

conservation area appraisal

Introduction

The conservation area in Metfield was originally designated by East Suffolk County Council in 1973, and inherited by Mid Suffolk District Council at its inception in 1974.

The Council has a duty to review its conservation area designations from time to time, and this appraisal examines Metfield under a number of different headings as set out in English Heritage's new 'Guidance on Conservation Area Appraisals' (2006).

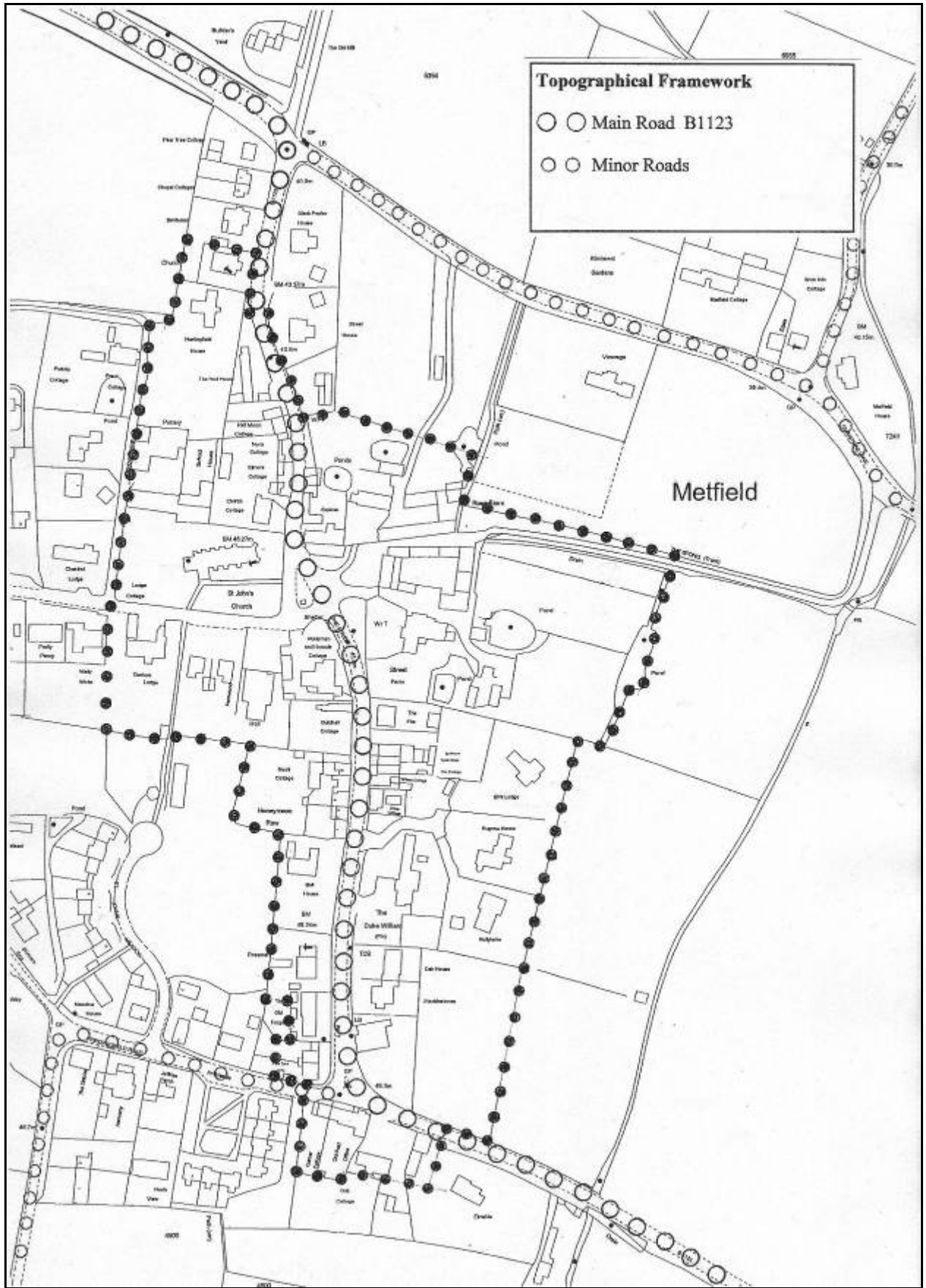
As such it is a straightforward appraisal of Metfield's built environment in conservation terms.



This document is neither prescriptive nor overly descriptive, but more a demonstration of 'quality of place', sufficient for the briefing of the Planning Officer when assessing proposed works in the area. The photographs and maps are thus intended to contribute as much as the text itself.

As the English Heritage guidelines point out, the appraisal is to be read as a general overview, rather than as a comprehensive listing, and the omission of any particular building, feature or space does not imply that it is of no interest in conservation terms.

Text, photographs and map overlays by Patrick Taylor, Conservation Architect, Mid Suffolk District Council 2006.



Topographical Framework

The village of Metfield is situated in the far north eastern corner of Mid Suffolk district, about five miles south-east of Harleston across the border in Norfolk.

It thus falls within the valley of the river Waveney, which remains to this day navigable up as far as Beccles. From 1860 the Waveney Valley railway line with its station at Harleston provided a further east-west link, however this was closed for passenger traffic in 1953.

The modern road network follows a similar east-west line, with the A143 bypassing Harleston to the south, between the town and the Waveney.



The parallel B1123 on the Suffolk side of the river passes right through Metfield and carries some heavy local, mainly agricultural traffic.

The village is situated in the southern edge of the broad flat valley of the river Waveney; this valley is cut down through the overlying clay into the underlying crag and chalk that makes up most of east Suffolk.

Metfield literally means meadow field.

In 2001 the population of the village was taken by the census as 342.

Archaeological Significance

The Suffolk County Sites and Monuments Record lists over 140 sites of archaeological interest from all periods in the parish of Metfield. Nearly half of these are 'Burnt Flint Patches' of unknown date.

The earlier of the dated finds include a Mesolithic flint pick and two Neolithic polished flint axes.

More recent remains include a Saxon coin and a host of pottery scatters from Iron Age through Roman to Medieval times. Other Medieval sites listed include the parish churchyard and a dozen moated sites.

There is also some Post Medieval interest, represented by the sites of three windmills and a handful of former farmsteads.

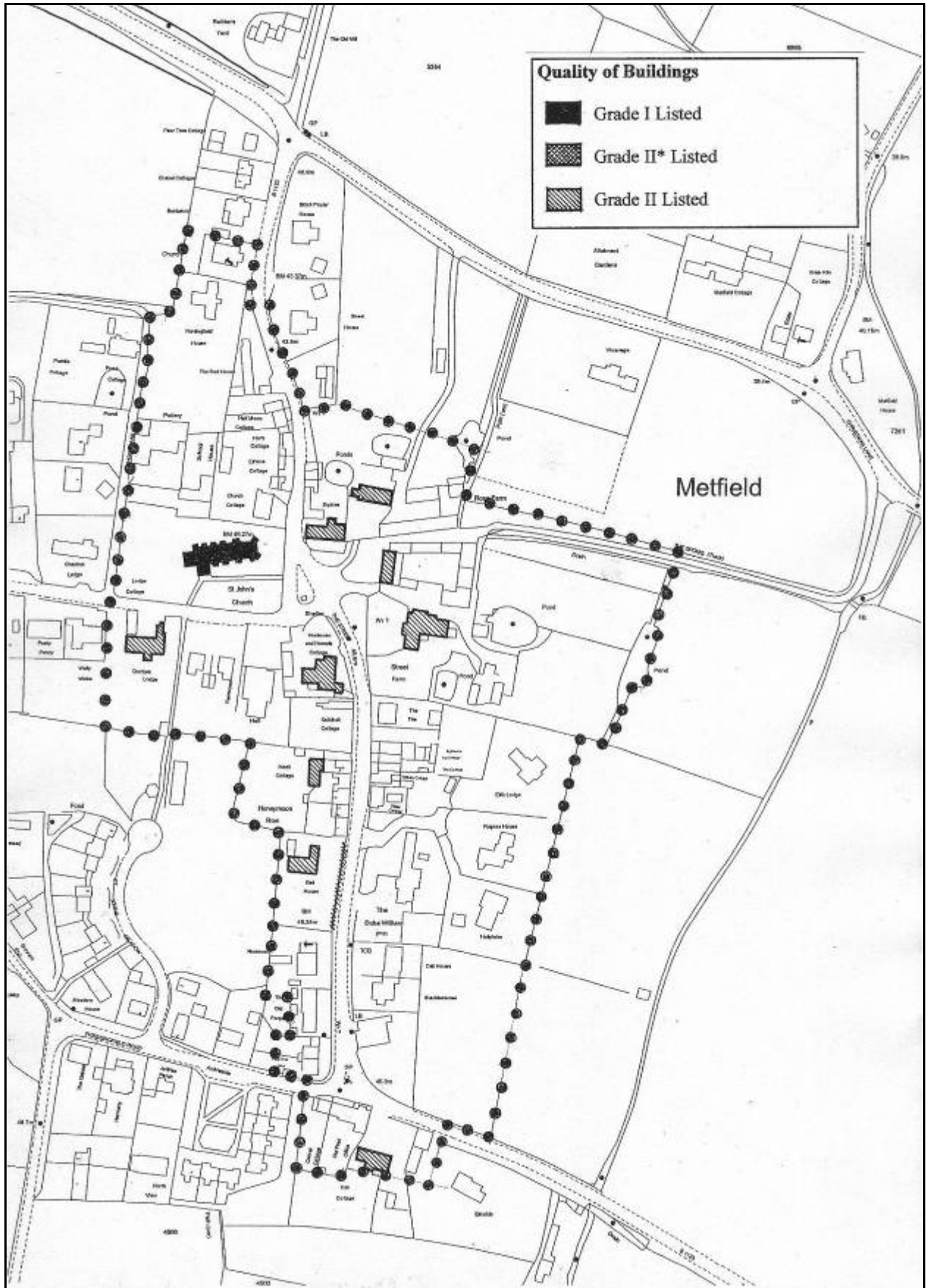


Whilst these present nothing outstanding in terms of visible remains, they show that Metfield has long been a centre of human activity.

Metfield is not mentioned specifically in the Domesday survey of 1086, however it was included as part of nearby Withersdale, now part of the neighbouring parish of Mendham.

Records indicate the existence of a Gild Hall in 1556, which might possibly still be present as the original part of what is now Doctor's Lodge, appropriately sited opposite the churchyard.





Intrinsic Quality of Buildings

There are only eleven listings in the centre of Metfield, the buildings being predominantly domestic in scale with few commercial uses. The older properties are mostly timber-framed and either plastered or encased in brick in the 19th Century.

This is borne out by the two grade II listed farmhouses facing the green opposite the church. Both are timber-framed with black pantile roofs, but whilst Rose Farmhouse remains rendered, Street Farmhouse has been refaced in Suffolk White brick and given a pedimented porch and iron railings. A third grade II listed farmhouse, Oak Cottage at the south end of the Street, has been converted into two cottages, but retains a similar form.



Metfield has a single grade I building, the Church of St John the Baptist at the village centre. Although mainly 15th Century and Perpendicular in style, it has a tower and a few other remains from the late 14th Century.

Pevsner describes the church and also mentions a nearby grade II building, the former Squire's shop, now called White House: "pretty, completely urban Regency shop" with its two original 50-paned bow windows.

Other grade II listings include Nook Cottage, The former Huntsman & Hounds public house, now a private residence, the barn adjoining Street Farmhouse and the previously mentioned Doctor's Lodge.

Traditional Building Materials

Many of the unlisted buildings in Metfield are of traditional form and grouping, and although not up to "listing" quality as individual buildings, still have interest for their visual impact. A first glance would seem to indicate an abundance of rendered and brick buildings either painted or left natural as soft 'Suffolk Reds'.

The local red brick features throughout the village, principally on cottages dating from Victorian times and some others that have been re-fronted at that time. As well as the red brick, a small amount of Suffolk white brick features, predominantly at Street Farmhouse, but also as contrast detailing to the red brick of the fine Methodist Chapel and the former School. One other 19th Century building of note is the Metfield Stores, red brick and black pantile with a fine Victorian traditional shopfront.

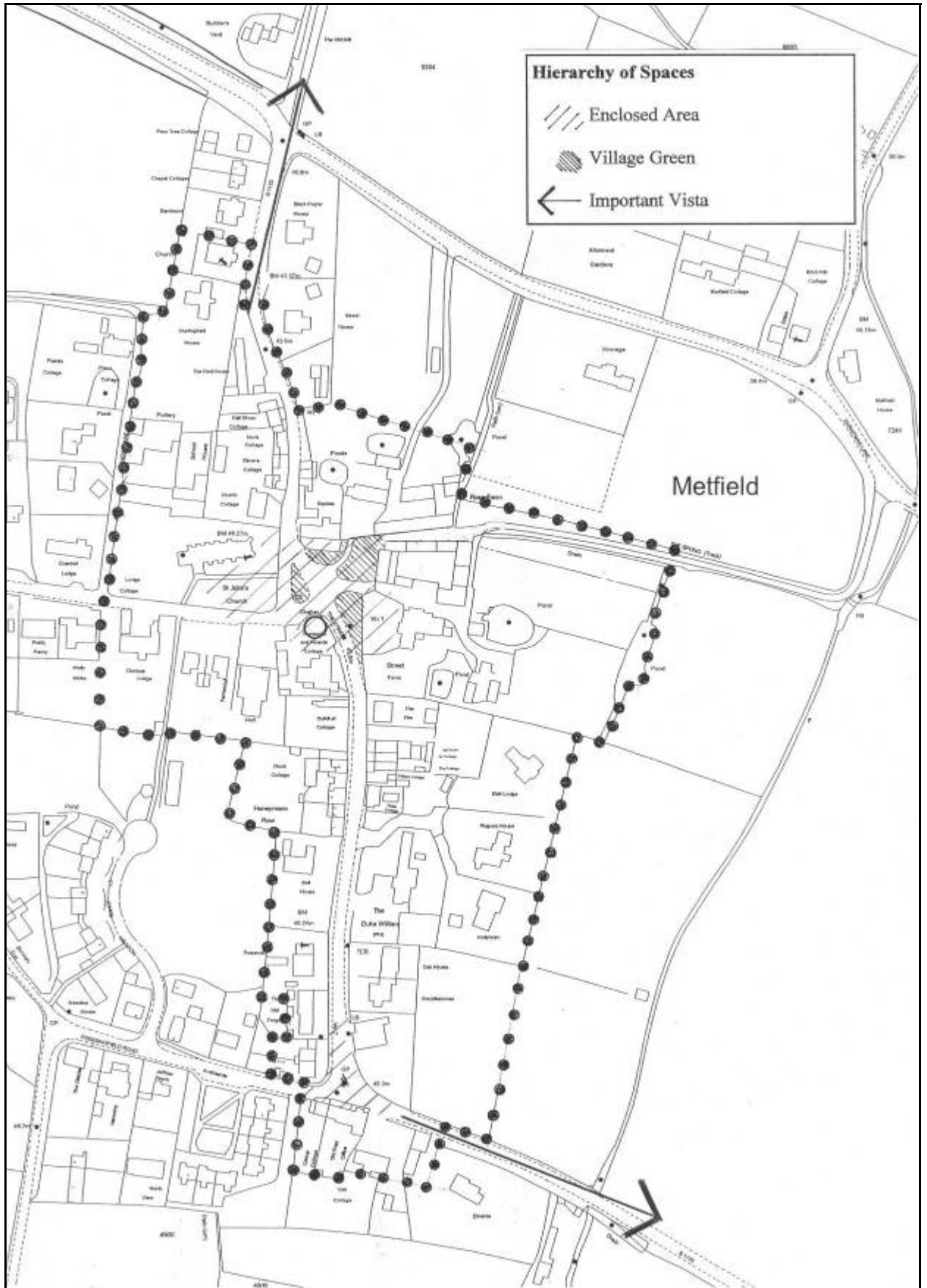


A small amount of flintwork is evident around the village; it has not been used extensively but as facing for a cottage gable end and notably on the church and its boundary wall.

Many of the timber-framed buildings may have been thatched at one time; the steep roof pitches often the only clue remaining. The prevalent roofing material now is pantile, mostly the black glazed variety so common in the Waveney valley.

There is however a scattering of natural red clay pantile and some clay plaintile too. The churches seem to have the only examples of slate roofs and the remaining roofs are intrusions of concrete tiles on modern infill buildings.





Hierarchy of Spaces

Metfield is centred around a small green, around which are clustered six of its listed buildings, including the church. Running from north to south through the main part of the village, and cutting across this green at its centre, is Metfield Street, the route of the B1123 through the village.

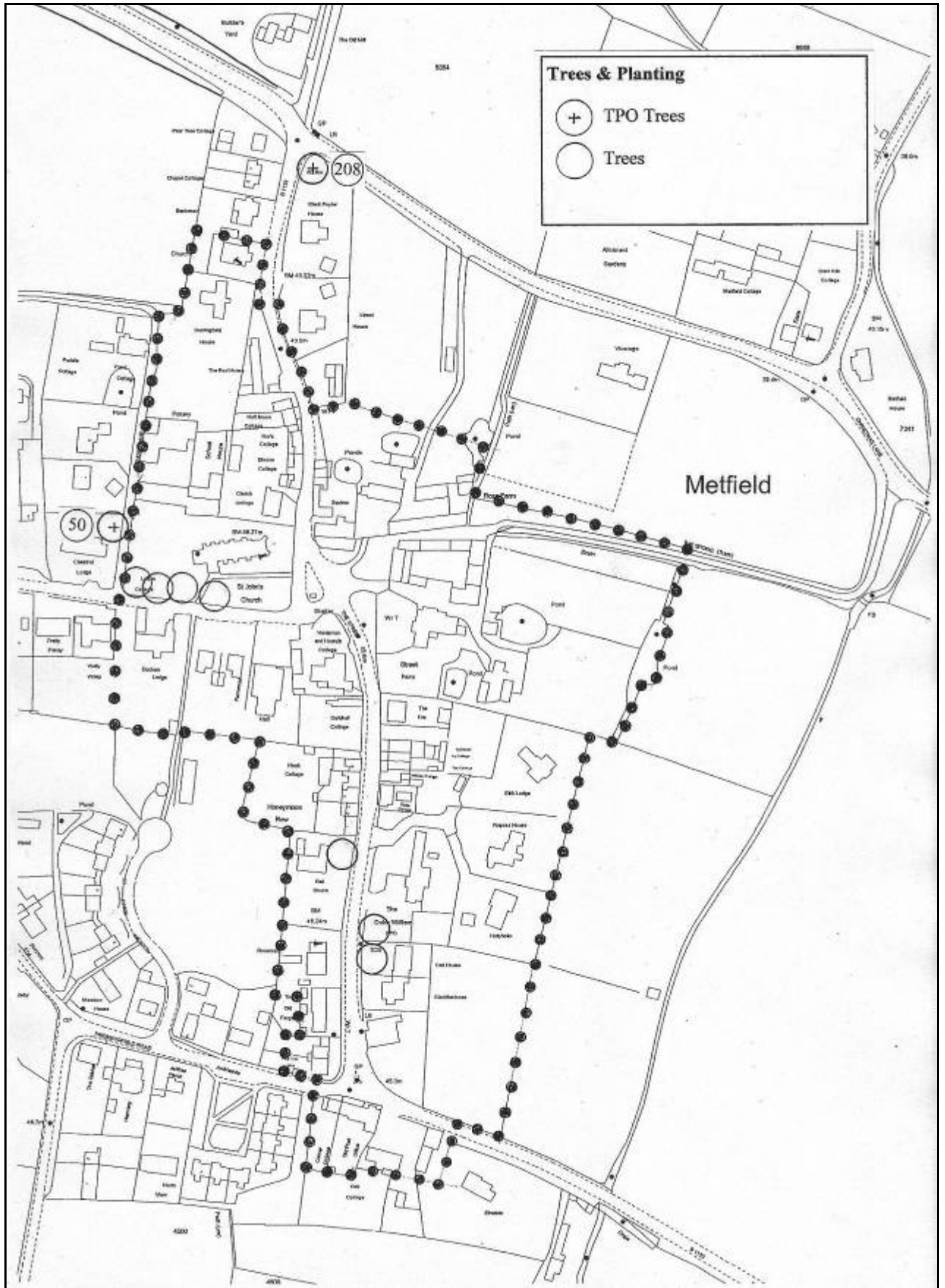
This road turns west at the village's northern extremity and east at the southern, thus reinstating its overall east-west orientation. At the northern turn there is a cross-roads outside of the conservation area, whilst at the southern turn there is a small triangular grassed island, where Fressingfield Road comes in. This junction, along with its surrounding terraced cottages, Oak Cottage and the Metfield Stores, forms a second focal space at this end of the village, enhanced by a good view out eastwards into the countryside.



The eastern half of the main green is the only part that is 'registered village green', mostly grassed and containing the village sign. Here squeezed between the out-buildings of Rose Farm and Street Farm there is a narrow grassed lane leading off eastwards and known as The Spong.



The western half of the green is less green and contains a village pond, now within the curtilage of Huntsman & Hounds Cottage, and a junction with Skinner's Lane, leading off westwards. There remains a small triangle of grass, but this is overshadowed by the black-boarded shelter, and will not remain grass for long, once the Holm Oak tree unwisely planted there takes hold.



Trees & Planting

Most of the trees within Metfield are not obvious on first inspection of the village. They are set back from the main street and contained within gardens or adjacent roads. Although not easily noticed at first, the loss of any of these trees would be detrimental to the village.

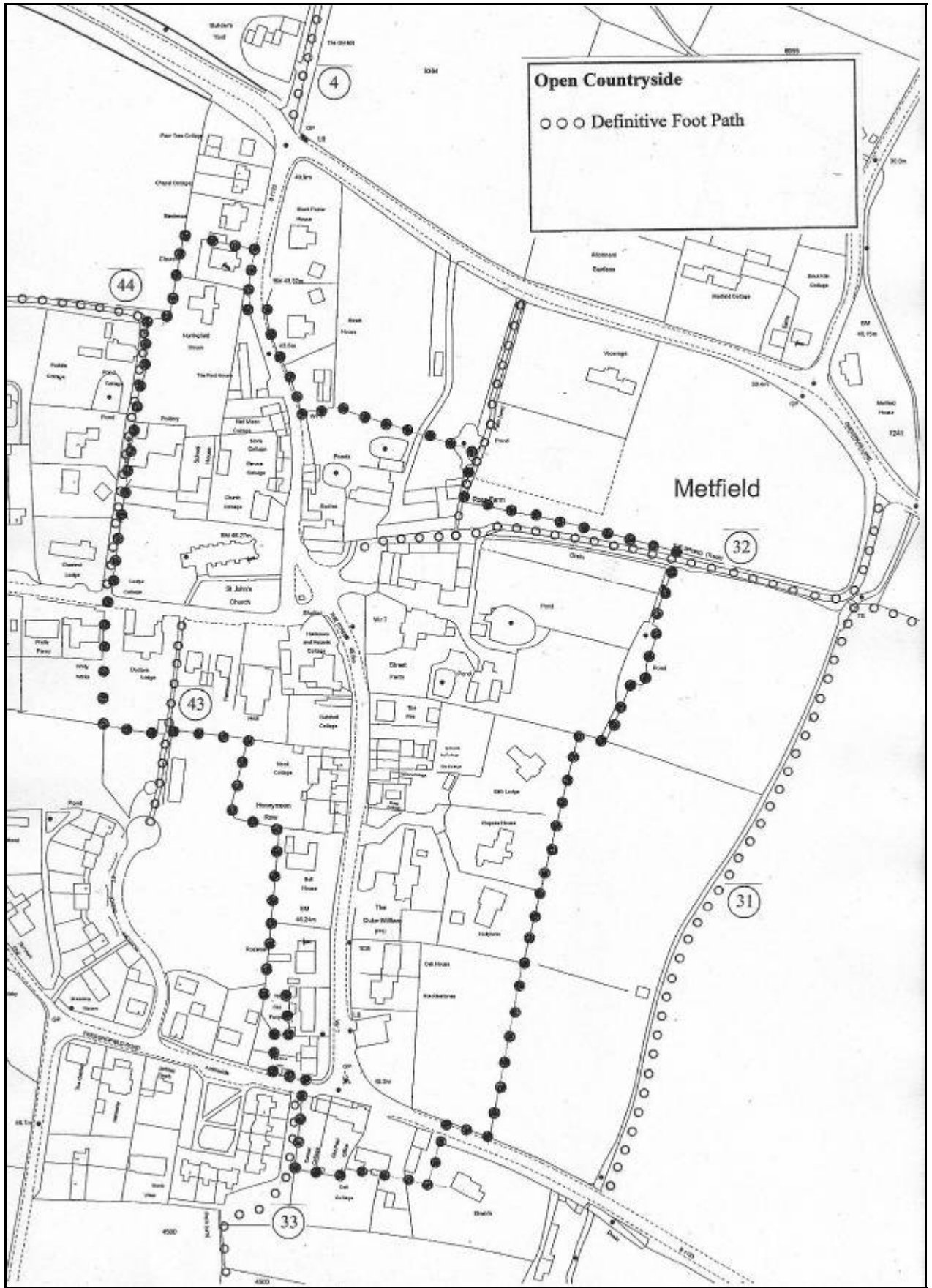
The more obvious exceptions to this are very visible along Metfield Street: a large mature Sycamore in front of Bell House and some Sycamore and Oak nearly opposite behind the telephone box.

The churchyard also makes a contribution with its perimeter delineated by Limes just behind the flint boundary wall.



Further afield in the parish there are trees, which have been felt at risk and thus been made the subject of tree preservation orders. These include a Horse Chestnut opposite the churchyard in School Lane (TPO 50) and two Oaks further west off Skinners Lane (TPO 71).

At the north end of the village a Black Poplar, subject of TPO 208, blew down in January 2004 and should by now be replanted, whilst out of the village at Rookery Farm, TPO 72 covers seven Horse Chestnuts and a Wych Elm.



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Relationship to Open Countryside

Metfield as a village is quite compact and has a slight urban feel to it, especially along the northern section of the Street, where the buildings close in on the road.

One is not therefore immediately aware of the surrounding countryside, however it does not take long to be out into the open if you head in the right direction.

Starting at the church, there are three paths leading out of the village. Off the east side of the green The Spong continues as footpath 32 eastwards until it joins a lane that ultimately rejoins the B1123 to Halesworth.

Southwards from the church, the footpath 43 alongside Doctor's Lodge continues as the Fressingfield road after about a quarter mile.

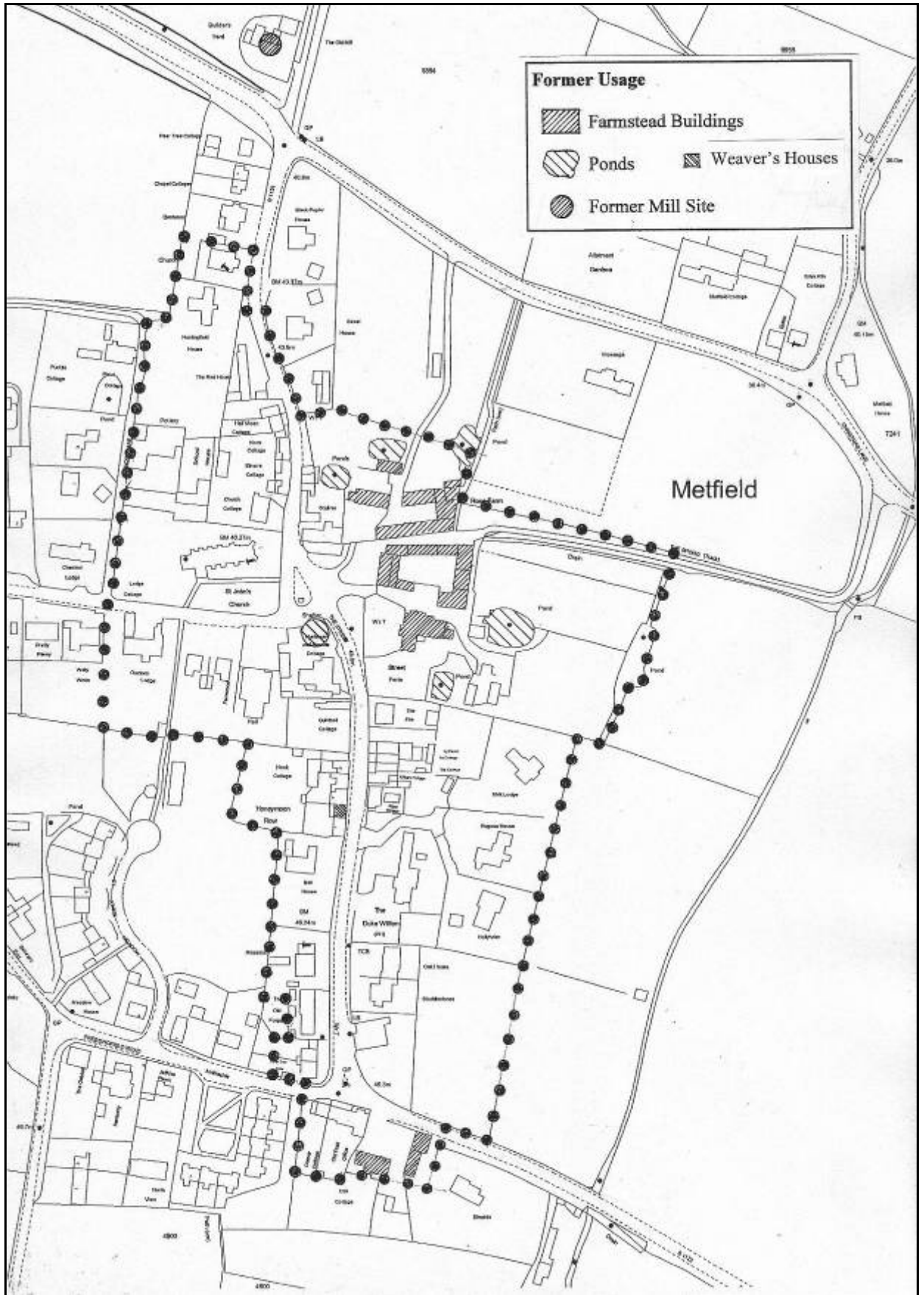


School Lane, footpath 44, bordering the west side of the churchyard turns abruptly west just past the school and eventually splits into footpaths 45 and 46 heading north and south respectively.

Further afield the north end of Metfield Street continues northwards after the road takes its westwards turn as a lane to Rookery Farm (footpath 4). Similarly at the south end of Metfield Street footpath 33 continues southwards towards the moated site of Metfield Hall.

Overall this makes the village of Metfield very well connected to its surrounding countryside, with a network of footpaths allowing for easy pedestrian access.





Prevailing & Former Usage

With its three remaining farmhouses, two of them still surrounded by former ponds, Metfield can be seen to have its origins as an agricultural community.

The parish also had three windmills that are known about, two of the post and roundhouse type, one a tower mill. The stump of the latter can be found at Office Farm about a mile south-east of the village, whilst there are remains of one roundhouse at Mill Lane near Willows Farm about half a mile out in the same direction. The other roundhouse was at the north end of the Street, near the junction with another Mill Lane.

Around a dozen linen weavers were operating in the village during the 18th Century and there remain two three storey weaver's houses as part of Honeymoon Row on the Street.



There was also a brickworks in the village in 1805 and records from 1844 show that there were two blacksmiths, three corn millers, four wheelwright / carpenters, and a brick and tile maker.

This picture is borne out by field names in the Tithe Map Apportionment of 1839. Here the linen industry gives rise to many fields called 'Hemplands', where the crop was grown or 'Winding Field', where the linen was processed. There is also the self explanatory 'Mill Piece', 'Mill Meadow' and 'Claypit Field', whilst field names such as 'Overthwart' or 'Short Bottoms' remain mysterious.

As with much of Suffolk, agriculture played a big part of village life.



Losses & Possible Gains

Metfield suffers somewhat from the impact of accommodating traffic. Whilst the road through the village is only a B-road, it connects the two market towns of Harleston and Halesworth, from where traffic continues onto the A12 Suffolk east coast road. There is also a good deal of local traffic servicing the rural economy, large tractors, trailers and heavy goods vehicles, all having to squeeze through the narrow Street and cross the central Green.

The small triangular green at the south end of the Street has a very useful directional signpost on it, unfortunately festooned with other signs for speed restriction and water hydrant location, giving a cluttered effect. Elsewhere, quality of signage is also an issue outside the Duke William public house, where a better designed approach would benefit the streetscape.



Another feature that is detrimental to Metfield is the overhead wiring carrying the village's telephone and electricity supplies. The under-grounding of these utility supply lines would greatly improve the appearance of the skyline, but remains unlikely to attract the funding needed.

The black-boarded shelter on the village green is, like the sign on the southern triangle, a necessary feature that could be better implemented. A smaller shelter, less prominently sited could, improve the visual amenity of the green area a great deal. In addition for the future of that amenity, it is suggested that the Holm Oak tree planted nearby be replaced with a lighter-shading, grass compatible deciduous species.



References & Further Reading

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Tithe Map & Apportionment 1839 Metfield Suffolk Records Office

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by Mid Suffolk District Council
Environmental Policy Panel
27 May 2008*