



Combe

VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

November 2021

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1. INTRODUCTION



What is a Village Design Statement (VDS)?

Combe's Village Design Statement is a planning document that has been prepared by residents of the parish, under the auspices of the Parish Council. The aim of the VDS is to provide design guidelines that can help to shape any future development so that it blends in with Combe's distinctive rural landscape and heritage. The VDS details Combe's landscape characteristics, the form and shape of its settlement, and its vernacular architecture.

Once adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document by West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC), this Village Design Statement will be regarded as a 'material planning consideration' for determining planning applications within the Parish of Combe. This means that those applying for planning permission should demonstrate that

they have taken the VDS design guidelines into account, alongside those embedded in local, regional and national statutory planning policies. Although many small changes to dwellings within the village will not require planning permission, the VDS can also provide helpful guidance to householders by highlighting a range of design principles that can be incorporated into the smallest of developments.

The VDS is not about whether development should take place (this is one of the purposes of the West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031), but rather about how changes should be undertaken so as to respect the identity of the locality. It seeks to capture what is valued about the past and present landscape, whilst giving people a say in how Combe will evolve in the future.

How was our Village Design Statement produced?

This VDS has been produced through an extensive process of consultation and engagement with those living and working in the parish of Combe. The consultation aimed to document what local people feel about Combe, what makes it special, and what priorities people have for the future. We gathered information in several ways:

Informal events: we began in the summer of 2019 with informal discussions and events designed to reach different groups of residents. Activities included walks around the parish boundary, informal conversations at village events, and activities with children at Combe Primary School.

Questionnaire survey: we carried out a household survey in late 2019. A questionnaire was delivered to every household in the parish of Combe (a total of 321 occupied households). The questionnaire was also available online. Over half (53 per cent) of Combe's households responded to the questionnaire; 169 households in total. All responses were anonymous.

We received a good distribution of responses across age-groups, length of residence and geographical areas of the parish. This gives us confidence that the findings in this VDS represent the views of many in the local community.

Consultation on design guidelines: the draft Village Design Statement was posted online, and comments invited. Residents also had the opportunity to review, and comment on, the proposed design guidelines at a drop-in session held in the Reading Room. The final document reflects this consultation, and enshrines the values and priorities of the people of Combe.

Combe as a place – summary of community consultation findings

Local people see Combe as a special place, and they have a strong sense of identity, community and attachment to this Cotswold

landscape. The church, the stone cottages, the village green with its oak trees, and the traditional Cotswold buildings at the heart of the village stand out as particularly special.

Residents told us that they love the wide-open views across the countryside, the wooded approaches to the village, river walks, the dark night skies, and the generally well-kept appearance of Combe. One of the clearest messages from the findings was how much people value, and wish to protect, open green spaces within the village.

If development were to take place in the future, most people would prefer affordable housing, built on a small scale, and in sympathy with the existing character of the village.

A report on the consultation findings can be found at <https://combepc.org/2021/02/24/vds/>

Design guidelines for Combe

The distinctive character of Combe is shaped by its rural setting, dispersed layout, historic village core and architectural heritage. The design guidelines that have emerged from the process of local consultation broadly seek to ensure that:

- the current harmony between buildings and physical landscape, in terms of scale, location and design, provides a guide for future development;
- any new development has regard for community cohesion, sustainable living, biodiversity and the implications of climate change.

Full details of the design guidelines may be found in Section 10 of this document.

2. REGIONAL PLANNING AND CONSERVATION CONTEXT

The rural parish of Combe is located 12 miles north-west of Oxford and falls within the administrative district of West Oxfordshire. It comprises the village of Combe, the small hamlet of East End, scattered farm buildings, and a small business park on the site of the Blenheim Palace Sawmills on the River Evenlode. The parish falls within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

Planning framework

At this regional scale, the special character of the area already benefits from protection and sustainable development guidelines enshrined in the West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031, the West Oxfordshire Design Guide (2016) and

the West Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment (1998). These regional guidelines sit, for planning purposes, within the wider national statutory planning, policy and design framework.

The West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031 outlines a hierarchy of local settlements, in which Combe is classified as a 'village'. This means that some development is permissible, but this will be limited to that which 'respects the village character and local distinctiveness' (Policy OS2). In addition, the Plan notes that Combe is in an area that has been designated for 'special landscape protection, conservation and enhancement' as part of the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Wychwood project.

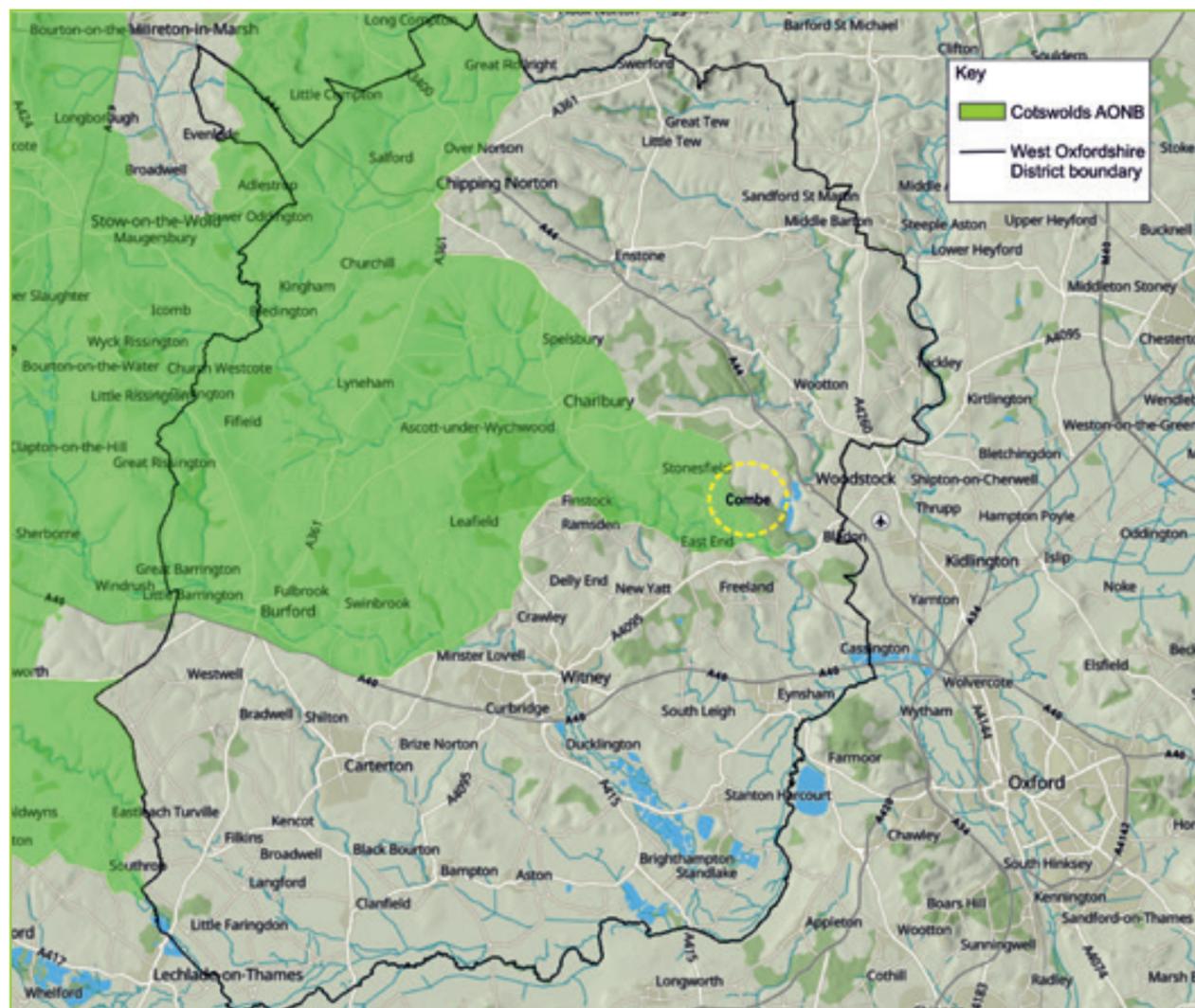


Fig. 1 West Oxfordshire administrative district and AONB boundary. Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. License no: 100060856

Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

Combe's distinctive limestone landscape heritage is protected through its location within the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), the purpose of which is to conserve the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural legacies of the region through the work of the Cotswolds Conservation Board. The West Oxfordshire Design Guide builds on this to provide more specific guidance for landscapes, settlements and buildings typically found in West Oxfordshire. Any proposed development has to be assessed within this context.

Wychwood Project

The parish of Combe lies within the area covered by the Wychwood Project, which seeks to conserve and restore the natural landscape and wildlife habitats associated with the former royal hunting Forest of Wychwood.

Combe's VDS

Combe's VDS must be read within the broader statutory planning and conservation framework outlined above. The merit of the additional guidelines specified in this document lies in their focus on the distinctive features of the Combe landscape, and the value placed by residents on particular characteristics that they wish to see preserved and/or enhanced.

Quotations, shown in green, in the following sections of this document have been taken from the questionnaire survey responses.



3. THE PARISH OF COMBE - THE PLACE

The parish of Combe is bounded by the River Evenlode to the south and south-west, and, in part, by the course of the Roman Road of Akeman Street to the north-west. The Great Park of the Blenheim Palace World Heritage site lies to the east. The hamlet of East End sits in a quiet, narrow cul-de-sac bordering the ancient oak woodlands of the Great Park. Since much of the parish is farmed or managed by the Blenheim estate, their strategic vision for the area will play a role in how Combe's landscape evolves.

The parish was home to 768 people at the time of the 2011 census, but this has now

risen to over 800 residents. Most people are permanent residents, and there are few second homes.

Combe has one pub, a pre-school and a primary school, but is dependent upon nearby settlements for other key services. The parish is served by a limited rural bus service and the nearby Cotswold Line, but most residents rely on private transport for access to amenities.

The village community is thriving and dynamic, with a strong sense of identity and community spirit. The presence of the primary school ensures a well-balanced age

structure. A wide range of community organisations, operating from three community spaces and the church, span all age-groups and provide strong support for vulnerable elderly people and the young.

The cohesion of the village was clearly evident with the onset of the Covid-19 crisis of 2020, when local people quickly mobilized to run a pop-up shop, provide a village-wide support network and raise emergency funds for those in financial need.

“A small old English Cotswold village with a medieval church and cricket grounds in the centre and quaint cottages surrounded by farmland and countryside”



Fig. 2 Combe with parish boundary. Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. License no: 100060856



4. LANDSCAPE SETTING

The parish of Combe is set within an undulating landscape of Cotswold Oolitic limestone scenery, characterised by hills, valleys, woodland and meadows.

Geology and physical geography

The village of Combe is located on a hill rising to 120 metres above sea level, and is surrounded by farmland and remnants of ancient woodland. South of the village, the ground declines to the top of Grintley Hill and Combe Cliff, before descending steeply to the valley floor. The western edge of the parish is defined by similar slopes. The River Evenlode runs along the bottom of this escarpment, and a narrow, stone arched bridge (built 1825) (see photo on page 7) carries the main road out of the village towards Long Hanborough.

The river is subject to regular flooding in winter and at other periods of sustained heavy rainfall, making the road impassable at times. Localised bands of Oxford clay also present a drainage challenge, and give rise to

intermittent surface water flooding across the locality.

Rough, unmade paths weave their way down the steep scarp slopes to the river and adjacent meadows on the floodplain. This peaceful landscape is greatly prized for its tranquillity and as a place for recreation and wildlife. The Blenheim Palace Sawmills business park is located in a secluded site on the river and has been sensitively designed, in terms of scale and materials, to blend into its setting. The Cotswold Line passes nearby, along the valley bottom.

The underlying geology (Jurassic Limestone, Oxford and Kellaways clay, and glacial sands and gravel) has given rise to the widespread use of limestone and slate in the vernacular architecture of this area. Stone-built workers' cottages are a distinctive feature of Combe's historic centre, and traditional Cotswold field and property boundaries of dry-stone walls thread their way through the landscape.



Fig. 3 Aerial view of Combe. Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. License no: 100060856

Iconic views

Combe's geographical location on a hill spur affords a number of long vistas across the surrounding countryside, which are greatly appreciated by residents. Sites on the southern and western edge of the village have commanding views across the Evenlode valley, and to the north and east lie farmland and the wooded fringes of the Blenheim Palace Great Park. Sites along the eastern approach to the village from Combe Lodge Gate offer long views across arable fields to the church spire in the neighbouring village of Church Hanborough. These views are largely uninterrupted by development, and farm buildings and scattered houses nestle into the landscape in a largely unobtrusive way. In addition, there are unspoilt views from East End across the countryside toward Long Hanborough and Bladon.

In a recent Management Plan, Blenheim acknowledges the special qualities of the open countryside bordering the Great Park, which it describes as contributing 'high scenic value to the setting of the World Heritage Site because of its character and

topography' (Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site Management Plan, 2017). The panoramic view over the countryside from Combe Lodge Gate, and the remnants of ancient woodlands to the east and south of the parish, are highlighted as particularly special.

Landscape and quality of life

It is important to recognise the contribution of the Combe's physical landscape to people's quality of life. Our consultation findings indicated that the tranquillity, beauty and biodiversity of the extensive open countryside within the parish were appreciated and enjoyed by all age-groups, for recreational, educational and therapeutic purposes.

The attractiveness of the landscapes does, however, present challenges in terms of the management of visitor parking and its impact on the locality. Traffic congestion, littering and the destruction of verges can blight the quality of local life, especially in the east of the parish where visitors seek access to the Blenheim Great Park via Combe Lodge Gate.



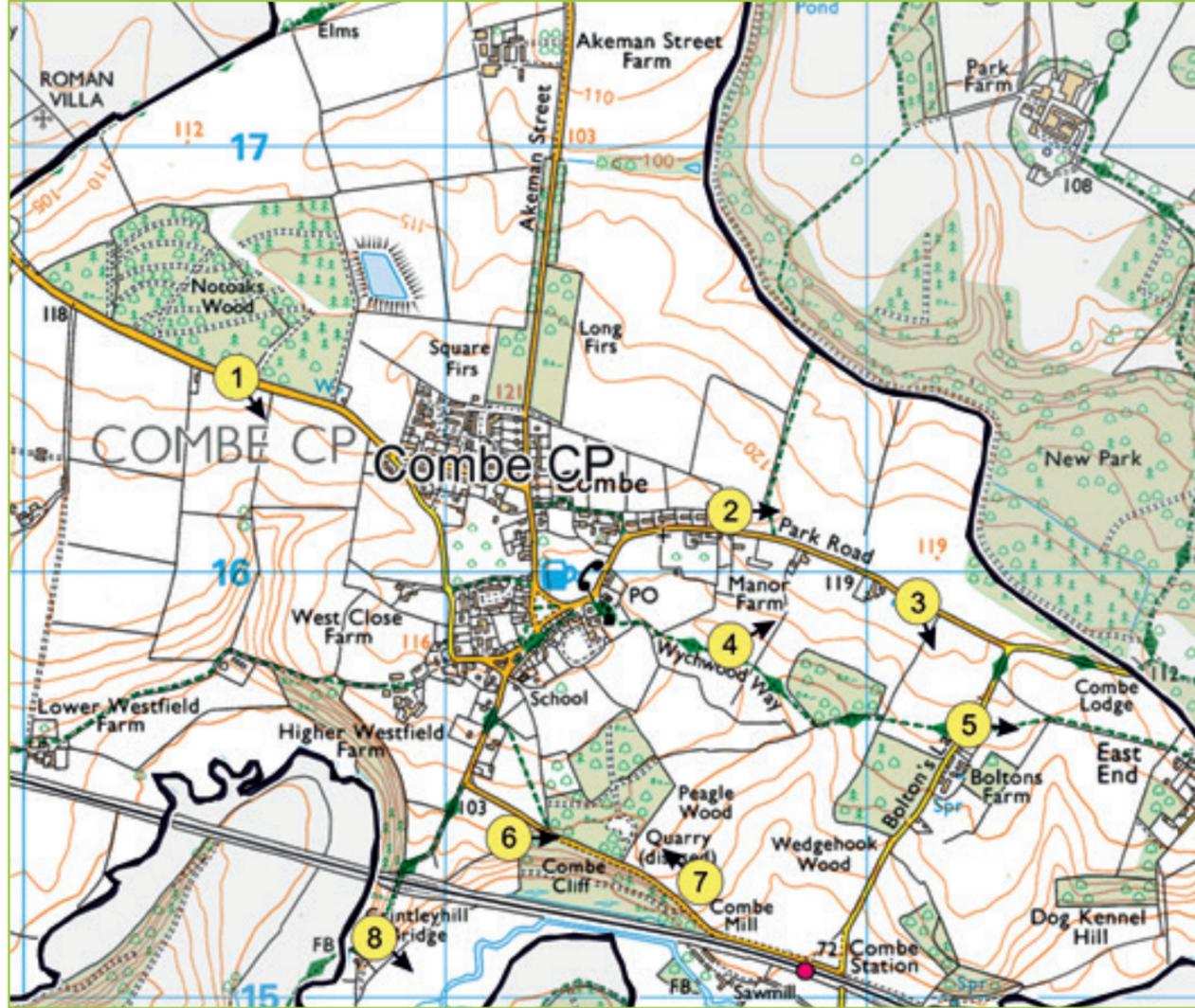


Fig. 4 Iconic views across surrounding landscape. Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. License no: 100060856



1 View from Notoaks Wood towards west Combe



2 View from Park Road towards Blenheim woods



3 View from Park Road towards Church Hanborough



4 Fields near Frogden Wood



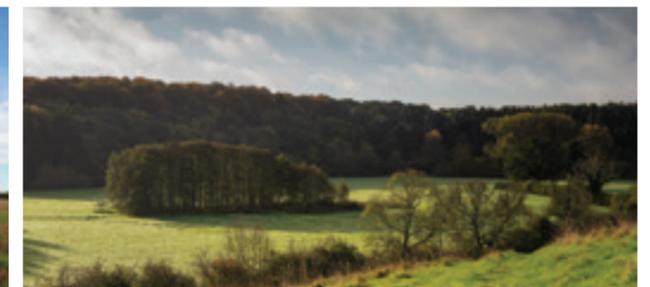
5 View towards Blenheim woods and East End



6 Woods at Combe Cliff



7 View from Combe Cliff towards Peagles Wood



8 The Evenlode valley from Grintley Hill

5. SETTLEMENT PATTERN

The settlement pattern in Combe reflects a combination of topography, history of growth, changing local economies and development decisions by landowners and residents. The layout is characterised by dispersed settlement, interspersed with open green spaces. The historic centre of Combe, however, is tightly clustered around the village greens and other iconic buildings. The 14th century church, with its gothic tower, is the most prominent architectural feature in the village landscape.

Settlement evolution

Early history

It is thought that the village's early site on the banks of the River Evenlode was abandoned in the late 13th/early 14th century for its current hilltop location. Population numbers in the parish have fluctuated greatly as a result of changing employment opportunities, migration and varying mortality rates, but Combe's origins lie in a predominately agricultural community of small farmers, labourers and rural trades people.

There are still scattered dwellings, particularly former farmhouses, that date back to the 15th - 17th century, e.g., The Old Farmhouse, Green Close, Horns Close and Higher Westfield Farm, but most of the historic workers' cottages, seen in the centre of the village, were constructed as the population expanded in the mid-18th century. The hamlet of East End also grew in the 1700s, but only a handful of cottages from this time remain.

The current nuclear layout of the heart of Combe village, centred on the site of St. Laurence Church Combe Longa, Alma Grove and the main village green, is largely consistent with this early period of development, as depicted in the 1778 map of Combe (see Fig 5). The triangular green sits at the junction of several roads leading in and out of the village, and linear development has gradually spread along these.

The 1778 map shows common lands and open fields, cleared of trees ('assarts'). This open landscape was, however, set to change as the process of enclosure got underway in 1792. Piecemeal enclosure subdivided the extensive Combe Green, and smaller parcels of land were consolidated into 'closes', usually bounded by walls and hedges.

The legacy of enclosure may still be seen in the field patterns (although smaller plots have been amalgamated over time) and in the names of houses, for example, Green Close, Horns Close and West Close Farm. The parcel of enclosed land received by the church, located on the southern edge of the village, was later subdivided and gave rise to Combe's allotments (dating back to 1845).



Fig. 5 1778 map of Combe. Source: British History Online: Combe. <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol12/pp75-82> [accessed 19 September 2021]

Twentieth century onwards

The 20th century saw an amalgamation of farms, a decline in traditional rural trades and a changing employment structure, especially with the influx of commuters. The construction of several post-war housing developments on green field sites provided an opportunity for some local residents to move out of unimproved stone cottages into more modern accommodation. This set the stage for the renovation, and often amalgamation, of small, older properties in the historic heart of the village.

The majority of 20th century development lies on the northern side of the village on land that was previously Combe's common grazing land, and was enclosed as part of

the Blenheim Estate. Key phases of public and private housing development include the construction of housing along Akeman street, Stonesfield Road, Chatterpie Lane and the northern side of Park Road (mainly in the early-mid 20th century), the addition of an estate of affordable, mixed tenure housing in the north-west of the parish in Knott Oaks in the 1980s, and infilling along Horns Lane and the southern side of Park Road.

Small centrally-located housing developments were also permitted, notably, the 1960s Orchard Close development (on former farmland, once owned by Orchard Cottage) and Combe Gate (built on land released by the Old Farmhouse and Green Close in the 1980s).

Housing affordability in Combe, as elsewhere in the District, remains a challenge, although house prices in Knott Oaks remain lower than some newly built 'affordable' accommodation in neighbouring villages. The village also benefitted from a small development of rented/shared-ownership homes on Stonesfield Road in the early 2000s.

The different phases of expansion of Combe have generally respected the architectural heritage of the place. Residents describe it as a traditional, largely unspoilt, well-kept Cotswold village, comfortably integrated into its surrounding rural landscape.

“Combe is a real English village, wrapped inside beautiful scenery”



6. COMBE'S HISTORIC HEART AND CONSERVATION AREA

The historic heart of Combe village is highly valued by residents. The traditional Cotswold stone cottages, Grade I listed church, the Victorian brick buildings of the Old Vicarage and Reading Room, pub, Church Walk, together with the village greens, oak trees and Cedar of Lebanon, combine to give a distinctive sense of place.



The intimate scale of the old heart of Combe reflects the historical pattern of enclosed fields, lanes, pastures and former local amenities. The pubs (with the exception of the Cock Inn), shops, post-office and Methodist chapels that once sustained village life have now gone, but are immortalised in houses names. Alma Grove field, once used

for dairy farming and currently home to a small number of livestock, remains in the centre of the village and offers striking views across some of Combe's most charming and distinctive landscapes.

“A quintessential Cotswold village ... a gem”

A number of relics from past centuries are embedded within this historic village landscape. There are two former hand-operated village water pumps and a stone horse trough near the Little Green. The village pound (West End) has been conserved and is maintained by the Parish Council. Many cottages have retained the stone structures that once housed the earth closets, and some residents have renovated the wells that were a source of domestic water. They now mostly serve as ornamental garden features.

Residents identified a range of iconic views within the village, which they felt captured its sense of place and cultural legacies. The most highly prized view was across the recreation ground towards the church, which is framed by a cluster of stone cottages in the foreground. Other favourite views were across Alma Grove field towards the church, across the main village green, and the view down the narrow passageway of Church Walk.

Alma Grove field



Conservation measures in the historic heart

Conservation Area status

Combe's historic centre is protected by Conservation Area status (designated in 1989). This status does not preclude development, but serves to manage and protect the special architectural and historic character of the village centre through the implementation of additional planning controls. There is no Conservation Area Appraisal document for Combe.

Listed Buildings

In 2023, Combe had 38 Listed Buildings on the National Heritage List for England (including one Grade 1 listing - St. Laurence

Church), which affords protection when development is proposed. Most are houses of architectural interest, or assessed to be integral to the historic character of Combe and its cultural heritage, as explored in Section 8. The remaining listings are important public buildings (see Section 9), key features of the heritage landscape (e.g., the old telephone box, the Combe war memorial and the chest tomb in the churchyard), or reflect part of Combe's economic past (e.g., Combe Sawmill Mill, Grade II* listing).

The full list of Combe's Listed Buildings can be seen on the Historic England website: <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>, or at: <https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/england/combe-west-oxfordshire-oxfordshire#.YBI3suj7SUK>

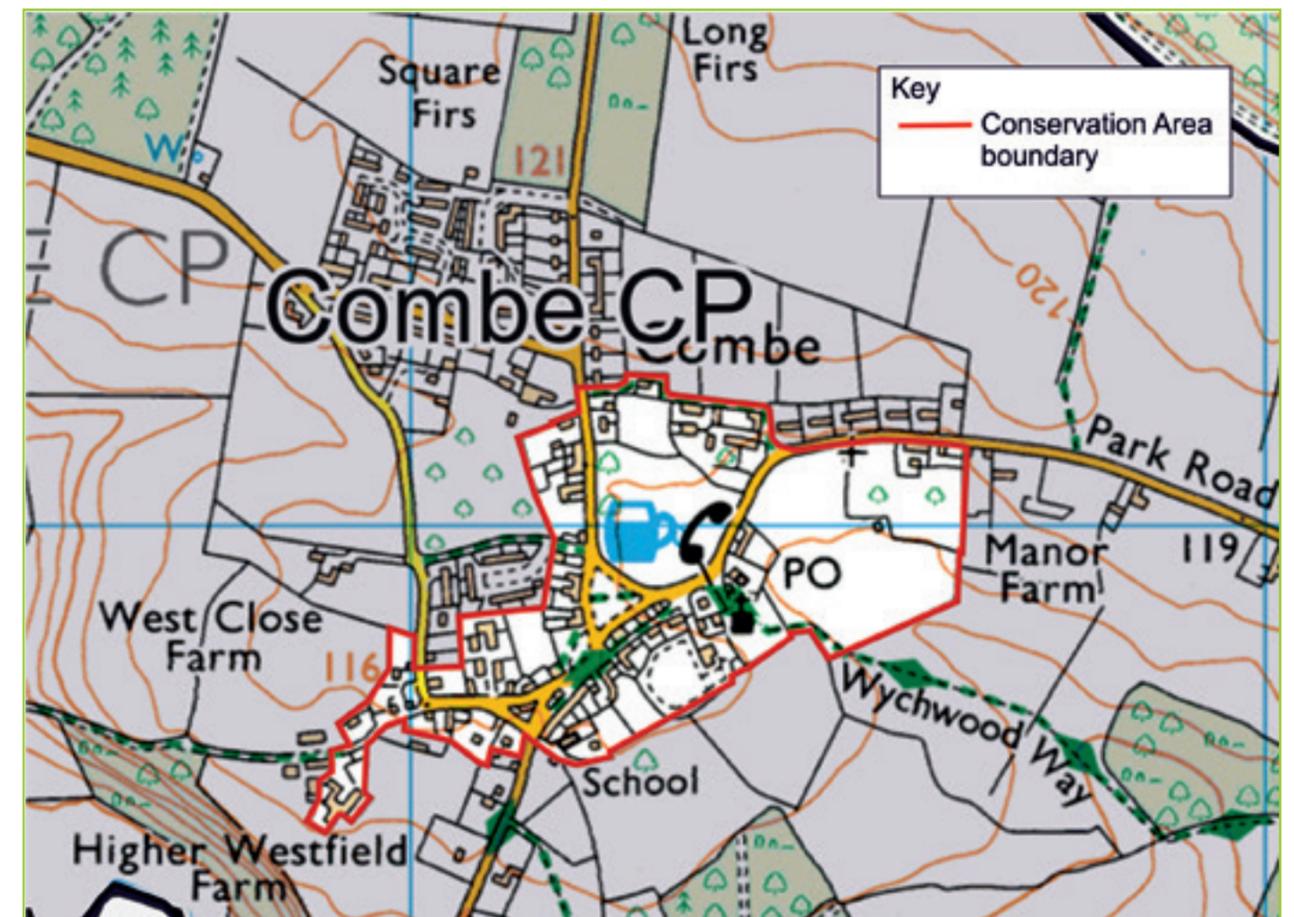


Fig. 6 Combe's Conservation Area. Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. License no: 100060856



7. GREEN SPACES, LOCAL GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND BIODIVERSITY



Fig. 7 Highly valued green spaces in the village of Combe. Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. License no: 100060856

Both the natural and cultural heritage of the area is embodied in Combe's open green spaces and green infrastructure; mostly notably in its historical field patterns, gardens associated with its vernacular architecture, hedgerows, and the remnants of ancient woodland from the Wychwood Forest. The village's tree landscape was significantly affected by Dutch Elm disease in the 1970s, and has undergone extensive re-planting, although native oaks remain a distinctive local species.

In line with the West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031, which advocates enhancing the District's environmental assets and biodiversity, we seek to take action locally in order to protect and improve the green infrastructure of Combe and restore natural ecosystems. We define green infrastructure as a network of multifunctional green spaces

that have potential benefits for biodiversity, and people's health and wellbeing.

Our survey indicates that there is a strong desire amongst Combe's residents to retain and preserve the rural integrity of the village and its surrounding landscape.

Valued green spaces within the village

Five key spaces were identified within the village as particularly important to its rural appearance and feel - Alma Grove field, the recreation ground, the village green/s, the churchyard, and the allotments. In addition, people highlighted the charm of private gardens and the few remaining orchards, as well as the smaller spaces and verges that make up the open character of Combe.



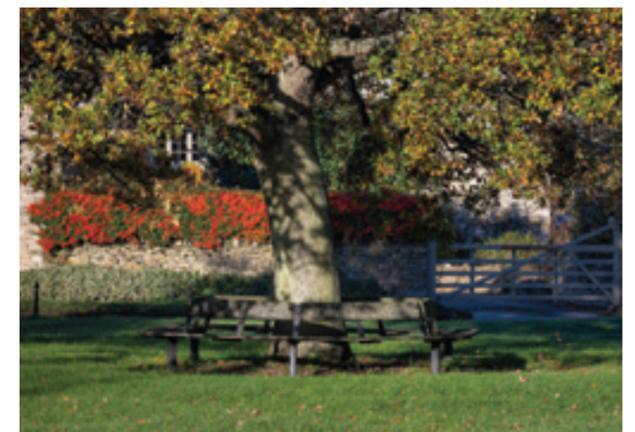
“It wouldn't be Combe without footpaths and endless fields”

The main village green, commonly described by residents as the 'heart of the village', has been registered (along with other centrally located green spaces) under the Commons Registration Act 1965. This provides a measure of protection from encroachment and development. The oak trees on the green are seen as integral to its historic character. People felt that the presence of grazing animals in the centrally located Alma Grove field, on land adjacent to the green owned by the Blenheim Estate, captured the rural sense of this place.

Valued green spaces beyond the village

Residents placed high value on access to the open countryside. Wooded copses of deciduous trees are dotted throughout the landscape, and the bluebell woods of Peagle Wood and Frogden Wood are particularly enjoyed by local residents.

In addition, the scenery associated with wooded approaches to the village, notably those leading into the village from the south-east, via Combe Cliff, and from the north, via Akeman Street, are highly valued and are seen as intrinsic to the rural character of the place. One resident described them as 'setting the scene' for the village. The historical antecedents of these approaches are evident on the first Ordnance Survey map of Combe,



published in 1882-87 (British Online History, sheet 26), in the plantations of Square Firs and Long Firs to the north, and the ancient woods of Combe Cliff to the south.

Beyond the village, tracks and 'rights of way' weave across a rural landscape that is appreciated for its beauty and tranquillity. Important attributes of these open green



spaces include: low noise levels, woodland areas, hedgerows, dispersed settlement, networks of narrow country lanes, the peacefulness of the river valley to the south, and the backdrop of the dense woodlands of the Blenheim Palace Great Park to the north (which is also a GI Registered Park and Garden).

This rural landscape gives rise to both secluded spots and wide-open spaces for exercise, recreation and a diversity of wildlife habitats. Children emphasised the importance of nearby woods and green spaces for the freedom to roam and play.

Biodiversity

Residents' enthusiasm for the preservation of large and smaller open spaces and green corridors is entwined with growing concerns for the protection and enhancement of biodiversity, and the restoration of natural ecosystems. Although sensitive wildlife habitats have already been afforded special protection through the Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) and other conservation initiatives, our concern extends more widely to consider the amenity value and biodiversity implications of all land management, farming and development practices across the parish. There is an eagerness to get involved in greater stewardship of the parish's natural capital, which will help, for example, to restore the quality of verges, hedgerows, woodland, soil

and water as rich and productive habitats for a diversity of wildlife.

Several sites in the parish have been designated for special protection because of distinctive species characteristics or sensitive habitat status:

- the Oxfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) has identified the northern banks of the Evenlode Valley, with its limestone grasslands, riverside fens and Combe Cliff ancient woodlands, as a Conservation Target Area.
- Coombe (sic) Fen, a rare fen meadow habitat, is specifically recorded as a protected Local Wildlife site by the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre (TVERC).
- Sturt Copse and the Stonesfield Common - Bottoms and Banks (which extends across the north-west parish boundary) are protected as Sites of Special Scientific Interest in the West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031 (Policy EH3).
- Baggs Bottom (on the boundary of Combe and Stonesfield parishes) is particularly important for butterflies, insects and wild flowers.
- the designated ancient woodland copses of Notoaks Wood, Wedgehook Wood, Combe Cliff woods, Peagle Wood, and Brice's Wood are all protected under the West Oxfordshire Local Plan.



Fig. 8 Registered common land in Combe. Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. License no: 100060856



Fig. 9 Ancient woodlands in Combe parish. Crown copyright Ordnance Survey. License no: 100060856

8. THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT – ARCHITECTURAL STYLES AND MATERIALS

Our VDS follows the tenets of the West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031 and West Oxfordshire Design Guide (2016), which seek to achieve outstanding design standards for everyday enjoyment and as a material legacy for future generations.

The idea of 'outstanding design' must be understood in a local context, not only reflecting standards for West Oxfordshire and the Cotswolds AONB, but the special character of Combe itself. The village currently nestles within its rural landscape, and most buildings blend-in well to their surroundings. Building materials reflect the local geology, and Combe's character owes

much to the consistent use of local materials and styles of construction in both past and recent developments.

Historical dwellings: style and materials

The historic core of Combe village is characterised by a mix of small workers' cottages, former farmhouses and a few larger properties. A number are Grade II Listed buildings. All have been modified to some extent in subsequent centuries, but retain their distinctive characteristics. Good examples of architectural styles and use of material are:

Workers' cottages/vernacular architecture
Fern Cottage, Rose Cottage and End Cottage are highlighted in their Historic England List entries as a group of dwellings that form an integral part of the historic centre of the village and strongly define Combe's vernacular tradition. This row of small, 18th century, workers' cottages lies in Church Walk, the narrow lane previously known as the Passage or Tchure.



Other Grade II Listed cottages are scattered throughout the village. Notable examples located beyond the Conservation Area include Whitton's (Park Road), an early 17th century thatched cottage, with possible



medieval origins, and Mosses and Rose Cottages (18th century) on Park Road. There are also four cottages at East End that date back to the 17th – 18th century.

Most of Combe's older dwellings are built from the rough coursed limestone rubble that is intrinsic to the character of the parish. Many have steep pitched roofs, typically constructed from natural Stonesfield slate. Some Welsh slate may be found on shallower pitched roofs. Red Oxford brick chimneys are characteristic of this area. Timber lintels over doors and windows, mostly small-paned, are common. Many of the stone cottages would once have been thatched, but now only a handful of thatched roofs remain.



Combe House

Two notable 19th century additions to the historic central village landscape are unusually characterised by red brick construction – the Old Vicarage and the community facility known as the Reading Room. Both were designed by H. W. Moore of the firm of Wilkinson and Moore in Oxford, a highly distinguished firm of architects and developers, responsible for many of North Oxford's houses. Both of these Combe buildings are regarded as fine examples of Moore's work.

Larger properties

There are also a number of larger properties that local people feel are an integral part of Combe's historic architectural landscape. Notably,



Combe House chimneys



Green Close

- Combe House, a former rectory, and now a private house, that dates from the 16th century/early 17th century;
- Green Close, a late medieval hall house, remodelled and extended in the 17th century and early 20th century; and
- The Old Farmhouse, a former farmhouse dating from the mid/late 16th century, with 17th and 18th century additions.

Further details of these three properties, together with Combe's other larger Grade II Listed dwellings, may be found in Appendix 1.

Recent developments: style and materials

For the most part, more recent housing constructions have been modest and blend-in well, without detracting from the overall character of the village.

Apart from the detached new houses of the early 20th century, which are of varied styles, the majority of newer building in Combe is of simple generic housing styles, and developments have largely used materials in keeping with vernacular traditions. A few of the larger early 20th century detached houses were built in stone, although this was

“Combe is the perfect balance between old buildings and newer built ones in the traditional style”

a dressed stone rather than the traditional coursed random rubble of the cottages, and some had red brick details, as in Horns Lane. Others were rendered or pebble-dashed blockwork.

Some of the earliest council properties were built in an unusual type of concrete brick, an early attempt at reconstructed stone. The later council and Blenheim Estate houses on Akeman Street are built either of rendered blockwork, or buff brickwork similar in colour to new Cotswold stone, with roofs generally constructed of concrete plain tiles.



Some details, such as windows and porches, gave a nod to the local vernacular style. For example, two of the early council houses on Akeman Street were constructed with window mullions and drip mouldings over the windows and canopies over the doors.

The Park Road bungalows and newer housing are again predominantly built of buff brickwork and of render, pebbledash and reconstructed stone, with larger concrete tiles on the shallower pitched roofs. More recent, larger new houses have been constructed of coursed Cotswold stone blocks, with reproduction stone roofing slates, as in Combe Gate.

Boundaries and curtilages

Property boundaries in Combe's Conservation Area and beyond typically take the shape of dry-stone walls, traditionally built of Cornbrash Limestone, or hedges. Our residents' survey found strong support for the retention of dry-stone walls as an integral feature of Combe's village landscape. Other boundary materials often reflect the local character outlined in the West Oxfordshire Design Guide, for example, willow hurdles and open panel fencing.



More recent developments in Combe have tended to preserve the 'building line' along the roads. This has helped to provide a visual unity between the older and newer building forms and preserved the spacious feel. Many properties are served by gravel drives, which are not only consistent with the rural vernacular, but also help to moderate run-off from rainfall in this flood prone area.



30

Implications for future architecture and design

The Cotswold stone cottages and other historic buildings in the centre of Combe are highly valued for their contribution to what makes Combe special. The West Oxfordshire Design Guide provides clear guidance on architectural details and building materials sensitive to the local character of the Limestone Wolds. It also highlights the sorts of construction and development decisions that can harm the appearance and erode the cultural heritage of villages such as Combe.

Our survey gave insights into how residents would like to see Combe's built environment evolve in the future:

Materials

The use of materials that complement the traditional building style was favoured; 65 percent of survey respondents thought that it was 'very important' to build with traditional, or similar, building materials in the future. Some people were happy to see the use of more modern materials, if of high quality.

Scale and character

People stressed the importance of affordability and sympathetic scale and design in any new development. It is generally felt that there is a good mix of old and newer housing in the village, although the recent development on the eastern approach to the village was frequently cited for its inappropriate scale and style. In contrast, three new houses on Akeman Street were



appreciated for their sensitive design, and the way in which they blend into the surrounding built environment.

Residents were of the opinion that any future housing development should:

- be in character/sympathetic to the existing mix of housing and historical legacy of the village;
- be of modest scale, to protect the rural appearance and feel of the village;

- have regard for more sustainable living and the implications of climate change, with the goal of moving the parish towards carbon net-zero. This objective is in line with West Oxfordshire District Council's Climate Change Strategy, 2021-25.

It should also be noted that, given the value placed by residents on green spaces and low-density building, the idea of 'in-filling' in Combe is unlikely to be popular and may be seen as a threat to the intrinsic character of the place.



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9. PUBLIC REALM



“It’s largely unchanged in visual character over many decades, yet still very much a living village”

The condition of the public realm is integral to the visual character of the area. It also impacts on residents’ quality of everyday life and others’ experience of a place. Although the management of public spaces falls under the control of a number of different organisations and authorities, including, for example, Oxfordshire County Council Highways department and various utility companies, this VDS presents an opportunity to outline residents’ preferences for the maintenance and improvement of this part of the parish landscape.

Street scene

The peaceful and well-maintained street scene in Combe’s historic heart is central to its Cotswold village character. The exceptional charm of the narrow passage of Church Walk, with its red and blue paviers, adds to the unique appearance of Combe. The mottling of the dark red bricks suggests that they originated from the Blenheim Estate brickworks on Boltons Lane.

Modifications to the street scene should enhance local distinctiveness and aim to maintain a sense of place, with particular attention paid to the rural character and open nature of Combe’s settlement pattern. The character and appearance of Church Walk should be conserved.

New street furniture, such as street signage, bins and seats, should be kept to a minimum and should complement the rural character of the village.

Public buildings

Several historic public buildings in Combe provide a focus for community life and help to forge a sense of local identity and belonging. All are centrally located, within, or close to, the Conservation Area, and reflect Combe’s social and economic past.



Church of St. Laurence, Combe Longa - Grade I Listed Building, built for Eynsham Abbey in 1395, in the Perpendicular style.

Cock Inn – Grade II Listed Building. The Cock Inn started life as a public house in the 18th century on the site of Church Cottage, before it was moved in the early 19th century to its current location on the village green. It was first listed as an Asset of Community Value in 2014, and re-registered in 2019.

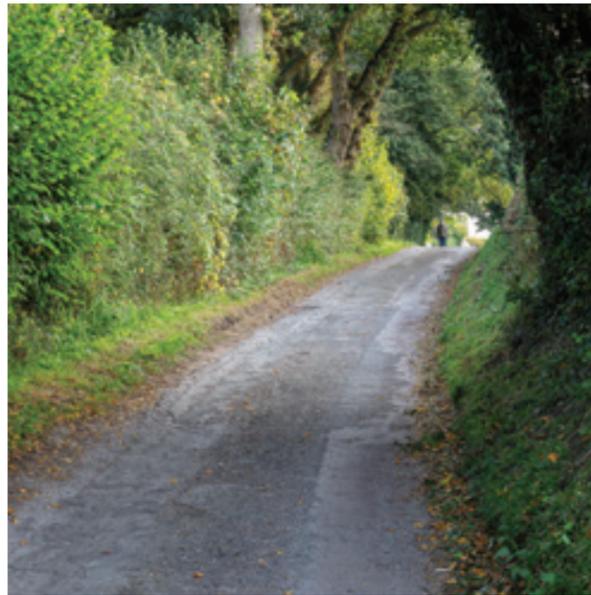
Combe Temperance Reading Room and Coffee House (locally known as the



Reading Room) – the architecture of this public building is distinctive because of its construction using high-quality red bricks. The building was opened as a Temperance Reading Room in 1892. It now serves as one of Combe’s community centres.

Combe Community Hub – the Community Hub is located in a former Methodist Chapel, built in 1893 of Cotswold limestone. The building was registered as an Asset of Community Value in 2015, and bought by the village in 2017. It serves as a community centre and houses Combe’s Pre-School and After-School Club.





Village Hall and Recreation Ground Pavilion – the Pavilion is located in Combe’s recreation ground, a field previously owned by the Blenheim estate. The building provides a community space and offers iconic views across the cricket ground towards St. Laurence Church.

Rural road network

The parish’s narrow, rural road network contributes to the village’s appeal and reflects its long agricultural past. The hedgerows, dry-stone walls and native trees that line the lanes enhance their distinctive character. Residents picked out Chatterpie Lane, in the west of the parish, with open fields along its western boundary, as particularly evocative of Combe



as a place. The narrow approach to East End also captures the settlement’s cultural heritage.

The restricted rural highways nevertheless present challenges in terms of parking, congestion and erosion of the verges, as well as safety concerns for walkers, cyclists and equestrians. Innovative solutions to restrict speeding traffic, provide cycle lanes and improve footpaths, particularly to transport hubs, are to be sought.

Utilities and drainage

Combe’s landscape is blighted by utility poles and overhead power cables. Further cabling should be placed under ground, where appropriate. The parish is not served by gas. Domestic oil tanks can be an intrusive part of the landscape.

Drainage in Combe has been an on-going challenge. Surface water flooding occurs within the village, which can accumulate downhill, under the railway bridge. This is exacerbated by occasional flooding of the River Evenlode across the main road from Combe to Long Hanborough, which makes this road impassable at times. The potential



for flash flooding has been compounded over the years by the infilling of former ‘holding ponds’ and additional stormwater run-off generated by new developments. A flood plan for the village, prepared in 2007, included a recommendation that Alma Grove pond should be enlarged.

Mains foul drainage was installed in Combe village in the 1960s. Population growth, associated with new housing development, has stretched this drainage infrastructure beyond capacity, as evidenced by the overflow of foul water in, for example, Horns Lane and Park Road at times of heavy rain.

Dark skies

There is wide appreciation of the intrinsic value of the dark skies above Combe for the enjoyment of people and benefits to wildlife. This is consistent with the CPRE initiative to reclaim dark skies (<https://www.cpre.org.uk/what-we-care-about/nature-and-landscapes/dark-skies/>).

org.uk/what-we-care-about/nature-and-landscapes/dark-skies/).

Combe has no street lighting, and our survey results indicated that the majority of Combe residents do not wish this to change. Some residents would like to see lighting levels reduced further, both for reasons of appearance and nocturnal wildlife. The light pollution from LED lighting at Combe Halt was singled out for particular criticism, and some would like to see domestic external lighting arrangements moderated.

Tranquillity

The value of Combe’s spacious and tranquil environment is underlined by recent population growth and accompanying noise and traffic congestion across the local region. The peacefulness of the Combe landscape is highly valued by residents and visitors, for reasons of health, well-being and the wildlife environment.



10. DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING DEVELOPMENT IN THE PARISH OF COMBE

Context

The West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031 seeks, amongst other things, to 'conserve and enhance the character and significance of West Oxfordshire's high quality natural, historic and cultural environment' (Policy CO14). Enshrined within this Plan is the principle that development in villages, such as Combe, will be

'limited to that which respects the village character and local distinctiveness and would help maintain the vitality of the local community.'
(Policy OS2, section 4.22)

Elsewhere, it states that:

'... villages will accommodate growth of an appropriate scale and type to help ensure their future prosperity and that of the rural areas around them without compromising their intrinsic character, appearance and setting.'
(Our Vision, section 3.2)

This section of our VDS sets out design guidelines that seek to ensure that Combe's intrinsic character, appearance and setting is conserved and enhanced in light of future development. These guidelines reflect the physical, historical and cultural legacy of Combe, and have been devised through extensive consultation with local people. They should be considered within the national, regional and local statutory planning framework, and set against the backcloth of guidance offered by the Cotswolds AONB, Combe Conservation Area status and West Oxfordshire Design Guide 2016.

General principles

- The current harmony between buildings and physical landscape, in terms of scale, location and design, should provide a guide for future development.
- New development should have regard for community cohesion, sustainable living, biodiversity and the implications of climate change.

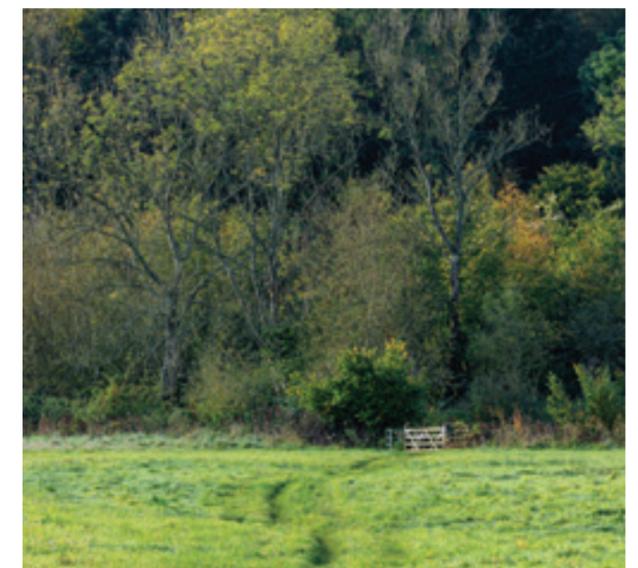
Surrounding countryside and landscape setting

- New development should not have a detrimental impact on vistas from within the village, nor on distant views across the surrounding rural landscape.
- Woodland copses in the surrounding countryside, and on entrance routes into the village of Combe along Akeman Street and Combe Cliff, should be preserved.
- The River Evenlode and its local environment should be preserved, and the water quality enhanced.
- Developments should not exacerbate the risk of flooding, either in terms of frequency or intensity, within the village or from the River Evenlode.
- Historic landscape features, such as the stone bridge, should be conserved.
- New development should respond sensitively to nearby designated heritage assets, avoiding unacceptable harm to their significance.

- Development which threatens access to the countryside or wildlife-rich sites should not be permitted.

Settlement pattern and historic core

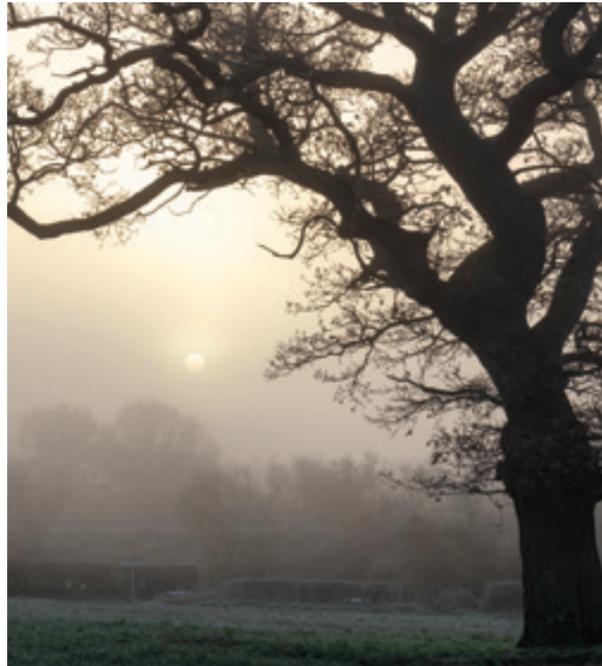
- The dispersed settlement pattern should be preserved to retain the spacious, open, rural character of the village.
- Development within the Conservation Area should adhere to the pattern and character of existing settlement, respect the historic heart of Combe, and conserve or enhance the village's heritage assets.
- Vistas along Church Walk, the approach to St. Laurence's Church, across the village greens, and across Alma Grove field should be preserved as part of the historic street scene.
- New development at the margins of the settlement should respect the form and character of the village of Combe and Combe's East End so as to blend-in with the scale, density and rural appearance of the parish.
- Development in the open countryside, beyond the current settlement area,



should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances, and in accordance with the principles of the West Oxfordshire Local Plan and the Cotswolds AONB.

Green spaces, local green infrastructure and biodiversity

- The open green spaces between the village of Combe and East End should be preserved and protected from development that is inappropriate in scale and character for this rural setting.
- Fields in and around the village should be conserved as part of the traditional pastoral landscape of Combe. The centrally located Alma Grove field in Combe village is highly valued by residents.
- The village green, and the oak trees in the heart of the village and beyond, are integral to the historic character of Combe and should be sensitively preserved.
- Open spaces, verges and hedgerows present green corridors that should be maintained as wildlife habitats and part of the rural landscape. Measures are needed to protect these from the adverse impact of traffic and parking.
- Green spaces between houses should be retained to reflect the character of the settlement and provide spaces for recreation and wildlife. Infill should be discouraged.
- The allotments are an important green space that contribute to the health, well-being and open habitat of Combe. New development on this site should be excluded.
- Green spaces associated with historic relic features, notably, the stone horse trough and water pump on the approach to the Church, contribute to the intrinsic character of the village and should be preserved.



- Mature trees make a positive contribution to Combe's landscape. Where retention is not possible, replacement trees of native species should be planted.
- All landscape management, and every new development, should seek a net gain in biodiversity and create opportunities to restore natural ecosystems.

Building form and materials

- New developments should be sensitive to Combe's architectural heritage, and aim to be environmentally sustainable and low energy.
- New build should (i) take into account the height of surrounding buildings, (ii) the density of settlement, and (iii) reflect, and blend-in with, the local building materials and architectural designs, as recommended in the West Oxfordshire Design Guide.
- New development should be considered in terms of its visual impact and aim to avoid harmful effects on the built environment and wider setting. Property frontages should aim to retain the traditional charm of East End and Combe.



- Existing dry-stone wall boundaries should be preserved as far as possible, within and beyond the village settlement.
- Fencing materials should follow the West Oxfordshire Design Guide, and avoid close board panel fencing for aesthetic and wildlife reasons. Where possible, any new development should incorporate dry-stone walls rather than fencing.
- The use of traditional materials and native planting is to be encouraged as part of any new development.



- Any new development should include, where possible, provision for well-integrated off-road parking. Driveways should be constructed of water permeable material.
- Proposed developments should minimise encroachment on important views.
- Proposals for new-build housing should have regard for the need for good quality, affordable dwellings.
- All management of buildings and landscape, and any new development, should seek to move the parish towards carbon net zero as outlined in the WODC Net Zero Carbon Toolkit.



Public realm

- Changes and repairs to country lanes (especially Chatterpie Lane) should seek to maintain the rural charm of the parish and not encourage additional traffic use that could damage their character.
- Networks of footpaths and public rights-of-way should be preserved, well-maintained and, where possible, extended.
- Utility companies and statutory bodies should seek to minimise the visual impact of new installations on the appearance of the parish.

REFERENCES

- Care should be taken to preserve the distinctive character of Church Walk, with its red and blue paviers.
- Any new development should have regard for the effect of surface materials on stormwater run-off, which might increase the risk of flooding.
- The location, layout and design of new parking areas, public and private, should seek to minimise their visual impact on the public realm, and consider the use of permeable materials to moderate the effects of run-off.
- Careful consideration should be given to the design and layout of developments that might disturb the tranquillity of Combe.
- Efforts should be made to conserve the dark night skies above Combe, keeping light pollution in public and private settings to a minimum for safety.

Blenheim Palace World Heritage Site Management Plan, 2017.

Combe: British History Online, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/oxon/vol12/pp75-82>

Conservation Target Areas, <https://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/biodiversity/conservation-target-areas/oxfordshires-ctas-to-download/>

Landscape Character Assessment (Architecture), <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/3qcnserd/4-design-guide-local-character.pdf>

Oxfordshire Historic Landscape Characterisation, <https://oxfordshire.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=373201dd651c410bacef130ffb3d8d11>

Thames Valley Environmental Record Centre, <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/lyxlf5wd/list-of-local-wildlife-sites-in-west-oxfordshire.pdf>

VeloCity, Emerging Vision for Blenheim Estate, 2020, [velocity_blenheim-sketchbook-200729.pdf](https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/velocity_blenheim-sketchbook-200729.pdf) (sustainablewoodstock.co.uk)

West Oxfordshire Design Guide, <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/planning-and-building/planning-policy/supplementary-planning-documents/>

West Oxfordshire District Council, 2021, Climate Change Strategy for West Oxfordshire 2021-2025, <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/32wj4oq1/wodc-climate-change-strategy-24-03-21.pdf>

West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2031, <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/media/feyjmpen/local-plan.pdf>

West Oxfordshire District Council Net Zero Carbon Toolkit, 2021, <https://www.westoxon.gov.uk/environment/climate-action/how-to-achieve-net-zero-carbon-homes/>



Details of Combe’s larger Grade II listed dwellings

Combe House - former rectory, now private house. Dates from the 16th century/ early 17th century, with early 19th century additions in the Tudor/Gothic Revival style.

Green Close, The Green - late medieval hall house, which was remodelled and extended in the 17th century and the early 20th century. The fenestration was altered in the 20th century.

The Old Farmhouse, Chatterpie Lane – former farmhouse, mid/late 16th century, with 17th and 18th century additions. The property was remodelled extensively in the early 20th century for the renowned sculptor Hamo Thornycroft.

The Old Post Office, Park Road – former post office, mid/late 17th century, thatched roof.

Horns Close, Horns Lane – former farmhouse. Early 17th century, remodelled in the mid-18th century.

Higher Westfield Farm – former farmhouse. Early 17th century, with 18th century additions.



This document was prepared by Combe residents. We should like to thank all those volunteers who gave freely of their time to help with the village consultation, household questionnaire distribution and collection, and the production of the report. Special thanks go to the following, for their particular contributions.

Steering group members

Deborah Phillips	Elena Softley	Paul Coffey
Alan Revell	Julia Sharpe	Jen Hurst
Margaret Moore		

Report preparation

Deborah Phillips

Report contributions and comment

Elena Softley	Jonathan Ford
Sue Goodman	Amanda Ford

Photography

All images © David O’Brien

Mapping

Simon Phillips

Report graphic design and production

Sophie Johnson Creative

WODC planners

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Combe

VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

November 2021