



The previous chapter explored in detail how the built environment plays a major role in defining the character of the landscape of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. A wide range of factors concerning form, materials and details have been identified as essential to the local distinctiveness of the region, and information provided on where they are located and how they are used. This chapter picks up a number of these threads, with specific reference to how particular elements of the built environment (and hence local distinctiveness) are at risk from loss (or already lost).



UNFORTUNATE MODERN PASTICHE



FARM CHARACTER LOST TO CONVERSION



INCONGRUOUS MODERN FARM BUILDING



FUN, BUT NOT THE COTSWOLDS AONB

Each element is discussed in terms of a problem (i.e. why it is at risk or already lost) and then a strategy as to how it might be maintained or recovered. The following elements are dealt with:

- Form of settlement
- Details within settlement
- Dry stone walls in the landscape
- Gates and stiles
- Stone slates
- Thatch

The key points that emerge from this chapter are then summarised.



SUBURBAN SPRAWL - LOSS OF EDGE CHARACTER



SUBURBAN SPREAD OF A VILLAGE

5.01 Form of Settlement

The Problem

Pressure for residential development within the Cotswolds AONB is immense, reflecting the desires of the many people who wish to settle in an area of readily-accessible countryside which represents *par excellence* the epitome of rural tranquillity. This desire for new houses has already compromised the internal and external form of many settlements, despite the fact that buildings are constructed in a 'traditional' style utilising many 'Cotswold' features. Erosion of the special character of the edges of settlements is a particular problem, as towns and villages have become 'suburbanised' by development that is entirely inappropriate in its density (generally too low) and formal relationship with the surrounding landscape. Internal form has also been eroded by the proliferation of 'infill', the uniformity of streetscape resulting from the loss of the distinctive gaps between buildings being anathema to the ordered yet varied character of settlements within the AONB.

Strategy

The key to ensuring development maintains the distinctive form of a settlements is the preparation of non-prescriptive Village Design Statements or Conservation Area Appraisals that can then be adopted by the local authorities as Supplementary Planning Guidance, and hence used as a tool to assist development control. Design Statements and Appraisals should include a comprehensive analysis of the edge-character of the settlement along with an 'audit' of all spaces between and around buildings. Edges and spaces can then be graded in terms of their capacity to absorb development, prior to the preparation of site-specific design briefs for all sites where development is deemed appropriate. The possibility of grant-aid to encourage local communities to set-about preparing their own Village Design Statements should be explored (grant-aid could contribute towards the cost of employing the guidance of a professional advisor and the cost of producing documents).



STADDLE STONES (AT RISK FROM THEFT)



OVERGROWN VILLAGE SPRING



REMAINS OF OLD MARKET CROSS VULNERABLE TO TRAFFIC



NEGLECTED WELL IN NEED OF REPAIR

5.02

Details within Settlements

The Problem

Many of the 'details' that provide the final layer of local distinctiveness within a settlement - village crosses, pumps, ponds, staddle stones, signposts, etc. - sit in exposed, public locations and hence are vulnerable to accidental damage, vandalism and (sadly) theft. Also, since they are not generally 'owned' by anyone, there is little incentive for their maintenance, other than perhaps where issues of health and safety are concerned. Yet many of these features are unique and hence crucial to local distinctiveness - and many are irreplaceable; when lost they are gone for good.

Strategy

The recording of the location and condition of all features within and immediately around a settlement should be an integral part of the preparation of a Village Design Statement or similar document. Beyond that, those objects that are not the responsibility of a local authority (e.g. bridges) should be offered for 'adoption' by interested groups or individuals who would be prepared to 'keep and eye on them' and to ensure their continued maintenance.



DRY STONE WALL BEING COLONISED BY A HEDGE



COLLAPSE AND DERILITION OF A DRY STONE WALL



HEDGE REPLACING DRY STONE WALL



POST AND WIRE FENCING - THE ALTERNATIVE?

5.03

Dry Stone Walls in the Landscape

The Problem

Dry stone walls are central to the distinctiveness of the landscape in many parts of the AONB, yet are often seen to be ill-maintained and in a state of advanced dilapidation, a consequence of the relative susceptibility of oolitic limestone to decay and the radical changes in farming that have occurred over the twentieth century (a greatly reduced agricultural workforce, decreased margins and the post-war emphasis on efficient food production mean that there has for a long time been little incentive to maintain field boundaries at anything above the most functional level).

Strategy

The first stage in recovering and maintaining the distinctiveness afforded by dry-stone walls is to extend the concept of Village Design Statements to the preparation of parish 'maps', which must include surveys of the location and state of all dry stone walls. Reference might have to be made to historical documents to identify where dry stone walls have been lost completely, bearing in mind the importance of understanding their relationship to other types of field and park boundary (i.e. the identification of a missing wall must be based on fact not perception). Walls can then be graded in terms of their vulnerability, and hence works of repair or reinstatement prioritised. A campaign to raise the profile of the work being done on dry stone walls by the AONB Partnership and the Dry Stone Walling Association should aim to convince local and central government of the value of encouraging the management of the countryside of the AONB as a revenue-generating resource (i.e. tourism), possibly via the incentive of tax allowances for individual owners.



TRADITIONAL WOODEN GATES



MASS-PRODUCED METAL GATES



MEAL GATE POST AND WIRE FENCING



VULNERABLE TIMBER STILE

5.04 Gates and Stiles

The Problem

Gates within the predominantly agricultural landscape of the AONB play an important part in defining local distinctiveness. Traditionally of wood, their various designs speak of the history and traditions of farming within a particular area, particularly prior to mechanisation. However, the demands of modern methods of husbandry and food production mitigate against the retention of old wooden gates. They are less robust than metal gates, requiring more maintenance and a greater frequency of replacement, and - perhaps more importantly - often too narrow for modern farm vehicles and machinery. Stiles and pedestrian gates are also vulnerable to loss, with the ever-increasing pressure of leisure-access to the countryside meaning heavier use of footpaths and hence a greater need for the maintenance of the 'gaps' in hedges and walls.

Strategy

Village Design Statements and their associated parish maps should include a detailed survey of all gates and stiles within an area, noting their location and condition as a precursor to prioritising their maintenance and repair. The loss of traditional forms of timber gate could be allayed by the development of appropriate local stiles of metal gate, suited to the requirements of the modern farmer. Likewise where pedestrian gates and stiles need modification, such as might be necessary to permit disabled access. Consideration should be given to the cost of maintaining gates and stiles on footpaths, perhaps transferring the burden from landowner to local authority.



STONE SLATES IN NEED OF MAINTENANCE



WELSH SLATE REPLACES STONE SLATE



RED PANTILES AND WELSH SLATE



STONE SLATES REPLACED BY PANTILES

5.05 Stone Slates

The Problem

Stone slates were traditionally produced on a very small scale, the stones being taken from close to the surface leaving shallow pits and depressions known as 'delves'. Essentially, they were a by-product of 'working the land' and hence do not fit easily within the modern view of quarrying as an industry focused on aggregates or building stone. This means a shortage of stone slates for both repairs and new buildings, and consequent lack of persons skilled in their laying. This makes the use of stone slates often impractical or prohibitively expensive.

Strategy

The first factor in safeguarding the future of stone slates is to ensure the availability of adequate local supplies of suitable stone. Minerals planning policies already support small-scale working for the benefit of the built heritage, and the Stone Roofing Association are drafting guidance on planning permission for the extraction of stone for roofing. However, obtaining market economics for stone slates are still unbalanced, with demand outstripping supply, meaning high costs and long delivery times. Incentives to encourage the production of stone slates as part of a programme of farm-diversification and the continued encouragement of their use via the development control process would both help establish a sustainable future market. The public also needs to be informed of the historic link between stone slates and farming; the small-scale nature of delving must be widely understood, dispelling the perception of stone-extraction being the sole preserve of large-scale modern quarries.



THATCH IN NEED OF MAINTENANCE



WELSH SLATE REPLACES THATCH



INAPPROPRIATE REED THATCH



THATCH REPLACED BY PANTILES

5.06 Thatch

The Problem

Survey work carried out as a part of this project has revealed the massive loss of thatch across the whole of the AONB and its replacement with 'alien' materials that can be found throughout the whole of England (refer Chapter 4.05). The reasons for this loss are complex, reflecting to a large degree social and economic changes within the countryside, but also misconceptions over the durability of thatch as a roofing material. Many of the latter - especially those regarding the use of long straw - date from the well-intentioned post-war policies of the Rural Industries Bureau, which saw 'house' thatching re-defined as a building trade and separated from the 'agricultural' thatching of hay ricks, wood piles, root clamps and the like. The emphasis on efficient food production and changes in harvesting techniques have also created a severe shortage of suitable straw - thatching straw is now a specialist crop, rather than a by-product of grain production.

Strategy

While the wholesale re-introduction of long straw thatch across the whole of the AONB is perhaps neither practical or desirable, an increase in its use - and perhaps the reinstatement of roofs now covered in materials such as corrugated iron - should be encouraged. As in the case of stone slates, the answer may in part lie in rural diversification with farmers being encouraged to switch production to varieties of wheat that are primarily intended for building use, with grain as a by-product. Stronger links between thatchers and straw producers also need to be encouraged, with perhaps some blurring of the boundaries between the two (e.g. grants for thatchers to grow their own straw, or for farmers to diversify into thatching).

5.07

Summary

The examples cited in this chapter illustrate the inherent fragility of a number of key elements that contribute to the variety and distinctiveness of the Cotswolds AONB. Some, like dry stone walls or stone slates are obvious, yet often taken for granted. Others, like the form of settlement or the loss of long-straw thatch are more subtle, though the consequences of their loss in terms of the character of the area is just as great.

It is perhaps true to say that the main reasons why these elements are at risk are the time-old issues economics and redundancy of use or function, not simply the demands of the 'modern' world. Towns and villages are under pressure and their form at risk due to the affluence that creates a demand for new homes. Stone slates, though desirable to many, are simply too expensive to produce. Dry stone walls are expensive to maintain. Long straw for thatching is both difficult to obtain and expensive to lay. Details such as mounting blocks and sheep washes no longer serve their original function, and modern farming requires gates that are wider and more durable than in the past. The dictates of practicality force the pace of change, as has been the case throughout history.

Running some what counter to this historical trend is the relatively recent perception that local distinctiveness should be maintained, regardless of the fact that the traditional forces that moderated change no longer apply. It is therefore necessary to find contemporary solutions to modern-day issues, exemplified by the key points that emerge from the problems and strategies discussed in this chapter:

1. The starting point for the maintenance or recovery of local distinctiveness must be the preparation of Village Design Statements, Conservation Area Appraisals, Parish Maps or other documents that record what is there and how it fares at the moment. Local distinctiveness must be understood in terms of fact, not hearsay or idealistic misconception.
2. As was the case in the past, there needs to be a strong link between the built environment and agriculture, especially as regards the sourcing of materials for roofing and walling. The image of the countryside existing only for food production needs to be dispelled, and the sustainable diversification of the rural economy encouraged.
3. Education and information are essential if the general perception of issues such as the working of delves is not to be an obstacle to the maintenance of local distinctiveness.
4. Fiscal measures - in the form of grant-aid or tax incentives - may be necessary to 'kick start' rural diversification, to establish sustainable markets for craft skills and traditions, and to support educational programmes and training initiatives.

These are the core issues that need to be addressed, locally and nationally if the distinctiveness of the Cotswolds AONB is to survive long term.



RE-ROOFING IN STONE SLATES



DRY STONE WALLER AT WORK

