

COUNCIL
17 JULY 2025

**DESIGNATION OF NEW MIDDLETON ST GEORGE CONSERVATION AREA
AND ADOPTION OF FINALISED APPRAISAL**

**Responsible Cabinet Member -
Councillor Chris McEwan, Economy Portfolio**

**Responsible Director -
Trevor Watson
Director of Economy and Public Protection**

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. The report seeks Councillors' approval to designate a new conservation area at Middleton St George and to adopt the corresponding appraisal. The document that has been submitted is called *Stockton & Darlington Railway: Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area Appraisal. Finalised document. May 2025.* See **Appendix 1.**

Summary

2. The report provides justification for the designating a new conservation area at Middleton St George and adopting the corresponding appraisal. The draft version of the appraisal (December 2024) had been subject to a six-week public consultation period. Amendments have been made in light of the comments received.
3. Following the adoption of the finalised appraisal, the text currently marked in yellow will be amended to reflect the adopted status of the appraisal. No other changes will be made. The adopted appraisal will be named: *Stockton & Darlington Railway: Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area Appraisal. Adopted document. May 2025.*

Recommendations

4. It is recommended that :-
 - (a) Council adopts the new conservation area boundary at Middleton St George (see chapter 6.0 of the finalised appraisal).
 - (b) Council adopts the new conservation area's name: *Stockton & Darlington Railway: Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area.*
 - (c) Council adopts the finalised appraisal for the new Middleton St George Conservation Area.

- (d) Council authorises the amendment of finalised appraisal with regards to the text marked in yellow, to reflect the adopted status of the document. The adopted appraisal will be named: *Stockton & Darlington Railway: Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area Appraisal. Adopted document. May 2025.*

Reasons

5. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons :-

- (a) Fighting Cocks was an original stopping point (station) along the Stockton & Darlington Railway (S&DR) of 1825. The presence of the railway led to the establishment of the Middleton Iron Works in 1864, which sparked the development of the village of Middleton St George.
- (b) The bicentennial of the S&DR is this year. There will be many events along the former route to celebrate the birth of the modern railway. Darlington Borough Council (DBC) has been making significant S&DR-related investments, and Middleton St George Parish Council is also preparing for its celebration within the village. Over the past few years, heritage assets at Fighting Cocks have been promoted through the Middleton St George Neighbourhood Plan, S&DR Heritage Action Zone and Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub.
- (c) The appraisal demonstrates in detail that sufficient special interest survives at Middleton St George which is associated with the S&DR and the industrial development of the village justifying the designation of a conservation area. It picks up the 'unfinished' work by Durham County Council who proposed a (different) conservation area boundary for Middleton St George in 2022.
- (d) The draft conservation area boundary proposed by DBC has generally been welcomed by residents who took part in the public consultation. It is also supported by the Friends of the S&DR and Middleton St George Parish Council. Amendments have been made following feedback received, including concerns raised by Historic England.
- (e) Once the conservation area boundary has been adopted, the appraisal will provide an evidence base for managing change in the area and form a material consideration in the Planning process. Conservation area designation can also assist if funding is sought for larger regeneration or conservation schemes within the boundary.
- (f) The appraisal also includes suggestions to improve the condition of the area. These are in line with the aims of the Middleton St George Neighbourhood Plan and the Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub.

Trevor Watson
Director of Economy and Public Protection

Background Papers

- (i) Darlington Borough Council (2024) *Stockton & Darlington Railway: Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area Appraisal. Public Consultation Draft. December 2024*
- (ii) <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/17327/msg-np-made-version.pdf>
- (iii) <https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/16184/fighting-cocks-heritage-hub-guide.pdf>

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Council Plan	<p>The appraisal:</p> <p>(a) Supports economic growth through sustainable and well-planned development (priorities).</p> <p>(b) Underpins the Plan's priority of valuing our heritage and culture.</p>
Addressing inequalities	No impact
Tackling Climate Change	Possibly slightly positive impact. The appraisal raises some awareness against the use of modern materials that are incompatible with traditional buildings, which often have a high-carbon footprint and adverse effect on the insulating properties of traditional structures.
Efficient and effective use of resources	If the appraisal is adopted, there may be a slight increase in additional officer workload in planning applications and enforcement.
Health and Wellbeing	Possibly slightly positive impact. The information provided in the draft appraisal may lead to wider improvements in the area.
S17 Crime and Disorder	Possibly slightly positive impact. The information provided in the draft appraisal may lead to wider improvements in the area.
Wards Affected	Sadberge & Middleton St George
Groups Affected	No impact
Budget and Policy Framework	This report does not recommend a change to the Council's budget or policy framework.
Key Decision	No
Urgent Decision	No
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	No

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

Background Information

6. A conservation area is '*an area of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*' (Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990).
7. There is currently no conservation area at Middleton St George.
8. Fighting Cocks was an original stopping point (station) along the Stockton & Darlington Railway (S&DR) of 1825, which is of international significance being the world's first public railway on which a locomotive hauled passengers. The village of Middleton St George did not exist at the time. This stopping point in the middle of nowhere was likely chosen as it is the location of an ancient road junction where the old lane from Darlington met the route of the former Roman road. With the advent of the railway, industrial sites were established at Fighting Cocks. In 1864 the Middleton Iron Works occupied a large site further to south which sparked the development of Middleton St George including rows of workers houses and a village centre.
9. Much of the surviving special interest at Middleton St George comprises structures and other elements linked to the S&DR, the regionally important Fighting Cocks Reservoirs which predate the historical settlement, and buildings associated with the industrialisation and resulting creation of the village.
10. Up until the appraisal, the focus at Middleton St George was mainly on the S&DR.
11. General interest in the railway heritage increased as minds started to focus on the S&DR Bicentennial and the founding of the Friends of the S&DR in 2015. Darlington Borough Council (DBC) has been making significant S&DR-related investments, and Middleton St George Parish Council is also preparing for its 2025 celebration within the village.
12. A 2016 Historic Environment Audit identified Fighting Cocks as a location of significant heritage value with several S&DR-related assets and remains still to be found.
13. In 2017, Historic England accepted the whole 26-mile route of the former S&DR as a Heritage Action Zone, following an application by the Stockton & Darlington Railway Heritage Board which included DBC. Launched in May 2018, the S&DR HAZ aimed to better manage, preserve and utilise heritage assets with a view to stimulate economic growth through various projects in the build-up to the railway's bicentenary in 2025. Programme outputs which directly affect Middleton St George include improvement works to the level crossing and the provision of information and interpretation.
14. In May 2019, Middleton St George Parish was formally designated as a neighbourhood area. In September 2022, the Middleton St George Neighbourhood Plan (2022-2036) was made which includes actions and policies protecting the former route of the S&DR.

15. In early 2020, the Parish Council and the Friends of the S&DR responded to local interest by establishing the Middleton St George S&DR Heritage Steering Group with the mission of delivering the Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub, which comprises a number of projects to improve the heritage assets at Fighting Cocks.
16. In July 2022, Durham County Council (DCC) provided *Conservation Area Assessments – Route of the former Stockton & Darlington Railway. Darlington & Middleton St. George*, proposing a conservation area boundary for Middleton St George. It was not accompanied by an appraisal to justify their proposal (see chapter 5.0 of the appraisal).
17. In November 2023, DBC's Conservation Officer was shown around Fighting Cocks by the Friends of the S&DR. Projects to be delivered by the Fighting Cocks Heritage Hub were also outlined. The Conservation Officer met the Friends on other occasions in 2024 when there was progress or completion of some of the projects (e.g. mural, waiting shed, vegetation clearance).

Draft Appraisal (December 2024)

18. An appraisal for Middleton St George was drafted between March and June 2024 by the Conservation Officer. It included:
 - (a) Information on the planning implications of conservation area designation (chapter 2.0).
 - (b) A detailed assessment of the significance of Middleton St George and its surroundings based on its historical development, spatial/character analysis and values attributed by the local community and other stakeholders (chapter 3.0).
 - (c) A description of its condition and its causes and any issues which have led to the deterioration of the area (section 4.1).
 - (d) An assessment of threats/potential future issues as well as opportunities for enhancement (sections 4.2 & 4.3).
 - (e) Proposed conservation area boundaries based on the special interest of the area, including DCC's initial suggestion as well as additional areas (section 5.1).
19. At the cabinet meeting on 3 December 2024, Councillors approved the public consultation on the document *Stockton & Darlington Railway: Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area Appraisal. Public Consultation Draft (December 2024)*.

Public Consultation

20. The draft appraisal was available for consultation on the Council's Conservation Areas webpage from 13 January to 24 February 2025, along with a feedback form to be completed. There was also a link to an online portal where the document could be viewed and commented on.
21. Paper copies of the appraisal (read only) and feedback form were available at the Town Hall (by appointment only) and at the Crown Street and Cockerton libraries.

22. The public consultation was advertised on the DBC website and Facebook page.
23. Site notices were hung in various locations of the proposed new conservation area boundary.
24. In addition, the Council directly notified individuals, groups and organisations that were likely to have a particular interest in the Middleton St George Conservation Area.
25. At the request of the Middleton St George Parish Council, the Conservation Officer gave a presentation on the proposed new conservation area at the Middleton St George Women's Institute on 20 January 2025 (see Appendix 1 of the finalised appraisal).
26. During the consultation period, a total of 15 responses were received comprising representatives of (number of responses in brackets):
 - (a) (9) Residents (in or close to assessment area)
 - (b) (1) The Friends of the Stockton & Darlington Railway
 - (c) (1) MSG Parish Council
 - (d) (1) Darlington Borough Council
 - (e) (1) Historic England
 - (f) (1) Durham County Council
 - (g) (1) Other
27. Following the public consultation period, a summary of all the comments received was put on the Council's Conservation Areas webpage on 26 February 2025:
<https://www.darlington.gov.uk/media/22796/middleton-st-george-conservation-area-consultation-responses-jan-2025.pdf>.
28. The feedback on the draft appraisal and proposed conservation area boundary was generally supportive, including from the Friends of the S&DR and Middleton St George Parish Council. However, there were two objections including from Historic England who argued that more work was needed to clearly identify the special architectural or historic interest that DBC sees as desirable to conserve or enhance, and to use this to reconsider the boundaries proposed.

Finalised Appraisal (May 2025)

29. Following the consultation period, the Council's Conservation Officer worked methodically through all the feedback received and made amendments throughout the document where deemed necessary. An overview of the comments and how they were processed is provided in appendix 2 of *Stockton & Darlington Railway: Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area Appraisal. Finalised document. May 2025*. See Appendix 1.

30. Extra care has been taken to provide considerable clarification on the identification of the special interest (see section 3.1 of the finalised appraisal) and justification for proposed boundary designation (see section 5.1 of the finalised appraisal) using Historic England guidelines. It is considered that the concerns of Historic England have now been adequately addressed.
31. Moreover, additional areas have been included in the finalised new conservation area boundary (see section 5.2 of the finalised appraisal).
32. The finalised appraisal includes text marked in yellow which will be updated once the document is approved for adoption. There will be no other changes. The adopted document will be named: *Stockton & Darlington Railway: Middleton St George (Fighting Cocks) Conservation Area Appraisal. Adopted document. March 2025.*

Financial Implications

33. Advertisement costs: Notice of the newly designated boundary will be published in the London Gazette and at least one local newspaper.

Legal Implications

34. Conservation area designation under the Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended).

Estates and Property Advice

35. The proposed boundary changes will affect the DBC-owned land, most notably the former railway corridor and the Whinnies nature reserve.

Carbon Impact and Climate Change

36. The appraisal raises some awareness against the use of modern materials that are incompatible with traditional buildings, which often have a high-carbon footprint and adverse effect on the insulating properties of traditional structures.

Consultation

37. See point 20 to 25 above

Outcome of Consultation

38. See points 26 to 31 above.