

Open space land (known locally as Town Green) off Bell Street near Surgery – Sawbridgeworth.

John Bosworth Conservation Officer October 2020

Introduction.

I was requested by local EHDC Members Cllrs. Eric and Ruth Buckmaster to advise them in relation to the above site, particularly regarding the wall fronting Bell Street. The above Members considered the space could be improved and that reduction of the wall's height and providing a new entrance from Bell Street would likely make the site more accessible and better used by pedestrians. Following our joint site visit on 9 September 2020, Members also requested I provide other general advice which is set out below.

A further meeting with the above Members took place on 7 October, following which some refinements were made to the original document. On this date, and entirely coincidentally, we met a Jon Hartley from Arbtech who was undertaking some arboricultural survey work on the site on behalf of the Town Council.

In discussion with other colleagues, I understand advice has previously been given in relation to both the legal position relating to the wall and also in relation to the general landscaping of the site.

The purpose of this presentation is mainly to provide a preliminary concept for discussion. Whatever emerges as the final scheme the author's principal advice is that the solution is holistic in terms of principle and detail, accepting that finances may dictate its implementation staged over a longer period.

General Description.

The site is owned by the District Council. It is in the centre of Sawbridgeworth and in close proximity to important listed buildings and a well-used car park serving the town. It is understood the initiative for seeking improvements is locally generated.

The Conservation Area Appraisal produced by Beams and adopted 2014 advises the site is masked by a good brick wall, presumably formerly part of the garden of 4 Bell Street. However I do not agree with their additional reference that the trees make it an *attractive space* for the Surgery.

The open space is very important site in Sawbridgeworth's historic townscape. It is traversed by a diagonal path leading to the Surgery and Day Nursery and a path on its eastern boundary leading to the nearby EHDC car park.

Within the open space there are many trees including one exceptionally fine Beech Tree. The reader is invited to look at satellite images to observe how significantly the site is dominated by tree cover. Left unchecked the tree cover, its domination and shade it casts will increase. Tree species are principally Sycamore, Yew, Lime and Ash. Arbtech (see above) advised many of the trees were probably planted about 30-50 years ago. The Beech is much older and was probably a feature of the original historical garden. Elsewhere the space is grassed with various shrub planting areas of little visual importance. Within and nearby is hard surfacing, seating, signage and other street furniture of various types with no overall co-ordinated design and generally of poor quality. There are areas of bare earth. I noticed on my site visit miscellaneous evidence of unsociable behaviour beneath one of the seats. This heightens my general perception of an important open space somewhat 'tired and dark' where significant improvements could be made for the greater enjoyment of the community. The District Council's Arboriculture Officer agrees with this general observation.



Location Plan





Picture 1-2. The Wall fronting Bell Street. Recorded in the Listed Building description as forming part of the adjacent listed building. Height varies 1.35-1.8 m. Probably earlier 20th century date. The wall provides an important sense of enclosure and complete demolition would be inappropriate. Alterations to reduce height by a modest amount and to provide a new entrance would need Listed Building consent and Planning Permission. Picture 2 shows buttress support placed later – stability of wall needs checking.



Picture 3. Diagonal path crosses and bisects the open space leading to Surgery. Various elements of street furniture of poor design. Worn and 'tired' grass areas. Fine beech tree which the Council's Arboriculture Officer advises is a variety which originates from the Rivers Nursery.



Picture 4 -5 There is a 'maze' within the area prepared and constructed by the local Scouts Group for the Millennium It is not prominent and as can be seen the central insignia feature damaged by mowing the author was informed. If as likely and as advised, local considerations dictate the maze remains; it could be improved and significantly enhanced. For example the circles of grass could be replaced with a contrasting hard surface, a central feature to give vertical emphasis could be provide together with seating and perhaps low box hedge or other planting surrounding it.



Pictures 6-7. Areas of tree and shrub planting which in the author's opinion is of limited landscape value. Bare earth particularly detracts. The deciduous trees are likely to be of a more recent date with no historic association with the original garden.



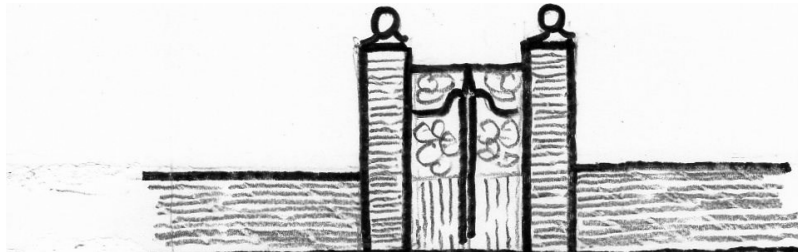
Picture 8. Pathway on eastern boundary leading to car park. Bare earth areas, street furniture and signage. An area of potential improvements, removal of some trees and possible replanting (Rivers varieties?) with views through to open space.

General consideration.

The author agrees with Members perception that this important open space would benefit considerably from improvement and making it more accessible to the community. The following advice is offered.

1. Seize the initiative. There is a real opportunity to make significant improvements and create a high quality urban space in this important location and provide a more desirable, inviting and useable open space.
2. Appoint a landscape consultant. It is essential that all elements: soft landscaping, hard landscaping, surfaces, signage and street furniture are considered comprehensively in detail and if necessary implemented over a longer period. Choice of common and appropriate surface and seating solution is most important. Check for services which may cross the site.
3. Reduce the height of the wall fronting Bell Street by a modest amount to agreed common height and provide a new centrally located entrance. This makes the enhanced open space visually more prominent and better used and enjoyed by the community. This to be subject to obtaining the necessary consents and resolving any access/highway safety issues. The wall forms part of the space and works involving alterations to it and provision of a new entrance should be considered as being part of an

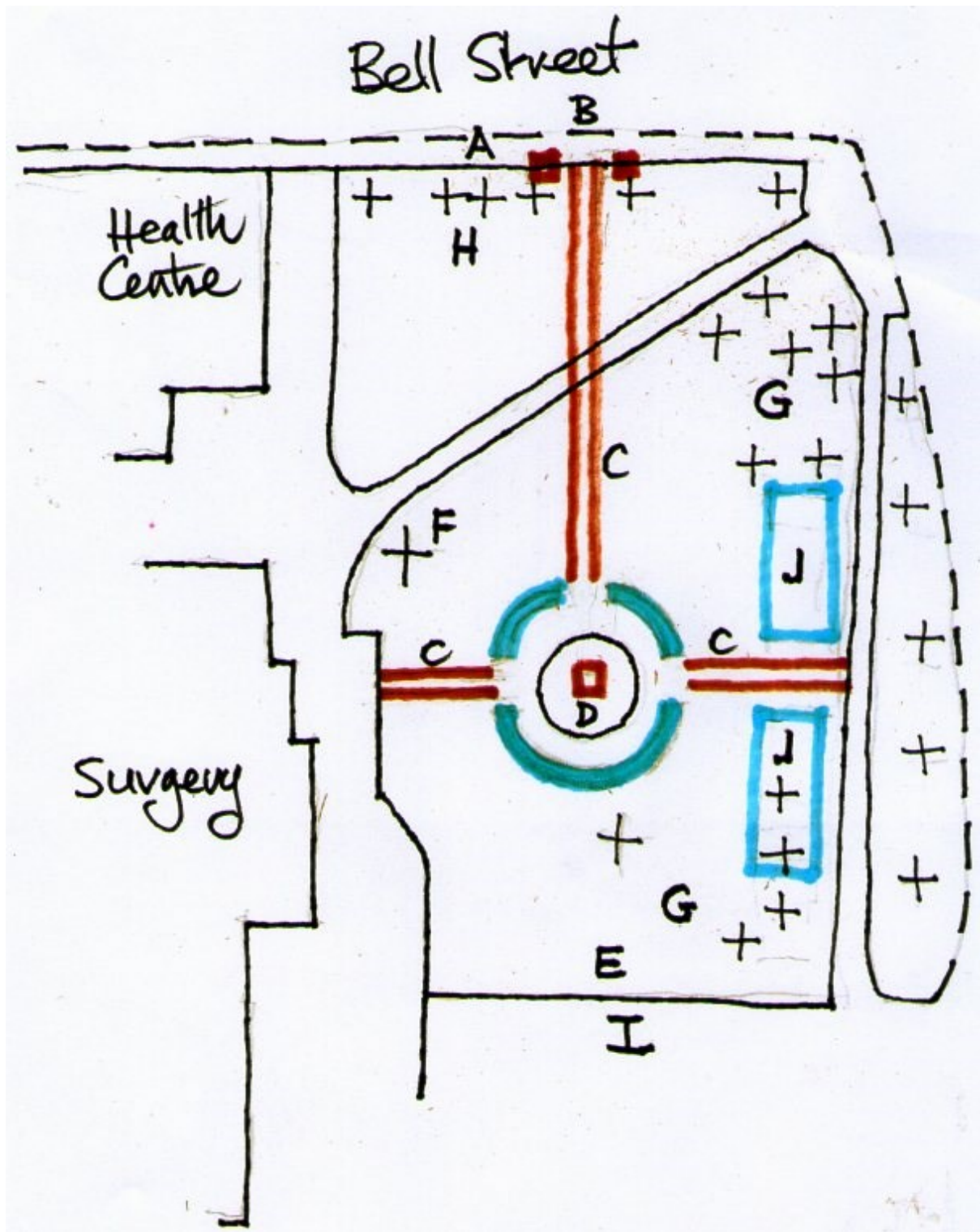
holistic scheme involving significant improvements to the open space itself. Simply providing a new access without making real improvements to the space itself would be a lost opportunity. The wall appears to have moved out of the vertical in some parts and is supported by a buttress in one location. Its stability therefore needs consideration.



Picture 9. Possible concept for entrance from Bell Street. Traditional solution with brick piers and Iron Gate. There are other design solutions.

4. Subject to agreement from the Council's Arboriculture Officer remove trees and shrub areas so as to increase useable space and create a lighter atmosphere. Replacement planting: Both the Council's Arboriculture Officer and the author consider the incorporation of some Thomas Rivers (Victorian nursery had close historic association with the town) replacement tree species could be an option and fruit varieties, if chosen, could be of additional community benefit. Consider involving the community in such planting. Possible high quality interpretation board. The Council's Arboriculture Officer will advise in relation to tree works and associated procedures.
5. Abandon and replace the existing path system. Provide a new path system and improved surface detailing with access to the car park to the south, the Surgery to the SW via a prominent and well-designed central feature with seating. The importance of achieving such an outcome that is well designed, relevant and prominent is essential. Such a central feature with an historic association with the town would provide an ideal solution. However if the 'Scout's Maze' remains there are various solutions to achieving improvements that perhaps could be implemented with assistance from the original providers, i.e. the Scouts. Finding an acceptable solution to this issue is most important.
6. Possible area on southern boundary for Market stalls, associated with creating formal clipped yew hedge (from existing hedge) between open space and car park.

SEE SKETCH next page. Only conceptual and very diagrammatic.



Picture 10. A - Reduce height of wall to common level- consider its existing stability. B - New entrance from Bell Street. C - New geometric path system with visually improved surfacing detail. D - Central focal feature and seating. If Maze feature is to remain suggest enhancement. One solution could replace grass with contrasting hard surface, vertical stone feature with carved scout insignia and possibly surrounding low Box hedge or other planting. E -

Possible Market stalls area. F – Retain Beech Tree subject to health considerations, consider modest crown lifting to reduce shading. G – Remove trees to be agreed. H – Consider options for frontage Lime trees, Retain, remove, re-pollard. I - Formal clipped yew hedge from existing. J – Possible replanting – Rivers varieties + interpretation board.

Once a final design has been produced check what, if any, consents are required. In addition to Listed Building Consent and Planning Permission relating to works to the wall, these potentially relate, firstly, to works to trees and secondly, establishing/formally confirming whether or not other works are considered as Permitted Development under Part 12 of the General Permitted Development Order, Development by Local Authorities.