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SUMMARY

Proposed improvements to the A46 Stoneleigh Road junction will impact on Westley Bridge, a bridge built in the early 19th century. Archaeology Warwickshire was commissioned in September 2017 to assess the historic significance of the bridge in order to inform the design and position of a new bridge that is planned to be built beside it.

Westley Bridge was built in the early 19th century and became a county bridge in 1829. Originally a narrow, single-carriageway bridge, it was widened in 1982. Construction of the original bridge was in red sandstone, and incorporated a segmental arch and a parapet with plain terminal piers, all of which are characteristic of Warwickshire bridges in the early 19th century. However, when the bridge was widened in 1982 it was faced in new material which, despite the continued use of red sandstone, has resulted in a significant loss of character. The report argues that the bridge does not meet the criteria to be listed as a building of special architectural or historic interest, but that it is a heritage asset of local interest. It recommends that the bridge should be retained, if possible, and that the erection of a new bridge on its east side will have a positive outcome if it can make visible the historic character of the older bridge.
1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Proposed improvements to the A46 Stoneleigh Road junction will impact on Westley Bridge, which is on Stoneleigh Road north of the main roundabout but close to the proposed alterations. Westley Bridge is on Stoneleigh Road at SP31789 73701 and spans the Finham Brook in a shallow stream valley (Fig 1). A previous assessment of the structure suggested that it could be put forward as a candidate for listing, on the basis that the structure was built before 1840 and is representative of its type (Greig 2017). If it is not designated, the report argued that the bridge should be considered as a heritage asset of local importance.

1.2 At the time of writing it is proposed to build a new bridge on the east side of the existing bridge, at a distance of only 3 metres apart. The purpose of this report is to determine the historical significance of the bridge, whether it is likely to meet the criteria for listing as a building of special architectural or historic interest, and the impact on the setting of the structure if a new bridge is built alongside it. The conclusions are intended to inform design proposals for the new bridge and road layout.

1.3 The bridge was visited on 20th September 2017. The vegetation cover was at its peak and inhibited a full view of all of the structure. The north-west side was completely inaccessible because of the vegetation cover. However, access was sufficient to determine the historic character of the bridge and to understand its significance.
2 LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND

2.1 Historic buildings which are of special architectural or historic interest are protected under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. Historic England has set out the criteria for establishing what is special in terms of architectural and historic interest. To be of special architectural interest a building must be:

of importance in its architectural design, decoration or craftsmanship; special interest may also apply to nationally important examples of particular building types and techniques (e.g. buildings displaying technological innovation or virtuosity) and significant plan forms;

2.2 To be of special historic interest a building must:

illustrate important aspects of the nation’s social, economic, cultural, or military history and/or have close historical associations with nationally important people. There should normally be some quality of interest in the physical fabric of the building itself to justify the statutory protection afforded by listing. (DCMS 2010, 4)

2.3 In addition, a building can be listed if the exterior contributes to the architectural or historic interest of any group of buildings of which it forms part. This is known as ‘group value’. It can refer to a visual group, such as a village or city street, or a thematic group, such as a series of milestones or canal bridges along a transport route.

2.4 The general principles of determining special interest are based on age and rarity, aesthetic merits and national interest. Generally speaking, the older a building is, the fewer comparable examples there is likely to be. In practice it means that most buildings erected before 1840 are listed if they retain a significant proportion of original fabric. Intrinsic architectural merit is a key consideration in judging the suitability of a building for designation, although other criteria, including technological innovation or social and economic historical association, are also important where relevant. However, where a substantial number of buildings of similar quality and type have survived, a more selective approach is adopted for buildings in the period 1700-1840 and only the most representative or most significant examples are selected.
2.5 Listed buildings are selected to be of national interest, but that includes significant examples of regional building types. This encompasses regional variations in common building types, such as vernacular houses, industrial buildings found only in certain regions, and the use of regional building materials. The state of repair of a building is not a consideration when determining the special interest of a building.

2.6 Most pre-1840 bridges would be worthy of listing, provided that they are substantially intact. Historic England guidelines recognise that most bridges of that date have been modified and/or altered, but whether an altered bridge qualifies for listing depends on the extent of alteration (Historic England 2011, 6).
3 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

3.1 The history of Westley Bridge has been covered in a previous report. There was a medieval bridge here, but the salient points are that a new bridge was constructed in the early nineteenth century that became a county bridge in 1829. The earliest map on which it is depicted is the 1843 Tithe map, where a ford alongside the bridge is also indicated (figure 2). If there was a ford, it was no longer in use by the time of the Ordnance Survey map of 1887 on which the narrow, single-carriageway bridge is shown with rough ground on either side of it (figure 3). A major extension of the bridge occurred in 1982 when it was widened on the upstream side.

3.2 By the early nineteenth century bridges were normally the responsibility of the County Surveyor, or were constructed at the expense of the parish or private individuals. Westley Bridge is in the latter category because it did not become a county bridge until after it was constructed.

3.3 It is possible that Westley Bridge was built by John Rennie (1761-1821), the Scottish civil engineer who built many canals and bridges. This conjecture is based solely on a similarity of construction with the widening of Stoneleigh Bridge, which has been attributed to Rennie and is discussed further below. Rennie was also employed at nearby Stoneleigh Abbey where he built Park Bridge 1813-14, which may have been how he came to work in the area (Pickford and Pevsner 586).
4 THE STRUCTURE

4.1 The bridge is a single-span, two-carriageway road bridge with a flat deck. The original face survives on the downstream (east) side (Figs 4, 5). It is built of dressed red sandstone with a segmental arch. A string course above it defines the base of the parapet. The parapet is brick, with red-sandstone coping, and terminates in simple square piers. The brick is partly nineteenth century hand-moulded brocks, but is otherwise of modern materials.

4.2 The upstream (west) side of the bridge was added in 1982 (Figs 6, 7). It is built of dressed red-sandstone blocks, matching the downstream side but with modern materials. However the arch ring is of smooth-rendered concrete and the string course is of concrete blocks. The parapet is superficially similar to the downstream side, but is built of modern machine-moulded brick with a coping of concrete blocks.

4.3 The underside of the bridge is original brick, except for the extension on the east side, which is smooth-rendered concrete. Although the deck of the bridge is flat, the original string course on the downstream side suggests that originally the bridge was slightly ramped to the centre.

4.4 The abutments below the arch are of red sandstone. On the south-west (upstream) side the abutments and bridge approach are retained by a stepped rubble-stone wall erected in 1982. The approaches to the bridge on the east side can be seen to be laid on to concrete blocks, which constitute reinforcement of the embankment following accident damage in 1967 (Fig 8).
5 ASSESSMENT

5.1 The bridge is an isolated structure at the foot of a stream valley. As it has no visual relationship with any other listed building it cannot be listed for group value and does not contribute to the setting of any undesignated heritage assets. Assessment for listing and of its general significance must therefore focus on the intrinsic qualities of the structure.

5.2 The Georgian period saw the beginning of a transport revolution. In addition to the creation of a canal network, there was widespread expansion and improvement of England’s road system, to the extent that numerous stone-arched bridges were constructed during the period, mainly the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. That is the historical context of the bridge, but for listing purposes more discernment is applied to bridges of that type and period because they are common.

5.3 However, a bridge erected before 1840 would qualify for listed-building status if it retains sufficient original fabric and character. This is not the case with Westley Bridge, however. The bridge has been widened, so that it no longer retains its original character of a narrow rural bridge. The east side of the bridge is comparatively well preserved, and replacement of the original parapet brickwork with some modern materials would not in itself disqualify the bridge for listing. (However, the clash of red sandstone and red brick does not contribute to the aesthetic quality of the bridge.) The bridge soffit is also mostly original work and is clearly distinguished from the widening in 1982. However, the western face has no historic fabric. The sandstone is modern, although similar to the original, but the dressings and parapet are of concrete and modern machine-moulded brick.

5.4 When built, Westley Bridge was an arched bridge characteristic of the region. The red sandstone, known as ‘Bromsgrove sandstone’, was widely used in Warwickshire as late as the early 19th century. Its arched construction, and details such as string course and parapet terminating in plain square piers, can be seen in other listed bridges in the county.

5.5 Two such bridges are in Stoneleigh Civil Parish, both listed grade II. Cloud Bridge (NHLE number 1364946) is a three-bay sandstone bridge with segmental arches and rounded cutwaters. Westley Bridge is essentially a smaller version of this design, with similar string course and parapet, but with no need for cutwaters as it has no piers in
mid-stream. Stoneleigh Bridge (NHLE number 1035160, and also Scheduled Ancient Monument number 1005729) is a medieval bridge, but was widened in the early nineteenth century, also in dressed red sandstone, with similar arches and cutwaters. Attribution of the nineteenth-century work to John Rennie appears in the official list entry, but this attribution is notably absent from the recent edition of *The Buildings of England* (Pickford and Pevsner 2016, 579). A single-span bridge, but richer in detail, is Fieldon Bridge on the Warwickshire-Leicestershire border in Grendon (NHLE number 1361279). It is a red-sandstone bridge with segmental arch, but the arch ring is rusticated, and the coped parapets curve outwards to square terminal piers.

Fieldon Bridge is well preserved, but an example of an altered bridge that has been listed at grade II is Thelsford Bridge (NHLE number 1325528). However, unlike Westley Bridge, much of the original sandstone facing was re-used when Thelsford Bridge was rebuilt. Each of these listed bridges has a stone parapet, where Westley Bridge has the cheaper alternative of a brick parapet with stone coping. It is arguable, therefore, that this regional bridge type is already represented on the list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest by examples that are better preserved than Westley Bridge.

5.6 In conclusion, therefore, Westley Bridge is not of sufficient architectural or historic interest to justify listed-building status and is a building type that is already represented on the statutory list. As a historic bridge it has local-historical interest, however, as an example of road improvements in late-Georgian England. It is a small early-19th century rural bridge retaining original character and detail on its east face. The materials are characteristic of the region and of many Warwickshire bridges of a similar date. The arch ring, parapet string course and the terminal square piers are all characteristic of late-Georgian bridges in Warwickshire.
6 IMPACT OF DEVELOPMENT

6.1 The bridge should be considered as a heritage asset and therefore the policy should be to retain it if possible. However, without a statutory designation there would be no legal obligation to make every effort to preserve it.

6.2 At present the bridge makes little visual impact because it is set in a valley bottom with dense vegetation cover on both sides. It is proposed to build a new bridge on the east side of the present bridge, at a distance of only 3 metres (Fig 9). This has advantages and disadvantages with regard to the setting of the old bridge. At present the bridge structure is not visible from the road and the stream bank is not accessible to the public. By building a new bridge on the east side, therefore, the historic fabric of bridge will be made visible. The disadvantage is that the rural setting of the bridge structure will be harmed. However, given that the historic fabric is not at present experienced in any meaningful way, retention of the old bridge beside a new bridge would be a reasonable compromise.

6.3 Given that the western side of the bridge was built in 1982, a case for maintaining this side of the bridge cannot be made on conservation grounds. The bridge is not visible on this side at present and there are no proposals to make it so in the future.

6.4 It has been established that the stream has been crossed by a bridge since the medieval period. Construction of a new bridge may therefore have an impact on surviving evidence of earlier bridges than the present structure. This can be mitigated by the implementation of an archaeological watching brief during the groundworks.
7 CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Proposed road improvements to the A46 Stoneleigh Road junction include the building of a new bridge that will affect the setting of Westley Bridge, an early-nineteenth century road bridge. The bridge was widened in 1982. Although its west face was built in a similar style to the original face, and with some comparable materials, there has been an overall significant loss of character. The bridge well represents late-Georgian road improvements across the county and surviving original fabric is built in a style and with materials characteristic of the region. These determine the significance of the building as a heritage asset of local interest, but the bridge is not of sufficient quality to be designated as a building of special architectural or historic interest.

7.2 As a heritage asset of local interest the bridge should be retained if possible. At present the built character of the bridge is not easy to experience, because the original fabric is not visible from the road and the surroundings have dense vegetation cover. By building a new bridge immediately to the east, the surviving historic character of the bridge will become visible, an outcome which is considered to outweigh the resultant loss of rural setting.
REFERENCES

DCMS 2010 Principles of Selection for listed Buildings.


Figure 1. Location plan.

Figure 2. Detail of Stoneleigh Tithe map, 1843 (Warwickshire Record Office CR 569/213).
Figure 3. Detail of 1887 Ordnance Survey map (Warwickshire sheet. The map appears to show either a walled and/or a raised approach to the bridge.

Figure 4. The east face of the bridge from the north bank.
Figure 5. The east face of the bridge from the south bank.

Figure 6. The west face of the bridge from the south bank.
Figure 7. The west face of the bridge from the south bank.

Figure 8. Concrete blocks underlying the bridge approach on the south bank.
Westley Bridge, Stoneleigh, Warwickshire

HISTORIC BUILDING ASSESSMENT
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Figure 9. Proposed new road layout.