



CONSERVATION AREA HISTORIES:
SWARKESTONE
DISTRICT OF SOUTH DERBYSHIRE



The Crewe and Harpur Arms, Swarkestone, 1946. By courtesy of the Derby Daily Telegraph Ltd.

Swarkestone is a small village on the north bank of the Trent. It is dominated by Swarkestone Bridge **(1)** and its mediaeval causeway that meanders, for nearly three quarters of a mile, across the flood plain to the village of Stanton by Bridge.

The bridge once stood on the medieval King's Highway from Derby to Coventry and may well have been a major route and river crossing for centuries before the Norman Conquest. Lowes Lane **(2)** remained the main road to Derby well into the 18th century. Swarkestone Bridge is first documented in 1204 as the "ponte de Cordy" and was probably made of wood. Remains of two early wooden bridges over a former course of the Trent were discovered a few miles downriver in the early 1990s, close to one another in gravel workings at Hemington. They were thought to date from the 11th and early 13th centuries.

A local tale credits the building of the bridge to two maiden ladies called Bellamont, who saw their lovers drown while trying to cross the flooded Trent meadows in the 13th century. It is said that they devoted their lives and their fortune to the building of the bridge, and died as starving paupers. Despite an assertion that the ladies were buried at Prestwold, Leicestershire, there is no hard evidence whatever that the story is true. The Bellamont family was certainly associated with Swarkestone, but not until a much later period.

However, the stylistic evidence suggests that Swarkestone Bridge was rebuilt in stone during the late 13th and early 14th centuries, which accords with three Royal grants of tolls for bridge "repair" between 1324 and 1347. The river bridge itself was rebuilt in 1795-97 after a disastrous flood had reduced its predecessor to ruins. The mediaeval causeway, widened and strengthened in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, survives. It remains heavily used today as a vital link on the A514 from Derby to the southern part of the County, connecting with the nearby network of motorways.

Swarkestone takes its name from a Dane called Swerkir who, it is surmised, was granted land in the aftermath of the Danish occupation of Repton in 874. Swerkir may have been posted here to defend an important route, or perhaps the land was simply a reward for services rendered. Swarkestone's strategic importance has subsequently been marked by a minor battle between Roundheads and Cavaliers in January 1643, and the Bridge has achieved some notoriety as the place where the advance guard of Bonnie Prince Charlie's Army finally turned back to Scotland in 1745. Even during the Second World War it was defended by gun emplacements and tank traps against the threat of a German invasion.

More properly called Swarkeston (a nineteenth century vicar added an extra flourish to the name of his parish - and it stuck), the suffix "ton" indicates that it was an Anglo Saxon settlement long before the Danes. Indeed there is ample archaeological evidence on the river terraces above the village to show that there has been human activity and settlement in Swarkestone since the arrival of the "Beaker People" in the early Bronze Age (2600-1600BC) at least. Collectively known as Swarkestone Lowes, five or six tumuli (3) dominated the skyline to the east of Lowes Lane until most were ploughed out in the 20th century. Only one now remains in anything like its former glory, lying by the road to Lowes Farm. Some of the tumuli were reused as burial places by early Anglian settlers in the fifth or sixth centuries, and an exercise track for horses (4, 4) took a circuit round them in the eighteenth century.

Slightly to the north west of Lowes Farm is the site of both an Iron Age and Romano British settlement (800BC – 500AD), while aerial photographs showing crop marks suggest that there was some sort of settlement below the farm on both sides of the road to Barrow. The name "Russewijk", which gave its name to a furlong in one of the old common fields of Swarkestone, may signify a Dark Age farmstead. It lay near the road to Weston on Trent and the neighbouring stretch of the Trent and Mersey Canal.



The river and cottages at Swarkestone. By courtesy of the Derby Daily Telegraph Ltd.

13th century references to lands lying on "the Brink" are a reminder of Swarkestone's perilous position at the floodplain edge. However, when the present settlement was first established it perhaps seemed safer, as the main channel of the Trent may then have run on the Stanton side of the valley. High river levels still cause anxiety today, and floodwater occasionally invades the lanes of the village.

By 1086 Swarkestone was already a well-established community with a long history. The Domesday survey shows that King William held the same land that had been held by King Edward the Confessor and described as a berewick of Melbourne, whilst Henry de Ferrers was rewarded with the land of four freemen. This division of land is reflected in deeds and documents of Swarkestone until 1632, when the Harpur family finally bought out the last freeholder. The village and parish were thus united into a single ownership that survived, largely intact, until sales by the Harpur Crewe estate during the 1980s.



The Swarkestone Pavilion. SDDC Collection.

Geoffrey de Bec is the first recorded Lord of the Manor in 1215. His name appears in a document transferring the advowson (the right to appoint a clergyman) of the church in Swarkestone from the Knights Hospitallers at Barrow to the de Bec family. The advowson still nominally lay with the Harpur Crewe family as Lords of the Manor until the last year of the 20th century.

The Church **(5)** was possibly built as a daughter chapel for the Knights Hospitallers in the mid 12th century, or some years earlier by a manorial lord. It certainly boasted a chevron ornamented chancel arch and a tympanum carved “with monstrous quadrupeds”, both Norman, but all this was lost when the church was rebuilt in 1876. However, the Harpur Chapel built before 1577 remains little altered, as does the 14th century tower save for the loss of its corner pinnacles. The rest of the church is now an exercise in Victorian Gothic, designed by F.J. Robinson.

Opposite the church lies a small house of the early 19th century, later converted for use as a parish room **(6)**. Used for vestry meetings, parish events and in between times as a “reading room”, it became a private house in the late 1970s.

In the mid fourteenth century the Rolleston family became the Lords of the Manor and remained so for 200 years until Richard Harpur, a Serjeant at Law, bought their land in 1557. A fine Chellaston alabaster tomb to John Rolleston who died in 1482 survives in the church, as do the grand monuments to Richard Harpur (Judge at the Court of Common Pleas d1577), his son Sir John Harpur (d1622) and their wives. The memorial to

the last Sir John Harpur of Swarkestone (d1679) amounts to a postscript on the florid monument to his second wife, the much-married Lady Frances Willoughby.

During the 16th and early 17th centuries Richard Harpur and his son Sir John amassed, between them, vast tracts of land in South Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Until 1679 and the absence of a direct male heir, Swarkestone was the principal family seat. In the 1620s Swarkestone Hall was a fine Elizabethan country house (7) boasting a gatehouse, some 45 rooms, a wine cellar and a dovecote.

The house was damaged during the Civil War but repaired afterwards. It appears to have been little used after c1715 and was pulled down during the first half of the 18th century. Thereafter Calke Abbey became the hub of the Harpur estates and Swarkestone's importance declined. Some ruins of Swarkestone Hall yet remain in the grounds of Old Hall Farm. They suggest that an older house (perhaps that of the Rollestons) was incorporated into Richard Harpur's splendid new one. Other fragments, together with the evidence of aerial photography, suggest that the Old Hall lay in and around the close adjacent to the ruins and towards the Bowl Alley House (8). An impressive pair of stone gate piers survives by the main road (9).



Old Hall Farm. By courtesy of Barbara Foster.

Bowl Alley House, also known variously as the Balcony, Pavilion, Stand, or Banqueting House, was completed in 1632 and rivals the bridge as Swarkestone's best known landmark. It was built just in time for the coming of age and marriage of John Harpur of Breadsall who, as an 11 year boy, became heir to the estate in 1622 - a singularly tragic year for the Harpurs. Two heirs died in succession that year, along with "Old Sir John" himself. Young Sir John survived a fractious wardship to marry Catherine Howard, granddaughter of the Earl of Suffolk and stepdaughter of William Cavendish, later the 1st Duke of Newcastle. Sir John entered his inheritance in 1632. It seems probable, therefore, that the Bowl Alley House - an architectural confection if ever there was one - was built to celebrate these twin events.

The building takes its name from the close in which it was built, but it was indeed a banqueting house built at the very height of their fashion. It was a pavilion to retire to after feasts, for conversation, for enjoying a dessert



Ruins of the Old Hall. By courtesy of Barbara Foster.

course of sweetmeats, fruit and wine, and to admire the view from the rooftop. The accommodation included a cellar. Puddings apart, it was used from its inception as a place for card and dice games where considerable amounts of money changed hands!

The Bowl Alley House is built in the style of John Smythson (d1643), who was partly responsible for the rebuilding of William Cavendish's fairytale castle at Bolsover, but there is no evidence that Smythson was directly involved at Swarkestone. The "surveyor" (as architects of the day were known) at Swarkestone is named as a Mr Wooldridge, perhaps an associate of the Smythsons. The building was constructed by Richard Shepherd for £111 12s 4d, with extra being paid for the lead for the domes.

The Bowl Alley House was abandoned when the Hall fell out of use, but care was taken to preserve the masonry shell as a folly, or as a symbol of family pride and history. Sir Henry Crewe of Calke (1763-1819) clearly visited Swarkestone from time to time, as he had a boathouse there and built a short-lived "casina" or fishing lodge near it in 1809 **(10)**. In more recent times the Rolling Stones have famously posed in front of Bowl Alley House for a record sleeve, and in the early 1980s it was lovingly restored by the Landmark Trust for use as an unconventional holiday home.

Nearby lies the "Tithe Barn", now a house **(11)**, and dating from the sixteenth or early seventeenth century. It is unlikely, considering its size and original features, to have ever been a tithe barn. In the nineteenth century it was "the stables" and was possibly used as such from the start. Its gardens back onto the presumed site of the Elizabethan Hall and an arrangement of brick and stone walled enclosures that once housed gardens. The gravelled paths of a formal garden have been recorded in one of them **(7)** and the bricks were almost certainly made in the nearby Brickiln Close which is recorded c1585.

Old Hall Farm itself is, as yet, a bit of a mystery **(12)**. Its style and detailing, with mullioned windows, suggest a date in the first half of the seventeenth century, but its site is curious, given that the Old Hall itself was so near and was still standing then. The house was extended in the nineteenth century and a fine "new model farmyard" of c1840 stands nearby.

Agriculture was the main activity of the village until relatively recently. Half of the land was enclosed by 1632 and the common fields were finally enclosed in 1777. There is however evidence of a cottage weaving industry, a stone mason's yard **(?13)** and large scale maltings **(?14)** in the eighteenth century. Swarkestone briefly boasted its own school in 1649. Shoemakers flourished from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, and there was the usual complement of butchers and bakers. The blacksmith perhaps turned his hand to candlestick making! On each side of the bridge, on the Swarkestone bank of the river, there were wharves associated with the "raff" or timber trade, which no doubt gave Woodshop Lane its name. It was floating timber, pinned against the river bridge by the current, that destroyed the old bridge in 1795. Another wharf at Cuttle Bridge on the Trent and Mersey Canal **(15)** served the plaster pits at Chellaston from the 1780s, and resulted in a realignment of what is now the main road to Chellaston and Derby.

The Trent and Mersey was completed through Swarkestone in 1777 and a short-lived link from the River Trent to the Derby canal and the Trent and Mersey canal was dug in 1795 **(16, 16)**. It was built by the Derby Canal Company to serve the South Derbyshire coal measures, as part of a proposed network of canals south of the river. In the event these were never built. The link closed in the 1820s as a result of lack of trade and punitive charges by the Trent and Mersey Canal Company (for the use of both its water and a short length of its course). The best remaining evidence of it is the entrance from the Trent, just over the wall of the Crewe and Harpur garden.

The picturesque black and white timbered frontage of the "Crows Nest" on Woodshop Lane **(17)** may date from the early seventeenth century, but its use as a dairy in the 1920s and 30s has meant that not much else has survived. It is now a private house. Elsewhere in the village there is some evidence of ancient timber framed buildings that survived a disastrous fire in 1654. Less spectacular than the frontage of the Crows Nest, roof trusses at Hollies Farm **(18)** on the banks of the Trent probably predate both the fire and the insertion of a flue before the 1630s. Other timber framed cores survive elsewhere, but much of the village housing dates from a "great rebuilding" in the nineteenth century.

Lowes Farm includes a handsome farmhouse **(19)**, originally built as racing stables by Sir Harry Harpur (1739-1789) in 1777. An exercise course was laid out nearby **(4, 4)**, which shows clearly on the Swarkestone parish plan of 1844, and races were held on Sinfin Moor. Soon after Sir Harry's death, the stables at the Lowes were converted into a house, which has recently been divided into apartments.

An inn, known by "the sign of the Talbot", could be found at Swarkestone in the mid sixteenth century. Its site is unknown, but rentals and Quarter Sessions records suggest that it may have stood by the river bridge on the Stanton side **(20)**. Certainly an Inn stood there in the 1680s, if not before, marked as a chapel on OS maps. It was superseded by the Crewe and Harpur Arms **(21)** which, together with its fine stable block, was built in the late eighteenth century in anticipation of the tumpiking of the road to Ashby. In the event this never happened, but huntsmen and cockfighters alike gathered in its forecourt for a bit of sport in the nineteenth century.



The River Bridge (1795-97). SDDC collection.

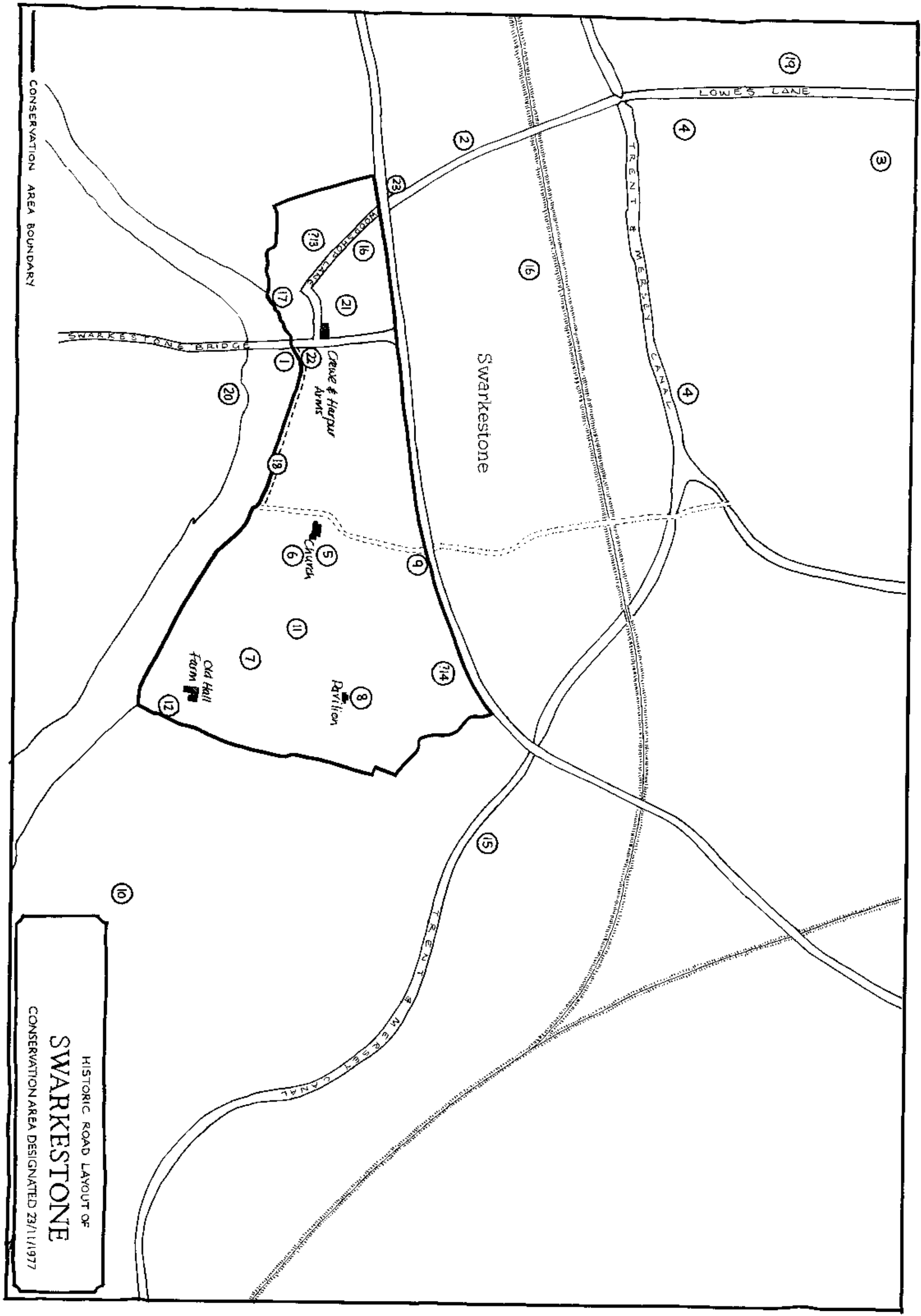
Bridge House across the road **(22)** was built around the same time although there are indications that the rear section of the house is somewhat earlier and built on even older foundations. An alehouse known as “The Gate” at the junction of Barrow Lane **(23)** served for many years as a watering hole for the canal users.

Touched by major national events and innovations throughout its history, its landscape carved through by canals, railways and roads and its farmers largely gone, Swarkestone nevertheless remains the small village it was in the twelfth century. Remarkably, in size and configuration the village has scarcely changed since the sixteenth century and for many of the people of Derby, the parish boundary on the brow of Chellaston Hill now marks the place where the countryside begins.

Barbara Foster.

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CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY

HISTORIC ROAD LAYOUT OF
SWARKESTONE
 CONSERVATION AREA DESIGNATED 23/11/1977