



CONSERVATION AREA HISTORIES:

# ASTON ON TRENT

DISTRICT OF SOUTH DERBYSHIRE



*The village centre, probably in the 1930s. Courtesy of Mr. F.W. Hinds.*

Aston, with its twin settlement of Weston, is seated low in the Trent valley, the village itself lying along the 125 feet contour. North-east of the village was the former Shardlow Moor (1), described by the Derbyshire historian Woolley in 1712 as “a large wet moor” between Aston, Elvaston and Shardlow, “which belongs to the several towns in the neighbourhood”. The London Road from Derby (i.e. the present A6) crossed the middle of it. It should be noted that in this area a “moor” was a low-lying, wet area, in contrast to the high, barren areas which we think of as moors today. The remains of the moor were enclosed in 1757, and the four open fields of Aston on Trent were enclosed in 1761-3. The parish of Aston formerly included Shardlow and Great Wilne, but they became a parish in themselves in 1838, when a new church was built at Shardlow.

Visually the terrain is uninteresting, but the fertile and productive soil guaranteed Aston’s appeal to early settlers. Philip Kinder, the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century Derbyshire historian, called the Aston area “ye granary of Darbyshire”. Along the south-east side of Shardlow Road lie the remains of an Iron Age settlement (2) and a Neolithic “cursus” (3, 3, 3) with associated barrows (Scheduled Ancient Monument no. 185). The scheduled area extends southwards as far as Weston Grange. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that the present nucleated settlement at Aston predates the Anglo Saxon origins hinted at by the place name.

The village retained its agricultural character until the 1960s and ‘70s, when the old village centre became hemmed in by developments of a suburban character, making the village a satellite “dormitory” of Derby. Other industries besides agriculture were incidental, except for the brickyard and plaster pits to the north west of the village (4), which remained in operation until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. They are well outside the limits of the conservation area, and therefore beyond the scope of this study.

In 1765, Mr Wyman of Aston on Trent, a land surveyor, perfected his own version of the stocking frame, but framework knitting was never prominent in the village. Pilkington, in 1789, wrote that “The only appearance of manufacture in the whole parish of Aston is three stocking frames”. Glover, writing in 1829, notes that there were two lace machines and a few stocking frames in Aston.

Other than this modest evidence of a textile industry, the most important episode in the village’s industrial history was a recent one, beginning in 1941 with the establishment of “Notsa Engineering” by Mr. James Lowther and his wife Ann, with just three employees. During the war, the engineering industry was deliberately dispersed to avoid concentration in towns and the consequent risk of total destruction by enemy bombing. “Notsa” (“Aston” spelt backwards) was established in a squash court remaining on the site of Aston Lodge (5, see pages 5 & 6), and helped develop components for rocket, aircraft and nuclear research. The company gained particular recognition for its “Maxi-Check” precision-measuring machine. There are modern houses on the site today.

At Domesday, Aston belonged to the royal manor of Weston, which included land in Weston, Aston, Shardlow and Wilne, and two churches. A charter of 1009 describes the boundary of the estate in Anglo-Saxon, and shows that it included the modern parishes of Weston, Aston and Shardlow/Great Wilne in their entirety. The two Domesday churches are probably represented today by the present churches of Weston and Aston. In the case of Aston, the assumption seems borne out by the Norman west tower, which is built against the earlier west wall of the nave (6). The nave, formerly aisleless, has a stone at its north west corner carved with a Saxon interlace pattern. So the original Saxon church was perhaps rebuilt in the late Saxon or early Norman period. There is no identifiable Anglo Saxon masonry in Weston Church today, but as Weston was the head settlement of the estate the church there was probably the earlier one.

The names Weston (west farm) and Aston (east farm) suggest an early and close relationship between the two settlements. They were possibly “twins”, but Weston seems better sited for habitation and was near the ferries over the Trent to Castle Donington and King’s Newton. It has been suggested that Aston was colonised from Weston. Before the church of St. James was built at Shardlow in 1838, a “church boat” brought the people of Shardlow and Great Wilne to Aston, where space was reserved for them in the south aisle.

Shortly after Domesday, William the Conqueror gave the manor of Weston, complete with its lands in Aston and elsewhere, to his nephew Hugh, Earl of Chester. The Earl of Chester in turn gave it to the Abbey of St. Werburgh, Chester, which he re-founded. The Abbot of St. Werburgh’s thus became the main landowner in Aston, and Lord of the Manor of Weston until the Reformation. In 1257, the Abbot obtained a grant for a Tuesday market at Aston, with a three day annual fair at the Festival of St. Peter ad Vincula. The fair and market seem to have been unsuccessful, but the former market cross (site marked at 7) remained in situ until 1837 and is shown on several plans of the village. Stocks for the punishment of offenders were still in place near the Cross in 1829.

At the Reformation, the last Abbot of Chester became the First Bishop of Chester. Chester Abbey became Chester Cathedral and the former Abbey lands (including the manor of Weston) became part of the endowment of the new Bishopric. The Bishop did not keep Weston for long, as it was given up to the Crown c1547 in exchange for land near Manchester which was more useful to him. Weston was then sold by the King to his secretary Sir William Paget of Beaudesert (Staffs), who settled it on his younger son Charles. From Charles, the property descended to his great niece Mary Gerard who married Anthony Roper of Eltham, Kent, in 1612.

Roper is credited with starting the impressive but sadly incomplete Weston Hall c1633, on an old moated site that had once contained the Abbot of Chester's Hall. Building ceased after a few years due to impoverishment and the outbreak of the Civil War. Meanwhile, in 1633, Roper had bought the Aston estate of the Hunt family, including the house and grounds that later became Aston Hall and Park. The Hunt's estate, formerly the property of the Smith family and then (until 1513) of the Tikhull family, was one of a number of lesser estates in Aston that developed during the later Middle Ages. In 1630, John Hunt finally sold the estate, depleted by previous sales, to John Gregorie of Nottingham, who sold it to Roper.



*A meet at Aston Hall. Courtesy of Mr. F.W. Hinds.*

Roper died in the 1640s, leaving all his Derbyshire lands to be sold. However, his daughter laid claim to the manor of Weston as her deceased mother's heir, and sold much of the land belonging to the manor to Nicholas Wilmot of Gray's Inn in October, 1647. Wilmot's purchase cost him £3,150 and included land in Aston, Shardlow and Wilne, but chiefly in Weston.

The rest of the manor, including Weston Hall and land in Weston, Aston, Shardlow and Wilne, was sold to Robert Holden of Shardlow, gent (c1595-1659), for £3,436 5s 4d in March, 1648. During the previous month, Holden had also bought the Aston Hall estate for £400, reflecting its comparatively small extent at that time. In addition, Holden bought the "advowson" of the churches of Aston and Weston, i.e. the right to recommend a specific person for the Bishop's approval as vicar or rector of a parish. In practice, the advowson was used to provide livelihoods for younger sons of the Holden family. This is demonstrated, for example,

by the lych gate at the entrance to the churchyard **(8)**, erected as a memorial to James Shuttleworth Holden, Rector of Aston from 1869 – 1916.



*No. 16, The Green, 1969. Courtesy of Derby Evening Telegraph Ltd.*

Robert Holden's sons Henry and Samuel took up residence at Weston and Aston Halls respectively. Samuel (d1692) was the principal heir and Aston Hall became the centre of his estate. The Holden estate was slowly enlarged by purchase over the succeeding centuries, particularly after Edward Anthony Holden embarked on a series of land purchases in 1833.

Aston Hall, befitting its enhanced status as the centre of a growing estate, was rebuilt in 1735 by Robert Holden (1676-1746), a successful lawyer. Documentary evidence for the new building **(9)** is lacking, but three rainwater heads survive in place bearing the initials RHE (Robert and Elizabeth Holden) and the date. The house is of brick, painted "stone colour" by 1857, and has been altered and enlarged many times. It has now been converted to apartments, incorporating some offices. The design is attributed, on stylistic grounds, to Francis or William Smith of Warwick.

The road pattern of the village centre was substantially changed in 1786, when a new road was laid out from Aston to Weston, further away from the Hall than the old road had been. Until then, the road to Weston began at the south east corner of the churchyard **(10)**, proceeding close by the west front of Aston Hall and by the former "Long Walk Wood" in Aston Park **(11)**. The first part of the present road from Aston to Weston was already in existence as a less important route, known as "Lawrence Lane" and heading towards Chellaston **(12, 12)**. The remainder of the present Weston Road was entirely new.

Officially, the reason for diverting the road was to make it more convenient for the public, but the underlying reason was clearly to improve the amenities of Aston Hall and its Park. The new road towards Weston was a southward branch out of Lawrence Lane, its beginning now marked by the bend at the junction of Chellaston Lane and Weston Road **(13)**. With the old road eradicated, the land between the old and new routes was added to the Park and landscaped.

The park at Aston Hall, though pleasant enough, seems never to have been particularly notable. White, in his *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Derbyshire* (1857) hesitated to call it a park at all, merely describing the grounds as extensive and “park like”. Today, the park is spoilt by degeneration and modern development. Only a small part of it is included within the conservation area, and it is of little intrinsic value in its current state. Its chief merit lies in providing an appropriate setting for the Grade II\* listed Hall. There is no trace of the garden improvements designed by T. H. Mawson in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, or of the avenue of chestnut trees to the Hall from the village recorded in 1829.

The heart of the conservation area is formed by the triangular block of land in the village centre **(14)**, between Derby Road and The Green. The whole of this space was no doubt the original Green and would have been the venue for the market granted in 1257, with the market cross at its south end. A plan of Aston in 1798 shows that it was densely built over by then, probably by successive encroachments on the original open space over a long period.



*The Lodge. Courtesy of Mr. F.W. Hinds.*

Today, the built development here is more loose and patchy, due to the compulsory purchase and demolition of several properties under South East Derbyshire Rural District Council’s slum clearance programme. Nos. 10 – 20 Derby Road, on the west side of the triangle, were bought for demolition in 1967. Nos 17 and 19 The Green, adjoining the Smithy House at the north east corner of the triangle, were bought for demolition in 1971. The former Methodist Chapel of 1829 on The Green **(15)**, one of the oldest in the Castle Donington Circuit, was demolished a few years before. The present replacement building opened in October 1967, occupying the site of two cottages as well as the site of the original building.

North east of the Green, on Clarkes Lane, were six almshouses **(16)** founded in 1870, funded by a land exchange and a £100 legacy left by the Rev. R. H. Murphy. Two were pre-existing houses which were purchased and altered. The other four, attached to them, were a row of single roomed dwellings, facing south. They were demolished in the 1970s, having been declared unfit for human habitation, and were replaced by modern

dwellings on a different site. The original site, now redeveloped, is excluded from the conservation area boundary.

Between the road junction at the village centre and the Church and Hall to the south, the conservation area reduces to a narrow strip. This has happened because two significant properties, one on either side of the road, have been demolished. Their sites have been redeveloped with modern housing estates which are not suitable for inclusion within the conservation area boundary.



*10-20 Derby Road, 1967. Courtesy of Derby Daily Telegraph Ltd.*

On the west side of the road, the “missing” property is the Rectory **(17)**, which had extensive, mature grounds. It had clearly been greatly altered in the Victorian period, with extensions, ornamental bargeboards and elaborate chimneystacks. But some of the external brickwork was probably 18<sup>th</sup> century and the irregular form hinted at still earlier origins. The central part was of three storeys, with tile hanging to the top storey, and there were gabled side wings. One of the side wings was demolished around the 1940s, and the whole house was demolished in 1969 for redevelopment with a modern rectory, later followed by several houses in the grounds.

After the Hall, the second most important house was Aston Lodge **(5)**, demolished in the 1930s and since replaced by modern housing developments known as “Lodge Estate”, “Shirley Park” and “Park View”. The Lodge was built for Joseph Greaves, probably in the late 1730s, and was originally a stylish two and a half storey house of five bays, approached from the road through a handsome pair of gates reliably attributed to Robert Bakewell. In 1829, the Lodge was occupied by a member of the Holden family.

It would be interesting to learn more about the history of this key site before Joseph Greaves built his house on it. Was the space unbuilt? Were there a number of village house plots there which were amalgamated to form the site? Or was there a previous substantial house there, belonging to one of the lesser estates in Aston?

Like Aston Hall, the design of the Lodge has been attributed to Francis or William Smith, but only tentatively. The house was progressively enlarged, but to no good effect from an architectural point of view. The

extensions were oversized and ponderous in relation to the original building.

The most significant remnant of Aston Lodge today is the water tower and adjacent stables etc., which were a late addition to the property probably built c1910, now converted to housing and called “Lodge Mews” **(18)**. There is very little trace of the once elaborate gardens, which were developed and improved into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Bakewell’s iron gates were removed to Long Eaton in 1932.

The Holdens’ Aston Hall Estate was finally sold in 1898, but on that occasion it was sold as a complete entity. The purchaser was William Dickson Winterbottom, a Manchester book-cloth manufacturer, who preserved the integrity of the estate until his death. The estate was then put up for auction again, in November 1924. This time, given the plight of country estates after the First World War, it was almost inevitable that the estate would be broken up, and so it was. The Hall itself was sold to Nottingham Corporation as a hospital “for mental defectives”. Over time the grounds were developed with wards and staff accommodation, and the landscaping was eroded.

There are 13 listed buildings in the parish. One of them is a lock on the Trent and Mersey Canal, but the other twelve lie within the conservation area boundary. They comprise the Hall (Grade II\*), Parish Church (Grade I), two chest tombs in the churchyard (Grade II), the lych gate and churchyard walls (listed Grade II as a single building), a Victorian shelter formerly housing a pump (Grade II), and seven village houses (all Grade II). Of these houses, the most striking is 16, The Green **(19)**, bearing a datestone inscribed “WCM 1690”.



*The Rectory. Courtesy of Mr. F.W. Hinds.*

The former Village School **(20)** is unlisted but worthy of mention. It was built in 1844 on land given by Sir Richard Wilmot Bart. and was given to the parish in 1845 on condition that it should be used for educational purposes by “the lower and labouring classes”. The costs of the building were defrayed by the Holden family, whose crest is on the outside wall. An addition was made in 1910. The school closed in 1984, when a new school was opened.

There are, no doubt, several other unlisted properties which would prove to be of interest upon internal inspection. Manor Farm, for instance, is a possible example **(21)**, but no systematic survey of Aston’s vernacular buildings has ever been undertaken.

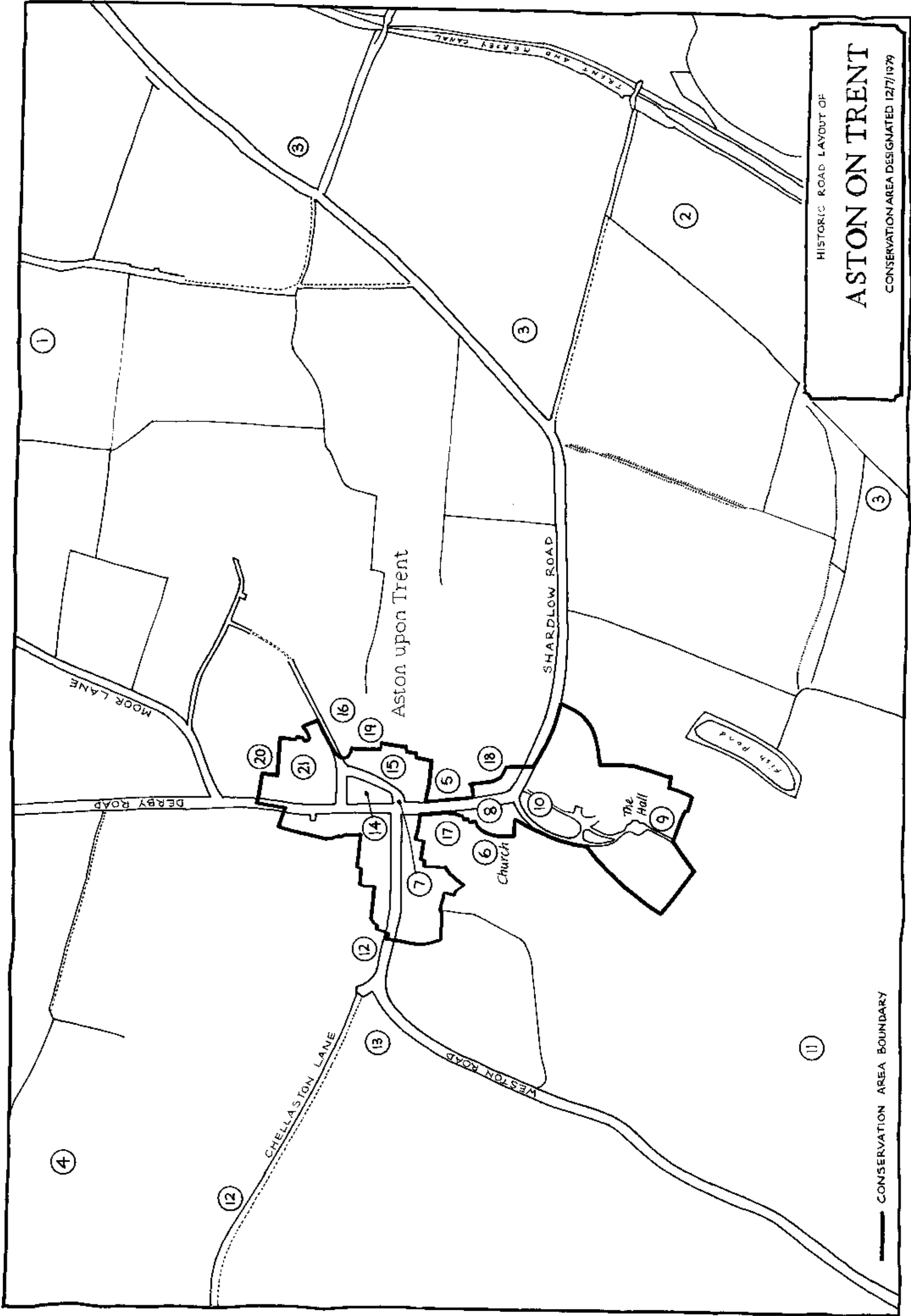
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HISTORIC ROAD LAYOUT OF

# ASTON ON TRENT

CONSERVATION AREA DESIGNATED 12/7/1979



— CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY