

Special Character Area Assessment

Abbey Foregate

Introduction

Conservation Areas are "areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve and enhance" (Section 69(1)(a) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990). Under Section 69(2) of the above Act, the Borough Council as the Local Planning Authority have a statutory duty from time to time to review the extent of designation in their area and, if appropriate, to designate further areas.

Conservation Area Designation

Shrewsbury Town Centre Conservation Area was designated in May 1970 in response to the Civic Amenities Act 1967. This area included the immediate surroundings of the Abbey Church, which was roughly triangular in shape. At the time of designation the whole of Abbey Foregate was not included due to developments since the War, particularly in the commercial field, which destroyed much of the area's former character together with the road widening and tree felling operations.

The central conservation area was extended in 1981 to include the whole of Abbey Foregate as the importance of incorporating principal approaches to the town centre was recognised. Therefore, the Abbey Foregate study area includes both the area around the Abbey and the area which was later designated.

The Purpose of the Report

This report will act as Supplementary Planning Guidance to the Shrewsbury and Atcham Local Plan. It should inform local residents, the general public and developers and also provide a tool for Development Control work.

Location and Population

Location

The study area of this report is located in Shrewsbury Town Centre Conservation Area. Abbey Foregate is marked as number 5 on the map of the Conservation Area, figure 2.1. It has traditionally been the main route of approach to Shrewsbury town centre from the east. The southern boundary of this area runs along the Rea Brook.

Population

The exact population of the study area is not known. However, a calculation using the average household size for each ward from the 1991 Census of Population gives an estimate of approximately 650 residents.

The Origins and Development of the Settlement

Abbey Foregate has always been an area of major historical and architectural importance in the development of Shrewsbury. It has formed the principal approach to the town from the east since the foundation of the Abbey in 1083. When the Abbey was built, it formed a focal point around which development took place. As a consequence, the majority of the oldest existing buildings in Abbey Foregate lie to the west of the area, around the Abbey. As the town grew, development spread out along

the main road leading eastwards from the Abbey, where most of the buildings date from the 19th and 20th centuries, with a few earlier exceptions.

During the 11th century, the Rea Brook was diverted and its water impounded at the Abbey Pool. This provided the mill race with a uniform level to turn the mill wheel. After 1128 the people of Shrewsbury were obliged to send their corn to the Abbey Mills. The income from the mill, the Abbey fairs and the vast amounts of land held, made the monks of Foregate a very wealthy community. At the peak of its prosperity this great mass of irregular, but stately buildings must have presented the appearance of a fortified town with its embattled walls and turreted gate.

The approach to the town through the Foregate was known as London Road as all coaches from London used this approach into the town centre. During this period the availability of land and building stone encouraged residential development in the area.

In 1586 Queen Elizabeth I enlarged the Borough to include Abbey Foregate. This action combined with the pleasant environment and location of the Foregate continued to attract wealthy members of society.

Lord Hill's column was built between 1814 and 1816, adding considerable status to the Foregate and encouraging further residential expansion. Thomas Telford's road improvements for Shrewsbury included the construction of a new section of road that cut through the south of the Abbey and its gardens in 1835. Although this resulted in the formulation of a more direct route along Abbey Foregate, it divided the Abbey and much of its grounds. The Railway Bridge and viaduct were erected in the mid-nineteenth century, when rail travel was at its height.

Monkmoor and Cherry Orchard developed as suburbs towards the end of the nineteenth century. The growth of the suburbs was related to people's desire to live in more spacious surroundings and the disorder that persisted in the centre of Shrewsbury.

Prior to the late 1950's the area suffered little change. However, pressure for development, planning policy prior to Conservation Area designation and indifferent architectural treatment in the period since 1960, have combined to diminish the overall quality and to lose the sense of cohesion and integrity that once existed.

Existing Land Uses

Introduction

Appendix 3 shows the land uses in the area. The area links Shrewsbury's town centre to its residential suburbs, and as such, it has a variety of uses. On the whole Abbey Foregate's commercial buildings are located towards its western end, nearer the centre of the town and also on the southern side of the road.

Ecclesiastical

As stated in section 3, the Abbey Foregate area has developed around the Abbey, which is still in use today. Some of the buildings which were built in association with the Abbey still exist. As a consequence of this, the western side of the study area remains important in ecclesiastic terms.

The pulpit, still survives situated on the edge of the car park and surrounded by railings to limit access to it. The almshouses, lie just to the north of the Abbey.

Residential

Many substantial residential properties, which have been built in an ad hoc manner, line Abbey Foregate itself. Examples of this can be seen in figure 4.4 and 4.5. A limited amount of new housing has been introduced into the area. Following the establishment of development along Abbey Foregate, late Victorian terraced housing was built to the north of the area.

Commercial

As the town has grown, so functions have spilled over into the suburb. There are many commercial properties concentrated along this approach to the town centre. Most of these can be found around the Abbey and on the southern side of Abbey Foregate. These include shops, offices, garages, small hotels and guesthouses, tyre distributors, builder's merchants and public houses. To the south of the Abbey, the Grade II* Listed Abbey Guest House and NO 193 Abbey Foregate have been restored and refurbished to create the Shrewsbury Quest. This has provided more of a focal point for activity and enhanced the visual appearance of an area which contained buildings in severe disrepair.

There is a car park adjacent to the Shrewsbury Quest, in which lies the early 14th century pulpit.

Industrial

In the past there has been some industry here, but it was not as concentrated as in the north of the town. Within the Conservation Area boundary there is very little industry, the only significant elements consisting of a bakery and some light industries (i.e. joinery).

To the south of the Conservation Area is a site often referred to as 'the back of the sheds.' This area has recently attracted relocating industries such as Safeway's Superstore, which moved from, the now vacant, Nos 173-175 Abbey Foregate.

Recreational/Open Space

There are two areas of formal recreational/open space in the study area. The main area is the Rea Valley, which is largely unspoiled, with a limited recreational use. The second area is the Abbey Sports Ground which is located to the north of the Abbey and consists of a pavilion, two bowling greens, a tennis court and a car parking area. Although limited in recreational terms, the Abbey Grounds and the car park also provide areas of open space.

The Archaeological Significance of the Area

In 1985, the Shropshire County Museum Service commissioned Birmingham University Field Archaeology Unit to undertake excavations in advance of the proposed redevelopment covering part of the site of the former monastic precincts around the Abbey.

The excavations were carried out by the Unit's 'Shrewsbury Heritage Project' and were concluded in 1988. The Abbey foundations and associated features were confirmed to be of national importance.

In the Shrewsbury and Atcham Local Plan, this site is identified as an ancient monument under policy HE3. This policy is designed to protect the archaeology from potentially damaging new development:

'Planning permission will not be granted for development which would have an adverse effect on the site or setting of a scheduled ancient monument' (SABC, 1997).

The Shrewsbury Abbey, including the pulpit, is a Scheduled Ancient Monument, number 359 on the County Monuments Record.

The Architectural and Historic Qualities of the Buildings and the contribution they make to the special interest of the area

Introduction

This area has a diverse range of building types and styles as it developed in an ad hoc way over an extensive period of time. This diversity incorporates many architectural historic qualities, which contribute to the townscape of the area.

Architectural Styles and Building Materials

The Abbey Foregate has three main architectural styles, the first being timber framed buildings, which was the dominant building type until the end of the 16th century. As Shropshire was once a well-wooded county, timber, especially oak, was a natural material for building construction. The majority of timber-framed buildings have not survived. Most of the surviving timber framed buildings are of box-framed construction. Medieval box framing usually has very large panels that needed to be braced for stability.

Abbey Foregate also has an example of a rarer type of timber frame building. Nos. 18-21 Abbey Foregate is a cruck frame building, where a large timber has been sawn in half to produce two identically shaped pieces of timber. These are joined by a collar beam, from which everything else in the building is supported. It was built around the 15th century as a row of houses and shops, but has been much altered and is currently in use as a garage and a restaurant. The base of one of the crucks can be seen on the exterior, and four massive cruck trusses with base collars are visible internally.

Later buildings are largely constructed of red brick with plain tiled or Welsh slate roofs. An example of this style is No 139 Abbey Foregate. It is a house now in commercial use, which was built in the late 18th century. This two-storey building with attic dormers is brick with a Welsh slate roof. No 49 Abbey Foregate, is Grade II c1800, brick with a plain tiled roof.

Finally, there are also a number of buildings made with coursed and squared red sandstone. The Abbey itself is an example of this constructed of local stone known as Keele Bed Sandstone. The Abbey also contains a different variety of New Red Sandstone, quarried from outcrops a few miles north of Shrewsbury.

Listed Buildings

Abbey Foregate displays a wealth of buildings which have architectural or historic interest, with over 150 having listed status.

One of the most significant is the Abbey, which is classified as a grade 'A' church (ie of national importance) and a Grade I listed building. Substantial elements of the structure are late 11th - early 12th century. The Abbey prospered until the late 14th century, which was probably when the magnificent west window was added. This is an early example of the Perpendicular style of English Gothic. After the dissolution in the 1530's, the locals used the nave and tower as a parish church.

The rest of the magnificent church was pulled down and its stones quarried for new buildings, in particular the nearby mansion of Whitehall, built between 1578 and

1583. Although this building lies just outside the study area, its importance should be recognized. In architectural terms, it was claimed to be one of the finest 'double-pile' houses in England.

The claustral buildings to the south of the Abbey, including the infirmary, survived in part until Thomas Telford diverted Abbey Foregate through them in the early 19th century.

Other historic buildings of particular significance include, the Abbey Guest House and Mill, Abbey House, and the Park Social Club - these are all designated Grade II* . The Park Social Club is the earliest example of the town of a brick façade that makes a real attempt at classicism. The lower added wing of the Abbey Guest House is built against the single surviving wall of another Abbey structure. This west wall may incorporate an earlier precinct wall, and represent an original watergate. Most of the listed buildings in the study area are Grade II.

The contribution made by key unlisted buildings

This study area is an exception to most Conservation Areas as a large proportion of the buildings in Abbey Foregate are listed. It is perhaps these buildings that make the Conservation Area special. However, there are a few key unlisted buildings which possibly contribute to the character of the area. The railway cottages down Newhall Gardens, are a good example of a terrace built in about 1840 which has largely retained its original features, thus keeping its sense of unity and uniformity. It is necessary to note, however, that the private gardens have been eroded and the road could be tree lined to give a greater sense of enclosure.

The railway cottages along Railway Road and Portobello also make a positive contribution to the character of the area.

Many of the unlisted buildings have been built in the latter part of this century, and some of these respect the character of the conservation area better than others.

These more recent developments have a horizontal emphasis rather than a vertical emphasis. Nos 42-43 Abbey Foregate have limited activity along the street because the activity within the building starts on the first floor, creating a 'dead frontage' at ground floor level.

Green Spaces and Trees

Green Spaces

Public open space in Abbey Foregate is limited as much of the open space is in privately owned back gardens. The principle area of green space is the Rea Valley, which is a sizeable area in the south of the Conservation Area. It forms part of a wildlife corridor, which links the River Severn and the upper reaches of the Rea Brook extending to Pontesbury and beyond. This is an important local landscape feature, which provides informal space close to the centre of the town. It consists of semi-pasture and meadow, scrub, hedgerow and carr woodland, making an invaluable contribution to the aesthetic character of the town.

Future development is unlikely to take place here due to the extensive flood plain of the Rea Brook. In addition, this area is designated in the Local Plan as green space under policy LNC4, and as a Local Nature Reserve, under policy LNC10. This reduces the scope of development that would be permitted on or around the site.

Trees

Trees are an important element of any Conservation Area, not only in public places but on private land as well. As the majority of buildings along Abbey Foregate front onto the pavement, private open space that is visible from the main road is limited. However, mature trees can be found on the pavements along Abbey Foregate, enhancing the visual richness of the area.

The grounds of the Abbey have a variety of mature trees including oak, beech, lime, cherry and robinia, some of which are over 100 years old. In 1946 a number of Oak trees were planted in this area to commemorate rural Britain's achievement in raising nearly £9,000,000 for the Red Cross agricultural fund during World War II.

The Setting of the Conservation Area and its relationship with the landscape or open countryside, including definition of significant landmarks, vistas and panoramas where appropriate

The Abbey Foregate suburb is a linear development with a landmark identifying each point of entry. To access the area from the centre of town, it is necessary to cross over the river Severn on the Grade II* Listed English Bridge. On entering Abbey Foregate from this direction, Shrewsbury Abbey is clearly visible as a prominent landmark to the left of the road.

As you enter Abbey Foregate from the east, Lord Hill's Column, which lies just outside the Conservation Area boundary, is clearly visible on the right hand side of the road. It was built between 1814 and 1816, to the designs of Thomas Harrison of Chester, and at 41 metres, it is claimed to be the largest free standing Greek Doric column in the world. Situated next to the County Council offices it forms an impressive landmark and vista, which informs visitors of their close proximity to the historic town.

As this study area is not on the periphery of the settlement, its relationship with the open countryside is limited. However, as mentioned in earlier sections of this document, it borders on to the Rea Valley, a significant green corridor.

The extent of loss, intrusion or damage, i.e. the negative factors

The demolition or removal of features can strip an attractive building of its decoration, individuality and authenticity. If these are replaced, it is often with inappropriate alternatives or unsympathetic materials.

Some of the historic features of the Conservation Area have been lost over time. Abbeydale House which is located to the north east of the Abbey is one example of this. Its charm has been diminished by the removal of its original multi-paned sashes and replacement with larger plate glass. Another example is No 186, Abbey Foregate where replacement windows are of a different style.

Two of the windows in No 133, Abbey Foregate have been bricked up, thus altering the character of the building.

Inappropriate Buildings

Maps of this area show the compactness of the historic core of the town. Large modern buildings, which are out-of-scale with inappropriate roofscape, have a negative impact on the medieval texture of the town.

No 142 Abbey Foregate is a building, which differs from the majority of the buildings as it does not face onto the street, thus creating a blank facade.

Intrusive Signage

Shop fronts have an important impact on the street scene and influence the quality of the environment in Conservation Areas. Negative impacts include out of scale fascias with garish colours, particularly when a corporate image is used.

A few of the commercial properties in Abbey Foregate have intrusive signage near to buildings of high architectural quality.

Painting External Facades

Painting the external façade of a brick house or a stone cottage is one of the cheapest, but most potentially damaging of 'improvements' that can be made quite legally in a Conservation Area. Although it can be enhancement, it can draw the eye unnecessarily and have a detrimental impact on the surrounding buildings.

The Enhancement Proposals

Introduction

As stated in section 1, it is desirable to enhance Conservation Areas as well as preserve them. This section suggests a number of enhancement proposals, largely based upon the negative factors that have been identified. These proposals can be achieved through the use of mechanisms, which are already in place. These include legislation, policies and grant aid.

Features

It is important that the character of the Conservation Area does not deteriorate through loss of features. In the area, owners are eligible for Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme and Conservation Enhancement grants, whereby owners can maintain the traditional features on their properties.

Signage

Policy HE10 of the Local Plan relates specifically to shopfronts on listed buildings and in Conservation Areas. It states that:

"Shopfronts which have been insensitively altered to the detriment of the character of the area must be restored." (SABC. 1997).

External Facades

The painting of external facades is not encouraged. However, when painting does take place, it should be regularly maintained and a colour scheme appropriate to the building and should be carefully considered.

Public Access

The Rea Valley has some potential for increased public usage through the introduction of walkways, planting schemes and landscape improvements. It could be made more accessible whilst retaining much of its inherent character and natural beauty.

Redevelopment of Sites

A Planning Brief can be prepared for a site to give guidance to potential developers. Development on sites which do not have such supplementary planning guidance relating specifically to them need to consult Conservation Area policy.

The site at Mill Lane is approximately 0.46 hectares and slopes down from Abbey Foregate to the Rea Brook. In January 1998 a Planning Brief was prepared for this site which identifies the planning history, site constraints, development criteria and design considerations. Appropriate development on this site would enhance this part of Abbey Foregate.

Section 10 identifies Nos 173-175 Abbey Foregate as being discordant with its surroundings. One option for this vacant building would be to restore and reuse the building. This could include removing the front canopy which would reduce the horizontal emphasis of this building. Alternatively, the site could be redeveloped. If the latter is to take place, any new development should front onto Abbey Foregate and respect its setting in terms of land use, density, height, scale, massing and materials.

Suggestions have been made for changes to the Scheduled Ancient Monument site in order to reinforce links between the Abbey and the land to the south of the road. Long term alterations could include rerouting this section of the road. The opportunity would then be created to improve the setting of the Abbey and the Abbey Pulpit. In the shorter term, the exclusion of the car park in the immediate environs of the pulpit and the landscaping of the site of the former monastic buildings would be of considerable benefit to the setting of the Conservation Area. Any changes that take place must not have any kind of detrimental effect on the Scheduled Ancient Monument.

Conclusions

Having surveyed the Abbey Foregate area, various strengths and weaknesses have been identified. Perhaps the most positive characteristics are the abundance of buildings worthy of listed status and their diversity. The area is also a key route into the town, important in terms of archaeology and open space. However, its character has perhaps been spoilt by post war developments, primarily due to their horizontal emphasis.

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