5.1 Setting the Scene

This part of the Conservation Area covers two of Totnes’ medieval suburbs, created in the 12th or 13th centuries just outside the town’s West Gate. The outer and inner enclosures of the Saxon burh shared a common boundary along the line of South Street, and it is where South Street meets High Street that the gate once stood [right]. The structure was doubtless rebuilt in medieval times, but in the 18th century it was finally removed as an inconvenience.

- The main, and probably oldest, of the two suburbs was called ‘Little Totnes’, being on land owned by the Borough. Although a continuation of High Street beyond the West Gate, it’s real focus was the Rotherfold: a cattle market that originally extended from where Leechwell Street leaves High Street to where the Lamb is today. Encroachments over the centuries have reduced its size, although a group of houses was actually removed from its south side in 1967 [above].

- The other suburb was in Follaton Manor owned by Totnes Priory. It was astride Plymouth Road, but not on the alignment it has today. Then it left High Street at Collins Road (at the corner of the much larger Rotherfold), forked left where Collins Road now turns right [below], and then joined the current Plymouth Road where it crosses the by-pass. In all probability, the original line of the road lead directly from the West Gate, but this was changed when the burgage plots of Little Totnes were laid out. This new line persisted until 1765 when a turnpike was constructed along it but it must have been inconvenient even so, as shortly after it was changed to the line it has today.

- Nowhere else in Totnes is the town’s ancient core, and the Conservation Area that focuses on it, so close to the open countryside. Indeed, while Mount Pleasant and Laurel Cottage are within both, their ‘lane-side’ setting across the by-pass is distinctly rural in character and quite unlike that of a town [above]. (Before the construction of the by-pass, of course, Cistern Street continued into Harpers Hill, and was actually known as Harpers Hill Street in years past).

- Leechwell Street is also within the ancient core of the town and the Conservation Area, but it too is soon ‘closed’ by a rural backdrop in which the by-pass is now well concealed. [above]
The close relationship this part of Totnes has with the countryside is a significant characteristic of the town's setting; not just in the visual sense but in historical terms too. It's from here that the curving ridge on which the town was originally set projects out from the steep valley side, with Cistern Street, then High Street and finally Fore Street following the line of its gradual descent to the river. The steepness of the valley side, and its northerly aspect, probably account for its remaining part of the countryside (The by-pass, after all, is only marginally more distant from the castle than the East Gate). Even the splendid views towards Dartmoor weren't reason enough. It seems, for the 'villa-builders' of the 19th century to develop the rising ground any higher than they did (right).

The historic core of the town begins to lose its tightly-knit, high density, development pattern before reaching the line of the Western by-pass (which is one of the reasons why so few buildings had to be demolished when the road was constructed). Along the Plymouth Road the progression from high to low density is typical of 'organic town growth', with older, tightly-knit terraced forms giving way to more recent villas in gardens (above). The continuity of this 'organic' pattern has been fragmented, however, in the progressions along Cistern Street and Leechwell Street. Here, sizeable chunks of their original, tightly-knit, fabric, are missing; nearly all removed to allow improvements to the markets alongside. In all, as many as a dozen buildings have been demolished along the east side of Cistern Street and along both sides of Leechwell Street where No.16 has been left in complete isolation (above right). Never intended to be exposed, its gabled ends now tend to bring a certain bleakness and disharmony to the street scene; an effect which is repeated whenever demolitions have taken place. This is the case at the Rotherfold where the demolished buildings faced Leechwell Street and Cistern Street as well as the (much smaller) square. (They actually occupied the entire expanse of the area that is now paved) (below)

Although not within this part of the Conservation Area, the Castle Keep is more a landmark here than anywhere else along the town’s main thoroughfares. It is very much a focal feature in views along Cistern Street towards the Narrows, drawing the eye up from street level to the rooftops above;..... where the predominance of chimney stacks and pots, and the general absence of dormers and rooflights, tend to enhance the historic scene (above).

The mix of 2- and 3-storey building heights; the changes in road levels, and the sizes of the spaces between and around the buildings, mean roofs have a significant presence in this part of the Area - and, of course, from the Castle Keep they truly dominate the scene (below). Their appearance and form add considerably to the interest and character of the Area. For the most part their ridge lines run parallel with the street, but nevertheless there are significant numbers at right-angles (particularly in High Street and the north side of Plymouth Road), which nearly all have hips facing the street (right).

Fronts with gables, on the other hand, are largely absent from this part of the Conservation Area, with the Kingbridge Inn displaying one of the very few examples of this essentially 17th century or earlier form (above). The Victorians, in particular, reintroduced it as part of their Gothic Revival style of architecture (above right), but again examples are few. It's likely that gabled fronts were once more numerous, particularly on High Street where several buildings date from the 17th century, but as in other parts of the Area, when these were re-fronted or refashioned in the 18th and 19th centuries the gables were replaced with 'classical' hips. Exposed timber framing disappeared too, along with the integral mullioned windows - although this one in the Narrows managed to survive. (below)
The hybrid appearance that combines 16th or 17th century form with 18th or 19th century finishes and detailing continues into this part of High Street, with examples in Leechwell Street too. The jettied floors at 82 and 84 High Street are a sure sign of 16th or 17th century origins [above] and a former ‘timber-framed’ appearance not unlike that of the Museum at 70 Fore Street.

Side passage entrances are a common feature of frontages in High Street and in most cases evidences the ‘gallery-with-back-block’ plan so often followed by Totnes merchants in the 17th century. As a result, shop frontages tend to incorporate passageway doors as well as shop entrance doors, so display windows are generally not continuous and quite modest in scale [above]. Moreover, even before reaching the Rotherfold, High Street has already begun to gather a more solid, domestic ground-floor character on account of the appearance of the existing and former pubs; the Bull Inn [below left] and the former Plymouth Inn [below right].

Although many have been altered since their insertion, most of the historic shopfronts in the Area still retain much of their authentic character. Perhaps the most unusual are at 86 and 88 High Street. Both are bow fronted: 88 following the shape of the projecting window above it [right], and 86 on a continuous curve between the party walls [below].

This appraisal was completed with a funding contribution from Totnes and District Preservation Trust.

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The historic interest of the Area is much enhanced by the survival of the leechwell—a remark

5.2 The Conservation Area

When the Tudor Conservation Area was first designated by the District Council on 5th July 1969, the

5.3 The Listed Buildings

Off the 412 Listed Buildings in the Toton's Conservation Area, 92 are located here, most inside the line of the Western By-pass

5.4 The Scheduled Ancient Monuments

The leechwell, on Leechwell Lane, a medieval holy well that was still used as a public water supply until the 1930's. On Leechwell Lane, a medieval holy well that was still used as a public water supply until the 1930's.

5.5 The Listed Buildings

Of the 412 Listed Buildings in the Toton's Conservation Area, 92 are located here, most inside the line of the Western By-pass, taking in the square at the Rotherfold along the way. For most of its length the boundary was drawn tightly around the historic buildings in closely-knit groups that were the most historic interest of the Area, their general styling is essentially late 19th and early 20th century, and stands out to reflect local characteristics.

Key Conservation Components Map

The historic interest of the Area is much enhanced by the survival of the leechwell—a remark

Plan 5. The Area Around Rotherfold/Plymouth Road

Although the majority of buildings in this part of the Conservation Area were built in the late 19th and 19th centuries. Mostly domestic, very few from major stock in the past. The people there are not likely to be of historical significance. The high street end, with more than 200 years separate the oldest and youngest historic buildings in the Area, their general styling is essentially late 19th and early 20th century, and stands out to reflect local characteristics.

Cautionary Note

While more than 300 years separate the oldest and youngest historic buildings in the Area, their general styling is essentially late 19th and early 20th century, and stands out to reflect local characteristics.

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