

Totnes Conservation Area Character Appraisal. Summary Document

The Totnes Conservation Area Appraisal was adopted by South Hams District Council in 2007. Its content is briefly summarised below.

Totnes Conservation Area

Totnes has been described as 'Probably the most outstanding town of historic importance in Devon' and by the Council of British Archaeology in 1965 as one of forty towns 'so splendid and so precious that the ultimate responsibility for them should be regarded as a national concern'. The centre of Totnes was designated a conservation area in 1969, one of the first in the county. Later, in 1985 it was extended to include Moorashes, Warland, Plymouth Road and New Walk; and in 1992 to include warehouse and cottage buildings.

History of Development

The original Burh of Totnes was founded in 10th century and the Bridgetown Hill-Fore Street-High Street axis probably follows line of Saxon trackway. The line of the 10th century town fortifications is still clearly preserved along Ramparts Walk and South Street. By the time of the Norman Conquest, Totnes was the second largest and richest town in Devon (after Exeter) and it continued to grow in the Middle Ages, its fortunes peaking in the 16th and 17th centuries. The merchants' houses built in that period transformed the town centre. Building campaigns in Plymouth Road, Bridgetown and The Plains took place in the early 19th century and transformed these areas; however, the architectural style in this period was more restrained than previously. Even outside the town centre, very little new development took place after the early 19th century. This has ensured that the compact character of at least the older part of the town has largely been preserved intact. There are gaps in our understanding of the early history of town, especially, and opportunities for archaeological investigation should be grasped where possible.

Setting

The town's location was originally strategic; it occupies a spur with the Castle at its crest and the lowest crossing place of the river Dart at its foot. Its setting is dominated by the surrounding countryside and, being built on the sides of the Dart valley the rolling topography ensures that its rural situation is almost always in evidence.

Buildings in the Town

Half of the 438 listed buildings in the town are located along the continuous frontage of Bridgetown – Cistern Street; one of the most impressive concentrations in any country town. These include Grade 1 listed buildings emblematic to the town such as St Mary's Church, the Eastgate, The Guildhall and the Castle. However, what makes the town impressive is the setting of these amongst the remaining buildings, especially the large number of Merchants houses which, together, boast one of the finest collections of 16th and 17th century ornate plaster ceilings in the country. Many of these houses

were built to the *deux corps de batiments* plan with a second kitchen block behind the main, front block linked by a gallery. Because of the locally distinctive nature of these, it is vital that all surviving examples of this plan type should be preserved. Behind the narrow, two or three storey frontages lining Fore Street and High Street, the medieval burgage plots (strips of land) are frequently well conserved and the amalgamation or breaching of their boundaries should always be avoided. Totnes has been no stranger to alterations in the past and many of the buildings above were altered considerably in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, this was mainly a *re-fronting* exercise and little demolition took place. The hybrid appearance of these buildings is one of the features that make the town attractive. Those few houses that were completely rebuilt such as 36 and 47 Fore Street were set back from pavement and clearly designed to reside in rather than trade from. Because of the topography of Totnes, it is often also possible to glimpse the roofs and the rear parts of houses; this less orderly (but no less charming or historic) vision of the town enriches our experience of it and adds a dimension that often remains unseen in other historic places. Also of interest are the former warehouses along the river, now converted to residential use, and those on Collins Road by the railway.

A large number of traditional, classical 19th and early 20th century shopfronts survive in the town, although the ground floor frontages are characterised by a number of different treatments making for a variety and sense of intimacy. At higher levels, the most common form of window on principal elevations is the timber sash window. In general, most buildings remain uncluttered by modern additions such as hanging signs, hanging baskets and alarm boxes. Likewise, most roofs are clear of rooflights and dormer windows.

Building materials

Exposed stonework can be seen on some of the most important buildings in the town including The Castle, Guildhall and St Mary's Church as well as some of the least grand – various factories, mills and warehouses. The local stone type is brown volcanic tuff. Red sandstone from the east of the town and grey limestone and granite from the west are also found. There are also a significant number of slate-hung buildings (often painted) along Fore Street and High Street (mainly on the north side). These form one of the emblematic features of Totnes. However, painted render is the most common walling finish in the town, under which the construction can either be of stone rubble or timber framed. By far the most common roofing material in the town is natural slate. Its use reflects the historic proximity of the South Devon slate quarries (all of which have been closed for more than a century).

The Essence of Totnes Conservation Area

With its layers of illustrious history and privileged location, Totnes is a complex town. It has a compactness that distils the best natural and rural features (its glorious setting, the presence of the river, the views out to the surrounding countryside from most of the conservation area); and an ancient townscape (narrow, 16th century houses along the steep main street with burgage plots behind; the Castle, Parish Church and Guildhall; clearly definable Saxon boundaries) with a sophisticated and pioneering commercial

and cultural tradition which attracts residents and visitors alike. It would therefore be simplistic to define the essence of the conservation area purely in terms of its physical form or even its historical development. Within this unique and monumental fabric, the salient features of which are described above, there is a thriving community made up of all ages, together with a number and variety of small businesses that belie the town's size. The historic cultural influence of Dartington Hall and its longstanding attraction to those interested in the arts, cultural activities and alternative lifestyles can be seen throughout the town. Totnes is a good example of the interdependency of a community and its activities and the historic fabric – if one were to decline, the other would suffer.

Problems in the conservation Area

Traffic congestion is the most obvious problem in the conservation area and is discussed further in the Management Plan. A related problem is the bottleneck for through-traffic at the bottom of the town. Parts of the town centre would also benefit from enhancement work; notably, the Rotherfold and Civic Hall Square.

Character Areas

The conservation area can be divided into four *character areas* and these are described below:

1. The area around Rotherfold and Plymouth Road

- Area formerly known as 'Little Totnes'
- Rotherfold was a cattle market extending between Leechwell Street and The Lamb.
- Follaton Manor, owned by the Priory straddled Plymouth Road
- Proximity to countryside dominates
- Top of Leechwell Street visually closed by wooded backdrop
- Tightly knit terraced forms of historic core give way to villas in gardens and then countryside.
- Around Cistern and Leechwell Street, significant areas of housing were demolished to accommodate markets.
- Castle more of a landmark from Cistern Street than elsewhere in the conservation area.
- Absence of dormers and rooflights
- Roofscape is dominant. Appearance and form of roofs adds considerable interest and character to the area. Ridges parallel to street are most common. Preponderance of chimney stacks and pots.
- Gable fronted buildings less common in this part of the conservation area
- Typical height of buildings is lower than the rest of the town.

2. The area around High Street

- Castle stands at top, but is largely hidden from view.
- Parkland trees around castle further obscure it from view when looking into the conservation area.
- St Mary's Church another important landmark from afar but is also hidden from much of High Street.
- Priory and its grounds affected development of town in area behind church: no burgage plots; no rear access road.
- East Gate stands on line of Saxon defences. Building over dates from 1842. Restored after fire in 1990. Adds drama to street scene creating visual enclosure.
- Exceptionally good 16th and 17th century houses, often gable or hipped roof fronted (including those of the Butterwalk).
- South Street's unkerbed surface emphasises its character as a boundary
- This area has most examples of *deux corps de batiments* plan
- Butterwalk, Poultry Walk and other loggias (once even more common) are a distinctive characteristic of this part of the town.
- Different kinds of slate hanging in evidence.
- Not many dormer windows in the area.

3. The area around Fore Street and The Plains

- 129 Listed buildings in this area.
- 1 Scheduled Ancient Monument – the medieval chapel of St Katherine and the Holy Ghost at Warland.
- Typically, houses are built with eaves parallel to street; either shallow, deep with brackets, sometimes with ornate cornice and others with parapet. Gable fronts less common except in high part of street.
- At the top end of Fore Street there is a preponderance of bay, bow and oriel windows.
- The bottom end of Fore Street is wider and so are the plot widths compared with further up.
- Vertical sliding sash windows predominate.
- Many small gaps between buildings.
- Several buildings, usually 18th century or later, are set back from the pavement.

4. Bridgetown

- Much older than its 19th century appearance.
- Open meadows to the north define linear form.
- Woodland along river Dart brings countryside into town.
- 19th century villa development checked before it reached Bourton valley.
- Dominated by bridge crossing river Dart.
- 19th century buildings dominate.

- Variety of siting and design. Broken or staggered building lines and ridgelines characteristic.
- Redundant shopfronts common.
- Seymour Terrace unusual in being set back and raised above the height of the road.
- Cast iron railings important where they survive
- Slate hanging not common
- Roofs often concealed behind parapets.
- Local slate dominant roofing material
- Unpainted, ashlar-inscribed render distinctive.
- Many classical architectural features.
- Vertical sliding sash windows dominate.
- Original dormer windows typical.
- Villas in north east of area typical of Victorian up-market suburb.
- Steamer Quay used to be accompanied by four more warehouses along river
- Rowsells Lane formed medieval boundary of suburb. Still retains some of its industrial character.

Special features

- Ancient town plan
- Approaches and remains of ancient bridge crossing
- Historic waterfront
- Motte and bailey castle
- Walls ditches and gateways associated with ancient town
- Many grand 16th and 17th century houses; also 18th and early 19th century
- 412 listed buildings in conservation area; 6 Grade 1 and 28 Grade II*
- 4 Scheduled Ancient Monuments
- Also, numerous unprotected structures of interest including late 19th and early 20th century houses; burgage plot and other boundary walls; railings gates and gate piers; granite kerbs and gutters; stone, brick and cobbled pavements; letterboxes etc.