

Detailed Development History for Sutton Coldfield High Street Conservation Area

1086 to 1528 – A Medieval Market Town

In the Domesday Book of 1086 Sutton Coldfield is described as a royal manor, previously held by Edwin, Earl of Mercia.

In 1126 Henry I exchanged the manor of Sutton with Roger de Newburgh, Earl of Warwick, for land in the county of Rutland. A park and water mill are mentioned in the exchange, but no manor house. However, the site of the manor house is known to be at the location of the present Manor Drive approximately half a mile south-west of the High Street/Coleshill Street junction (Map 4, 2).

The medieval settlement of Sutton (Great Sutton) sat on the sandstone ridge to the east of Sutton Park above the crossing of the boggy Ebrook (Plantsbrook) valley. Its location in the middle of the manor and at the junction of the important route north from Birmingham to Lichfield (Mill Street, High Street) with the road from Coleshill and Warwick (Coleshill Street) contributed to its development as the local centre for a growing twelfth and thirteenth century population. This process was fostered by the Earls of Warwick who established both the parish church and the local market here.

The parish church of Holy Trinity was probably founded in the first half of the thirteenth century (first recorded in 1287) and was built on a rise just south of the junction of the Birmingham and Coleshill roads (Mill Street and Coleshill Street). The site allowed the necessary room for a good-sized graveyard and its elevated position would have given prominence to what appears originally to have been a relatively small building.

In 1300 the Crown gave the Earl of Warwick the right to hold a weekly market and annual fair in Sutton. The market charter would have formalised an existing situation, since Sutton had almost certainly become the local market centre before then, serving the surrounding settlements. Later map evidence indicates a typical funnel shaped market place just to the north of the church at the junction of the roads from Birmingham (Mill Street, High Street) and Coleshill (Coleshill Street).

Map evidence also suggests that the linear settlement had at least a partially planned layout. On the east side of High Street and Coleshill Street generous house plots were regularly laid out with large crofts at the rear, running down to the glebe lands at the valley bottom. This plot sequence seems to have extended from the site of the present Moat House on Lichfield Road (Map 4, 4) to a site identified with the present nos. 57 – 59 Coleshill Street. It may date from around the same time as the foundation of the church although there is no direct evidence for this. There is a less obvious pattern on the west side of the High Street, where the steeply rising terrain must have made the establishment of house plots more difficult, as indicated by later terracing

along the street frontage. The properties here had no long rear croft, their yards and gardens backing directly onto the fields behind. They are probably later than those on the east side of the road and perhaps represent a period of urban expansion.

Occupational surnames found in the manor in the fourteenth century demonstrate a variety of crafts and trades normally associated with urbanism. Although Sutton did not have borough status, there can be little doubt that in the later medieval period it functioned as a town. However, the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century seems to have been a period of decline for the town.

1528 to 1850 – Gentrification and Civic Pride

John Harman alias Vesey born in Sutton, (c.1462–1554) was famously responsible for the sixteenth century renaissance of Sutton Coldfield. He was made Chaplain of St. Blaise in 1495, (the free chapel belonging to the manor) and he thereafter used his fortune and influence to benefit his birthplace. He was behind the licence for a weekly market and two annual fairs given in 1519 and in 1527 founded a grammar school. In 1528 his interest persuaded the King to bestow borough status on the town. He also built the first public buildings within the town, the sites of which are still used for civic buildings today, and paved the streets.

The population of Sutton Coldfield grew throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While the local economy as a whole remained largely agricultural, a variety of craftsmen and tradesmen continued to live and work in the town. Sutton also increasingly became the habitation of gentlefolk and particularly of widowed gentlewomen.

Up to the 1630s buildings in Sutton town were constructed in the local sandstone and in timber frame. The present nos. 1-3 Coleshill Street exemplifies the sandstone type and can be dated to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. The present nos. 57–59 Coleshill Street provides an example of timber frame dated to the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century. In 1623 the present no. 1 High Street, was built in stone following the destruction by fire of the 'Inn of tymbre building' (White Hart) which previously stood on the site. The present nos. 5-7 High Street (Vesey House), built c.1630, is the first known example in the town of a house constructed in brick, a superior material at that time, and its fashionable appearance was designed to display both wealth and sophistication.

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The growth of urbanism and consequent rise in the status of towns which followed the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 was reflected in a surge of

building activity lasting well into the eighteenth century and a shift from vernacular to classical building forms. As this national trend reached Sutton the town's appearance began to change. New houses built for the prosperous tradesmen, professional men and country gentry who took up residence on High Street and Coleshill Street were constructed according to classical principles, while existing buildings were given increased status through the addition of a classical facade. Timber frame and local stone gave way to fashionable brick.

The present no. 20 High Street (Ivy House), newly built c.1700, is the earliest remaining example in the town of this new sophisticated type of urban building, while the present no.1 Coleshill Street and no. 36 High Street (Cull's House), refronted c.1712 and c.1736 respectively, are early representatives of the fashion for classical facades. Nos. 46 and 56 High Street and the front of the present no. 1 High Street provide other early examples of the style.

John Snape's 1765 plan of Sutton Coldfield for the local landowner Andrew Hackett provides the first detailed cartographic evidence for the town. It shows Mill Street and the present High Street and Coleshill Street (within the present Conservation Area) as built up, with an almost continuous frontage along the east side of the present High Street.

On the west side of the High Street a narrow alleyway (Clifton Street) leads into the Clifton holding by the Three Tuns Hotel (established before 1723, present no.19 High Street) and through to the fields known as Clifton Hills. An opening on the west side of Mill Street gives on to two footpaths running west and north through the Ready Croft, the field which then belonged to the present Vesey House (nos. 5–7 High Street). From Coleshill Street opposite the church a footpath (part present Church House Drive) leads into the glebe lands.

The Town Hall (Moot Hall), first built during Vesey's time and rebuilt in 1671, is shown at the junction of Mill Street and the present High Street and Coleshill Street. The properties to the south of the Hall and below the church (now Vesey Gardens) appear to be market infill dating from the medieval period, either the result of gradual encroachment or perhaps deliberately planned to increase rent income from the town.

The original grammar school built on Mill Street had been in a state of collapse by 1727 and a new schoolroom was built just beyond the town on the present Lichfield Road (Map 4, 7, Free School, now Bishop Vesey's Grammar School).

Following a period of sustained local opposition the first turnpike routes through Sutton parish were established under an Act of 1807. As part of the works enabling this Mill Street was widened. In 1826 a further Act was passed to allow the reduction of the gradient. A shallow cutting was made at the top of the street and a new straight course (The Dam, The Parade) raised on an embankment at the bottom (Map 4, 8), bypassing the old line of the road which was along the former mill pool dam (Lower Parade)

In the same year Sir Edmund Hartopp of Four Oaks Hall, just to the north of the town, effected an exchange of land with the Corporation under the terms of Sutton's Enclosure Act, passed in 1825. As a condition of the exchange Hartopp laid out a carriage road, Park Road, from the junction of Mill Street with The Dam to the new park entrance (Map 4, 9).

In 1826 the construction of the Town School (now Baptist Church) began at the junction of Blind Lane (Trinity Hill) and Mill Street. At the same time ten almshouses (Map 4, 10, now demolished and the site occupied by Mill Street car park) were erected on the adjacent site. In 1836 a middle school for boys was built on Church Hill on the site now occupied by the Sons of Rest. The workhouse on Mill Street was converted into the master's house. The building on Church Hill was later taken over by the Infant School.

The churchyard was enlarged in the nineteenth century. In 1832 the school property (St. Mary's Hall, Old Schoolhouse) on the south-west side of the churchyard, together with the Corporation land to the north, was taken into the burial ground, raised and levelled and walled off. The churchyard was extended slightly into the north side of Blind Lane and, in 1836, the roadway was widened on the south side. The steep gradient was reduced by cutting down into the hill. The churchyard was closed for new burial following the establishment of the Sutton Coldfield cemetery in 1877.

The Town Hall (now the Masonic Buildings) was opened in 1859. A retaining wall to contain the higher 'waste' ground at the rear of the building was constructed in 1860.

1850 to 1938 – Railways and Commuter Suburbs

The mid-nineteenth century saw the beginnings of suburban development in the local area, fuelled by commuter migration from industrial Birmingham. In 1853 Hacket Street (Station Street) was cut west of Mill Street and High Street across the Eade or Ready Croft and the land divided into building plots. Reddicroft and Lower Reddicroft were laid out along the line of the old fieldpaths with a new access cut from Mill Street below the Gate public house (established c.1810).

In 1859 an Act was passed granting the London and North Western Railway the right to construct a branch line from Aston terminating on the west side of the town. The line's approach involved the construction of a substantial embankment with a bridge over Park Road and the terminus was laid out on the site now occupied by the station car park (Map 4, 11). The railway opened in 1862 and carried both goods and passengers. The entrance to the passenger station was on Station Street.

The railway increased the numbers coming from Birmingham to enjoy Sutton Park. In the expectation that the new means of transport would also bring wealthy visitors, a group of investors built a luxury hotel. The Royal Hotel (now the Council House), begun in 1863 and opened in 1865, stood above

landscaped terraces with its front elevation towards Sutton Park. In 1864 the hotel company made a tree lined carriage drive or 'cul' (now part of King Edward's Square) to the rear of the building. Back Station Road (later Railway Road) was cut in 1868 to give the railway company access from Park Road to the station goods yard.

The arrival of the railway quickened the pace of suburban building. The development of Tudor Hill, on part of the Hartopp Exchange, began in 1864 with the construction of the Lodge (2 Tudor Hill). Upper Clifton Road (Clifton Hill) was staked out in the same year. The road joined the widened hotel carriageway to run onto the High Street. In 1871 a more direct route (Rectory New Road, Rectory Road) was cut from Coleshill Street to the Rectory to allow the sale of land for building.

In 1870 the Town School (now occupied by the Baptist Church) was rebuilt to hold the growing number of pupils and in 1879 a new aisle was added to the north side of Holy Trinity Church to accommodate a larger congregation. Building along The Dam (the Parade) and the development of a new retail focus for the town began in 1869.

The Midland Railway opened its line through Sutton in 1879. The railway, which ran from Water Orton to Walsall, severed the crofts and gardens on the east side of the town, cutting north-west under High Street and Anchorage Road to run across Sutton Park. Property on the High Street was removed to make an approach road (later Midland Drive) to Sutton Town Station (Map 4, 13), which was raised on an embankment. The approach to Sutton Park Station (Map 4, 14), beyond the High Street and Anchorage Road, ran from Upper Clifton Road. Trees were later planted alongside the railway to soften its appearance. Sutton Town Station closed in 1925 and Sutton Park Station in 1965, although it remained open for mail trains for some time after.

In 1884 the London and North Western Railway Company opened its extension line from Sutton to Lichfield. The new line curved north-east of the original branch terminus to run through a tunnel under the High Street, beyond which it emerged to pass beneath the Midland railway. The bridge over Park Road was widened to take the additional track and a new station entrance (the present day entrance) and forecourt constructed at a higher level below the Royal Hotel. The terminus became the coal and goods yard and retaining walls were built around it. The loss of part of the hotel grounds allowed the extension (Clifton Hill, Railway Road) of Back Station Road (Railway Road) over the tunnel onto High Street. On the east side of the street, between the present Old Bank Place (Albert Court) and 32 High Street, the railway company built a walled yard. Services from the station were gradually closed between 1965 and 1972. It was re-opened in 1978 as part of the Birmingham cross-city line when the former station goods yard was converted to car park for commuters.

In 1885 Sutton Coldfield was made a municipal borough. The Municipal Charter of 1886 established a democratically elected council with new powers and responsibilities. As a result of this public works took place including the

erection of a fire station attached to the Town Hall which was completed in 1888.

Suburban growth kept pace with a still rising population. Victoria Road was cut south-east from the junction of Mill Street and the Parade in 1887/8 and developed with speculative housing. At the end of the nineteenth century Tudor Road was cut, along the line of a footpath running from Back Station Road (Railway Road) across Upper Clifton Road to Tudor Hill. Between 1899 and 1910, Tudor Road, Lyndon Road, Upper Clifton Road, Park Road (within the present Conservation Area) and Anchorage Road (within the present Conservation Area) were built up. There was also new housing development on Coleshill Street. Development on the High Street included extensions and additions to the Swan Hotel (now the Royal Hotel) in 1896 and 1897 and the construction of Lloyd's Bank, built 1900, and the London, City and Midland Bank, built 1901, on either side of Midland Drive.

In 1902 the Corporation purchased the former Royal Hotel for use as a Council House. In 1903 the municipal buildings on Mill Street were sold to the Sutton Coldfield Masonic Hall Company. The new Council House was opened in 1902 and the approach from the High Street named King Edward's Square. A town hall and a new fire station were erected on a site previously occupied by outbuildings. The fire station, with its hose tower and clock, was opened in 1905, the town hall, designed 'to harmonise with the existing Georgian buildings in the town' was opened in 1906. It was extended in 1936 and again in 1965, following the relocation of the fire station to Anchorage Road. The War Memorial in King Edward's Square was erected in 1922; the tennis courts and bowling green on Tudor Road were opened in 1925 and 1927 respectively.

The Town School was extended in 1888 and again in 1902 when cottages were cleared on Trinity Hill to provide a playground (now Baptist Church car park). In 1907 a new Boy's School (now occupied as the Baptist Church Hall) was built on land once used as a sand quarry on the corner of Trinity Hill and Victoria Road. In 1915 a manual training school for boys (now occupied by the Baptist Church) was erected above the playground on Trinity Hill.

The scheme for the Vesey Memorial Gardens suggested to the Council in 1935 involved the removal of the small properties on Coleshill Street, Mill Street and Church Hill to open up a vista of the 'admirably sited' church and provide a memorial to Bishop Vesey. The site was acquired and levelled and the gardens opened in 1939. The Sons of Rest clubhouse was built on the site of the former Infant School on Church Hill and was opened later the same year.

1938 to Today – Ring Road, Conservation and Changes of Use

By the 1930s traffic had become a serious problem in the centre of Sutton, particularly on the A38 as it passed along the Parade, Mill Street and High Street. In 1938 the Council put forward a scheme for a town centre relief road. Following various discussions a revised scheme was accepted in 1971.

On Station Street, at its southern end, the route joined a proposed inner ring road (Brassington Avenue, Victoria Road). The road schemes were given consent in 1973 and the ring road was completed in 1977. In 1972 the A38 Sutton Coldfield bypass opened relieving some of the traffic from the town centre.

Delay and uncertainty over future plans for the area and the constant pressure of traffic resulted in a general deterioration of the fabric in the historic core and the loss of a number of traditional buildings to dereliction, road improvement and redevelopment. The Jubilee Dispensary (Map 4, 15), erected in 1887, and the former grammar school property on Trinity Hill were among buildings removed for road improvements on Coleshill Street. On the High Street no. 41, no.32 and no.17 (Ennis House) were demolished, the last two in an advanced state of decay. On Mill Street a row of derelict cottages (nos.16 –32) were pulled down. The sites were all redeveloped.

The council property on Anchorage and Upper Clifton Roads began to move from residential to office use and parking around the Town Hall had become a problem. To relieve the pressure the Council demolished the cattle sale yard (Map 4, 16) on Anchorage Road, built in 1898, and no. 4 Upper Clifton Road (St. Nicholas, Ardmere House) and laid them out as car parks.

A Conservation Area centred on the High Street was first proposed in 1968. The Council was concerned to protect the historic core of the town during a period of change as the Parade was redeveloped and uncertainty over the relief road, but no decision on boundaries could be made until the new road pattern was approved. High Street, Sutton Coldfield Conservation Area was finally designated by Warwickshire County Council in November 1973 (Map ?). It included 'the best preserved sector of Old Sutton'.

In 1974 Sutton Coldfield became administratively part of Birmingham following the implementation of the 1972 Local Government Act. In recognition of this the Birmingham City Council Coat of Arms was amended in 1977 to incorporate the historic symbols of Sutton Coldfield: The Tudor rose and a bishop's mitre.

In 1984 the Council secured a Town Scheme to improve the appearance of the historic streetscape on High Street and Coleshill Street. Grant aid was made available for sympathetic repair work and the aim was to concentrate on groups rather than individual buildings. The five year scheme met with some success but was eventually discontinued through lack of interest

The late twentieth century saw significant redevelopment in the area. Station Street, purchased for the road schemes, was gradually cleared and is now mostly occupied as car parks. The properties surrounding the Three Tuns were demolished and Clifton Street stopped up. Office blocks were built at the front of the site, the remainder left clear for the relief road. The stone house at no.34 High Street was demolished and later replaced with an office building. Office blocks and residential units were developed around Midland Drive and behind Coleshill Street (nos. 1-7) and High Street (nos.2-36). Westhaven

Road, on the boundary of the Conservation Area, was adopted in 1983. The west side of Mill Street (nos. 1-32) was redeveloped with offices with only the façade of the former Post Office (no. 8), built in 1908, retained. The west side of Holy Trinity churchyard was given up for a new parish hall (the Trinity Centre) and the associated car park. There was also a general loss of the variety of uses traditionally associated with the town. Most the buildings in the historic core are now in use as office accommodation or converted to residential use. The Town Schools are occupied by the Baptist Church, the playground on Trinity Hill converted to a car park.