Romsey
Conservation Area
Comments on the proposal to create
a new Conservation Area for Mill Road.

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Parker’s Piece  Petersfield  Romsey  Burnside
Petersfield  The Workhouse  The Isolation Hospital  Romsey

Allan Brigham. January 2011
1. Romsey Conservation Area

Comments from East Mill Road Action Group (EMRAG)

We support the proposal to create a Conservation Area for Romsey, and to include it in a broader Mill Road Conservation Area.

1. **We believe that this will enhance the character of the area:**
   - By ensuring common standards both sides of the bridge – Petersfield already benefits from being a Conservation Area.
   - By bringing Victorian Romsey into the 21st century while still making sure new developments reflect the special character of the area. Not to stop change, but to encourage sympathetic development. This builds on the success of the General Improvement Area (GIA) created by the City Council in 1981. The GIA put a stop to the demolition of Victorian properties, many of which at the time were considered to have only a 15 to 20 year lifespan due to poor maintenance. By working with residents to encourage improvements to houses and to the public realm the GIA gave the buildings and community in Romsey a new lease of life. The area now flourishes but is under enormous pressures which threaten the success of the GIA in giving the Victorian housing stock new life and in creating a sustainable community.
   - To open the door to the possibility of grants to improve the area

2. **Why now?**
   - Existing residential neighbourhoods in Cambridge are facing much housing pressure.
   - New housing is promised in the future, but it is important that the older areas of the city considered special are given protection to remain special places where people want to live.
   - Other areas of Cambridge are very keen to become Conservation Areas. If Romsey fails to qualify it is likely to be seen as a second rate area. The special character of the area may have been destroyed before Romsey is considered again.

3. **What is a Conservation Area?**
   - A Conservation Area is an area considered worthy of preservation or enhancement because of its special architectural or historic interest, "the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance". More than 9,000 have been designated nationally.

4. **Benefits of being a conservation Area:**
   - Designation gives control over the demolition and major alterations to buildings and provides the basis for policies designed to preserve or enhance all the aspects of character or appearance, that define an area’s special interest.

Conservation Area status could have prevented these conversions made to former shop fronts on Mill Road. They have a negative impact on the street and are visually threatening and intimidating to local residents.
2. Why the Buildings and History of Romsey are of Special Interest

Romsey Town has a unique place in the history of Cambridge. The Victorian street pattern created a distinct and close community which was strengthened by employment that was not dependent on the University – especially on the railways, in the building industry and in the cement works. Surrounded by countryside Romsey had the characteristics often associated with mining villages, the nearest there was in Cambridge to an industrial area, yet almost rural. This distinctiveness forged a strong sense of identity amongst local residents.

1. **Mill Road was a track across the fields ending in a footpath to Cherry Hinton until the coming of the railway in 1845.** Traditionally it was known as Hinton Way. By 1830 Baker’s map shows that it was known as Mill Road, after the windmill sited near Covent Garden. The only buildings shown on Mill Road in 1830 are the windmill and Mill Road Nursery (sited between today’s Romsey terrace and Hope Street). Off Mill Road were the houses in Covent Garden, Barnwell New Church (on the site of the cemetery) and Polecat Farm (on the site of Romsey Terrace). These buildings reflect the rural character of the area, although the Church had recently been built to serve the new and growing urban population in the East Road area.

2. **The location of the railway and station led to the urbanisation of Mill Road in the second half of the 19th century** as the railway gradually replaced the river Cam as the transport link for heavy goods. Railway sidings, workshops and an iron foundry all provided employment. Josiah Chater records in his diary that he walked out of town to see the new ‘Eagle Foundry’ (City Council Depot 2010) on 26th April 1847 and found: ‘they are getting quite a little town in that part of the world’. Mill Road had the character of a new town rather than a residential suburb.

3. **The Romsey side of the tracks remained undeveloped and agricultural until the late 19th century.** A correspondent remembered in a letter to the local paper that: ‘The iron footbridge over the railway on Mill Road had wooden steps and gave access to the open fields beyond it. In fact, so countrified was the area that when the Royal Standard was built it was known as ‘Apthorpes Folly’ after William Apthorpe, the brewer who built it’. The Royal Standard was built in the 1880s.

4. **Romsey Town was a new ‘town’ built on the fields between 1880 and 1905.** It is a very distinct area of late Victorian working class housing.

5. **Romsey had a strong sense of community – it was so far from the town centre that it was served by its own shops, clubs and churches.** Most of these are still standing.

6. **The well defined boundaries helped to create a cohesive community.** Mill Road was a cul de sac still ending at the footpath to Cherry Hinton until the building of Perne Road in the 1930s. So were all the side streets running off Mill Road, which ended in fields or at the railway tracks. The only way into Cambridge town centre from Romsey was over the railway bridge. Most journeys were by foot and people knew or saw each other regularly and this contributed to the strong sense of local identity. Victorian and early 20th century Romsey was in fact a large cul de sac stretching out into the fields.
7. At first glance the houses look similar but a host of features distinguish the houses and identify the different builders. These distinctive features characterise the area.

8. **The houses of Victorian Romsey were well built and remain largely intact.** The terraces reflect the social status of the working class residents - front gardens, crenulated bay windows and hallways for the skilled working class elite, many of whom were railway drivers, others with doors opening from the front room onto the pavement.

9. **Romsey was different** – the railway, not the University, dominated employment and the area was known as ‘Railway Town’.

10. ‘**Little Russia**’: Romsey residents resented the privileges of the University. This led to a radical political tradition and the election of the first Labour Councillors. During the General Strike in 1926 Romsey became known by others in Cambridge as ‘Little Russia’ or ‘Red Romsey’ after many local residents joined the strike in protest against proposed cuts to wages. This further strengthened the distinctiveness of the area. The Labour Club was built by voluntary labour at this time, reflecting the spirit of cooperation that characterised the area.

11. **General Improvement Area (GIA): 1981.** By the 1970s many of the Victorian houses in were still without modern facilities (indoor toilets, bathrooms) and deteriorating due to poor maintenance. Younger families now able to afford cars were moving out of Cambridge to new, larger houses, and the community in Romsey was under threat. Demolition of the older properties was seen by many as the way forward but local residents worked with Cambridge City Council to introduce a General Improvement Area. This opened the way to grants to improve both properties and the public realm with the intention of giving the area a new lease of life. It proved successful and injected a new vitality into the area that built on existing strengths.

12. **Romsey today is a different community to the ‘Railway Town’ or ‘Little Russia’ which defined and set apart the area into the 1970s.** But residents born in that era still live here, and it retains a strong if reshaped sense of identity and of being a distinct community. This is shaped by arrival from the city centre along Mill Road over the crest of the railway bridge (a key feature, the nearest there is to a hill), by the Victorian street pattern of terraced houses where people still live close to each other, and by the shared facilities on Mill Road on either side of the bridge. The fields which once defined the boundaries of the area are gone but the green spaces which still surround Romsey continue to make it distinctive (Coldhams Common, Coleridge Recreation Ground, the footpaths to Cherry Hinton along the Tins and Snakey Path, allotments at Vinery Road, Fairfax Road and Burnside) while Romsey Recreation Ground, part of the Conservation Area, is a jewel in the heart of this area of high density housing, always packed with local families after school.
13. The Victorian street pattern and houses continue to give the area its distinct identity:

‘The streets feel secure and the children can visit friends by themselves and have more independence than many children the same age. We can live our daily lives without having to rely on the car. I love living here because it feels like a village – but I still have all the advantages I love about living in a City.’

“We chose to live in Romsey Town because we immediately fell in love with the house and its proximity to the multicultural buzz of Mill Road. I love sitting in my garden watching the world go by, saying hello to my neighbours. We’re connected by our gardens, our wheelie bin routes and the walls of our houses. We borrow chairs, feed each other’s cats and share stories of our lives. There's nothing that I like more than the fact that I'm known in a few shops - they know what paper I read, the content of my favourite sandwich and that I like an extra shot in my coffee. I take great pleasure in chatting to my neighbours - it all adds up to feeling like I have a sense of belonging. It feels like home.”


Baker: 1830

OS: 1904. Showing Romsey Town as an extension of Mill Road across the railway tracks. Surrounded by fields, allotments and cement works the only way into Cambridge was across Mill Road bridge.
3. Local Features

1. Romsey was built between 1880 and 1905. This was a time of high Victorian empire. The era is reflected in street names – Malta Road, Cyprus Road, Suez Road, Madras Road, Hobart Road, Montreal Road, Natal Road – pub names – The Empress – and house names – Pretoria Terrace, a reminder of one of the wars of Empire, the Boer War.

The cast iron street name plates and the stone house names are an important part of the Victorian heritage.

The Empress was built in 1887, and celebrates Queen Victoria’s Golden Jubilee. It stands at one of the many junctions on St Philip’s Road, and like the former shops (as that shown at junction of St Philips Road and Winery Road) it ‘bookends’ the surrounding rows of terraces, creating a feature while not being out of scale.
2. **Mill Road was and remains the spine of Romsey**, with streets running off at right angles. Unlike other main roads in Cambridge **Mill Road brings residents together from either side of the road, rather than acting as a barrier**. Shops developed to serve the local community where most journeys were on foot and a trip to the town centre and back took an hour. These shops still serve the local community, to an extent not seen elsewhere in Cambridge, with many customers still arriving by foot or by bike.

Some shop fronts have been altered but the Victorian building is normally visible above - see Co-op.

Many shops retain original features.

3. **The railway defined Mill Road, and Mill Road bridge is the ‘gateway’ to Romsey Town**. The crest of the bridge hides this extension to Mill Road from those approaching from the city centre, while the view from the top of the bridge presents a surprise panorama of shops, houses and churches. The vista is of a hidden community. The bridge is a key feature.
4. **Romsey has a very cohesive housing pattern which strengthens the feeling that this is it is distinct community** and of a particular time.

This provides a contrast and a distinction with the more diverse street pattern in St Matthews where after the enclosure of the open fields in the early 19th century much land was held by the colleges. When this land was developed for housing later in the century the plot sizes were specifically laid out for larger houses suitable for the new middle class, and were often leasehold (eg. St Barnabas Road, Glisson Road). Some were semi detached. Plot sizes on land held by non-college owners were smaller (eg York Street, Sturton Street), normally terraced, and occupied by the working class.

In Romsey there was no college owned land and the housing echoes, though even more strongly, the pattern of ‘Sturton Town’, the streets between Mill Road, Norfolk Streets and the railway tracks that are in the existing St Matthews Conservation area. There was very little housing aimed at the middle classes. However the houses in Victorian Romsey were of higher quality than older working class properties in the town centre, with toilets, cold water and gardens rather than yards. Because of this the rents were higher and the area attracted the working class elite – those with skilled and steady jobs. Many of these came from the nearby railway companies, who were the largest employer in Victorian and early 20th century Romsey.

OS 1886: The street pattern and first houses in Romsey Town had been built by 1886. Streets run at right angles or parallel to Mill Road. The only exception is the attractive sweeping arc of Argyle Street as it followed the railway line, almost unique in developments anywhere in late Victorian Cambridge. Nearly all these houses are still standing.

![OS 1886 map of Romsey Town](image)
The houses shown on the 1886 map had nearly all been built in the preceding few years – the earliest dated building is 1879.

Most other houses were built in the following decade.

Great Eastern Street remains a cul de sac, as were all the streets in Victorian Romsey apart from Vinery Road which connected with Coldhams Lane. Journeys were on foot and via Mill Road, as many still are, a factor that strengthened community cohesion as residents knew their neighbours.

On the smallest plots front doors opened from the front room onto the pavement. On slightly larger plots (15ft wide on average) houses were set back from the pavement behind front gardens, bay windows announced the status of the residents and hallways led from the front door to the kitchen (eg. Romsey Road, Hemingford Road, Ross Street, St Philips Road).
A few detached or semi-detached properties were set amongst the rows of terraces, but they were of a similar style and period. Side passages gave occupiers their own private access to the rear of these properties, rather than sharing rear access with neighbours as in the terraces.

5. **There were two exceptions to the housing types outlined above.** Both predated the buildings in the surrounding streets. Mill Villa, afterwards The Lodge, and Romsey House were substantial houses with large gardens situated on Mill Road.

The Lodge lay between Cavendish Road, Sedgwick Street and St Philip’s Road. It had been built by 1867, and was demolished in the 1930s to be replaced by the shops of The Broadway on Mill Road, with terraces in the side streets.

Romsey House survives, its grounds diminished by the building of Coleridge Road but remaining an imposing, red brick neo-Tudor building. Built as Romsey Cottage in the 1840s, it was part of a farm of 60 acres before being rebuilt as Romsey House in the late 19th century and becoming the home of a Cambridge solicitor.

Romsey House. The original houses predated the surrounding streets and dated from the 1840s. At one time a farm, it was converted into a neo-Tudor mansion in the late 19th century.
6. The attraction of Victorian Romsey is the apparent unity of the house styles in the area. Yet there is much variety in the detailing of these houses when you look closer and this gives interest and identity as you walk down the street.

Although the size of the houses in the side streets was determined by the landowners when the plots were first laid down, and only varies between plots by approximately a meter, no one builder was responsible for developing the area. Different builders can be identified by the variations they gave to windows, doorways, and the decorative use of red brick on white gault brick frontages. These and other features such as stained glass doors distinguish each group of buildings.

This was the last major phase of building in Cambridge to make use of white brick for the front of buildings. There was little use of red brick in the houses built in the early 1880s but by the end of the decade red brick is used to create patterns and variety on the white brick. By the outbreak of World War One red brick had become fashionable for the entire frontage of developments elsewhere in Cambridge.
Bay windows gave houses status. Crenulations turned a terraced house into a castle.

Red brick was also used to create different effects under the eaves.
7. Some Victorian houses were also used as work premises. Most outbuildings have subsequently been converted into dwellings, but some can still be identified.

The buildings at the rear of this house in Hemingford Road were once used as a laundry.

Was this house in Marmora Road built to display the skills of a local stonemason?
8. The public buildings of Romsey echo the social status of the area. They are not grand or intimidating but on a scale that is in keeping with the area while providing distinctive landmarks. The Baptist church and St Philip’s Church provide distinctive features; the former Methodist Church (now Romsey Mill) though modest, reflects the strength of nonconformity in the area, is a feature at an important junction, and has been adapted very successfully for 21st century purposes; while the Salisbury Club and The Labour Club break up the line of shops and create interest and provoke curiosity.

St Philip’s Church, Mill Road. Former Methodist Church, Mill Road (now Romsey Mill)

Social Clubs: Salisbury Conservative Club (1891)

Romsey Labour Club (1928)
9. The most prominent public building is the former Isolation Hospital for Infectious Diseases (now Brookfields Hospital). The hospital was built on the edge of the countryside at the same time that the rest of Romsey was being developed. It remains eye-catching and provides a much needed sense of space at this end of Mill Road. The site should be used to repeat in Romsey the very successful redevelopment of the former Workhouse in Petersfield (now Ditchburn Place), with a similar combination of open space fronting Mill Road and retention of the best older buildings.
10. Public Space: Romsey Recreation Ground

The park provides a much needed open space in this area of high housing density. It breaks up the rows of terraces in the neighbouring streets, acts as a through route for many residents and provides welcome vistas. There is nothing comparable in the St Matthews Conservation Area.
4. A Conservation Area for all of Mill Road

We support a single Conservation Area for Mill Road to include Romsey.

1. Romsey remains a strong and distinct neighbourhood with many active community groups. It is a distinct but integral part of Mill Road.

2. The streets of Petersfield have been a Conservation Area for many years (including Gwydir St, Sturton St, York St). Romsey is as distinctive as these streets and has a unique history in the story of Cambridge.

3. Mill Road bridge links the communities that live off Mill Road. One Conservation Area for the whole of Victorian Mill Road would unite the area and reflect the strength of today’s community.

4. The success of Mill Road Winterfair and the creation of Parkside Federation illustrate that Mill Road is one, very active, community.

East Mill Road Action Group was formed by local residents to improve the built environment and open spaces in Romsey.

- We have coordinated responses to the development of the former Robert Sayle Warehouse and Co-op garage on Mill Road, working with the City Council to produce a Development Brief which has raised standards for new building and open space on the site.

- We have worked with Romsey Action to consult with residents on possible improvements to Romsey Recreation Ground. EMRAG’s report was welcomed by the City Council consultant who drew up proposals for the recent improvements to the park.

- We have coordinated annual ‘Visions of Romsey’ events to celebrate the area. Each of these have been attended by 150 to 200 residents and have proved very popular.

Visions of Romsey 2009:

‘Thank you so much all of you - it was a hugely enjoyable, inspiring and informative evening, and I came away proud to be a Romsey resident which I have only been since last August (having spent the previous 10 years in Gwydir Street on the other side of the bridge!), and teach at EF (which is in the beautiful Romsey House which featured in one of the slides) - and just love the vibrancy, sense of community (even in spite of the many rental properties) and historical importance of it.

I thought the evening was very well planned, and liked the mix of topics/speakers, the food + exhibits (although I had to leave early - so didn’t get to partake). Without coming to the meeting, I don’t think I would have been so aware of the significance of applying for conservation status, or the visionary/cohesive effect of Parkside Federation, or the environmental issues surrounding Burnside (I’m keeping an eye open for water voles).’

Sue P. Marmora Road.
Appendix 1: Burnside

The case for including Burnside in the Romsey/Mill Road Conservation Area.

Burnside is an integral part of Victorian Romsey.

- Historically Hinton Way ended in the footpath to Cherry Hinton. Hinton Way later became Mill Road and when this original track across the fields was developed for housing in the late 19th century it was extended along the line of the footpath until it met the railway. The houses of Romsey extended to the railway, and the tracks determined the boundary of Romsey here as at Malta Road, Suez Road etc.

- Beyond the railway the footpath and stream continued to Cherry Hinton. The final sections of the new Mill Road become known as Brookfields and Burnside, named after Cherry Hinton Brook which follows the footpath known as Snakey Path from Cherry Hinton to Burnside before flowing towards Coldhams Common and the Cam.

- Until Perne Road was built in the 1930s Mill Road continued to terminate at Burnside with the footpath to Cherry Hinton.

- The building of Perne Road and the increase in the volume of traffic along it have amputated Burnside from Romsey but including it in the Conservation area would help to reintegrate it with Mill Road. This would encourage pedestrians and cyclists from Mill Road to use the footpaths as routes to Cherry Hinton, and it would open up again for Romsey residents 'their' green space, on their doorstep but unknown to many. Not only is Snakey path a green lung but it ends at Cherry Hinton Hall, an important recreational space.

- The character of Mill Road has always been defined by the green approach to this area of very dense housing from the city centre (Parker’s Piece, Petersfield, Donkey Common). Just as important historically was the termination of Mill Road in open countryside. Burnside with its 19th century houses overlooking stream, allotments, footpath and adjoining lakes is a reminder that this countryside is still present if hidden to many.

The Conservation Area should include the houses of Burnside and adjoining stream.