

# Aberlady:

## A Living Space



Place-making essentials for renewal of a picturesque East Lothian village

**Living Streets Scotland** believes this report offers a super discussion opportunity. It sits well with current Scottish Government policy on place-making and the promotion of cycling and walking. Measures to encourage slower speeds and public realm improvements should be supported.

**Aberlady Community Association** recognises the considerable thought and effort that has gone into this report which, amongst other issues, has highlighted the need for more effective traffic management in and around Aberlady. The recommendations in the report for village gateways, more crossing points across the A198, 20mph through all the village roads and safer routes for cyclists and pedestrians are particularly welcomed as short term improvements. In the longer term, in order to protect our coastal village, an Aberlady by-pass should be carefully planned and considered.

**Aberlady in Bloom** endorses this thoughtful, well written and presented report.



**1st Aberlady Brownies** welcome this report. As traffic through the village can be a particular problem Brownie leaders fully support the issues raised and suggestions made. On many occasions (even in normal times) we've had to physically stop the traffic at the west end of the village to escort over 20 Brownies safely across the road. Both the speed and volume of traffic coming through the village is a worry. As some of our Brownies live at

Ballencrieff and Myreton we enthusiastically support the need for safe cycling routes into the village.

**Aberlady Parish Church** embraces this report into the ongoing issues of excessive traffic through the village. Recently the church made significant investment in restoring its beautiful building and its medieval tower for the future. We've provided information leaflets for visitors and tourists both in English and foreign languages to encourage visitors, and to satisfy national grant funders. Any support to make the church more accessible is most welcome.

**Aberlady Conservation and History Society** support this report, which demonstrates a keen understanding of the village, past and present. Public safety, an improved community and visitor environment and local heritage suggest a thoughtful and more considerate response to some serious and longstanding issues.

**Cycleforth** advocates and promotes safe cycling and the provision of cycle facilities in the North Berwick Coastal Ward. We strongly support this report, particularly its call for reduced traffic and slower speeds in Aberlady High Street, but also the need for safe off-road routes connecting Aberlady to neighbouring communities and the Longniddry railway station.



## Introduction

The sub-text on the title page of this paper refers to place-making essentials for renewal of a picturesque East Lothian village. When looking at photographs of the village High Street from one hundred years ago you might observe that it hasn't, on the face of it, changed much at all. The properties on either side of the crescent shaped road look much the same. But you might also observe that the High Street *looks* wider, that it had more shops than we have today - public houses too if Sandy Forrest's *howff* down the Sea Wynd is included - and yet it looks less busy.

It had a character of its own. It was more self-sufficient for the essentials of life and there were jobs a-plenty. And, during the summer months, villagers would let out their houses to holidaying families from Edinburgh, lured by the pull of a slower agricultural pace of life in a community situated on the sweeping, protected bay that takes its name. In 1952, the bay became Britain's first designated local nature reserve – a wildlife sanctuary.

This paper isn't about turning the clock back. Rather it helps to identify where we've gone wrong and how with a little imagination and vision we can help recreate the essence of the village when it was so popular, a place to grow and much more open to tourists. Addressing oppressive vehicle traffic levels is central to change but it's not the only area that requires attention.

Most of the matters raised in this paper were raised three years earlier following an extensive village survey conducted under the community Climate Friendly Aberlady project<sup>1</sup>. In this respect, the North Berwick Coastal Area Partnership has recently given notice to East Lothian Council that subsequent requests from the community to the local authority have been regularly ignored or rejected out of hand, despite them being well-evidenced and researched. This contextual narrative is written to encourage a more positive and enthusiastic response from officials and elected councillors.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.aberladyheritage.com/projects/climate-friendly-aberlady-community-survey/>



## 1. Welcoming Gateways: Tourism and Safety

Village gateways should offer an encouraging welcome to visitors, particularly to tourist villages like Aberlady. They should project something of the essence of the place, its identity and a sense of community.



For motorists they should also signal a change to their driving context, providing a 'heads up' to slow down and to drive carefully. Pedestrians, old and young, and family pets are all about and need to cross the road. Care is required. In Aberlady terms, the east and west entrances to the village are long straight stretches of the busy A198. The third village entrance is from the south on the A6137 Haddington Road.

On reaching the village, the change in driving context is relatively sudden, more so for visiting tourists unfamiliar with the locality or its charms and attractions. However, local drivers with laissez-faire attitudes can sometimes become complacent about the driving care required.

Welcome to Old Aberlady, designed for pedestrians, horses and carts. It's worth remembering that the public road running through the village conservation area was designed in a bygone age when the conventional modes of travel were by foot, horse or cart. At the time, continuous streams of motorised vehicles were not even imagined.

A maximum speed limit of 20mph for village roads was requested in the 2018 survey and communicated to the local authority. So when, in late 2020, the speed limit was introduced as a temporary measure under emergency Covid powers it was warmly welcomed. We'd like it to be normalised and made permanent.

As yet, there are no firm ideas on the physical form any gateways might take, other than a presumption that they would be stone-built. However, they should be aesthetically pleasing for both villagers and visitors. They should draw attention to our uniqueness and reflect our heritage. Our heritage is that of a port, of agriculture, of a wildlife sanctuary and of early Christianity. Through a combination of inspiration, consultation and competition, we will seek an appropriate artwork design for the gateways from within the community, which we hope will receive support from the local authority.

## **2. Traffic and Tourism**

The village survey of 2018 provides evidence of the deep erosion of place and safety posed by increasing traffic volumes, which far exceed that which the village can reasonably accommodate while remaining attractive to villagers and tourists. Most of this traffic is 'through-traffic' in that it is not traffic originating or terminating in the village but vehicles using the road through the village to reach somewhere else.

Aberlady has evolved over time. It has a rich heritage as an early Christian settlement, as a busy port, as a market town and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it proved to be a sought after destination for families seeking to escape from city life in Edinburgh to a slower pace of life in a scenic coastal and agricultural environment. This annual influx was hastened by the arrival of trains to the village. Charabancs full of excited passengers with their luggage piled higgledy-piggledy on top regularly plied back and forth from the rail station, now Aberlady Caravan Park. Bathing boxes situated on the Kilspindie sands were kept busy throughout those long summer months.

Today, we still wish to encourage tourists. They are vital to the success of our local economy and are welcome. However, the impact of excessive traffic levels is overwhelming. Visitors need time and space to appreciate the village and its surroundings. We have to make room for them.

The results of the village survey in relation to traffic levels were a cry for help to the local transport authority: a plea that fell on deaf ears. It would make such a huge difference to the quality of life in our community if through-traffic was encouraged to take the landward B1377 from Longniddry Station eastwards rather than divide Aberlady like a rushing river in spate. At Longniddry, the A198 coastal route should be more persuasively identified as a tourist route to a conservation village and generally unsuitable for commercial, commuting or HGV traffic. This arrangement could not be enforced but essentially this is a marketing exercise promoting place-making on the coastal tourist route.



This paper recognises that this proposal might have a knock on effect for much smaller settlements on the landward B1377. However, as far fewer people will be affected, this is very much the lesser of two evils and, in any case, eastbound traffic for Gullane should not reach the communities at Ballencrieff Farm cottages or steadings as it would be syphoned off at the preceding junction of the B1377 and the A6137 from Haddington.

For some years now through-traffic approaching Aberlady on the A6137 from Ballencrieff has been diverted towards Luffness Mains and Mill so as to avoid the village. It seems entirely sensible for westbound through-traffic on the A198 to be similarly diverted at the Luffness Mill junction where the road priority markings would change. If, as has been suggested, such changes might mean the reclassification of the public highway through the village to a B route, what difference would that make to village life or to the local economy?



The response received from the local authority to this diversion proposal is that *'it may be a community aspiration, but that is no justification'* (sic). It is worth noting here that *The Scotsman* newspaper of 22 November 1938 carried the news that the local authority of the day supported a bypass of Aberlady's High Street with a new road to the north, between the church and the Bay.





AN EAST LOTHIAN BY-PASS – The approach to Aberlady on the coast road from Edinburgh from which a proposed by-pass would be carried to the left of the church. This northern route, recommended by the Road Board, has been approved by the County Council. On right, the corner at the east end of the village, near where the by-pass would join the existing road to Gullane.

Following a Public Inquiry it was decided that the proposal would not be taken forward. The text beneath the two photographs reads as follows:

AN EAST LOTHIAN BY-PASS – The approach to Aberlady on the coast road from Edinburgh from which a proposed by-pass would be carried to the left of the church. This northern route, recommended by the Road Board, has been approved by the County Council. On right, the corner at the east end of the village, near where the by-pass would join the existing road to Gullane.

It confounds logic that in 1938 the local transport authority considered traffic levels to be sufficiently high to warrant the construction of a new bypass yet today's traffic levels today don't, apparently, justify diverting through-traffic onto an existing alternative route. In the longer term, it is hoped that a new road connecting North Berwick to the A1 will be considered as a priority - if it is not already. In the meantime, meaningful change could be introduced with ease.

### 3. The West End: Opening up the Landscape

Most objective observers would likely agree that our ancient Church characterises the West End of the village of Aberlady. Set in a spacious churchyard it looks quite majestic, particularly after the recent improvement works which have seen its warmly toned stones repointed, its roofs retiled and, to cap it all, a resplendent new weather vane in black and gold fitted to the high steeple.

A church on this site has looked down on the village for over 1200 years, since the days before Scotland and when our village was Pepperham, a

wealthy settlement of the monastery of Lindisfarne on Holy Island. Early saints travelled this way and the high cross standing in the Memorial Garden is a reminder of those times of seismic change, of warlords and holy men. Today, the 15th century tower is the oldest visible part of the structure while the main body of the building was largely rebuilt in the late 19th century. Only the north facing transepts from the 16th and 17th centuries and the tower were retained in the reconstruction. Our church can be safely said to be one of the most beautiful in Scotland, framed by the stunning backdrop of the Bay and Gullane Hill.

With this unique heritage, one has to wonder why the church and the cross are largely hidden from visitors entering the village from the west. Only when you are upon the church is it visible to tourists travelling the busy A198 or walkers on the John Muir Way.



The planning authority's Conservation Area Character Statement strongly suggests that '*the bowling green, by the War Memorial and the Parish Churchyard*' should have an open aspect to allow approaches from the west to '*highlight the landmark Parish Church*'. Any spot removal of trees to open the view from the west in this way would require Conservation Area Consent but any tree or trees lost could and should be replaced one hundred fold with new planting schemes in the field boundaries to the south and east of the village. The Woodland Trust welcomes such applications from communities to conserve and sustain wildlife and it would dovetail neatly with the local authority's climate change strategy.



*Our church, hidden from visitors' view by trees and hedges, even in early spring before tree canopies have set.*



*A 1930s view of the church from inside the Memorial Garden*



*The current view from the Memorial Garden*



*The West End in the early 1930s*



The following words from 1926 describe the approach to the village from the west<sup>2</sup>:

“Before you is the Parish Church, while on one side you pass the Bowling Green, with its neat little pavilion; and, adjoining the Green is the War Memorial and the Memorial to the late Lady Wemyss - an old Venetian Fountain. The piece of ground around these has been tastefully laid out; and seats are now provided for the use of visitors. The lines quoted on one of these seats should arrest the attention: -

‘The scent of a flower for pardon,  
the song of a bird for mirth,  
we are nearer God's heart in a garden,  
than anywhere else on earth.’

“Looking beyond, over the intervening fields, away to the north, there is a beautiful open prospect, with the wide bosom of the Firth reflecting the many coloured clouds, as they settle down to a rosy sunset. Then, just before you reach the churchyard gate, you will notice a rather uncommon erection of masonry, locally known as the “Loupin'-on Stane”. There are not many such in the country, or in any country, and it must be of somewhat ancient date. It was used in bygone times by the ladies coming out of church to mount their horses; for, no doubt, they came from fairly long distances in those days, and their ponies would be the principal means of getting about.”

The views to the church, the intervening fields and to Gullane Hill as described here by Reid are today largely blocked from view.

#### **4. The Pedestrian Realm**

At some point after the photograph to the left below was taken, a decision was made to give over a large part of the pedestrian pavement to road vehicles. The transport policy at the time clearly prioritised road users and free flowing traffic but it disadvantaged pedestrians and bus users.

The wide pedestrian area here was known in the village as the ‘Old Road End’. Whether this was because the main road leading to Longniddry turned south via Kirk Road and continued via Gosford Estate (before the straight stretch of the A198 heading west was constructed), or because this is where the road serving the long row of cottages of Craigielaw Farm entered the village, or both, is not clear. What is clear is that this pedestrian area was a

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<sup>2</sup> A Historical Guide to Aberlady. John P Reid, 1926.

popular meeting spot and for going ‘over the stile’ to Church Lane and the Kilspindie road below.

A safe ‘living space’ in the modern policy area requires a substantial degree of pedestrian priority and it seems appropriate in this context for the area of pavement previously given up to road users to revert to pedestrian use. Such a move would not only provide waiting passengers with greater sightlines to arriving buses, it would also slow traffic speeds.



The ‘Old Road End’ c.1900



... and in 2021

## 5. A Pedestrian Crossing

Whatever the case for the pelican crossing in the High Street was (and remains) the same case surely extends to a crossing at the West End, a full 300 metres away but with exactly the same traffic and traffic levels to contend with.

A safe crossing is needed here to access, from the south, the Scottish Ornithologist Club, the Bowling Club, the Memorial Garden, Church Lane (leading to the bay), the Church, the John Muir Way, local bus services and to allow returning school pupils to return to Craigielaw. From the north of the A198, pedestrian access is required to expanding residential areas, the Primary School, the Pleasance Playpark and local bus services. The local Brownie leaders need to physically stop traffic to shepherd their children over the busy A198. Aberlady Primary School Parent Council unanimously support a pedestrian crossing here also and it should be prioritised without further delay.



*The West End, where roads and paths unite to create a heavy pedestrian footfall. There is no safe crossing point however.*

The gates of the Pleasance Playpark and the Bowling Club neatly align to provide pedestrian access over the A198. The ideal site of a new pedestrian crossing?



## 6. The High Street

Would today's objective observer define the village High Street by its architecture, by the charm of its properties or by its monuments? The most pronounced and dominant feature of the High Street today is the unedifying, completely out-of-place and relentless flow of through-traffic. There is no pedestrian realm other than sometimes dangerously narrow pavements on each side of busy traffic. The traffic levels witnessed today in this village context are unacceptable.

An unwelcome consequence of having little pedestrian space is that two old monuments - the 18<sup>th</sup> century Market Cross and, outside the church gates, the medieval 'Loupin'-on Stane' or Mounting Steps - sit largely unnoticed.



*The 18th century Market Cross, a Scheduled Ancient Monument, barely seen because of traffic flows*

Since the advent of motorised transport, successive layers of asphalt have continued to be laid on the pavements. So much so that one layer of steps has become almost completely covered with the result that the cross has lost both height and prominence. This is bad news for villagers and visitors.





*The Market Cross once stood more openly towards the centre of street area but adjoining properties have continued to encroach outwards. Today, the earliest visible line of the properties on the north side of the street is hardly discernible.*

The 'Loupin' on Stane' could tell a similar tale as its surrounding pavement area has been reduced to provide more road space. And, as at the Market Cross, asphalt levels have continued to build upwards with one level of step almost covered. Remarkably, too, the pavement has developed a marked slope from the churchyard wall to the road. The rationale for this is quite unfathomable.

During 2012 a site meeting involving officials from the Transport and Environment (Planning) teams, it was agreed that improvement measures would give the 'Loupin' on Stane' and the Market Cross a greater prominence within the conservation area. These measures included the laying of appropriate paving stones around the bases of both monuments.



The post-Medieval 'Loupin' on Stane' helped churchgoers to mount their horses and carriages

It was thought too that reinstating the wrought iron railings on the churchyard wall would enhance the 'Loupin' on Stane' by giving it an enclosed backdrop. Drawings for the railings work are available. To help reduce costs, the railings in Church Lane would be plain in design.



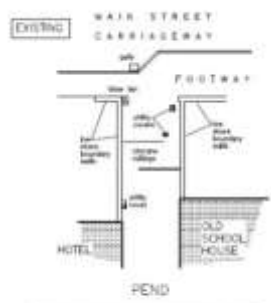
It was agreed too that the appearance of the lane running between Ducks' Inn and the Old Schoolhouse to its east let the conservation area down somewhat.

The solution was to enhance the lane with Caithness slab paving and to provide wrought iron pedestrian safety railings on this key pedestrian artery. The resultant plans are shown overleaf.



Proposed new surfacing in random sized pieces of Collieston stone flaggs Area=12.0 sqm=Stone kerb=2.4 km

Proposed new surfacing in random sized pieces of Collieston stone flaggs laid symmetrically to accommodate the Stone Area=12.0 sqm=Stone kerb=6.4 km



Proposed new surfacing in random sized pieces of Collieston stone flaggs Area=12.0 sqm=Stone kerb=7.9 km

Aa previously noted transport policy was adapted at some time to give vehicles priority over pedestrians and any sense of 'place'. Despite all the words written about communities and place-making, about Smarter Choices, Smarter Places and Space for Living there has been no cohesive attempt to redress this balance, not in Aberlady. The street map below, for example, shows the south end of Sea Wynd. The pavement on the east corner of the junction is simply nowhere near wide enough for a child or elderly person to safely walk to the Village Hall.



*The south end of the Sea Wynd*

The situation is the same at the north end of Sea Wynd. These hazards were brought to the attention of local authority transport officials in 2018. The need to reconfigure the junction to safely accommodate pedestrian access to the Village Hall has never received a response, other than references to parking management schemes.



## 7. Footpaths and Cycleways

National budgets for Active Travel i.e. walking and cycling have received a bit of a fillip as a consequence of the Covid pandemic. When travelling other than by foot or bicycle was restricted there was a sharp rise in active travel. The policy makers would like to maintain that shift in favour of cycling and walking and to help that along new 20mph and 40mph speed limits were introduced.

However, would-be cyclists want much greater assurances on safety before they will regularly venture out on two wheels. The village survey called out for an off-road cycleway between Aberlady and Longniddry. The vast majority supported a route in Gosford estate that respectfully circumvented the formal landscaped gardens of the grounds. Its route runs south from Kirk Road via the former Right-of-Way to Spittal but turns west towards Harelaw when that route breaks the tree line. Such a route to Longniddry and its rail station would reduce substantially the number of commuter car journeys from the village (in regular times).



*The previously suggested offroad cyclway between Aberlady and Longniddry Station*

Regretfully, the grounds of Gosford have been vandalised recently and the Estate supports an off-road cycle route that follows the A198 to Longniddry as far as Lyars Road. This route is considered much too dangerous to encourage more casual or commuting cycling. So long as current traffic levels persist, active travel levels will not rise until off-road cycling infrastructure is in place. This is tourist country. We should be investing in cycling and walking.

Parents at Ballencrieff Steadings have also been pressing the case for a safe cycle/walking route. This time to allow their children safe active travel to Aberlady Primary School. There's a clear case too for a segregated cycle/footpath between Aberlady and Luffness Mains Farm and onwards to Myreton for the same reasons, and from Luffness Mains to Drem rail station.

Active Travel and Safe Routes to School are national policies and Active Travel budgets have never been as high as they are today. Can we please have an off-road cycling and walking network for the Aberlady area that looks after the needs of our local population and supports local tourism?

There is potentially space to the west of the village that could provide ample secure visitor car parking while also acting as a manned tourist information and active travel hub, providing off-road walking and cycling maps, bike hires and guided tours.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper has been written as a catalyst for change. It builds on the village survey of 2018 and should be read in conjunction with it. We hope that, this time, it will be engaged with more fully by Gullane Area Community Council, North Berwick Coastal Area Partnership and East Lothian Council. The suggestions for change in these pages do not all have to be linked to those bodies' annual budgets. In some cases the community only needs permission - and positive encouragement.

Ian Malcolm

for the Climate Friendly Aberlady Project



e: [hello@aberbadyheritage.com](mailto:hello@aberbadyheritage.com)

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The artist responsible for the artwork in this paper is Aberlady resident, Maiia McNicol. For further information, please contact her by an email to [maiiamcnicol@yahoo.com](mailto:maiiamcnicol@yahoo.com)