The premises of Sohal's Nursery Cash & Carry, corner of High Street and Ford Street



Plate 43: Façade of the former Prince's Cinema, showing state of disrepair



Plate 44: Part of churchyard, showing overgrown pathway in the left foreground