

Land at Fives Court, Angel Lane, Mere, Wiltshire

Heritage Impact Statement

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ABSTRACT

Avon Archaeology Limited was commissioned by Kate Stethridge, of Wiltshire Council, to undertake a Heritage Impact Statement as a follow up project to a full Desk-Based Assessment which had been carried out by AAL in November 2022. The site is in Angel Lane, Mere, Wiltshire, and is currently occupied by a modern care home building immediately to the south of the town centre. It is intended to establish sheltered housing for elderly residents, but proposals for exactly how this is to be achieved, are not yet finalised. The proposal is currently at pre-app stage, and this report, together with the Desk-Based Assessment already completed, will form a part of the formal planning submission for the project. The present, additional review should be read in conjunction with the earlier DBA. The site falls just outside, and to the south of, the boundary of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB, and within the boundary of the Mere town centre Conservation Area.

There are no Scheduled Monuments on the site itself or indeed within Mere – the nearest being on Castle Hill, to the north of the town, and a small group of Bronze Age barrows immediately to its west. A burial, supposedly of early medieval date, was identified on a site less than 50m to its south-east, but otherwise, there is very little known about the archaeological resource either on the site itself or in its immediate vicinity.

In terms of below ground heritage assets, it is probable that damage has already been done within the footprint of the building itself, but the same may not apply to the car parks and other open spaces around it. It is certainly the case that at one time or another, the area within the site boundary was at the least partially occupied by various (probably agricultural) buildings of post-medieval, and specifically 19th century origin. However, in the mid-1990s, a nationally-important, furnished inhumation burial, of Anglo-Saxon date, was discovered only a few



metres to the south of the study site's southern boundary. The location is well away from the site of the medieval parish church, which itself is likely to have been of at least late Anglo-Saxon foundation. It is unclear how this single chance discovery fits into the general context of contemporary activity, settlement and other burial sites in the immediate area; nonetheless its importance makes it a material consideration for present purposes, especially if it might have been part of a cemetery.

In terms of the specific remit of this report, however, which is to examine potential impacts of the new development on two main heritage assets (the church of St Michael to the west of the site, and the so-called Fives Court Wall to its north), and on the wider Mere Conservation Area, it is our judgement that, when balanced against the clear public good that will accrue from provision of a new care home facility, the potential impacts (or 'harms' in the language of the NPPF) can be characterised as less than substantial.



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NOTES

Whereas Avon Archaeology Limited have taken all possible care to produce a comprehensive summary of the known and recorded archaeological evidence, no responsibility can be accepted for any omissions of fact or opinion, however caused.

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HERITAGE IMPACT STATEMENT

1 Introduction

1.1 The following account is intended to examine the setting of the site, and its significance within the context of the local landscape, and other nearby heritage assets. We have taken as our overarching guiding document in this respect the formal Historic England standard and guidance relating to the settings of historic sites and buildings, originally published in 2017 (Historic England 2017). The foregoing review (Desk-Based Assessment) has already laid the groundwork for what follows, and the following aspects have already been covered:

- Topography and Geology
- Historical Background
- Archaeological Background
- Historic Map Evidence

It is important that the present document should be read *in conjunction* with the earlier, full DBA. The fundamental planning policy issues, both local and national, have also already been covered, but it will be necessary here to look in rather more depth at further elements of these areas, as and when they arise. It is further to be noted, however, that the present UK administration inherited from the previous government, a detailed and extensive process of review of the NPPF. Far-reaching modifications to the present text (December 2024) are expected, the overwhelming imperative being to 'streamline' the planning process with the simple aim of making it faster at every part of the planning framework. It is not yet known how this review will, ultimately, impinge on general matters of heritage and heritage assets; but for the time being at least, Section 16 of the Current NPPF continues to apply, and archaeology and related subjects remain matters of

'material consideration' that must be taken into account as development projects go through the planning process.

2 Planning Policies and Guidance Documents

2.1 As already stated, some of this material is, inevitably, carried over from the preceding Desk-Based Assessment, but in this section it is to be approached from a rather different perspective. By far the most relevant of the very many formal guidance documents in this respect however, from any official body, is Historic England's *The Setting of Heritage Assets* (2nd edn, 2017), which we have already mentioned. This advice note focuses on the management of change within the setting of heritage assets. This document aims to aid practitioners with the implementation of national legislation, policies and guidance relating to the setting of heritage assets found in various disparate sources and guidance, but most notably the NPPF itself. The guidance is largely a continuation of the philosophy and approach of earlier iterations, and does not present a divergence in either the definition of setting or the way in which it should be assessed.

2.2 As with the NPPF the document defines setting as '*the surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve*' (HE 2017, 2). Setting is also described as being a separate term to curtilage, character and context. The guidance emphasises that setting is not a heritage asset, nor a heritage designation, and that its importance lies in what it contributes to the significance of the heritage asset, or the ability to appreciate that significance. It also states that elements of setting may make a positive, negative or neutral contribution to the significance of the heritage asset.

2.3 While setting is largely a visual term, with views considered to be an important consideration in any assessment of the contribution that setting makes to the significance of an asset, and thus the way in which an asset is experienced, setting also encompasses other environmental factors including noise, vibration and odour. Historical and cultural associations may also form part of the asset's setting, which can inform or enhance the significance of a heritage asset.

2.4 This Historic England text provides guidance on practical and proportionate decision making with regards to the management of change within the setting of heritage assets. It is stated that the protection of the setting of a heritage asset need not prevent change and that decisions relating to such issues need to be based on the nature, extent and level of the significance of a heritage asset, further weighing up the potential public benefits associated with the proposals. It is further stated that changes within the setting of a heritage asset may have positive or neutral effects. These points have a very particular bearing on the case of the present site.

2.5 The document also states that the contribution made to the significance of heritage assets by their settings will vary depending on the nature of the heritage asset and its setting, and that different heritage assets may have different abilities to accommodate change without harming their significance. Setting should, therefore, be assessed on a case by case basis. Historic England recommends using a series of detailed steps in order to assess the potential effects of a proposed development on significance of a heritage asset. The 5-step process is as follows:

1. Identify which heritage assets and their settings are affected;
2. Assess the degree to which these settings and views make a contribution to the significance of a heritage asset(s) or allow significance to be appreciated;

3. Assess the effects of the proposed development, whether beneficial or harmful, on the significance or on the ability to appreciate it;
4. Explore ways to maximise enhancement and avoid or minimise harm; and
5. Make and document the decision and monitor outcomes (*ibid*, 8).

3 Identification of Heritage Assets

3.1 The preceding Desk-Based Assessment has already identified those assets which lie closest to the site, but for present purposes, by far the overwhelming concern will be with potential impacts on historic buildings, and in this context, those buildings are the ones which are protected by statutory listing. It is relevant to remind ourselves at this point that, as we have already noted in the preceding Desk-Based Assessment, the entire historic core of Mere lies within a formally designated Conservation Area, which includes the study site, towards the southern boundary of the CA, and a whole suite of listed buildings. This is a formal designation relating to heritage protection, and will certainly represent a material consideration in the local authority's deliberations regarding any formal planning application which will be submitted in relation to the study site. In the immediate vicinity of the site, there are in fact only a few buildings which are likely to be relevant for present purposes. The site is effectively completely shielded from view from Church Street, lying as it does well behind that street frontage, and, indeed, is also set well back from the eastern side of the Angel Lane frontage. There are three listed buildings in the immediate vicinity of the site which the local authority might regard as material considerations for present purposes, in terms of potential impacts on them of the proposed development. An additional level of visual blocking is provided by the surprisingly unlisted barn which stands on the northern side of the entrance to the study site, and which very effectively screens the site entrance from the northern end of Angel Lane.

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- The so-called Fives Court Wall, fully discussed in the Desk-Based Assessment. This is a Grade II Listed structure, and is record DWI7950 on the Wiltshire Historic Environment Record. On the National Heritage List it is 1130743. The formal listing description dates it to the 19th century, but the explicit evidence for this is not stated. The 'function' and ultimate origin of this structure are likewise completely obscure.
 - The R & M Cochran building, to the north of the study site, fronting onto the southern side of The Square. This is grade II Listed, and is record DWI8028 on the Wiltshire HER. It is 1318647 on the National Heritage List. The listing actually covers modern property numbers 4-5 The Square but it seems clear that originally, what is now no. 5, consisting of a combined shop and house, was originally two properties. And indeed the formal listing description notes it as consisting of 'two houses and shop in a row'. This property includes two north-south ranges attached to the rear (southern) elevation of the building, which are completely invisible when looking at the northern elevation from The Square. These are not separately mentioned in the formal listing description, but we presume that they are included within the statutory protection by virtue of being within the curtilage of the listed building. The date of the latter is given by Historic England as 18th century. However, it is possible that this date may be incorrect, and we wonder if instead an existing timber framed building was merely refronted in the 18th century. We think that this building would benefit from being examined again, with a view to revising the formal listing description, especially in terms of the possible actual date of the building. However, this would only be possible through a thorough internal survey, and that will not be possible under the present ownership of the building.
 - It seems clear however that, notwithstanding the presence of the Conservation Area, and the building and structure noted above, the main concern of the local authority is most likely to centre around potential

impacts on the church of St Michael the Archangel and its graveyard, the eastern boundary of which lies about 120m due west of the centre of the study site. As might be expected of an anciently-founded church, it is Grade I Listed. It is DWI7892 on the Wiltshire HER, and 1130755 on the National Heritage List. As might be expected, the formal listing description for such an important historic building, is long and detailed, and that narrative is not the direct concern of this report. The overriding concern for present purposes is in the relationship between the two sites (ie the study site and the church), and the extent, if any, of potential impact of new development at the former, upon the latter. To a large extent, the details of the physical structure of the church are immaterial in this context. The most important consideration is that it is *the* focal feature within Mere's historic townscape, acting as a visual fulcrum from which all of the surrounding buildings take their cue, and around which, historically, the town *itself* is likely to have been structured from a very early date. It can be stated with a high degree of confidence that there is likely to have been a church on that site by the year 1000 CE.

4 Assessment of Significance

4.1 The author had paid a personal visit to the site for the purposes of the preceding Desk-Based Assessment, but paid a second visit explicitly for the present Heritage Impact Statement, as somewhat different imperatives were involved. This visit was carried out on Monday, 20th Jan., 2025. A new photographic record was made for this return visit, and especially, the use of an aerial drone allowed us to gain a somewhat wider perspective on the study site's relationship with its immediate environs. It seems to us that the south-western quadrant of the Mere Conservation Area, bounded by Salisbury Street and Church Street on the north and west, and Boar Street to the east, represents a convenient and realistic framework within which briefly to assess the significance

of the three major assets already noted, and their relationship to the proposed development site.

4.2 Setting. We have already noted the presence of the three main listed buildings which are those with the greatest potential for impact from the proposed development, and the fact that by virtue of its position on a rear plot, set well back from both the main frontage of Church Street, and from the frontage of the very minor route of Angel Lane, the study site in and of itself, and the present structures upon it, have a visual impact upon their surroundings which can reasonably be described as considerably less than significant. There are currently five main structures, fulfilling accommodation and other functions, and all are single storey save for one. In simple terms, the site as it is currently disposed, is visually unobtrusive - one is virtually on top of it before one realises that it is even there. What is important here will be the relationship of the study site to both the three main identified assets (above), and 'its' part of the wider Mere CA, and while it is simply not possible to assess this with complete objectivity, there are key points which, in our judgement, are absolutely fundamental in arriving at any kind of meaningful judgement in this respect. And this matter turns on a central issue, namely the height and massing of the proposed new building.

4.3 As we have already noted, views to the site from the northern end of Angel Lane, looking south, are entirely blocked by the northern elevation of the unlisted, but historic barn which stands on the northern side of the entrance into the site. The barn is, in effect, a two storey building, and it has something of the same effect on views from *within* the site, looking to the north and north-west. The barn forms the southern element of what was clearly a farm yard, and a range of buildings extending to its north forms the eastern side of the yard. These are clearly later than the barn, and are only of single-storey height, but they reinforce the visual blocking both from within the site, and looking towards it from Angel

Lane. Indeed this former farmyard has the effect of completely obscuring views into the site from Angel Lane (**Plate 5**). Also, currently, looking *out* of the site towards the rear (southern) elevation of the listed asset known as the Cochran building, fronting onto the southern side of The Square, there does not appear to be any intervisibility whatsoever, even to the two north-south ranges attached to the rear elevation of the building. As we have already noted, these two ranges are completely invisible when looking at the northern elevation of that building from The Square. The same is true of the so-called Fives Court Wall, from and to which there is no intervisibility with the site from ground level.

4.4 Turning to the asset which it is likely will be of most concern to the local authority, the church of St Michael the Archangel, to the west of the study site. Exactly opposite to the site, an alleyway-type footpath leads westward off the western side of Angel Lane, directly into the south-eastern corner of the churchyard (**Plate 3**). From the site entrance, the main body of the church itself is completely invisible, with views blocked by buildings of various heights on the western side, and to the west of, Angel Lane, on the northern side of the footpath. The only part of the church which is visible from the site entrance is the tower, and even then, in the summer months, intervening tree foliage at least partially obscures it. In the winter, the church tower is more fully visible from the site entrance. Crucially, however, in the other direction, looking from the eastern side of the churchyard, eastward, back towards the study site, the latter is completely invisible, so far as the current heights and dispositions of the buildings are concerned (**Plate 4**). Ground levels on the two sites are pretty much identical, at about 106-107m aOD. As *presently* composed, therefore, it can reasonably said that the level of harm, in terms of visual impact, of the study site on the church is less than significant.

5 Proposed Development

5.1 The final iteration of the development has not yet been framed in detail. However, the most likely option will be for the partial demolition of the existing building, while keeping as much of the load-bearing structure as possible, enabling the addition of an extended first floor.

6 Assessment of Impacts

6.1 We reiterate again that that there are no heritage assets of any description within the site boundary. There is a theoretical potential for direct, adverse impact upon surviving, in situ archaeology during the course of any necessary groundworks that will be required during construction of the new building. However, since much of the new structure will occupy the footprint of the existing building, the likelihood of survival of significant archaeological deposits and structures, is probably low. We would also suggest that the relatively low height of the proposed new structure will have little noticeable impact on the setting of nearby heritage assets, and most importantly, on the church to the west, and that the two sites will remain as they are now, with the upper stages of the church visible from the site, but in the other direction, the site effectively invisible from the church, *except*, of course, from the top of the tower.

6.2 The central concern here is a judgement about the *degree* of harm that may be involved the present case, since it is 'harm' to existing heritage assets with which much of the formal policy and guidance, both local and national, is concerned. The actual groundworks required in the course of construction of the new building in relation to potential impacts on any surviving, in situ archaeology, could be mitigated for relatively easily, for example, by a watching brief.

6.3 In considering available guidance, mainly in the form of the NPPF as currently framed (Dec. 2024), and Historic England's specific guidance on setting (2017), it is our overall judgement that perceived 'harms' that might be caused by the proposed new development on the main heritage asset under discussion here, should be categorised as less than substantial.

7 Overall Conclusions

7.1 This Heritage Impact Statement has been prepared by Avon Archaeology Limited on behalf of Wiltshire Council. It has attempted to address issues of both built and other heritage considerations in relation to the proposed development of a new independent living housing scheme for older people, on the site of the current Five Courts Care Home, Angel Lane, Mere, Wilts. The site is not covered by either statutory or local protection, although it lies within the Mere Conservation Area. The development will include the removal of a large part of the unprepossessing modern block, and its replacement with a more up to date building of independent living housing specifically for older people. We consider that this document meets the requirements of the NPPF and local planning policy, and provides sufficient information and assessment to identify the potential impacts arising from the development of the site on the identified heritage assets, which may be of concern to the local authority.

7.2 The report has put forward arguments to suggest that potential harms to nearby heritage assets arising directly and causally from the proposed development, should be considered as less than substantial. This judgement applies explicitly to the site of St Michael's church, to the west of the site, and to the so-called Fives Court Wall, to its north, on the eastern side of Angel Lane. In the context of the NPPF, the tests of paragraphs 207 to 211 will probably be

considered to be engaged. Paras. 215-218 of the NPPF therefore explicitly apply in this case:

215 Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.

216 The effect of an application on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account in determining the application. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect non-designated heritage assets, a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset.

217 Local planning authorities should not permit the loss of the whole or part of a heritage asset without taking all reasonable steps to ensure the new development will proceed after the loss has occurred.

218 Local planning authorities should require developers to record and advance understanding of the significance of any heritage assets to be lost (wholly or in part) in a manner proportionate to their importance and the impact, and to make this evidence (and any archive generated) publicly accessible. However, the ability to record evidence of our past should not be a factor in deciding whether such loss should be permitted.

7.3 In this light, we would reiterate that it is our judgement that the *overall* harms to the heritage assets identified close to this site, could reasonably be judged as less than substantial, when balanced against the public gains and benefits of a new, modern facility for a demographic which has suffered, and continues to suffer greatly, from an egregious lack of specialist provision both locally and nationally, and *especially* in the local authority sphere (see for example Holt, ud).

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PLATES



1. Composite panoramic view of the site entrance, from inside the site, looking west. The southern elevation and eastern gable end of the unlisted historic barn close to the site entrance can be seen in the middle of the frame, and a part of the church tower beyond.



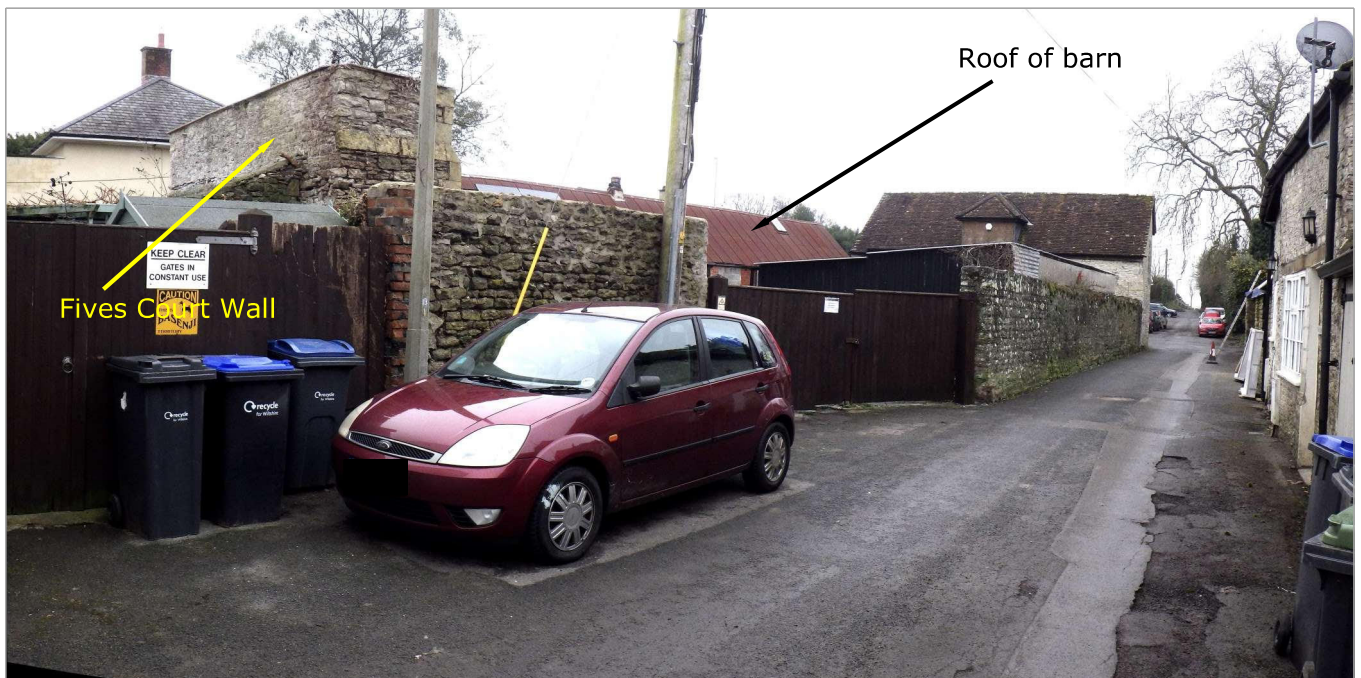
2. View of the rear of nos. 4 and 5 The Square, from inside the site at its northern end. View to north.



3. View to the west from just outside the site entrance. The right-hand of the two access ways in this frame is a public footpath leading to the churchyard. The upper stages of the church tower are clearly visible.



4. View looking east from the western end of the public footpath shown in Plate 8, at the south-eastern corner of the churchyard. The site of the current care home in Angel Lane is completely invisible from this position, and the same is very likely to be true of the new building which is proposed for the site.



5. View from near the northern end of Angel Lane, looking south-east. The corrugated iron roof of the surviving single-storey barn on the eastern side of the farmyard, bounded on its northern side by the Fives Court Wall, is seen in the centre of the frame, and effectively obscures views into the care home site from this location.



6. Aerial view taken from directly above the site, looking west and north-west. The so-called Fives Court Wall, which is a listed structure, is indicated.



7. Aerial view taken from directly above the site but from a rather lower height than in **Plate 11**, looking west and south-west. One of the current care home buildings is seen on the extreme l/h side of the image.



8. Aerial view taken from directly above the site, same location as **Plate 7** but from a greater height. The view pans round from south-west (l/h side) to north-west (r/h side). The entire western part of the town of Mere is seen on the r/h side of the frame. The relationship between the church, the Fives Wall, and the care home site, is evident from this image. Most of the built up area visible in this image falls within the Mere Conservation Area.



9. Low level aerial view taken from directly above the site, looking due west, towards the church. This image was taken deliberately not far above the ridge height of the present care home building, in an attempt to illustrate intervisibility between it, and the two main relevant heritage assets, the church and the Fives Court Wall.