

MERVILLE GARDEN VILLAGE



Conservation Area

Department of the
ENVIRONMENT
for Northern Ireland





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I NTRODUCTION

Merville Garden Village was the first of a new type of residential development to be built in Northern Ireland. Formulated on the principle that good design could provide a modern suburban estate that still retained the advantages of a rural environment, Merville remains virtually as it was built in 1949, a unique environment which, to this day, is valued and cherished by its residents.

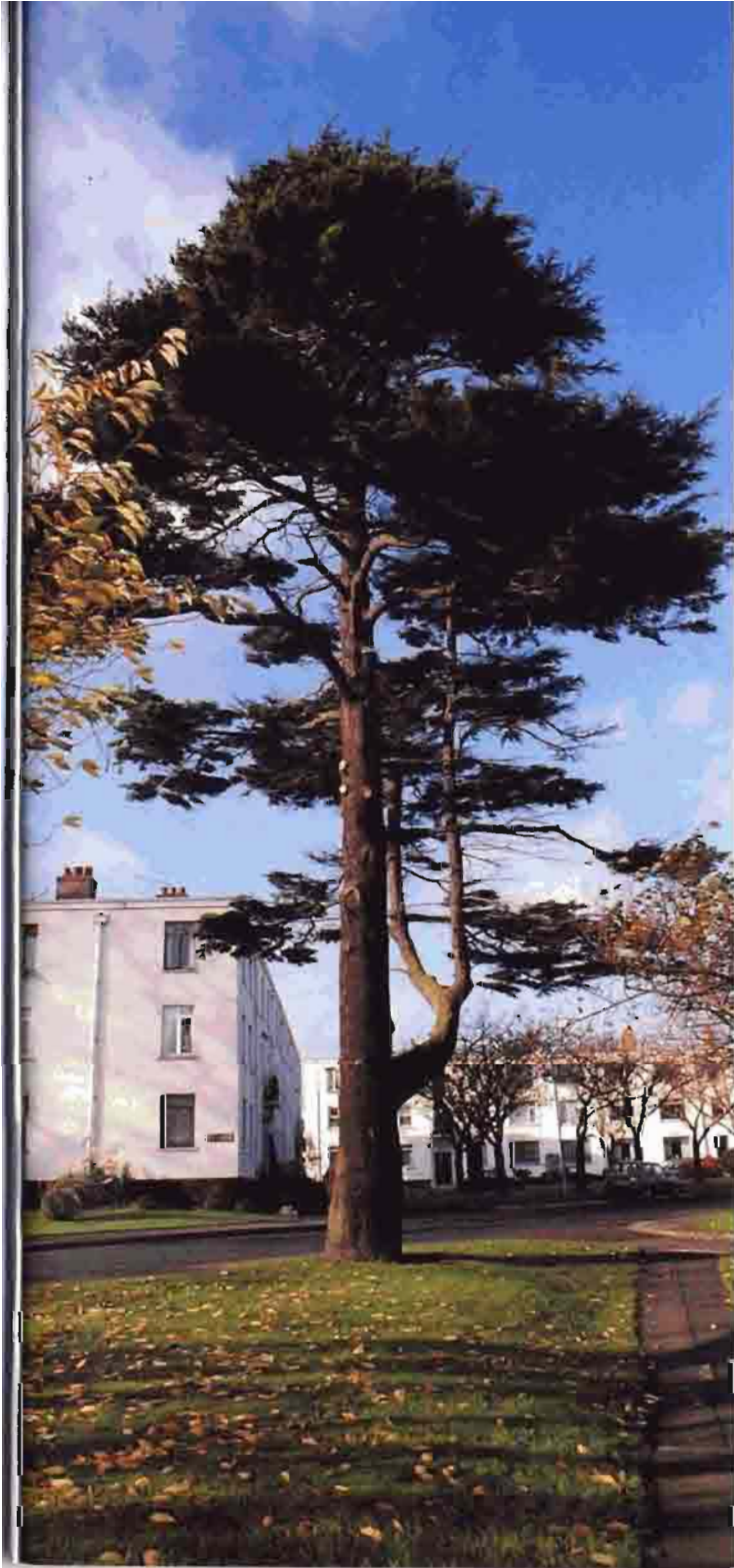
Designation of Merville Garden Village as a conservation area gives recognition to its particular architectural significance and heritage value.

I am confident that this provides the framework for the preservation and enhancement of the village and will ensure that the outstanding quality of this suburban environment is maintained.



Minister for the Environment.





P LANNING CONTEXT

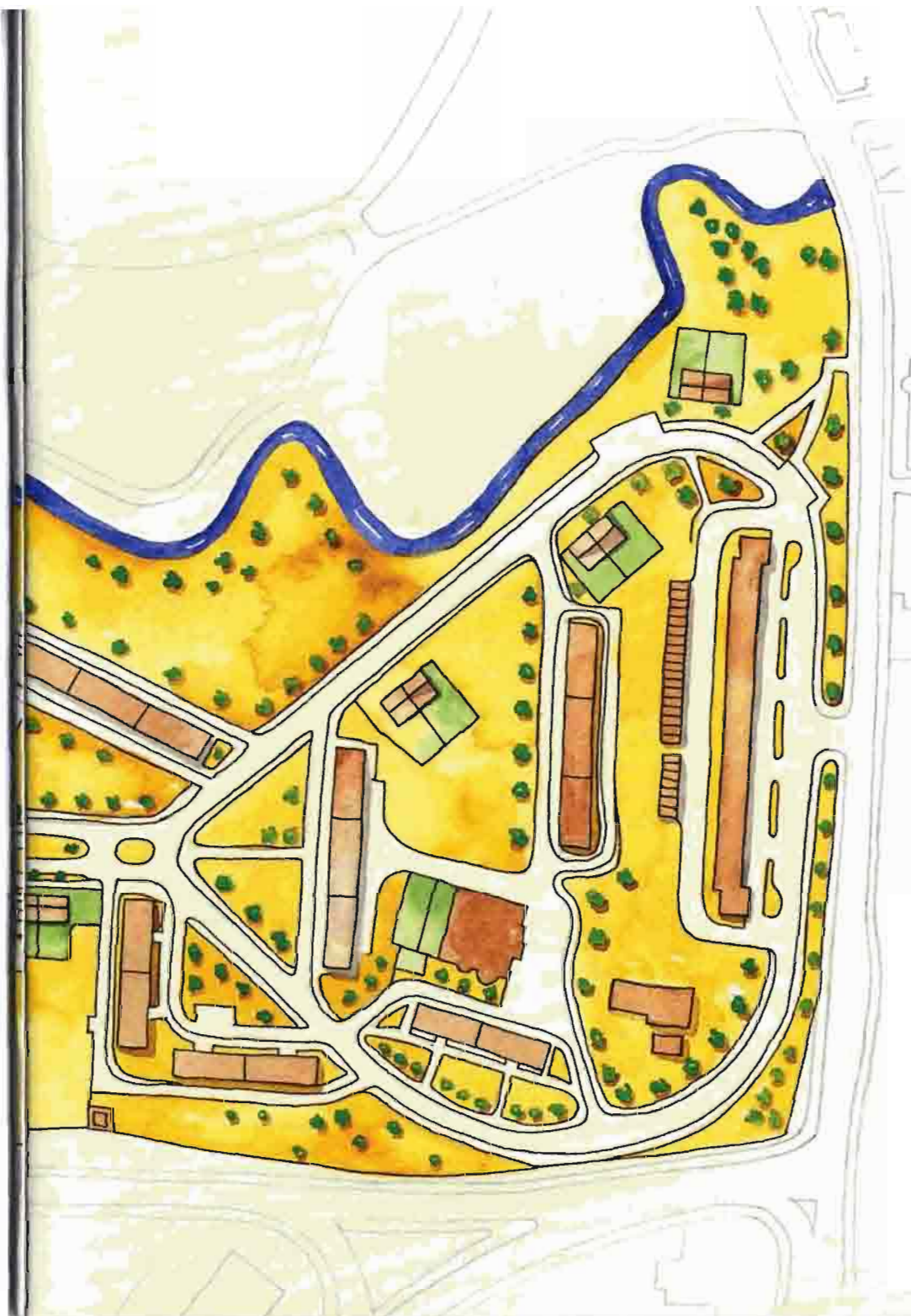
An important element in the Conservation Strategy for Belfast outlined in the Belfast Urban Area Plan 2001 is the protection and enhancement of the city's most important areas of townscape value. The Department's conservation programme has, so far, concentrated on the main showpieces of the civic environment which lie within the city centre and in the vicinity of Queens University.

Suburban Belfast and surrounding districts contain areas of special townscape character which, although on a more modest scale, are an important part of the city's heritage and add to the image of the city as a whole. The first suburban residential areas to be designated as conservation areas were Malone Park and Adelaide Park in South Belfast.

The Department now wishes to designate Merville Garden Village, located in Newtownabbey Borough to the north of the city, as a conservation area. The formality of layout and consistency of architectural detailing make this area worthy of protection.







CONSERVATION AREA DESIGNATION

Within the overall objectives for the development of the Belfast Urban Area and Newtownabbey in particular, the Department's policy in Merville Garden Village will seek to protect and enhance the townscape character of the area including important landscape features within it. To be effective in a residential area such as Merville, conservation needs the active participation of the local community. The Department will welcome the involvement of property owners and occupiers in conserving and enhancing the Conservation Area.

Notice is hereby given that the Department of the Environment (NI) in pursuance of the powers conferred upon it by Article 50 of the Planning (NI) Order 1991 has designated the area indicated on the boundary map as a Conservation Area, being an area of special architectural and historic interest, the character of which it is

desirable to preserve and enhance. Maps of the designated area have been deposited at the Newtownabbey Borough Council offices, Belfast Divisional Planning Office and the Belfast Development Office at the following addresses:

Newtownabbey Borough Council
The Square
BALLYCLARE

Tel: Ballyclare 52681

Belfast Divisional Planning Office
Bedford House
16-22 Bedford Street
BELFAST
BT2 7FD

Tel: Belfast (01232) 252800

Belfast Development Office
Clarence Court
Adelaide Street
BELFAST

Tel: Belfast (01232) 540540

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

EARLY HISTORY

Many years ago, when the site of Belfast was still only a mud flat, the Glas-na-Bradán River which forms the north east boundary to the Merville Estate, was the last inlet on the western side of Belfast Lough. It would have provided access through the dense forests of oak and elm towards the caves and vantage points on Ben Madigan (Cave Hill) and Carnmoney Hill for a variety of travellers, marauders and smugglers. Carnmoney Hill is an extinct volcano and contains the scarce mineral Hullite. It was also the site of Dunanney Fort known as "the place of the assemblies" in Celtic times (500 BC) where ancient fairs were held.

Merville is in the parish of Carnmoney in the townland of Drumnadrough thought to translate as "the village of the Druids". The townland was included in a vast parcel of lands granted to Sir Arthur Chichester by Queen Elizabeth I and bequeathed to subsequent generations of Earls and Marquises of Donegall.

Merville House may have been built by the fifth Earl who in 1791 became the first Marquis of Donegall. When it was advertised for sale, however, in 1799 its owner at the time was



recorded as John Brown. It was regarded as one of the most prestigious "Gentleman's Seats" in Ulster as was its neighbour Longwood House which originally stood on the site now occupied by the Abbey Shopping Centre complex. Longwood House was at one time the residence of Nicholas Grimshaw, a Lancastrian who established what is reputed to be the first cotton mill in Ireland at Whitehouse in 1784. In order to provide water power to drive the mill machinery, Grimshaw cut a distributor from the Glas-na-Bradán River.

At that time the total population of Belfast was only 12,000 engaged mainly in agriculture and the cottage industries. Grimshaw's mill eventually employed 1,000 people and is now generally accepted as being the cradle of the Industrial Revolution in Ireland.

The Merville Estate having had a number of owners was acquired by Edward Coey in 1849 for the princely sum of £4,500. Coey's initial offer of £3,500 had been accepted by the vendor Major Rowan but he was gazumped by the vendors agent.

Edward Coey went on to become the only Liberal Mayor of Belfast in 1861 and was knighted at a



flower show in Botanic Gardens in the same year. His family Coat of Arms are preserved in the stained glass window at the head of the stairs in Merville House. After his death in 1887 his family retained the estate until it was bought by the Robinsons (the Bacon Curers of Whitehouse) around the 1920s. In 1941 the British Army acquired the estate for 'movement control' during the war.

Merville derives its name from the French "Mer" (sea) and "Ville" (house) to translate as "house by the sea". It was an appropriate name which may well have attracted Thomas Arlow McGrath to consider the Merville Estate as his first post war Garden Village.



Sir Edward Coey,
Mayor of Belfast in 1861
Reproduced by kind
permission of
Belfast City Council

MERVILLE GARDEN VILLAGE

As its name implies Merville Garden Village is built on English garden village lines. It also draws much of its inspiration from the Garden City movement founded by Ebenezer Howard at the beginning of the century.

In his book "Garden Cities of Tomorrow" published in 1898, Ebenezer Howard developed his idea of building new towns in the countryside. The idea was seen as a solution to the problems of overcrowding, poor housing, inadequate

sanitation and poor health which were typical of the large industrial cities of the nineteenth century. Howard believed that new towns in the countryside, built with the full range of social, community and employment facilities, would combine the best aspects of town and country. Garden villages are based on a similar philosophy. They represent an attempt to provide high quality social housing in an attractive setting and with complementary social and community facilities.

Merville Garden Village was built in the late 1940s by Ulster Garden Villages Ltd, a non-profit



making housing association. The founder of the association was Thomas Arlow McGrath, a local builder from Lurgan, who was inspired by some of the housing developments he had seen in Northern France during the Second World War. On returning from the war his aim was to build high quality housing for rent in attractive environments and served by local shops and community facilities. Such developments, he felt, would provide relief from the amorphous sprawl of Belfast and offer an alternative to the temporary, pre-fabricated developments which were being built at the time.

Plans for the estate were prepared by E Prentice Mawson, FRIBA, one of the foremost English architects of the day. The completed estate consisted of 14 lock-up shops, 256 flats, 28 cottage flats, 52 semi-detached houses, 94 terrace houses, the original mansion house and gate lodge and 3 small terrace houses erected by the original owner. The gate lodge and 3 terrace houses have since been demolished.





Ulster Garden Villages built other garden villages at the time including Abbot's Cross, Fernagh, Princes Park, Kings Park, Rush Park, Queens Park, Muckamore and Whitehead. Although built along similar lines to Merville, none of these estates display the same quality of environment, layout or design.

In 1951 Ulster Garden Villages went into liquidation and Sir Cecil McKee was appointed as receiver. In 1984 1140 houses in the garden villages, including 146 in Merville, were offered for sale to sitting tenants at discount prices. The 256 flats and 28 cottage flats did not form part of the sale and remain in the ownership of Ulster Garden Villages. The sale generated sufficient capital to pay the mortgagees, Liverpool Victoria Friendly Society and Northern Bank and placed the company on a sound financial footing once again.



P RESENT DAY

Merville Garden Village has a quality which sets it apart from other suburban estates. In keeping with the principles of the Garden City and Garden Village movements it combines architecture and the natural setting in a way that affords its residents a spacious environment, rich in contrasting form and colour, yet retaining a suburban intimacy.

The estate is bounded by the Shore Road to the south-east, the Abbey Shopping Centre to the south-west and open land to the north-west. Along each of these sides a wall, fence or hedge provides a clear boundary definition. Only on the north-east side where the open space within the estate merges into the Glas-na-Bradán river valley is there a lack of clear definition.





One of the most interesting features in the layout of Merville is the retention of the original field lane which runs down the middle of the village and which adds greatly to the rural atmosphere. The mature trees and hedgerows flanking the lane provide a natural canopy which unites the lines of houses and flats on each side. At regular intervals along this central spine are intimate culs-de-sac of white walled houses with their dark tiled roofs, black porches and window shutters. Iridescent green lawns and rows of regularly spaced cherry trees complete the rich pattern.



The success of Merville owes much to the vision of both the developer and architect involved. The architect, E Prentice Mawson, demonstrates through his design a strong modernist influence with clean lines and repeating forms. Merville, however, also displays many exquisite touches which give the estate a unique charm and which are undoubtedly a product of the developer's passion for a rural French vernacular. The imitation window shutters and decorative porch canopies are, in all probability, a result of this influence.



The blending of styles is perhaps best demonstrated in the rectangular austerity of the three storey apartment blocks where monotonous rows of regularly spaced windows are suddenly punctuated by a highly detailed and typically French entrance. Above the imposing arched

portal, tall windows are perched on the slender curved base behind a delicate tracery of ballooned railings which frame the balcony.

Again, in contrast, the balconies to the rear of the apartment blocks are quite different, almost brutal in appearance. They were designed to have a practical application enabling residents to dispose of refuse by means of a vertical chute connected to the collection bin at ground level.





Throughout the village the siting of the apartment blocks has been a carefully considered part of the whole environment. On the steeper slopes close to Belfast Lough huge redwood trees and the sloping site reduce the apparent scale of the blocks, granting them a more friendly domestic quality. To fully exploit the view of the lough the blocks are positioned at a variety of angles. This also contributes to the informal aspect of the village, permitting sequential views that a more traditional layout would hide.

At the foot of the slope, next to the Shore Road, a long red brick terrace of shops with apartments above, flags the entrance to the village. Here the environmental quality is not to the standard found elsewhere in the estate.





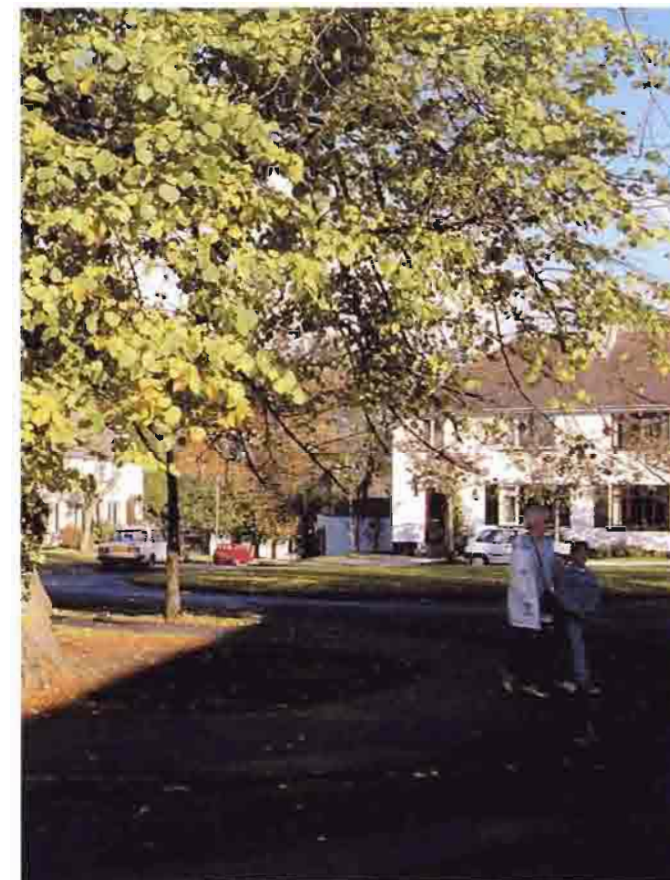
hopper heads on the apartment blocks add an air of authenticity rarely found elsewhere.

Perhaps the true character of Merville emerges in the way that the formal ranks of the cherry trees contrast with the tall trees and rustic charm of the central laneway. Side by side they parody the mix of houses with apartment blocks and emphasise the blend of rural and suburban influences which combine to create such a fascinating, sometimes curious but always friendly environment.

The main attraction of Merville is undoubtedly its unity of character arising from the formality of the layout and the consistency of architectural detailing. Some of the original details have been destroyed especially where window frames have been changed and the glazing pattern has been altered. Other unwelcome alterations include the introduction of rooflights, the painting of houses in colours other than white and in a few instances, the disruption of the open plan layout through the erection of front garden hedges or fences. These

alterations, however, are few in number and because of the powerful stylistic impact of the wider design features, they do not significantly alter the overall character of the estate.

In addition there are many smaller details which can easily be overlooked. Many of the houses, for instance, still retain the delightful metal sprigs which finish the slope of the ridge tiles. Other details such as the use of leaded windows to denote the cottage flats or the downspouts





William

DEVELOPMENT AND DESIGN GUIDELINES

1. NEW DEVELOPMENT

Merville Garden Village represents the best of its type of development in the Province as well as being a very successful housing environment in its own right. Almost entirely original and intact the buildings are an excellent example of early 1950s architecture.

In most Conservation Areas some new development is envisaged as part of the usual pattern of a changing environment. However the design of the Garden Village relates the architecture and landscape in such a composite way that it is extremely unlikely that new development could be accommodated within the setting without jeopardising its overall integrity.

At present there are very few alterations or extensions to the original buildings and no additional garages have been built. The limited size of the side and rear gardens has been a factor in restricting development, as have some conditions of leasehold.



Under the terms of the Planning (General Development) Order (NI) 1993 certain types of development including minor alterations to dwellings, erection of gates and fences and painting of property do not require specific planning permission. However, the Department has power under Article 4 of that Order, to direct that in any particular area, these types of developments require the grant of planning permission. The Department will give consideration to the application of such a direction after consultation with residents.





2. LANDSCAPE FEATURES

The sloping site with its central laneway of trees and hedgerows alongside the grassed areas and formal lines of cherry trees are the essential components that form the landscape setting.

Maintenance of these features is essential if the quality of the environment is to be retained. Conditions of leasehold have required residents to contribute to the costs of grass cutting and tree pruning which has proved to be a very successful management of the environment to date.

However the hedgerows in the tree-lined central laneway are in danger of becoming overrun with ivy and will require careful maintenance if that habitat is to continue to flourish.

In order to secure the long term future of the landscape features the Department will undertake a study of the area with recommendations for any remedial or preventative treatments which may be required, including if appropriate the application of Tree Preservation Orders.



3. ROOF TYPES

All the three storey apartment blocks are flat roofed. The houses have conventionally pitched roofs which are finished in slate, or clay tiles.

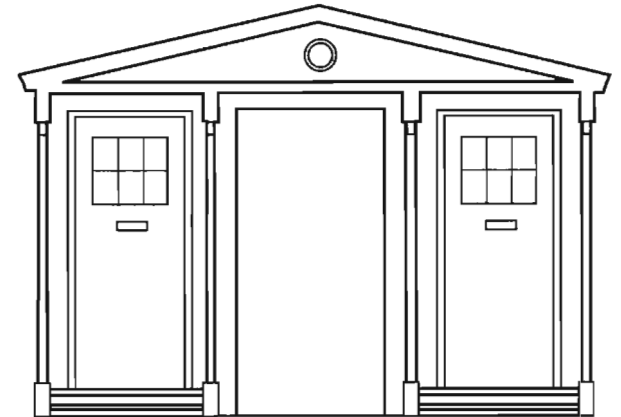
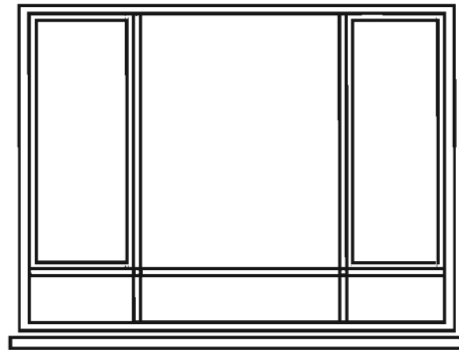
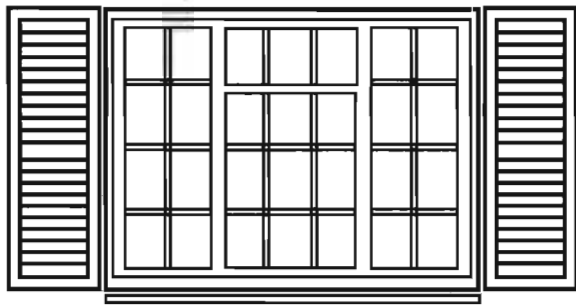
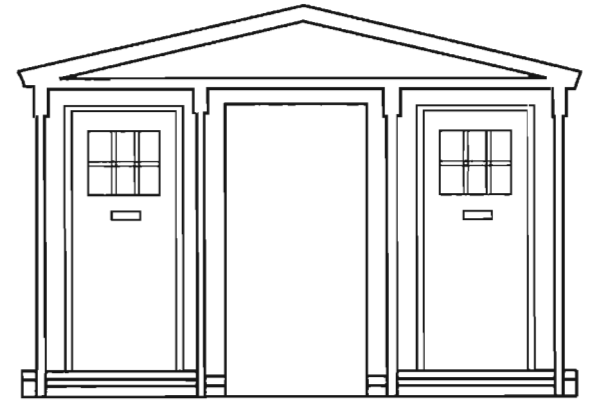
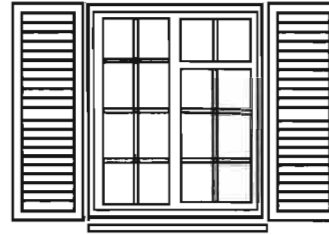
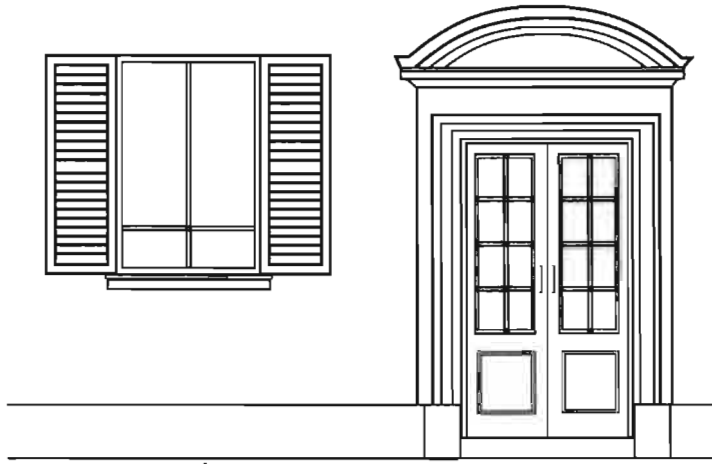
When repairs are carried out it is important that matching materials are used. Some of the houses have decorative scollaped tiles on the sloping ridges which should be retained. Similarly the iron

sprigs which project from the ends of the ridges at eaves height provide an interesting visual detail.

Replacement gutters or down spouts should be made of similar material to the original and match the profile and type of fixings. In some cases alternative materials such as aluminium may be considered if they match the design of the original and are painted.

Dormer windows and rooflights break the distinctive visual pattern of the roofs and will be discouraged on the front of properties, although consideration may be given to the fitting of rooflights to the rear of properties.

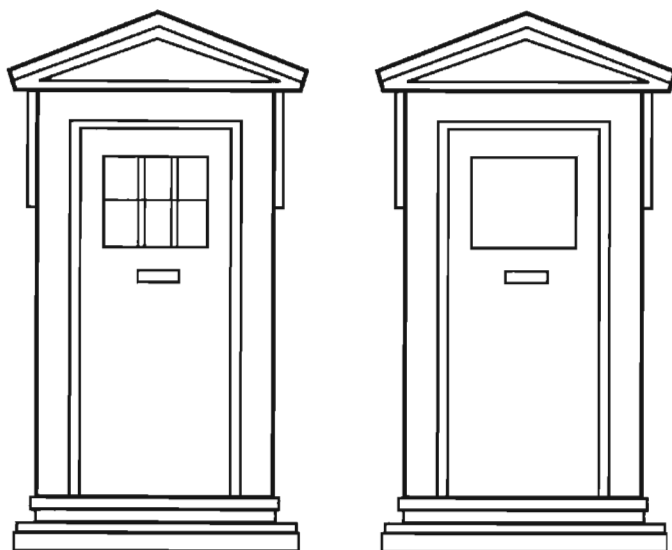
Original Door and Window patterns





4. WINDOWS AND DOORS

Within the original plans for the Garden Village a variety of different window and door types of a similar pattern were specified. More recently doors and windows which do not complement this general style have been fitted. The gradual loss of authentic details does have a detrimental effect on the visual quality of the whole area and therefore only doors and windows which conform to the range of types shown should be considered as appropriate replacements.



5. FRONT BOUNDARIES

An important characteristic of Merville is its open plan layout which contributes to the overall quality of the environment. The Department would seek to preserve this quality and would strongly discourage the erection of front boundary walls, fences or hedges.





7. EXTERNAL WALL FINISHES

An important feature of the estate is that the external walls of properties are painted white, while details such as the porch canopies and false shutter panels are painted black.

A small number of properties have been painted in different colours and if this were to continue the cumulative effect would detract from the overall appearance of the estate. The repeating value of the detailed elements would also suffer.

Keeping all buildings painted white with black details exhibits the architectural quality of the village to its best advantage.

6. DETAILS

Much of the village's charm is derived from the unusual use of details on both the houses and apartment blocks, each of which have distinctive entrance details. The triangular porch canopies and false shutter panels form a decorative repeating pattern which extends throughout the two storey houses. Retention of these and the distinctive porticoes to the apartment blocks is essential to the preservation of the area's character.





ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Department wishes to record its gratitude to those who helped in the production of this booklet and those who gave permission for the reproduction of illustrative material.

Professor John Hendry, B Arc MCD PhD
MRTPI QUB,
Department of Environmental Planning

Mr Bob Armstrong, local historian and resident

Belfast City Council

Merville Garden Village,
Residents Association

Canon EJH Shephard B.A., B.D.

W.B. McKee & Sons, Estate Agents



Price £2.00