

Blair Atholl Conservation Area Appraisal



October 2007



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INTRODUCTION

Conservation Areas

1.1 Conservation areas are crucial to the conservation of our built environment. There are over 600 conservation areas in Scotland. They contain groups of buildings extending over areas of a village or town and can also include public parks, woods and historic land. To safeguard them for the enjoyment and benefit of future generations any new development should preserve or enhance their varied character. The local planning authority is required to determine which parts of its area are of special architectural and/or historic interest. It may propose and designate these as conservation areas. The public will be consulted on any proposal to designate conservation areas or change their boundaries.

1.2 Conservation areas must be safeguarded and enhanced. This is defined through:

- Defining the character that merits protection, including the space between buildings;
- Use of appropriate controls over development, demolition and advertising;
- Financial assistance, where appropriate, for works of repair and restoration;
- Protection of trees;
- Interpretation schemes, through leaflets or exhibitions;
- The implementation of enhancement schemes based upon a conservation area appraisal.

1.3 Designation as a conservation area does not place a ban upon all new development within its boundaries. However new development will normally only be granted planning permission if it can be demonstrated that it will not harm the character or visual quality of the area. New development should also positively enhance the area through good design rather than just create a neutral effect.

Reason for conservation area designation

2.1 The principle of a conservation area designation has already been established through the Local Plan consultation process. The Highland Area Local Plan indicates that the Council will designate a conservation area in Blair Atholl. The Council will also investigate and progress, where appropriate, enhancement schemes for the area.

2.2 Local Plan policy indicates that there will be a presumption against development which would harm the character or appearance, or which would not preserve or enhance the conservation areas.

Purpose of the conservation area appraisal

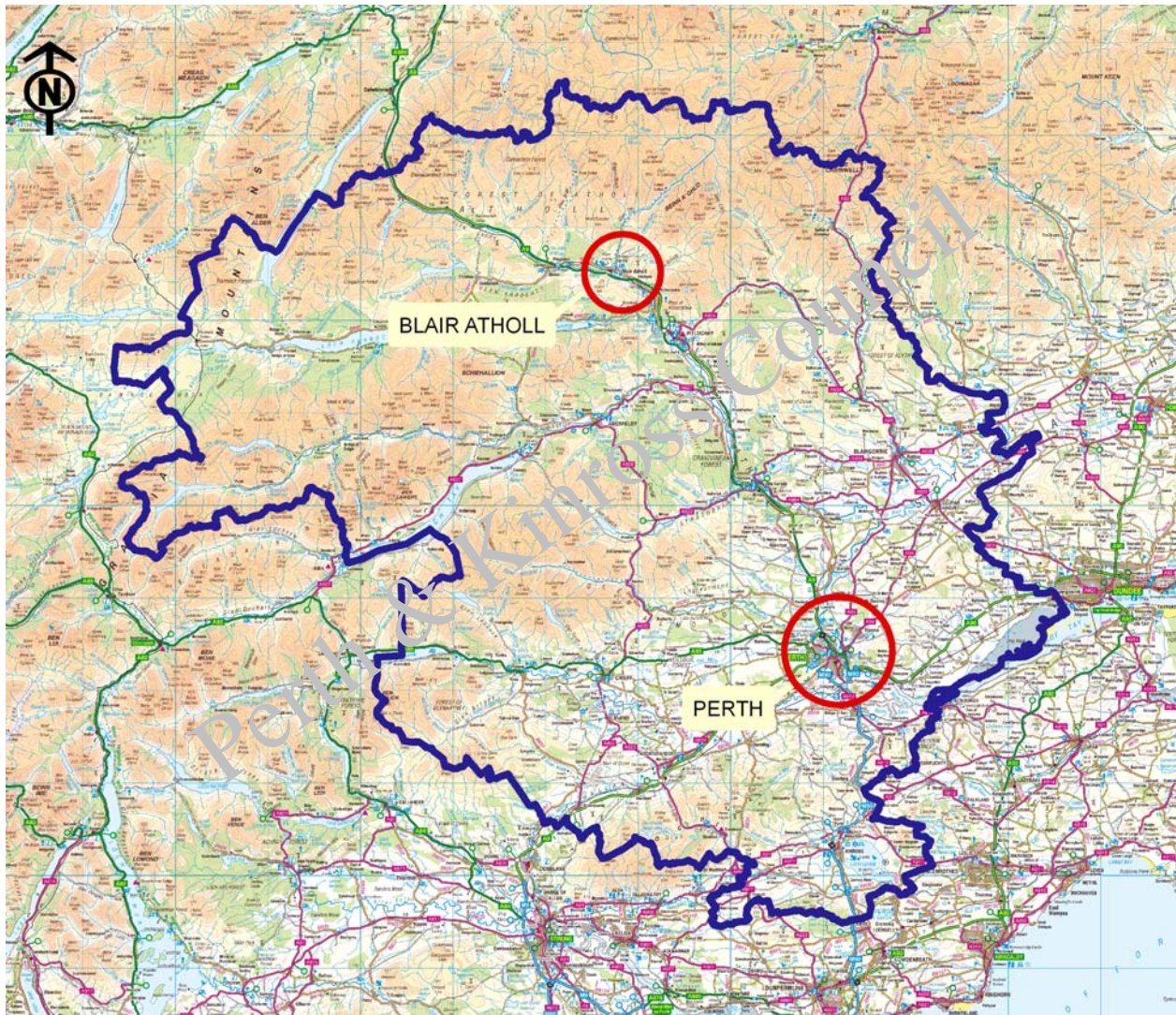
2.3 A conservation area appraisal is a management tool which helps to identify the special interest and changing needs of an area. It serves as supplementary planning guidance to the Local Plan. The appraisal provides the basis for the development of a programme of action that is compatible with the sensitivities of the historic area and can enable the local authority to fulfil its statutory duties to protect and enhance that particular area.

2.4 Appraisals also assist development control and management. They provide the opportunity to inform residents about the special needs and characteristics of the area and help developers identify and formulate development proposals. If a conservation area's special interest has been clearly defined and published in an appraisal then this definition will help those thinking to invest in the area and can be used to guide the form and content of new development.

CONTEXT AND SURVEY

Location, history and development

Map 1: Location of Blair Atholl within Perth & Kinross

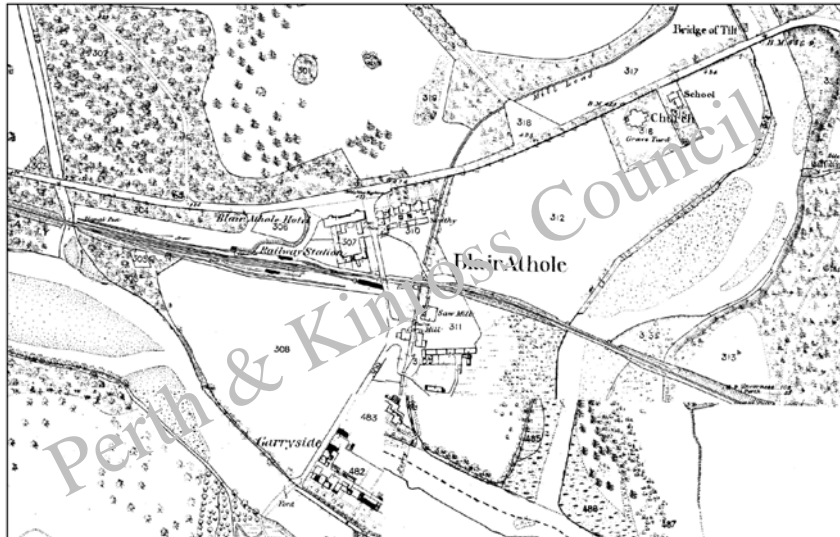


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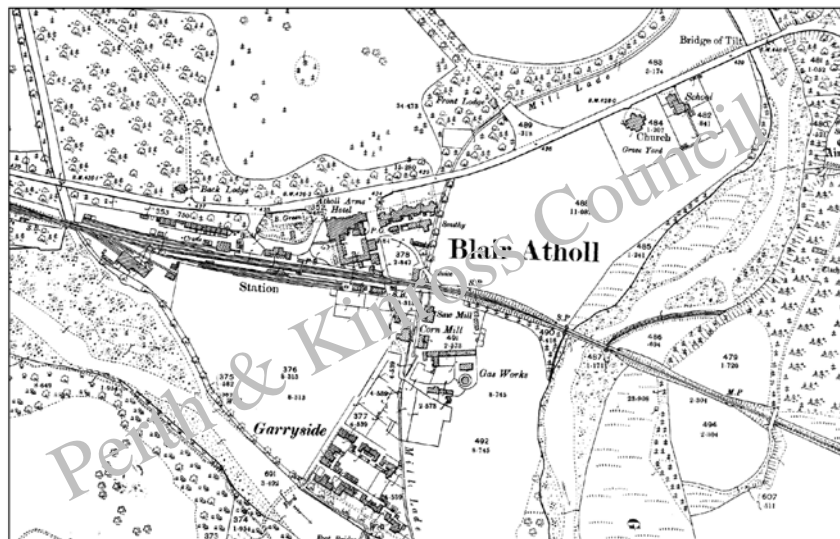
3.1 The parish of Blair Atholl was formed by the amalgamation of the four parishes of Blair, Lude, Kilmaveonaig and Struan some time before 1632. The parish area is mountainous, surrounded by major peaks including Beinn a'Ghlo, modern forestry, historical deer forest and lochs. Settlement generally follows the minor valleys of the Errochty, Bruar and Tilt feeding into the major water courses of the Tummel and Garry. The village of Blair Atholl is located approximately 10 miles from the northern boundary of Perth and Kinross with Highland/Aberdeenshire, within Glen Garry and on the confluence of the Garry and Tilt.

3.2 The history of the area is to a large extent the history of the Clan Robertson and the Atholl family. Blair House or Castle, their main seat, was established in the thirteenth century and has undergone many later phases of alteration and development. The former village core at Old Blair is located within the policies to the north-east of Blair Castle. Agricultural and estate improvement led to the village being relocated to a site immediately against the southern estate wall. A planned estate village developed here from the early nineteenth century, centred around the new parish church and Atholl Arms Hotel. Agricultural improvement in turn encouraged industrial growth with meal and saw mills and a gas works appearing in Blair Atholl in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

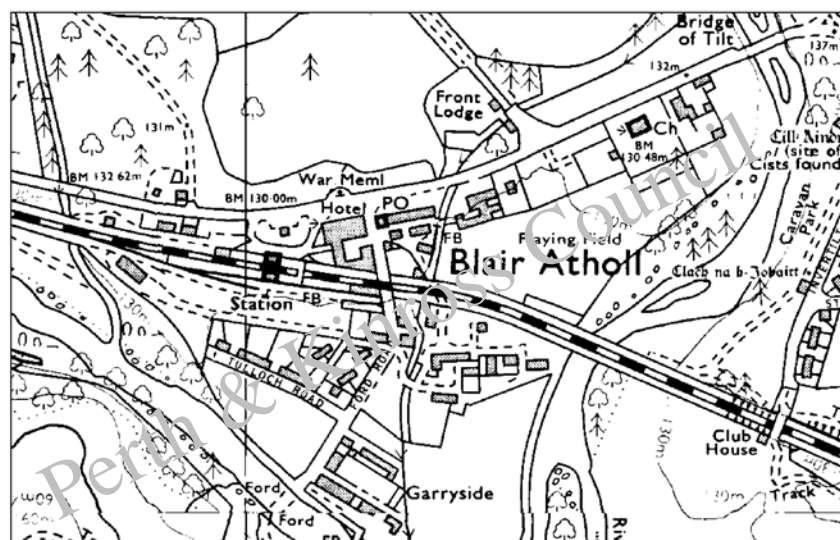
Settlement Development



Map 2: c.1867



Map 3: c.1900



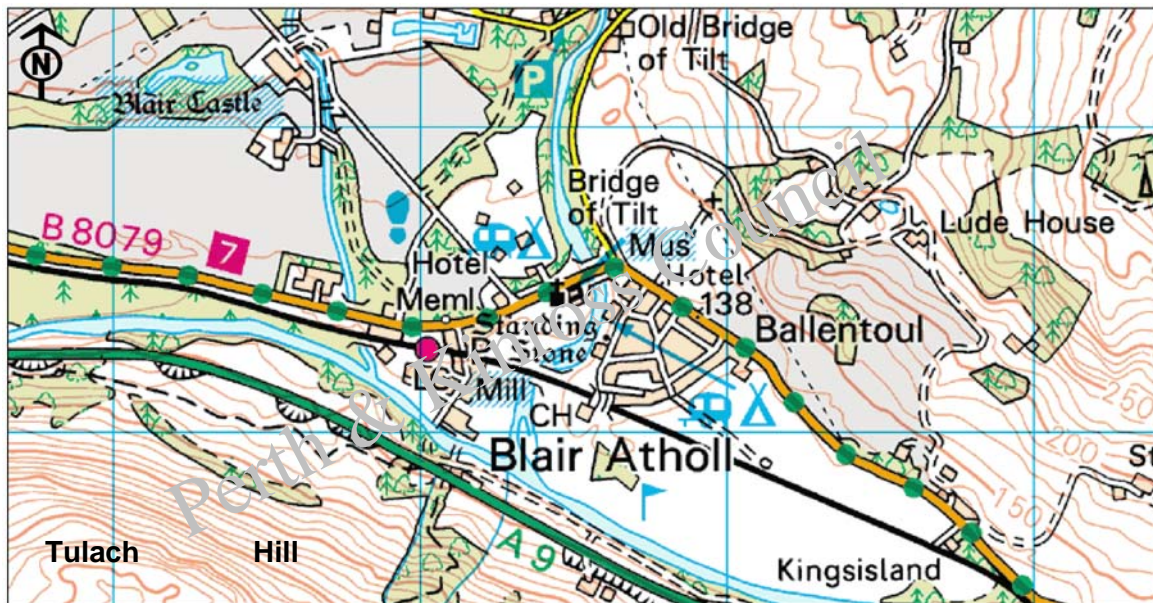
Map 4: c.1973

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TOWNSCAPE ANALYSIS

Setting

Map 5: Blair Atholl and Bridge of Tilt



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4.1 The compact size and location of Blair Atholl mean that the surrounding topography plays a key part in its character. The confluence of the rivers Garry and the Tilt creates an open, picturesque frame to the south and east sides of the village with water meadows, wooded areas and the recreation ground. Tulach Hill to the south forms a dramatic landscape backdrop to the formal design of the main street. The designated historic landscape of Blair Castle to the north is rated as Outstanding for its artistic, historical, horticultural, architectural, scenic and nature conservation value. As this landscape effectively pre-dates the current village its presence plays a crucial role in the settlement's evolution. The railway also adds to the picturesque setting of the village: reputedly the Duke of Atholl would only allow the Inverness and Perth Junction Railway to cross his land if it could be designed so as not to detract from the estate, and the ornate castellated portals of the 1863 viaduct were considered to satisfy his requirements.



Railway viaduct

Activity and movement

4.2 Commercial and tourist activity, including shops, hotel, cafes and museum, is concentrated on the main street. There is also a general stores shop located in Ford Road, behind the hotel. Blair Castle and grounds are a long-established tourist attraction recording one of the highest visitor numbers of the major tourist sites throughout Scotland, and host several national events each year including horse and sheep dog trials. The surrounding area provides for a variety of leisure activities including walking, riding, hunting and watersports, many of which use Blair Atholl and the Atholl Estate as a base. Visitor accommodation is provided in a number of major caravan sites including the Blair Estate site just to the east of the main gates and another on the south-east bank of the Tilt to the south of the Tilt Bridge. Hotels, guest houses and self-catering accommodation is also scattered throughout the village area, mostly in adapted private residential accommodation. The A9 bypasses the village although volumes of traffic are relatively high during the peak tourist season, the car park directly south of the main entrance to the grounds of Blair Castle being well used during this period. Aside from seasonal and tourist-based activity the area has a role in management and forestry on the Atholl Estate, for example in the sawmill just inside the Castle boundary immediately to the west of the village.



Main Street



Ford Road

Street pattern and topography

4.3 The core of the village is a planned linear development along the main road flanking the southern boundary wall of the Blair Castle grounds. The grouping of listed parish church and school, drill hall, cottages and Atholl Arms hotel create a single-aspect high street facing north towards the listed estate wall, gates and lodges and the 1920s War memorial with the designated landscape of the castle grounds beyond. Ford Road runs off the main road to the south, providing access to the nineteenth century development originating with the mills and works in this area of the village. More recent housing development lies to the south and west. There is a varied network of pedestrian paths or routes off the main street, running alongside the mill lade and around the eastern edge of the village along the banks of the River Tilt. The railway line creates a sharp division within the village between the formal, planned main street frontage to the north and the more organic development of industrial and agricultural origin to the south.

Old Photographic Record

Atholl Arms Hotel
c.1947



Main Street
c.1930

Old Bowling Green
c.1920



Photographs courtesy of A.K. Bell
Local Studies, A.K. Bell Library, Perth

Buildings and townscape

4.4 The planned townscape of the estate village creates a very attractive composition with a variety and at the same time harmony of architectural styles and forms. Building heights in general are an even mixture of one and two storey. Most buildings have slate roofs and random or coursed rubble walls using local sandstone or whinstone. Mid nineteenth century revivalist styles are prevalent in the village, particularly Baronial, with characteristic details including crow steps, stone skews, tall chimney stacks and corbelled wall corners.

4.5 Landmark buildings include the parish church, first of the estate buildings built between 1823 and 1825, and the Atholl Arms Hotel, partly three storey, a Scots-Jacobean design built in 1832.



Blair Atholl Parish Church



Atholl Arms Hotel

4.6 Blair Cottages, built in 1840, are a neatly planned, symmetrical group of eight dwellings in a Scots-Tudor style. The village hall, of 1907, is a mild Baronial style, built as a drill hall for the Scottish Horse. The mid-nineteenth century former school, which now houses a folk museum, and the 1930's timber clad post office form an important visual group on the eastern edge of the main street.



Blair Cottages



Village Hall

4.7 Key buildings south of the main street are the old meal mill, now converted into a house and visitor centre, and the railway station with its fine latticed footbridge. Key buildings and spaces within the village are indicated on map 6.



Meal Mill



Railway Station & Footbridge

Spaces

4.8 All spaces, regardless of ownership and accessibility (ie. public and private spaces) contribute to the amenity and character of an area, as indicated in Planning Advice Note 65, 'Planning and Open Space'. The term 'open space' covers green space consisting of any vegetated land or geological feature in a village and also civic space including squares, market places and other paved or hard landscaped areas.

4.9 There is a large green area of public open space on the eastern side of the village, the 'Memorial Park', which incorporates playing fields, a bowling green and an attractive woodland walk along the banks of the River Tilt. This walk links with pedestrian routes along the lade and in front of the Blair Cottages. The route of the lade through the town creates an interesting feature and reminder of its industrial heritage. All buildings are set back from the main street; Blair Cottages have an integral layout with a formal 'green' at the front but others have low-grade hard landscaping or gravelled parking areas.



Memorial Park



Lade

4.10 There is no particular focus of pedestrian activity in a civic space or square. The immediate area around the Atholl Arms Hotel, The Square and corner shop in Ford Road is probably the main focus for local pedestrian and vehicle activity. There is a concentration of tourist pedestrian activity in and around the public parking area associated with the museum, café and information centre for the Atholl Estates, and to a lesser extent at the public car park in front of the bowling green.



'The Square'



Museum & Old Post Office



War Memorial

4.11 The village war memorial is located in its own semi-circular space on the north side of the main street, with the stone boundary wall of the Castle grounds set back at this point from the road edge. This attractive setting of the memorial, with mature tree groups behind it, is a sensitive location which should be retained as such and not be adversely affected by any development pressures.

Trees and landscaping

4.12 Blair Atholl is located within 'big tree country' with various waymarked trails and the village is framed by substantial tree groups to the north and south-east and forested areas beyond. These tree groups or woodland areas are an important feature and make a positive contribution to the setting of the village, providing a backdrop and visual enclosure. There are a variety of tree species including oak, birch, alder, rowan, beech and Scots pine.



Memorial Park - Tree belts



Approach from West

4.13 Tree groups and lines of trees or tree belts on one or both sides of the street add an important dimension to the townscape experience. There are tree lined corridors as one approaches the village on the main road from the east and the west. The woodland areas to the south of the village which fringe the rivers Tilt and Garry may be sensitive to development pressures. It is of supreme importance to protect this woodland as it provides a natural foil to the Conservation Area boundary and restricts views of the A9. As mentioned earlier, the Blair Castle grounds to the north of the village are a designated historic landscape and provide both views and enclosure from mature tree groups. Key tree groups in and around the village are indicated on map 7. (Further information on trees in conservation areas at Appendix 2).



Tree belts to South



Tree cover behind Estate Walls

Character areas

4.14 As Blair Atholl is a relatively small, planned village of the 19th Century there are no distinctive or different character areas making up the sum of the parts. The Appraisal treats the village conservation area as one character area, including the green spaces which are associated with the 19th Century planned development.

Negative factors

Former petrol station site

5.1 This site directly north of the railway station is a semi-derelict area of land adjacent to the main street and the access road to the railway station. This area was used as a bowling green from the late nineteenth century onwards. The kiosk building is presently used as a bookshop.

Public toilets and tarmac area

5.2 The public toilet building is not conducive to the traditional architecture of the adjacent village hall and the tarmac area in front is ill-defined. The overall visual quality of this space is poor.



Old Petrol Station Site



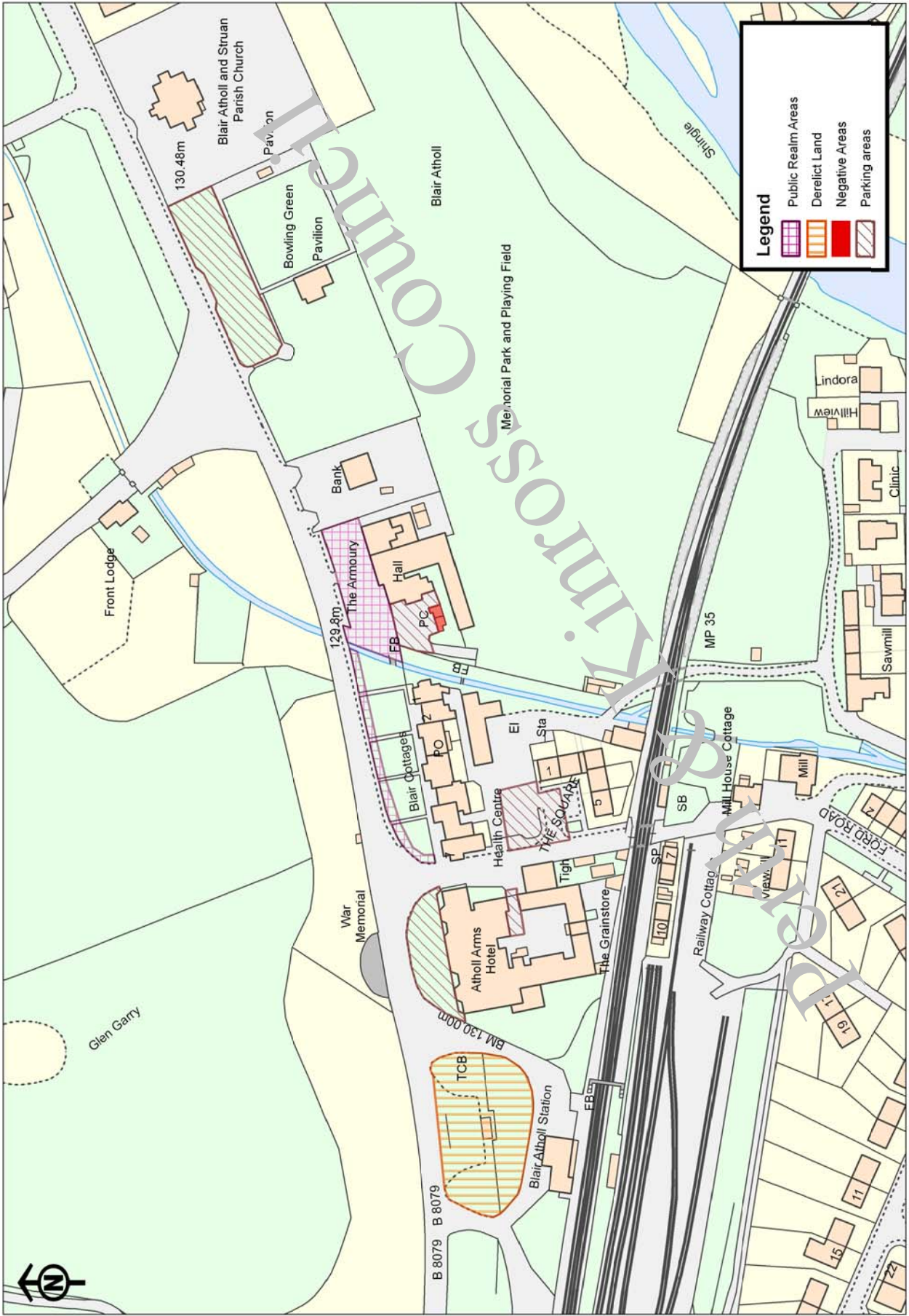
Public Toilets & Car Park

Signage

5.3 There is a mixture of official tourist signposting and private, 'home-made' type signage along the main street which has a tendency to create a cluttered impact. The area would benefit from rationalisation and harmony.

5.4 The shop fascia signage for the corner shop in Ford Road is of a standardised, national corporate image type, not appropriate for the traditional townscape of the village and would benefit from improved design and materials.

Map 8: Negative Factors



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Building by building analysis

Buildings at Risk survey

6.1 There are no buildings currently listed in the Scottish Civic Trust's Buildings at Risk Register at the present time but the situation will be monitored at regular intervals.

Public realm audit

7.1 There are various public or semi-public parking areas along the south side of the main street which lack definition and quality hard or soft landscaping. These are the public parking area beside the museum and former post office; the parking area in front of the Atholl Arms Hotel, and the area around the former petrol station.



Parking area at Museum, looking east



Atholl Arms parking area

7.2 The main driveway entrance to Blair Castle is a rather wide and expansive area of tarmac and scalping which would benefit from some softening through improved materials/landscaping and more of a pedestrian friendly relationship with the south side of the main street.

7.3 The grassed areas existing between the edge of the main street and the building line of the village lack usable street furniture and small-scale soft landscaping. The yews along the edge of this space appear to form part of a historic planting but have suffered from a lack of management in recent years.



Entrance to the Castle



Grass lawns and yew trees, Blair Cottages

Surveys of specific issues

8.1 All conservation areas contain streetscapes, building types, architectural details, materials or other features which are unique to that area and a result of their historical development. These features contribute to an area's local distinctiveness, the characteristics that lend it a unique sense of place. Some of these characteristics are general or intangible, but others can be quite closely defined.

8.2 The following is not an exhaustive list and will be augmented in the future. It identifies the most important types of features and elements of the townscape which help to shape its identity, but which may be most at risk of incremental erosion. A full survey of each category will be undertaken as part of the building analysis survey. This will provide example images which may be referred to when new development, alterations and extensions are proposed in the area.

Windows & doors



Characteristic fenestration patterns, fine quality joinery.



Materials



Distinctive use of rubble and dressed stone, slate and timber.



Roofscapes



Landmark chimneys, strong, unbroken roof forms, finely detailed finishes.

Decoration & detail



Corbelled corners, exposed rafters, simple joinery, quoins and expressed rubble.

Industrial/commercial



Fine shopfronts and original signs, historic industrial infrastructure, agricultural survivals.



Sensitivity analysis

Setting of the conservation area

9.1 The edges of the conservation area can be sensitive to potential development. The Highland Area Local Plan indicates zoned areas of land for housing at Garryside on the south side of the village, industrial or business uses on the west side, and caravan site development on the east bank of the River Tilt. These areas or zones are outwith the conservation area but are on the immediate edge or in close proximity to the conservation area boundary. It is important to preserve and enhance the setting of the conservation area and the design, scale and landscaping of any development must not adversely affect this setting. Also, existing tree belts should not be adversely affected.



Garryside fields



East bank of River Tilt

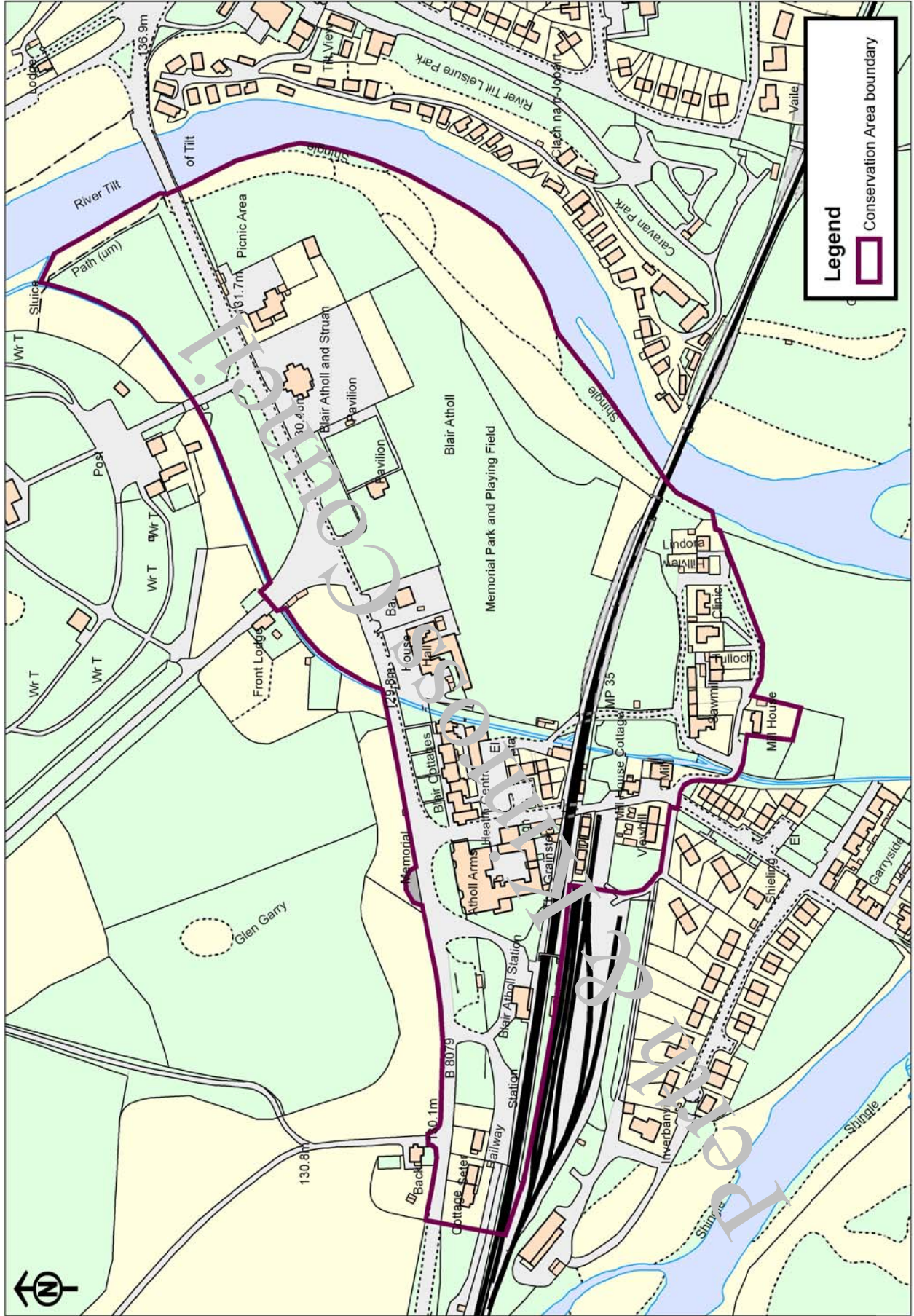
Archaeology

9.2 There are no scheduled monuments within the conservation area. The nearest monument is a standing stone in the caravan park area on the east side of the River Tilt. Other monuments are indicated in the Perth & Kinross Heritage Trust's historic environment record, including the war memorial, churchyard and the Bridge of Tilt.

Assessment of Significance

10.1 The townscape of Blair Atholl is relatively unaltered since it was developed as a planned village in the nineteenth century for Atholl Estate workers. Varied and harmonious architectural styles with Victorian decorative features are displayed. The green spaces framed with mature tree groups and the River Tilt enrich the townscape and its setting.

Map 9: Conservation Area Boundary



CONSERVATION STRATEGY

Using the Conservation Area Appraisal

11.1 The Conservation Area Appraisal (CAA) provides a sound basis for development management and for initiatives to promote environmental and economic improvements. Key issues and features that contribute to the character of Blair Atholl are addressed and proposals will be put forward for enhancing the character of the area. This will be done through local consultation with amenity groups, businesses and other community organisations. Public meetings and exhibitions will also be arranged.

11.2 Based on the findings of the appraisal, the conservation area boundary has been drawn to include those areas of the village which are a focus of architectural and historic character and quality, reflecting the various important phases of the village's evolution. Areas have been excluded which, in the Council's opinion, fall short of the necessary standard owing to the dispersed nature of any buildings of architectural merit or their irreversible erosion through unsympathetic alteration. Remote areas of listed buildings may also have been excluded as they already have adequate protection. However the boundary will be kept under review as policies change or as research highlights previously undervalued areas.

11.3 The CAA provides a framework for on-going management of the conservation area in the medium term as well as the near future. The key objectives are:

- To ensure maintenance of the integrity of the conservation area;
- To prevent erosion of character through small-scale change;
- To enable future evolution and change as long as it is appropriately controlled.

11.4 Implementing these objectives will depend on a number of factors:

- Development proposals must be in accordance with current development plan policies relating to conservation area status and special character of the historic buildings, open spaces and tree groups. Design, materials and detailing will require to be in accordance with design guidelines prepared by the local planning authority;
- Development proposals should demonstrate a sustainable approach, including use of materials and sustainability of use;
- Adaptive re-use of buildings and mixed use projects to ensure a reverse in physical, visual or economic decline will be positively considered subject to compatibility with neighbouring property and uses;
- The potential for economic regeneration will be considered as a positive factor, subject to compatibility with neighbours.

11.5 Whilst current planning policies provide a framework for protection of the conservation area, it is important to ensure implementation and enforcement where necessary. A combination of guidance, information and planning tools will be used in this management role, as indicated below:

- Conservation area guidance: design advice will be provided for owners and occupiers of

residential and commercial property with regard to building alterations and improvements, and there will also be advice for any new build site infill;

- Grant aid: the local planning authority will provide information regarding what grant schemes may be available from partnership agencies and other organisations for certain types of repair or enhancement works;
- Enforcement action: the planning authority has produced an enforcement charter which will identify any unauthorised works within and adjacent to conservation areas as priorities for action;
- Repairs Notices: the planning authority will seek to work with owners of listed buildings but will take action in terms of undertaking urgent works or requiring repairs where owners allow buildings to fall into disrepair;
- Compulsory Purchase orders: the planning authority will exercise its rights to acquire buildings in disrepair to assist their repair and conversion in partnership with other agencies;
- Education and training: the planning authority is in the process of establishing links with Historic Scotland and Scottish Enterprise to facilitate conservation training programmes for building contractors and other interested parties or private individuals. PKHT has recently secured resources from the Heritage Lottery fund to develop an interpretive and outreach education programme in conjunction with other agencies to promote understanding and enjoyment of conservation areas.

11.6 There is a firm commitment from the planning authority to ensure the protection and enhancement of Blair Atholl Conservation Area and to use statutory planning powers when these are required. The importance of public consultation with local civic amenity and community groups and local businesses is fully understood and this will continue after the conservation area has been designated and established.

Monitoring and Review

The conservation area will be monitored through;

12.1 Photographic surveys: a detailed survey of all buildings and open spaces within the conservation area has been undertaken as part of the appraisal and will form a basis for monitoring further change.

12.2 Observation: officers from the planning authority will visit the conservation area at regular intervals and check on the progress of any restoration and enhancement schemes and also observe any other works occurring which may be unauthorised.

12.3 Liaison: officers will liaise with local amenity groups, the public and other interested parties as necessary.

12.4 Review: the conservation area appraisal will be monitored and reviewed from time to time depending upon budget constraints and other priorities.

PROPOSALS

Opportunities for Development

Gateway Centre project

13.1 A site within the village is required for the proposed Blair Atholl Gateway Centre building complex and the favoured location is the open space area immediately to the east of the old school museum. The Highland Area Local Plan identifies this site for tourist development. The purpose of the Gateway Centre will be to provide a visitor service to support the village and the castle, provide a service hub to the wider area and act as a gateway to the Cairngorms. This project should provide the perfect opportunity to improve the hard landscaping, edges and definition of parking areas around the building group including the museum and former post office and to integrate well with existing interpretative facilities and green space. The building complex itself will need to be of high architectural quality and in sympathy with the general mass and scale of the village townscape. A planning/design brief will be produced for this key site.



Area proposed for Gateway Centre Project

Former petrol station site

13.2 This area, identified in the Highland Area Local Plan as the station and old forecourt area (site ref.I1) is an opportunity site for business, shopping, tourist, leisure or residential use with associated environmental improvements and landscaping. A development brief will be produced to guide and encourage suitable development. Some initial visual improvements and temporary landscaping to the site would be beneficial.

Local path networks

13.3 The management of the conservation area provides an opportunity for the development and enhancement of path networks passing through and around the area. The site identified for the Gateway Centre or one of the other public spaces in the village could act as a hub or information point for paths users.

Opportunities for Planning Action

Advertisements

14.1 There are certain types of advertisements (shop signage) which do not require advertisement consent under the Town & Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) (Scotland) Regulations 1984. It is possible for a local planning authority to propose an Area of Special Advertisement Control and seek the approval of the Scottish Ministers. (Further information on Areas of Special Advertisement Control contained in Appendix 1).

14.2 The competition for business signs in Blair Atholl will probably increase in the short to

medium term, which may have the potential to produce more standardised shop signage and negative visual clutter, if not suitably managed. Special Advertisement Control status would be a useful development management tool and it is proposed to draft control measures for Scottish Ministers' approval.

Trees

14.3 There is a case for Tree Preservation Orders to be formulated around the edge of Blair Atholl if tree belts or groups important to the setting of the conservation area are located outwith the boundary and therefore do not have conservation area protection. The Council will consider serving TPO's if any important tree belts in these areas are under apparent or potential risk. (Further information on trees in conservation areas at Appendix 2).

Opportunities for Enhancement

Main Street

15.1 There is the opportunity to create a better visual edge to the open green and parking spaces on the south side of the main street. Proposals could include:

- a) façade improvements to the public toilet block and a hard and soft landscaping scheme to improve the surfacing and edges of the parking area in front of the block and village hall;
- b) rationalisation and improvement of parking facilities for both cars and coaches, in order to integrate visitor requirements with the character of the area;
- c) formal soft landscaping of the grassed area in front of the Blair Cottages with attention to trees, flowerbeds and suitably designed street furniture such as seating;
- d) a continuation of the 'green edge' along the front of the Atholl Arms Hotel parking area and at the former petrol station site, including a soft and hard landscaping scheme and suitable outdoor seating;
- e) a soft landscaping scheme for the War Memorial and improvements to ground surfacing.



View looking West along Main Street



View looking East along Main Street

Sensitive treatment of the wide driveway entrance to the Castle and its pedestrian links to the south side of the road should also be considered.

All proposals will be subject to further research, development and consultation. They will be designed to accord with the requirement to preserve the historic character of the conservation area, its listed buildings and the adjacent historic designed landscape.

Ford Road

15.2 The area which includes the parking space around The Square and the rear yard entrance to the Atholl Arms Hotel would benefit from a hard landscaping scheme to define edges and improve visual quality. Consideration should be given to the reinstatement of the former courtyard arch and white horse.

Signage scheme

15.3 A partnership scheme with tourist operators and local businesses will be promoted with the purpose of rationalisation and enhancement of signage.

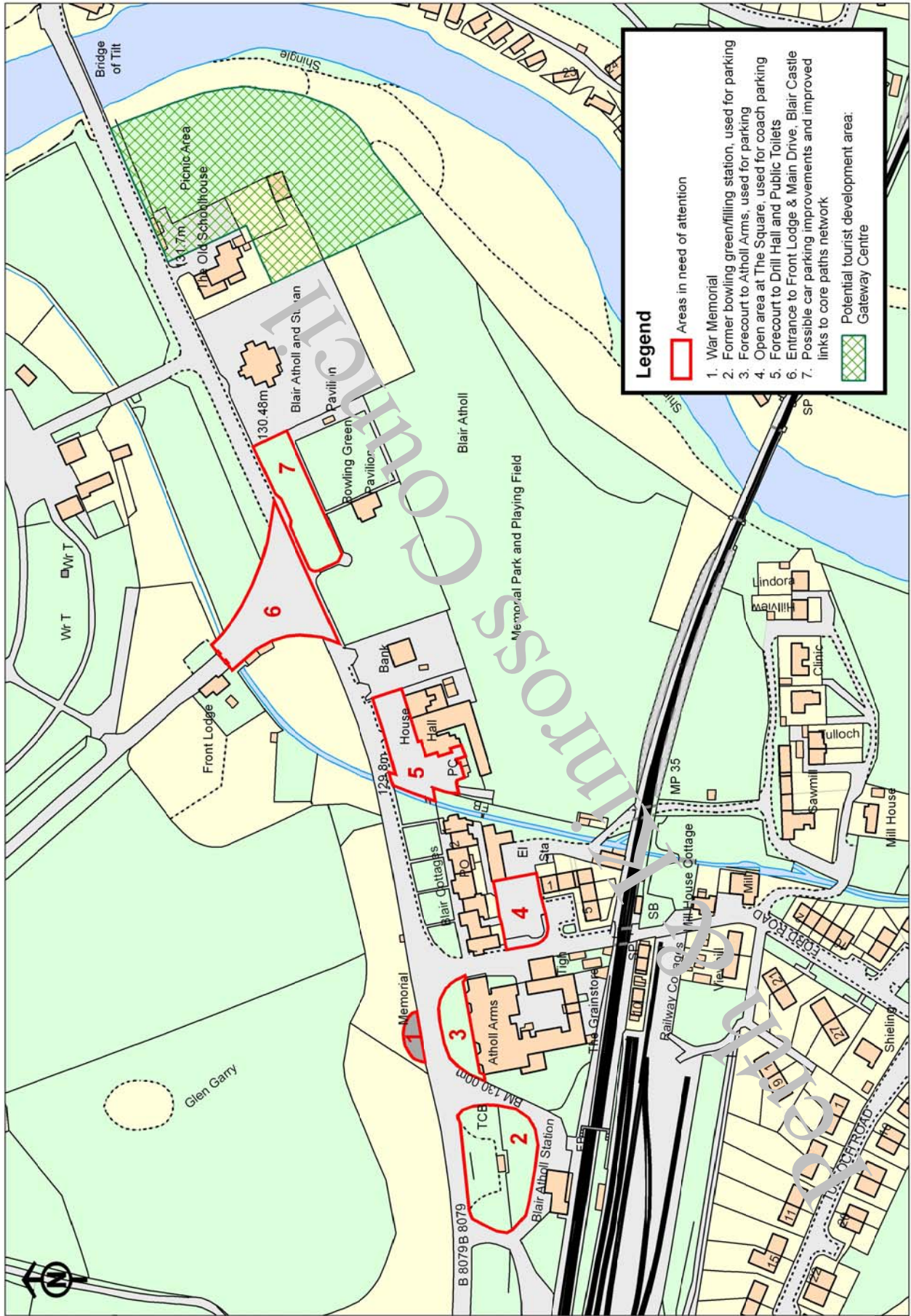


Rear entrance to Atholl Arms Hotel



Signage Clutter at Museum

Map 10: Areas in need of attention



Appendices

1) Advertisements—Areas of Special Control

Special Control status means that any advert with lettering height of more than 0.3 of a metre (rather than 0.75 of a metre without Special Control) requires advertisement consent. Also any sign on business premises which is above 3.6 metres from ground level (i.e. above the normal shop fascia level of between ground floor ceiling height and first floor) requires advertisement consent.

2) Trees in conservation areas

All trees in a conservation area are covered by the Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act 1997. Under this Act the local planning authority must be given six weeks notice of the intention to uproot, fell or lop trees. The planning authority then has the opportunity to discuss suitable management of the tree(s) with the owners, such as thinning rather than lopping. The planning authority would also have the option to propose protection by Tree Preservation Order (TPO). Failure to give notice will render the person liable to the same penalties as for contravention of a TPO, which could involve a fine not exceeding £20,000 per tree.

Sources

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