

SURLEY ROW

A description based on two CADRA articles, one for Caversham Bridge c. 1988 and the other c.2018.

Surley Row is one of Caversham's most distinctive historic streets: a narrow, gently winding lane whose character still reflects its origins as an old route leading north out of Reading. The name *Surley* most likely derives from Old English, meaning “*south of a clearing*”, a reference to its position on the southern edge of historic woodland and farmland. Unlike much of Caversham, the land around it was developed relatively late, allowing the Row to survive as a quiet, almost rural enclave. Its domestic scale, absence of a footway, and the long runs of mellow brick walls create a strong sense of enclosure, while the lack of through traffic preserves its tranquil atmosphere.

Although the houses vary widely in age and style, they form a harmonious group through their shared materials — brick, stucco and plain tile — and through the subtle idiosyncrasies that give the street its charm: small belfries, distinctive chimneys, unusual windows and the occasional glimpse of a garden or gable behind the walls. Views along the Row are naturally broken at the midpoint by stuccoed houses set slightly forward, and the whole street is softened by greenery, including mature oaks at both ends.

The topography adds further interest. From Peppard Road the lane rises to a small plateau before dropping steeply between high, almost cliff-like brick walls to Rotherfield Way, then climbing again beyond. This modern road creates an unfortunate break in the historic line of the Row, separating it from its north-western end, though the long run of semi-detached houses on the south-west side of Rotherfield Way is a fine and largely unspoiled example of a post-war self-build initiative.

Surley Row is around three-quarters of a mile in length, although just under half a mile lies within the Conservation Area. Beyond the designated boundary, at the far north-western end, is **Grove Cottages** — a short early-20th-century street representing a later phase of Caversham's suburban growth. These modest, well-proportioned houses form a small, cohesive group typical of the period's domestic architecture. Although not of the same historic pedigree as the timber-framed and Tudor-Gothic buildings further south, they contribute to the wider story of Surley Row as a route that continued to evolve long after its earliest houses were established.

Historic Buildings along the Row

The 1988 description provides valuable detail about individual buildings, many of which contribute significantly to the area's character.

At the Peppard Road entrance, Surley Row once presented a distinctly traditional scene, complete with an old-style phone box, a wall-mounted post box and a wide grass verge.

Hill House — for many years the home of MP Tony Durant — can be glimpsed through the trees.

Approaching from Rotherfield Way, the lane climbs steeply beside the high wall of **Springfield St Luke**, concealing the house itself. St Luke's is an imposing early-19th-century villa associated with several notable Caversham residents, including Admiral Coffin, benefactor of the Westfield Road almshouses. Opposite, only the rear of **No. 23 (Farmcote)** is visible from the street, though its principal elevations — 18th century with early-19th-century extensions — lie hidden from view.

Near the Peppard Road end are several houses of particular interest:

- **No. 4 White Cottage** — 18th century with early-19th-century additions
- **No. 2 Fir Tree House** — 18th century with later alterations
- **No. 1** — formerly part of Hill House, notable for its large bell

Several neighbouring houses narrowly missed listing when the area was first assessed.

Beyond Rotherfield Way, the Row contains some of its oldest and most distinctive buildings: a timber-framed Tudor cottage; the mid-19th-century Tudor-Gothic **Grove Cottage** on the west side; and **No. 46**, a colour-washed flint house on the east. Just beyond stood the Gardeners' Arms, once a popular public house and now replaced by a small modern close. Although the Conservation Area boundary stops here, further listed buildings lie along the continuation of Surley Row.

Designation

Surley Row was formally designated as a Conservation Area in November 1988, recognising both its architectural interest and its enduring sense of place.