



# ROCK PARK CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL AND MANAGEMENT PLAN

---

## PART 1 - CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

Prepared for Wirral Council by Donald Insall Associates Ltd, 2007 – Wirral Council 2009

## CONTENTS

### PART 1 – CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

#### PREFACE

- Background to the Study
- Scope and Structure of the Study
- Existing Designations, Legal Framework for Conservation Areas and the Powers of the Local Authority

#### **1.0 LOCATION**

- 1.1 Geographic Location
- 1.2 Topography
- 1.3 General Usage (e.g. residential)
- 1.4 Conservation Area Boundary and Statutory Designations

#### **2.0 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

- 2.1 Early History and Origins
- 2.2 19th Century Development
- 2.3 20th Century Growth and Expansion
- 2.4 Other Philanthropic Developments
- 2.5 Archaeology

#### **3.0 LANDSCAPE AND VISTAS**

- 3.1 Setting and Relationship with the Surrounding Area
- 3.2 Character and Relationship of Spaces
- 3.3 Views and Vistas within the Area
- 3.4 Green Spaces and Planting

#### **4.0 TOWNSCAPE AND PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS**

- 4.1 Grain, Scale, Repetition and Diversity
- 4.2 Boundaries and Surfaces

#### **5.0 ARCHITECTURE, MATERIALS AND DETAILS**

- 5.1 Prominent Styles
- 5.2 Known Architects and Designers
- 5.3 Materials
- 5.4 Typical Features and Details

#### **6.0 NEGATIVE FACTORS**

- 6.1 Overview
- 6.2 Recent Development
- 6.3 Unsympathetic Extensions
- 6.4 Unsympathetic Alterations
- 6.5 Public realm

- 6.6 Loss and Development Pressures
- 6.7 Changes to the Setting of the Conservation Area

### **7.0 SUMMARY OF SPECIAL CHARACTER**

## PREFACE

### Background to the Study

This report has been prepared by Donald Insall Associates Ltd on behalf of Wirral Council. Its purpose is to clarify the designation of the Conservation Area, which will protect and enhance the character of the merchant estate of Rock Park.

### Scope and Structure of the Study

The scope of this Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan is based on the guidelines published by English Heritage ('Guidance on Conservation Area Appraisals' and 'Guidance on the Management of Conservation Areas', both dated February 2006) and represents a factual and objective analysis. In accordance with the guidelines, the following framework has been used as the basis for this analysis:-

- Location and population
- Origins and development of the settlement
- Prevailing or former uses and their influence on plan form or building type
- Archaeological significance
- Architectural and historic qualities of buildings
- Contribution made by key unlisted buildings
- Character and relationship of spaces
- Prevalent and traditional building materials
- Local details
- Contribution made by green spaces, trees, hedges, etc
- Setting of the Conservation Area and its relationship with the surrounding landscape
- Extent of loss, intrusion or damage
- Existence of any neutral areas

The document has been structured to encompass these areas of study and concludes with recommendations for the Conservation Area boundary and other matters such as provision of Article 4 Directions.

### Existing Designations, Legal Framework for Conservation Areas and the Powers of the Local Authority

Since the 1967 Civic Amenities Act local authorities have been empowered to designate as Conservation Areas those areas within their districts which were considered 'special'. The subsequent Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act of 1990 consolidated those powers and defined Conservation Areas as:-

*"areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance".*

Such areas are diverse. They may be large or small; residential or commercial; civic or industrial; old or relatively modern. They may represent social ideals or civic pride. They may be specifically designed or speculatively produced; modest or grand. They may contain Listed Buildings of architectural or historic interest or may simply have local historic association. However, common to all will be an identifiable environmental quality which should be protected from unsympathetic redevelopment or alteration.

Wirral Metropolitan Borough Council has declared 25 Conservation Areas throughout the Borough reflecting the variety of building styles and environments exhibited within its borders.

The content of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 is clarified by national Planning Policy Guidance (PPG15): Planning and the Historic Environment and is supported by more recent Regional Planning Guidance for the North West (RPG13), which identifies as a key objective the need to ensure active management of the regions environmental and cultural assets.

The principles of these documents are further supported by Wirral Council's local Heritage Conservation policies contained within its Unitary Development Plan.

This legislation and policy framework enables the authority to exercise greater control over development within Conservation Areas and, where appropriate, this may be supplemented by the use of 'Article 4 Directions' to remove permitted development rights. In this way, minor changes, such as window replacement or loft conversions, which may be cumulatively detrimental, can be controlled.

National policy stipulates that local authorities have a duty to review, from time to time, their regions to ensure that places of special architectural or historic interest are being protected. The boundaries of existing Conservation Areas may be revised, new areas may be designated and those areas which have been eroded to the extent that their special character has been lost may be de-designated.

Whilst the Council recognises that, for Conservation Areas to remain 'live' and responsive to a changing society, changes must and will occur, it nevertheless undertakes to ensure that all changes make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of its Conservation Areas and do not result in any serious loss of character or features.

Planning legislation supports the authority in this by increasing its control over development. It does this in the following ways:

- Buildings and structures may not be demolished without formal consent from the Council (Conservation Area Consent).
- Trees are protected and all work to them requires consent from the Council.

- New development is expected to reflect the quality of design and construction of the surrounding area and should make a positive contribution to the area's character.
- Local planning authorities may, if necessary, exercise even greater control by removing the basic permitted development rights of householders.
- Under section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the Council has a legal obligation to ensure that "special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance" of the area when formulating decisions on planning applications.

The first step to protecting the inherent qualities of a Conservation Area is having a thorough understanding of its character and Planning Policy Guidance PPG15 advises that "the definition of an area's special interest should derive from an assessment of the elements that contribute to (and detract from) it".

This should then underpin local policies for the areas protection. Such a definition requires a thorough appraisal of the area to assess the contribution of each element (e.g. buildings, boundaries, trees, surfaces, etc.) to the areas overall character. PPG15 notes that "the more clearly the special architectural or historic interest that justifies designation is defined and recorded, the sounder will be the basis for local plan policies and development control decisions".

Whilst an appraisal aims to identify the essential elements which give an area its character, it is not intended as a detailed evaluation of each building and feature. Therefore any buildings, features and details may still have importance even though not specifically referred to in the document and any omissions do not indicate lack of merit or interest.

## PART 1 – CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

### **1.0 LOCATION**

#### **1.1 GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION**

- 1.1.1 Rock Park is located on the eastern edge of the Wirral peninsular on the banks of the River Mersey. It is adjacent to the built up area of Rock Ferry and is within the mixed residential and industrial belt of development stretching from the town of Birkenhead along the A41 to Eastham and Bromborough at the south-eastern corner of the Wirral.

#### **1.2 TOPOGRAPHY**

- 1.2.1 The area around Rock Park is undulating with an overall fall towards the Mersey. The New Ferry by-pass, slicing through the conservation area, goes through slight cuttings at the higher points and Rock Lane East is artificially banked up as it bridges the modern road.

#### **1.3 GENERAL USAGE**

- 1.3.1 Rock Park is virtually all in residential use, with the exception of a small number of buildings at its northernmost extremity. These include a redundant convent, yacht and sailing clubs and a public house.

#### **1.4 CONSERVATION AREA BOUNDARY AND STATUTORY DESIGNATIONS**

- 1.4.1 Rock Park was designated as a Conservation Area in 1979. The current boundary follows an irregular line to the west to include all of the remaining original villas and their plots. To the north the boundary extends around the land of St. Margaret's Convent before returning inwards to exclude a section of the bypass. It crosses the bypass at Rock Lane East and then follows the new road north – westwards to include the Royal Mersey Yacht Club and other buildings on the north of Bedford Road East. The boundary then extends along the pier and out into the estuary to include an area of mud flats (designated a Site of Special Scientific Interest – SSSI) defined by the mean low tide line, before returning inland at the slipway shortly before the New Ferry pier. At the southern extremity of the conservation area, Summerhill and Dell House are included on the Dell and the Public Park (former cricket field) and Bowling Green.

## **2.0 HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

### **2.1 EARLY HISTORY AND ORIGINS OF SURROUNDING AREA**

- 2.1.1 Although the discovery of some archaeological finds nearby suggest the early inhabitation or use of the area, the recorded history of the area commences in the medieval period. At around the turn of the 13<sup>th</sup> century the manor of Bebington of which the land at Rock Ferry was part, was held by Robert de Bebington from the Warlestons. The land passed to the Minshull family in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Records from the 17<sup>th</sup> century refer to the Manor House Derby House, with its grand carvery, a large part of present day Rock Ferry. The house built was thought to have been situated on a site to the south of Rock Lane West, close to its junction with New Chester Road.
- 2.1.2 Records from 1689 refer to a Rock Farm which was believed to have been on the site of the later Hotel. Nicholas Blundell's diary of around 1700 also seems to refer to this site; 'we dined at Chester and thence went to Rock Hous'.

### **2.2 19TH CENTURY DEVELOPMENT**

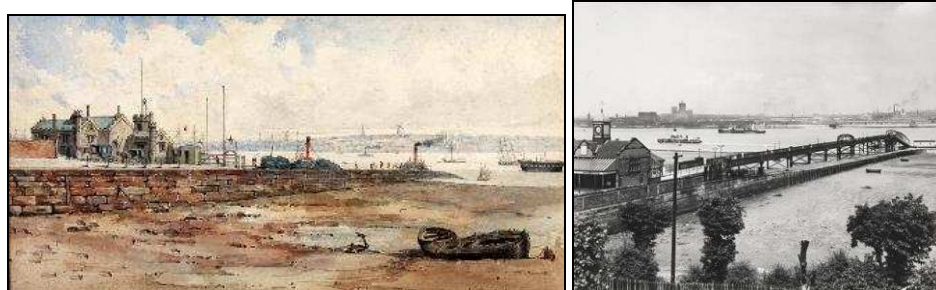
- 2.2.1 Although a ferry service had existed at Rock Ferry in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was the introduction of a steam ferry service in 1830 that stimulated the improvement and development of the area. Crossing the Mersey until that time had often been time-consuming and hazardous but with the steam ferries the experience was relatively pleasant and safe. This encouraged more people to cross the river estuary for non-essential purposes and the Wirral soon subsequently became a desirable residential location for many merchants working regularly in Liverpool.



*The Royal Rock Hotel in around 1896*



- 2.2.2 The Royal Rock Hotel had been built in around 1805, but in 1836 the building and the surrounding pleasure gardens were altered and extended. This coincided with the construction of the Esplanade and bath house along the banks of the Mersey.



*The pier in 1858 and 1905*

- 2.2.3 Also in that year, several Liverpool gentlemen formed a joint stock company called the 'Rock Ferry Company' for the purpose of developing the area. Land was purchased by the company and in the following year plans were drawn up by Jonathan Bennison. It is understood that the layout by Bennison laid out the roads and building plots but the design of individual houses were left to the architects employed by the individual land-owners, subject to a number of constraints. These were thought to include materials, size and height. It was also thought to stipulate that buildings were either to be detached single family houses or appear as being such in the instance of semi-detached houses. The Park's Articles of Agreement of 1837 stipulates all the particular constraints.
- 2.2.4 The construction of the houses of Rock Park was relatively rapid. The 1840 title map of the area shows that within the first 3 years around half the houses had been completed. It is also understood that the remainder were built very soon after and almost all by 1850. Just a very small number of buildings have been constructed in Rock Park since that time.
- 2.2.5 The wealthy merchant ship owners and professionals living in Rock Park not only enjoyed the benefits of the landscaped park but also sought leisure pursuits nearby. In 1844 the Royal Mersey Yacht Club was formed and in the following year a number of Rock Ferry gentlemen established a pack of beagles for hunting in the surrounding rural area. A cricket ground and bowling greens were also introduced.
- 2.2.6 In 1853 Nathaniel Hawthorne, the famed novelist, came to Liverpool as American Consul. He initially stayed in the Royal Rock Hotel but after a month he rented no.26 Rock Park. During his stay of 2 years he wrote a diary which included the following entries:

Hawthorne wrote on September 1<sup>st</sup> 1853:

*'Today we leave the Rock Ferry Hotel, where we have spent nearly four weeks. It is a comfortable place, and we have had a good table and been kindly treated. We occupied a large parlor, extending through the whole breadth of the house, with a bow window, looking toward Liverpool, and down the intervening river, and to Birkenhead, on the hither side. The river would be a pleasanter object, if it were blue and transparent, instead of such a mud-puddy hue; also, if it were always full to its brim: whereas it generally presents a margin, and sometimes a very broad one, of glistening mud, with here and there a small vessel aground on it.'*

The following day, he added:

*'We got into our new house in Rock Park yesterday. It is a stone edifice, like almost all the English houses, and handsome in its design. Rock Park, as the locality is called, is a private property, and is now nearly covered with residences for professional people, merchants, and others of the upper middling class; the houses being mostly built, I suppose, on speculation, and let to those who occupy them. It is the quietest place imaginable there being a police station at the entrance, and the officer on duty allows no ragged or ill-looking person to pass. There being a toll, it precludes all unnecessary passage of carriages; and never were there more noiseless streets than those that give access to these pretty residences. On either side there is a thick shrubbery, with glimpses through it of the ornamental portals, or into the trim gardens with smooth shaven lawns, of no great extent, but still affording reasonable breathing-space.'*

- 2.2.7 Although Rock Park itself was completed quickly within the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the surrounding area continued to be developed. A particular impetus for Rock Ferry's growth was the increase in the number of people employed at the industrial plants; in particular Cammell Lairds in nearby Tranmere. Consequently, much of Rock Ferry was developed in dense terrace housing. However, a number of more spacious and opulent areas also appeared nearby such as Egerton Park and the Barton Estate, which, although technically in New Ferry, has a number of its houses included within the current Rock Park Conservation Area.

### **2.3 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY CHANGES**

- 2.3.1 In 1910 the Olympian Gardens were opened next to the Royal Rock Hotel. People travelled from across the Wirral and Liverpool to see piano concerts and comedy shows held in a large tent set amongst trees and shrubs on land owned by Charles Boulton. However, these gardens were short-lived, closing in the late 1920's following Boulton's death.
- 2.3.2 Despite the proximity of the Mersey's residential areas and the towns of Birkenhead, Rock Park suffered little direct damage in the Second World War, with the only affected building being Hawthorne's former house no. 26 which lost its cupola (that had had a refractor and revolving dome installed in it by subsequent owner and astronomer Isaac Roberts). The onset of the

Second World War changed many of the industries on which much of the local economy hinged and had a number of other affects, for instance the termination of the ferry service in 1939. From around the 1950's the stature of the area declined. By the 1980's the area had a reputation for crime and many of the buildings had fallen into a state of disrepair.

- 2.3.3 The most significant 20<sup>th</sup> century change to the area happened in the 1970's with the construction of the New Ferry bypass which was to dissect the Rock Park into two halves. In 1971 when the construction of the bypass was imminent, architectural writers Nikolaus Pevsner and Edward Hubbard visited Rock Park and wrote the following in their book 'The Buildings of England: Cheshire':

*At the time of writing, the estate (which includes some houses in Rock Lane East) is remarkably complete, there having been no demolition and hardly any infill. Shortly, however, a dual carriageway bypass road is to be constructed, cutting the layout in two and involving the demolition of several houses and the entrance lodge. A practical alternative route exists for the road and the unnecessary and short-sighted destruction of Rock Park is an unforgivable act of vandalism.*

- 2.3.4 Not only were a number of houses, the Royal Rock Hotel and much of the landscaping lost at the time of the construction of the bypass, but the destruction of much of the original fabric of Rock Park continued into the 1980's and 1990's. This happened despite the designation of the area as a conservation area in 1979, the listing of most of its buildings and the formation of a local pressure group, the Friends of Rock Park. In 1995 the council demolished no. 1A Rock Lane East; one of the original sandstone detached villas; on the basis that it had become 'a serious eyesore' and because spending the £175,000 quoted for its restoration could not be justified. Slightly later in 1997 a planning application to convert the former bath house into a bistro was turned down on the basis that the car parking noise and eventually this proposal would harm the character of the area. At that time the building had become a target for vandals and was in a poor state of repair. Later that year and presumably as a result of that decision, the building was demolished.

## 2.4 ARCHAEOLOGY

- 2.4.1 The Merseyside Archaeological Service Historic Environment Record holds accounts of sites of interest in and around the Rock Park Conservation Area. Below ground finds include:
- a roman coin with the head of Emperor Hadrian, found in an allotment in 1952.
- 2.4.2 The Birkenhead History Society report on their website that bronze artefacts have been found in the surrounding Rock Ferry, however their location or origin is not specified.

### **3.0 LANDSCAPE AND VISTAS**

#### **3.1 SETTING AND RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SURROUNDING AREA**

- 3.1.1 At the time of its construction, Rock Park would have been fairly detached from neighbouring settlements, however, it was subsequently swallowed within the built-up area stretching almost along the full length of the eastern side of the Wirral peninsular. Immediately abutting Rock Park are Rock Ferry to the west and New Ferry to the south. Both of these areas have had degrees of deprivation over recent decades and are now part of the area focussed for regeneration.
- 3.1.2 Rock Park is approximately ½ mile away from Rock Ferry railway station which provides direct travel to Birkenhead, Liverpool and Chester. Rock Ferry provides local services such as schools, churches and smaller shops but with the above mentioned towns and cities providing most sources of services and employment.
- 3.1.3 Rock Park's relationship with the river is much weaker than it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the pier and landing stages no longer used and the Esplanade largely closed-off, generally visitors are unable to view the Mersey from almost all but the conservation area's southern extremity.
- 3.1.4 To the north of the conservation area the land alongside the river is predominantly industrial with large oil tanks prominent visually around Bedford Road East.

#### **3.2 CHARACTER AND RELATIONSHIP OF SPACES**

- 3.2.1 Although the original layout of roads and building plots remain still recognisable in modern maps, on the ground the character originally intended by Bennison would have been quite different from that of today. Whereas villas would have had a relationship with each other within streets this only happens now in one instance with buildings now only relating to each other laterally, down the road. This occurs now on the two separate parts of Rock Park road; on one side there is an almost continuous run of houses and the other either dense semi-mature trees or fencing. The resultant character is odd and uncomfortable with neither the positive effects of a sense of enclosure or that of open views created. The roads are disjointed and the layout almost certainly confusing to visitors. The bypass also introduces a degree of noise disturbance into the park that does impinge on its otherwise peaceful and tranquil character: opportunities can be considered for future mitigation.

### 3.3 VIEWS AND VISTAS WITHIN THE AREA

- 3.3.1 The visual composition of a number of buildings facing towards each other have generally been lost and buildings are often surrounded by trees, so therefore long range views are generally not afforded. However, of particular note are the views out towards Liverpool with Pier Head, the Albert Dock and the Anglican Cathedral, all prominent from the New Ferry end of the Conservation Area. Equally, the view of many of the villas facing the Mersey is also an important part of the visual character of the area and features in views from the esplanade and the pier/ jetty.



*(top) View from the Esplanade towards Pier Head; (middle) View from the Esplanade towards the two Liverpool cathedrals; (bottom) from the jetty towards the Esplanade and New Ferry pier*



3.3.2 Particularly around the sports ground (former cricket field) but also from a number of other more open areas St Peter's church is visible. This view is important as it links Rock Park to the church; the church was built around the time of Rock Park and partially funded by the Company, however many of the physical connections have been lost, therefore the retention of the visual links is of particular importance.

3.3.3 Other views towards buildings across the sports ground or area of grass near to the New Ferry Pier are also of interest.

### 3.4 GREEN SPACES AND PLANTING

3.4.1 Since the construction of the bypass and consequently the demolition of a number of the villas, there has been a considerable increase in land not directly associated with a particular building. There is a deep strip of such land along the eastern and much of the western side of the bypass. This land together with the sports ground, the land around the former site of the hotel and grass near New Ferry Pier is all owned and managed by the council. The lack of funding is evident in the often unimaginative choice of planting and inadequate maintenance. This is in stark contrast to the richness of planting that would have been seen in the garden to the villas and the grounds of the hotel. Despite the limitation of the planting in these areas, it acts as an important visual buffer to the bypass and to the individual areas to the north.

3.4.2 Many of the gardens to individual houses in the conservation area contribute greatly to its character. Large trees and shrubs help to frame the individual buildings but also add to the wider street scene. Trees along the winding roads allow views to be opened up gradually as the visitor progresses along the street adding to the sense of intrigue and spaciousness. Even in the cases of the derelict or poorly repaired houses, the often overgrown trees within the plots still contribute to the overall sense of greenness within the area.



*General street scenes showing the 'greenness' of the area and the strong visual character created by the dense overhanging trees.*

3.4.3 The presence of the Bowling Green and sports fields (although not really used as such) is an important reminder of the recreational past.

3.4.4 All of the publicly accessible green spaces are identified within the UDP as being 'Urban Greenspaces' except the following areas which are classified as being 'Primary Residential':

- The small area of park to the west of the bypass, off Rock Park.
- The site of 1A Rock Lane East
- The area of trees between the northern end of Rock Lane East and the Esplanade.

## **4.0 TOWNSCAPE AND PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS**

### **4.1 GRAIN, SCALE, REPETITION AND DIVERSITY**

- 4.1.1 Within each road, or section of each road, there is a fairly consistent grain. The houses facing onto the Mersey or onto Rock Lane East have the largest plots. On Rock Lane East the earlier houses are detached and their plots are around 50-70m deep and 20-30m wide. Houses on Rock Park are generally paired, with their individual plots being on average 55-65m deep and 12-30m wide to the east of the bypass and 30-40m deep and 13-14m wide to the west.
- 4.1.2 Original buildings are almost all of a similar scale and massing being of 2 or 2½ storeys in height. It should be noted that the storey heights (with the exception of attic or ‘half’ storeys in gable ends) are much higher than those within modern houses. Buildings are spaced out laterally by at least half of their width. There is some variety in the positioning of the buildings with their plots although there is always space allowed for generous garden to the sides of the buildings originally if it was not available to the front and rear.
- 4.1.3 The design of each house is different with almost no repetition beyond that of the block, in the case of a semi-detached pair, for instance. However, there are some elements of buildings repeated within the area, such as gateposts, wider surrounds and gable details, which potentially link the builder, the architect and/or plot owner. The only instances of whole buildings being repeated occurs at numbers 11/13 and 14/15 Rock Park and the red brick late Victorian terraces.

### **4.2 PRINCIPAL BUILDINGS AND FEATURES**

- 4.2.1 The original villas are almost all of a similar status architecturally, therefore one or another cannot be individually singled out as being most significant. The fact that such a large number of the conservation area’s buildings are later and can be described as being critical to the character of the area clearly indicates the high level impact of any loss.

### **4.3 BOUNDARIES AND SURFACES**

- 4.3.1 Almost all adopted road and pavement surfaces are modern, with the exception of stone kerbs and a few areas where old setts are visible where modern tarmacking has worn away.
- 4.3.2 The front boundary wall, gate posts and railings are a key part of the character of the conservation area. The vast majority of buildings have attractive stone gateposts which are either original or are high quality



replacements sympathetic to the character of the area. There are a number of different shapes of gateposts, often repeated elsewhere in the area, possibly signifying the original owner or developer of the land. All gateposts to villas are of a relatively consistent height, but their plan forms include circles, octagons and squares. Most plinth walls are low and of a simple form. The majority are of sandstone but some are of brick with a rendered finish. Railings have recently been reinstated to almost all of these walls. These are thought to be approximately to the original design, but are constructed from steel.



*Original gatepost and boundary wall treatments*

## 5.0 ARCHITECTURE, MATERIALS AND DETAILS

### 5.1 PROMINENT STYLES

5.1.1 Rock Park has no one overriding architectural style, but is instead characterised by its particular mix of influences. The 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings can be broadly split into two categories:

- Classical / Italianate –These buildings are proportioned loosely according to classical rules and adopt features such as cornices, quoins, pilasters and ground floor rustication. Many of the buildings have an Italianate character created through particularly projecting cornices at eaves level and in their detail around openings. Most roof pitches are relatively low and occasionally behind a parapet. All windows are sash windows and openings are positioned in a regular rhythm across the façade.



*Buildings of a classical or Italianate influence*



*Buildings of a vernacular revival or gothic influence*

- Vernacular Revival / Gothic – Buildings with details derived from other traditional building types. Influences include Gothic, Jacobean, Elizabethan and Medieval building periods. In contrast to the Classical / Italianate buildings, roofs are more steeply pitched and elevations have fewer formal proportions and design rules used. Plan forms are generally more complex and buildings are less likely to be symmetrical. Gables are used regularly as features in the design of buildings, and like openings, are shaped to reflect the style of the building. Chimneys are typically more prominent on buildings of these styles.

## 5.2 KNOWN ARCHITECTS AND DESIGNERS

- 5.2.1 No information concerning the architects of any of the individual buildings is readily available or understood to exist during the writing of this report. The buildings of rock Park share similarities with the slightly later (1840s) buildings in nearby Clifton Park and Birkenhead. Architect Walter Scott designed numerous buildings both classical / Italianate styles in these two areas. Although these buildings bear some resemblance to the houses in Rock Park, there is no replicated detailing apparent which would indicate that Scott worked there.



*Similar buildings in Clifton Park*

- 5.2.2 Relatively little is known about Bennison, who designed the layout of Rock Park. Bennison was involved in mapping and is known to have carried out a



survey of Liverpool 1835. There is no evidence available to show that he was involved in the design of buildings during his career.

### 5.3 MATERIALS

- 5.3.1 The most common materials seen within the conservation area are buff sandstone ashlar, render and Welsh slate. Where render is used it is often scribed so as to resemble fine ashlar. Brickwork does not seem to have been used as an exposed material except on a few limited instances of garden walls and the external walls of the Yacht club and terraced houses.

### 5.4 TYPICAL FEATURES AND DETAILS

- 5.4.1 **Windows** within the Rock Park houses seem to have all originally have been vertically sliding sashes at the time of the buildings' construction. The style and configuration of these windows varies according to the decoration and form of the building. All sashes would have had been sub-divided with glazing bars. The most simple of sashes are split into two parts by a vertical glazing bar, but perhaps the most common configuration is 6 over 6 format (or 3 over 6 / 6 over 9 formats for smaller / larger windows). The use of thin margin lights down the sides of the sashes is an elegant and fairly unusual detail which is seen in Rock Park.



*Windows in the conservation area*

- 5.4.2 Many of the sash windows are grouped together in twos or threes. In the case of tri-partite windows, the two side windows are generally narrower. In a number of instances the head of windows are arched.
- 5.4.3 Window surrounds are a particular feature of the conservation area and are generally one of the key components in a building's architectural composition. Many surrounds are made up of highly ornate carved stonework, often with classical forms such as pediments and scrolled brackets. The simpler buildings have moulded architraves around or hoodmoulds above their windows. There are some cast and wrought iron balconies in some buildings, worthy of faithful conservation.
- 5.4.4 **Doors** themselves within the conservation area are often not highly apparent from the road, being either recessed from the building frontage or on a side elevation. The door surrounds and entranceways are generally celebrated architecturally, however, with carved stone canopies, porches and surrounds.



*Doors within the conservation area*

- 5.4.5 **Chimneys** play a part in the visual composition of most buildings, although they are typically of a simple rectilinear design. A few buildings have more ornate or visually dominant chimneys; these buildings generally have a more gothic inspired design. These chimneys have separated flues for approximately the final 1 metre of their height, built in a circular or octagonal shape, before they rejoin at the top with a projecting moulding.



*Chimneys within the conservation area.*

- 5.4.6 As many of the lower storeys of the buildings are obscured, the **roof details** of the buildings in Rock Park are critical to their contribution to the character of the area, being often the most prominent feature. A few of the more

classical buildings have deep, ornate cornices, but otherwise simple roof forms. Where buildings have gables facing onto the street, the verge projects and they are generally supported on a number of brackets. These brackets are often a feature along the eaves of building, also to form dentils in the cornice.



*Roof details in the conservation area*

- 5.4.7 Roof details of the more gothic buildings vary. Gables either terminate at a stone parapet wall with projecting kneeler stones at the eaves, or the roof can project with an overhanging verge ornamented with a decorative bargeboard.
- 5.4.8 Rooflights are apparent in some properties, and whilst a small number of smaller skylights can be important to a building's functioning, e.g. over a stairway, their number should be minimised and they should not be grouped into a dense array or be sited asymmetrically across a roof.

### **6.0 NEGATIVE FACTORS**

#### **6.1 OVERVIEW**

6.1.1 A study of this nature cannot attempt to highlight every part of the built environment that has a detrimental impact on the character or setting of the conservation area; instead this report summarises the most apparent of examples and key problems within the conservation area as a way of encouraging an understanding and awareness of these issues.

6.1.2 Appended to this document is a plan showing the contribution of buildings to the character of the conservation area. The plan was produced as a tool to gain an understanding of the significance of different parts of the village and to inform as to the appropriateness of the boundary. This plan categorizes each building, or group of buildings into the following groupings:

- A: (Red) – Buildings that are critical to the character of the area: typically these may be landmark buildings and / or buildings with most of their original character retained
- B: (Yellow) – Buildings that contribute positively to the character of the conservation area: buildings may have some alterations but with original character is still prominent
- C: (Green) – Neutral - Either modern buildings of little interest or buildings where character has been lost beyond economic redemption.
- D: (Blue) – Buildings that detract from the significance or character of the area.

#### **6.2 RECENT DEVELOPMENT**

6.2.1 There have been only a few new buildings constructed within the conservation area boundary since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These are as follows:

- New flats adjacent to 1 Rock Park
- Nova House, Rock Park Road
- Tranmere Sailing Club, Bedford Road East
- No. 85, The Dell

6.2.2 The latter two of these modern buildings are both only on the outer edge of the conservation area, are of a modest scale and set adequately back from the road and far enough away from historic buildings to have only a very limited impact on the conservation area. It should be noted however, that the very



limited number of such developments means that they are described as having a neutral impact – in greater numbers such buildings would undoubtedly be treated as detrimental.



*Development in the conservation area which is detrimental to its character or to the setting of its listed buildings: (left) new flats adjacent to 1 Rock Park; (right) Nova House on Rock Park Road*

6.2.3 Nova House, on Rock Park Road, however, has a detrimental effect on the setting of both adjacent listed buildings and the character of the conservation area as a whole. Particularly obtrusive are the elements of the site along its road facing boundary: a garage is cited immediately adjacent to the road and is constructed of basic readily available materials to a fairly standard design without reference to the special characteristics of the conservation area. The garage has a direct and adverse effect on the visual relationship between the two neighbouring listed buildings. The fence along the front boundary is also of a basic construction and it detracts from the quality and appearance of the streetscene as a whole. The house itself is of an entirely incongruous scale to the rest of the conservation area and built of inappropriate standardised materials, however, it is slightly set back from the road and the building line, which means that there is the potential for its detrimental visual impact to be lessened by good landscaping in the future.

6.2.4 The building now completed to the north of 1 Rock Park, on the other hand, has taken on board a number of the characteristics of the conservation area in its design and materials. However, on balance it has a detrimental effect on the conservation area for the following reasons:

- The scale of the building dominates that of its listed neighbour in width, depth, height and mass
- Being in the foreground and forward of the prevailing building line, the building visually dominates numbers 1-4 Rock Park when viewed from the jetty and Esplanade
- The building is of a quality insufficient to justify its position as a 'gateway' to Rock Park
- The detailing of the building is crude in terms of sills and other features and its prominence has made these matters highly apparent. The finishing and details are not of a quality that equates to that of the existing buildings of the conservation area.

- Some of the proportions of the building are poor relating to the existing historic buildings – the doorway in particular is undersized
- The presence of the 4<sup>th</sup> storey is not ideally suited to the building, and any construction above a cornice line needs to be demonstrably subservient to the rest of the building.
- The punctuating of the façade and roof with an array of vents, rooflights and electrical / telecommunications fittings lessens the overall quality of the building and detracts from its simple form.
- The large tarmaced forecourt for car parking is obtrusive and allows little space for the planting that requires to be established in order to soften the impact of the building.

The Council took action in respect of the unauthorised departures from the approved plans, specifically the alterations to the roofslope, rooflights and dormer details that cheapened the overall composition and undermined its contribution. Unfortunately, apart from minor amendments to the dormers, the Council was not supported in its case by the Planning Inspector. Because the developer chose a method of construction involving render covering a concrete block structure, it was not possible for planning staff to clearly see the departures from the approved plans until the rendering was predominantly complete – otherwise enforcement action may have been attempted at an earlier stage in the process.

### 6.3 UNSYMPATHETIC EXTENSIONS

- 6.3.1 There are relatively few extensions within the conservation area of a significant size. Most extensions have been to the rear or sides of houses to provide ancillary accommodation such as porches. In many cases extensions have involved the alteration of existing outriggers and therefore have not substantially changed the form of the building. The most unsympathetic of extensions are likely to be those that confuse the original form of the building and lessen the overall perception of quality. Good extensions would either use the materials and detailing of the original building or be of a modern design and construction that is of a high quality but adequately contrasting to the original.



*Extensions within the conservation area. The first two images show extensions of a similar form to elements of the original building, but lacking the quality of detailing, the third shows very poor quality and highly visible single storey additions.*



### 6.4 UNSYMPATHETIC ALTERATIONS

6.4.1 There have been many changes to the buildings within the conservation area. These changes are often detrimental to the architectural character of the building and adversely affect the perceived quality of the street or even area as a whole. These changes include:

- The insertion of new or alteration to existing openings
- Replacing original windows, within modern designs and materials such as UPVC
- The replacement of doors
- The replacement of slate roof coverings with modern tiles
- Rendering or painting over originally exposed stonework
- Poor quality repairs, particularly where using a change of material
- The installation of rooflights
- Changes to chimneys



*Unsympathetic alterations within the conservation area: (left) rooflights inserted into the roof slopes; (right) concrete pantiles*

6.4.2 The foremost alteration to historic fabric within the conservation area is the replacement of original doors and windows. These alterations are often well intentioned – to improve the thermal or acoustic performance or to reduce maintenance requirements for instance, but the visual effect, particularly on the architecturally simple buildings is immense. The original sash windows would have had very slim profiles, giving an elegant appearance. In contrast, a UPVC or aluminium replacement, particularly when holding a thick double glazed unit, has considerably thicker framing elements, which are more obtrusive visually and will let much less light into the building. To exacerbate this problem, it appears as though many of the buildings' sash windows were replaced with casements (albeit of a relatively sensitive design) many decades ago, confusing the original design intention of the building.

6.4.3 The reconfiguration of opening panes (particularly when replacing sashes with top-hung casements) dramatically changes the architectural character of the building. Where windows are replaced in timber, these can also

adversely affect the appearance of the building where the original detailing is not followed and often the quality of the timber is far substandard to the original, giving it a short lifespan. There are a few instances where secondary glazing has been used in the village (e.g. in the village hall), which will always produce a more satisfactory visual result than a double glazed equivalent. The use of UPVC windows is more prevalent amongst, although not restricted to, the unlisted buildings.



*Replacement windows within the conservation area: (top left) an example of an instance of two different configurations of sash window within a building. It is not clear which is original and either may be appropriate but together they are detrimental to the rhythm of the façade. The bottom windows is an example of a stained finish which is inappropriate to the character of the building; (top centre) the detrimental impact of casement windows feigning to be sashes; (top right) large picture windows which result in an historic building appearing to be modern; (bottom left) illustrating the way that modern windows can adversely affect the overall perception of quality to a façade; (bottom right) modern casements again changing the character of the building.*

- 6.4.4 There are a number of instances where new openings have been inserted into the walls of historic buildings. The carefully elevations of the buildings are generally particularly well proportion and as a result any new opening upsets the balance rhythm and geometry of the existing fenestration or may change the character of an intentionally plain façade. The effect of inserting a new opening through existing fabric where it penetrates through details such as cornices is particularly great.





*Photographs illustrating the detrimental impact of inserting new openings. The left-hand example shows a small window penetrating through the decorative cornice, the right shows an oriel window (possibly older) and a modern canopy that have unbalanced and changed the architectural quality of the façade. Both of these facades are particularly prominent.*

6.4.5 There are a number of further issues, which do not involve the loss or damage to historic fabric but have a detrimental affect on the appearance of the conservation area. All of these matters could be changed without or with little cost, therefore can be considered management issues. These include:

- The installation of service fixings and fixtures such as rainwater and waste pipes in prominent positions
- The repainting of facades in inappropriate colours
- Changes to the landscape setting, for example large areas of hard landscaping for car parking.
- The installation of satellite dishes and aerials.
- Bins stored in front gardens, presumably due to a lack of facilities at the rear.



*Management issues: (left) a recently painted façade; (right) waste and soil vent pipes, together with a modern fascia treatment.*

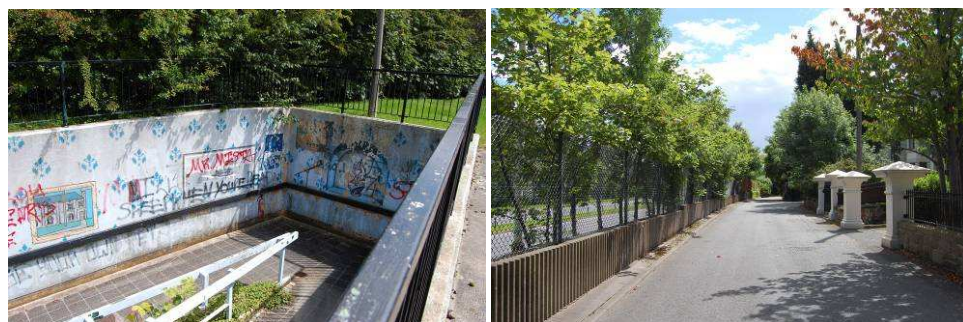
### 6.5 PUBLIC REALM

- 6.5.1 Many of the roads (most notably Rock Park itself) do not have pavements, however, where pavements exist, they are of modern materials, such as concrete slabs, with the exception of some stone kerbs. Roads are all tarmaced, although there are some areas of granite setts showing through around the junction of Bedford Road East and Rock Lane East. Although these surfaces are generally fit for purpose, they are not of a quality that corresponds to that of the listed buildings.



*(left) granite setts beneath tarmac; (right) modern concrete slab pavements with concrete walling, presumably constructed at the time of the by-pass*

- 6.5.2 Many of the most obtrusive public realm works are associated with the bypass. The underpass, connecting the two halves of Rock Park, despite decoration by the residents at the same time as the Conservation Area Partnership Scheme, has been covered in graffiti making it intimidating and an undesirable means of access, even during the day. As a result of resident pressure it has now been closed as a right of way. There are also long lengths of concrete walling which does not reflect the high quality natural materials seen in the original Rock Park elements. Immediately alongside the bypass the walling has additional chain-link fencing behind it or in other areas basic aluminium fencing is used. All of these elements are entirely unacceptable within an area of historic interest and add to the detrimental impact of the modern road itself.



*(left) the underpass; (right) wall and fencing alongside the by-pass*



- 6.5.3 The jetty, pier and esplanade are all historic features of great tourist potential but in an unsafe condition. Despite their appearance, considerable amounts of historic fabric remain, but are being lost due to erosion, vandalism and poor maintenance.



*The jetty, pier and Esplanade*

## 6.6 LOSS AND DEVELOPMENT PRESSURES

- 6.6.1 The construction of the by-pass was clearly the most considerable reason for loss of historic fabric within Rock Park's history. During, or around that time approximately 12 of the original / early villas were lost, together with the lodge and many boundary features the remaining houses. An even greater impact is to the area's character, however, with its division perhaps meaning that it will never again function as a single community and the noise and visual impact permanently blighting the buildings' qualities.

Pevsner wrote of Rock Park in his 1971 Buildings of England – Cheshire:

*'At the time of writing, the estate is remarkably complete, there having been no demolition and hardly any infill. Shortly, however, a dual-carriageway by-pass road is to be constructed, cutting the layout in two and involving the demolition of several houses and the entrance lodge. A practical alternative route exists for the road, and the unnecessary and shortsighted destruction of Rock Park is an unforgivable act of vandalism.'*

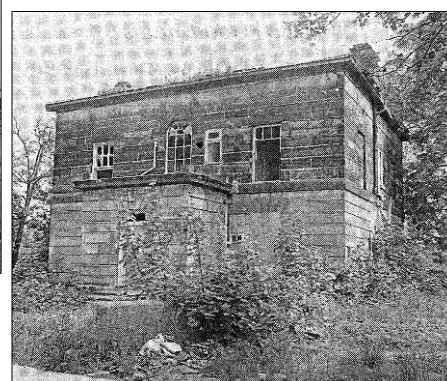


*Images of Nathaniel Hawthorne's residence*

6.6.2 The by-pass resulted in the loss of one of the area's most significant buildings; the former home of Nathaniel Hawthorne. The association of 26 Rock Park with this important figurehead would have meant that the building would have been of international significance. The other lost villas would have undoubtedly made a considerable visual contribution to the character of the area and the lodge would have been important both as a gateway to Rock Park but also as a record of how it worked as a gated community.

6.6.3 Despite the declaration of Rock Park as a conservation area in 1979 and the listing of most of the remaining villas, which should have raised the public's awareness of the significance of the area, the destruction continued. Number 1A Rock Lane East, a detached sandstone villa and the Bath House, one of the earliest structures, were both lost. These buildings had both fallen into a very poor state of repair and their demolition was apparently justified on the grounds of them being an eyesore and on public safety grounds. The Royal

Rock Hotel, perhaps one of the reasons for the citing of the planned estate, was lost in the



*Images of 1A Rock Lane East and the Baths taken from newspaper cuttings shortly before their demolition*

6.6.4 As well as many whole buildings, numerous building elements have been lost in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Original railings were presumably lost in the Second World War. Many buildings have lost original joinery features such as windows, doors and bargeboards as they have fallen into disrepair and replaced with cheaper alternatives or simply changed in accordance with the fashions of the time. Very little remains of the original walling alongside the Esplanade, presumably as its greater exposure has meant that the original fabric has eroded away and become unsafe before being replaced. However, the garden walls fronting on to the esplanade have an identifiable original pattern of construction in buff coloured sandstone; with larger stone block courses at the base giving way in two further phases of progressively smaller blocks to a final saddle-shaped coping.

### **6.7 CHANGES TO THE SETTING OF THE CONSERVATION AREA**

- 6.7.1 Industrial activities to the north have affected the setting of the conservation area. The industrial area along the Mersey near Birkenhead has encroached on Rock Park throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and the oil terminal is now very prominent. The impact is visual but also economic in that safety concerns (whether based on facts or otherwise) reduce the desirability of living in the area. The construction of the by-pass, already well documented in this report and the deprivation of the surrounding areas of Rock Ferry and New Ferry in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, have had a similar economic impact. In these areas many of the 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings have been replaced by very basic or poor quality housing.

### **7.0 SUMMARY OF SPECIAL CHARACTER**

- 7.1 The following is a list of features that are part of Rock Park Conservation Area's special character:
- Important and relatively early example of a planned speculative estate of upper-middle class housing.
  - Large group of listed buildings, each of individual architectural interest.
  - Most buildings are relatively intact with the majority of their principal features surviving.
  - Buildings are constructed of high quality materials, with the use of sandstone and slate highly prominent.
  - There is an exceptionally high level of architectural detailing, in particular that of carved stonework to window surrounds and eaves details.
  - Many of the buildings hold a remarkable position overlooking the Mersey and with views towards many of Liverpool's landmarks
  - Most buildings sit within a very green landscape with many mature trees.
  - Original or good quality and appropriate gateposts and boundary walls exist to most sites.
  - The association of the area with prominent figurehead Nathaniel Hawthorne.