

Semington Neighbourhood Planning

Introduction to Semington



Semington

*“Under elms near Semington the threshing-machine boomed, its unchanging note mingled with a hiss at the addition of each sheaf. Otherwise the earth was the rooks’, heaven was the larks’, and I rode easily on along the good level road somewhere in between the two”.*¹

Semington is a *large village*² within the Melksham Community Area and lies between Melksham and Trowbridge in the heart of West Wiltshire. The parish comprises Semington village and the settlements of Little Marsh and Littleton with other houses and farms dotted across the area. The village High Street was previously the route of the A350 but is now a no-through road except for cyclists, buses and emergency vehicles. The village is surrounded by low intensity agricultural land, mainly on flood plains and mostly set to open pasture. The Kennet and Avon Canal, and Semington Brook are important features of the village and there are many footpaths, bridleways and byways in and around the parish. The village has many active clubs and societies, businesses and farms as well as a busy village hall, active church, popular school and welcoming pub. Semington Parish Council meets monthly and aims to support the life of the community and encourage the ongoing evolution of the character of the village, in line with its published Framework.³

A Brief History of Semington

Semington is an old settlement and people have lived here since at least the 12th century. Earlier habitation in the area is indicated by the discovery of Romano-British pottery fragments near Whaddon and the evidence of Bronze Age settlements in fields adjacent to St George’s Road discovered by a 2021 archaeological survey. The early history of Semington is closely bound up with the ancient manor (and nearby modern parish) of Steeple Ashton and was once part of the Whorwellsdown Hundred. The land belonged to Romsey Abbey prior to the Dissolution when it was acquired by Sir Thomas Seymour who forfeited it to the Crown in 1549 when he was executed for treason. In 1894, Semington and Littleton, together with nearby Whaddon were brought together as a new civil parish, with Whaddon subsequently being transferred to Hilperton parish.

The parish sits in the valley of Semington Brook, which rises on Salisbury Plain and joins the River Avon at Whaddon. The Brook has been the northern boundary of the parish for centuries and formed part of the southern border of the Forests of Chippenham and Melksham that date from 1228. Melksham Forest covered a 33 square mile area stretching from Calne in the north-east to Semington in the south-west, and during the 13th century, King John hunted in the Forest. The settlements around Melksham were then mainly made up of small farm groupings, and Semington village is still surrounded by farmland and some of its farmhouses date from the 1500s. The large open fields in Semington were extensively enclosed by the end of the 16th century and by 1813 only two small open areas remained. The most prominent landowner in Semington after enclosure was the Duke of Somerset when arable farming constituted around 16% of the land. Pasture and meadow primarily for sheep farming, which had been increasing in the area from the late Middle Ages, was the pre-eminent type of farming in Semington itself.

During the Second World War, Semington lay on an important anti-invasion line of defence. An anti-tank trench was dug around the south of the village, starting at Semington Brook to the east and ending at the canal to the west. Concrete bollards and pillboxes were also built and the remains of a few of these are still visible. Evacuees from London arrived to be lodged with local families and go to school. Nearby Melksham camp accommodated both British and American Air Force personnel and aircraft and gliders operated from Keevil airfield. Semington had its own Home Guard unit.

¹ Edward Thomas was commissioned to take a bicycle ride from London to the Quantocks, and to write a book about it. The book: *“In Pursuit of Spring”* was published in April 1914. In Chapter VI, after leaving Trowbridge, Thomas passes the Lion and Fiddle at Hilperton and then wrote the passage quoted.

² In the Wiltshire Council Core Strategy (p. 43) Large Villages are defined as settlements with a limited range of employment, services and facilities. The Holt Neighbourhood Plan suggests that, typically, a large village will have a combination of a population of 1000 plus, with local employment, a shop, a PO, a primary school, church(es), a village hall, pub(s), a mobile library, reasonable transport links, some leisure and recreational facilities, and developable land. Many, but by no means all, of these are features of Semington which does not feel like a *large* village to those who live there.

³ semington.org.uk/parish-council/framework-themes .

A prominent parish feature is the Kennet and Avon Canal. This was begun in 1794 in order to provide a navigable link between Newbury and Bath. The section from Foxhangers (below Devizes) to Bath, including the construction of a wharf at Semington, was completed by 1804 and the canal was opened throughout its length in 1810. Its main traffic was coal. The Wilts and Berks Canal, completed in 1810, began at a junction with the Kennet and Avon at Semington and was a route to Abingdon via Melksham and Swindon. When the Wilts, Somerset and Weymouth Railway opened in 1848, traffic on the canals began to terminally decline. Although the station on the Devizes to Trowbridge branch line was called Semington Halt, the line of the railway has always been north of the parish. The route was lost in the 1960s Beeching cuts.

In 2002, a book called *Semington Past and Present* was produced by the Semington History Project Group, and edited by Gabrielle and Doug Firmager. Copies are available from the Post Office in the Village Hall. An extended history of the parish can be found on the Wiltshire Community History pages of the Wiltshire Council website.⁴

The Parish today

Around one thousand people live, work and go to school in the Parish of Semington. Semington is linked by road and rights of way to the nearby towns of Bradford on Avon to the west, Devizes to the east, Melksham to the north, and Trowbridge to the southwest. These towns are important to Semington as centres of employment, commerce, transport, secondary schooling, further education, health care and leisure. Although well connected to these towns, the village is separate, and both geographically and culturally distinct from them all.

The character of Semington is actively rural. In and around the parish, there are five working farms and several other agricultural small holdings, with much of the land being used for non-intensive pasture. The village, which lies to the south of the Kennet and Avon canal, was once dominated by the A350 running through its heart, but the opening of a bypass in 2004 provided a welcome respite, and since then the village has been actively rebuilding its rural character. The High Street is increasingly the heart and hub of the village; the place where people gather at the village hall, the pub or around the Christmas tree. The architecture of the High Street, with its attractive blend of old farmworkers' cottages, grander houses and the 18th century pub, is a key element of the rural character of the village. There are 33 listed buildings in the parish.

Semington is well connected, with the A361 and A350 providing road and rural bus network links to neighbouring towns and further afield. Like many Wiltshire villages, it has multiple rural rights of way. The byway to the west and the old road to the north provide cycle, equestrian and pedestrian access to Trowbridge (via Hilperton) and Melksham respectively. The canal and its towpath also offer pedestrian and cycle access to Trowbridge, Devizes and beyond, as well as to multiple footpaths and minor roads for circular walks and cycle rides.

The community of Semington is active, with over 20 clubs and other groups covering a wide range of interests. There are also multiple small businesses, from farms to garages and narrow boat servicing, to the small businesses at the Turnpike. A wide range of community institutions including the primary school, the Independent Living Centre, the church, our sports facilities, the village hall and the Somerset Arms and the crematorium actively support the community and bring in visitors.

The parish is fortunate to have several buildings and structures of significant historical interest, including the 14th century St George's church⁵, the Victorian Poor Law workhouse,⁶ the Brunel aqueduct on the canal, multiple pill boxes and other WW2 relics, Georgian and earlier stone houses, many of which are located in the village. There are others in the surrounding countryside including the 18th century Littleton Mill which was burnt down in 1802 during a protest against the introduction of gig and shearing frames. The parish has a number of notable houses built in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. The village school began in 1859 but now has modern buildings. The village hall, built in 1933 and recently refurbished, is at the heart of the village, both geographically and socially.

The relatively light agricultural use of the farmland around Semington, with much of it set to grazing and grass cropping, together with the dew ponds and the water courses of the canal and brook, provide attractive habitats for wild flora and fauna. Deer, foxes, badgers, hares and rabbits are complemented by herons, kingfishers, kites, kestrels, sparrow hawk, ravens and buzzards, great crested newts, and a number of bat and owl species. Water voles and even otters have been seen in the brook, as well as less welcome mink. The canal is well stocked and draws people from afar to fish, while Semington Brook hosts a wide range of smaller fish and the occasional

⁴ history.wiltshire.gov.uk/community/getcom2.php?id=198

⁵ historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1262412

⁶ workhouses.org.uk/Melksham

trout. Wildflowers are found throughout the area and ancient hedgerows are evidenced by the variety of species they host.

There are a number of significant landscape perspectives within the parish. The most prominent lie along the Kennet and Avon canal in each direction including not only the waterway itself but also the many bridges, buildings and other canal infrastructure. In addition, there is the brook as it meanders its way through the parish from Littleton towards the Avon. There are extensive and unencumbered views to the east from the southern end of the High Street across the parish with the iconic Roundway Down in the background, and to the west of the village where the fields run out towards Hilperton giving open views alongside the canal. The images on the parish council website show all these features.⁷

Housing Development in the Village

Up to the end of the Second World War, most housing in the village was concentrated along the High Street from its junction with Pound Lane up to the Kennet and Avon canal, and along Church Street. Other significant properties were near the old turnpike where the A361 and the old A350 now cross, and along St George's Road at the workhouse complex. Between 1801 and 1841 the population of the parish increased from 265 to 570 people, although numbers were swelled by the people who moved to the Melksham Union workhouse which had been opened in 1839. The population of the parish was in the range 400 to 500 from the 1841 census to that of 1931. Numbers then gradually increased to 930 in 2011, and the 2021 national census showed 934 people lived in the Parish

Council housing was added along Pound Lane after the war, with the period from the 1960s to the millennium seeing further housing development along there and along St George's Road and Church Street. Recent times have seen further building along St George's Road and at the Turnpike. Most of these developments have been small scale and have included affordable housing. They have also had the support of the parish council and villagers in response to evidence of housing need, particularly through the 2014 rural housing needs survey carried out by Wiltshire Council.⁸ There have also been attempts by property developers to build relatively large numbers of houses outside the village settlement boundary.⁹ That these were unsuccessful is a tribute to the determination of villagers to retain influence over how, and at what pace, their village develops. As we plan for the future there is a broadly-shared view that our priority ought to be to maintain Semington's identity and rural feel by protecting its green spaces, wildlife and environment for the physical and mental well-being of those who live and work here.

The Planning Context for Semington

This Plan has been prepared with regard to the National Planning Policy Framework 2021 as well as guidance set out in the National Planning Practice Guidance 2019.¹⁰

As well as having regard to national policies and guidance, the Neighbourhood Plan must be in general conformity with policies in the Wiltshire Core Strategy/Local Plan. The Wiltshire Core Strategy was adopted in January 2015. The Core Strategy was prepared containing policies and principles on how the county will develop through to 2026. The situation is changing, however, because Wiltshire Council is currently reviewing the Core Strategy and it will then become the Wiltshire Local Plan. A review is required because the Government encourages local planning authorities to revisit their Local Plans every five years. Wiltshire Council formally consulted on the draft new Local Plan in 2021, and a new Local Plan is expected to be in place in 2025.

The draft plan published in 2021 gives Semington a new build allocation of 35 dwellings in the period 2016 to 2038. At the time of writing, 25 houses have been built, 18 are being completed, and there is full planning permission for a further 26.

⁷ semington.org.uk

⁸ A 2021 housing needs survey by Wiltshire Council is being discussed by the parish council

⁹ For example, in 2016, proposals came forward to construct over 150 new dwellings which would have increased the housing stock by over 35%.

¹⁰ planningguidance.communities.gov.uk