

## 4. Character and appearance

### 4.1 Identification of Character Areas

The Conservation Area covers a relatively small area of Ashton – in – Makerfield but includes most of the Victorian town centre, the open spaces around the two churches, and examples of back street Victorian workers housing. Some poor quality mid 20th Century housing to the south is included within the boundary. See Figure 7. Character Areas.

The Listed Buildings within the Conservation Area are the two churches – St Thomas’s and St Oswalds; St Oswalds presbytery; and the gates into the grounds of St Oswalds. See Figure 7. and Appendix 2.

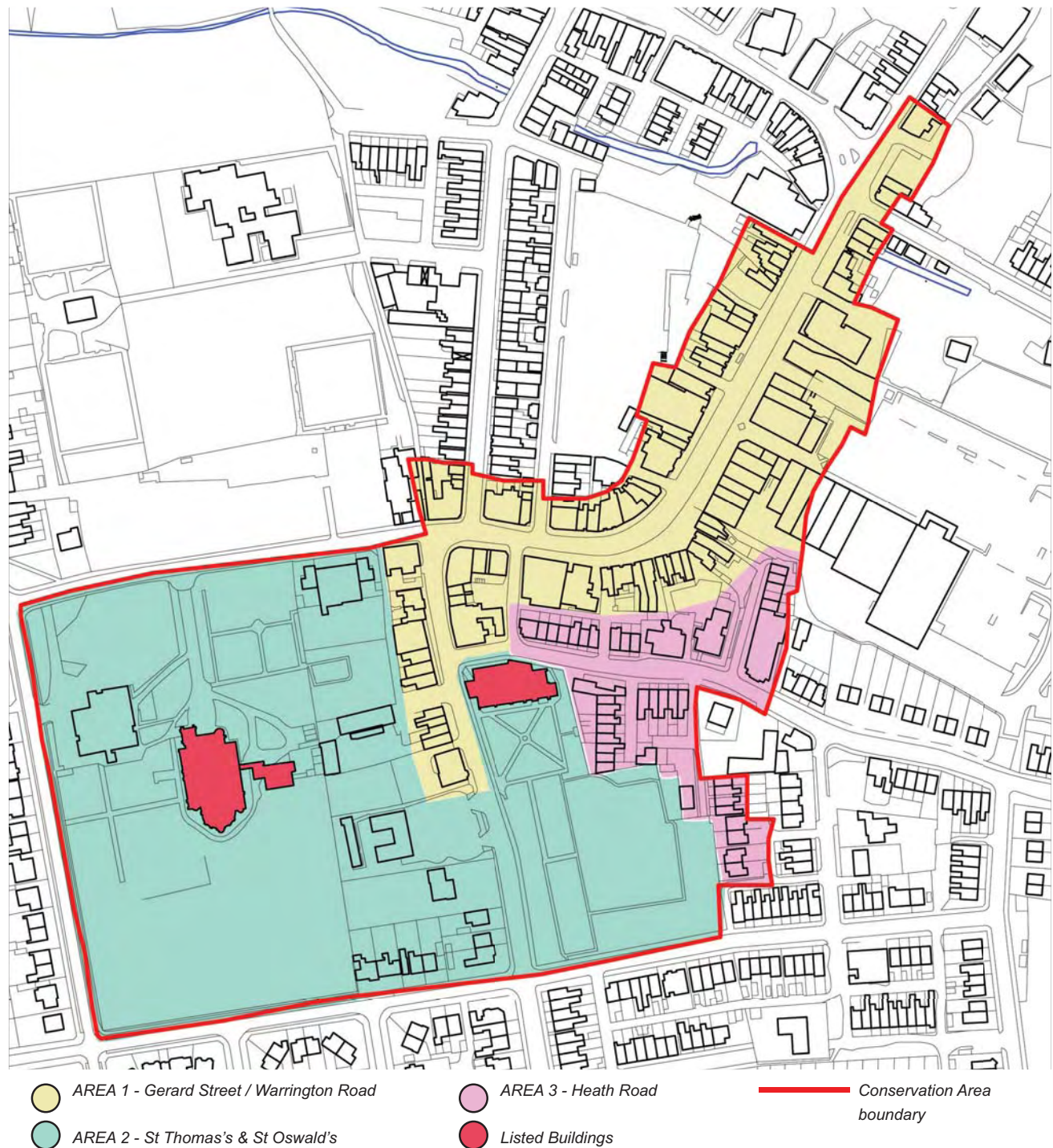


Figure 7: Character areas and listed buildings.

## 4.2 Gerard Street/Warrington Road Character Area

The Gerard Street/Warrington Road area has traditionally been the commercial centre of Ashton and the building and road alignment follows the medieval form established in the early years when the settlement was little more than a village. The Angel Inn on Warrington Road marks the entrance to the town centre when entering from the south. From the north, the Wigan Road junction with Gerard Street identifies the start of the town centre Conservation Area.

As described above, the majority of the buildings were rebuilt during the 1850 to 1910 period when the town was expanding fast and the economy strong. The resulting building types reflect importance of the centre for shopping and leisure ie. the number of inns. The redevelopment during this period has left us with a cautious yet individual Victorian architectural heritage. With limited expenditure the Victorian owners were able to achieve significant detailing to provide an expression of their importance and distinction.

The route through the town centre encompasses a number of distinctive spaces that result from the historic development of the town:

- In the north, the broad junction with the Wigan Road is emphasised by the curved frontage of the Bank facing the more confining locations of the two inns either side of the Bolton Road.
- The broad alignment of Gerard Street provides a notable space as it rises up the hill and curves out of sight creating interest.
- The wider pavement on the south side of the bend was probably used for trading in past centuries.
- The tight off-set junction with Warrington Road and Bryn Street joining Gerard Street is particularly defined by the higher Cooperative building and the important group of shops, no's 70-74 Gerard Street.
- Either side of Gerard Street, short streets link through to back street activities, often giving important glimpses of potential, ie. Butchers Lane ended by St Thomas's; the passage through 45 Gerard Street giving a sight of A Court housing; the lane beside the Golden Lion joining the market; and the route opposite the Gerard Arms leading into the Gerard Shopping Centre



*View of off-set junction at southern end of Gerard Street.*

#### 4.2.1 Architectural and historic qualities of buildings

The resulting townscape reflects the sum of qualities of the building groupings. As the 19th Century progressed, the level of ornamentation and detailing increased. The earliest examples included the Palatine Buildings 1863, a simple two-storey commercial development where the detailing is limited to first-floor lintels and a corner doorway. Later commercial developments, such as the three-storey Central Buildings 1899, on the same side of Gerard Street, displayed extensive brick and terracotta detailing with exuberant window arches and parapet with name and date in large lettering.



*View of Central Buildings, 1899*

Each development provides a special contribution to the area with its own character. The building designs range from simple two-storey mid century shop units as found on the southern side of the bend on Gerard Street, to the more extravagantly detailed parapet, brick detailing and cupola on 3-5 Gerard Street. The townscape mixture includes two and three storey buildings, most in brick but with some rendered and others with mock timbering. This pleasing townscape, with a blend of styles from this period, is punctuated by the even more notable public house architecture – in particular the Gerard Arms (now sadly having lost most of its heritage detail – see comparative photographs), the Red Lion and the Golden Lion.

The commercial buildings along the short length of the Warrington Road included in this Character Area repeat these themes. An additional point of interest is provided by the use of local sandstone facing on the buildings around the junction with Heath Street.

The newer buildings in this Character Area have fitted well within the heritage townscape with a sympathetic use of scale, materials and form – the recent Gerard Street elevation of the Gerard Centre; the 21st Century Aqua bar at no. 1 Gerard Street; and the 1970's Sir Thomas Gerard inn on the site of the Congregational Chapel.

The form and structure of the architecture is attractive but the overall townscape is dominated by inappropriate and unattractive shop fronts and signage. Many of the key attributes of the area are lost above this poor quality ground floor façade.

## 4.2.2 Audit of heritage assets

Although no buildings and structures of local architectural or historic interest in Ashton have been included in the local list, there are a significant number of buildings of suitable heritage quality that could qualify for this designation and present a positive contribution to the local townscape. The selection of these buildings results from their history, their architectural styles and detailing, or their importance in the townscape and group value.

Of particular note, and of suitable quality for consideration of full listing are: (see photographs):

- Cross Keys public house - 1900
- Red Lion public house - 1893
- Bridge Foot House - 1902
- No. 45 Gerard Street – an original shop front and pedestrian passage linking to A Court terrace housing - mid C19



*Cross Keys public house*



*Red Lion public house*



*Bridge Foot House*



*45 Gerard Street*

Other buildings and groups with significant townscape and heritage merit as important elements within this Character Area which could be included in the local list are: (see photographs and Figure 8. Townscape Characteristics):

- The length of buildings on the north side of Gerard Street including the Palatine Buildings 1863, Commercial Buildings 1876, the Golden Lion Inn, the Gerard Arms and Central Buildings 1899 – no's. 24-68 Gerard Street.



- The buildings on the south side of the bend of Gerard Street from no's. 43-63 including traditional brick shops and mock timber frontages.



- The grouping at the northern end of the Conservation Area including the Robin Hood public house, Cross Keys Inn, Bridge Foot House and on the opposite corner of Princess Road, no. 7 Gerard Street.

- The buildings on the off-set junction of Warrington Road/Gerard Street – the Cooperative Hall, the King's Arms Inn, 2 Liverpool Road and 70 - 74 Gerard Street which provides an important end to the view north along Warrington Road.



- Buildings along the northern end of Warrington Road – the Police Station, the Chapel, the two groups of shops and houses (Church View 1894) and the Angel inn on the west side, and the Fleece inn on the east side with its rear stable building facing Butchers Lane.



### 4.2.3 Local & traditional building materials

The basic local and traditional building materials are brick walls and slate roofs, with no buildings, other than the churches, above three stories high. The diversity and interest within the Conservation Area results from the variety of roof lines and the use of brick and terracotta detail and decoration, and a range of cladding materials. The earliest buildings, mid C19, have the simplest decoration. The Palatine Buildings with rendering above the shop fronts and a minimal brick decoration on the arched lintel above the first floor windows, and the undecorated brick shops no's 41 to 51 on the south side of the bend on Gerard Street. A number of the historic shopfronts merit preservation.

As the century progressed and the economy expanded, the owners sought greater detail on new buildings to demonstrate their individuality and importance. The redevelopment of Gerard Street displayed a range of materials and decoration – particularly on public houses. Examples include:

- The Red Lion 1893 and the Golden Lion Hotel 1905, both display black and white mock timber details above a brick ground floor. The Golden Lion also has terracotta facings to the ground floor bay windows and faience to the doorway.
- Central Buildings 1899 and Bridge Foot House 1900, both with ground floor retail use, have extravagant brick and terracotta detailing, especially along the parapet line. Bridge Foot House has a turret and cupola on its corner.
- The Gerard Arms Hotel previously was the grandest building in Ashton. Mainly built in brick it had two ground floor bays with balconies above and one central first floor bay. The mullions and details were in stone topped by a large carved frieze with the name and crest. The contrast with the basic painted building of today with atrocious shop signs is particularly sad (see past and present photographs).
- The group of buildings around the junction of Heath Road and Warrington Road have a sandstone facing which contrasts with the buff coal measures sandstone facings and red triassic/perman sandstone masonry on the adjacent St Thomas's church.



#### 4.2.4 Negative factors

The main negative factor throughout this character area is the inappropriate and poor quality shop fronts often with loud and unattractive signage that detract from the qualities of the heritage buildings along most of Gerard Street.

There are numerous examples of unsuitable materials and designs with unfortunate loss of heritage shopfront detailing and signage. The most dramatic example is the changes to the front of the previous Gerard Arms with the loss of ground floor bays, to accommodate the conversion to the Greensway shopping centre and supermarket. See photographs showing the use of the building as a hotel and the current changes.

The difficult market conditions resulting from the economic downturn and other competing locations has in a number of cases led to poor maintenance, inappropriate repairs and further loss of heritage detail. An example is the fenestration on no.28 Gerard Street, on the left of the three Central Buildings 1899, where the loss of the original glazing pattern detracts from the qualities of the whole historic grouping.

The other significant negative factor is the vehicular impact of through traffic – especially the numerous heavy lorries. Not only does this erode the experience for shoppers who wish to hold a conversation or try to cross the road, but it detracts from the townscape qualities and the opportunity to appreciate the historic buildings. The resulting public realm is of poor quality with a wide road and inappropriate pedestrian surfaces and street furniture for this attractive heritage townscape.



Traffic congestion on Gerard Street and on the pavement .



Poor maintenance on Gerard Street.



Present day Gerard Arms Hotel



Gerard Arms Hotel as it was in 1920's .

## 4.5 Summary of Character

Figure 8. Townscape Characteristics, identifies the key findings from the three Character Areas assessments. This diagram demonstrates the density of buildings of heritage and group interest and the scale of the issues of concern.

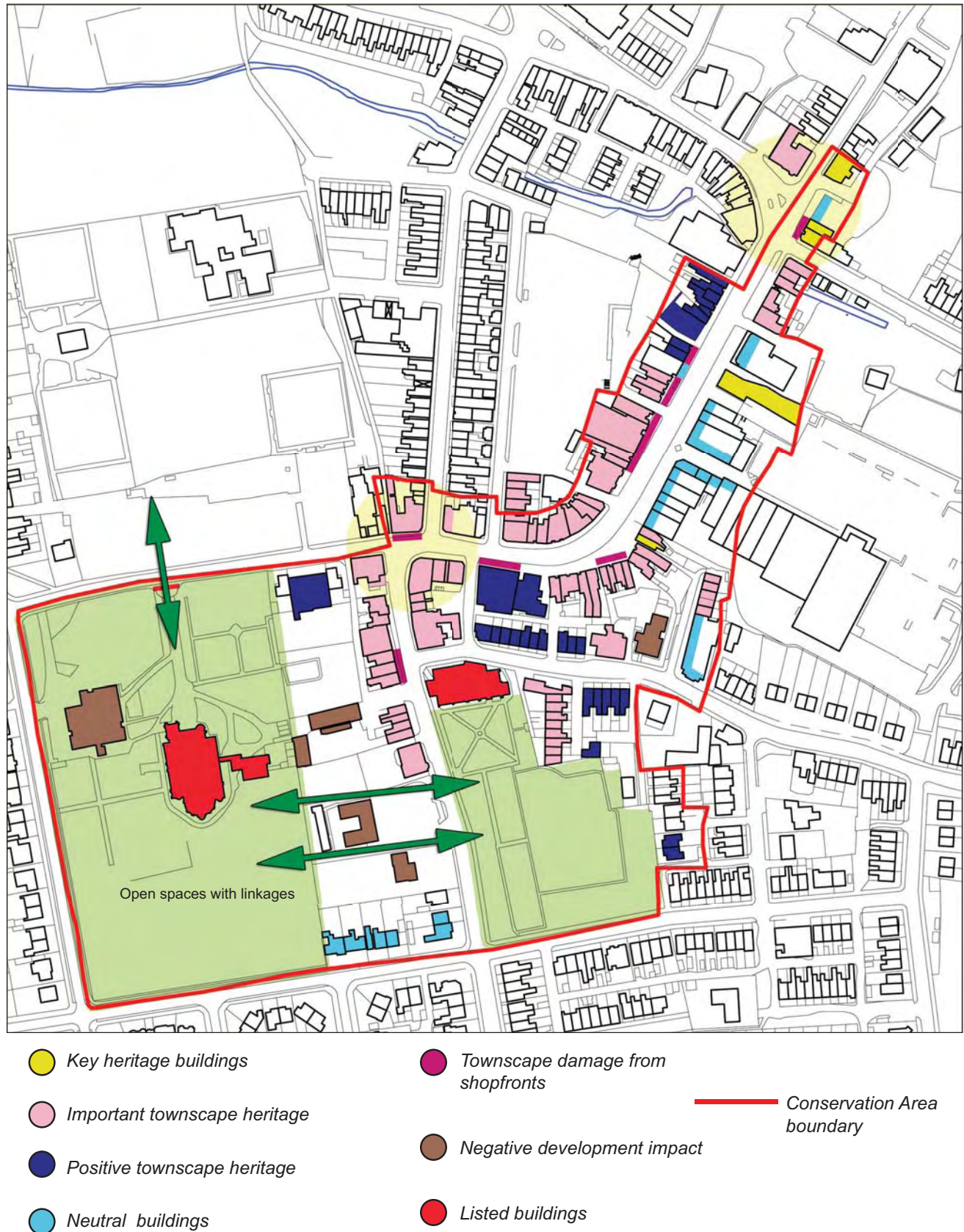


Figure 8: Townscape characteristics

### 4.3 St Thomas's and St Oswald's Character Area

The Character Area centred on the Parish and Roman Catholic churches to the southwest of the town centre introduces a more open and landscaped quality which presents an important balance within the built-up townscape. The area has been the traditional location of the two churches and with their surrounding open spaces, particularly in the case of St Oswalds, have provided 'green lungs' for the urban population. To the north of St Oswalds, and outside the Conservation Area is the recreation area, which is now cut into by the construction of a primary school, but together with this Character Area, this creates a 'green' boundary to the western side of the town centre.



*St Oswald's Roman Catholic Church*



*View north from St Oswald's*

#### 4.3.1 Architectural & historic qualities

The buildings of architectural note in this Character Area are all Grade II listed – St Thomas's church, St Oswalds church and its Presbytery and the Gates to its grounds (see listing information in Appendix). In addition to their qualities as individual buildings and structures, they are particularly important townscape elements with their surrounding churchyards and the adjacent urban area.

St Thomas's church and tower introduces the town centre to those arriving from the south. The churchyard with its low boundary wall provide a large open area which enables good views of the side elevation of the church and across to the mixture of attractive terrace houses that define the eastern border.

The grounds of St Oswald's church and presbytery are even larger. In contrast to St Thomas's, the heavy boundary planting of trees and bushes encloses the churchyard and gardens and creates an area of limited visibility from the surrounding roads. A modern community centre with parking is located within the grounds and though it has few architectural qualities, the enclosing landscape and planting limits its impact.

St Oswald's grounds used to be bounded in the east by a line of terrace properties along the Warrington Road including the Vicarage for St Thomas's. To the south of the Angel public house, these have cleared and the sites redeveloped with poor quality C20 buildings – even the new Vicarage. The single storey community hall with its car park and the new vicarage both have large sites and their trees and other planting provides a 'green' visual link between the two churchyards. The C20 housing around the corner of Warrington and Vicarage Roads has little visual or heritage merit, except for the interest in two asymmetrical sets of semi-detached houses - no.s 20/22 Warrington Road and 6/8 Vicarage Road and no.s 20/22 and 2/4 retaining original leaded coloured glass.



*St. Thomas's graveyard*

#### **4.3.2 Public realm audit**

This Character Area includes the most significant open spaces and landscaped areas within the town centre. The important contribution to the townscape is defined by its open unbuilt character and with the strong emphasis given by the walls, trees, hedges and green spaces.

St Thomas's graveyard is bounded by a low stone wall which enables views from the Warrington Road of the side elevation of the church. Tall poplar trees reinforce these edges and provide structure within the graveyard by lining key pedestrian routes and framing the views of the church.

In contrast, the large and dense lines of tree planting and high hedges which bound the more extensive grounds of St Oswald's creates a sizeable enclosure which is difficult to view from the surrounding roads. Though the church can be seen from its main drive, the summer foliage limits views of the presbytery, the community hall and associated parking, and the more open spaces with the graveyard and sizable areas of unkempt pasture.

The contrast between these two areas provides an important element to the character of the town centre. Equally important are the trees and open spaces in the grounds of the Vicarage and the community hall that link these two landscaped areas. The frontage car park and single storey hall on the Warrington Road provide partial views of St Oswalds, and the adjacent Vicarage with its large plot has retained important large trees which reinforce this link.

#### **4.3.3 Negative factors**

The negative elements which have an impact on the quality of this Character Area are the C20 developments associated with the churches. The community Centre and Vicarage on Warrington Road are poor examples which lack any architectural or heritage merit and detract from the entrance to the town and separate the two open areas with undistinguished buildings.

## 4.4 Heath Road Character Area

The Heath Road Character Area includes the examples of the traditional terrace housing, built during the Victorian period, that are located directly behind the Gerard Street frontage.

The short A Court terrace linked directly by an enclosed pedestrian passage to Gerard Street, the terrace of five properties facing the Commercial Inn and the grouping called Commercial Square that have now been replaced by the day centre, are and were the oldest properties. A cinema was built on A Court in the 1920's, but this was converted for commercial uses in the 1960's, and has now been demolished for a new housing development. The latest terrace was constructed at the beginning of the C20 with views over St Thomas's graveyard.



*Examples of terrace housing on heath road.*

### 4.4.1 Architectural & historic qualities

The simple traditional terraces form the majority of the buildings in this Character Area and none have been listed or merit local listing or can be considered individually as making a special contribution to the area. In total their heritage merit results from the retention of the traditional Victorian townscape, and an interesting range of brick, fenestration and gutter details.

The predominant materials are brick with slate roofs. The earliest terrace in A Court is a very simple construction and design with basic three dimensional brick details, and the later properties display more brick detailing and decoration and in the case of 1-13 heath Street bay windows and rendering. The striking L-shaped terrace around the graveyard, Church Terrace, has rendered first floors with mock timber cross framed black boarding as decoration. A later terrace on Heath Road, facing the rear of St Thomas's, was probably designed with first floor rendered panels as decoration.

The key building within this small grouping is the Commercial Inn. This fine redbrick public house was built as a hotel around 1900 and displays attractive brick detailing and decoration – particularly on the two gable ends facing Heath Road. Of equal importance is the distinctive L-shaped Church Terrace that provides an eastern boundary to the graveyard and war memorial. Further east and just out of the Conservation Area are buildings of historic note - Cave Browne Evangelical Church and the Hingemakers Arms.

#### 4.4.2 Negative factors

Though much of the heritage urban structure and buildings remain, significant damage to the townscape of this Character Area has been caused in recent years by the replacement of traditional materials and details.

In particular, it is the widespread inappropriate alterations and replacements that are changing the heritage character of the area – the replacement of traditional windows and doors; the removal of brick detailing, chimney pots and stacks; the use of pebble dash and other non heritage wall finishes; the removal and replacement of boundary walls and railings; and the introduction of satellite dishes.

Together these changes have a significant impact on the overall heritage townscape and it is important to reverse these trends in order to retain the traditional character of the area.



*A Court terrace with replacement doors and windows detracting from the original brick detailing.*

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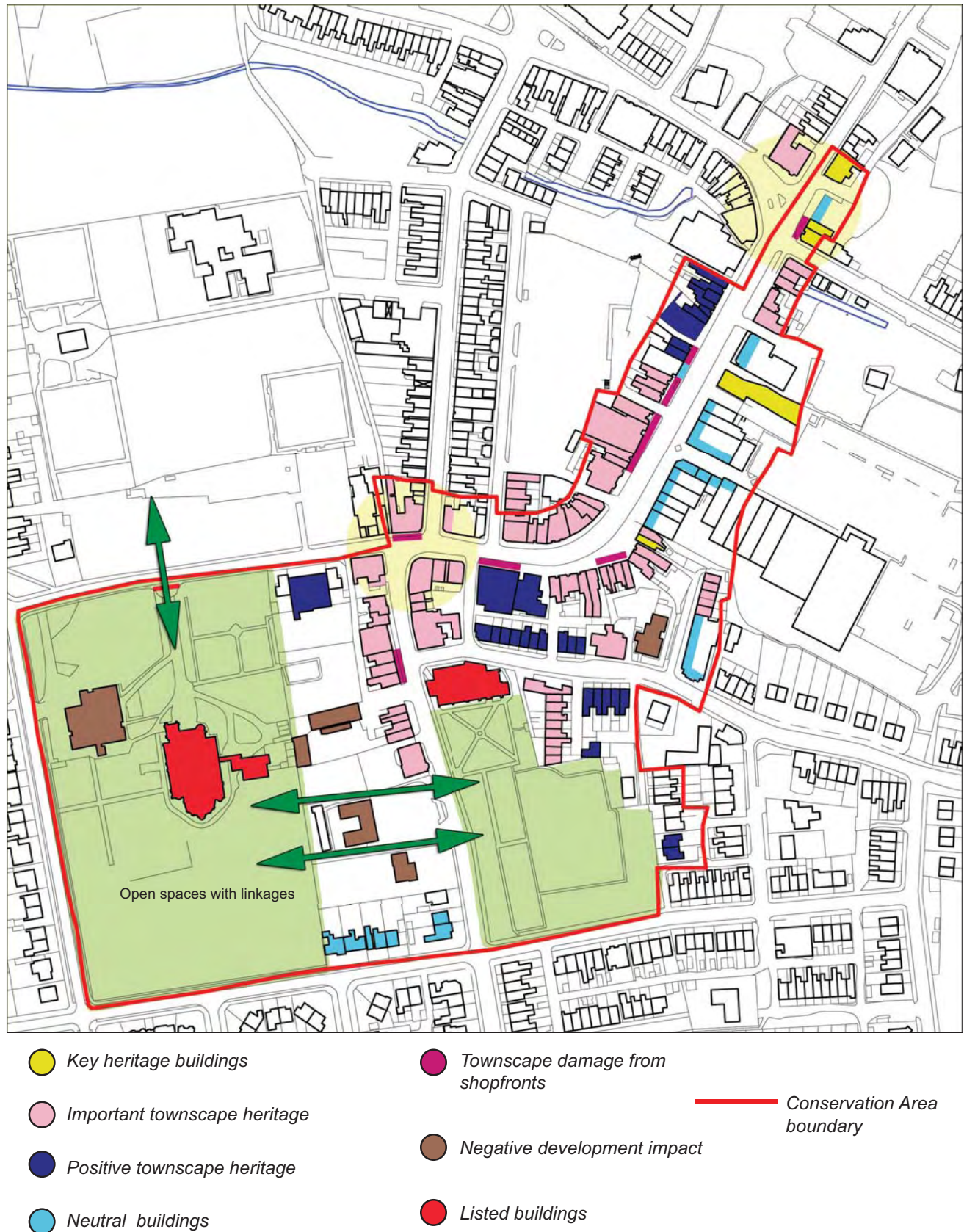


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