

# **Hilton Village Design Statement 1999**

## **What is a Village Design Statement?**

Village Design Statements (VDS) were instigated in 1993, by the then Secretary of State for the Environment, as a means of involving local people in the evolution of their communities. A VDS is a document which seeks to "describe those qualities of the village valued by the local people" (Countryside Agency guidance booklet). It aims to identify "the landscape setting, the shape of the settlement and the nature of the buildings themselves".

The role of a VDS is not to prevent change but to influence its form, by reflecting the views and expectations of the village's residents. It is a means of enabling those who actually live in the community to have a say in future development. To that end, it includes "Guidelines" (highlighted here by a § symbol), which aim to ensure not only that Hilton remains "pretty" but that any changes to the fabric of the village preserve or enhance its distinctive character. A VDS is concerned not only with large development but also with works carried out by the Utility Services and Local Authorities, together with minor adjustments to homes, gardens, paths and hedges - all of which alter the character of a village.

## **Who is it for?**

This VDS is addressed to anyone contemplating or involved in construction, or in the modification of existing properties, no matter how large or small, which will affect the village scene. It exists to help:

- Village Residents.
- The Local Planning Authority.
- The Parish Council.
- Developers.
- Builders, architects and designers.
- The Local Highway Authority.
- Utility Services (Gas/Electricity Companies etc.).

## **How does it work?**

The VDS has been approved by the Local Planning Authority as Supplementary Planning Guidance to the Huntingdonshire Local Plan. Although the Local Plan does not envisage major development in Hilton, the philosophy and guidelines articulated in this VDS will be taken into account when planning applications are assessed. Such applications should also result in developments that can be readily absorbed into and harmonise with the existing visual character of the village.

Hilton's VDS has been made available to everyone in the village. It offers guidance to people who are considering extending or altering their properties, by providing a summary of the prevailing views of the village as a whole on future development.

## **How was Hilton's VDS produced?**

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A Group of village residents put this document together during 1998 and 1999. It is the distillation of the views of the village at large, secured through a wide ranging and extended process of consultation, which included:

- Sending questionnaires to every local group, business and school.
- A day long Workshop, during which about 40 people studied the village in detail.
- Participation in local events, such as the Harvest Fayre.
- Articles in Spectrum (the local monthly magazine circulated to all households) and The Hunts Post.
- An 'open door' policy on the part of the VDS Steering Group.
- Consultation with other villages which have produced Design Statements.
- Inviting comment on a draft of the VDS that was distributed to every household in the village.

### **The Evolution of the Village**

The first records of Hilton predate the Battle of Hastings when the village formed part of the manor of the nearby village of Fenstanton. In the Dark Ages, the site must have seemed attractive to the people who settled in farmsteads here. It was situated just above the damp flood plains and fens of the Great Ouse Valley and yet still had access to the main travel routes. Although the land comprises predominantly heavy clay - hard to work and much of it would still have been covered in forest- the settlement would have offered some safety away from the dangers of the river, the ruinous Ermine Street to the west and the Via Devana to the north.

Hilton's subsequent evolution has followed the irregular and unplanned open character that is the essence of many Saxon villages in eastern England. It developed slowly through the Middle Ages, as forests gave way to the plough, and gradually evolved into a rural community whose existence revolved around agriculture. Its farms gave rise to associated trades in the village such as carpenters, millers and blacksmiths. In turn these and others developed into services such as butchers, bakers and public houses supplying the needs of the village and then the wider locality.

The varied size and nature of dwellings in Hilton enables a wide range and mix of people to live in the village. This ensures support for the many social and cultural activities that exist. Also, the residents of Hilton recognise that the retention of small local businesses and commercial activities are important to the vitality of the village. Although many of the traditional businesses have closed, some core services still survive. Furthermore, other home based enterprises are emerging, such as nurseries, stabling and recording studios, together with such services as accountancy, architecture and fitness training. Although the nature of these activities is different from those that previously existed they ensure some local employment opportunities will continue and that the village will not become merely a dormitory for nearby towns and cities.

Much of the village is a designated conservation area, but the rest of the village also has an individual character which needs to be safeguarded.

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§ Encouragement will be given to the retention and promotion of appropriate commercial activities that are in accordance with the policies of the Huntingdonshire Local Plan. They will be required to help maintain the vitality of the village, whilst also protecting and enhancing its distinctive and attractive character.

§ The conservation area safeguards key historical features within its boundaries. However, any proposed new development outside the conservation area should also take account of the village's historical origins and will be assessed with regard to its effect on the preservation and/or enhancement of any Listed Building or the Conservation Area.

§ New housing developments will be required to take account of the Huntingdonshire Local Plan concerning the provision of a mix of house types and tenures to help maintain a broad range of residents and thereby assist in supporting the vitality of the village.

### **THE VILLAGE CHARACTER**

#### **The Landscape Setting**

The village of Hilton, as its name indicates, occupies land that is slightly higher than the surrounding countryside. Although the village has grown considerably over the last 35 years, its character is still one of a relatively small and attractive settlement lying within and forming part of a wider open agricultural landscape.

This character is partly due to the survival of the compactness of the settlement, with newer development being contained within its original framework. Also noteworthy, and without compromising compactness, is the presence of some remaining pasture around the edge of the village and, in particular, the soft open edge on the northern side reflecting its earlier associations with Fenstanton and access to ancient travel routes. This allows the countryside and large numbers of mature trees to extend into the heart of the village, thereby emphasising its self-contained appearance and the slightly elevated location in the landscape.

The survival of the landscape setting of the village and its maintenance is particularly important considering the great loss of tree cover in the surrounding countryside, the incursion of mineral workings and the erosive pressure of heavy through traffic.

§ Any proposed development in or in the vicinity of Hilton will be assessed as to its potential effect on the landscape setting of the village. Particular regard will be given to retaining the small size of the village and maintaining the undeveloped areas that provide a soft edge to the settlement and enable countryside to extend into the village. This factor will bear especially strongly on any mooted development beyond the existing village boundaries.

#### **The Form and Layout**

Hilton is formed by a loose grouping of former farmsteads linked together by roads, paths, water courses and open spaces. More recently, the space within this framework has been 'in-filled' with modern housing development. Those factors that influenced the form and layout of the village in the past are still evident today. Principal among them are: the orientation of the main travel routes, land ownership and the need to accommodate the advantages and disadvantages of water.

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The direction of the main watercourses and highway is still south-west to north-east with the latter reflecting the village's early association with Fenstanton. It also provided access to the nearby market of St Ives and the transport corridors through the river valley. These are linked with other roads providing internal access within the village to the church and farmsteads which, from the beginning, were the focus of most activity in the village. The present gentle twists and turns of the roads, combined with their slight rises and falls, are witness to avoiding physical constraints such as water courses and water logged ground while taking advantage of higher land and better drained soils.

Water and communication was again influential in determining the form of the settlement when livestock was driven through and around the village from the market at St Ives to London. For a while the demand for overnight grazing and watering ensured that the village's ponds, of which 16 still remain, and greens, not only survived but became more established.

The influence of land ownership has also played a significant role in the shape and form of the village. For example, the church and the farmstead buildings, as well as occupying large areas of ground, still play an important role by punctuating views on bends at corners and across open spaces. These farmsteads also benefited from the Enclosures Act, which not only saw their land ownership extend into the surrounding village fields but also inadvertently brought about the formal establishment of the village Green. The Green, which extends to some 27 acres, is the most distinctive feature of the village.

The positioning of buildings and the need to avoid flooding and encroachment on the highway and green open spaces is also a characteristic of village form. This is particularly noticeable around the Green where properties are situated well forward on their sites. This provides enclosure to the Green on three sides, thereby giving greater emphasis to this large green open space. Furthermore, although many of these buildings are large, their scale is reduced by their development in depth, extensive gardens and the size of the Green. Many of these areas form part of the designated Conservation Area whose policies are designed to preserve and enhance its special character.

§ Any proposed development will be assessed with regard to its effect on those characteristics that form an important part of the village's form and layout. Particular regard will be paid to the way the development would integrate with and form part of a linked overall pattern, with attention being given to maintaining and enhancing views and settings both along roads and paths and across open spaces.

§ Landowners and service providers should demonstrate that they have taken account of the village's form and layout characteristics, particular regard being paid to maintaining and enhancing views and settings when making alterations or changes.

### **Buildings**

Although Hilton does not present the immediate 'flashlight' image that some settlements do, with a predominance of a particular material or style of building, it does retain a prevailing character reflecting its East Anglian location. Furthermore, it contains features that are distinctly local to this corner of Huntingdonshire. The built environment of the village is predominantly made up of one, two and three storey dwellings, farm buildings of various

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sizes and other ecclesiastical and commercial buildings. They fall broadly into two categories both in location and type.

### **Individual Buildings and Small Groups**

The first category includes individual and groups of buildings that have been erected, replaced and modified since the village was first settled. About 40 of these buildings are listed as being of Historic and or Architectural Interest, with some originating from the 16th century. In addition to the church, they include the farmsteads and other subsequent 'in-filling' situated along the Graveley Road, Potton Road, High Street and around the Green. Much of their external appearance is defined by the use and influence of local materials, construction techniques and craftsmanship.

The underlying form of these buildings is of narrow gables, steep pitched roofs and windows and doors that are modest in relation to their façade. These features were dictated by the properties of locally available materials and the need to cope with the weather. In Hilton these materials included oak framing, elm boarding, lime render, brick, reed and long straw thatch and clay peg tiles. The overall appearance is of well proportioned buildings with a vertical orientation further emphasised by the presence of chimneys, combining colour and texture that were natural to the locality. This includes white limewash, pitch black boarding, soft red brick for walls and 'tweedy' coloured roofs. Particularly important are the surviving clay peg and pan tiles, in variegated pale shades of yellows, browns, reds, pinks and greys, that are a special and distinctive feature of the village and surrounding area.

Over time, the introduction of white brick and white painted brickwork has served to reinforce local building colours. Even the use of red peg tiles, mixed in the right proportion with local tiles, has maintained their distinctive appearance. Although, the importation of slate and concrete introduced new roof colours and often resulted in wider gables and shallower pitches, their small number reflects the gradual evolution of building techniques and styles and also the availability of alternative materials - without eroding the basic built character of the village.

### **Housing Estates**

The second category relates to the many housing developments that have been built over the last 35 years. Although they form the major part of the village's buildings and incorporate features of a more suburban style, they do not overwhelm the rest of the village or undermine its intrinsic character. There are several reasons for this. Most are estate developments that are grouped together and well located within the village framework. They lie off the main village road network and are served by cul-de-sacs, which give them an inward looking focus. Consequently, most of their impact on the village is limited to the point of access. This contrasts with most other development in the village which is spread out along the main road network and serves to emphasise its presence and strengthen its contribution to the village character. The integration of estate developments within the village is further assisted by the ample areas of public open space that were provided in some of the earlier developments. These areas, with their now maturing trees, complement the many greens that are a defining characteristic of the village.

Although some of the earlier estates, like some individual buildings, placed great emphasis on horizontal aspects embodied in the concept of 'open plan', with wider and straighter

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roads, broader gables, shallow roof pitches, picture windows and feature panels of hanging tile etc., some of the more recent developments, such as Scotts Close and Crescent, have been designed to incorporate proportions and materials that foster the indigenous village character.

§ All proposed new development will be assessed with regard to its effect on those aspects that form an important part of the distinctive and attractive character of the built environment of the village, while also recognising the need to ensure such development is in keeping with its immediate surroundings.

§ Any new housing development will be assessed with regards to the policies contained in the Huntingdonshire Local Plan concerning crime prevention.

§ Planning applications should be supported by sufficient information, including illustrative material, to show how the visual appearance of new buildings is likely to evolve and what the effect of the development on the village is likely to be in the longer term.

### **Open Spaces and Water Features**

The spaces between, around and in front of buildings can be as important as the buildings themselves. Responses to the questionnaires, reflected in this VDS, showed unequivocally that the people of Hilton value greatly the village's open spaces. The Green represents the most important and distinctive feature of the village. Its size and location within the village, combined with all the traditional attributes of a green, make it truly representative of the quintessential English village. To residents it represents the history of the village. It is also the place where common rights holders retain historical privileges, games are played, festivals held and events and people commemorated.

The presence of many other roadside greens and ponds in the village enhances the status of The Green which in turn is reinforced by the presence of many fine trees and the parish church. The church is positioned on slightly higher ground which makes its tower an important landmark within the village. Of similar importance is the Sparrow Monument, while the Maze, which was cut in 1660, is one of only eight ancient turf mazes still surviving in England. The former red brick school, with its distinctive cast iron diamond glazing bars, and the cricket clubhouse also both contribute to the role and importance of The Green.

When approached from the east the full impact of The Green is suddenly realised on rounding a bend in the Fenstanton Road at the entrance to the village. From the west and south the opposite experience occurs with smaller sections of green and highway verge combining with ponds, streams, fords and moats to provide a more gradual build up to the Green.

The stock of public green areas within the village has decreased over recent years through estate development. Although not laid out in a way that consciously links them with earlier spaces, these estates do, with the trees they contain, contribute to the abundance of green space within the village. Another factor that contributes to the character of the village's green spaces and water features is their informal and semi-natural state. Of particular note is the lack of kerbs and the abundance of Willow and Rush. Where it has been necessary to provide structures, such as several small white footbridges, they have become a distinctive

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local feature. In Hilton they are known as 'Brows' and provide highlights to the otherwise semi-natural scene.

Whereas many of the buildings and structures that have been erected on the village's open spaces are in keeping, there are others that are both poorly designed and detract from the attractiveness of these areas. It is hoped that in due course some of the less sympathetic structures will either be relocated or replaced by structures of a more appropriate design.

§ Any proposed development will be assessed with regard to its effect on the green, open spaces and water features in the village. Particular regard will be paid to protecting their settings and views and to maintaining their informal and semi natural state.

§ Landowners and service providers should demonstrate that they have considered the effect of their proposed actions on the maintenance and quality of the village's green open spaces and water features, both within and around the edge of the village. Particular regard should be paid to drainage features and their importance to wildlife.

§ Opportunities will be sought to extend the stock and quality of green, open spaces and water features in and around the edge of the village.

§ The scale of planned extensions to existing buildings should take account of the potential impact on the spaciousness of the area within which they are situated and on neighbours' access to light.

§ Any proposed development should take account of the important role of space around and between buildings in both maintaining the character and built form of the village and in preventing overlooking or overbearing effects on adjoining buildings.

### **Trees, Hedges and Landscaping**

The 'greenness' of the village, whether viewed from without or within, is an important defining characteristic of Hilton. The presence of many native trees, hedges and shrubs is not only an essential feature in 'clothing' the village and forming part of its setting in an open arable landscape; it also assists in defining the distinctive open spaces and routes within the village. These trees, hedges and shrubs also enhance the quality and setting of many village buildings.

Until recently huge elm trees dominated the Hilton skyline. It is therefore fortunate that the existence of several large properties and the Green has ensured a continuity of tree cover over the centuries and enabled some specimens of oak and beech to grow both in size and age. It is estimated that two huge oaks on the Green are probably 300 years old. Tree planting has also taken place to commemorate coronations, jubilees and notable residents.

Hawthorn hedges and hedgerow trees of ash and field maple provide an attractive approach to the village and reflect the enclosure period as well as the local geological and climatic conditions. Similarly, white willow and rushes are present in and around the village and help to define and emphasise the many water features that are part of Hilton's existence.

Over the years the village has seen an increase in planting of more ornamental and exotic species of planting. Whilst this can add colour and texture to the landscape, it is important that, in the public zone, the balance is maintained in favour of native species. This in turn

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helps to maintain the habitat that is key to the survival of the indigenous wildlife of the village.

Trees and open spaces are so important to the village that the Parish Council has responsibility for their management over a large area. This influence is extended through its voluntary Tree Warden, who continually monitors the health, condition and safety of trees and co-ordinates planting initiatives. The Warden also liaises with the county and district councils to promote the principles set out in Cambridgeshire Landscape Guidelines, which have been adopted by Huntingdonshire District Council as Supplementary Planning Guidance.

§ Trees, shrubs and hedges that contribute to the special character of the village should be encouraged, promoted and protected.

§ The maintenance, replacement and planting of new trees, shrubs and hedges should favour native species, particularly in the public zone.

§ New developments should be supported by a scheme that will utilise to the best advantage all existing landscape features and include new planting in a way that will ensure long term integration, reinforcement and management of the special landscape qualities of the village.

### **Roads, Paths and Tracks**

Of the roads and paths that serve the village, the Potton Road (B1040) carries the largest volume of through traffic, including a significant proportion of heavy vehicles. These not only dominate and erode the character of this part of the village but also separate it into two halves. Consultation during the production of this VDS prompted vociferous and widespread comment about the effects of the growth in the volume of traffic on this the village's main thoroughfare - even though it is not defined as a 'distributor route' in the County Structure Plan. This road has a major impact on the village's quality of life, which a VDS is specifically designed to preserve or enhance.

Although the B1040 has been widened and alignments smoothed to improve the flow of traffic, not all bends in the road have been removed and the one that exists to the north of the cross roads provides a sudden and attractive entrance to the village - although the associated cross-roads are extremely hazardous. This is similar to the approach that exists on the Fenstanton Road at the eastern end of The Green.

In addition to the public having a right of access to the village green, people also have a right of way along the roads, paths and tracks that serve the village. It is by moving along these routes that the visual qualities and distinctive characteristics of the village are experienced. In Hilton the quality of these routes contributes significantly to the attractiveness of the village.

The openness of the Fenstanton Road and part of Church End contrasts with the enclosed nature of other roads into and within the village. The western approach to the village along the Graveley Road embodies many valuable features, starting with well maintained hedges and hedgerow trees, with additional enclosure being provided by such elements as dark stained vertical close boarded fencing, gault brick walls and Yew hedges. All are of

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appropriate height and are traditional forms of boundary treatment found elsewhere in the locality, giving the appearance of a co-ordinated design. This theme is taken further with some of the buildings being positioned on or close to the highway boundary. Surface treatments within the Highway boundary are also informal with an absence of kerbs and the survival of gravel footpaths that are often separated from the road by grass verges and banks. The quality of the routes is also enhanced by changes in the height and width of features that are mirrored by ponds, such as The Ware, that run parallel to the road. This same characteristic is also evident at the cross-roads, in Church End and at Reeves Ditch in the High Street.

Alternative routes into and out of the village are provided by footpaths and bridleways over the countryside. The route from the north follows the alignment of former drove roads, such as the Mere Way and Brookside. On entering the village at the Graveley Road, it skirts the western edge of the village along Tithe Lane - a track that has been worn by the hooves of cattle from a previous age. To the south-east another bridleway enters the village from the Elsworth direction and again offers fine views across The Green.

The roads and footpaths provided as part of recent housing developments have been well integrated with the existing network and improved accessibility within the village. Through careful design and without compromising safety, the excesses of highway engineering have been avoided and dominance by vehicles has been reduced. A good network of footpaths now exists, allowing easy movement between the various areas of the village. These paths are themselves distinctive, being of a character that lies somewhere between the informality of the open routes over the Green and the more formal enclosed paths within and connecting estates.

The village's road and path boundaries are often defined with hedges and this is part of its attractive rural character. Other treatments such as palisade fences, five bar gates, black ornamental gates and railings are also in evidence.

§ Any proposed development in the village will be assessed with regard to its effect on the safety and character of existing roads and paths in the village, the likely impact on levels of traffic, particularly along the B1040, and the extent to which the proposed changes might encourage 'rat running'.

§ Any proposed development in the village will be required to provide vehicular and pedestrian access in a manner that both reflects the special character of the village and reduces the impact of vehicular traffic, whilst at the same time ensuring adequate parking and servicing facilities.

§ The B1040 should not be designated a 'distributor route' and measures should be taken to reduce the volume of traffic using it, particularly HGVs.

§ Encouragement will be given to measures which preserve or enhance the quality of existing roads, paths and tracks and to the provision of new routes, including cycleways, that complement the existing network.

§ Ranch style, concrete post and wire and interwoven fencing should be avoided in prominent locations and hedges should be properly maintained.

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### **Village Furniture**

Most items of 'furniture' (which comprises everything from lampposts to benches to street signs) are located along the roads, paths and within public areas. It is along these routes that the quality of the village environment can be most affected and influenced by how such features are designed and maintained. Even minor improvements or additions to such features can also do much to enhance the overall appearance of the village.

In Hilton the Sparrow Monument is a particularly fine and unique item of furniture, although other more functional items, such as the milestone in Potton Road or letter boxes and seats on the Green, are also important because they not only mark the development of the village but they are familiar and pleasing to the eye. However, there are also instances of items of poor or standard design that could be improved. These could include the bus shelter, the utility services building at the cross-roads, as well as overhead lines and plastic road bollards.

§ When carrying out works affecting village furniture, Local Authorities and the Utility Services, should do so in ways that contribute to the special character of the village, consulting the Parish Council before work is undertaken.

§ Encouragement will be given to the replacement of poor quality village furniture and the provision of new items that contribute to the character of the village where appropriate.

§ Public and private lighting should balance the requirements of safety with light pollution and intrusion.

§ Seats and/or trees of remembrance are encouraged.

### **And finally ...**

"When we build, let us think that we build for ever". (John Ruskin)