

Castor



Built Environment Audit 2002/2004



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This is a Peterborough Environment City Trust (PECT) audit methodology, for which PECT retains the intellectual property rights. It was developed in association with Richard Donoyou MRICS, MRTPI, Veronica Thorne (Peterborough Civic Society), and Richard Brown (PECT). The Audit survey work was completed by the villagers. Richard Donoyou compiled the final report and produced the Townscape maps.

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1.0 Summary

The Audit methodology has been successful in prompting a different way of thinking about the built environment. The surveys have involved a cross section of community interests and age groups, stimulating wider investigation of the buildings, walls and trees, which combine to create Castor's unique townscape.

The data captured has given new insights into the built environment and led to debate based on knowledge rather than conjecture.

The Audit has strongly informed the drafting of the Castor and Ailsworth Village Design Statement and gives a basis of understanding between Peterborough City Council, as the local planning authority and Castor Parish Council and local people.

In replacing intuition with method, the Audit's findings have challenged many long held preconceptions of Castor as, predominantly, a conservation village.

Of the three hundred and twenty primary buildings in Castor, most (two hundred and sixteen or 67%) were built during the last fifty years. Castor is thought of as a stone village and all surviving buildings originating before 1900 are built in local oolitic limestone. However, almost all twentieth century buildings are constructed in modern brick with concrete tiles.

The combination of the pre-twentieth century buildings, stone walls and forest trees planted in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and historic street pattern form the basis of Castor's attractive townscape. In contrast, twentieth century development has made almost no positive contribution to the village's character and appearance. It appears that no new substantial stone walls have been built since 1900, nor is it certain that modern plantings will effectively replace the large forest trees planted two to three hundred years ago and now reaching maturity.

There is some evidence that recent planning policies, reinforced by building conservation grants have been successful in conserving the basic historic fabric of the village. However, the evidence shows that new building makes little concession to traditional building forms, siting or materials and does not reinforce, enhance or continue the high quality built environment, which evolved up to 1900.

If new buildings are to contribute positively to Castor's built environment legacy, fundamental changes are needed to the repetitive and uniform estate-type development which prevailed throughout the twentieth century.

This is the challenge for the twenty first century.

2.0 Project Objectives

2.1 Village Design Statement

The community of Castor wishes to play an active role to protect and conserve its unique village environment. The Countryside Agency's Village Design Statement (VDS) initiative provides a mechanism through which local people can research and prepare plans and proposals for their communities.

Following a VDS workshop organised by the Countryside Agency at the village hall, Castor Parish Council resolved to prepare a 'Joint' Village Design Statement for Castor and the neighbouring village of Ailsworth. This document has, therefore, been prepared in parallel with an Ailsworth Built Environment Audit, led by Ailsworth Parish Council.

2.2 Objective Research

There was a view that planning issues often became contentious because some decisions appeared to be based on matters of opinion rather than established facts. To minimise subjectivity and provide a clear basis for future policy, it was considered that the VDS should, wherever possible, be based upon hard information and data. Peterborough Environment City Trust (PECT) was requested to consider developing a research methodology which would provide the hard built environment database and at the same time allow a wide spectrum of community interests to be actively involved.

The idea of an Audit was then developed with the prime objective being to produce a statistical picture of the village, which would be of intrinsic value as a historical document and at the same time, provide a sound database for other policies and projects.

Over a 10-year period, PECT has developed particular expertise in local environmental research and auditing with projects such as the Peterborough Natural Environment Audit and Peterborough Energy Audit receiving national recognition. The experience gained in these projects was applied to the built environment and a comprehensive audit methodology devised.

A Local Heritage Initiative grant was awarded to Castor Parish Council to enable the field testing of the new built environment methodology. Peterborough City Council confirmed that the results of the research could be used as the foundation for the Castor VDS.

2.3 A Community Project

Active participation of a wide range of groups and organisations, of varying ages and interests was considered essential. To achieve this, the large and complex task of researching and preparing a comprehensive built audit was broken down into a series of smaller, simpler tasks. Relatively straightforward field survey techniques assisted data capture and standard Excel spreadsheets were used for data recording and subsequently added to the Access database for further analysis.

Almost all communities include some people who have gained ICT skills to manage and manipulate spreadsheet data through their work and education. The computer based system also allowed several people to work and input into one or more survey tasks and for the data and results to be shared through floppy disks, CDs and email.

The survey method does not require assistance from built environment professionals such as town planners, architects or urban designers.

2.4 Measurability and Repeatability

The survey method established a measurable 2003-4 built environment baseline, and allows a subsequent re-survey as a whole or in selected parts so that changes over time can be identified and accurately measured.

2.5 Wider Applicability

Through the testing and refining of the concept of built environment auditing in the village of Castor (along with parallel projects in the villages of Ailsworth and Thorney), it was hoped that a robust and tested methodology would emerge. This could then be made available for use by other communities to help them understand and plan for the future of their towns and villages.