Old Matlock
Conservation Area Appraisal

2. Origins & Development
• Topography
• Historical Development
ORIGINS & HISTORIC DEVELOPMENT OF THE AREA

This section is not intended to be a full history of the settlement but a brief overview of its origins & development.

Topography

The Conservation Area includes Old Matlock (or Matlock Town) and Matlock Green. Together these comprise the earliest settlement area of the 'Matlocks'. This settlement was divided by the topography of the area. The core of the original village was located on top of the limestone plateau and the market area was located on the flatter land below the plateau adjacent to the Bentley Brook. The physical division between the two areas of the settlement is marked by the almost vertical limestone 'cliff'. The parish church (dedicated to St Giles) is, advantageously, located on top of this 'cliff' and the main street of the village slopes gently down towards the 'Green'. Stoney Way, which links Knowleston Place with the Parish Church, is particularly steep as a result of the topography.

Historical Development

The Domesday Book of 1086 includes an entry for 'Mestesford' which has been tentatively identified as the original settlement. No church is mentioned in the Domesday Book. The earliest visible fabric of the church is 13th century, however, records confirm that a church did exist in Matlock by 1130. The tower is 15th century and the body of the church has undergone various re-builds in 1760, 1783, 1871 and 1898. Part of the former old porch was retained at the last restoration and placed against the south wall of the tower. This contains a date stone of 1636. By 1896 the old churchyard was declared full and the church purchased 1.25 acres of adjacent land to extend the churchyard. The churchyard has been extended again in the 20th century.

Whilst the settlement of Matlock is of medieval origin there is nothing of this period remaining with the exception of some parts of the parish church and the general road layout. With regard to the latter this identifies the medieval plan form of the settlement, connected indivisibly with the topography of the area. The current A615 (Alfreton Road) is a former turnpike road which was created in 1759-60.

A Parliamentary Enclosure Map was prepared in 1784 (Fig. 4). Whilst this is primarily concerned with lands on the outskirts of the settlement it does include a tantalising representation of Matlock Green as it was in 1784. The accuracy of this map is questionable as to whether all buildings then extant were depicted. Nevertheless it is an early map showing a part of the settlement in the later 18th century.

The triangular ‘island’ in Matlock Green can be clearly made out as well as the line of the Bentley Brook. This is of particular interest as it depicts two water courses – the northern one being the historic and natural line of the Brook and the southern line being what must be a man-made course for the Brook. This was most probably related to the proposals for the re-construction of the Mill (see below) in Matlock Green where a straightened water course would be required for enhanced water power. Interestingly the map appears to show that the Brook ran across the road at the bottom of Tag Hill (as a ford?) before it was bridged over in the later 18th or early 19th century. Two bridges over the Brook are depicted – one near Huntbridge House and the other at the bottom of Stoney Way.

The earliest, accurate, map of Matlock is the Tithe map of 1848-49 (Fig. 5). In essence, this depicts a ‘village’ comprising the historic settlement centred around the church and the lower settlement centred on the ‘Green’. The Bentley Brook, which runs through the settlement provided its raison d’etre (i.e a good supply of fresh water).
The Tithe map shows the settlement in detail and allows many of the buildings and structures to be identified on later maps and on the existing fabric of the town. The map clearly shows three areas that could be described as open spaces where markets, fairs and other activities would have taken place. The first of these is south of the parish church and comprises a large open area. It is probable that this space served as the village ‘square’.

The map depicts a single tree located within this space. The current oak tree was planted in 1924, replacing the previous tree. The tree is located within a raised circular bed retained by a stone wall. To the south side of the circular wall is a weathered stone within the grass which may be the stump or socket for a former market cross. Further investigation is required to confirm or deny this attribution.

The second open space was located between the parish church and the bridge crossing the Bentley Brook (towards the bottom of Tag Hill). This is an irregular shaped space but was clearly retained, without development, to provide a usable open space. The third, and final, open space is the ‘Green’ – a name which it still goes by. The Tithe map indicates that the ‘Green’ was, at that time, a long, wide, space. This space lay in the bottom of the shallow valley through which the Bentley Brook runs and was formed on the flattest part of the land.

To the east of the Green is a mill with a large millpond to its south. This mill, known as Huntbridge Mill is considered to be on the site (or close to) the medieval corn mill. Two bridges cross the Bentley Brook. The ‘Hunt Bridge’ crosses the Bentley Brook just east of the mill and the second bridge crosses the brook on the road leading from Matlock Green up to the Parish Church. The current Hunt Bridge is a modern bridge, dating from the 1960s or 70s and probably re-constructed as a result of road widening or road level alterations.

The other bridge to the west of Huntbridge House is a semi-circular stone bridge probably dating to the late 18th or early 19th century. Another four bridges cross the Bentley Brook at strategic locations. Three of these are constructed from stone and probably date from the late 18th/early-mid 19th century. The bridge over the Brook opposite Knowleston Place (leading into the gardens) is a particularly slender and elegant footbridge. The last of these bridges, fabricated in oak, was constructed in 2006 as part of the Matlock Parks Project.
In association with the section of the Bentley Brook which passes in front of Knowleston Place it is interesting that the riverbed is fully formed in stone setts, almost like a roadway. This is an unusual feature.

Former gas light plinth donated by John Knowles in 1867. This originally stood in Matlock Green (on the site of the current bus shelter).

It is possible that the brook flooded in previous centuries and particularly in the medieval period when the settlement was being established. The founders of the settlement rightly chose higher ground for the church and village centre. The present day road that leads from the Green up into the village is called Tag Hill and provides a gentle climb out of the valley bottom. A ‘well’ (so named on the 1880 OS map) is located on the south side of Tag Hill, however this comprises a stone trough rather than a well shaft. The visible remains of the limestone outcrop (perhaps once much more exposed and visible) running almost parallel to the village street, and upon which the church stands, must also have provided a good reason, and location, for siting the early village.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1880 (Fig.6) is the first truly accurate map of the settlement. In the thirty-year period separating this map from the Tithe map, very little change or development has occurred. What changes there have been are confined to the odd infill development and the construction of a few buildings on the periphery of the settlement. To the south west of Knowleston Place, which took its present form by the 1860s, is a public garden laid out on both sides of the Bentley Brook.

Even as late as 1900 (Ordnance Survey 2nd Edition – Fig.7) the overall spread and extent of the settlement had expanded very little. This lack of development is interesting in that the separate identity of ‘old’ Matlock and Matlock Green was retained up to ‘modern’ times. The conclusion can therefore be easily drawn that the majority of the current, modern, development which has allowed Old Matlock to join Starkholmes and Matlock (Crown Square area) to join Matlock Green all dates from after 1900 and more specifically after 1920. The intensive development of the ‘Matlocks’ during the latter part of the 19th century – primarily the areas now known as Dale Road and Matlock Bank – appear to have left the old village and its ‘Green’ isolated and quite separate. Even today there is a sharp contrast in the character of the ‘Matlocks’.

A walk up Bank Road or along Dale Road provides a densely developed, urban, character whereas a walk along Church Street in Old Matlock provides a very different, and sharply contrasting character. Development after 1920 has primarily continued to fill gaps and spaces within the village envelope as well as some ‘ribbon’ development along the roads leading to and from the settlement.

View from the Bentley Brook looking towards Stoney Way and St Giles Church circa. 1910
A cattle market was held at Matlock Green every two weeks on the site of ‘Kwik Fit’ and on the carpark to the, former, Horseshoe Public House (some vestiges of that use still remain in the form of iron rings and fixings. A sheep fair was also held four times a year. The market closed in 1941. On the site of the current electricity sub-station, adjacent to the Harrison Almshouses, was the former pinfold.

A Congregational Chapel was built in Matlock Green in 1842 which was subsequently replaced by a larger chapel in 1866. This was located on Chesterfield Road. It was demolished in 1971. In Starkholmes, outside the Conservation Area, a Primitive Methodist Chapel was built in the early 19th century and replaced in 1905. This was closed in 1993 and demolished soon afterwards.

Huntbridge Mill – there has been a mill at Matlock Green since at least 1374, possibly on the current site but this cannot be proved. The current building dates from the early 19th century (records related to the construction of a flax mill in 1825) with later 19th century additions. It was converted into residential use in the early 2000s. A mill pond was constructed to the south of the mill in the early 19th century and a large & impressive cast-iron pipe still survives which carried water from the pond into the Mill.

Datestones:

A selection of datestones found throughout the Conservation Area.

Refer to Fig. 8 – Building Chronology