

HANDSWORTH WOOD (AREA 6)

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Handsworth Wood is a mainly residential area about 4 miles Northwest of Birmingham city centre. It was named for the ancient woodland which was part of the manor of Handsworth. The area takes the form of an urban peninsula, bounded to the west by open fields, allotments, golf courses and woods of Handsworth, separated from Hamstead to the north by the River Tame and from Perry Barr to the east by a green corridor along the Tame and the railway, forming a hard' and 'impenetrable boundary. The southern boundary is somewhat less distinct as it merges with Handsworth; I have taken it to run east /west along Church Road and Wellington Road. Handsworth Wood Road is the main thoroughfare running north/south, becoming Hamstead Hill as the high ground drops sharply into to the Tame valley.

The district is characterised by housing of relatively high value compared to neighbouring districts. The largest and oldest properties are large C19th homes along Handsworth Wood Rd, Church Rd and some of the connecting roads (pics 1 - 4). Many are now flats or turned over to other uses, including a hotel and places of worship. Inter-war development of 3 and 4 bed detached and semi-detached homes (pics 5,6) forms the bulk of the housing stock and there are several post-war developments of family homes at the edges of the district.

The housing to the east of Handsworth Wood Road (the Cherry Orchard Road area) appears rather less exclusive but is still a high-quality residential area. Homes in College Rd and the streets off it (pic 7) are clearly smaller and more affordable. There are a few purpose-built flats, including what is now student accommodation at Brown's Green (pic 8). Other than housing, there are some shops at College Rd (pic 9) schools and academies, including King Edward VI Academy for Girls (pic 10), a couple of private bowling greens and Handsworth Golf Club on the western periphery.

The area is distinctive from surrounding districts, though perhaps less so where it borders Handsworth where similarities of built form, if not quality, continue for some distance south along Hamstead Road, past St Mary's and Handsworth Park, toward Villa Cross.

Whilst the diversity of building styles fails to produce architectural homogeneity across the whole area, internal homogeneity is achieved within the sub-areas where properties are generally of a similar type. I would argue also that a generally high level of maintenance and care of properties, gardens and streets constitute a common identifying character for the district. Overall, I'd say that the thematic continuities produce a 'well formed, coherent urban landscape' (Lynch, 1960).

The street pattern appears legible, and Handsworth Wood appears to be a straightforward place to navigate, save for some steep hills and a particularly tricky road junction where Friary Road meets Handsworth Wood Road. The district is connected to the surrounding area via a few roads. There are buses but no rail, the old Handsworth Wood Station having closed in the 1930s. These limitations, together with a feeling of exclusivity, suggest to me an 'introverted' district.

My mental image of Handsworth Wood' is of a well-established, functional district to which people aspire to live and, once there, are economically able to invest in the maintenance of their homes and neighbourhoods. I would expect that these views would be sufficiently shared to produce a public image (though I'm mindful of my position as an outside observer - there could well be a diversity of community views influenced by age, ethnicity, income etc). But if sufficient residents and others share this positive 'environmental image' of Handsworth Wood, perhaps this gives many residents an important sense of emotional security, and possibly, by extension, urban happiness?

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