



Castle Acre

Conservation Area

Character Statement



CASTLE ACRE, 4 miles N. of Swaffham, and 14 miles E. by S. of Lynn, is a considerable village, of great antiquity, having some traces of a Roman station, and the remains of an immense Castle and extensive Priory.

WILLIAM WHITE 1845

Region

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Introduction

.0.1 A Conservation Area - “An area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance”.

.0.2 The conservation of the historic environment is part of our quality of life, helping to foster economic prosperity and providing an attractive environment in which to live or work. The Borough Council is committed to the protection and enhancement of West Norfolk’s historic built environment and significant parts of it are designated as conservation areas.

.0.3 Conservation areas were introduced by the 1967 Civic Amenities Act. Local Authorities were required to identify areas of special architectural or historic interest, whose character or appearance it is desirable to preserve or enhance, and to designate them as conservation areas. This duty is now part of the 1990 Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act which also requires the review of existing conservation areas and, where appropriate, the designation of new ones. The quality and interest of a conservation area depends upon a combination of factors including the relationship and architectural quality of buildings, materials, spaces, trees and other landscape features, together with views into and out of the area.

.0.4 The Castle Acre Conservation Area was first designated in 1971, the first to be designated in Norfolk, and extended to include the area of St James’ Green in 1990. This document highlights the special qualities that underpin the character of the conservation area, justifying its designation. It also seeks to increase awareness of those qualities so that

where changes to the environment occur, they do so in a sympathetic way without harm to the essential character of the area. This type of assessment has been encouraged by Government Advice (PPG15) and it has been adopted as supplementary planning guidance.

.0.5 This character statement does not address enhancement proposals. Community led enhancement schemes will be considered as part of a separate process.

Origins and Historical Development

.0.1 Castle Acre was a Roman settlement situated on the Peddars Way Roman Road at the point where it crosses the River Nar. The Romans withdrew in the early part of the 5th Century but finds from an early pagan burial ground, and a later cremation cemetery, suggest that the Anglo Saxons took over the settlement. This part of Norfolk was called The Field ‘Acre’; the area with the castle therefore became Castle Acre.

.0.2 Unusually for Norfolk, Castle Acre is built on the side of a valley and not only has a large Norman Castle and earthworks, including a fine bailey gate, but also the ruins of a Cluniac priory sometimes described as the finest in the south of England.

.0.3 Following the Norman Conquest, ‘Acra’ was part of the huge estate given to William de Warenne, one of the King’s lieutenants at Hastings and also his son in law. De Warenne’s principal home was in Lewes in Sussex, but in 1070 he began building a country house (hunting lodge) on the site of the present castle. The rectangular stone house had a basement with living accommodation on the first floor and was

protected by bank with a timber palisade. Twenty years later in 1090 his son, the second Earl of Surrey, founded a priory to the south west, for Cluniac monks from Lewes.



.0.4 In the early part of the 12th Century, feuding between the Barons prompted the Third Earl of Surrey to consider the need for greater security and by 1140 the house had been converted into one of the grandest motte and bailey castles in England, controlling both the Peddars Way and the then navigable River Nar. At the same time, a planned Norman town, approximately 200 yards square was laid out on a grid between the Castle and the Priory. The town was defined by a ditch and wall which followed the present line of Pyes Lane, through Bailey Gate, along the southern edge of Stocks Green before turning south, just east of the church, and following Chimney Street back to the Castle.

.0.5 The early town still forms part of the existing village. Bailey Street was the main route through the town and the gate with its circular towers still stands at the northern end of the street. The southern gate was demolished during the last century. Pales Green was an open area within the planned town. It may have been the site of the

original market but this was soon relocated to Stocks Green, then a broad street outside the town, but now the focus of the village. By 1235 the Town had become known as Castelacr, Castel being the Old French word for castle and added to the original Acra.



.0.6 The De Warenne line ended in 1347 and the estate passed to the Fitz Alans of Arundel Castle. Castle Acre Castle fell out of use and stone was used to expand the Priory. The settlement prospered as it was on the main route to the medieval shrine at Walsingham and was the stopping off point for many pilgrims as well as other travellers.

.0.7 In the early 1400s, the Parish church of St James the Great was built outside the town walls, probably on the site of an earlier Saxon Church. Stocks Green also dates mainly from the 15th Century.

.0.8 In 1537, the Prior, Thomas Malling, surrendered the Priory and lands to Henry VIII. It then passed to the Gresham and Cecil families. With the Dissolution of the Monasteries the village declined some what and much of the land, including the ruined castle and priory was acquired by the Cokes of Holkham although there was no resident landlord or Lord of the Manor.

.0.9 Castle Acre retained its markets during the 1500s although many in Norfolk became obsolete, and records from 1595 shows a fair held on 25 July, the day of St James, the patron saint of the Parish Church.

.0.10 By the 1800s the village had expanded again. 'Holkham Estate windows' can still be seen, and many buildings in the village are recorded as showing signs of stone plundered from the Priory or Castle. Bryants Map of 1826 shows a settlement including the area of the original Norman Town, Priory and Castle and around the area called St James's Green.



.0.11 The school was built in 1839 and the White's Directory of 1845 records two fairs, mainly for pleasure, held on May 1st and August 5th. Castle Acre was an "open" village, without manorial control of property, where the poor and homeless could move in, and more houses could be built to accommodate them. Small terraces constructed mainly of brick with imported slate roofs and small or non-existent garden were often financed by tradesmen, craftsmen or small capitalists and, despite their cheapness, many still survive bearing the name or initials of their owner or builder.

.0.12 In the 1850s, Castle Acre had six recorded places of worship including St James's Church and Baptist, Primitive Methodist and Wesleyan Chapels, and a number of industries including a foundry, a tanner, a brick kiln, two corn mills, two smithies, a wheelwright, numerous dressmakers and tailors, and a saddlers. There was also a theatre in Drury Lane which was visited by groups of touring players and the village was a local centre for shopping.

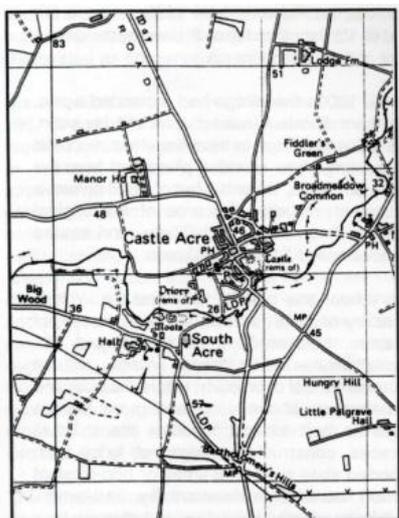


.0.13 Castle Acre has grown again in the late 20th Century. Many of the small terraces and cottages have become desirable places to live, and there has been considerable new development linking the different areas of the village. The ruined Castle and Priory are popular tourist attractions.



Setting and Location

.01 Castle Acre is situated along the upper northern slope of the Nar valley, 22.5 kilometres (14 miles) east of King's Lynn, and 6 kilometres (4 miles) north of Swaffham. The village is the only sizeable settlement on the line of the Peddars Way, the ancient track way which crosses the county from Knettishall Heath on the Suffolk border to Holme-next-the-Sea on the north Norfolk coast.



.02 Castle Acre looks out over an agricultural setting of large arable fields on the distant higher ground and smaller scale pastures in its immediate vicinity. It dominates the skyline when viewed from the valley bottom through which flows the clear chalk watercourse of the River Nar. One of the best views of Castle Acre can be gained from the A1065 Swaffham to Fakenham road, to the east of the village where the Castle, Priory, church and village rooftops are clearly seen nestled amongst the mature trees on the valley side.

Character Overview

.01 Castle Acre is a village of contrast with old cottages, open village greens, mature trees, enclosed spaces, narrow streets and sunken lanes. Its antiquity is very evident in the way that the village fabric is imposed onto and around the 12th Century castle precinct, with the remains of the Cluniac Benedictine Priory standing a short distance away, beside the river on the side of the valley. These two great scheduled ancient monuments, cared for by English Heritage, contribute significantly to Castle Acre's outstanding conservation area.

.02 The core of the village is contained within or beside the defensive earthworks. The Bailey Gate and some of the walls remain. Sited on the steep valley side, the abrupt changes in level of Castle Acre add considerable interest and provide dramatic outward views between the buildings to the countryside beyond. The character of the old village derives from its compact and historic form and from the high proportion of old buildings which exhibit continuity in scale, materials and detailing.

.03 The centre of village life is found at Stocks Green and High Street. There are two pubs and a variety of shops including two tea rooms, a delicatessen shop and a gift shop. The primary school, nearby, adds to the vitality of the scene. The village is a popular location for visitors and walkers and is especially busy at weekends.



.04 The lanes which lead from the centre are also important. The high hedges and sunken roadways contain views, so that occasional glimpses of the surrounding countryside are all the more sharp and dramatic. Considerable new development has tended to join up the different parts of the village.



.05 In general, buildings are two storey with a fairly solid appearance as window and door openings take up a relatively small proportion of the wall area. Windows tend to be vertically orientated and often multi-paned. Chimneys are a prominent feature of the village roofscape.

Spaces and Buildings

.01 Castle Acre Conservation Area has a series of distinct areas: the Castle, the old planned town of Bailey Street and Pales Green; Stocks Green; St James's Church and the pastures to the south of the village incorporating the site of the Priory; and St James Green/North Street to the northeast. These areas are connected by a number of interesting lanes.

.02 The site of the **Castle** is elevated and has commanding views over the Nar valley. Its setting is one of undulating grass banks interspersed with the remnants of chalk and flint walls. The shell keep castle is a masonry enclosure, extending around the top of an earlier motte which has steep banks. From the castle grounds, St James's Church tower can be seen together with the rooftops of properties along Bailey Street, amongst tree canopies. Trees provide a backdrop for the ruins and the area around the village hall provides a viewpoint for the castle walls, the River Nar and its surrounding countryside.



.03 West of the castle and within the old planned town is **Bailey Street**. A steep street, of high quality townscape, which gently winds down from the Bailey Gate in the north to the flatter valley pastures in the south. The steepness of the street reveals

views of the properties fronting Bailey Street and across to the fields, trees and hedgerows of the opposite valley side. The mixture of materials and architectural detailing adds to the interest of the terraced cottages and other buildings, including the Methodist Chapel and former Red Lion public house.



.04 Pales Green loops off Bailey Street to the west and is a mix of historic cottages and modern houses, dominated by the 16th Century Tudor Lodgings. Continuity is provided through the consistency of materials.

.05 Through the Bailey Gate to the north of Bailey Street, **Stocks Green** opens out as an impressive centrepiece to the village. The central green is dominated by a row of mature trees.



.06 The village sign, depicting the Priory, is located here surrounded by a seat, which provides a useful resting place for walkers. Apart from a glimpse of the church tower, the space is enclosed by almost continuous, two storey historic buildings of red brick and flint which front onto the green. Their small paned windows, gabled roofs with chimneys, and attractive traditional shop windows add to the quality of the townscape. A paddock and group of barns mark a change to the more open countryside to the west.



.07 St James's Church stands within its well-kept, walled churchyard, the village war memorial is also found here. Priory Road continues past the church, its rural character emphasised by the absence of footpaths, raised verge, hedges and trees. A view opens out over the grounds of the Priory to the opposite valley side. The remains of the Cluniac **Priory** rest within an extensive pasture setting in the bottom of the Nar river valley. Access to the site is controlled by English Heritage and there is a visitors' centre. A glimpse of St James's Church tower through trees provides a visual link with the rest of the village.



.08 South Acre Road runs between the St James's Church and the Priory and is a sunken, rural, road characterised by grass banks, hedges and trees with branches which arch over confining views. This leads downhill towards the river where a footbridge across a ford provides a popular spot for visitors and a good view of the Priory ruins on the hillside. **Chimney Street** affords wide views across pasture to the river. A footpath beside the small terrace of Priory Cottages leads to the church, but the trees of the Dyke Hills earthworks restrict other links to the village.



.09 St James's Green occupies an elevated position in the northern part of the village. The main area, just off the Massingham Road (part of the Peddars Way), is a huge green surrounded by a mix

of low density traditional cottages and modern houses. A crossroads dissects the green and the associated road signage in the middle is an unfortunate detractor, as is the abundance of overhead wires. The Stone Barn marks the entry to Castle Acre from the north and its flint boundary wall with arched gateway provides enclosure. Flint walls are a feature of this green, and those which front the prominent Western House are particularly significant. A mature copper Beech tree to the rear of this property adds to the visual amenity of the area and provides a striking contrast of colour especially when seen against the greys of the flint walls. A railway signal is an unusual feature and geese can sometimes be found wandering on the green. Glimpses to St James's Church tower can be gained across the recreation ground through a group of trees. Wide verges continue the landscaped feel as the road sweeps round and the space narrows slightly before opening out to another, smaller green interspersed with trees. This second, triangular, green is well contained by a uniform terrace of small red brick cottages and their low front boundary walls. A mature Horse Chestnut tree marks the junction of North Street with Orchard Lane and is a focal point when viewed northwards from North Street.



.0.10 North Street narrows as it winds downhill, past a mixture of modern and old properties, some of which front directly onto the road. The absence of footpaths emphasises the narrowness of the street whilst garden planting softens the eastern edge. East Green, at the end of North Street, is a small triangular space on a gentle slope and dominated by mature trees. From here, views out to the surrounding countryside can be gained and a public footpath leads out to the Nar Valley Way.

.0.11 The gradient of **Newton Road** rises slightly westwards. Although consistently two storey, the properties in this immediate area vary in materials and distance set back from the road. As a consequence, some properties have deep front gardens whilst others have made best use of the shallow verges at the roadside for domestic planting which complements the cottage feel of this townscape. A 'VR' post box is set in the side of the Old Post House and a decorative bracket on the property opposite, presumably once supported a hanging sign. Newton Road becomes **Town Lane** and represents a change in the character of the street scene. Two terraces of colour washed properties, facing each other, enclose the street and form a much harder line than the landscaped character of Newton Road. Beyond the former garage site (now residential), the conservation area boundary follows the northern edge of Town Lane itself and a hedge maintains the enclosure.

.0.12 Pye's Lane is narrow and slopes downhill southwards at a lower level than the modern properties to the west. The change in level is emphasised by the height of hedges on banks, and by the sunken nature of gardens to the east. An architecturally distinct group of grey timber clad properties built in the 'Swedish style'

occur at the junction with De Warrenne Place. Pye's Lane bends sharply to the west, its character changing completely to a dark leafy lane with mature trees which arch over, enclosing the space and confining views.



.0.13 Back Lane provides the northern boundary of the conservation area and is characterised by modern development and back land areas of paddock and rear gardens of the buildings fronting Stocks Green. **Drury Lane** is narrow with no footpaths and extends southwards from Back Lane. It is characterised by buildings crowding in on themselves and a telescopic view is gained through to the Bailey Gate and beyond.

Listed Buildings

.0.1 There are over 20 listed buildings in the conservation area. The Statutory List was revised in 1987 but there have been later additions.

.0.2 Listed Grade I

- **Church of St. James** Largely 14th & 15th Century, some earlier details. Restored by architect Ewan Christian. Rubble flint with squared knapped flint

and stone dressings. Perpendicular 4 stage west tower.

- **Castle Acre Priory**, Priory Road. Remains of Cluniac Benedictine Priory of St. Mary & SS Peter & Paul. 12th Century church and monastery, 15th & 16th Century alterations. Church flint with stone facings, flint monastery. Founded in 1090 by William de Warenne Second Earl of Surrey, dissolved 1537. Scheduled Ancient Monument No. SM21416.



- **Remains of Gatehouse to Priory**, Priory Road. C150, knapped, squared flint, clunch blocks, brick dressings. Scheduled Ancient Monument No. SM21416
- **Castle Acre Castle**, Pye's Lane. Castle containing earlier unfortified 11th Century country house converted into keep mid 12th Century. Outer ward approx. 1200 and 13th Century. Flint and clunch rubble, some stone dressing. Built by first de Warenne Earls of Surrey, father of founder of Priory. Abandoned 14th Century. Post conquest country house excavated 1972-77. Some remains probably contemporary with Bailey Gate. Formerly thought to be a Motte and Bailey Castle of one 11th Century build.

Scheduled Ancient Monument No. SM21441.



- **Bailey Gate**. Bailey Street. Rubble flint with stone dressings. Rectangular north gate of 13th Century west extension of fortifications to Castle Acre Castle. Prominent land mark in centre of village. Scheduled Ancient Monument No. SM21441.

.03 Listed Grade II*

- **Tudor House & Tudor Lodgings**. Pale's Green. Listed grade 2* Former pair of lodgings now single dwelling. Several notable interior features

.04 Listed Grade II

- **Dovecote in grounds of Tudor House**, Pales Green. 16th Century but major repair in 1880 noted on inscribed plaque to the rear. Interior has nesting boxes formerly of brick and clunch.
- **Barn to S.E. of Tudor House**, Pales Green. Barn 16th Century and later, probably former house, included for group value.
- **63/64 Bailey Street**. Late medieval with 18th and 19th Century additions. Interior

features entire length of gable end and eastern return visible.

- **Church Cottage, Church Lane.** Principally 19th Century, east gable end possible remains of 15th Century chapel on this site indicated by 18th Century maps references to Almoner's Garden or Chapel Close. Holkham Estate cast-iron casement window 19th Century. Listed as Abbey Cottage.



- **12 & 14 High Street.** 18th Century, flint and red brick. 19th Century Holkham Estate cast-iron window. Other details identify as former Holkham Estate cottages.
- **The Old Foundry, Newton Road.** 18th Century facade with gables c1600. Probably of 2 or more builds. Altered in the C20, flint, brick and render with stone quoins on the east gable.
- **The Stone Barn, Peddars Way.** 18th Century, coursed brick and clunch rubble



- **15 & 16 St James's Green.** Pair of cottages with 19th Century Holkham Estate cast-iron casement windows. These and other details identify as former Holkham Estate cottages.
- **Western House, St. James Green.** Late 17th Century. Interior features noted in listing especially panel painted with foliage, birds and sunbursts in various colours. Added to list in 1996
- **The Ostrich P.H. with cottage attached to east, Stocks Green.** 18th and 19th Century earlier core. 19th Century Holkham Estate cast-iron casement windows

- **Barnfields (listed as Fish & Chip Shop), Stocks Green** . Row of cottages now forming shop and one residential unit.



- **Albert Victor P.H., Stocks Green**. 18th Century.
- **K6 telephone kiosk, Stocks Green**. Designed in 1935 by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott.
- **Bailey Gate Cottages & Hill Cottage, 1-3 Stocks Green**. Included for group value with Bailey Gate attached at east.
- **Abbot House, Stocks Green**. Pair of cottages now in one occupation included for group value with Willow Cottage attached to west.
- **Willow Cottage, Stocks Green**. Date plaque 1735. Amended 1993 to exclude previous reference to Church Cottage

Important Unlisted Buildings

.0.1 The character of Castle Acre conservation area benefits from a wealth of listed buildings and the prominence of nationally renowned scheduled ancient monuments. However a good deal of the townscape character rests on the vernacular styles of its unlisted historic buildings. 173 of these historic buildings have been identified representing 63 per cent of the total number of buildings in the conservation area.

.0.2 These important unlisted buildings have been identified because of their prominent position, use of traditional materials, their character is substantially intact, and because they often relate to other historic buildings close by.



Post War Development

.0.1 Most post-war development in Castle Acre conservation area comprises infill housing and small terraces as in North Street and St James Green. Priory Court represents a larger housing complex in traditional materials which is prominently located at the junction of Massingham Road and Back Lane. There has been a considerable amount of modern housing development in Pales Green, Back Lane and Town Lane. The architectural styles and materials used generally reflect those of the traditional fabric of the village.

Traditional Materials

.0.1 The character of Castle Acre Conservation Area owes a great deal to the use of local traditional materials in the construction of its historic buildings.

.0.2 These materials include :

- Chalk
- Random and coursed field flint nodules
- Knapped flint
- Salvaged dressed limestone from adjacent ruins
- Norfolk red brick
- Clay pantiles – both natural red, and black glazed
- Welsh slate
- Colourwashed brick, flint and render

.0.3 Local chalk pits traditionally provided building materials. More recently there has been a considerable amount of rendering and colour washing of external surfaces which has diluted the textures of the local scene but also can be seen as adding variety to the overall character.



Archaeological Interest

.0.1 The village is dominated by, and nationally recognised for, its castle and priory ruins. In particular the castle ruins are interwoven into the fabric of the conservation area. Apart from these two extensive Scheduled Ancient Monuments there are many other sites within the conservation area where archaeological finds have been recorded as part of the Norfolk Sites and Monuments Record.



Detractors

.0.1 The special quality of conservation areas can easily be eroded by seemingly minor alterations such as unsuitable replacement windows and doors, inappropriate materials or unsympathetic paintwork, removal of walls, railings, trees and hedges.

.0.2 The most serious detractor is the overhead wires, poles and other equipment. Another detractor includes car parking at Stocks Green which can be disruptive and visually intrusive, particularly on weekends.

Conservation Objectives

Statement 1

The overall conservation objective is to protect and reinforce the established special character of Conservation Areas and their setting.

This will be achieved by:

- Encouraging the retention and maintenance of buildings which contribute to the overall character of each conservation area
- Ensuring that new development is sympathetic to the special qualities and character of each conservation area
- Protecting the setting of the conservation area from development which adversely affects views into or out of the area
- The retention, maintenance and locally appropriate new planting of trees
- Maintaining and enhancing local features and details which contribute towards an area's local distinctiveness
- Working with the community to prepare schemes of enhancement
- Encouraging the removal of detractors to the special character of each conservation area

Contacts and advice

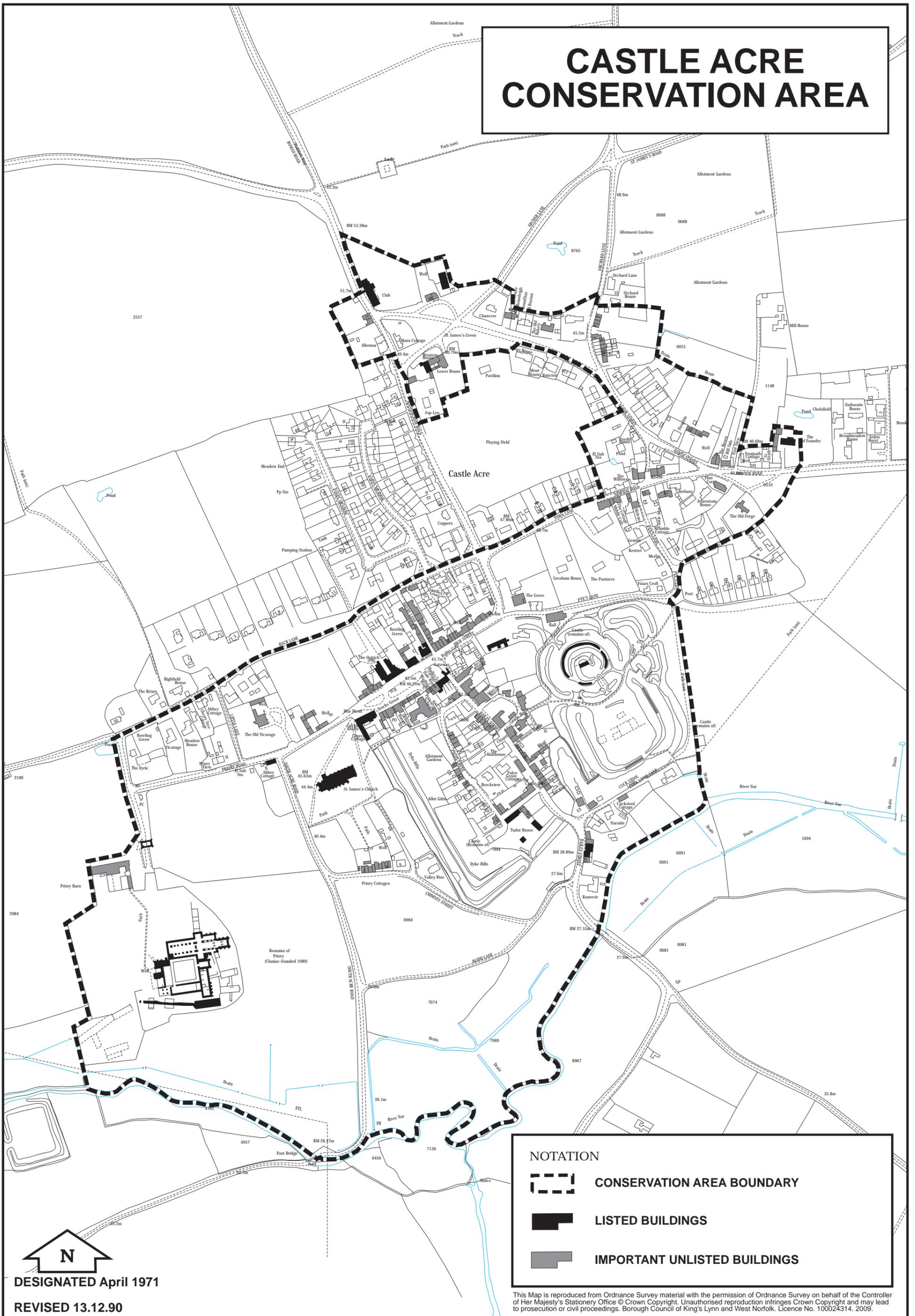
Within conservation areas, a number of special controls apply and it is advisable that anyone proposing to carry out new development, alteration, extensions, installations or demolition should seek advice from Development Services at an early stage. Special controls also apply to the trees and some may be subject to Tree Preservation Orders. Anyone wishing to carry out work to trees within a Conservation Area should therefore seek advice from Development Services.

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CASTLE ACRE CONSERVATION AREA



NOTATION

-  CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY
-  LISTED BUILDINGS
-  IMPORTANT UNLISTED BUILDINGS



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