

Underriver

Village Design Statement *February 2004*



A Vision of Underriver

On entering the village of Underriver from any direction the canopy of trees and narrow lanes heralds a peaceful and tranquil haven. Positioned astride and below the Greensand Ridge, the area has unparalleled views of the Kent countryside. The houses in the valley look out on the imposing wooded hillside, whilst those on the ridge have spectacular views of the patchwork fields and historic houses of the village and the valley beyond. For residents and visitors Underriver is a perfect rural setting, whatever the season or weather. Surrounded by busy towns and close to the main arterial routes of the South East, the beauty and serenity of Underriver, with its winding lanes, wooded paths, and open countryside should be treasured.

The aim of the recommendations in this Village Design Statement is to perpetuate this vision.

UNDERRIVER VILLAGE DESIGN STATEMENT

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The Village Design Statement Subcommittee of the Underriver Village Association, which prepared this document, consisted of:

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assisted by many other people in Underriver, who helped with the drafting on certain specialist subjects and the taking of photographs.

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The Purpose of this Village Design Statement

Purpose

1. Village Design Statements are intended to provide guidance for development proposals and to influence the application of the planning system. The Statement provides a context for new development based on local character and sense of place. It is not about whether development should take place: that is a job for the Sevenoaks District Local Plan. 'Development' means the construction, alteration, extension or replacement of buildings or other structures, or changes of use of land or buildings that either require planning permission or else have a significant impact upon the Village community or the owners of adjoining properties.
2. This Village Design Statement describes Underriver as it is in 2004. It emphasises the qualities valued by all those who live or work there. Its aim is to protect Underriver's exceptional qualities by ensuring that any future development is based on a considered understanding of the Village's past and present and will contribute to the local community. It is addressed to statutory bodies, public authorities, planners, developers, designers, architects, builders, engineers, local community groups, householders, landowners, farmers and other businesses.

Process

3. A subcommittee of the Underriver Village Association, backed by the majority of Underriver residents, has written it, with the full support of Seal Parish Council and of Sevenoaks District Council. It is the result of public consultation involving the whole Parish. In particular:
 - a. There were three well-attended public meetings.
 - b. All residents and some other locals had the opportunity to comment on the text.
 - c. There was wide-ranging individual consultation.
 - d. Sevenoaks District Council's planning staff was fully consulted.
4. Sevenoaks District Council has adopted this Statement as Supplementary Planning Guidance. It will take its recommendations into account when assessing future planning applications. This Statement will thus support the Sevenoaks District Local Plan as it affects Underriver; it will assist the work of Seal Parish Council and of the Underriver Village Association; and it will ensure that local knowledge, opinions and ideas are taken into account when development proposals are made. It will be updated as necessary in line with Reviews of the Local Plan.
5. The Underriver Village Association is grateful to the following organisations who have helped by making financial contributions, giving valuable advice or other material assistance:
 - a. Sevenoaks District Council;
 - b. Seal Parish Council;
 - c. Kent Rural Community Council.

The Village of Underriver

6. The Village of Underriver (referred to as a 'Settlement' for planning purposes) comprises some 1500 acres (600 hectares) of farmland, woodland, orchards and gardens. It is situated in the southerly part of the Parish of Seal in the District of Sevenoaks, Kent. It covers part of the Greensand Ridge to the south of Knole Park, including the southern edge of Fawke Common, One Tree Hill and Bitchet Common. The border then runs south, encompassing Underriver House and on to the edge of Great Hollenden Farm. From there it runs northwest to St Julians. In this Design Statement the words 'Underriver' and 'the Village' mean the whole area and the whole community within the Underriver electoral boundary.
7. The whole Village is in the Green Belt and nearly all is in the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The landscape of the Kent Downs is special and is of outstanding quality and value. It should be conserved and enhanced; and the long range views into and out of the village should be maintained. There are extensive Sites of Special Scientific and Nature Conservation Interest, as well as National Trust and common land.
8. Some 350-400 residents, including some 90 children, live in approximately 130 dwellings. These include the apartments in St Julians Club. Local employment is provided by businesses such as St Julians, the White Rock Inn, the local farms and homeworkers with internet connections.



Hop-picking in Underriver pre-1914



The Underriver Forge pre-1914



Millennium party, June 2000, & below Cricket in Underriver



History

9. The hamlet of Underriver is named in an ancient will as “sub le ryver” (ie “under the hill”). Although there is evidence of Saxon field names, the earliest settlements were probably Romschedde Manor and Shoads. Romschedde Manor was extant in the early 13th Century and the name survives in today’s Romshed Farm. At the end of the 13th Century, yeomen farmers established several substantial farmsteads, probably attracted by the abundance of spring water. Evidence of the original dwellings is still visible in the houses today. Five hundred years of undisturbed agricultural activity followed with crops, orchards and hopgardens. The hamlet was designated “The Golden Valley” by the 19th Century visionary painter Samuel Palmer.
10. At the beginning of the 18th Century the ancient manor of Shoads was replaced by Underriver House, probably built by Richard Goodhugh, High Sheriff of Kent. The Goodhughs, however, did not survive the century; and the estate was acquired by Henry Woodgate of Riverhill, whose heirs sold it to John Davison, the Judge Advocate General in 1862. The other major estate, St Julians, belonged to the Herries family; J.C.Herries, a former Chancellor of the Exchequer, had built the house in the 1830s. These two estates included most of the land in Underriver.
11. John Davison commissioned the building of St Margaret’s Church, which was finished in 1865 and consecrated in 1875, when a Church Elementary School was also established. In 1856 a post office receiving house was opened in a cottage in the Village; and, after several moves and two temporary closures, it was finally closed in September 1944. The White Rock Inn dates in part from 1820: the central section has been an Inn from at least the 1850s. The mid-19th Century extension of the railway to Sevenoaks (and soon afterwards to Tonbridge) gave greater accessibility to this hitherto remote hamlet. In the 1890s Lord Derby purchased most of the Davison estate.
12. In 1909 the Derby holdings were sold. This broke down the estate into individual freeholds; and some were purchased by people who wished to live in the country but to work in London. Over the last century the agricultural emphasis of the hamlet dwindled. Fewer people were employed on the land and there was a gradual increase in the number of residents who worked outside Underriver, either in local towns or beyond in London.
13. After World War II the pace of change accelerated. House prices rose sharply and properties changed hands frequently. In the mid 1970s the Village School was closed, as its roll was then considered too small to be viable. In 1980 the ecclesiastical Parish was joined with Seal St Lawrence.

Community

14. Underriver’s beauty, location and strong community life make it an attractive place in which to live. About a quarter of its residents (including housewives) work in the Village; about a third are retired; and the remainder work in London or elsewhere. Others come into the Village to work. Many who live outside but close to the Village strongly support its activities.
15. Underriver has no shops, no post office, no State School and a poor bus service. It is unlikely that a shop or a post office would be viable. Milk, newspapers and household shopping can be delivered and there is a regular postal service. Mains drainage is not available and mains gas is available in part of the Village only.
16. Community life is based around the Village Hall (opened in 1932), the Church, the White Rock Inn, the cricket ground and the recreation area. The Village Hall is a lively centre, in regular use by vigorous village societies including the Village Association, the Women’s Institute and the Horticultural Society. There are playgroups in the Village Hall and at St Julians. The Cricket Club has fixtures throughout the summer and horse riding is a popular leisure activity. The vibrancy of the Village was shown by its great response to its Millennium weekend in June 2000.



Examples of local architectural style

Buildings

17. Although Underriver has a wide range of interesting buildings the overall image is dominated by rural and woodland scenery. Within the village area of about 1500 acres (600 hectares) there are about 130 dwellings (some with associated farm buildings), the St Julians estate, a Church, an Inn, a Village Hall and a cricket pavilion.
18. The buildings are quite evenly spread along a network of narrow, winding roads. Many are fully screened by trees and hedges and very few are conspicuous. The more visible ones are the houses in the centre of the Village and some of the houses on the Greensand Ridge. Other houses on the ridge fit so well into the landscape that it is hard to see them from the valley.
19. The Village centre is small, comprising about twenty houses (including four managed by West Kent Housing Association), the Church, the Inn and the Village Hall. The houses in the village centre and the surrounding area were built over a long time-span ranging from the Middle Ages to more recent times and were occupied by farmers and craftsmen. They form an unusual settlement pattern of substantial buildings separated by short distances. Many of the houses, barns and walls in the area feature local ragstone, oak frames with wattle and daub, plaster or brick, red clay hanging tiles and roof tiles. There are a small number of fine buildings from the Georgian and Victorian periods. Oast and barn conversions add to the varied styles of dwellings in the village.
20. Except for Underriver House and St Julians, most houses were originally built of moderate size with two storeys, some with attics. Over the years many have been extended, reducing the number of small houses in the Village. There are, however, several pre- and post-war former council houses (now in private ownership) in the centre of the Village, together with modern timber-framed dwellings and other smaller houses within the Underriver boundary. Most buildings were designed in the style of the period in which they were built, although some of the more recent have incorporated styles from earlier periods. The use of Kentish materials and other features have allowed many of the more modern houses to blend satisfactorily with the earlier buildings.
21. There is a relatively high percentage of historic buildings in the area, including many which are listed. Examples are:
 - a. High House is a medieval hall house, which dates back to the 15th Century. It stands at right angles to the road and still contains two of the original bays. It has a sweeping style roof and tile hanging to the whole of the first floor.
 - b. Black Charles is a medieval timber-framed four-bay hall house, with a high-pitched roof on the front and a cat slide on the reverse slope. In the 18th century brick and stonework on the ground floor were substituted for the medieval walling, with tile hanging above.
 - c. Catts Cottage is late medieval and dates from the late 15th Century. It has two bays with gable windows and a two-storey connecting section with a tall 17th Century chimneystack. It features Tudor timber and whitewashed plaster and local stone with hanging tiles.
 - d. Falcon Cottage on Fawke Common dates back to the 16th Century. It is a compact cottage with ornate tile-hanging to the first floor. A large Edwardian extension has been added in a well-matched style.
 - e. Underriver House is the largest private house in the Village. It is a three-storey Queen Anne house with 19th Century additions and a modern wing. Built of local stone in continuous courses with flint infilling, it has sash windows and a hip tiled roof with dormers.
 - f. The fine Church was built in the 19th Century in a 13th Century Gothic style.
 - g. St. Julians was built in the early 19th Century as a grand home with fine views over the Weald. It is constructed of yellow brick, with a steeply sloping slate roof behind three gables. It has white bargeboards and stone window-bays with abundant glazing. From 1951 onwards, a country club and flats were created by adding extensions in the style that was then fashionable.
 - h. Green Lane Cottage, originally the home of a pig farmer, was built in the early 18th Century. It has a symmetrical elevation, with three windows on each floor and tile-hanging on the first floor.

22. The Sevenoaks District Local Plan together with National and County Plans provides the statutory planning policy framework for Underriver. It contains a general presumption against the construction of new buildings in the Green Belt, the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Only a few exceptions are permitted. This Statement's vision for Underriver depends upon the strict enforcement of this planning policy and the following design guidelines.
23. Because of Green Belt policies, new dwellings would be unlikely to be permitted in Underriver unless they were:
 - a. House replacements constructed within the curtilage of the original dwellings, where one dwelling replaced one dwelling and where the existing house was demolished before the replacement was built;
 - b. Residential conversions of redundant agricultural buildings of sound and substantial construction – ie excluding demountable buildings.
 - c. New agricultural dwellings where there was an essential long-term business need for an agricultural worker to live on site; or
 - d. Dwellings constructed under an approved affordable housing scheme that met the strict criteria in the Sevenoaks District Local Plan. These criteria include specific local housing need, proximity to local services and facilities, accessibility by public transport, acceptability of the site in landscape, environmental and highway terms and appropriate legal arrangements.
24. Planning permission is required to use caravans or mobile homes for residential or business purposes. These permissions are reviewed regularly to confirm that the permitted need continues. It is important to ensure that established planning rights are not acquired by default.
25. The following design guidelines are recommended where planning permission is needed and encouraged where such permission is not required.

R1. Particular account should be taken of the visual impact of any new developments upon the appearance of the Village. New developments should be designed to intrude as little as possible upon the openness of the countryside by taking advantage of the lie of the land and natural screening. The appearance of a low-density settlement should be maintained. Large obtrusive buildings amidst fields should be avoided.

R2. New developments should be designed so as not to damage distant views from and to the Greensand Ridge, from public roads and rights of way and from neighbouring properties. Large walls and prominent roofs on the skyline and large windows reflecting the light should be avoided wherever possible. Solar panels should be sited discreetly. Artificial lighting should be no brighter than required for its purpose: it should be low-angled, discreet and focussed as narrowly as possible.

R3. New developments should be sympathetic with the general character of the Village, which has a wide variety of building styles, but innovative architecture might be considered in appropriate locations. Developers should be encouraged to use traditional local materials and features, such as local ragstone, weatherboarding, oak framing and red clay hanging tiles or roof tiles. They should generally be of single or two storey construction and not higher than neighbouring buildings.

R4. New developments should be appropriately landscaped and screened with native species of trees and hedges. Close-board fencing over one metre in height may need planning permission and should be screened from the road. Where it would be appropriate for planting to complement new development, a suitable planting scheme should be submitted with the planning application. Mature trees and hedges should not be felled without good reason.

R5. Residential conversions of redundant agricultural buildings of historic interest should be designed to conserve as much as practicable of the original character. Appropriate doors and windows should be used.

R6. The materials and styles of house extensions should match or be sympathetic with those of the original buildings but need not necessarily be of the same architectural style.

R7. Wherever possible, non-residential agricultural buildings, domestic stabling and field shelters should be designed to minimise their impact upon the beauty of the countryside – for example by using subdued colours or cladding them with timber.

R8. Wherever possible, non-residential agricultural buildings, domestic stabling and field shelters should be located away from neighbouring properties. This would be especially important if they were likely to be used for activities that could cause a nuisance (for example by noise or smell) or lead to clutter in the countryside. Where practicable, they should be sited in natural hollows, behind existing or new natural screening or close to existing buildings. Road access to new agricultural buildings should have good sightlines.

R9. Caravans and mobile homes used for residential and business purposes should be made of good quality materials and painted in subdued colours. They should be well landscaped where practicable. Those used as agricultural dwellings should be sited where a permanent agricultural dwelling would be sited if such a dwelling was approved in due course.

R10 Measures to conserve resources should be designed into new development where practicable and consistent with the other objectives in this Design Statement. Developers should be encouraged to provide high levels of insulation, discreetly sited solar panels, dual flush toilets and grey water collection systems; and to plan construction site management so as to reduce waste and minimise the use of energy and water.



Some sympathetic conversions and extensions.



The local economy - employment

26. Underriver offers limited employment opportunities, but these help to balance the community and so add to the attractiveness of the Village. A number of Underriver residents have businesses there. Others come to work in the Village in various capacities.
27. Underriver has around 13 small farms of varying sizes and the beauty of its countryside is maintained largely by the farming community. Part time farmers outnumber full time farmers and the type of farming is almost entirely livestock, together with some fruit. One farm is in organic conversion and has a flock of free-range hens. Agricultural contractors are employed when needed. Farmers are experiencing the worst recession since the 1930s: in these difficult times they should have reasonable freedom to develop their agricultural businesses, including appropriate diversification. A number of properties have stabling and pasture; and many employ gardeners, home helps, handymen, etc.
28. The Underriver Under-Fives Nursery, Music Box, the St Julians Day Nursery and the White Rock Inn meet important Village needs and should be supported. The White Rock Inn and restaurant is a popular venue for both residents and visitors. St Julians provides recreational facilities for its club members, thus serving a wider community. It also accommodates a number of mainly hi-tech businesses. The use of private dwellings for business purposes also provides employment.
29. The Sevenoaks Local Plan makes it clear that proposals for the development of new businesses in the Green Belt, or for the expansion of existing businesses, are unlikely to be approved if they require the construction of new buildings on undesignated sites. Otherwise, there is a good case for encouraging business activities, provided that they do not intrude upon the quiet enjoyment of the Village and of the countryside. Any damaging business activities should not be permitted.
30. The following guidelines are recommended where planning permission is needed and encouraged where such permission is not required.

R11. New business developments should be designed so as not to harm the character of the area. They should not add significantly to local traffic. Nor should they cause a nuisance to other properties through excessive noise, dust, vibration, noxious emissions, loss of daylight, visual intrusion, clutter in the countryside, excessively bright artificial lighting or security surveillance equipment. Artificial lighting should be no brighter than required for its purpose: it should be low-angled, discreet and focussed as narrowly as possible.

R12. In principle, businesses that meet these criteria and other statutory planning policies should be supported, especially where they provide valued services to the local community. Businesses that cannot meet them would be undesirable.

R13. Adequate provision should be made for off-road vehicle parking, which should be screened with native species where appropriate.



The White Rock Inn and restaurant in the heart of the village



St. Julians club and business complex on the outskirts of the village



Mixed Farming in Underriver





A 30mph speed limit is essential for Underriver's narrow lanes



Horsriding

A woodland path



Roads and Transport

31. Underriver's winding roads contribute greatly to the character and charm of the Village. They are all in the "C" and "D" categories and most are very narrow. Some have high banks, high hedges or deep ditches. Excessive traffic, travelling too fast, is an increasing danger to local road-users, including walkers, cyclists and horse riders. Passing vehicles drive on to the verges, causing damage and unnatural road widening, which encourages further speeding. The lack of resources prevents adequate road maintenance by the Local Authority; and this adds to the danger. Kent County Council has plans for a pilot study to assess selected rural roads in parts of the County for appropriate speed limits. Meanwhile, national criteria have to be followed.
32. There are buses twice a day between Underriver and Tonbridge on Mondays to Saturdays. There is no direct service to Sevenoaks or to Hildenborough Station for commuters. A better service would benefit non-car-owners.
33. The following recommendations are made to enable Underriver's roads to carry the present volumes of traffic without altering their rural character and to protect its bridleways and footpaths.

R14. The Local Highway Authorities are requested to maintain Underriver's roads and verges to an adequate standard.

R15. Verge erosion caused by excessive rain should not be filled with tarmac, but should be rebuilt with natural sediment that hardens when it dries.

R16. Depending upon the outcome of Kent County Council's pilot study, a maximum speed limit of 30 mph should be considered for all Underriver's roads in due course.

R17. Suburban signing, kerbstones, pavements and street lighting should be avoided.

R18. Road verges in the centre of the Village should be cut regularly. Elsewhere they should be cut regularly to one metre from the roadway where this is essential for road safety.

R19. Footpaths, bridleways and other public rights of way should be kept open and in good repair.

R20. Any proposals to close public rights of way should be rejected. Any proposals for minor diversions to public rights of way should be considered on their merits. Major diversions should be rejected, unless there are strong reasons for approving them.

Landscape, Wildlife and Recreation

34. Underriver is in the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and includes Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), principally One Tree Hill and parts of Bitchet Common and Fawke Common and a Site of Nature Conservation Interest (SNCI) on Rooks Hill. There are also ancient woodlands, including White Rocks, Rooks Hill, and Brimstonewell Wood, which have had continuous woodland cover since the beginning of the seventeenth century. It is important that the Green Belt, AONB, SSSI and Tree Preservation Order policies are enforced rigorously so as to preserve these priceless assets for the future.
35. The northern part of Underriver is mainly woodland, with a few orchards, on greensand. Some of Bitchet Common is being managed to recreate heathland. The valley land is mostly heavy clay used for pasture. Ragstone is present at the base of the ridge, which historically has been quarried for local building purposes. A number of springs feed watercourses that run through the village and eventually feed into Hilden Brook. Several older properties have their own reservoirs.
36. Underriver's open spaces, lanes, bridleways, footpaths and farmland provide good habitat for flora and fauna. They are also much used for walking, cycling, horse riding and other forms of recreation. They are in good order due to volunteer and Parish Council action. The bridleways need drainage and surfacing with natural materials to bring them to a satisfactory standard.

37. A wide variety of birds and other wildlife are commonly seen or heard. The woodlands contain many tree, shrub and undergrowth species. The heavy clay soil and improved grassland means that wild flowers are not special in the area, except at a few sites. The practice of coppicing is vital to the cycle of woodland flora and fauna.
38. The SSSIs, the Commons and other significant parts of the Village are managed with a strong wildlife emphasis. Romshed Farm and St Julians follow the Countryside Stewardship Scheme, which supports wildlife and public access. Absalom's Farm has a significant habitat improvement element. A Village Wildlife Habitat project was started in 1996. New hedges have been planted and old ones are being renovated; woodland is being protected from stock; and wild flower patches are being developed. A beginning is being made on verge management for wild flowers.
39. Some of Underriver's landscape is adversely affected by overhead electricity and telephone wires and is at risk of further visual damage from new telecommunications developments, including masts and satellite dishes.
40. The following recommendations are made to encourage practices designed to protect Underriver's landscape, wildlife and habitat.

R21. Landowners and householders should be encouraged to protect existing wildlife environments and to create new habitats in the form of copses, hedgerows, ditches, ponds, field verges and open spaces of rough grassland. Excessive use of chemicals should be avoided.

R22. Local Tree Preservation Orders, which are enforced by Sevenoaks District Council, should be reviewed regularly to ensure that they are up to date. Landowners and householders should be encouraged to care for their woods and trees and to replace them when they reach the end of their lives. They should be discouraged from removing old farm hedgerows and encouraged to use native species for new planting in appropriate locations.

R23. New telecommunications developments, including masts, satellite dishes and other structures, should be approved only if they can be designed so as to have minimal visual impact and conform to national and local guidelines. A programme to relocate overhead wires underground should be encouraged.

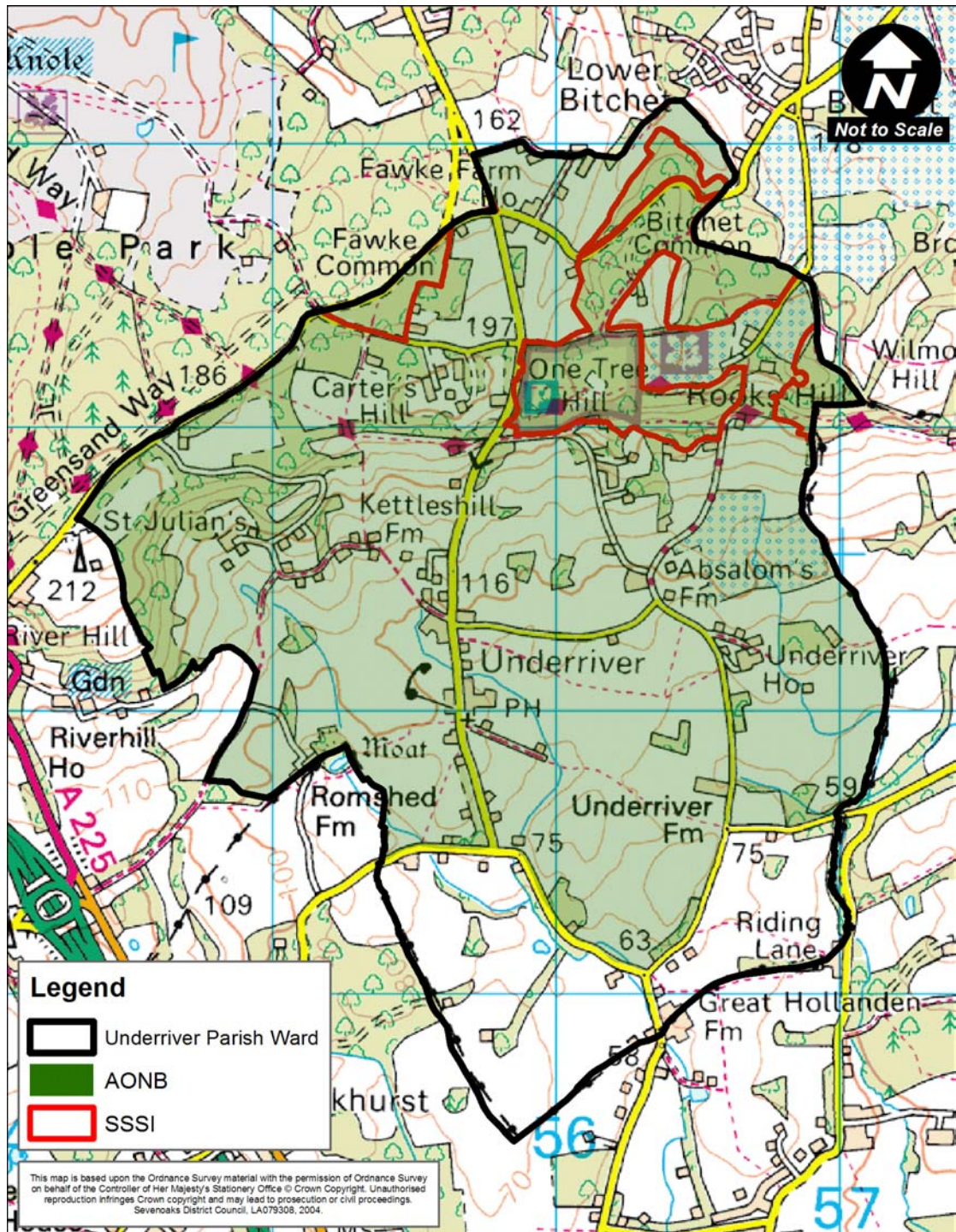


Examples of wildlife found in Underriver

Consultation and consideration for neighbours

41. It is important that the Underriver Village Association and Underriver residents affected by proposed developments should be fully consulted before any planning permissions are given for new developments in the Village.
42. Most residents wish to ensure that the ways in which they use their properties cause no avoidable nuisance or annoyance to their neighbours. It is a courtesy for those considering any building or change of use to consult their neighbours, whether or not the development requires planning permission. Consultation also helps to avoid problems over such matters as the size and location of garden sheds, redundant machinery or other refuse, the height of boundary hedges or the installation and operation of security lighting. Good neighbourliness helps to make Underriver a happy as well as a beautiful place in which to live.

Map showing Underriver's boundaries, the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (shaded green) and the Sites of Special Scientific Interest (outlined in red). *Please note information is shown only within the boundary of Underriver Parish Ward.*



The whole of the village of Underriver is in the Metropolitan Green Belt.



View of Underriver from the Greensand Ridge