

Spaxton Parish Plan - Part 1

The authors of this document acknowledge the Village Design Statements of neighbouring Quantock Hills parishes, and the Village Design Statement guidance published by the Countryside Agency (formerly Countryside Commission).

We are also indebted to:- The Countryside Agency for a generous grant to cover the costs of research and publication: The Community Council for Somerset for guidance particularly in the early stages: Sedgemoor District Council for guidance in finalising the document: The staff of the Quantock Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (hereafter AONB) for their generous support and help with the costs of photocopying: Hinkley Point for duplicating the questionnaire which went to the whole parish: The staff of Sedgemoor District Council Community Planning Department: The Spaxton Society: The inhabitants of Spaxton parish and to the Parish Council, without whom this document would not have existed.

1. INTRODUCTION

This design statement concerns the parish of Spaxton. Included in the parish is an area inside the Quantock AONB which is subject to specific planning constraints. This design statement has been prepared by a working party of local people, working under the aegis of the Spaxton Society, a local amenity group, with the full support of the Parish Council.

The purpose of this village design statement is to influence the ongoing maintenance of the village and to guide future developments. It should be used by residents, planners, developers, builders and public bodies as a framework for the future structure of the village.

This statement has been derived from the views of the residents of Spaxton Parish through a process of consultation which involved:-

- _ the setting up of a working party open to all, at the instigation of the Parish Council.
- _ the use of a questionnaire, circulated to every household in the parish, to gather material relevant to the production of both this Village Design Statement and a Parish Plan.
- _ an all-day display and presentation in March 2002 in the Village Hall, with speakers from the Quantock AONB, the Community Council, and from Sedgemoor District Council.
- _ display of draft Parish Plan and Village Design Statement for comment at the Spaxton Flower Show in August 2002.
- _ an open evening meeting in January 2003 to discuss the proposed Village Design Statement and Parish Plan.
- _ consultation with Sedgemoor District Council Planning Department.
- _ approval of the final document by Spaxton Parish Council.

This culminated in adoption of the Village Design Statement as supplementary planning guidance by Sedgemoor District Council on 16/07/2003. The Sedgemoor District Local Plan contains relevant development policies and this Village Design Statement provides more detailed guidelines for building design work in the parish.

2. PARISH CONTEXT

2.1 Geographical Location

Spaxton village is situated on a ridge between streams which run down from the hills to join the River Parrett. The village lies at the

edge of the slopes of the Quantock Hills which form its southern and western backdrop. To the north the undulating landscape falls away to the Bristol Channel and there are far reaching views in the east across the Somerset Levels to the Mendip Hills. To the west of the parish lies the 16 hectare Hawkridge Reservoir, built in the 1950s to supply water to the Bridgwater area.

The parish stretches from the A39 road in the north almost to the crest of the Quantocks in the south at Buncombe Hill. The southern part of the parish is part of the Quantock AONB, created in 1957 and the first in England. The village itself lies outside of the AONB though the hamlets of Aisholt and Merridge lie within it.

Recommendations 7.01 7.02

2.2 History

There have been settlements in the area of Spaxton from early times. Aerial photographs suggest the existence of possible iron age farmsteads in the fields around Four Forks. The remains of a Roman farmhouse with heated floors was found at Roughmoor in the east of the parish. The name of Spaxton is Anglo-Saxon and may mean the enclosure of the speaker or counsellor. Spaxton appears in Domesday Book and the oldest part of the parish church may date from then, though the majority of the current building was built in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Although Spaxton currently presents itself as a linear village spread out along the road from Bridgwater to the Quantock Hills, this is the result of quite recent infilling and development. Before the 19th century the population was more scattered, living in the surrounding hamlets as well as the settlements at Spaxton West End and around the church. Apart from the church, there are at least three other medieval buildings in the parish. These are Court Farm to the north of the church, Clerk's Cottage, south of Four Forks, which incorporates a 15th century hall, and Gothelney Hall at Charlynch.

2.3 Present Day Spaxton

The parish currently (2003) has approximately 1000 inhabitants, the majority of whom live in Spaxton or Four Forks. At the time of writing, there are about a dozen working farms in Spaxton parish.

Spaxton is fortunate to possess a wide range of amenities. It has a church, a successful primary school, a shop with post office, a garage, and a public house. In addition there is a well-used village hall with a children's playground and two sports fields. The village hall has just been extensively improved thanks to a generous bequest from a former inhabitant of Spaxton together with grant assistance, and through much hard work by a dedicated voluntary committee. The Parish Council purchased the second sports field in 2002, with a major financial contribution from the Junior Football Club and grant assistance from Sport England.

2.4 Planning Constraints

The southern part of the parish lies within the AONB and is subject to very strict planning constraints so as to maintain and enhance the visual attractiveness of the area.

The ancient nucleus of the Spaxton settlement is a designated conservation area. This includes St. Margaret's Church, Court Farm, and the former water mills at Tuckers Mill and Splatt Mill.

The Bridgwater Area Local Plan, adopted in August 1995, defined a "village development boundary" around two built up areas at Spaxton and Four Forks which allowed for a limited amount of new housing development. These boundaries are unchanged in the Draft Sedgemoor District Local Plan. New development in the parish will generally be limited to small infill sites, extension or redevelopment of existing buildings, conversions, new boundaries, and agricultural or other buildings requiring a countryside location.

There are 33 listed buildings in the parish.

Recommendations 7.02 7.03

3. LANDSCAPE SETTING

The parish is mostly agricultural with some small woods and a number of streams. On the extreme west it reaches almost to the ridge of the Quantocks and the thin soils of Aisholt Common; the east of the parish has rich pastures and arable fields on top of heavy Mercian Mudstone Series marls. Originally the parish must have had many small fields, surrounded by banked hedges of elm, hawthorn, field maple and other shrub species, and dotted with numerous hedgerow trees of oak, elm and ash. The elm trees are gone though the elm species survives in the hedges. The oaks are now mature or over-mature and most young trees seem to be ash. With a few exceptions, new hedgerow trees seem to be fortuitous survivors rather than planted or deliberately encouraged to grow. On the low-lying areas of the parish a number of hedges have been removed to create large fields . Waterfowl frequent Hawkridge reservoir which also provides trout fishing. The Somerset Trust for Nature Conservancy owns part of Aisholt Wood.

Recommendations 7.04 7.05 7.06 7.07

4. SETTLEMENTS, BUILDINGS AND SPACES

Spaxton village comprises 3 distinct areas; Splatt Lane and the conservation area, High Street stretching from West End to the Village Hall, and Four Forks.

The historic buildings found in the original settlement around the church now form a conservation area. Abutting the churchyard is a pair of cottages which may have been the medieval church house, used for meetings such as the sale of 'church ales' for fund raising. Also within this are Cook's Almshouses of 1708, Court Farm and two former mills ('The Old Mill' and 'Splatt Mill'). Court Farm has 15th century freestone windows and doors. Other Spaxton houses may be of considerable antiquity but the lack of suitable local freestone meant that their windows were wooden and have been renewed.

There is a recent development of starter homes at Routleys Orchard in two short staggered terraces.

High Street has only become a continuous settlement within the last century. The crossroads where the roads to Pightley and Nether Stowey branch off, is the centre of a group of (apparently) pre-19th century stone and rendered-stone houses. This nucleus of houses around West End has now been extended to the north, west and east.

Four Forks, lying at the extreme east of the medieval parish, probably takes its name from the crossroads between the Charlynch to Barford road and the Spaxton to Bridgwater road. It currently has most of the amenities of Spaxton:- the Post Office and Shop, the Lamb Inn, and Waterman's Garage. Limited development along the main road in the early 19th century was followed by intensive speculative development of the large field to the south-west of the crossroads from the 1830s onwards. This area has many cottage type houses of rendered cob, rough local red sandstone or mixed cob and stone traditional to the area. These date from between 1830 (e.g. the Lamb Inn) and 1910 (The Cottages). The unusual, almost urban, character of this area is added to by the presence of the disused chapel of the Agapemonites, a notorious Victorian sect, and a number of early 20th century 'Arts and Crafts' houses.

In Charlynch Lane are two small groups of cottages, mostly of 19th or early 20th century date, which represent the main settlement of the former parish of Charlynch. The now de-consecrated Charlynch church lies on the hill above this road, accompanied by the former rectory and school. The rectory, now two houses, is partially 17th century, partially Georgian. All three buildings are now private dwellings, but the lych gate and southern half of the churchyard are in the care of the Parochial Church Council.

Twinell Lane, which ends at Hawkridge Reservoir, represents the western continuation of Church Road across Peartwater Road. A small group of mainly 19th and 20th century buildings lies at or near the road junction.

Further along is the former Twinhill Mill and mill house, both of 17th century origin.

Further afield are more small hamlets. North of Spaxton village lie Currypool and Radlet. All have old houses, including two long farmhouses perhaps of 17th century at Radlet. Aisholt, Merridge, Bush and Pightley lie south-west and south of Spaxton. Bush Farmhouse is of 16th century origin.

Pightley has a number of cottages and larger houses dating from between the 15th and the 19th century. Both Aisholt and Merridge consist largely of traditional buildings, with very little modern development.

The parish's 33 listed buildings include churches, two former manor houses, a mill, substantial farmhouses, thatched cottages and the former Agapemone Chapel. Each has its own architectural interest and collectively they display a richness and diversity of character which is supplemented by many unlisted old buildings throughout the parish.

Before the 20th century most buildings and boundary walls in the parish were built of local stone and this has been a major contribution to local character. The underlying geology varies across the parish but has yielded at least two types of red sandstone, limestone, slates (not roofing slate) and siltstone of varied dark red-grey colouring. These stones have mainly been used as rough-hewn "rubble". Finer quality freestone dressings for some buildings may have been imported from elsewhere in the county.

The stonework was often rendered and, or, colour-washed. Bricks were often used for chimneys, quoins, window arches and surrounds. Window openings were also formed with timber lintels which are occasionally visible and there are several historic properties with mullioned windows in stone or timber. Thatched roofs were probably once commonplace and several thatched properties remain. Some roofs are slate but red clay tiles became

predominant. Bricks and tiles are likely to have come from local brickworks in Bridgwater and have a characteristic warm red colour.
Recommendation 7.09

Most of the buildings erected since the 1930s have departed from traditional materials and styles in one or more ways. Former local authority houses built as short rows of identical semi-detached pairs introduced a suburbanising influence. This has been compounded by later private developments which can be variously criticised in terms of form, siting, materials and boundaries which have commonly lacked any real sensitivity to their local context. Dwellings have included many bungalows and large detached houses of un-rendered brick, being neither of a specifically local character nor in scale with pre-existing buildings.
Recommendations 7.01 7.03 7.08 7.09 7.10 7.11

5. HIGHWAYS, TRAFFIC AND SIGNS

Spaxton and its surrounding hamlets are reached by narrow winding lanes. Together with the bridleways and footpaths these roads form a dense network of communications over the central and southern parts of the parish. The north-south road from Taunton to Nether Stowey, which joins the eastwest road at the head of Hawkridge Reservoir, is used as a link between Taunton and the villages to the north of Nether Stowey. This road is not suitable for any quantity of traffic or heavy lorries.
Recommendation 7.12

The parish has 42km of footpaths and bridleways, the condition of which was recorded in some detail in the 'Milestones' survey of 1994/95. A number of these have been signposted from the roadsides, but there is almost no waymarking and many of them are difficult to use or impassable. The newly created 'Quantock Greenway', which is intended to lure visitors away from over-visited parts of the hills, passes through the parish.
Recommendation 7.13

The parish has retained several cast iron signposts and post boxes of traditional design. There is street lighting at the southern end of Splatt Lane. Security lighting is becoming more common, but it needs to be installed in a way that avoids light pollution in the rural environment. Some recent developments seem to involve a large number of lights, which are left on all night.

Recommendations 7.13 7.14 7.15

One of the least attractive aspects of the village is the abundance of poles and overhead cables. Laying these underground would be an obvious, though hardly cheap, step to improving the appearance of the village. This has already been done for safety reasons at the playing fields beside the village hall.

Recommendation 7.16

6. PROPERTY ALTERATIONS AND DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

If the exterior of a building is to be altered, or if changes to paintwork, front garden or boundaries are planned, those concerned should be encouraged to look at the property as if they were impartial observers and ask the following questions:-

- _ How is this building distinguished from those around it and in what ways does it relate to them? Roof lines, roofing materials and hues, chimney and window forms and materials, and boundary structures should be sympathetic to neighbouring properties and to local tradition.
- _ Does the building have any special or distinctive features such as doors, windows, architectural embellishments, which need to be retained?
- _ Can other buildings that have been restored, converted, or changed, provide any lessons for good or bad design?

- _ Will the proposed developments be sympathetic to the immediate environment and to the building's history? Can the desired changes be achieved in ways that do not degrade the building or its environment?
- _ Are the proportions of windows and doors being maintained?
- _ Can matching materials be used?
- _ Has the owner, architect, developer, and builder read these guidelines?

Above all, it must be realised that it is possible not just to resist unsympathetic changes or developments, but to actually enhance the attractiveness not only of new, but also existing buildings. For example, exposed brick could be rendered to bring it into line with local tradition, and metal or plastic windows replaced by modern wooden ones which can be equally functional and durable.

Sedgemoor District Council's development control staff can provide advice on the need for planning permission, and listed building or conservation area consent in individual cases. The Council's Landscape Officer is responsible for trees affected by tree preservation orders.

Recommendations 7.08 7.09 7.11 7.12

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

7.01

Development over the last 100 years has turned a village that consisted of scattered clusters of buildings into a linear settlement. We believe that it is important that some of the former clustered nature of the housing be retained. In particular we follow the Local Plan Development Boundary in strongly recommending that the open areas between the school and the Methodist Chapel on the

south of High Street, and the gap between Four Forks and the rest of Spaxton be maintained. These allow locals and travellers alike sudden and inviting glimpses of the Quantock Hills. In addition the space between Four Forks and the rest of Spaxton emphasises the very different nature of the two settlements.

7.02

Spaxton is set in beautiful countryside and a characteristic feature of the village is that there are far reaching views of the sea, the Mendip Hills and the Quantock Hills. These views can be seen from many points in the village. Any new development should endeavour to retain this feature. Views back from the Quantock Hills towards Spaxton should be preserved and enhanced. This involves not just monitoring developments in Spaxton village, so as to preserve open spaces, but also those in the land between the village and the hills.

7.03

Planning criteria for listed buildings and conservation areas should be rigorously enforced.

7.04

Developments involving the destruction of existing hedges, mature trees, and the canalisation or piping of streams should be resisted.

7.05

Thought needs to be given to the long term maintenance of the current landscape. Many of the hedges around the parish are in need of sympathetic attention to mend gaps. Drastic mechanical cutting should be avoided. In particular the gaps in the hedges between Four Forks and the rest of Spaxton should be systematically replanted.

7.06

Many of the existing hedgerow trees are of a considerable age. Current hedge cutting practices need to be modified so as to permit new tree growth. The elms lost to Dutch Elm Disease some decades ago cannot regenerate and encouragement needs to be given to landowners to actively plant new trees in their hedges, so that the well wooded appearance of the landscape be maintained.

7.07

The use of quick growing alien conifers as garden or agricultural fencing should be discouraged.

7.08

Architectural drawings should show new developments or alterations in their environmental context, especially when they are visible in the street scene or from other public vantage points.

7.09

Buildings and walls in new developments should reflect the predominance of local stone or render as the traditional materials, with red brick generally reserved for architectural detailing. Salvaging and re-use of local stone is to be encouraged. Reconstituted stone is inappropriate as it is unlikely to replicate the characteristic irregularity of the local stone used in Spaxton.

7.10

New developments should respect the scale and character of their surroundings. Garages and outbuildings should have pitched roofs. Boundary walls of local stone can often help new development blend with its village setting. Large expanses of concrete or tarmac for driveways should be discouraged, and greater use of natural materials be used instead, to soften the appearance.

7.11

The height and pitch of roofs should be in sympathy with those of surrounding buildings.

7.12

We see it as important that the historic, winding character of parish lanes be preserved, making sure that any unavoidable widening be blended in.

7.13

It is expected that the County Council will retain and maintain cast iron signposts at road junctions. Timber finger posts marking rights of way are most appropriate in this rural area. Street names should in future be metal rather than plastic.

7.14

One of the assets of villages like Spaxton is the view one gets of the stars on cloudless nights. Given the growing awareness of the loss caused by 'light pollution', we recommend that no street lighting be introduced.

7.15

It is incumbent on all the inhabitants of the parish to ensure that security lighting and associated lights do not detract from the natural darkness of the rural environment.

7.16

We recommend that thought be given to the progressive placement of overhead wires and cables in underground conduits.