

Oakham Neighbourhood Plan Walkabout Comments

South-West Oakham – The ‘Rivers’ housing estate

Topography and development history

[see map at end]

The area covered now consists of later 20th century housing estates, bounded on the SE by Brooke Road, with open arable farmland beyond, and on the SW by the slopes of the Brooke Hill ridge which rises quite steeply towards its crest at an altitude of some 525ft OD and forms a visual backdrop to the whole of this side of the town, if not beyond. The N and NW boundaries of the area are taken as Welland Way, extending from the Brooke Road level crossing and following this road around, with its side closes, towards its transition into Trent Road. From the lower slopes of Brooke Hill the ground gradually loses height through these estates to around 360ftOD by the level crossing, and then drops more steeply again towards a tributary of the River Gwash. Water drains from Brooke Hill and various springs in the general direction of Brooke Road, and then crosses and runs parallel to that road until just before the 1950s council houses, where it follows the boundary of that area to drop down under the railway and join the Gwash tributary where it changes course towards Swooning Bridge on the Uppingham Road.

Historically the whole of this area formed part of the open fields of Oakham until the parish was enclosed in 1836. There is still considerable evidence of medieval ridge and furrow along the lower slopes of Brooke Hill, since the area was never subject to any substantial arable use. At enclosure, new field boundaries defined by hedges and ditches were put in place over the whole of this area, as indicated on the enclosure map of that date and mirrored on the Ordnance Survey's 1st edition 25-inch map of 1885. The only road was Brooke Road, with no links across to either the Uppingham or the Braunston roads – all the other roads we see today are later 20th century additions. There is no evidence of more than the odd farm building, and it was not until around the beginning of the 20th century that the first houses appeared along Brooke Road. It is clear from comparing the 1st and 2nd edition OS 25-inch maps that although by 1904 new plot boundaries indicate an intention to develop housing along this road, by that date only three pairs of semi-detached houses had been constructed. By 1928, however, the great majority of the terraced and other houses that we see today had been put in, including the outlying Caxmir Cottage with its long garden plot beyond the modern Trent Road. By 1952, all but a couple of the existing Brooke Road houses had been built, as too had the two groups of council houses on the SE side of Brooke Road close to the railway and the level crossing. Finally, Brooke Hill primary school was built on the furthest plot of land from the town on Brooke Road.

When the housing estates were imposed this was done piecemeal, as indicated below, with the result that many of those enclosure hedge-lines are still preserved as boundaries between the different developments even today, and still separate the gardens of one area from those of another, even though most of the accompanying drainage ditches may now have been filled in. The development of Welland Way also entailed the realignment of the level crossing and the placing of the new road junctions at a short distance from the railway, leaving a small triangle of land where Brooke Road originally ran.

It is also worth noting that for a time there was a plot of allotment gardens in a close near to the level crossing in what is now the angle between Brooke Road and Welland Way. These are shown on the 1928 25-inch map but not on other editions.

Two historical events have impacted on the area. In the late 1840s the Syston to Peterborough Railway cut a swathe around the western side of the town, necessitating a level crossing where it crossed Brooke Road, with a crossing keeper's lodge (now long gone). Today the railway defines the NE perimeter of the arable fields which are overlooked by properties on Brooke Road.

Secondly, in the first decade or so of the 20th century, but after 1904, a 900-yard rifle range was set up, following the territorialisation of the army after the end of the South African wars and the establishment of, amongst others, the Oakham School OTC. A series of firing positions were set up every 100 yards in a line from what is now the N side of Welland Way towards the butts on the lower slopes of Brooke Hill. Just a couple of these survive in that field, the remainder having been subsumed beneath the new housing estates, but all their positions are recorded on the 1928 25-inch map.

Street Scene

There is some degree of variety in the character and interest of the various roads in this area.

Brooke Road differs from the rest in that most of the houses along its length, up to its junction with Trent Road, date from the first half of the 20th century, as noted above, and also in that these include a few short terraces and semi-detached houses in traditional red brick. It also has two groups of council houses dating from the 1950s, with associated garages. Currently a new mixed housing development is taking place to the rear of these.

Brooke Road is a narrow road bedevilled by traffic flow problems, with a few too-narrow parking bays and roadside parking, inevitable due to the impossibility of providing sufficient off-road parking. This is exacerbated at certain times by parents driving to and from the primary school to set down and pick up their children. Like part of Welland Way and Trent Road it is also on the route for the local town bus service.

The length of Welland Way from the Brooke Road crossing to its junction with Balmoral Road is amongst the earliest of the new roads, and is characterised by a sequence of mainly 1960s houses of various designs and a few bungalows, mostly with garages and a parking space. Although the houses are closely spaced, there remains an impression of openness. It has a few roadside trees, but the most distinctive feature is probably the fact that there are long parking bays for much of its length. This give rise to an uninterrupted traffic flow, and an uncluttered feel to the view along the road, something which should be emulated elsewhere. On the other hand, the frequent lengthy closing of the level crossing barriers often means that there is a build-up of stationary in-bound traffic, which can trap vehicles wishing to exit from Brooke Road (including the town bus) and can extend even beyond the Tyne Road junction.

The rather sinuous Tyne Road provides an alternative route from Welland Way to Trent Road, often used by local drivers to avoid some of the traffic flow problems. Again, it has a fairly open feel, with houses mostly well set back from the road and with some green verges. There is a variety of house type, but a number of properties have been extended. Two closes on its W side lead to a green space.

Welland Way, from Balmoral Road in an anticlockwise direction until it becomes Trent Road, differs in that here there are more smaller houses, many of them built in the 1970s, close together and with small gardens. Closes such as Calder Close are similar in character, with a more constrained and less open appearance. Front gardens, where they exist as such, are generally lacking in interest and very much suburban. Nonetheless, roadside parking is not generally an issue. Wreake Walk and Ribble Walk are exceptions to the rule in that they consist of terraces of very small houses with small back gardens, limited access and detached communal car parking. There is also a terrace of modern houses on the corner of Balmoral Road, the site of a former garage. Tiled porches add visual interest and a cohesive style to this terrace.

The backs of houses along the SW aspect of this estate – for example in Dove Close, part of Welland Way and part of Tay Close – overlook the open ground of Brooke Hill, with good views up to the woodland along its upper slopes, and separated from it by a hedge and ditch. Some of the ground in that field is extremely wet and often has standing water, especially in the furrows of the ridge and furrow.

One anomaly is Waltham House, between Welland Way and Glen Drive, a former office block which is now made into small flats, with a row of very small bungalows in its grounds. Glen Drive itself consists almost entirely of bungalows.

Trent Road and the closes off it represent the later part of this development, the Caxmir Park estate, built in the 1970s–80s. The layout here, although sometimes a little tight, is generally more relaxed and less formal. Houses mostly have open front gardens and may be set back from the road, with lawns or grass verges, garages and some off-road parking. Around the junction with Tyne Road, there are generous green verges. There are few traffic issues, except that during term-time parents frequently park here and in Spey Drive to walk the short distance to the school.

Finally, the outer limit of Brooke Road is defined by the existence of the primary school and its grounds, with an adjacent car park which is convenient for dog walkers and others who walk across the fields up onto Brooke Hill, before the road continues as a minor rural highway up Brooke Hill towards the village of Brooke and beyond. Generally there is little heavy traffic apart from delivery vehicles, the town bus service and some farm and horse-box traffic along these roads.

Open Spaces

Besides the relatively generous verges in parts of this area, particularly along Trent Road, Welland Way, and Tyne Road, there are several specific open spaces at various points, most of which provide pedestrian walkways from one road to another and may have a few maturing trees:

From Tees Close and Avon Close linking to Trent Road, a long grassy area often used by dog walkers, which also links through one of the old hedge-lines to Chater Road and also to Forth Close.

A small open grass area in Spey Drive.

A long grassy area leading from Forth Close through another old hedge-line towards Welland Way.

A grassed area on the opposite side of Welland Way from the Forth Close link. This in turn leads to a smallish green space in the centre of Wreake Walk.

Plain square grassed areas on three sides of Waltham House in Glen Drive, one of which has a fenced children's play area.

These open spaces mostly provide links along hard-surfaced paths from one road to another, reflecting the relatively informal lay-out of most parts of this estate. There are also links via Irwell and Severn Closes to another green space and children's play area in an adjoining part of town at the end of Harrington Way and eventually to Southfield primary school and also the Braunston Road.

Buildings

All the buildings in this area apart from the Brooke Hill primary school are residential. Most are straightforward houses in a variety of brick types ranging from the traditional red brick of the early 20th century houses along Brooke Road to standard London Brick Company products in various shades in the 1960s–70s houses or other products in the most recent ones.

Some houses with partial cladding or asymmetrical roof design add to the variety of house type. Most of the estate houses will have three or four bedrooms and will have garages. Quite a few have been altered or extended, mostly in compatible materials apart from some of the extensions attached to the first houses along Brooke Road. There is only one stone house, a solid building on Brooke Road with a large brick extension.

The council houses (as they used to be) are built in a typical style for their type, with lapped concrete panels, but some have been improved. There are also some multi-storey blocks of social housing with garages between them and the Brooke Road crossing.

There are around five electricity sub-stations enclosed by safety fencing, and three letter-boxes at strategic points.

Landmarks

There is little here that would stand out as a landmark. However at the junction of Welland Way and Brooke Road there is an early concrete RCC fingerpost with wooden pointer which should be retained.

Views and Vistas

Housing estates do not generally lend themselves to wide views or long vistas. However, the view down Welland Way has already been mentioned, and a number of the roads do offer limited pleasant outlooks for at least some houses, with a low degree of overlooking except in some rear gardens.

The most important countryside views are those from Brooke Road extending not just over the arable fields but with a longer perspective in the Eggleton / Gunthorpe / Brooke Hill arc. Looking down Trent Road also gives a view across the fields. Similarly, from various points, and certainly from some back gardens as noted above and from first floor windows, there are good views of Brooke Hill itself including the maturing woodland along its upper slopes. Viewpoints include Don Close and one or two points along Welland Way looking towards the hill, as well as other glimpses. In the other direction, from some first-floor windows there are views towards the town centre which may include the church spire. These are valuable elements which should not be put at risk by the insertion of more housing or other developments.

Looking back from the top of the Brooke Hill ridge provides a wide uninterrupted view NE across the whole of the town and the elevated ground on the other side of the Vale of Catmose, as well as towards the E in the direction of Eggleton and Rutland Water and the SE towards Manton and Gunthorpe. The hedge-lined course

of the railway is an unobtrusive element in these prospects. It would be very undesirable to interrupt such rural views by the interpolation of yet more housing.

Improvement ideas

The most important requirement for improvement is action to resolve the traffic flow and parking issues along Brooke Road. This is also a matter of public safety, particularly for children going to and from school. The potential for accident seems unacceptably high.

A good standard of roadside maintenance should be the norm but there are some places in the area where weed growth and road edging have not been dealt with recently, and some examples of pothole vulnerability. These only get worse, and more expensive to rectify, if not followed up.

One of the hard-surfaced paths bordering the green space between Welland Way and Waltham House has completely broken up and needs to be resurfaced.

The historic RCC fingerpost at the foot of Welland Way has not been redecorated recently and is in need of attention and possibly restoration. It should be maintained in compliance with the Department for Transport's Traffic Advisory Leaflet No 6/05, *Traditional Direction Signs* (June 2005) (available on-line). This states, *inter alia*, that:

‘Policies for the protection and restoration of historic street furniture command widespread community support and should be included in local development plans or frameworks. Because of the beneficial contribution that fingerposts can make to the local character and distinctiveness of an area, policies for their repair or reinstatement should be included in Village Design Statements, Parish Plans and other relevant work, such as the Quiet Lanes initiative, as well as in Local Transport Plans.’

and

‘All surviving traditional fingerpost direction signs should be retained in situ and maintained on a regular basis. They should be repainted every five years in traditional black and white livery.’

There is one bus shelter for the town bus service, on Welland Way opposite Irwell Close. Consideration might be given to another perhaps in Trent Road.

There are few bench seats for pedestrians in this area, and consideration might be given to identifying other suitable locations.

There is no pedestrian signage anywhere, but some useful pedestrian fingerposts could be installed to indicate short-cuts across town or towards the town centre.

There is a triangle of land adjacent to one of the Brooke Road social housing flats, the original line of Brooke Road before the level crossing was moved and the road re-aligned, which is currently screened by a tall *Leylandii* hedge and used for recycling containers. This appears to be inefficiently laid out. If combined with the flats property it could provide some additional off-road car parking as well as recycling. This possibility – and the actual need for a recycling point here – should be investigated.

The long periods for which the level crossing is closed, causing much longer delays than is usual at a level crossing, mean that traffic is often stationary for five minutes or more, with engines idling and causing unnecessary pollution. Negotiations should take place with Network Rail to enable the installation of signs requesting drivers to turn off their engines if this does not happen automatically, and to pursue the possibility of reducing the waiting times – especially if the frequency of freight trains is destined to increase.

Tim & Joy Clough, August 2018

