2.1 Setting the Scene

This part of the Conservation Area focuses on the heart of the original Anglo-Saxon settlement where the first Totnesians lived – within the smaller of two oval-shaped enclosures whose defensive boundary is still followed by North Street, Rampart Walk and South Street. The town’s most significant monument, the castle, is a focal feature, as too are the Parish Church and Guildhall nearby that occupy the site of a former Priory. In this part also is the site of North Ford; a 13th century suburb that straddled the boundary between the Borough of Totnes and Dartington Manor, on the line of the passage below North Gate, Lower Collins Road and Barracks Hill beyond.

By the time of the Conquest, Totnes was the second largest and richest town in Devon (after Exeter) so the building of the Norman castle soon after must have caused great disruption to people and property. The artificial mound (‘motte’) is one of the largest in the country, and along with its associated horse-shoe-shaped enclosures (‘inner and outer baileys’) which straddle the line of the Saxon defences, it was built to protect the new lord from the townsfolk, as much as the town itself. The mound occupies the highest point of the Saxon burh, so not surprisingly the stone keep built on top in the early 1200’s (and thoroughly rebuilt a hundred years later [artist impression above]) is a striking landmark. Originally the mound (at first with a 15 feet square timber tower at its crest) would have dominated the town, but as the great ditch around it was filled, and the streets below it built-up, its visual presence became more and more obscured. So much so, in fact, that today in this part of the Conservation Area, its domineering impact can only be readily appreciated from Castle Street, particularly at the North Street junction [right].

Also within the oval, St Mary’s Church is likewise a major landmark with the four pinnacles of its tower reaching the height of the keep’s crenellations. As with the keep, the buildings lining the main streets hide it mostly from view, until, with an element of surprise, it is revealed through a large gap in the High Street frontage, (the site of the former Corn Exchange/Allottery) [above]

As well as land for the castle, another sizeable chunk of the Saxon oval, the part now occupied by the Church and Guildhall, was also taken shortly after the Conquest to build a Priory in the town. Other land just outside the oval, stretching round to the East Gate, went with it too, creating a single ownership that has had a marked influence over the way the town has developed here. The absence of separately occupied burgage plots meant there was never the need to create a rear access road like South Street on the opposite side. At Rampart Walk, therefore, the stature of at least part of the original Saxon defences is still well preserved. Near the East Gate, the Walk is characterised by what appear to be tiny cottages with little more than roof space [above]. The gaps in their roofscape, however, not only reveal the ‘commanding’ nature of the Walk, but also the fact the buildings have ground floors well below its level. One and a half storeys below to be almost exact, meaning they’re a ‘normal’ 2-storeys after all. As a group, these buildings typify the way burgage plots were developed in the town, although few others had the opportunity to introduce new entrances onto a public way alongside (albeit through the roof!). As a site, the plot is a significant one, being next to the town’s defences and possibly on the line of the original ditch. This accounts for it not being released for development until 1437 when the fortress conception of the town had been well and truly abandoned.
A more recent sign of the town abandoning its ‘fortress’ roots is the tree planting in the castle’s inner bailey and moat. This has created a parkland setting that combines with the open meadow of the outer bailey to draw the countryside into the heart of the town. It does, however, mask the town’s greatest monument to a considerable extent for much of the year [below]. As the artist’s impressions displayed in the castle grounds show, however, a faithful and authentic setting for the castle would be one devoid of trees, not only in the outer bailey, but the inner bailey and moat too [right].

Probably the best known and most photographed building in Totnes is the East Gate, on the line of the Saxon defences where Fore Street becomes High Street [left]. Like many other buildings in Totnes it has had several guises, the current one dating from 1835 (with the clock faces and bell tower added later). Its embattled ‘fortress-like’ appearance, which gives more than a hint of the building’s historic significance, was restored after a devastating fire in September 1990. It adds drama to the street scene, creating visual enclosure and the sense of entering one space and leaving another even though it spans a continuous highway.

It is hard to imagine how much building activity went on in High Street (and the higher part of Fore Street) when the town’s economy boomed through the 16th century and into the 17th. So much, in fact, that it brought about a complete transformation – which in form, if not in detail, has lasted to this day. Here, in particular, the town’s merchants displayed their considerable wealth and evidenced the fact that Totnes ranked 16th (in wealth) out of all English provincial towns in 1524. The most prestigious houses were 3-storeys in height, and the restored, ‘timber-framed’ parts of 70 Fore Street and 27 High street give an idea of what their outsides looked like. Inside too the show of wealth continued, with the finer houses adorned with high quality wall panelling, chimney pieces and staircases, and some magnificent plaster ceilings [above and left]. Together these houses survive to make Totnes one of the most complete, and finest, towns of the Elizabethan-Jacobean age in England.
It is in this part of the Conservation Area that most examples of the distinctive plan form (that comprises a front block on the street and one or more detached blocks behind linked by a corridor or first-floor gallery) survive. A side passage entrance on the ground floor, that provides access to the yards and blocks behind, is often a sign of the plan’s existence [above].

The plan form just described is actually found in various states of preservation in every house between 29 and 55 High Street. But it’s another, more obvious, aspect of their plan that makes these houses ‘extra’ special, and that is their upper floors are carried over the pavement on columns creating loggias beneath. Collectively the group is known as ‘The Butterwalk’, and today it is one of the town’s most distinctive, and distinguishing, features. It actually took more than a hundred years to reach the continuous length it is today, as its creation was a gradual process with one owner taking the lead and others following suit. In the photograph to the left, the rubble-stone column on the left is 18th century while the one on the right dates from the 19th.

That the creation of these ‘Walks’ was a piecemeal process is illustrated by the Poultry Walk on the opposite side of High Street, where the buildings are more obviously of different ages and their loggias not entirely continuous [above]. There is evidence too, at 16 High Street, that loggias were created elsewhere in the town, but were abandoned. Surviving in its partially exposed return [below] is a small section of archway that formed the open side of the loggia of 1585 (and which its neighbour, No.18, now blocks).

The practice of creating under-cover Walks has certainly left its mark on the town’s character; a mark that would have been all the more pronounced had the so called ‘Exchange’ or ‘Church Walk’ building survived [below right]. It occupied the gap on High Street in front of St Mary’s but was demolished in 1878. Add to this the ‘loggia-sized’ porch to the Seven Stars Hotel and the single storey loggia on the Guildhall [below] (as well as the cloisters of the former priory!). It could be said that the architectural device has characterised the town’s appearance ever since Norman times!
2.1 Setting the Scene

The formal designation of Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, Tree Preservation Orders and Scheduled Ancient Monuments ... be certain that the designations shown on the Map are still correct, please check with the Planning and Building Control (Conservation Team) at the District Council.

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2.2 The Conservation Area

Almost the entire part of the Area next to the river is of much greater interest. It is crowned by the main ridge line of the town, including the Highway, Castle Street, Mill Race and Fore Street. The Castle, Church, the Church Close and Totnes Priory are among them (The Castle, St Mary’s Church, the Guildhall, the circuit walls, the entire window had survived a further 200 years under a slatework coat [left].

2.3 The Listed Buildings

61, 67 and 73 High Street were date-stamped to 1714, 1715 and 1716 respectively, by the owner and the date of the building’s construction is of the utmost interest. The stack and the dressing of window and door openings, and the forming of the building’s character, tend to authenticate the building as being of the same period. Historic roof structures are indeed so, adding interest to both visual and historical terms. The stack running up the rear of the building (the stack) is particularly impressive (please allow time to examine it carefully). Some of the few examples that do exist are the majority have been long past over - like those to the front of 33 High Street in the Butterwalk (please).

2.4 The Scheduled Ancient Monuments

The 19th century to ‘up-grade’ appearances, and while several complete examples survive in the High Street, there are some much smaller instances within the core of the Area and brings with it a tremendous potential for the future.

As elsewhere in the Conservation Area, building in brick was never the norm; the majority of the houses started life as half-timbered structures, the dressing of window and door openings, and the forming of the building’s character, tend to authenticate the building as being of the same period. Historic roof structures are indeed so, adding interest to both visual and historical terms. The stack running up the rear of the building (the stack) is particularly impressive (please allow time to examine it carefully). Some of the few examples that do exist are the majority have been long past over - like those to the front of 33 High Street in the Butterwalk (please).

The change from glebe to hip was part and parcel of the ‘new look’ architecture that ‘overhauled’ the town’s appearance during the 19th century to ‘up-grade’ appearances, and while several complete examples survive in the High Street, there are some much smaller instances within the core of the Area and brings with it a tremendous potential for the future.

2.5 HIGH STREET

While most early recorded surfaces were worn smooth from the traffic, later ones tended to be left in their ‘natural’ state. Only one of them survives with its original appearance intact, and that is at 13 High Street, just before the junction with the New Road. It was probably applied soon after the Exchange was demolished in 1878, and still forms the ‘stole’ that was sculpted into the windowsill to imitate the ‘impression of the old stones.’ This ‘architectural device’ was customarily used during the 19th century to ‘up-grade’ appearances, and while several complete examples survive in the High Street, there are some much smaller instances within the core of the Area and brings with it a tremendous potential for the future.

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When applied to subdivisions of timber-framed walls, render is the most consistent finish resulting in this part of the Area and downtown street scene that encloses the Bertram, Hall. Most is smooth finished, producing a somewhat digital, ‘urban’ appearance that is entirely suited to a town setting. On the other hand, the ‘compositions of strength’ in South Street in particular produce a more intense appearance that appears quite ‘out of place’ when many of the houses started life in high-quality buildings. At the end of High Street (bungalow type) [left].

The row of redbrick houses that meet the street come are understandably those adorning the back of the shops. Their numbers are few, but they are an important part of the overall appearance of the street. The two most interesting, Nos.10 and 12 High Street, while most early recorded surfaces were worn smooth from the traffic, later ones tended to be left in their ‘natural’ state. Only one of them survives with its original appearance intact, and that is at 13 High Street, just before the junction with the New Road. It was probably applied soon after the Exchange was demolished in 1878, and still forms the ‘stole’ that was sculpted into the windowsill to imitate the ‘impression of the old stones.’ This ‘architectural device’ was customarily used during the 19th century to ‘up-grade’ appearances, and while several complete examples survive in the High Street, there are some much smaller instances within the core of the Area and brings with it a tremendous potential for the future.

Historic roof structures often help to understand the evolution of a building, so their shape and interest tend to authenticate the building as being of the same period. Historic roof structures are indeed so, adding interest to both visual and historical terms. The stack running up the rear of the building (the stack) is particularly impressive (please allow time to examine it carefully). Some of the few examples that do exist are the majority have been long past over - like those to the front of 33 High Street in the Butterwalk (please).

Key

- Outdoors the area of appraisal
- Conservation Area Boundary
- Existing Conservation Area
- Listed Buildings
- Other Historic Buildings with a Positive Impact
- Trees covered by a Tree Preservation Area
- Other Important Trees (signposted)
- Boundary between sub areas

Cautionary Note

The Town Centre Conservation Areas, Listed Buildings, Tree Preservation Orders and Scheduled Ancient Monuments are now part of the planning process – so you may be certain that the designations shown on the Maps are still correct, please check with the Planning and Building Control (Conservation Team) at the District Council.
With slate supplies so close to hand, it's not surprising the material was favoured by many 18th and 19th century owners wishing to 're-fashion' (and weather proof) their house fronts (and rears) by cladding over the 'old-fashioned' timber-framing. Although the practice was most prevalent in this part of the Conservation Area, only on the north side of High Street, from the church to the higher end of the Butterwalk, and in the modern Civic Square opposite, can it be said that slate-hung elevations dominate the scene.

Elsewhere slate-hung fronts are few and far between, while examples of decorative patterns are now quite rare. A band of simple 'fish-scale' slates survive across the width of 39 and 41 High Street as if to confirm the long history these separate houses had of single ownership. 10 High Street, on the other hand, has a band of semi-circular cut slates, as well as a diamond-shaped panel of the tiniest of slates in its gable. However, the most attractive and skilfully executed example in this part of High Street must be the one at 34 and 36; the product of a late Victorian revival of a disappearing practice, designed to complement the architecture of this very fine street.

Polychromatic slate hanging (where bands are created using different coloured slates) is now a rarity in the town, but as the sole surviving example of the 'art' illustrates, the effect can be very pleasing. Not so architecturally creative, however, is the practice of painting slate fronts, although in all probability its purpose was a positive one; to improve the appearance of repaired slate-work that had been patched in the process. Nearly a quarter of the slate hung fronts in this part of the Area have been treated in this way, and as all are on High Street, their contribution towards the interest and character of the area is both significant and obvious. They appear to evidence a common approach to extending the life of the cladding beyond normal expectations. For example, the small sized slates at 54 High Street suggest antiquity, and it could well be they date from the building's re-fronting which the rain-water hopper-heads put at 1813!