INTRODUCTION.

Under Section 277 of the 1971 Town and Country Planning Act, Breckland District Council is empowered to designate Conservation Areas. A list of twenty three potential areas has been drawn up in addition to the four already designated by the County Council., which are considered worthy of Conservation because of their architectural and historic importance.

It should be emphasized that Conservation does not imply the fossilization of settlements. In essence it endeavours to resolve the conflicting economic and aesthetic demands made on our architectural heritage, in such a way that the appearance of towns and villages is enhanced. To achieve this, growth and change in settlements must be allowed, and in this context Litcham is classified as a Category (ii) village in the County Interim Settlement Policy., "where estate development on a modest scale would be appropriate". Although recent growth has not always been translated into good design, in future higher standards of residential development will be required.

Although this policy statement refers primarily to the Conservation Area, designation is only the first step in the preparation of a more general environmental appraisal, in the context of an overall policy for the parish.

HISTORICAL GROWTH.

The recorded history of Litcham is scant and explains little of its origins or subsequent growth. A settlement was originally established on higher ground above the marshy valley bottom, but near a point where the river could be forded. It soon developed as a route centre to the extent that during the reign of Edward I., it received the right to hold a weekly market. This was at a time when successive kings pursued an active policy of creating market towns as a new source of revenue. Some, because of more favourable locations, grew at the expense of others. Litcham was one of those which declined so that by 1836 White observed that the market had long since been obsolete. Something of its former atmosphere is still embodied in the plan and fabric of the village, particularly Church Street. It was surely here that the market was held - it would certainly explain its unusual width and the elegance of its houses.

SETTING.

From Priory Farm in the bottom of the Upper Nar Valley the road climbs gradually uphill past the Church and into the, village centre
which sits astride the B1145 at a point where several roads and country lanes converge. From most directions Litcham is approached across bleak, arable farmland, relieved only by stag-headed trees and occasional hedges. Dropping down into the village and the wooded valley bottom is refreshing. Here the spaces are closely defined by warm brick and flint cottages knit together by garden walls, trees and conifer hedges. The contrast between these two environments is enhanced by some very well-defined edges to the village, unspoilt by ragged new development. Each main approach is marked by good individual or groups of buildings often strengthened by a backcloth of large mature trees.

This is particularly true of the road from Lexham, beyond the baronial Police Station (1947), cottages and out buildings cluster before Litcham Hall, itself unusually near the road for such a notable Georgian building. The meadow opposite is however an integral part of - its setting and should not be developed. One magnificent beech by the roadside frames the view into the village.

The eastern edge is emphatic with a mass of trees in and around a disused chalk pit which has been included in the Conservation Area not only for its visual effect but also for its wildlife interest. Further south Chalk Farm is a compact group of buildings surrounded by open fields, but beyond, a wedge of "quality" development has been driven into the rectory grounds, at the expense of an important line of trees. The development is regrettable, not so much because of the materials used, but because its layout is so unimaginative on a site which had such potential. The only redeeming features are the remaining belts of trees. Straight ahead at the crossroads-stands a fanciful 18th century cottage with small pointed windows everywhere, heavy hood-moulding and stepped gable.

The southern approach is quite different alders, willows and the spread of The Warren punctuate valley bottom meadows. Just across the river Priory Farm has an impressive range of outbuildings as well as a tall 18th century farmhouse which marks the beginning of the village. It is unusual in that it incorporates the remains of a 14th century hermitage. The result is a curious mixture of domestic redbrick and ecclesiastical limestone embodied in projecting buttresses.

**FORM AND CHARACTER.**

Litcham is an intricate network of streets and lanes which converge at two points - at the corner of Litcham Hall where Pound Lane begins, and in the centre by the Bull Hotel. They are connected by two parallel streets- Front Street and the narrower Back Street, a
fairly common arrangement in larger villages. Back Street acted as a rear service road for carts and wagons and gave direct access to nearby fields via a system of paths and tracks. The character of this area is small scale and domestic, set very firmly by short rows of 18th and 19th century cottages in redbrick and flint with pantiled roof and shallow arched openings. Uphill from the Bull are several large Victorian houses set behind shiny tarred walls and conifers. They are plain with large sash windows and hipped slate roofs. Further uphill are more terraced cottages, firstly 18th century with simple brick facades, and beyond, some late 19th century equivalents - much more solid with heavy red brick dressing and chalk stained flint. The effect is assertive and very like the Methodist Chapel (1909) in Front Street.

In contrast to the main east-west axis, Church Street is wide and impressive as it slopes down hill, until it sweeps round, narrows and continues towards Priory Farm. Not surprisingly the buildings here near the Church are larger and more elegant - 18th century houses in red brick pedimented doorways, tumbled gables and regular sash windows. These include the Old School House now crowded from behind by the new school buildings. Their massing, flat roof and drab red-brown brickwork strike a discord so close to the centre. The Church itself is set back and a little above the road behind a tall crowded row of trees. Its tower in redbrick with little pinnacles dates from 1699.

PRESSURES.

Litcham has experienced relatively little demand for new housing in recent years, although the short cul-de-sacs and single dwellings are in general poorly designed and bear little relation to the form and materials of traditional buildings in the village. In addition several cottages, notably in Front Street, have recently been rendered and had unsuitable modern windows inserted. But change has rather been brought about by the demolition of a number of properties - occasionally to make way for new development, but more significantly in response to Demolition Orders made under the Public Health Acts.

This has occurred particularly along Back Street where few buildings now survive. Instead there are ugly and untidy gaps, and a poorly surfaced car park which together with a rash of wires and poles create a very unattractive area right in the centre of the village. Further along another large gap reveals Manor Drive opposite. It, exposed entrance badly needs a few larger trees for instant effect. Opposite the Bull Hotel a small green has been created by the removal of a corner building. Although the view up Church Street now
lacks a terminal point, it has opened out this otherwise closely defined area. It could however, look so much more attractive if properly laid out.

The present unsatisfactory appearance of Back Street is due also to the imminent road widening scheme programmed for next financial year. In recent years the B1145, which runs through the heart of the village, has been increasingly used as an alternative route between King's Lynn and Norwich. Once implemented, Back Street should look much tidier and somewhat different. Here is a very real opportunity to enhance the area by ensuring that the details of the scheme - the positioning of road signs, the use of materials retrieved from demolished buildings, the choice of kerb stones, paving, etc., - achieve a high standard of design in such a sensitive area. It might also be possible to underground or re-site the wires and create a second small grass area where the car park now stands.

POLICIES.

Breckland intends to ensure;

1. A very high standard of design for all new development and modernisation within the Conservation Area, to be achieved by using the architectural vocabulary embodied in the traditional buildings of the village:

2. Enhancement of the area by treating eyesores and providing additional amenities. All this will be achieved by a combined use of the existing planning legislation, wide consultation and voluntary effort.

Existing Buildings. The 1974 Town and Country Amenities Act ensures that no building within the designated area can be demolished without planning permission. Designation also strengthens the case for adding buildings to the statutory List of Buildings of Architectural or Historic Interest. The original list is now woefully inadequate, omitting many of less obvious importance. Only a few buildings in addition to the Church are listed and therefore require permission for even minor alterations. Today, most of the buildings constructed before about 1850 should be protected. A list is being prepared for further study with this in view.

New Buildings. - Applications should be accompanied by details of design and materials., and will normally be given wide local publicity. The Planning Authority is also empowered, by use of Article 4 Directions, to bring within its control, various types of permitted development, such as garages and farm buildings, which might threaten the area.
Trees. - Trees are an integral part of the village. The 1974 Act does require owners within the Conservation Area to give at least six weeks notice before felling or lopping, but a selective policy of Preservation Orders is required to safeguard the most valuable groups of trees. This should ideally be accompanied by a planting scheme in and around the village, and it is hoped that the Parish will take advantage of Breckland District Council's planting programme.

Street Furniture. - The accumulative effect of wires, signs and surfaces can so easily ruin the appearance of an area. Although the Planning Authority have little direct control over such details, much can be achieved through close consultation with the relevant authorities. In this connection, the County Surveyor is being consulted on the new road scheme for Back Street, for traffic signs, parking areas, street lighting and resurfacing, and the Post Office and Electricity Board on overhead wires. There are also many opportunities for local residents to instigate small-scale improvement schemes in consultation with the Local Planning Authority, to remove or screen eyesores, clear and maintain footpaths, and provide well-designed facilities such as seating and litter bins.

Consultation. - Two way consultation is an integral part of the Conservation process. All planning applications will be automatically referred to the Parish Council for their observations, and it is hoped that local opinion will be channelled through the Council and that any other matters concerning Conservation in the village will be brought to the attention of the Planning Authority.

February 1975