

# Macdonnell Gardens



Conservation Area  
Character Appraisal

Adopted – January 2012



Planning for a Better Watford

## Macdonnell Gardens Conservation Area Appraisal

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## 1.0 Introduction

The Macdonnell Gardens Conservation Area Character Appraisal aims to set out the area's special character and appearance and how it can be preserved or enhanced.

This appraisal will be used to help inform the design of any future development proposals so that they preserve or enhance the area and acknowledge its features.

It is important to note that no appraisal can ever be completely comprehensive and that the omission of a particular feature, building or open space should not be taken to imply that it is of no interest.

## 2.0 Background, Scope and Structure

The borough of Watford contains eight other conservation areas, the oldest of which were designated in 1973 and 1975. The Urban Conservation Strategy produced during 2001 designated a further five conservation areas - including The Square. More recently the High Street / King Street Conservation Area became Watford's most recently designated conservation area in 2006. In addition, the Watford Heath Conservation Area and Estcourt Conservation Area were extended in 2008 and 2010.

This appraisal is structured to include:

- A summary of designation
- Policy background
- Definition of the special interest of the area via spatial and character analysis, historical development and important features.

## 3.0 Designation

Macdonnell Gardens was designated as a conservation area, under Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, on the 16th January 2012. The main aims relating to the area are:

- to protect the area from inappropriate development which would harm the special character of the area;
- to protect the detailing to buildings which contributes to the special architectural and historic interest of the area;
- to protect the strong and consistent building lines;
- to protect the central green space from proposals which would dominate or harm its character or appearance.

## 4.0 Definition / Summary of Special Interest

The Macdonnell Gardens development was built in the 1930s for occupation by disabled ex-military officers, who had fought in World War 1, and their families. Since then the development has remained as a place for disabled ex-military officers, from all three branches of the armed forces, to live with their families.

This is an unusual form of urban development and one with a military history that is manifested in the various related physical features – such as commemorative plaques and flags.

The buildings display a strong architectural character, with original features, such as brick chimneys, Crittall windows and timber doors, largely still in situ and in good condition. The street has managed to retain its original character as a result of sensitive management and retains its integrity as representing a simple but dignified form of inter-war architecture. The consistent streetscape is formed around a central green space, lending the Gardens a notable suburban character not found elsewhere in the Borough.

## **5.0 Location and Setting**

Macdonnell Gardens is located in the north-western part of the Borough of Watford, close to the boundary with Three Rivers District. The street is bordered to the south-east by the A405 (Kingsway North Orbital Road), which is a wide inter-war dual carriageway. To the west are cul-de-sacs of semi-detached housing, while there are rows of detached houses to the east. To the north is a diverse mix of houses along the historic route of the High Road, with urban edge parkland beyond. The well treed borders and the inward facing pattern of development give Macdonnell Gardens a secluded feel, within an outer-urban setting.

## **6.0 Archaeology and Historic Development**

### **6.1 Archaeology**

In the absence of detailed survey work into the archaeological potential of the area covered by the Conservation Area, it is difficult to make any conclusive comments on this topic. There are no recorded archaeological finds in the immediate area on the County Council's Historic Environment Record (HER). However, a series of finds have been recorded beyond the A405, in the western part of the Kingswood Estate. HER records 974, 975 and 4818 detail that Roman coins, Medieval pottery and a Bronze Age arrowhead have been found at Orbital Crescent, Summerfield Road and Goodrich Close respectively. In addition the former site of Leggatts Farm on Clarke Way may have connections to a medieval manorial site, while parts of the High Road to the north-east may have archaeology relating to the former settlement there.

There are no scheduled monuments in the proposed Conservation Area.

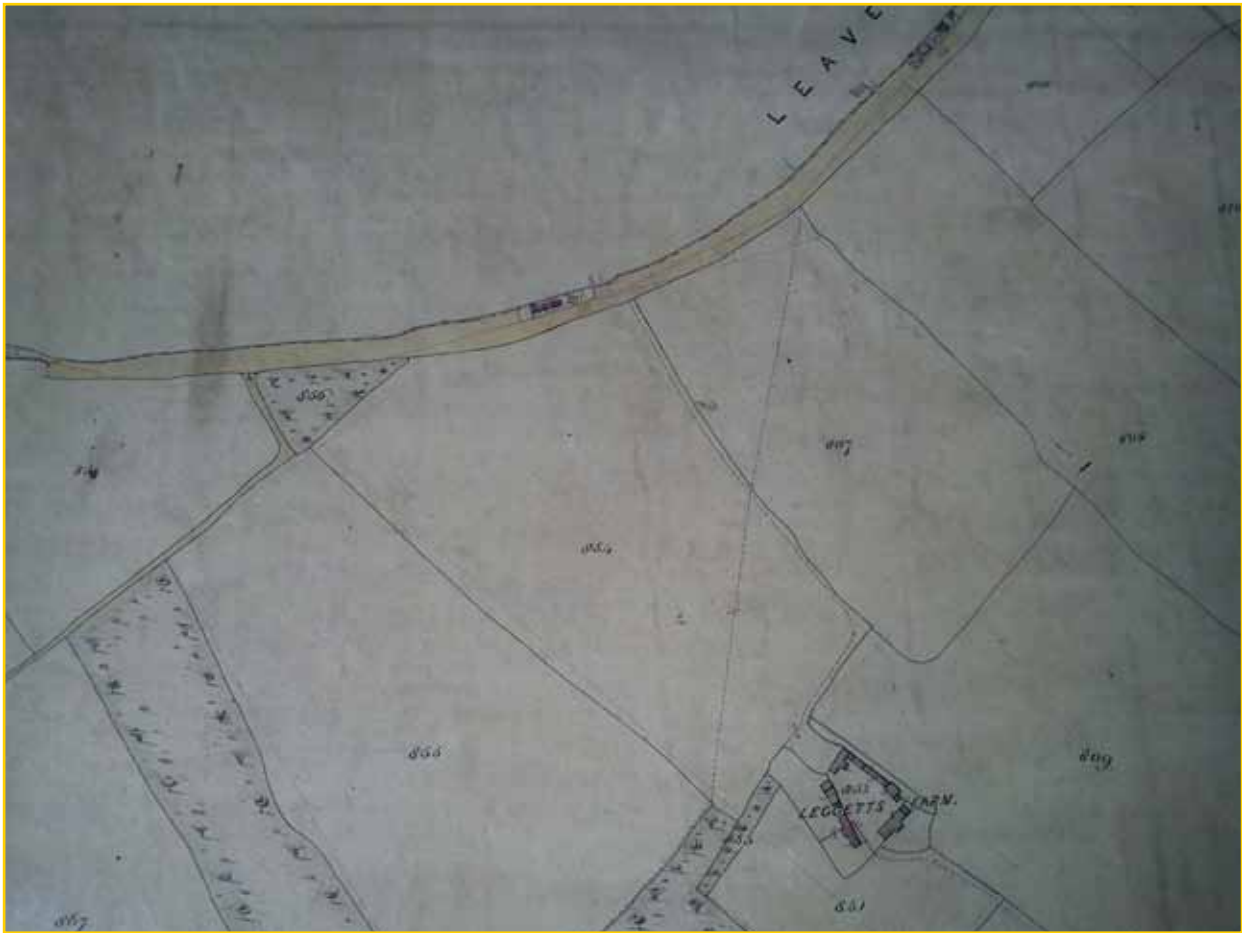
### **6.2 Historical Development**

Before the arrival of the railway, development in Watford had been largely limited to the town's historic core around the High Street. Development outside the centre was generally limited to farm complexes and the various buildings associated with wealthy landowners, such as Cassiobury. The agrarian nature of the area in question can be seen on the Dury and Andrews' map from 1766, which shows the north-western part of the District largely taken up with farmland. The High Road was established by this period, although it was then known as Russell Lane, and scattered development had been built along it – with a greater concentration of buildings to the north-east. The northern part of Gammons Lane can be seen in the south-western corner of the map, while Leggatts Farm is the most significant local feature (called 'Laggatt's Farm' on this map). The area that was to become Macdonnell Gardens appears to be shown as woodland at this point.



*1766 Dury and Andrews Map with approximate area of proposed Conservation Area highlighted in red*

The 1842 Tithe Map demonstrates little change in the general makeup of the area in the intervening decades. Still rural in character, the land south of High Road/Russell Lane consisted largely of farmland relating to Leggatts Farm. At this point the tenant farmer was Henry Fellowes (junior), while the landowner was the Earl of Essex – who resided at Cassiobury House. The two large fields to the south of the road (854= Home Field, 807= Glen Field) were listed at this time as arable farmland. A short terrace of houses can be seen to the north of the road, which were likely to have been farm labourer's cottages.

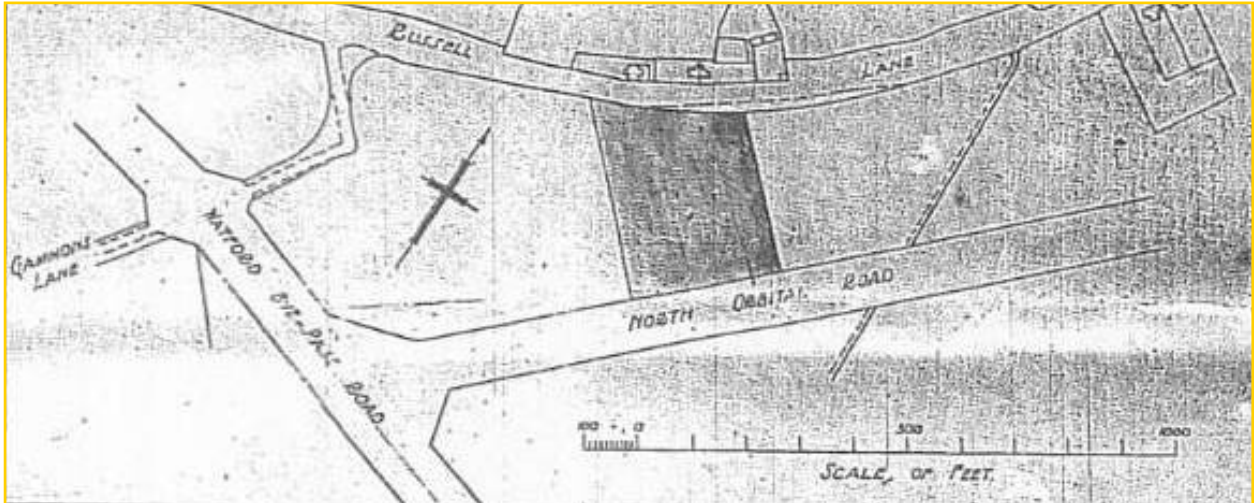


1842 Tithe Map

The character of the area was to change little until the 1920s when a new distributor road was constructed nearby. The 'Watford By-pass' (A41) was completed by 1929, while the 'North Orbital' (A405) was completed in 1932. New roads opened this part of the District up to large scale urban development and the land relating to Leggatts Farm was sold off to property developers. The parcel of land that was to become Macdonnell Gardens had been obtained by the Watford Gardens Estate Limited, a local company that was involved in the development of new housing estates, such as at Maytree Crescent, during the inter-war period. However, the land was not to be developed for a conventional housing estate and was instead to be the setting for an important piece of local military history.

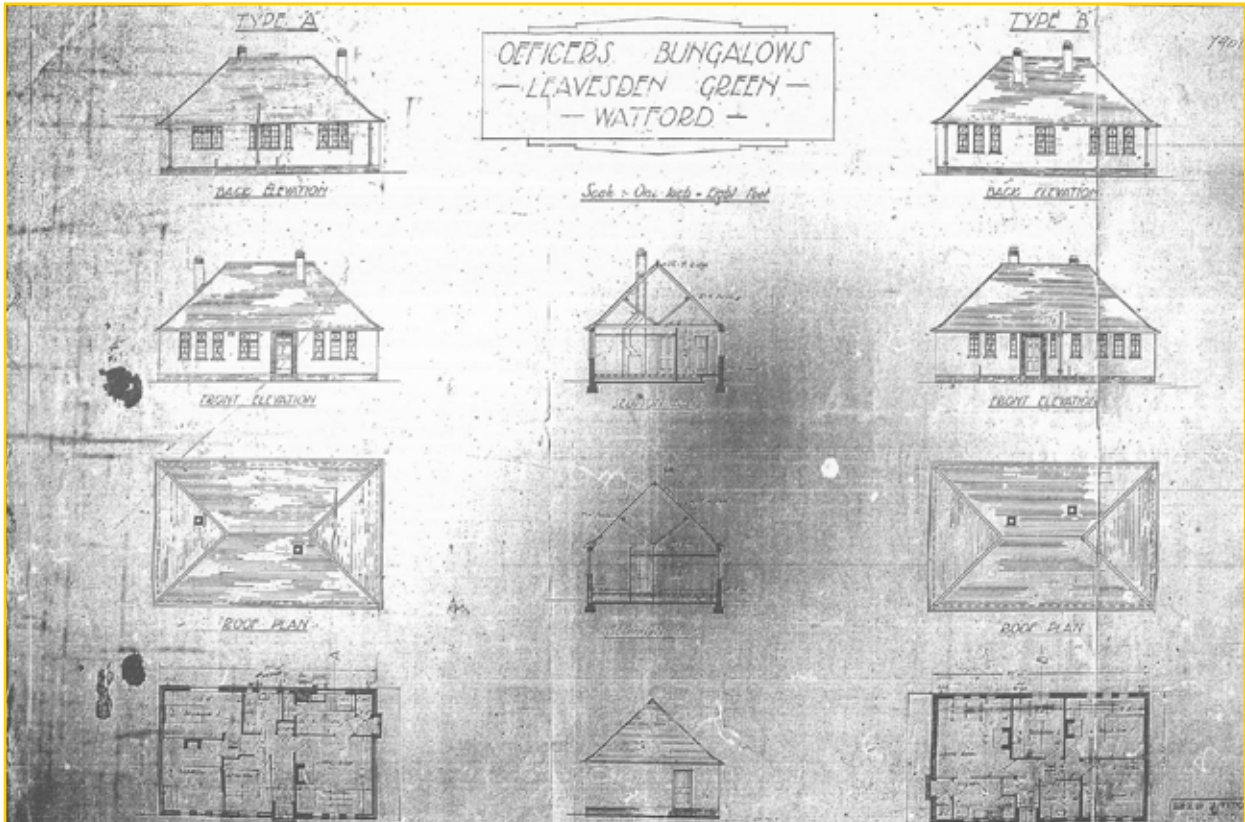
One of the myriad consequences of the First World War was the need for new housing to accommodate the large numbers of servicemen returning to Britain following the cessation of military activity in 1918. This need was manifested in the setting up of a series of charitable organisations concerned with providing accommodation for ex-servicemen – both disabled and the more able, as well as the passing of the Housing, Town Planning, &c. Act 1919. One of the intentions of the Act of Parliament was to allow the building of new houses by the state for returning service personnel, but it was also part of a wider response to research showing the nation's housing stock was inadequate. The various charitable organisations that were created at this time included both national organisations, such as the Royal British Legion, and local charities, such as the Birmingham based Alderson Trust. One of these charities, The Disabled Officers' Garden Homes, was created specifically to cater for the housing needs of disabled former officers and their families. It was this organisation that was to settle on Watford as the location for a new community of homes for ex-servicemen.





Plan from 1932 showing the proposed development site

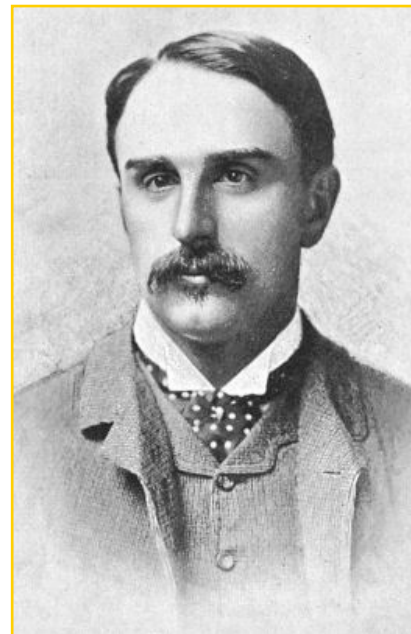
The reasoning behind the choice of land on the edge of Watford is not entirely clear, although its rural aspect away from industrial land uses was detailed as a positive reason for the location in contemporary newspaper reports. Moreover, the contemporary articles in local newspapers indicate that the land was obtained from charitable donors who wished to remain anonymous. These donors may have been local to Watford and it has been suggested that one was the local printing magnate David Greenhill. In any case, the land was passed on by the Watford Gardens Estate Limited on the 6th May 1930 and the Borough Council of Watford subsequently gave permission for the building of 12 bungalows on the land on the 21st May 1932.



Plan from 1932 showing the design of the proposed houses

The charitable efforts to raise funds for the building of the new houses had been led by a Mrs Annie Macdonnell, who was the founder and organising secretary of The Disabled Officers' Garden Homes, as well as the organising secretary of 'Crusaders of St George' – who were another charity concerned with providing for the needs of disabled ex-servicemen. Annie Macdonnell was the widow of William Macdonnell, a former Lieutenant-Colonel in the Connaught Rangers, who had died in 1919. The Connaught Rangers was an Irish regiment of the British Army that fought in various military campaigns, before being disbanded in 1922 following the establishment of the independent Irish Free State.

The houses were designed by a local architect called Henry Colbeck, who was part of the architectural practice of Moore-Smith and Colbeck with his partner John Moore Smith. The firm had offices in both London and Watford and were responsible for the design of a number of building projects in the town.



*Annie Macdonnell (left) Henry Colbeck (centre) and Viscount Knutsford (right)*

Having obtained permission for the building project in May 1932, the first 6 bungalows were constructed by the local builder Mr G. S. Rose and a formal opening ceremony was held on the 30th October 1932. The event was held against the backdrop of driving wind and rain, but was attended by around 250 people, including: the Mayor (Alderman W. Bickerton), Deputy Mayor (Alderman F. W. Jeffs), the Mayor-elect (Councillor J. Evans) and various other alderman, councillors and council officials. Following an introduction from the Mayor, Annie Macdonnell gave a speech, before the principal speech was given by Lord Knutsford – a local aristocrat who resided at Munden House, near Watford. The foundation stone was formally laid at the entrance gates by Lord Knutsford, before the Right Reverend Bishop Lander blessed the ceremony. Gerald Lander was the Assistant Bishop in the Diocese of St Albans and a former Bishop of Victoria, Hong Kong. The national anthem was played and prayers were said before a minute's silence was taken. A closing speech followed by the Vicar of Leavesden – the Rev. C. V. R. Scott.



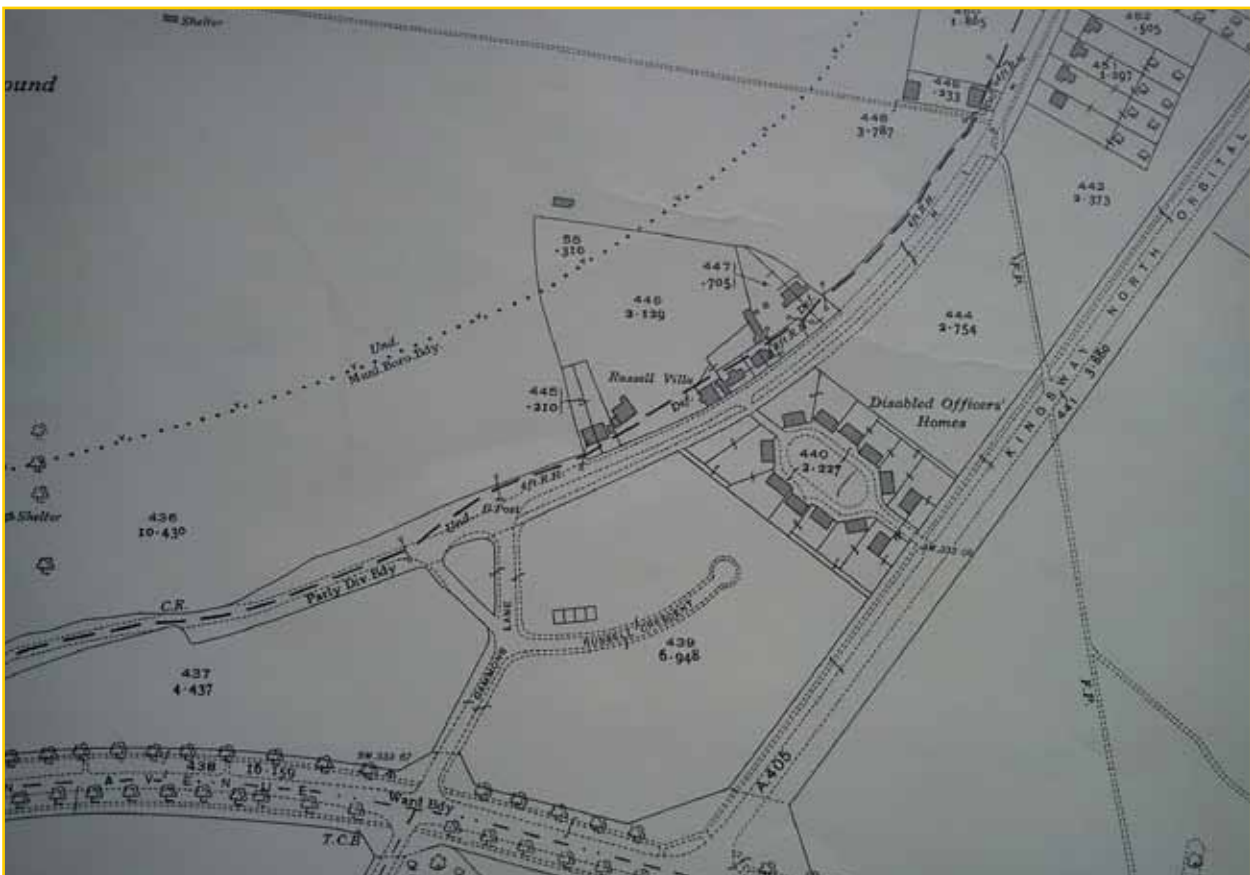


*Image of the Opening Ceremony from West Herts Post 3rd November 1932*



*Image of the Opening Ceremony from Watford Observer 5th November 1932*

At the opening ceremony, Mrs Macdonnell had informed the crowd present that if they were to build the final 6 houses they would need to raise a further £5000 by July 1933, in order to obtain the Government Grant of £7 10s per house (per annum for a period of 40 years). Following further fundraising efforts, the final six houses were built during the following year. On the 12th April 1933 the development was visited by Prince George, the Duke of Kent, as part of a wider visit to the town. The first destination on his tour of the town was to Macdonnell Gardens, where he planted an oak tree close to the flag pole on the central green, before talking to the residents and founders. Prince George was the younger brother of the monarchs Edward VIII and George VI. He served in the armed forces and was killed on the 25th August 1942 when his aircraft crashed into a hillside near Dunbeath, while the oak tree died several decades later due to a gas leak affecting its root system.



1939 OS Map

The ornate wrought iron entrance gates, which had been produced by a Leavesden based metal worker, were taken down for salvage during World War II. However, these were subsequently replaced with new gates in 1998. Various garages were built to the rear of the houses between the 1950s - 1970s, while more modern garages have been more recently installed at the rear of Nos. 1, 3, 6 and 8. Various modest alterations have been made to a number of the properties to improve disabled access – such as new handrails or ramps.

The first residents to move into one of the houses were Major H. P. Ponsonby, his wife and three children. Major Ponsonby had served in the British Army in both the Second Anglo-Boer War and World War I – where he was wounded and contracted malaria. Since 1933 the homes have been occupied by different generations of disabled retired military officers and their families.

No. 1 Bungalow was known as "The Foundress and Life Governors' Home".

The foundress was Mrs. Macdonnell and the Life Governors in 1933 were:

The Lord Camrose	The Lord Melchett
Mr. S. B. Joel	Mr. A. J. Mitchell
Sir Henry McGowan	Miss Beatrice Towse

and Mr. H. Clifford Turner

No. 2 Bungalow, known as "Journey's End Home" was connected with Mr. R. C. Sherriff, the author of the play "Journey's End".

No. 3 Bungalow, known as "Bank Branches Home", was built with monies raised by members of Branch Banks of the "Big Five".

No. 4 Bungalow, known as "The Spotlights' Home", was connected with an Amateur Dramatic Society of that name which raised monies for ex-Service Charities, and was managed by Major Edmund Bayford, DSO., who was a playwright.

No. 5 Bungalow, known as "Emma Mary Cox Home".

No. 6 Bungalow, known as "Lois Morgan Home". Miss Delmar Morgan was a member of the Executive Committee of the Homes in 1934.

No. 7 Bungalow, known as "Hong Kong Home", was built with monies partly subscribed by residents in the Far East.

No. 8 Bungalow, known as "Medical Officers' Home".

and Nos. 9, 10, 11 and 12 Bungalows do not appear to have had names.

*Summary of the names of the 12 bungalows from a leaflet produced by the Officers Association on the history of Macdonnell Gardens:*

## 7.0 Spatial Analysis

This section considers the morphology of the area, key spaces, and important views and vistas into and out of the area.

### 7.1 Character and Interrelationships of Spaces

The development was planned as a discreet residential cul-de-sac and is unified by its simple layout around a central green space. The buildings turn their backs onto the existing road network and the relationship between the adjacent streetscape and the development itself is therefore a weak one. Although the front gardens of the houses are relatively small, a sense of space is created by the open frontages onto the central green space and access route. The openness of the shared space is further emphasised by the limited boundary treatment to the central green, marked just by widely spaced stone markers, while the route network does not have any road markings or a separate pavement. The oblong shaped central space is largely taken up with a lawn, with more elaborate landscaping on the south-eastern side consisting of a rose garden, a line of shrub/tree planting and a flagpole.



*Central green space*



*Rose garden*



## 7.2 Key Views and Vistas

Generally flat and with buildings of a consistent height, the topography and built form of the area limits the potential for dramatic views. The views into the proposed Conservation Area from the High Road and the A405 are restricted by the landscaped boundaries and limited access points into the development. The two principal access points into Macdonnell Gardens are relatively narrow, with the pedestrian access from the A405 offering only limited views inwards through the ornate gateway.

Within Macdonnell Gardens, the consistent built form around the central green is set against the taller flagpole, which serves as a landmark feature within the formally landscaped space.



*Views into the development from the High Road (left) and the A405 (right)*

## 8.0 Character Analysis

### 8.1 Character Zones

The proposed Conservation Area is relatively small and only has one significant character area – a low density suburban housing scheme from the inter-war period. Nevertheless, there is some subtle variation between the open vistas of the central area and the more secluded setting of the rear private garden spaces.

### 8.2 Activity

Given the residential land use of the proposed Conservation Area, levels of street activity are relatively low. However, the communal green in the centre of the development is pivotal to engendering community spirit and serves as a central recreation area for residents.



*Aerial view of Macdonnell Gardens*



### 8.3 The Qualities of the Buildings and their Contribution to the Area

The proposed Conservation Area represents an unusually well preserved estate of inter-war suburban housing, where original architectural features have generally retained their integrity. As all of the houses date from the same two year period and were designed by the same architectural practice, there is an overall homogeneity in the area but with punctuation. Although all the houses face onto the central green space, there is some variation in the degree of setback from the internal route network. Similarly, although the general massing and scale of the bungalows is consistent across the estate, there are two different building types in evidence – with variation in the configuration of doors, windows and chimneys.

Although the development shares characteristics with other more standard forms of inter-war housing development, the particular demands of the brief for this development have given it a more distinctive urban form. The need to accommodate disabled ex-servicemen resulted in a functional form of development for occupants with more restricted mobility. The houses are single storey bungalows, with generously sized spaces to their frontages. The configuration of the development serves both to facilitate a sense of community as well as to provide a secluded form of development that is insulated from noise and disturbance in the wider area – such as the A405.

This is an unusual form of urban development and one with a rich military history that is manifested in the various related physical features – such as the commemorative plaques and flags. Nevertheless, the buildings themselves are representative of a wider understated architectural style from the early twentieth century, which can be understood within the wider movements of Arts and Crafts design and the rural leaning aesthetics of the garden city movement.



*Front elevation of number 9*



*Numbers 8 – 10*

### 8.4 Memorial Plaques

Memorial plaques are a significant feature within the proposed Macdonnell Gardens Conservation Area. The first 8 properties have memorial plaques adjacent to the front doors. The inscriptions are listed on page 13, but the plaques at house numbers 3, 4 and 8 have since been part/wholly covered over. There is an additional plaque to the memory of Mrs A. J. Macdonnell in the rose garden that features in the central green space, while the original foundation stone is located within the brick pier adjacent to the entrance gate on the south-eastern side of the development. However, the inscription is faded and difficult to read. More recently, a memorial plaque to Lt Col “Joe” Centre MC was placed by residents on a bench which faces north along the central green.



*Plaque on house number 2*



*Plaque on house number*



*Plaque in the rose garden*



*Plaque in the wall adjacent to the pedestrian entrance*

## **8.5 Prevalent Local and Traditional Building materials**

### **Facing Materials**

Red bricks in a stretcher bond are the predominant facing brick. These are generally covered in a layer of white render. The hipped roofs are covered in plain clay tiles, with white rendered brick chimneys and clay pots. The windows are metal casements of the Crittal type, painted white. Window cills are formed of two courses of tiles in cement. There are timber doors, with brick thresholds and steps.



*Rear elevation of number 2*



*Front elevation of number 6*

### Floorscape Materials

The internal route network is covered in red coloured tarmac, with the central green space and rear gardens covered in grass/shrubs. The front gardens are either covered in gravel or small areas of grass/shrubs – some with paving slabs leading up to the front doors.

### 8.6 Contribution of Trees and Green Spaces

The site is flat and contains only a few large native trees (8m+ in height). These are located in small tree belts on the north-west boundary with High Road and the south-east boundary along the A405. The main component trees are ash, cherry, oak, beech, holly, thorn and scattered purple leaved cherries. There are also poplars within the High Road belt of trees. There are no significant trees within the centre of the site or rear gardens, with the exception of the two tree belts referred to above. There are a number of large shrubs in front gardens and the planted area to the south side of the central green; all are trimmed and well kept, as is the grass area. Taller hedges (i.e. those showing above 1.8m fence height) occur on the High Road boundary and in parts along the rear service road boundaries. These comprise both mixed species and evergreen. There are a few taller trees in the adjacent properties along the High Road, Redheath Close and Russell Crescent.

The main landscape features are the larger trees to the road boundaries and these link in with verge planting in High Road and screen planting along the A405 and Redheath Close - adding to the tree lined effect on the A405. The height and density of this planting screens views of Macdonnell Gardens, with only limited views via the road entrance from the High Road and through the pedestrian entrance from the Kingsway.

One area of concern is the poor condition of several of the cherries located on the High Road frontage, in the vicinity of 12 Macdonnell Gardens, which, if they continue to decline, will open up the tree belt.



*Trees at Kingsway boundary*



*Trees at High Road boundary*



### 8.7 The Extent of Intrusion or Damage (Negative Factors)

Since the development at Macdonnell Gardens was originally completed, alterations and additions have been modest in scale and have largely been in keeping with its character. In terms of original features, the covering up of some of the original plaques on the front elevations of houses is unfortunate. A more substantial problem is the poor state of a number of the older garages and the general deterioration in the quality of the surface that accesses them.

### 8.8 Capacity for Change

The designation of a conservation area does not provide a block on any development within its boundaries. However, change though must not come at the expense of degrading the character and scale that makes the area special, and alterations to properties need to be sympathetic to their context.



## 8.9 Neutral Areas

The proposed Conservation Area boundary was drawn in such a way as to largely avoid including extensive areas which dilute its character.

## 9.0 Article 4 Direction

An Article 4(1) Direction was served on land and properties at Macdonnell Gardens on the 25th July 2011. A revised version of the Article 4(1) Direction was confirmed on the 17th January 2012. This Direction restricts permitted development rights with regards to:

- Development within the curtilage of a dwellinghouse comprised within the following classes of Part 1 of Schedule 2 to the said Order:
  - Class A – enlargement, improvement or other alteration;
  - Class B – an addition or alteration to its roof;
  - Class C – any other alteration to the roof;
  - Class D – the erection or construction of a porch outside any external door;
  - Class E – the provision of any building or enclosure, swimming or other pool required for a purpose incidental to the enjoyment of the dwellinghouse, or a container used for domestic heating purposes for the storage of oil or liquid petroleum gas;
  - Class F – formation of a hardstanding.
- Development within the area defined by the attached map comprised within the following classes of Part 2 of Schedule 2 to the said Order:
  - Class A – the erection, construction, maintenance, improvement or alteration of a gate, fence, wall or other means of enclosure.

## 10.0 Local Consultation

An earlier draft of this Character Appraisal document was published for public consultation from 19 October to 18 November 2011. This final version has been produced with the benefit of the comments received during that consultation. The Council intend to produce a further document containing management proposals for the area; a public meeting will be arranged to inform the preparation of that document.

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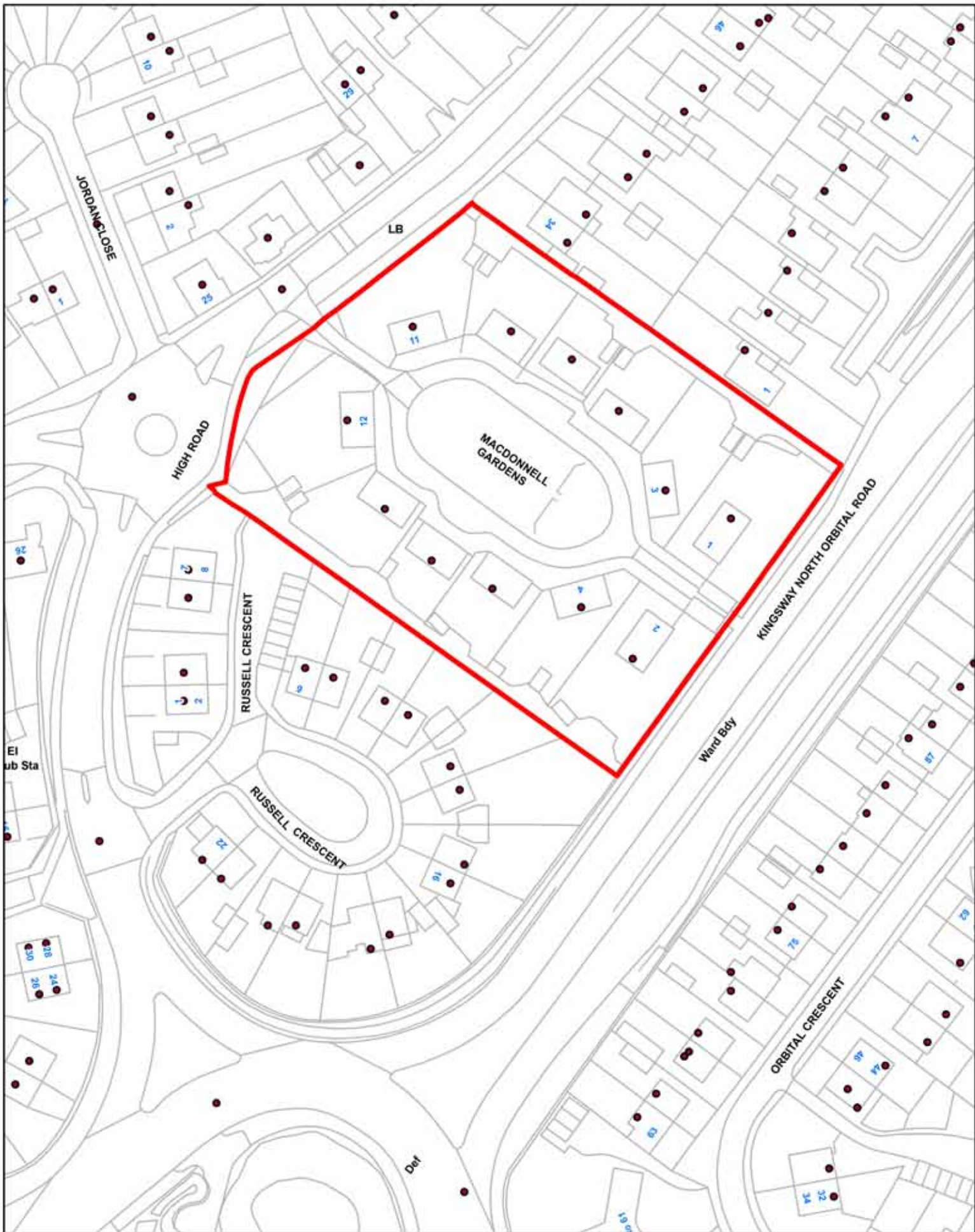
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**Macdonnell Gardens Conservation Area**



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