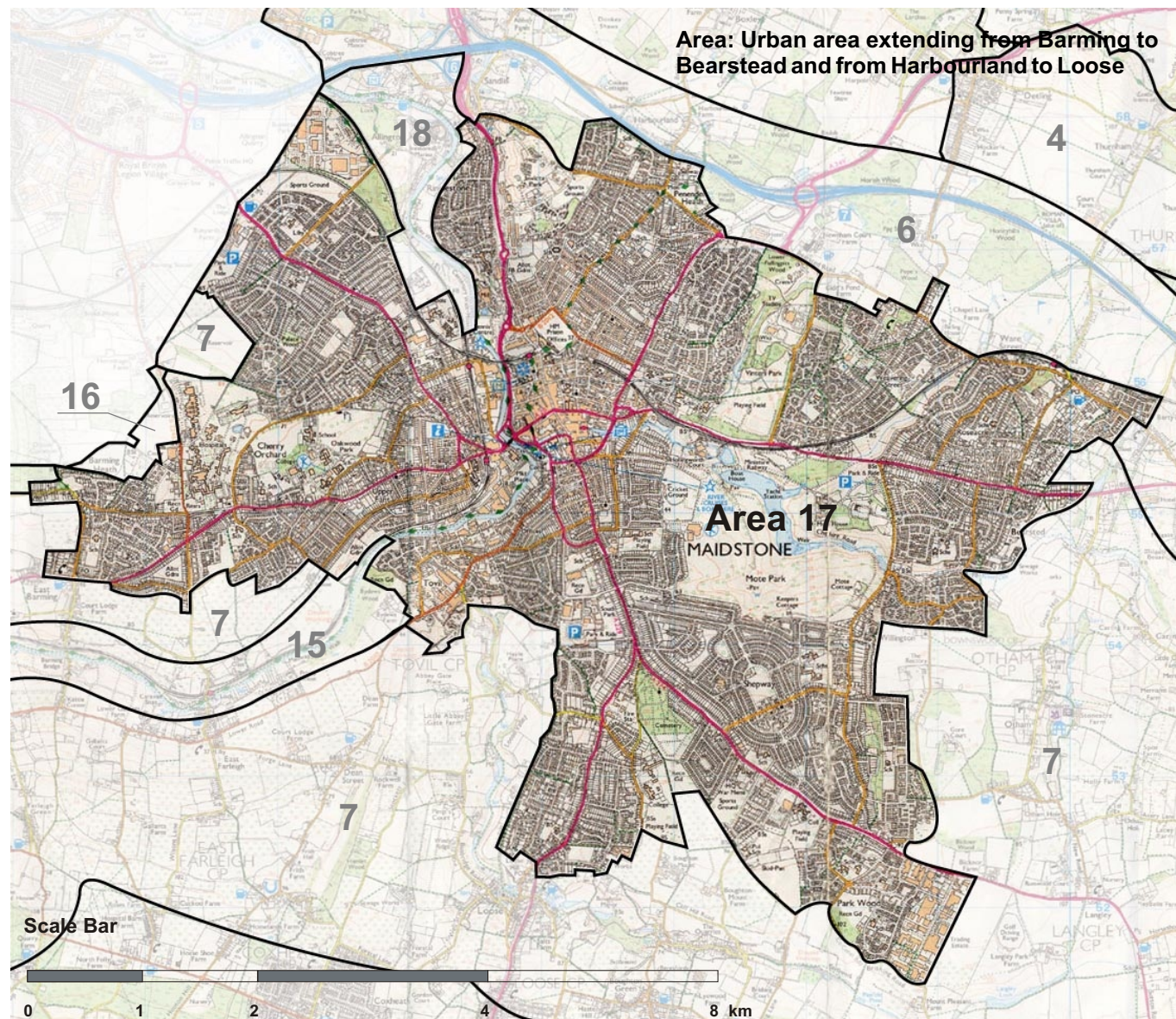


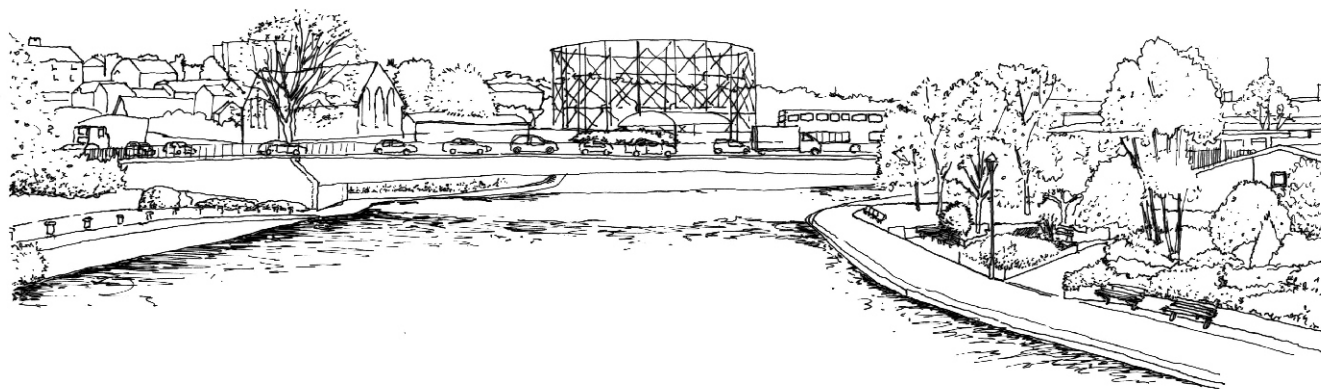
Area 17: Maidstone Urban Area

Landscape Character Areas



Landscape Character

The river Medway provides the focus of the town's landscape, with built development long established, particularly along its eastern bank. Much of Maidstone retains the character of a small country town, with significant rural influences. The undulating topography is a distinctive feature, permitting glimpsed views to the rural hinterland, particularly towards the North Downs and from ridge-top to ridge-top.



Within the centre of the town the natural influences of the River Medway have been diminished

Area 17: Maidstone Urban Area

Landscape Character Areas

The town has spread along the main radial routes that converge from the surrounding areas. Consequently the oldest parts of the settlement are at the core, where the more substantial medieval buildings are concentrated, while the main routes into the town are often characterised by 19th century housing. Recent development has spread between these transport routes, leaving the steeper, damper land of the river valleys largely undeveloped. This, together with the establishment of some large historic parks, has resulted in the strongly-defined star shape of development on the higher ground, divided by green areas of more rural character in the valleys between.

These green divisions, together with the views to and from high land, are key factors in the rural influence upon the town. The undulating topography, which is responsible for this factor, also increases the importance of trees within the townscape. Views of development on sloping land give almost aerial perspectives, where canopies become more prominent in breaking up views of otherwise continuous roofscapes. Such elevated views also highlight the prevalence of Victorian evergreen plantings (exotic conifers), associated with the historic parks and other sites scattered throughout the town.



View of North Downs from high ground at Oakwood

The river Medway is the other key factor influencing the town's character. For most of its passage through the town it forms a tranquil and relatively rural feature, with vegetated banks and mature trees at the water's edge. However, within the centre of the town these natural influences have been diminished and are deteriorating (see sketch). The new transport corridor along the east bank severs the town from the river and dominates the character of this area. Retaining walls have further urbanised this area and diminished the influence of the river on the landscape. Tree and shrub planting in this area has also failed to reflect the rural riverine character of the Medway through the remainder of the town. A new linear park along the river Medway is currently being implemented (2001) and will provide effective links between the rural river to the west and the town centre. Within the town it will offer new access points to the river, enhance the character of the river corridor and increase public awareness of its presence.

Increased transport infrastructure pressure is evident, as is the influence of new large-scale out-of-town retail and business development. To the north of the town the transition from urban to the major transport corridor is almost seamless. The presence of these main routes, which include the M20, A29 and A20, has a distinct impact, which is increased by the paraphernalia associated with their use, such as petrol filling stations, large junctions and sliproads. They mark only the beginning of an infiltration of urban and commercial uses that bear more relation to transport access needs than to location.



The A29 has carved a route through the northern part of the town

Key Characteristics:

- county town; largest settlement in the Borough;
- river corridors of the Medway and Len;
- historic core at bridging points, now separated from the river by dual carriageway;
- star shape divided by the undeveloped valley sides of the Medway and its tributaries;
- varied land uses: industry, business parks, commercial centre, residential quarters and extensive public open space;
- abrupt interface of rural and urban landscape to the south;
- use of ragstone for historic buildings and boundary walls;
- undulating topography provides extensive views from high ground;
- town centre and historic core dominated by transport infrastructure;
- links with surrounding landscape via views to and from high land and penetration of green space into urban star-shape.

Area 17: Maidstone Urban Area

Landscape Character Areas

This loss of identity along the northern fringe is not echoed to the south, where the rural intensity of hedged orchards, pastures and historic villages abuts recent residential development. Here development has the potential to erode rural character, while in the surrounding rural areas the urban influence is more subtle, via the conversion of agricultural buildings and the suburbanisation of villages. To the west there is a stark contrast between the Medway valley and development adjacent to the A26, which is not well accommodated within the landscape structure. The modern dwarf rootstock orchards that flank the valley sides offer no substantial vegetation to integrate and soften the appearance of recent development. Consequently the visual impact on the adjacent rural areas is considerable.



Urban-edge development on high ground is difficult to screen

Landscape Designations

Several areas on the fringe of the urban area are subject to landscape designations. Along the northern boundary, outside the urban boundary, there are SLA areas at Allington, Cuckoo Wood, Sandling and east of Bearsted. Within the urban boundary there are 13 ALLIs, which are listed in the Local Plan. The main function of this designation is to denote particular distinctive features that are specifically important to the town.

Physical Influence

The county town occupies a position close to the main routes between London and Continental Europe, with direct access to the M20 and M2. Formerly its position on the Medway was of strategic importance. The town's location at a crossing point of a navigable river both influenced the early establishment of a settlement (by the Roman period), and provided opportunities for the development of water-related industry, such as milling (paper and cloth fulling), brewing and cloth manufacturing. The river has also been a major physical influence on the shaping of the urban landscape as the original major transport link, connecting Maidstone to London, Dover and France. The undulating topography has been instrumental in shaping the layout of the town. The major routes have been located on the higher land, followed by expanding development. The steeper slopes and wetter land of the valleys remained undeveloped, contributing to the strong star shape of Maidstone and the consequent close relationship between urban and rural character. Maidstone's location on the Greensand also influenced its development as it grew wealthy during the 16th century from the shipment of ragstone quarried from Loose, Allington and Boughton Monchelsea.



Historical and Cultural Influences

Much of Maidstone was wooded in prehistoric times and there is some evidence of Romano-British villas and cemeteries. There probably was an important Anglo-Saxon settlement around the Archbishop's Palace. By the 11th century it was a legal and administrative centre for the area and the town existed as a market and trading centre by 1200. It was created a Borough in 1559 by grant of Queen Elizabeth I, having been earlier governed under the authority of the Archbishop of Canterbury. The town prospered during the 15th and 16th centuries from quarrying and shipping ragstone as a building stone and for armaments (cannon balls). It thrived and grew with the Industrial Revolution and with the development of water-related industry throughout the 19th century, and is now the commercial and administrative centre of the county. It has, however, had a turbulent past. From Maidstone, Wat Tyler led the peasants in revolt in the 14th century and later defiance against the crown was headed by Sir Thomas Wyatt.

Like so many other towns, Maidstone expanded rapidly in the later decades of the 19th century, and demand for recreational space, combined with a nationwide movement towards the provision of public parks and gardens, prompted a response from the town council. Maidstone's first public park was the Brenchley Gardens, adjoining Chillington House, given to the town in 1870. In 1887 the gardens of the Archbishop's Palace were opened to the public after the palace was bought for the town by public subscription, to mark the Golden Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Areas of heath around the town (Penenden, Barming) were converted into sports pitches and recreation grounds.

Area 17: Maidstone Urban Area

Landscape Character Areas

Turkey Court: This site is an unusual combination of a gentleman's residence (now Grade II* listed) with extensive landscaped lake and gardens around a commercial (paper) mill premises. There has been a mill building on the site since the early 17th century but the main residence, current mill and drying loft complex date from 1730-1740, with subsequent additions. When paper making ceased in 1976, Turkey Mill was the oldest handmade paper-making mill in continuous production in Kent (1693-1976). The site is in the Len Valley, where the buildings straddle the stream and the land slopes gently upwards. To the south and east it is bounded by Mote Park.

Mote Park, which was purchased by the Borough from Lord Bearsted in 1929, is a grade II listed site in the English Heritage *Register of Parks and Gardens* and is the largest public park within any town in Kent (over 500 acres). It originated as a deer park with castellated manor house in the 14th century and was remodelled in the 'landscape' style in the 18th century. A large serpentine lake was formed by damming the river, and the current mansion dates from 1793-1801. Subsequent development in the mid-19th century also incorporated early to mid-18th century earthworks or formal garden features. It was sold to Maidstone Corporation in 1929 and currently contains the lake, house and 14 hectares of pleasure grounds as well as the park.

Invicta Park no longer reflects its former cultural associations. Park House, Sandling, formerly the centrepiece of the Ringlestone Estate, was associated with Tennyson, his sister having married the owner, Edmund Law Lushington, professor of Greek and later Lord Rector of Glasgow University. Tennyson was a frequent visitor, as his brother-in-law was also a member of 'The Society of Apostles', and it is believed that both *'The Brook'* and *'The Princess'* were inspired by his visits. As with so many other grand houses, the military took over in 1939 and the estate is now part of Invicta barracks, Park House now the officers' mess. The beauty of the parkland inevitably diminished under military occupation and it is now hemmed in by residential development, wedged between Sandling Lane and Chatham Road. The Ringlestone residential estate was built in the early 1930s.

Buildings and Settlements

Maidstone contains many fine historic buildings, including the College of Priests (1395) the Corpus Christi Fraternity Hall (c.1370) and the Archbishop's Palace, also dating from the 14th century. All Saints Church is the largest example of a 14th century Perpendicular church in Kent. Some streets have many 17th century buildings, some of them pargetted (decorative plasterwork on the façade), while the Town Hall dates from the 18th century and Maidstone Bridge from 1879 (replacing an earlier structure). The town is characterised by the coalescence of several settlements of different building type and style.

Traditional local materials, such as ragstone, pegtiles and weatherboard, and building techniques (including timber frame) are associated generally with the historic central core, with 19th and 20th century styles and materials, especially red brick and occasionally yellow stock bricks with red brick trim, found elsewhere. Modern materials and building styles, used for new commercial buildings within the town centre, are not always used in sympathy with adjacent buildings.

Around the periphery of the town, modern residential development follows a pattern familiar throughout the country that pays no heed to local vernacular style or materials. This later development often has a core of much older development surviving from an earlier village, as at Weaving Street. Here the ancient buildings owe their existence to agriculture, while the late-17th-century buildings reflect industrial development based on supplies of locally-quarried fullers earth and paper mills.

The use of ragstone for boundary walls is characteristic of the town and provides a hint of unity. The techniques used to construct or repoint them are very variable.



The use of ragstone unites, but more recent buildings have different roof styles



19th century terraced housing in north Maidstone

Landcover and Biodiversity

The vegetation and ecological framework within the built-up areas of the town is minimal. However, the undeveloped green areas form valuable wildlife corridors and links with the countryside. The river corridor forms one of those links but the centre of the town is predominantly hard-paved, with vertical edges to the riverbank and little vegetation. This reduces its value for wildlife and hinders the establishment of ecological habitats, reducing potential biodiversity. There are no sites of significant nature conservation interest within the town and where there is potential for their establishment in the town parks and open spaces, current landscape management has not promoted the development of such features. Land use is divided among residential, commercial, retail, industrial and business-park uses, with a strong transport infrastructure.

Public Open Space

Mote Park: The river Len punctuates the eastern edge of Maidstone with a narrow ribbon of open land associated with the river, linking Mote Park to the open countryside to the east through the development at Bearsted and Downwood. There are numerous other buildings within the park, many of them listed, but the integrity of the landscape has been compromised by the addition of a park-and-ride site on its north-eastern corner. Views into the park are limited by the ragstone wall that surrounds and contains it and by the dense vegetation around its perimeter. Within the park a variety of recreational uses compete with the historic plantings, and the character is confused and lacking in unity. The treatment of the river Len on the edge of the urban area leans more toward the urban than the rural and provides no natural link to the rural landscape beyond.

Vinters Valley: In 1782 James Whatman, having made a fortune from the production of high-quality paper at Turkey Mill, bought the Vinters Estate, reconstructed the old manor and had the parkland designed by the newly fashionable Humphry Repton. At that time the estate included Newnham Court, most of Weaving and Grove Green and pockets of land at Penenden Heath. In the 1850s his descendant, also James Whatman, MP, enlarged the impressive house still further and it became the centre of Maidstone's social life. By the 1930s the grand house was unoccupied and it was taken into military occupation in 1939. It was sold to a local builder in 1950; since then, housing development, the crematorium and the TV studios have crept into the edges of the estate. The house was destroyed in the 1960s and the Vinters Valley Trust was subsequently set up so that the remaining parkland could be used for public enjoyment and as a wildlife haven. It is a remarkable survival so close to the centre of a large town, with remnant specimen parkland trees and grazed fields surrounded by scrub vegetation and traces of former use, such as pathways and parkland ornamentation, balustrades and decorative gateways. It is now very informal, with chestnut coppice in Lower Fullingpits Wood (this name denoting the former presence of fullers earth and local industrial activity), and peaceful, once away from the traffic noise of the A249.



View towards town centre from within Vinters Park

The other main area of Public Open Space for the people of Maidstone is the *Cobtree Manor Estate*, most of which lies outside the urban area on the north-western corner of the town, separated from it by the M20/A229 junction and therefore part of Area 6 or 18. It is included here because of its relevance to the people of Maidstone. It seems that there was never a manor on this site, but the estate has a colourful history. Sir Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake, twelve times mayor of Maidstone, inherited the estate in 1908 and subsequently opened The Maidstone Zoological Gardens there. He bequeathed the house and park to the residents of Maidstone and in 1984 the Museum of Kent Rural Life opened, based on the buildings of Sandlings Farm. The site also contains a 130-acre municipal golf course, a country park and the Kent Wildlife Trust Centre. The Cobtree Estate of the 1830s is acknowledged to be the inspiration for Charles Dickens' 'Dingley Dell' in *The Pickwick Papers*.

Green Corridors

The principal areas of green space within the town lying between the star shaped development pattern can be considered as "green corridors" penetrating the urban area from the surrounding countryside, and are described as follows:

Loose Valley Corridor: The Loose Valley Corridor extends from Loose village (in Area 7) to penetrate the built-up area of Tovil, on the southern edge of the town. The deep-sided valley is flanked to the east by residential estates and on the west by open farmland and orchards. Within the valley lies a secluded, tranquil landscape of pasture, orchards and woodland (ash, field maple and sycamore, with some ash and willow pollards along the stream). From the upper slopes of the valley the residential development to the east marks the urban edge. Although Tovil has typical urban-fringe development such as light industrial buildings, supermarkets, etc, on its southern edge, the transition from rural to urban is abrupt, masked by topography and vegetation. This valley landscape therefore forms part of the Greensand Fruit Belt, with transition to an urban character at Tovil.

The Oldborough Wedge: This small area of open land consists of school playing fields, a cemetery, recreation ground and orchards. The 'wedge' separates the development that has grown up along the Loose Road and the Sutton Road on the southern edge of Maidstone. It provides a transition from the rural orchards and farmland of Area 7 and the upper reaches of the river Loose to the town, although the green space has an urban character due to the land uses and the proximity of residential development.

To the east of Maidstone lies the *Len Valley Corridor*, which has been described above when discussing Mote Park. The presence of this corridor prevents the coalescence of Bearsted and Willington, but has a generally urban character due to the limited open space, the landscape treatment of the river corridor and the proximity of housing, with the significant exception of Mote Park itself. The all-encompassing development which surrounds the park, and the presence of many competing uses within its boundaries, prevent it from enjoying a fully rural character, even given its size and extent of screening. The corridor also provides a setting for part of the River Len Walkway, which links the Archbishops Palace with Lenham Town Square.

In the north-eastern quarter of Maidstone two narrow fingers separate areas of 20th century housing development. *The Weaving Corridor*, or 'Banky Meadow', is a steep valley around a tributary of the Len, with a railway line forming its western boundary. Although linear in form and considerably hemmed in by housing, this area is very varied topographically (a good example of the way in which Maidstone developed on the high ground between river valleys). It provides informal open space for local residents and separates Grove Green from Bearsted. *Vinters Park*, to the west, is a broad swathe of former Repton parkland with public access to the Vinters Valley Park Nature Reserve, which is managed by the Vinters Valley Trust. Fullingpits Wood, at the northern end of this area, is managed by the Trust as chestnut, ash and hazel coppice with oak and beech standards and helps to muffle the traffic noise from the dual-carriageway Bearsted Road. Between the wood and the Park, a crematorium and TV studios take up the middle ground. This area therefore has a rather mixed character and is, somewhat surprisingly, more peaceful and rural closer to the town centre than on its northern edge.

The historic interest of *Invicta Park* has been discussed above. This 'green corridor' is dominated by the MoD landholding within the parkland around Park House. There is no public access and the influence of the M20/A229 junction is strong on the northern edge, despite the protection afforded by Cuckoo Wood Ancient Woodland, which lends a rural character to this end. Further south the park is either hemmed in by residential development, dominated by the A229 or screened by military buildings, so that the parkland character is not visible from the periphery and makes little contribution to the local landscape character.



River Medway within urban area, showing more natural and rural character south and west of the town centre

On the north-western edge of the town the urban boundary is drawn tight to exclude an area of countryside around the river Medway which separates the built-up areas of Allington and Ringlestone. This area, although bounded by the M20 in the north and a railway bridge in the south, has a largely rural character and is discussed in Area 18. It contains Allington Castle and marina and part of the Cobtree Manor Estate.

The Oakwood Corridor, on the western edge of the town, comprises Oakwood Park, which formed the landscaped grounds around a Victorian mansion in the Jacobean style, the formerly extensive grounds of Oakwood Hospital, which dates from the 1830s with characteristic early Victorian plantings, and the site of the present Maidstone District General Hospital. These areas separate Allington and Barming, and are of transitional character, fairly rural on its outer edge but becoming progressively more urban towards the east, where there is a significant amount of built development. From these areas extensive views of the North Downs can be seen above Allington, while the Medway remains invisible within its valley.

As buildings form the dominant element within the townscape, the choice of tree species does not have as critical an effect on the landscape character as it does in rural areas. The main objective should be to maintain the relationship between rural and urban areas. The use of large maturing native species should be incorporated wherever possible, particularly along the river and the transport corridors that link the town to the rural areas, and as a structural backbone to reflect the regional context of the town's location.

Some native trees mature to a size which would not easily be accommodated in more compact urban spaces, and public places are often enjoyed more when flowering species are used. In these situations 'near native' species are suitable alternatives, providing greater visual interest and an appropriate scale. The following list gives a few examples of native species and their close relatives:

Ash	<i>Fraxinus excelsior</i>	<i>Fraxinus oxycarpa</i> 'Raywood'
Cherry	<i>Prunus avium</i>	<i>Prunus avium</i> 'Flore Plena'
Crab Apple	<i>Malus sylvestris</i>	<i>Malus</i> 'John Downie'
Dogwood	<i>Cornus sanguinea</i>	<i>Cornus alba</i> 'Sibirica'
Guelder Rose	<i>Viburnum opulus</i>	<i>Viburnum opulus</i> 'Compactum'
Hawthorn	<i>Crataegus monogyna</i>	<i>Crataegus x prunifolia</i>

A more extensive list can be found at Appendix 3.

Street Trees

Street trees should be planted wherever there is sufficient space to allow them to mature to their full potential without significant arboricultural intervention, and where they will be safe from potential damage due to underground services, overhead cables, etc. They must not be planted where they could interfere with sight lines, street lamps, electricity or telephone lines or traffic signs.

Street tree species should be selected from the list in Appendix 3 in the following order of priority:

- Native trees from the adjoining landscape character area
- Native trees suitable for the soil type and geology
- 'Near-Native' trees suitable for the soil type and geology
- Ornamental trees suitable for the soil type and geology.

The Council seeks to promote the provision of Kentish character trees along the main approach roads to the town. Suitable species include field maple, common alder, silver birch, downy birch, hornbeam, beech, holly, wild cherry, whitebeam, English oak, mountain ash, wild service tree, small-leaved lime, wayfaring tree and box.

The Borough Council will place greatest emphasis on the planting of native species on main routes into the town and the structural elements of larger developments, with decreasing emphasis as the roads become smaller, the scale of development decreases and particular characteristics or practical requirements cannot be fulfilled by the use of native species.

In Conservation Areas adjacent to historic buildings, historic landscape objectives will take precedence over the requirement to use native species, should the two objectives be incompatible.

A cyclical pruning strategy may be required to maintain tree health, an attractive appearance and low potential for nuisance.

The following criteria should be considered when selecting trees for the urban environment:

- the species should be able to thrive in poor soils, polluted atmosphere and with limited water;
- they should be resistant to pest and diseases and have a naturally tidy form;
- they should be of pleasing aspect throughout the year. Good foliage is more important than flower; autumn leaf colour or winter bark colour may also be factors in selection;
- leaves should decompose readily in winter and they should not have large, hard or easily squashed fruit.

- the species selected should be the maximum size possible while still remaining of an appropriate size for its position; its canopy should not spread too wide and it should have neither large surface roots nor a propensity to sucker;
- in some circumstances the use of large nursery stock for immediate effect or resistance to vandalism will be necessary. Great care will be required to ensure their survival. Such trees will require staking, possibly guying, and irrigation. Tree guards may also be helpful for protection against vandalism. All trees will require aftercare for a minimum of five years, as follows:
 - ground clearance. An area of 1m diameter around the tree should be kept free of weeds and grass for a minimum of three years after planting;
 - irrigation is recommended where dry soil conditions prevail. Elsewhere infrequent soaking is preferable to frequent but inadequate watering, as this latter is likely to provoke surface rooting. Advanced nursery stock should always be irrigated for a maximum of two years;
 - stakes and tree ties should be checked every year and slackened to avoid damage to the bark;
 - all dead, diseased or dying branches should be carefully removed and any pruning necessary for correct development should be undertaken during the dormant season.

Green Space Adjacent to Urban Areas

Maidstone's 'Green Corridors', described earlier, are an important landscape component, preventing the coalescence of the different urban areas and linking the town centre to the rural areas around the periphery of the town. However, in some areas the benefit of these is not perceived as readily as it could be, as development prevents views from the public areas and main roads through the town.

This landscape guidance provides advice on how these green spaces could be enhanced. Some are predominantly urban in character while others relate to the rural landscape character area which they are adjacent to or part of. In general they are transition zones, providing green 'wedges' that penetrate towards the town centre and offer recreational opportunities and links between town and countryside.

The following landscape guidance may be applied to these green areas:

- ensure that the archaeological potential of any site is discussed with the County Council before finalising development proposals, as these river valley spaces were the site of early settlement from the Stone Age onwards. There are Roman archaeological remains and areas of industrial archaeological interest which merit protection from development;
- ensure that the landscape setting of these valleys and buildings of interest within them are enhanced by any development proposal. Planting on the upper slopes of these valleys will often help to screen development on the ridges and thereby preserve a more rural character. The valley floor should usually be left predominantly open so as not to mask the topography;
- ensure that any development proposals include adequate footpath provision and access to the footpath network. Adequate disabled access should be available at each entrance to these areas and consideration should be given to the provision of low-key parking facilities, especially where access is related to the busy transport corridor;
- plan the open space and layout of new development to create strong visual and physical links between green corridors and adjacent built up areas, particularly as seen from key transport routes;
- planting proposals should be appropriate for the area for which they are intended. In most circumstances it will be appropriate to reinforce rural character by using native species hedges and copses, particularly close to the boundary with rural areas. Within areas of more urban character it may be more appropriate to use semi-native or ornamental species, depending on the dominant existing planting within the area, such as Victorian planting within cemeteries or 18th/19th century parkland planting;
- when preparing woodland management proposals as part of a planning application, ensure that long-term replacement of sycamore by a native species is included;
- in order to maintain or restore tranquillity within parkland it may be useful to plant a buffer zone of trees around the perimeter, without totally obscuring views into the site. This would help to screen urban elements. Species selected should reflect the character of historic planting;
- seek to reinforce biodiversity and interest by re-examining management methods with a view to creating areas of infrequently mown grass and introducing wild flower areas;

- plan areas of open space and linking footpaths so that they are safe and attractive areas, in order to reduce the potential for vandalism and crime. Refer to MBC planning guidance on 'Planning Out Crime';
- all development proposals should enhance the Council's environmental objectives, which are to protect and enhance the environment and to ensure that present-day demands do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs and enjoy a high quality environment.

Areas of Local Landscape Importance (ALLIs)

Within Maidstone several areas have been designated ALLI by virtue of the contribution they make to the urban townscape and the link they provide to the surrounding countryside. They are listed in the Local Plan. Any proposals for development within or adjacent to such areas should maintain or increase open space, enhance local landscape character by using locally indigenous species and landscape styles when planting and provide improved public access. Further guidance on the design of open space is set out below and in the General Landscape Guidance section.

Open Space

Woodland and trees are important components of the open spaces within the developed area of Maidstone. Where the provision of open space forms part of development proposals, the promotion of nature conservation should be included where practicable. Woodland and scrub both offer considerable nature conservation opportunities and their species composition and scale should reflect those of the adjoining landscape character area. They may also be easier and more cost-effective to manage in the long term than standard treatments, such as mown grass. They will certainly be more interesting. Ornamental species should be used only where they contribute to the character of the development in a way that cannot be achieved by using native species.

The Borough's grassland resource should be protected and enhanced wherever possible. Although calcareous or unimproved neutral grassland is nationally rare and therefore to be regarded as a precious resource, all grassland is of potential value. The amenity grassland within the urban area should be managed to improve its diversity and contribution to nature conservation objectives and landscape character. A less intensive and more imaginative mowing regime could radically alter the appearance of some areas of open space, increase nature conservation value and cut costs.

Nature Conservation in Urban Areas

The Council will expect due account to be taken of nature conservation aims and objectives and of local distinctiveness. Within the urban area there are significant areas of amenity grassland that could be managed to increase their wildlife value. In addition, all existing features and areas of nature conservation value should be retained and all opportunities for habitat creation and enhancement taken. Existing wildlife networks and corridors should be extended towards the town centre by appropriate management and habitat creation. Derelict land can also be used for habitat creation, especially where it is adjacent to existing semi-natural habitat.

In an urban context, different habitat types have more importance. Overgrown and scrubby areas, which may be seen as untidy, will provide habitat and cover for fauna adapted to urban living. It may be appropriate to retain these areas by giving them a more acceptable buffer or 'face' where necessary, with some additional planting or careful management.

Woodland

The developed areas of Maidstone are heavily built up but the green wedges and corridors between them offer a link to the open countryside beyond as well as a valuable amenity resource. New woodland planting will be encouraged by the Council, except where it would involve the loss of permanent pasture or other important habitat, when it will be resisted. Species should be as found in the adjoining landscape character area, to increase elements of rural character. Ornamental or non-native species should not normally be included in urban woodland planting proposals. A management strategy should be included with any detailed planning application.

Rivers, River Corridors and Ponds

Any proposals for development adjacent to a river or within a river floodplain or valley should aim to enhance the distinctive landscape character, recreational and nature conservation interest of such a site. Particular consideration should be given to the need to avoid the construction of flood management or retention features that would not form part of the natural or historic landscape of such areas.

The Medway River Corridor: the influence of the river Medway through Maidstone has been allowed to diminish, particularly within the historic landscape, and major roads in the area have become dominant. New proposals in this area should seek to reinstate a riverside character and enable the river to assume a greater role, especially for pedestrians and cyclists. The use of wetland tree and shrub species would help this process, if suitable conditions for their establishment can be provided. The reduction of the canalised effect, i.e. the difference in height between the water and the river edge, should be considered in some areas. The establishment of wetland vegetation near the water, such as willow shrubs and trees, would have this effect. Significant lengths of the river wall should be maintained to reflect the historic context of a shipping town and enable future use by leisure craft. Consideration could be given to the creation of a bioengineered structure containing soil to provide an anchorage for plants at water level without compromising the safety of the river wall. The existing river wall could in places be lowered to provide access to the water and greater enjoyment of its tranquil properties.

Wherever possible, pedestrian and cyclist-friendly access should be accommodated in association with the river area, particularly if this can be separated from the major roads. Although in the town centre locations formal hard-paved areas may be appropriate, hard surface materials in general should reflect the natural character of the Medway, reinforcing the strong link it makes between the rural and urban areas of the Borough. A continuous gravel surfaced path, bound if necessary, would enable the influence of the river to be carried with greater strength through the town centre. The separation of the river from the historic core and the commercial town centre by the major roads should be broken down as far as possible, restoring the former links between the town and the origin of its existence and prosperity.

The Len River Corridor occupies a narrow area between two blocks of recent residential development and has an urbanised character. This is due to the type of hard detailing that has been used within it, especially around ponds, which tends to create the impression in some areas that, rather than being for use by the general public, the river corridor is fenced and inaccessible. Associated planting also reinforces this urban character, through the use of non-native species. A more relaxed approach, with consideration of a 'village pond' style and layout, would give this area a rural rather than urban character, especially if wetland native planting could be introduced to highlight the course of the river within the arable landscape.

Urban Fringe

Extensive dense boundary planting should be proposed around new urban fringe development that abuts rural or semi-rural areas. This is particularly important where new development occupies high ground that will be visible over a wide area. However, it would be inappropriate for this guidance to manifest itself as a solid woodland belt around the entire town. Views in and out of Maidstone are an important aspect of its landscape character, both in specific localities and over wide areas. The town does not need to be screened from the countryside but rather integrated with it. Substantial belts of native trees and shrubs around boundaries will create a soft edge around development. Edge-of-town development should contain a high proportion of open space, with structural planting within it as well as on its boundaries. Large areas of built development should be accompanied by significant numbers of large maturing trees. These will help to offset the impact of large areas of uninterrupted roofscape, especially when viewed from the surrounding area. Thus the effect of a transition between the higher densities of the town centre and the more rural influence on the urban fringe will be achieved.

Planting should reflect the species composition, scale and nature conservation interest of woodland and hedges within the adjoining landscape character area. Further details in relation to structure planting can be found in the General Landscape Guidance.

Transport corridors and strategic routes

Strategic routes are defined as including motorways, 'A' class roads, rail links and long-distance footpaths. The Council expects all new development that affects the character, appearance and function of strategic routes within the Borough to positively enhance these corridors and to reinforce local landscape character. Along transport corridors tree planting is often even-aged, having been established when the route was constructed. Such plantings will often contain 'nurse' species intended to assist the rapid establishment of the planting but not naturally long-lived. In certain circumstances, such as the creation of an avenue, the planting of a single, long-lived species may be appropriate, despite the difficult management decisions that may be needed in the later stages of the life of such a feature. Where existing even-aged, mixed species plantings are under consideration, effective management decisions that may be needed in the later stages of the life of such a feature. Where existing even-aged, mixed species plantings are under consideration, effective management via thinning, selective felling and replanting should be undertaken to achieve a varied age structure and appropriate species mix.

Within the urban area there are examples of planting that are only partly successful. Often a claustrophobic corridor effect can be created but the major views remain open. In this instance screen planting around the building would help integrate the development into the existing field pattern shown on the right of the photo.

If bunds have to be used for screening, they should be planted, not grassed. Planting would reduce maintenance, increase the visual and noise screening effect, and the hedge against the road would be redundant.

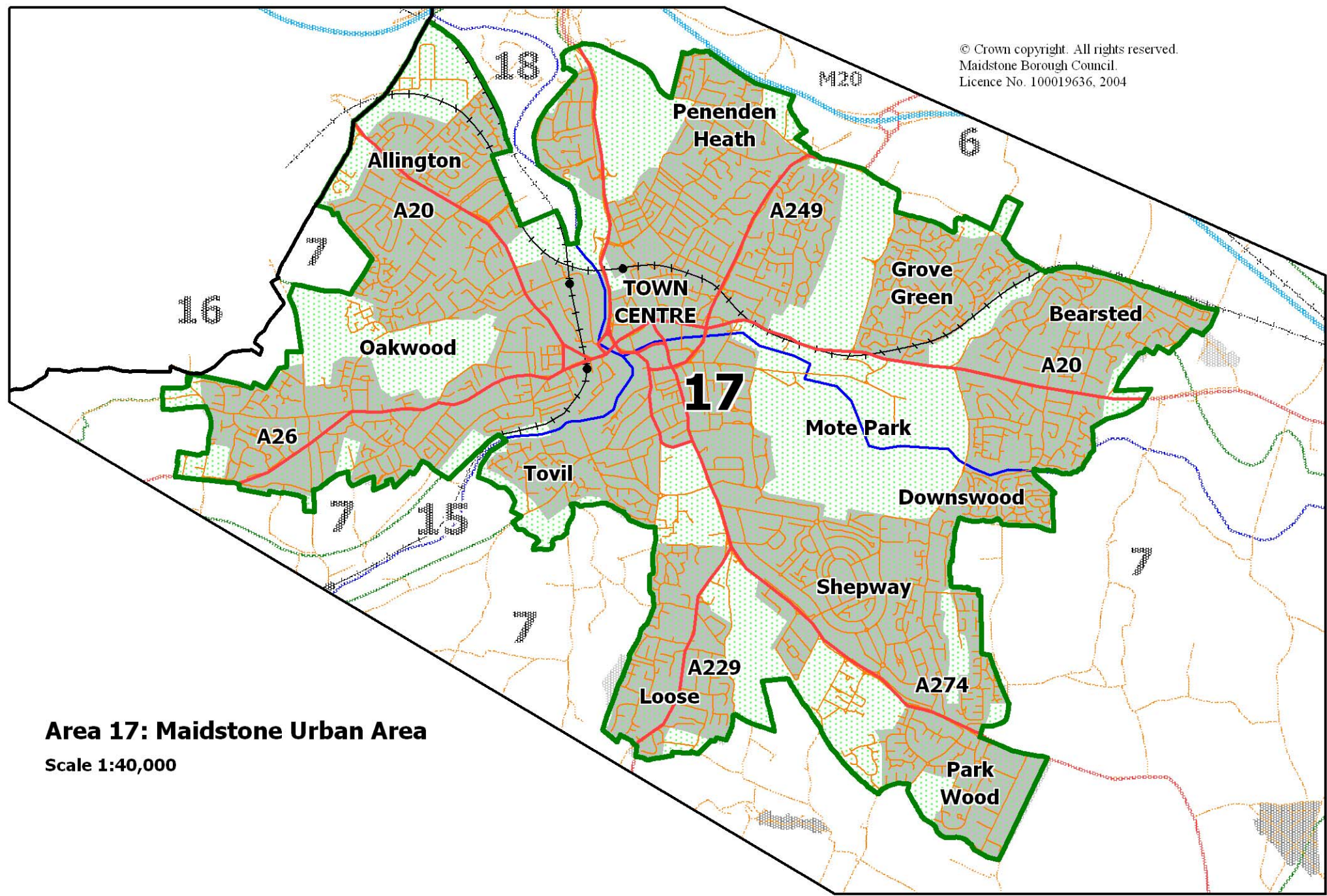


Boundary treatment can draw attention to the development; bunds, if essential, are best planted



Urban fringe: The building remains un-integrated in the wider landscape while the road is 'canalised' by planting

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Area 17: Maidstone Urban Area
Scale 1:40,000