

# Rode Village Character Assessment



*Figure 1 Rode village green.*

## Contents

Contents.....	1
1 Introduction.....	2
2 Brief Social and Economic History.....	3
3 Landscape setting of Rode.....	5
4 Settlement Form.....	7
5 Guidelines for Location, Density and Landscaping of Development.....	10
6 Open Space and Landscape in the Village.....	11
7 Views within and from the Settlement.....	12
8 The Village Streets.....	15
9 Visual Impact.....	19
References.....	20

## **1 Introduction**

1.1 Rode is a village of some 1,025 people (Census 2011) in a rural setting in North East Somerset. It is located on the eastern valley slopes of the River Frome, 12 miles south of Bath and 5 miles from Frome. It has key essential services including a Post Office and School, and other community facilities include a church, chapel and memorial hall.

1.2 Rode is a historic, working village, and the former brewhouse tower, now converted into apartments, is a key feature of the Rode Conservation Area. There is an additional conservation area around the medieval church designated more recently, the Frome Road Conservation Area. Throughout the village older buildings are built mostly in the local limestone and in a traditional style. Together the two conservation areas cover about 40% of the built environment. A detailed Conservation Area Appraisal was carried out on both Conservation Areas in 2009, an analysis that has informed this work. It is an important resource for development within the Conservation Areas, but also, we would argue, relevant for the wider village given the extensive coverage of the village with Conservation Area Status (shown in Figure 8). Any development in the village should pay regard to the historic form of the village, and the guidance in the Appraisal on traditional building styles within the conservation areas is also relevant for development in Rode generally, in order that the local distinctiveness is promoted and preserved.

1.3 The Character Assessment survey work was mostly carried out on August 15th 2014, a sunny day. Members of the neighbourhood planning group were assisted by Planning Aid in this work, and we used the BANES methodology to direct our inquiry. The Conservation Area Appraisal for Rode village and the Frome road area also assisted the analysis. This document is our evidence for policies in the Rode Neighbourhood Plan that require future development to protect and enhance the existing unique and distinct village character.

## 2 Brief Social and Economic History

2.1 Rode was mentioned in the Domesday Survey in 1086 as having three manors and several mills. The current Church of St. Lawrence was built on the site of an earlier church in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century. King Charles II is reported to have surveyed the surroundings from the tower on the lookout for Ironsides or Roundheads.

2.2 The village was heavily involved in the West Country woollen industry. A fulling mill at Shawford was recorded as early as 1516 and there were at least six mills sited on the River Frome within the modern parish, with the last closing in 1904.

2.3 In the early 18th century the spelling of the name of the village was changed from Rode to Road. This change was officially reversed in 1919 after complaints that the addresses in the village were confusing and letters and parcels were being mislaid. Around the end of the 18th century several of today's large houses, including Rode Hill (Langham), Merfield, Southfield, Shawford and Ivy House were built on the strength of the woollen industry. Later, in 1860, the Langham House became infamous when a child was murdered on the premises. The subsequent investigation was reported nationally.

2.4 Also at this time Baptists and Methodists built chapels in the village, and in 1824 Christchurch was built on Rode Hill. At the time the village was partly in Somerset and partly in Wiltshire. The church was built to serve those living in the Wiltshire parish of North Bradley. The church was made redundant in 1995 and is now owned by a musical instrument dealer, Andrew Hooker violins.

2.5 In 1920 the WW1 memorial was erected on the village green. The green had previously been known as The Pound and had a fenced area where stray animals were kept until claimed by their owners.



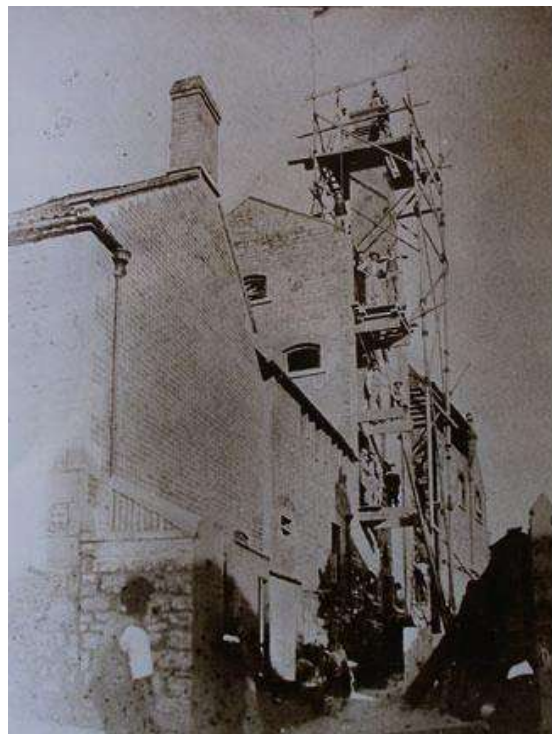
**Figure 2: The Pound and High Street c1900 by Wilkinson. Now the village green and war memorial.**

2.6 A recent development has been new housing on the site of the former brewery, including the conversion of the old brewhouse into apartments. The breweries 20th century buildings and some housing built for the brewery workers, were built in red brick, but they were the exception historically.



**Figure 3** *The Cross Keys Public House with the old Brewhouse now converted into apartments.*

2.7 In common with most other villages, Rode originally supported a wide variety of businesses, trades and shops. However in the early 20th century Fussells' brewery was the major employer. Its origins are believed to date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was extended in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and again in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. The brewhouse tower was built in 1903 and extended around 1935. Brewing ceased when the company was taken over by Bass, Mitchell and Butlers in 1962 and it became a bottling plant and distribution depot. The site was finally closed in 1992. As part of the subsequent "Old Brewery" housing development, the tower was refurbished and now contains several apartments.



**Figure 4** *Topping out the new brewhouse, 1904*

2.8 The village accommodates several businesses owned by the Fussell family, including Fussells Farms, Fussell's Fine Foods, Rode Haulage and Frome Area Building Supplies. Other significant local businesses include choconchoc, Camden Miniature Steam Services, and Peony and Moore. The village has a significant number of people working from home, about 1 in 5 of the economically active.

### 3 Landscape setting of Rode

3.1 Rode is situated on the Somerset-Wiltshire boundary 18km south of Bath and 8km north-north-east of Frome, It is within the Avon Vales National Character Area of Natural England, described as

*“an undulating, low-lying landscape of mixed, predominantly pastoral agriculture and small limestone-built towns, cut by the (Bristol) River Avon and its tributaries, and surrounded to the west, south and east by higher land”.*

The 1997 Mendip Landscape Character Study sets Rode within the lower Frome Valley, part of the Oolite limestone area of East Somerset, overlain in part by Oxford Clay. Rode is surrounded by farmland on all sides with small fields bounded by hedges, and in places this farmland comes into the village.

3.2 The core of the village is at about 60m above sea level, on a fairly level site above the valley slopes and floodplain. There is a gentle rise north to Rode Hill at the north of the village and an 80m rounded knoll to the south-east of the village. Rode is bounded by Rode Hill to the north, Bradford Road to the east, and Frome Road (A361) to the south east. The River Frome flows immediately to the west of the village, with a historically important crossing point at Rode Bridge. The course of the river is a tree-fringed, meandering channel, bounded by meadows, in a fairly narrow flood plain. Historically the river supported many working water mills, and Rode has the remains of Rockabella Mill and Scuttsbridge Mill sites within the parish, and The Mill at Rode pub and restaurant just outside it.



**Figure 5 The approach to Rode from the West is over a single track bridge. The Millers House is on the left.**



*Figure 6 The Millers House and bridge c1900.*



*Figure 7 The busy A361 Frome Road at the junction with Bradford Road.*

## 4 Settlement Form

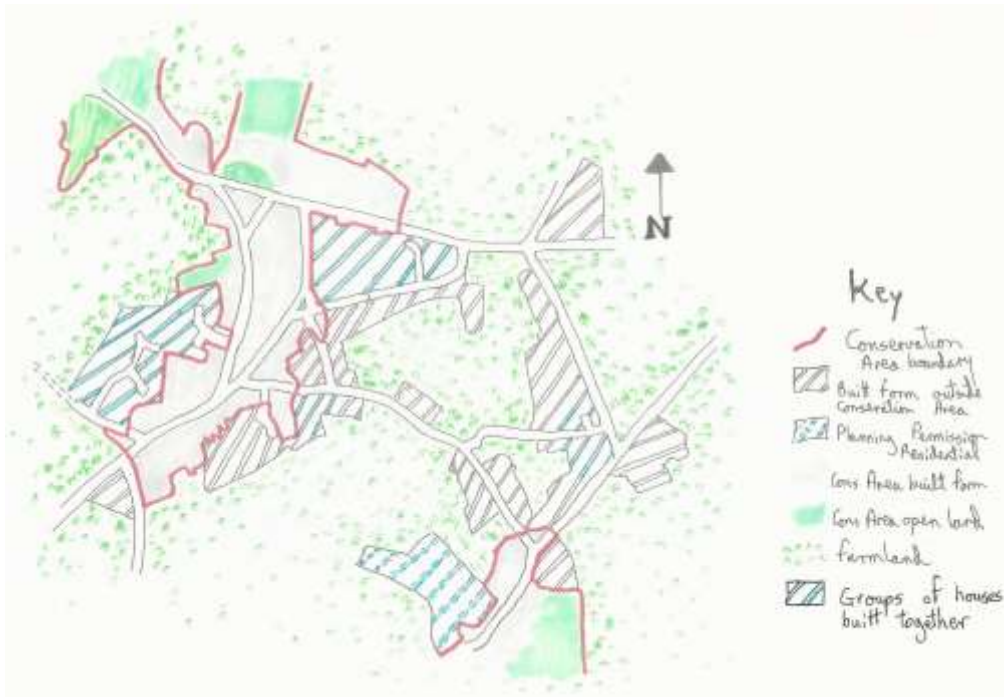
4.1 Rode is a nucleated settlement, although there is a distinctly separate section of the historic village along the Frome Road (A361), which now effectively severs the church from the village. This separate section of the village is the second conservation area, Frome Road. It is an area of dispersed dwellings and other buildings of a much lower density with an immediately rural appearance.

4.2 The larger Conservation Area of Rode includes the historic working village and former brewery, a much denser built form. This part of the Rode Conservation Area is characterised by close-built limestone buildings, little vegetation and narrow, enclosed streets with few views out. Figure 8, in which only the buildings are indicated, shows the difference between these two types of built form. The rest of the Rode Conservation area includes Rode Hill and the Mill environs, both typical of the dispersed rural development of the Frome Road Conservation Area. Outside of the conservation areas the village follows this more dispersed form of rural development, with some small more suburban infill estates.



**Figure 8 Rode showing only buildings blocked. Dense development in Rode Old Village.**

4.3 Development from the twentieth century has generally followed a more suburban or rural form. Figure 9 shows where small estates have been built in the twentieth century, other twentieth century development has developed informally along the lanes linking the older parts of the village. The village form still clearly has the fields separating the two historic sections, and this separation should be maintained visually.



**Figure 9 The built form of Rode.**

4.4 It is an aim of this work that future development pays more attention to context and the traditional form of the village. The recent development of detached houses in Red Lion Gardens (Figure 10) for example would be better suited to the more rural, dispersed areas of the village. Located where it is, the dense built form of the Rode Conservation Area would have been a better model for the form of the development. Development more suited to the dense historic core has been demonstrated better with the development of the brewery site. The informal layout, and variety of finishes (render, reconstituted stone and brick) is more in sympathy with the nature of the rest of the historic village core. Although use of brick here reflects the material of the brewery, in general brick is not a traditional or typical building material in Rode and should not be used extensively.



**Figure 10 The Red Lion Gardens development.**





***Figure 11 Village housing around the village green. The Fairfield estate on the left was developed in the 1980s while the cottages to the right of the picture date from the 15<sup>th</sup> century.***

4.5 In summary, there are two distinct historic development forms in Rode. Dispersed and rural as found around the medieval church and Rode Mill, dense and enclosed within the historic working village. New development will need to respect the traditional density and landscaping characteristics of the part of the village it is within, and the overall unique settlement form of Rode.

## **5 Guidelines for Location, Density and Landscaping of Development**

### **The Historic Working Village (Rode Old Village Fig 8)**

**G1: Development within the historic working village of Rode will be required to follow guidance in the Conservation Area Appraisal (CAA). Residential development should be of a high density and not include detached dwellings or extensive garden and hard standing areas.**

**G2: Within the historic village, landscaping, where appropriate and of a suitable scale, should be predominantly hard surfaces.**

**G3: Within the historic village, development will normally be expected to be two storey construction using traditional materials and incorporating traditional details as described in the CAA.**

### **The Rest of Rode**

**G4: Elsewhere in the village, new development should be low density to match the existing rural village areas, and should not exceed 25 dwellings to the hectare. Development should continue the use of extensive soft landscaping and tree planting to soften the lines of buildings and their setting.**

**G5: Dwellings in the rest of Rode should have garden space and off-road parking provided within their curtilage. Within the Conservation Areas outside of the historic working village guidance in the CAA should be followed.**

**G6: Development in the rest of Rode needs to present a varied visual appearance, while using the traditional materials of stone and some render as the main palette. Development can mix single and two storey development to achieve the varied and informal appearance.**

**G7: These guidelines are not intended to prevent innovative good modern design proportionate to the village and its context.**

**G8: Development should be of a sympathetic scale to the village, and reduce negative visual impact to a minimum.**

## 6 Open Space and Landscape in the Village

6.1 A Mendip Open Spaces Study, published in 2012, shows that Rode has a slight deficit in terms of open space. For the size of village and population, the study suggests Rode should have a total area of 2.32 ha of open space, compared with an actual value 2.15 (7.6% shortfall).

6.2 In the central conservation area of the village, there is relatively little green space, with just the triangular village green with the war memorial, and a small, sloping, grassed area where Farthing Row and Halfpenny Lane meet Lower Street. This is also where the remains of the Temperance Hall can be found. These small areas of open space in the historic old town are important exceptions to the general close-built form and are therefore protected as open space and Local Green Space. However the character of this part of the village and Rode Conservation Area is such that it would be inappropriate to provide further expanses of open space.

6.3 The second conservation area, to the south-east of the main part of the village and containing the parish church of St. Lawrence, is largely surrounded by agricultural land and is of a much more open appearance. However the rural character is masked by the very busy A361 Frome Road, and the Fussell operation, currently being decommissioned as the business moves further out from the centre of the village (see section 9).

6.4 On the south side of the village, with an approach down Orneage Close, is the village playing field. This contains a relatively large and level grassy area used for cricket matches, village fetes, etc. There is a fenced-off children's playground on the eastern side with swings, slides, etc. The playing field has a pavilion to the side and in the corner of the plot is a hut used by Scout and Cub groups. This facility is well used by villagers, with a playing field committee looking after it. A footpath connects the playing field and the village school who use it for their summer sports day.

6.5 An area of allotments lies on the west side of the village, with access via The Mead, or via a footpath off Lower Street.

6.6 The village is bounded on all sides by an agricultural landscape of fields and hedges, and occasional farm buildings. The village lies on a slight, west-facing slope, affording open views to the west from various viewpoints. The eastern boundary is at the top of the slope, with dwellings on Bradford Road having extensive views to the east.

6.7 The two main settlement areas are grouped around an area of open land. The most important of part of this area, Browns Ground, lies between Marsh Road to the north and Church Lane to the south. There is a public footpath running across this open land linking the two roads. Although privately owned, Brown's Ground has long been used by village residents for dog walking and exercising. Preservation orders are being requested for two large oak trees in the field. The highest point on the northern border of the field affords extensive views to the south and west. Its visual importance within the village is firstly that it is an open hub around which differing aspects of the village have developed, contributing crucially to the local distinctiveness of Rode. The views out from Brown's Ground are also an important local feature, much valued by residents.

## 7 Views within and from the Settlement

7.1 The location of the village on the sides of Rode Hill creates extensive views out. From view points at the top of Marsh Road for example, and the top of the footpath across Brown's Ground, there are extensive views to the West.



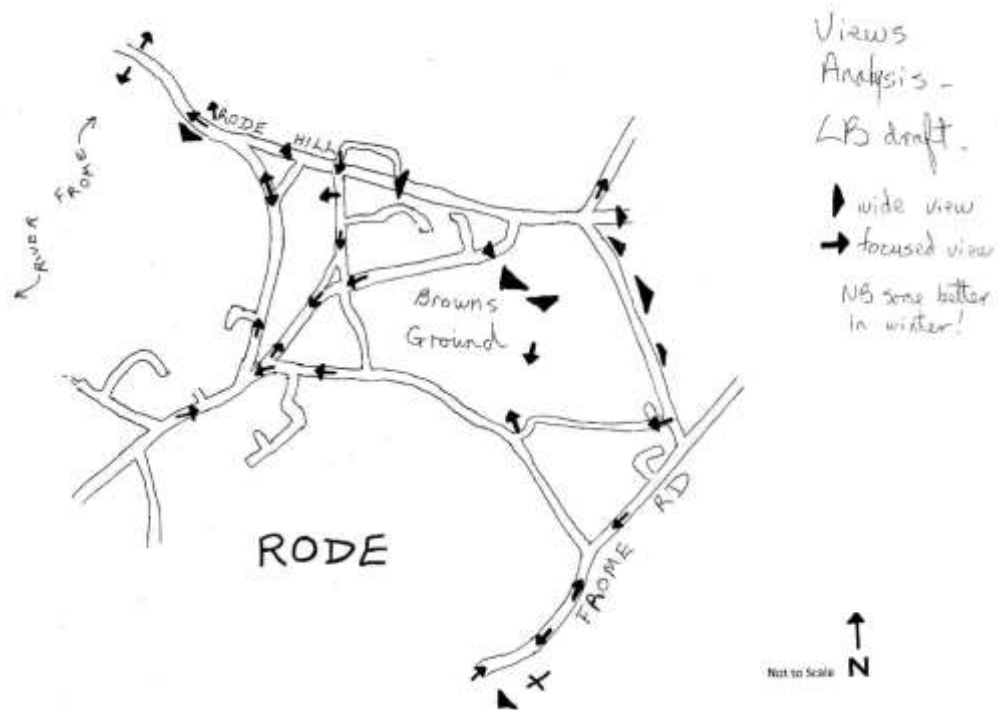
**Figure 12** Looking west down Marsh Road showing former brewery tied houses built in red brick.

7.2 From houses on Bradford Road between Frome Road and Rode Hill there are wide views to the East, including the Westbury White Horse, and the chimney of the now redundant cement factory.



**Figure 13** The view looking East from Bradford Road, the eastern boundary of the village.

7.3 Within the historic village, focused views of streets show attractive street scenes and glimpsed views of the surrounding countryside. Figure 14 shows both wide and focused views of particular merit in the village, that future development should respect.

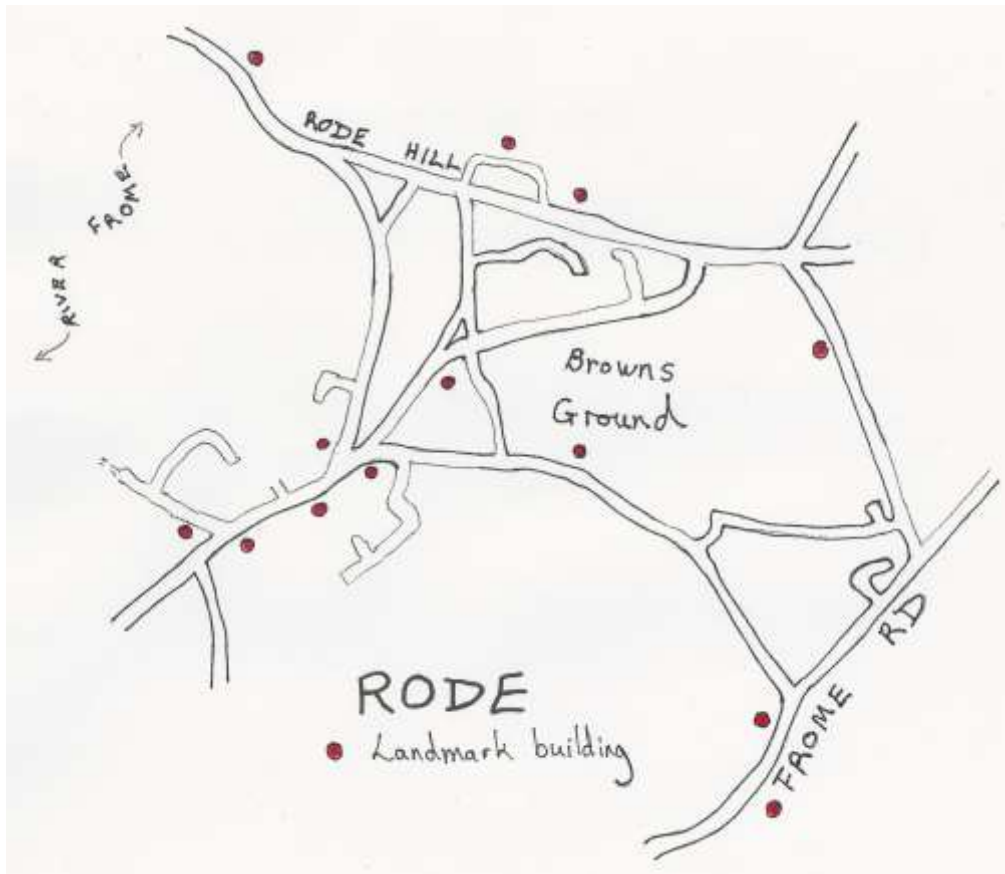


**Figure 14 Views analysis of Rode**



**Figure 15 Looking East up Rode Hill, from the junction with High Street, showing red brick brewery managers' houses either side of stone built houses, and Christchurch.**

7.4 An analysis of landmark buildings was carried out at the time of the survey, something that had already been done for the Conservation Areas. It shows landmarks spread along the main roads.



**G8: Views detailed in this Character Assessment are important attributes of the village and should be protected in any development.**

**G10: Landmark buildings should retain their distinctive features in any redevelopment, and these features should remain visually prominent from the street and other public areas and not be reduced by unsympathetic development.**

## 8 The Village Streets

8.1 It is likely that Rode first developed as a stopping point on an ancient east/west trackway close to a good crossing point of the River Frome; the footpath from Townsend in Rode across the river, now using Scutts Bridge, a packhorse bridge, to Woolverton marks part of this route. Other early tracks between Rode and nearby settlements have led to the pattern of old streets we see in the centre of the village today. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the wider Rode Bridge was built as a toll bridge providing a route from Woolverton to Trowbridge and, via Lower Street, to Beckington. So in the early days, routes between neighbouring communities passed through what became the heart of the village. Over the years, the routes between Trowbridge and Frome via the Frome Road (A361) and, to a lesser extent, between Woolverton and Trowbridge via Rode Bridge have become the most heavily used roads, leaving the centre of the village relatively free of through traffic.

8.2 The present St Lawrence Church was built in the 15<sup>th</sup> C. probably on the site of an earlier church and probably close to the Lord of the Manor's house. It lies to the south-east of the village centre and is severed from the rest of the village by Frome Road. The pavement on the side of the road by The Bell stops with a short overlap with the pavement on the other side of the road. Pedestrians have to cross a very busy road to reach the church or housing on that side. New development along it has missed an opportunity to improve the pedestrian environment on this road which, due to space restrictions, may need to use innovative ideas rather than the provision of traditional footway pavements each side and a crossing facility. Different paving and gateway features could reinforce the 30mph limit for example, with the removal of the central line markings to slow traffic. Some traditional measures such as footways and crossing islands will also be needed however.

8.3 Pedestrian access to the proposed development at the Church Farm site is a particular problem as there is no pavement either side of the A361 between the church and the entrance to the site. Developers have proposed a footpath that emerges onto the north-west side of the road at the point where the existing pavement currently stops and another footpath passing via fields at the back of the development towards the High Street.



*Figure 16 Heavy traffic on the A361 negotiating the tight bends near St. Lawrence church.*



**Figure 17** *The Parish Church of St. Lawrence is thought to date from the 15th C. The church is now difficult to access on foot due to the density of traffic on Frome Road.*



**Figure 18** *St. Lawrence c1900 when traffic wasn't a problem. The fine lych gate, built in 1873, was sadly demolished in a road accident in 1966.*

8.4 Some streets in Rode are without any pavement (footway) to walk on, as shown in figure 19 and illustrated in figure 20, though the majority have pavements on at least one side of the road. In the narrow streets of the old village they work reasonably well as shared spaces, although some extra measures to protect pedestrians and children would improve perceived safety levels.



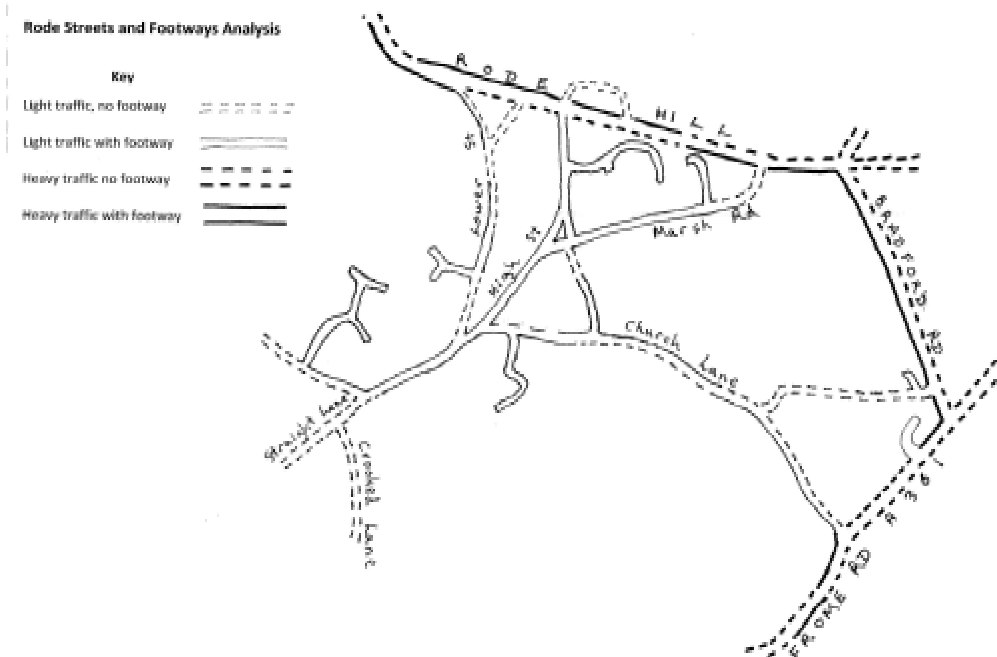
8.5 Existing Rights of Way link into village, although as shown in Appendix 1 of the Rode NP, the network is broken by unassisted crossings of busy roads and missing links. The latter are often stretches of heavily trafficked roads that have no footway between rights of way that could offer potential round walks for informal exercise, and important rural links from the village.

8.6 There are quiet lanes in and around Rode that offer further opportunities for informal recreation and active travel, particularly by bicycle. The relative safety of these lanes is promoted by the restriction of long views by hedging and roadside trees, and it is important to preserve the visual appearance and the wooded nature of the lanes.

**G11: Buildings in the Old Village area should continue with the narrow streets and buildings fronting directly or nearly directly onto the highway.**

**G12: New access ways in the Old Village area should be built on shared space principles, using traditional paving materials.**

**G13 Development fronting rural lanes should preserve and enhance the sheltering vegetational frame typical of them.**



**Figure 19 Street form in Rode**



***Figure 20 The junction of Lower Street and High Street showing narrow or non-existent walkways.***



***Figure 21 Straight Lane, a route suitable for vulnerable road users. A fine example of a rural lane.***

## 9 Visual Impact



***Figure 22 The Fussell development to the south of Rode nearing completion***



***Figure 23 A view of the Fussell development from St. Lawrence churchyard***

9.1 Development in the village needs to be of a similar scale to existing buildings and enhancing rather than detracting from important views and buildings in the village. Unfortunately a recent development demonstrates the dis-benefits of not properly considering visual impact. The buildings shown in figures 22 and 23 are located close to the southern boundary of Rode. They are out of scale, prominently located and not a good gateway feature. A development of this size and prominence needed to be located further away from the village and not impact important views of and within the village. Alternatively, it could have been designed in such a way that its visual impact was acceptable. The development also effects views from the church in the Frome Road Conservation Area. The development is to be screened by bunds, but these are also unfortunately, by necessity, out of scale with the village.

## References

“The Pictorial History of Rode” by Peter Harris published in 2011

“Discover Rode’s Past” by Peter Harris published in 2015

Rode Conservation Area Appraisal

<http://www.mendip.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=8702&p=0>

Mendip Landscape Character Study 1997

<http://www.mendip.gov.uk/landscapeassessment1997>

Natural England 2014: National Character Area profile 117 Avon Vales

<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/4822288767647744?category=587130>

Rode Neighbourhood Plan