

Brooklands Avenue Conservation Areas

Description of the Area

The Brooklands Avenue Conservation Area is a compact designation to the south of Cambridge city centre, first designated in May 2002 following a local campaign. Its original character was dominated by the large, mostly detached nineteenth century residences on Shaftesbury, Clarendon and Fitzwilliam Roads, as well as those facing the tree-lined length of Brooklands Avenue – which was originally Brooklands House’s drive. It incorporated Brooklands House, (now Historic England’s East of England office, but originally built in 1830 by the Fosters, a wealthy Cambridge banking family) but excluded the buildings on the north side of Brooklands Avenue that were in the larger City Centre Conservation Area to the north, including the original western lodge at the end of Brooklands House’s drive.

However, the boundary was altered and extended in 2013, partly to incorporate the northern side of Brooklands Avenue and the historic lodge. These changes regularised the boundary with the historic curtilage of Brooklands House and included both sides of Brooklands Avenue.

The boundary change also took in the area of land between Brooklands House and Shaftesbury Road. This 9.5ha area had historically been part of Brooklands House’s gardens and grounds, and had been redeveloped between 2003 and 2008 for housing. The development, known as Accordia, was at the time the ‘youngest’ addition to a conservation area, although the area also included the grade II listed Cold War bunker built in the 1950s to house the regional government in the event of nuclear war.

Accordia is consistently recognised as one of the most important recent housing developments in terms of its provision of a high density mix of housing types implemented to a very high standard of architectural and urban design. The masterplan followed the principles of high density urban living set out by the architect Richard Rogers in his 1995 Reith Lecture. Its quality was recognised through it winning the Civic Trust Award in 2007, and it was the first residential development to win the RIBA Stirling Prize and RIBA National Award in 2008.

Accordia provides residents with shared public and private space in a way that is aesthetically pleasing, and it has successfully mellowed in the ten years since its construction. Its design and use of materials referenced the existing built form of the adjacent conservation area, as well as of Cambridge generally. Most obviously this involved the use of pale clay brick. The retention of large historic trees dating from the nineteenth century Brooklands House gardens also helped to bed the development into its existing context. Their size and screening effect immediately created an intimate and pleasant place. Over time the only limitation to the development’s layout that has become evident is that, although very walkable, its connectivity to Trumpington Road and Shaftesbury Road is limited, with vehicular access restricted to a single access point on Brooklands Avenue.

Of Accordia's 378 units, 212 are houses of various sizes, 166 are flats, and 114 were designated as 'affordable'. The development illustrates the effectiveness of a carefully considered masterplan, with each section of the development responding to its context. Fronting Brooklands Avenue the houses are semi-detached villas, relating to the existing pattern of Victorian villas found in the adjacent conservation area to the north and east. Each urban block in the interior comprises interlinked courtyard houses, whilst the main spine road of Aberdeen Avenue is defined by close knit terraces. The larger blocks of flats are located adjacent to the open spaces defined by the reinstated former garden area south of Brooklands House and the historic line of Hobson's Creek.



A typical street-scene at Accordia. © Historic England Archive, Patricia Payne

When awarding the development the Stirling Prize in 2008, RIBA's comments were that *"This is high density housing at its very best. Beautifully thought-through houses are linked by a series of public, semi-public and private but visible spaces, making the whole development a joy to walk through. Houses and flats have good sized, well-proportioned rooms with views out ranging from the urban views to rural pasture. This development proves that good modern housing sells, that a committed local authority can have a very positive influence on the design, that a masterplan with a range of architects can be successful and that the very best architecture does not have to rely on gimmicks."*

While not originally designated, the Accordia development is an example of good growth that was strongly influenced by its historical and townscape context, and its location adjacent to the existing conservation area. Its subsequent incorporation into the Brooklands Avenue Conservation Area was justified owing largely to its high architectural quality, spatial layout and use of high quality materials. These factors were arguably of greater importance to its designation than the site's historical link to Brooklands House.

The designation of such a strikingly modern development as a conservation area also resulted in interesting management questions. Public consultation on the boundary changes indicated a strong desire amongst residents in the earlier sections of the conservation area for the creation of different “character areas” that were then to be managed separately and remain distinct, thus avoiding the spread of more contemporary architectural design into parts of the area adjacent to Accordia. Accordia residents also campaigned against changes to its character through, as they saw it, inappropriate permitted development, and this has manifested itself in the use of an Article 4 Direction specifically designed to maintain the character of Accordia only.



Modern high density terraced housing at Accordia. © Historic England Archive, Patricia Payne

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