

# Stoke Gabriel Conservation Area Appraisal



**Conservation Areas are usually located in the older parts of our towns and villages. They are places whose surviving historic, architectural and locally distinctive features make them special. Conservation area designation highlights the need to preserve and reinforce these qualities.**

The policies followed by the District Council when assessing proposals affecting conservation areas are set out in the South Hams Local Plan, while the Supplementary planning document 'New Work in Conservation Areas' explains how to achieve compliance with them. This is essential because the Council has a statutory duty to approve proposals only if they "preserve or enhance the character or appearance" of the conservation area.

The purpose of this appraisal is to set out what makes the Stoke Gabriel Conservation Area special, what needs to be conserved and what needs to be improved.





## Stoke Gabriel Conservation Area: Summary of Special Interest

Throughout history, the identity of Stoke Gabriel has been closely linked to the River Dart; it is built above an inlet, dammed many years ago to create the large pond which used to power a tidal mill. The village rises from the northern shore of this Mill Pool, its church in pride of place and its houses ranged on the hillside making for a setting that is truly unique. The river provided work and transport for previous generations and today draws tourists and residents alike. Below the church, a thousand year old yew stands amongst a huddle of cottages. The streets snake round the village and rise and fall steeply making for a townscape that unfolds as you move through



it, constantly revealing new views. In many places these streets are bounded by mature trees and high, stone walls, occasional gaps in them giving tantalising glimpses of what lies behind. Stoke Gabriel also derives its identity from the fact that it is not on the way to anywhere and still retains that certain peacefulness of a terminus village.

All these things help to define what makes the conservation area of Stoke Gabriel special. Yet, as ever it is more complex than this. Its picturesque setting, warm microclimate and easy accessibility to Torbay have drawn a large new population to the village (growing from 700 in 1941 to 1223 in 1971, since when it has remained stable). Where there used to be acres of apple orchards, there are now housing estates and the scale of this expansion is all too evident when approaching or viewing the village from afar – most of those houses on the hillside are in fact modern. And yet, within the conservation area the sense of intimacy and history have somehow survived intact. The walls themselves seem timeless and conceal much that is new, but the dramatic topography and ever-present rural scenery also have the effect of softening the new development and preventing monotony – the countryside is always in evidence.



For much of the year, lush, Devon vegetation overhangs the streets and dominates the views. As for the historic pockets of settlement, these seem to have changed little since before the beginnings of modern growth, which, for all its brash excess, has not spoiled this ancient village.



## Location and Setting

The topographical map (right) shows how the character of the village depends on the lie of the land. Because of Stoke Gabriel's dramatic setting by the Dart and its rolling topography, it seems there is a glimpse, vista, or panorama, around every corner. Some of these are dramatic, such as the views of the church across the Mill Pond or of the Dart over meadows from Duncannon Lane; other views of trees and woodlands, fields, or houses even, are nearer. Thus, the relationship with the surrounding countryside is always intimate. The main component map, on pages 6 and 7, shows how these views play an important role in the character of the conservation area. The southern orientation of the village makes for a benign living environment and thriving gardens.

Several of the higher status houses in the village such as Gabriel Court, Rosemount, South Bank and Stoke Gabriel House occupied the most prominent positions in the village when they were first built, though new development above them has now robbed them of this. Mature trees of both native and exotic species in their gardens make an important contribution to the conservation area.

The most dramatic view of the village from outside the conservation area is from the river Dart; because of its inlet site, the village is suddenly revealed as you pass. It is also prominent from land above the far shore near East Cornworthy (right).



Topographical map of Stoke Gabriel

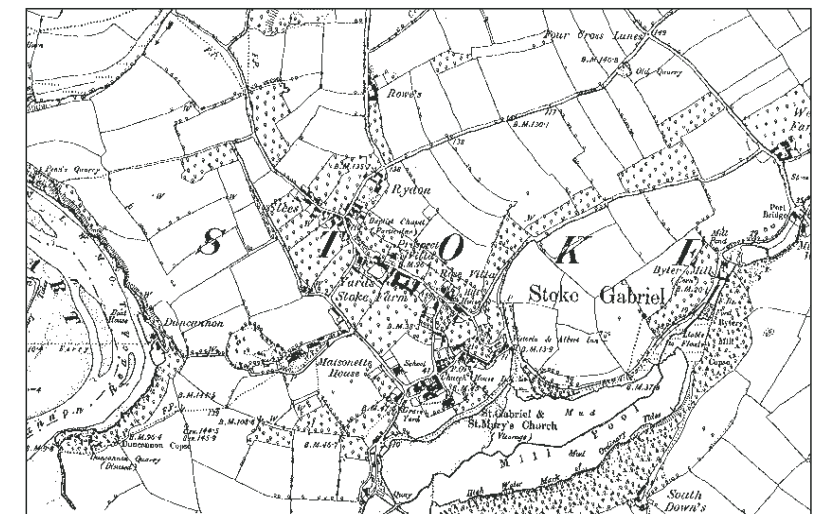


A view of Stoke Gabriel from the far shore of the river Dart.

## Historic Development and Townscape

Although little is known of the village before the church was built (or indeed through the middle ages), fragments of Iron Age and local Romano British pottery have been found very close to the centre and local place names Berry and Borough suggest there was a defensive settlement here. A church was mentioned in the Domesday Book of 1073.

What we can see is that the spatial pattern of development in Stoke Gabriel prior to the 20th century was unusual; the main group of dwellings north of the church was separated slightly from neighbouring Combe Shute; the village was then arranged into four further small residential groups, respectively, at the bottom of Mill Hill, at the top of School Hill, around the present Baptist Chapel and around the present site of the war memorial. These groups of buildings lay on a road that formed an elongated loop culminating in the main church group. The reason for this dispersed arrangement seems to have been the presence of three farms and three large houses in the village, all of which competed for land for apple growing and amenity. Stoke Gabriel's orchards were prolific and although much of the space between these groups of buildings has been developed, they still retain some of their respective characters; the stretch of Paington Road between Yarde Barn and the War Memorial still has a sense of the village's agricultural past with views into the former farmyards of Yarde and Stoke Farm (the entrances to the villas and new houses on the higher, north side are less prominent);



1st edition Ordnance Survey map of the village (circa 1890)



Modern map of Stoke Gabriel





■ The Barnhay (above) and Church Walk have a certain formality about them with a comfortable human scale. The former is a charming, elongated square faced by village houses on three sides, two of which are set back slightly behind 19th century railings. Narrow, partly cobbled pathways lead off it to the Church, Paington Road and Church Walk.



■ At the eastern end of Coombe Shute (above), the cottages line only one side and overlook a drop in the land with the Mill Pool beyond.



■ The northernmost group includes Rydon House, the Baptist Chapel and Slees Cottage. Flood Street (above) is ancient and enjoys a similarly intimate townscape to the deeper village.

the stretch between the War Memorial and the centre is much more formal and is enclosed by the highest walls in the village, behind which are the Gabriel Court Hotel, Stoke House and their gardens with specimen trees. The approach to Stoke Gabriel House and Duncannon Lane also has a rather stately feel. By contrast, the remaining areas are typified by cottages, some in tight groups but many with the broad outlook typical of the village.

The orchards were enclosed by the high stone walls which today contribute so much to the village's character. These walls have ensured that for the most part the lanes are as narrow as they always were and in many places have a delightful irregularity – they tighten and broaden; go uphill and downhill and frequently change direction, alternating between enclosure and opening up, revealing different buildings and views. The high walls have had the effect of screening some of the modern development which is part of why Stoke Gabriel has been able to absorb so much growth without being spoilt – the basic framework of the village is still there. Moreover, at night, the welcome lack of street lighting accentuates its historic and rural character.

■ The nearness of the sea is evident at The Quay (right) with the river tides, the scent of brackish water, the cry of seagulls and small boats moored on the shore.



■ The area south of the war memorial is enclosed by the highest walls in the village



■ Views into the former farmyards of Yarde and Stoke Farm (above) along Paington Road serve as reminders of the village's agricultural past.



■ Coombe Shute (above) drops down from the village centre to the former Victoria and Albert Inn and ancient cottages opposite. The narrow, tree-shaded lane snakes up the hill again and then, as it turns a corner, reveals views across the valley at its summit.



## Unlisted Buildings and Structures of Special Interest

There are many unlisted structures in the village which make a positive contribution to its character and these are shown on the main map. The Mill Dam has to be the most important of these, given that its existence largely determines the setting and character of the village. Little is known about its history, though references to it go back to the early 18th century. It is possibly much older than this, however, as the tidal mills at Totnes and Dartmouth date from the late medieval period. The mill buildings that stood on the dam were demolished in the 19th century.

Other important buildings include the attractive, Victorian Primary School - an important centre of the community; Gabriel Court Hotel standing proud on the hillside with its central turret and walled gardens; the Baptist Chapel, prominently situated up a flight of steps from a small cobbled courtyard; the group of 19th century houses at the bottom of Mill Hill and around The Quay; and the emblematic K6 telephone box in Church Walk. The village has various other interesting features such as cobbling in Church Walk, the arched water collection points at Coombe Shute and The Barnhay, attractive wrought iron gates at Gabriel Court and Stoke Gabriel House, the old pump at Mill Hill and the Sundial in Paington Road. Of the few modern houses that make a positive contribution, it is worth mentioning Oakridge, a 1960s villa which really makes the most of its leafy setting on Stoke Hill. The conservation area boundary has been amended to include this house and its neighbour as well as the historic walled garden between Fir Cottage and Broadpath.



■ Mill Dam



■ Primary School



■ Gate at Gabriel Court



■ Gabriel Court Hotel



■ Oakridge

## Activities and prevailing uses

A glance at the First Edition Ordnance Survey Map and a quick comparison with that of today tells us that where today there are houses, a century or so ago there were orchards. These produced mainly cider apples and provided seasonal labour for the village. Another seasonal activity was salmon netting – back in the 1950s there were some 20 boats between Dittisham and Duncannon - while, in the winter months, herring and sprats could be caught. Today, there are just 3 boats.

Another activity that went on in the first half of the 20th century was sand dredging (today, most of that fine sand in the Dart seems to have been replaced with mud). The surrounding farms were the main provider of employment for villagers until the post war period.

Stoke Gabriel must have been thought of as desirable in the 19th century when several large villas were built in the village; however, the charms of living here only really became easily accessible in the post-war period when residential development in the village started in earnest.

Today, the village provides little in the way of employment; though it does attract large numbers of tourists in the summer months.



■ Baptist Church



■ Summer tourists on Mill Dam

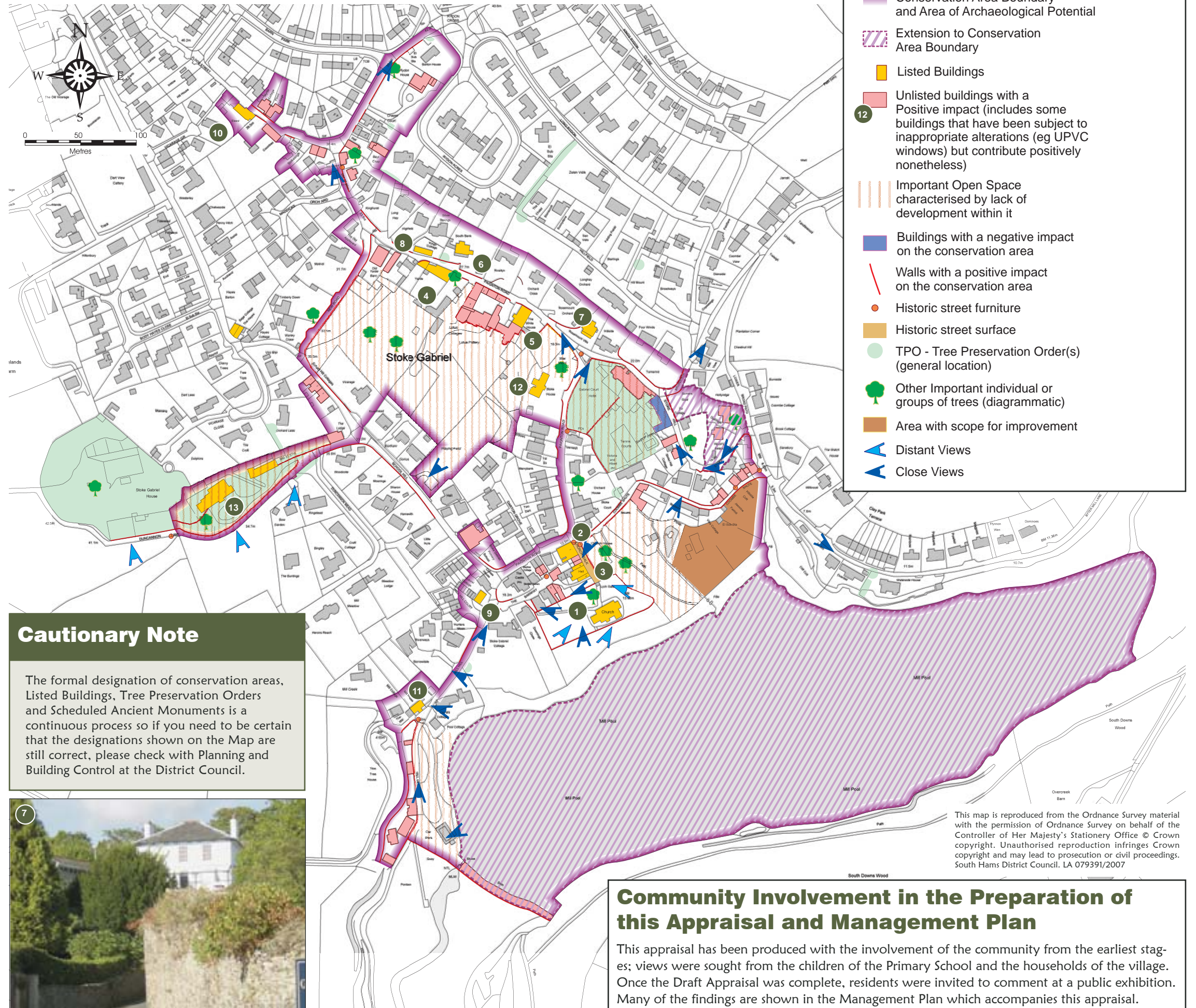


## The Listed Buildings

Surprisingly for a village of this size, there are only 13 list entries in Stoke Gabriel. The most important of these, listed Grade 1, is the 13th century **Church of St Mary and St Gabriel (1)**. Although subject to much Victorian restoration, it is still splendid. It is supposed that the **Church House Inn (2)** at the end of Church Walk dates back to medieval times as well. Also in Church Walk is the former **National School and attached cottages (3)**, an interesting group probably dating back to the 17th century. Otherwise, the listed buildings fall into neat categories: **Yarde (4)** and **The White House (5)** are the former farms along Paignton Road; **South Bank (6)** and **Rosemount (7)** are two fine, mid-19th century villas built above the latter two farms; **Kings Cottage (8)** and **Laurel Cottage (9)** are well preserved 17th century cottages (the latter is the only historic thatched building in the conservation area and formed part of a longer row until the 1960's); **Slees (10)** in Flood Street and **Mill House (11)** are examples of small cross passage houses; while **Stoke House (12)** and **Stoke Gabriel House (13)** (formerly Mazonet) are both large houses from the 18th century.



# Stoke Gabriel Components Map



**Cautionary Note**

The formal designation of conservation areas, Listed Buildings, Tree Preservation Orders and Scheduled Ancient Monuments is a continuous process so if you need to be certain that the designations shown on the Map are still correct, please check with Planning and Building Control at the District Council.



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**Community Involvement in the Preparation of this Appraisal and Management Plan**

This appraisal has been produced with the involvement of the community from the earliest stages; views were sought from the children of the Primary School and the households of the village. Once the Draft Appraisal was complete, residents were invited to comment at a public exhibition. Many of the findings are shown in the Management Plan which accompanies this appraisal.



## Building Qualities & Materials

Apart from singular buildings such as the church and school, the buildings of Stoke Gabriel can be divided into four main groups: modest village houses built straight on to the street ranging from tiny cottages to larger Victorian and Georgian dwellings; most historic buildings in the village fall into this category. Historic village farms - Yarde and White House (formerly Stoke Farm); mid-19th century villas – Rydon House, South Bank and Rosemount; and large 18th and 19th century mansions – Gabriel Court (formerly Hill House), Stoke House, Stoke Gabriel House (formerly Mazonet).

Even on the grander buildings, the usual local combination of rendered rubble and slate roof were used. Exceptions include the White House and Stoke House which are un-rendered and unpainted. Many of the more modest buildings forego the render and are of painted (formerly colour washed) rubble; roughcast is more common than render and slate hanging is very rare. Just one historic house in the village is still thatched (Laurel Cottage), although a new one has been added further down Mill Hill in recent years.

Although these distinctive groups are clearly identifiable, from many viewpoints the dominant house type of the village appears to be the modern bungalow with concrete

tilled roof and white painted render walls. It is one of the great strengths of the village that this modern development has been absorbed without sacrificing its historic character.

The only historic street surface that survives is that of Church Walk and the church path itself in grey limestone and buff stable bricks.

Perhaps the most distinctive structures in the village are the stone rubble walls (sometimes formed by the blind wall of a house) that enclose much of the streetscape. Like many of the other buildings, these are typically constructed mainly of carboniferous grey limestone with red Paignton Triassic sandstone or local shale mixed in, all pointed in mossy lime mortar and often rising above head height. Where walls are present, they tend to upstage what is behind them and they are an important part of why the village has kept so much of its historic character intact in the face of so much growth.

■ *Church Walk (right) is paved with a combination of river cobbles and stable bricks.*



## Neutral areas and areas with potential for Improvement. Building Condition.

The conservation area boundary has been drawn fairly tightly round what survives of Stoke Gabriel's historic core and most of the village's less satisfactory parts have therefore been excluded. There is modern development in the conservation area but when viewed from close up it is largely concealed behind the ubiquitous stone walls or softened by lush greenery; some is sympathetic in any case. However, there are two areas which could be improved and are worth mentioning:

South of the lower part of Coombe Shute is the former Victoria and Albert car park. This falls within the protected open space covered by Policy Area 2 in the Local Plan which also proposes the site for environmental improvement. It is somewhat neglected in appearance and, in recent years there have been proposals to develop

■ *Rear of Gabriel Court Hotel*



some housing on the site and to provide some public car parking together with environmental improvement. The site is not a great eyesore, however, and great care should be taken to ensure that any new development represents a real improvement over the existing.



■ *The former V&A car park*

The rear of the houses to the south east of Gabriel Court Hotel (below left) on Stoke Hill present an ugly, concrete rendered elevation that would greatly benefit from improvement (quite possibly, removal of the render would reveal historic stonework which would transform the effect of the wall on the streetscape)

One ubiquitous modern feature that subtly detracts from the character of the village are the double yellow lines along all its narrow streets. If possible, a more sympathetic alternative would be welcome.

Interestingly, the village has not been spoilt by an excess of UPVC windows; again this is partly due to the fact that many houses are concealed to some extent. However, where traditional windows survive their retention should nearly always be encouraged.

Where occasional opportunities for new development present themselves, the design will need to be of the highest standard, be it modern or traditional in form.

The **Stoke Gabriel Conservation Area Management Plan** that accompanies this appraisal sets out more detailed general proposals for the conservation area.