

## *Historic Environment Character Zone*

### **UET            Urban East Theale**

#### **Historic Character**

Theale is located near the floor of the Kennet Valley on the major road and rail routes through the zone and is known to have been a settlement from the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. It seems to have had mixed fortunes, but flourished during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Coaching traffic between London and Bath ran along what is now the A4, and Theale developed many inns and other trades to service travellers. During this time many buildings along the High Street were either constructed or re-façaded. The railway was built south of the village in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and, despite having a station, Theale's importance as a stop-over waned. Little development, apart from a few early 20<sup>th</sup> century houses on the village edge and at Theale Green, took place over the next 100 years.

The construction of the M4 and its junction with the A4 reversed the village's fortunes again and it became a favoured location for companies leading to the growth of a large business area south of the village. Housing construction accompanied this upturn and Theale is now about four times the size of the historic village.

Most of the zone is occupied by small housing estates constructed between the 1960s and 1990s, but there is also a sizeable open area of playing fields on the north-western side of the village. The majority of buildings on the High Street frontage are historic and much of the village core has been designated as a Conservation Area. New developments have however, led to the loss of the distinctive historic plot pattern to the rear of the street frontage. Despite some re-development Theale retains a largely historic centre and the feel of a village.

#### **Historic Environment**

HER records are quite common in this zone and some archaeological work, including excavation, has been carried out. The zone was also covered by the Middle Thames Survey and the Lower Kennet Valley Survey. Unlike other parts of the Kennet valley, no definite prehistoric material has been recorded from this zone. This probably reflects a lack of opportunity for discovery rather than a lack of deposits, as prehistoric material is very common in adjacent zones, and most building in this zone took place without archaeological monitoring. Extensive cropmarks of field systems were mapped in areas now covered by playing fields on the north-western side of the village. These field systems are thought to be later prehistoric/Romano-British in date. Evidence of Romano-British activity has been found at some sites, including early Roman features excavated prior to development at the Lamb Inn. Scatters of building material of this date, including tesserae, were reported in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is thought that a villa lay somewhere within the vicinity.

It is unclear whether there was any settlement at Theale in the early medieval period as it is not mentioned in Domesday, and the earliest reference to it was in 1208. The early development of the settlement is not well-understood, no structures or deposits relating to it have been recorded, but its site is thought to be the same as the present village. The first reference to a chapel was in 1291; it was last mentioned in 1675 and is thought to have become ruined and had largely disappeared by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The foundations of the chapel are reported as lying near the entrance of the present churchyard.

Most of the buildings on the High Street are historic and this has been recognised through its designation as a Conservation Area, and many of the structures are listed buildings. Many buildings in the historic core and the majority of other listed buildings date from the period of

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coaching prosperity and are an important record of this part of Theale's history. The only other listed structures in the zone are the 19<sup>th</sup> century church and some of its associated features.

### **Historic Environment Potential**

The archaeological potential of this zone is mixed. Due to the use of modern-earth moving machinery the archaeological potential is thought to be low in areas of recent housing. The potential of undeveloped or open areas within developments is likely to be higher. The nature and quality of any deposits present is hard to estimate. The presence of Roman features and building material and the ubiquity of prehistoric material in surrounding areas indicates that deposits of these dates may be encountered.

Any deposits or structural remains relating to medieval occupation at Theale will be significant in understanding the development of the settlement. Much of the historic building stock has not been studied and it has potential to contain further important buildings and yield significant information about the history of Theale.

### **Historic Environment Action Plan**

#### Conservation Issues

- There is continued development pressure in the area.
- Conservation Area appraisal and management plan overdue.
- More information about the form and character of the town is required to inform future development proposals. Need to undertake a new archaeological/historic character study.
- Redevelopment of the small number of 'Brownfield' sites in the village centre presents an opportunity for archaeological research, but a threat to the character of the settlement.
- The historic building stock is poorly understood and could therefore be threatened by inappropriate alterations/development.

#### Research Priorities

- Does a Romano-British settlement exist in the area near the school?
- What are the origins of the medieval settlement? What status did the settlement achieve?
- Does the remains of a medieval church exist beneath or adjacent to the current structure? Why is the church not in the historic core of the settlement?
- What is the date and significance of the historic building stock in the village?