

Snapshot Character Summary: Monkton Combe

Landscape type:

Designation: AONB, Conservation Area, sites of scientific interest and geological importance.

Character Summary

Monkton Combe Parish covers the area of hillside which slopes down from Combe Down to the River Avon to the east and the Midford Brook to the south. The main village sits in the middle of the parish, nestling on this south facing slope about 50m above the brook and is largely built around the main access road, Church Lane, which bisects the village along an east-west axis.

Monkton Combe is an ancient settlement (by monks originally, hence the name) on the direct driving route into Bath from the south, the pathways (drungs) of which still exist. In past times it has hosted a canal and a railway although few traces of either are still evident. The village shop/post office is no more but it boasts a church, a pub and a village hall, all clustered in a small area at the centre of the village. There is a shop and a garage in the Parish however, down on the A36 trunk route about 1km to the east.

The biggest influence on the character of the village, however, is the presence of a public (i.e private) school – Monkton Combe Senior School, which occupies a large site to the east of the central village and owns a significant amount of other land and property within the parish.

In term times the population of the school can exceed the rest of the village and the school and its business, responsible for much employment in the village is also responsible for much of the traffic travelling along the surrounding roads.

(There is, in the parish, another large state secondary school, Ralph Allen School, on the plateau above the village but there is little interaction between this and the Parish).

Elsewhere there are several settlements separated from the main village:

Tucking Mill is a small hamlet on the western edge of the parish between Monkton and Midford and the quiet rural location belies its industrial past which has shaped the valley and indeed, much of Bath itself. Excavation of stone and Fuller's Earth from the valley above, exposing the strata of the hillside, led the owner, William Smith, to make observations and propose the fundamental principles of modern geology which earned him the title, the Father of English Geology.

As well as some of the exposures of strata, other features which still exist include the 8 arch viaduct built by the Somerset and Dorset Railway which now forms part of national cycle route 24, the woodland landscape with rare fauna and flora, the site of the former tramway to Kingham Wood (the line of the present footpath) and the filled-in Somerset Coal Canal.

William Smith's house still stands as do the remains of the mill that processed cloth using the Fuller's Earth – a process that became known as tucking, giving this area its name.

Mount Pleasant is a terrace of small cottages, probably built for stone workers in the nearby Combe Down mines, on the ridge line of the hill to the north, now joined by several larger villas taking advantage of the same glorious views over the valley.

Trollopes Hill is the extension of the lane eastwards from the village beyond Brassknocker Hill, now leading down to the A36 and there are similar ribbon-like developments along the connecting roads to the north and east. A small group of houses is clustered at the top of Brassknocker Hill by the entrance to the large Combe Grove Manor estate (now a hotel), which occupies a commanding position over the village but is largely hidden from it.

Overall, buildings are a mix of sizes but largely older style in Bath or Cotswold stone and with pitched tiled roofs – no major residential development has taken place for many years and the infill that has been done has been in the style of existing housing.

What is not settled is either farmed, field sizes being varied and irregular and used mainly for grazing, used for recreation and sport or left as woodland. Field boundaries tend to be hedged while stone walling abounds in the settled areas and along the drungs.

Landscape Description

The landscape comprises the slopes that run from the valley bottoms in the south (Midford Brook) and east (River Avon) up to the ridge of the hills running round the south of Bath. As can be seen in photographs from the other side of the valley the area is heavily wooded at top and bottom where steep slopes or flooding make the land unsuitable for anything else.

The main settlement has concentrated along a contour about 50m up from the river running westwards from the main trunk road. Down by the rivers, largely bordered by trees, are fields, playing fields or woodland that act as flood plain; on the slopes above are large fields mainly used for grazing, bordered by hedges or stone walls, extending up towards the ridge. Along the plateau at the top is a mix of residential and commercial development interspersed with woodland.

Key Views and Landmarks

- 1) The road into the village from Brassknocker Hill winds through large open fields



- 2) The central village area on the lower slopes of the valley side, the main school site is in the foreground, to the left. The large blocks in the left background are the apartments adapted from the old brewery buildings attached to Church Farmhouse.



3) The village from the other side of the valley - from the church(left) to the school(right)

Note: Combe Grove Manor (top right), houses on Shaft Road going up the hill (centre), the drungs ascending the hillside and Mount Pleasant on the ridge (top left). Note also large irregular fields and abundance of trees.



4) The heart of the village – school buildings to the left, the Pub (with smoke rising), the Village Hall (opposite) and the Church (behind the trees to the right). The old brewery buildings are prominent from this angle, the old Church Farmhouse is on the right of the church.



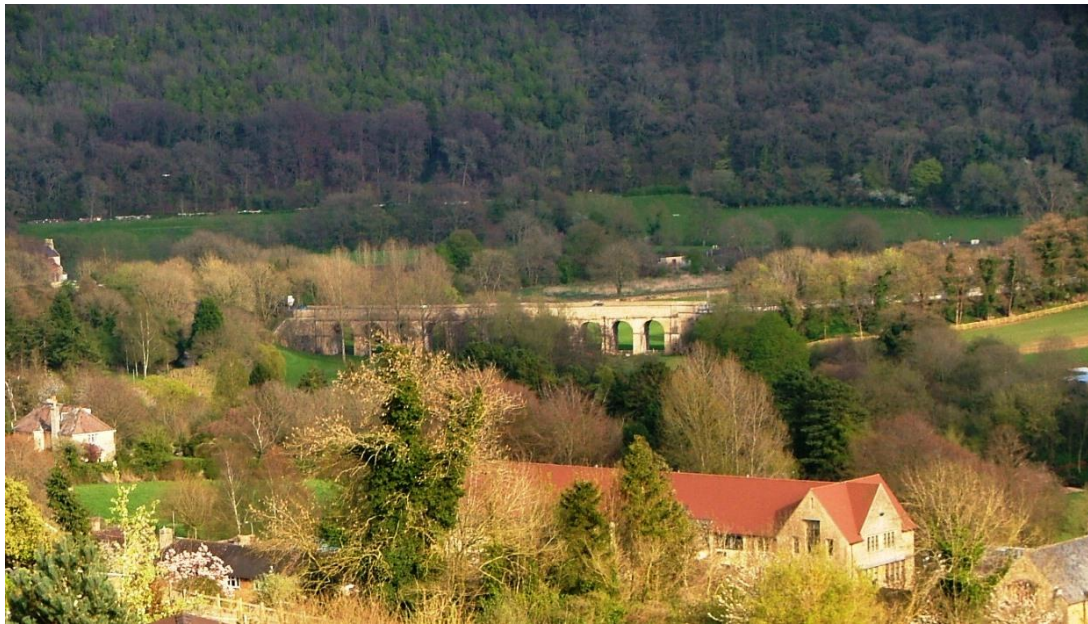
- 5) View from the Church entrance– note the small stone cottages, mullion windows and the typical dry stone walling.



- 6) School buildings of different ages and sizes alongside Church Lane



- 7) View east over the School from Shaft Road to the Avon Valley with the A36 Viaduct crossing the entrance to the Midford valley, the railway beyond that, then the river and the canal running through the trees at the top (line of boats can be seen) . The river forms the easterly border of the parish; the brook, running under the viaduct, is the southerly one



- 8) Brassknocker Hill bordered by pasture. 'The Clank' (path of old railway line) runs through the trees along the bottom of the picture



- 9) View from Brassknocker to the east looking towards the Avon Valley, Trollopes Hill runs across the foreground. The A36 Trunk road rounds the curve down to the viaduct, the road to Winsley and Bradford-on-Avon winds over the hill in the distance.



- 10) View over the village from Shaft Road – note the drung on the right, heading straight up the opposite hill



11) Ex-miners cottages at Mount Pleasant



12) Monkton's Ancient Monument: The Lock-Up



Settlement Pattern

The main village has grown up around the monk's settlements (from where the village gets its name) at the junction of the drungway, an ancient droving route into Bath, and the road in from Brassknocker Hill up to Combe Down. While parts of the pub and the old farmhouse and barn form some of the earliest buildings, the current church is relatively recent at mid-19th century and the village hall not built until 1928.

Mill Lane forms a link from the village centre down to the river and mill and subsequently, the canal which itself was superseded by the railway. It also is the location of Monkton's only scheduled monument – the old village jailhouse or Lock-Up (see pic [12])

The central area is quite compact and formed of traditional two storey houses although some of the old church farm buildings, including the barn and an original brewery, have been converted into larger blocks of accommodation.

Monkton School was formed over a hundred years ago around an old farmhouse and the then vicarage, but has expanded considerably and occupies most of the main village to the east of Mill Lane. Some of their buildings are relatively large and tend to dominate that end of the village.

The houses at Tucking Mill are the part of the industrial legacy of the extraction of Fuller's Earth in the hills above and the subsequent use of the canal for its transport. Clustered together at the bottom of the valley, dwellings are mainly old artisan cottages, their only consistent feature is the use of Bath stone in their construction.

Mount Pleasant was originally a row of small terraced cottages for workers in the local stone mines but the connecting road up from the village was the preserve of the more well-to-do resulting in some magnificent large Victorian or Edwardian villas with large gardens taking full advantage of the elevated southerly aspect.

Development to the east was largely ribbon-like along the access roads (or canal) with a boost being provided by the building of the A36 in the 19th century. Houses are relatively modest but with large grounds.

Buildings and Detail

Most of the houses are built using Bath or Cotswold stone with pitched tiled roofs. The most modern looking buildings are within the school site and are not generally visible to the passer-by so that consistency of style has not been so much of an issue as 'outside'.

Windows range in size and style but mullion frames are common. Chimney stacks, where present, are usually large and functional.

In the village, the large blocks of St Michael's Court apartments avoid dominance over the local terraces by being built on the slopes below the church. From the hillside behind or from across the valley however, they and the relatively large 3 or 4 storey buildings within the school are very noticeable (see Picture[10]).

The 'main' road through the village is predominantly lined by rough stone walls, presumably created as retaining walls when the road was cut from the hillside

Sense of Place

Monkton Combe is essentially an old rural farming community, a point emphasised by every access being alongside fields or winding through woodland. Its brief industrial heyday is long gone and it has returned to a place where sheep and cattle graze, rabbits forage and the buzzards soar above the wooded hillsides disturbed only by the cries from the school sport pitches as matches are decided and life friendships are made. From inside the village the views are of green fields and woods glimpsed between the buildings, but by walking up the drungs one is presented with a panorama of the whole settlement and it's setting near the junction of the two river valleys (see pictures [9] & [10]).

Positive Features and Special Qualities

What it lacks in people it makes up for in a wealth of historical and archaeological features and its scenic beauty (it is probably one of few areas left that has a completely tree-lined horizon) and tranquillity - the very qualities that have attracted residents to the parish for decades. If one considers that here we have a Cotswold village, on the sunny side of an unspoilt green valley with cycling and walking opportunities, in an ancient, historic landscape, all just over the hill from a bustling, social and cultural centre with World Heritage status its attraction (and its popularity) become apparent!

Negative Features

The village houses a small number of residents – only some 260 on the electoral roll and the demographic is skewed towards the elderly. Opportunities for more housing development are restricted due to land being unavailable (designated Green Belt and Conservation Area), unsuitable (too sloping or flood plain) or classed as agricultural.

The area around the old mill, the leat and the 'Island', that part of the valley floor between the leat and the river, is a mess.

Some overhead power lines spoil the view and character of the village

Looking Ahead

Residents obviously want to preserve their quiet rural lifestyle and conserve the rural, archetypal English village look and feel that goes with Monkton Combe. That is not to say that further development would be unwelcome but that it should respect the existing character and form of the village.

For reasons already stated, areas for housing development are limited to infill and conversion opportunities and apart from the schools, the pub and hotel there is little scope for local employment and there is no area that would lend itself to the creation of workshops or offices that would attract tradesmen or professionals to set up small businesses.

Development of the Two Tunnels cycle route has meant that commuting into Bath by cycle is now a much easier prospect but it has also meant an increase in the number of leisure cyclists traversing the narrow roads. Discussions are in progress as to the best route for such cyclists to take through the village to minimise conflict with cars and pedestrians.

Welcome enhancements would include the re-instatement of the weir on the Midford Brook and the resulting flow of water down the old mill leat which would help to clear and clean the area.

Although part of BANES, Monkton's telephone system is connected to the exchange at Limpley Stoke across the valley in Wiltshire. This is not scheduled to be part of the initial rollout of improved broadband connections and will have to await further funding. Any ways of hastening that development would be very welcome.

Registration of local features such as the pub and the 'island' as 'Community Assets' would help to preserve them in the event of future sale.

13) The Church and churchyard

