



ENGLISH HERITAGE

The Heritage of Historic Suburbs

More than 8 out of 10 people in England live in suburban areas ■. Many of these areas are currently undergoing significant change; in some areas by infilling and intensification of uses, in others through a struggle to regain their former vibrancy. This document, which should be read in conjunction with the English Heritage policy statement *Suburbs and the Historic Environment*, sets out the history and evolution of the English suburb and outlines the context for the issues currently facing local planning authorities in relation to suburban areas.

In *Suburbs and the Historic Environment*, English Heritage sets out how it sees their future planning and how local authorities can best respond to the challenges they face. These documents are the first step in our work with partners engaged with suburban planning, and are designed to help all those involved achieve the best and most sustainable solutions.

The planning system is currently undergoing far-reaching modernisation. This, together with other factors such as the Sustainable Communities agenda, is influencing decisions being taken that have significant implications for historic suburbs. Changes in central planning policy in recent years to achieve higher density in development and contribute to sustainability objectives have shifted the perception of suburbia by local planning authorities and private developers. This has led to an increasing number of problems specific to suburbia, a fuller discussion of which can be found in *Suburbs and the Historic Environment*.

English Heritage believes that the most successful approach to planning, executing and managing change in our suburbs is one based on a sound understanding of local character, including its integral landscape. We are continuing to develop our understanding of the issues facing local planning authorities, and further research to this end is underway. Collaboration with partner organisations to analyse suburban issues and possible solutions forms part of our strategy.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SUBURB?

The English suburb has been the subject of much analysis and many publications, yet a consensus about a precise definition has never emerged. Recent research projects have produced several differing typologies of suburban areas

In general terms, suburbs can perhaps be best described as outgrowths or dependencies of larger settlements — somewhere with a clear relationship with a city or town but with its own distinct character. Most places we think of as urban today were suburban once. Southwark was a Roman and mediaeval suburb of London; Edinburgh s

New Town was a Georgian suburb of the neighbouring Old Town. But over time they have been overtaken by the outward expansion of the original settlement so that they are now suburbs only in a historical sense.

THE SUBURBS TAKE SHAPE

Before about 1800, English suburbs possessed no uniform character or special building-types. Some were densely settled, unsafe and poorly managed, while others were looser and enjoyed better amenities. One common physical pattern on the edge of cities was ribbon development, which could take place along rivers as well as roads.

The definition of suburban character took place in the nineteenth century. Wealthy urban residents had long lived at least partly outside polluted and sometimes dangerous city centres. But now rapid changes in transport meant that a growing proportion of people were able for the first time to live at some distance from their work. This gave popularity and momentum to the English suburb. To many planners and reformers, suburbs seemed not only healthier and happier places to live, but morally preferable as well. The more people who could be persuaded out of the city to live a safe, orderly and restful family life in the suburbs, so much the better; or so the thinking went. That ideal was common ground for about a century between 1840 and 1939.

The character of the location and its layout largely depended on the purpose of the suburb — factors such as who it had been built to house, its relationship and transport links with the original settlement and its topography all played a part in its development.

Nevertheless, the basic conditions sought in the new suburbs were space and the self-contained family home.

This was planned and achieved in different forms. For example, the ideal vision was one of detached villas in naturalistic parkland setting with winding, tree-lined roads and large gardens, although such an arrangement could only be afforded by the prosperous. New developments such as the Bedford Park estate in London and Curzon Park in Chester were promoted as exclusive enclaves and aimed at the upper classes.

Much commoner in Victorian times, even for the middle classes, was development set out in a hierarchical fashion off straight streets, on plots with some space between houses or groups, and ample gardens. Though some houses were independent villas, even before the Victorian period the semi-detached type had become common. Houses in rows or terraces were also standard and lower middle-class or working-class suburbs, located closer to urban jobs, might not differ much from their inner-city equivalents. But in almost all cases there would be some attempt to give even small houses functional gardens and a measure of landscaping and planting along the public facade and in the street. Public space would be reserved for a few building-types like churches, and in good districts a park. Shops would be few and places of entertainment, including pubs, minimal.

Although there were general trends, no hard-and-fast architectural style exists for the suburbs, although an attempt at English character of a kind was usually made. Before about 1875 that meant a faintly picturesque mixture of materials, styles and planting. Houses and front garden boundaries tend to have Italian touches and to be stuccoed or in brick, while the churches are in Gothic and stone. Even in stone-building districts a hierarchy between public buildings, larger houses and smaller houses is almost always identifiable.

SHAFTESBURY PARK ESTATE, BATTERSEA

The expansion of the railway system (and subsequent introduction of reduced fares) often led to rapid population growth as employees were able to travel further to their places of work. The Shaftesbury Park Estate (built between 1872-77) was the first estate of cottages designed and built for working class families. The company architect, Robert Austin, planned over one thousand cottages with gardens laid out in tree-lined streets, for better paid workers who could afford the rent of between seven and thirteen shillings a week.

A Beckenham, London
Borough of Bromley



B+C Shaftesbury Park Estate,
London Borough of
Wandsworth



D+E Hermitage & Houghton
Road Conservation Area,
Manchester
F Beckenham, London
Borough of Bromley

G+H Penkhull, Stoke on Trent
I Beckenham, London
Borough of Bromley

J New Earswick, York
K Penkhull, Stoke on Trent
L Swanpool, Lincoln

M Gidea Park, London
Borough of Havering
N Penkhull, Stoke on Trent



O+P Birkenhead Park,
Wirral

Q+R Letchworth,
Hertfordshire



BIRKENHEAD PARK

Birkenhead Park, opened in 1847, was the first public park to be established at public expense in the United Kingdom. Designed by Sir Joseph Paxton, the park formed the centrepiece for the surrounding residential development which recouped much of the associated costs. Its design later influenced the layout of Central Park in New York, and remains largely intact today. It was designated a conservation area in 1977 and a Grade I registered park in 1995.

SUBURBAN EVOLUTION

After 1875 suburbs evolved. The houses themselves, the building blocks of the suburb, underwent serious architectural study and reform. Basements disappeared, internal plans improved, houses were designed in the round, and their architecture took on a consciously vernacular character. The visual model for this was the traditional English cottage, modernised almost out of recognition, a trend exemplified by the emergence of the garden city or suburb development.

The culmination of this movement was the inter-war semi (often not a semi at all) — the twentieth-century's equivalent of the urban terraced house. The two-storey dwelling of this type is the norm in the inter-war suburb but by no means exclusive. Blocks of walk-up flats can often be found.

The context in which these dwellings sit also changed. Suburbs became larger and more common as a result of the growing suburban railway network and a reduction in commuting costs. Most suburbs of the first half of the twentieth century are essentially railway suburbs. Though they have adapted themselves quite well to cars (through, for instance, the building of side-garages), they were not built with cars in mind. Few suburbs of this date had enough public facilities for their size or for the growing demands of their residents, though the growth of the shopping parade and the appearance of the occasional cinema, often in a moderne style at variance with the houses, did mitigate this. On the other hand the layouts of housing and their landscaping, especially among authorities and developers influenced by the garden-city movement, were often thoughtful and sophisticated. Varying road patterns, cul-de-sacs of different types, flexible building lines, houses angled at road junctions, grass strips between

LETCHWORTH GARDEN CITY

Letchworth Garden City was established in 1903, and today the 5,500 acre estate is today owned and managed by the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation. The Foundation is responsible for overseeing change in the majority of residential areas under the terms of ground leases, or schemes of management for freehold properties.

pavement and roadway, hedges rather than garden walls, pathway systems, tree lined streets, generous public parks, playing fields and open space — these are typical features of the best inter-war suburbs.

Part of the ideal of the suburb between 1840 and 1939 was that it was for family life, not work. That was never entirely the case. There were obvious advantages for workplaces and homes to be fairly close to one another. Indeed one important model for the twentieth-century suburb was the factory village, such as Saltaire, Bournville or Port Sunlight. Such places were originally self-sufficient communities and so should not really be classified as suburbs. Yet all three are located today in the outskirts of larger metropolitan areas. In practice it is hard to distinguish the suburb completely from the work environment. Some suburbs grew up around mills and factories that were outside cities already, while in other places employers found sites close to existing or intended suburbs.

SUBURBS SINCE 1945

These complicating factors have increased over time. The nearer we get to the present day, the harder it is to define suburbs precisely. The increasing mobility after the Second World War and the collapse of distinctions between classes, jobs and styles of life make it increasingly hard to generalise accurately about suburbs. So we are left with vaguer concepts such as suburbia, subtopia and now also exurbia. These phrases are useful, but they do not have the same precise connotation as the English suburb of the 1840-1939 period. Broad though that typology is, it has a coherence and identity worth respect and enlightened protection.

The widespread prevalence of suburbia and the number of people that live (or have lived) there demonstrate the importance it holds in terms of planning for the future. It is an important element of the historic environment, and often comprises the setting for much of our everyday

lives and helps to define the character of the places where we live. There is strong evidence that people develop a pride in and attachment to this special local identity. Understanding how these suburbs work and the role they play in relation to their adjacent urban areas is an important aspect in determining how they should be managed.

Many historic suburbs have over time proved themselves to be sustainable, with little sign of their longevity fading. Well over a century after they were first built, the most successful of them remain pleasant and sought after places to live, with a thriving mix of residential, retail and commercial elements all contributing to a strong sense of community identity. This success has in itself attracted development pressures, and illustrated the suburban capacity to accommodate change.

SUBURBS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

A number of demographic trends, changes to national planning policies and housing market conditions have combined to mean that relatively spacious, low density suburban areas (the archetypal leafy suburbs as discussed above) are coming under increasing development pressure. As a result, successive waves of new development, together with small-scale incremental change is in places gradually putting local character and distinctiveness at risk. Failure to address specific suburban issues on the part of local planning authorities could mean that many suburbs soon reach a tipping point beyond which it will be extremely difficult to bring about a renaissance.

These trends, and English Heritage's position on future approaches and planning, are discussed in more detail in *Suburbs and the Historic Environment*. This document includes an analysis of the trends affecting suburbia and their implications, sets out English Heritage's approach to historic suburbs and our views on how local planning authorities can address them. It also brings together a series of case studies looking at current best practice.

For further details, please see www.helm.org.uk/suburbs.
' English Heritage — March 2007