

# Market Place/London Street Conservation Area Appraisal



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# LONDON STREET/MARKET PLACE CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

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# LONDON STREET/MARKET PLACE CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

## 1.0 Introduction

### 1.1 Purpose of the appraisal

This appraisal seeks to record and analyse the various features which give the London Street/Market Place Conservation Area its special architectural and historic interest. The area's buildings and spaces are noted and described, and marked on the Townscape Appraisal map along with listed buildings, buildings of townscape merit, significant trees and spaces, and important views into and out of the conservation area. There is a presumption that all of these features should be "preserved or enhanced", as required by the legislation.

This appraisal builds upon national policy, as set out in *Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 (PPG 15) - Planning and the Historic Environment*, and local policy, as set out in the *Reading Borough Local Plan 1991-2006*, and provides a firm basis on which applications for development within the London Street/Market Place Conservation Area can be assessed.

### 1.2 Summary of special interest

The Market Place/London Street Conservation Area was designated in 1972 and extended in 1982.

The special interest that justifies designation of the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area derives from the following features:

- Linear conservation area beside the planned medieval southern approach road, over the River Kennet, to a market place and church outside one of Reading Abbey's gateways;
- The Hospitium of St John the Baptist, founded in 1189 (Scheduled Monument);
- Two of Reading's three medieval churches: St Laurence's and St Giles', both with well treed churchyards;
- Isolated examples of timber-framed 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century buildings e.g. nos 26/27 Market Place, nos 49/53 London Street and nos 3/5 London Road;
- Good examples of prestigious Georgian town houses in London Street;
- The fine collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century municipal buildings in Blagrove Street including Waterhouse's distinctive Town Hall and Victoria Hall, Concert Hall and Museum, Library and Art Gallery;
- Groups of historic building around Market Place;
- Special historic and architectural focus around St Laurence's Church and the Town Hall complex;
- Many examples of building with bricks (red, blue and buff) from Reading's extensive local brickworks;

- Fine examples of 19<sup>th</sup> century banks and commercial buildings notably Barclays Bank, King Street and NatWest Bank, Market Place;
- Three green open spaces namely the churchyards of St Laurence's and St Giles' and the burial ground of the Friends Meeting House;
- Public open space (part-pedestrianised) composed of Market Place and Town Hall Square i.e. the area around the statue of Queen Victoria;
- Jacksons Corner, a once busy crossroads and locally known landmark;
- Trees in the public realm particularly street trees in London Street, Market Place and Town Hall Square;
- Tranquil atmosphere of Church Street;
- The presence of the River Kennet and a short visible length of Holy Brook;
- Lengths of natural stone kerb and historic paving in the courtyard of The George Hotel, Thorn Lane and alleys off London Street;
- Two examples of 19<sup>th</sup> century monuments: Sir John Soane's Simeon Monument and the Queen Victoria statue;

## 2.0 The planning policy context

Conservation areas are designated under the provisions of Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. A conservation area is defined as "*an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance*". It is the quality and interest of an *area*, rather than that of individual buildings, which is the prime consideration in identifying a conservation area.

Section 71 of the same Act requires local planning authorities to formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of any parts of their area which are conservation areas. Section 72 specifies that, in making a decision on an application for development in a conservation area, special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.

This document should be read in conjunction with national planning policy guidance, particularly PPG 15 – Planning and the Historic Environment. The layout and content follows guidance produced by English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the English Historic Towns Forum.

### 2.1 Local planning policy

Policies which seek the preservation and enhancement of archaeological sites, historic parks and gardens, listed buildings and conservation areas are set out in Chapter 6 of the *Reading Borough Local Plan 1991-2006* which was adopted on 14<sup>th</sup> October 1998. . Of particular note are Policy CUD 8 (Existing and New Conservation Areas) and CEN 1 (Town Centre Conservation Areas), as well policies CUD 6, 7 and 9 (which three outline Reading Borough Council's approach to development in conservation areas. Copies of these policies can be found at Appendix 2 of this document.

The Local Plan's conservation objectives are stated as:

- (i) to conserve or enhance the Borough's stock of listed buildings and other buildings of architectural quality or historical significance;
- (ii) to identify protect or enhance areas of character;
- (iii) to identify and conserve areas of archaeological significance and to protect or enhance finds and sites for the education and enjoyment of Reading residents.

### **3.0 Location and setting**

#### **3.1 Location and context**

The Market Place/London Street Conservation Area is located in central Reading. The northern half of this linear conservation area contains the site of the town's medieval market place, now formally known as 'Market Place', and the recently restored 19<sup>th</sup> century Town Hall within which are the Museum of Reading and the Reading Concert Hall. Immediately to the west is the commercial heart of Reading i.e. Broad Street and the modern Oracle Shopping Centre. Immediately to the east is Forbury Gardens, the site of the outer precinct of Reading Abbey, now a public park and the town centre's largest public open space.

The southern half of the conservation area, comprising London Street and Church Street, lies on the south side of the River Kennet which flows eastward under High Bridge, shortly to join the Thames. The southern half is severed from the town centre by the Inner Distribution Road (IDR), a wide dual-carriageway that is difficult for pedestrians to cross.

The River Kennet passes through the narrow mid-point of this linear conservation area. The land rises gently northward from the river to St Laurence's Church where it becomes level. Similarly, the land rises gently southward from the river to the upper end of London Road.

#### **3.2 General character and plan form**

The spine of this linear conservation area is formed by the course of a planned 12<sup>th</sup> century southern approach road to a market place deliberately located outside the western gates of Reading Abbey's grounds. The route to the heart of the medieval town followed today's London Street, Duke Street and High Street. Though no longer a significant north-south route, the linear course of the old route and the triangular-shaped open space of the former market place remain.

London Street is noticeably wider than streets closer to the town centre and, generally speaking, development to the rear, east and west, of London Street is less dense than the tight urban form found in the conservation area north of the River Kennet.

Storey heights range from 2 to 4 storeys, the higher buildings being located close to the town centre in Market Place and Blagrove Street. A few prestigious buildings in London Street also rise to four storeys.

## **4.0 Historic development**

### **4.1 Archaeology**

There is clear evidence for Roman settlement on both sides of the Thames at Reading. Field enclosure ditches containing Roman pottery have been found in many places in Reading indicating thriving farming activity.

Reading is named after a Saxon tribe, the *Readingas*, who settled in the area in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Recent work on development sites in Reading has uncovered some evidence of early Saxon occupation.

Asser's *Life of Alfred* records that in 870-71 the Danes wintered in Reading and built a defensive earthwork between the Kennet and the Thames 'on the right hand side of the royal vill'. This earthwork is most likely to have been across the spur of land where Reading Abbey was later built although as yet no evidence for it has been discovered. A few Viking finds have been made elsewhere in Reading.

The Domesday Survey for Reading, undertaken in 1085-6, describes a large estate formerly held by King Edward and a church and estate held by the Abbot of Battle, evidence for a thriving urban community in the eleventh century centred where the main north-south and east-west roads crossed.

### **4.2 Historic development**

The turning point in Reading's history came in 1121 when Henry I founded Reading Abbey, later to become one of the richest religious houses in England until the Dissolution in 1539. The enormous abbey church now lies under the present Forbury Garden and Abbots' Walk to the east of the MarketPlace/London Street Conservation Area.

St Laurence's Church dates from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century and originally the outer abbey gate was immediately attached to its south flank. In 1189 the Hospitium of St John Baptist (the flint building in the churchyard of St Laurence's) was founded and probably in connection with this the church was enlarged. In addition to St Laurence, there were two other medieval churches in Reading: St Giles, which is in this conservation area, and St Mary's, which is in the St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area. St. Laurence's is the municipal church, with a special pew for the mayor, and the extraordinary monument of Sir John Blagrove, the mathematician. It also has the font in which Archbishop William Laud was baptised. St.Giles's was heavily restored in 1873. Both have graveyards, with some fine trees and interesting monuments. At the Reformation, both parish churches (and St Mary's) were stripped of their altars, statues, stained glass, and other finery.

During the medieval period Reading developed rapidly, based on the manufacture of woollen cloth, leather goods and silk weaving. This was encouraged by its good location on the crossing of major historic land routes, and by the proximity of the two waterways – the River Kennet and the River Thames.

In 1560 Elizabeth I confirmed the royal charter granted by Henry VIII, conferring greater powers of self-government to the town. However, the economy of the town was badly affected by the Civil War and a visitor commented in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century that ‘... *its houses are mean and the streets though pretty large, unpaved*’. The writer Daniel Defoe (1660-1731) called Reading ‘*very large, wealthy, handsomely built*’.

From the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Reading began to flourish as an important stopping-off place between Bath and London. Inns flourished and regular public coaches began in 1780. Leather tanning continued and new industries developed, most notably brewing, brick and tile making, iron-founding, and boat building.

Early 19<sup>th</sup> century maps show the town had hardly extended beyond its medieval core but a fast town expansion was stimulated by the development of the canals. The Kennet Canal was completed in 1723 and the Kennet and Avon Canal in 1810, bringing London and Bristol, two major sea ports, into direct communication by water.

A further boost to the development of Reading was the construction of the Great Western Railway which reached the town in 1840. The coming of the railway resulted in a rapid growth of major industries, notably Huntley & Palmers, biscuit makers, and Suttons Seeds, which provided work for a rapidly increasing population.

The stagecoaches that travelled between London, Bath and Bristol stopped at Reading's famous coaching inns including The Bear, The Crown and The George. In 1786 a new Town Hall was built, which is the Victoria Hall in the present-day Town Hall.

In the first national census, in 1801, the population of Reading was about 9,400. By 1851 the population had more than doubled, to 21,500, and at the end of the century, it stood at around 72,000.

In the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the centre of Reading was redeveloped by demolishing parts of the historic core of the town to provide offices and shopping precincts. The construction of the Inner Distribution Road, which started in 1969, improved traffic circulation but severed links between different areas of the town. More recently, the Oracle Shopping Centre has reinvigorated the town centre but meant the loss of a number of historic buildings including Simonds' brewery on the banks of the River Kennet. The canal became disused and impassable by the 1940s but since 1992 has been reopened for leisure uses following a restoration scheme by the Kennet and Avon Trust.

### 4.3 The effect of historical development on plan form; settlement pattern

Reading's early street pattern and the close relationship of medieval church, market place and river crossing place can still be traced today in the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area.

Reading grew up around the lowest point at which the River Kennet could be crossed. The original crossing place, the natural place for a town to be started, seems to have been at the bottom of today's Bridge Street. Towards this crossing place came roads from Oxford, Southampton, Bristol and London. The earliest main south-north route followed Southampton Street and Bridge Street to St Mary's Butts where the medieval St Mary's Church still stands.

Reading Abbey was situated on rising ground north of the River Kennet to the north east of the early river crossing. The growth of the town after the foundation of the abbey stimulated the building of St Laurence's Church which was built to serve the population which grew up around the Abbey. Gradually the focus of the town moved eastwards and a new market place, dominated by St Laurence's Church, replaced the earlier market place by St Mary's Butts which had been the nucleus of the town prior to the founding of Reading Abbey. St Giles's Church, on the other side of the River Kennet, was built for those who lived in the southern part of the town, enabling them to go to church even when the river was in flood.

As the influence of the Abbey grew, the early route along the course of today's Southampton Street, Bridge Street and St. Mary's Butts was rivalled by a south-north road leading directly to the newly established market place by St Laurence's Church via a new bridge over the Kennet. This new road followed London Street over the Kennet at High Bridge and led along Duke Street to the Market Place i.e. the backbone of the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area.

The earliest map of Reading, published in John Speed's atlas of Great Britain in 1611 shows that the plan of the town in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century resembled a triangle with a church roughly at each corner: St Mary's, St Giles' and St Laurence's. The two long roughly north-south sides of the triangle are formed by the two old rivalrous routes mentioned above. The River Kennet, spanned by two bridges (one over each route), flowed through the centre of the town. The northern side of the triangle was Friar Street. The most developed area is shown to be north of the Kennet and west of the site of Reading Abbey. This map identifies and names London Street and Duke Street and illustrates the triangular market place beside St Laurence's. A lane branched westward from London Street to St Giles' Church, the precursor of today's Church Street.

Reading was mostly contained within the medieval limits of the 'triangle' until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the town began to expand as a result of improved transport links and industrialisation. Rocque's map of the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century shows some development westward along Castle Street and the beginnings of development eastward along London Road. King Street was formed in 1760 by demolishing the row of houses which had till



then divided it into Sun Lane and Back Lane. Tomkin's map of 1802 is far more detailed and shows many buildings, especially in London Street, that are still standing today.

High Bridge, built of Portland Stone in 1787 to replace a wooden bridge of 1707 (which was itself a replacement), is now the oldest bridge over the Kennet, all of the bridges in Bridge Street having been replaced.

Within the conservation area there are two significant changes to its historic street pattern, both caused by the construction in the 1970s of the Inner Distribution Road (IDR) across the lower end of London Street: Mill Lane, which led westwards from the bottom of London Street to a mill beside the Kennet, has been obliterated by the new road and modern development; Queens Road, created in the 1830s as part of the eastward expansion of Reading, has, at its junction with London Street, been re-aligned and widened with an ensuing loss of many historic buildings.

The wide dual-carriageway of the IDR slices London Street into two parts. Its construction necessitated the demolition of many buildings. A one-way system and other traffic management measures have blocked the former north-south thoroughfare from London Street to Market Place and the town centre.

## **5.0 Spatial analysis**

### **5.1 Key views and vistas**

The landmarks in the conservation area are the tower of St Laurence's, the spire of St Giles' and the clock tower and lively roofscape of the Town Hall. The tower of St Laurence's looks over both Market Place and Town Hall Square. There is a good long distance view of the tower of St Laurence's from the north end of Duke Street - as one approaches from High Street the Town Hall clock tower comes into view and eventually one can see medieval church, 17<sup>th</sup> century timber framed buildings and 19<sup>th</sup> century town hall in a single view. There is an enticing glimpse of the spire of St Giles' looking eastward along Church Street from London Street, framed between two listed buildings the most northerly of which, no. 88, has a jettied first storey.

There are good views of the Town Hall and Concert Hall from Friar Street, Blagrove Street and Market Place.

Open space in Market Place enable good views of surrounding buildings especially nos 23-34 Market Place which are all listed. In summer, three trees in the southern end of the Market Place block the view of nos. 46-52 Market Place, a fine row of historic buildings which compete with adjacent undistinguished modern architecture.

The great width and the slight curve and rise of London Street permit long oblique views of the street's fine Georgian architecture, especially its west side.

Views along the River Kennet are pleasing and a distinctive feature of the conservation area. From High Bridge looking eastwards, there is a restful though not spectacular view of the river and modern riverside developments. From the new bridge in Yield Hall Place there is an exciting view westwards of modern commercial development outside the conservation area.

## **5.2 The character of spaces within the area**

The conservation area is, generally speaking, a tightly knit urban area composed of continuous frontages of two-, three- and four-storey buildings beside streets of varying length and width. Close to St Laurence's Church there is a wide part-pedestrianised area that includes the triangular site of Market Place and an adjoining paved area around the statue of Queen Victoria known as Town Hall Square. This open space, based on the medieval market place and forecourt of a former gateway to the Abbey, provides a good setting for the area's historic buildings especially St Laurence's Church, the Town Hall and a row of listed buildings (nos. 23 to 34) on the north-east of Market Place.

Whilst the River Kennet passing under High Bridge provides a pleasant break in the frontage of Duke Street, the IDR is a wide, characterless dual-carriageway that completely disrupts the historic street pattern and spoils the continuity of the Duke Street/London Street route to and from the town centre.

London Street is unusually wide whilst the entrance to Church Street and the short length of High Street are narrow and enclosed and have the feel of town alleys.

The only green open spaces are graveyards adjoining three places of worship: St Laurence's Church, St Giles' Church and the Friends Meeting House. Former back yards or gardens have been developed or are used for car parking.

## 6.0 Definition of the special interest of the conservation area

### 6.1 Definition of character areas

The conservation area can be divided into four character areas. Two character areas in each of the two distinct parts of the conservation area, north and south of the Kennet.

Although historically it was the River Kennet that separated the inner core of Reading from its southern suburbs today the separation is marked much more emphatically by the Inner Distribution Road (IDR). For the purpose of this appraisal, the short section of London Street north of the IDR, despite its historical attachment to the length of London Street south of the IDR, is included in the northern part of the conservation area.

The four character areas are:

#### *South of the IDR*

- Area 1: London Street, south of the IDR;
- Area 2: Church Street and environs of St Giles' Church;

#### *North of the IDR*

- Area 3: Jackson's Corner including King Street, London Street (north), Duke Street and the River Kennet;
- Area 4: Market Place and environs of St Laurence's Church and Town Hall including part of Blagrove Street and The Forbury.

#### Area 1: London Street:

London Street has medieval origins and is marked '*London Strete*' on John Speed's 1611 map of Reading. Though many of London Street's buildings have a distinctively Georgian, and later, appearance, parts of older structures can be found including cellars made from limestone 'quarried' from Reading Abbey, possibly in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

There are a few remaining 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century buildings including nos. 49-53 London Street, listed grade II, which has an 18<sup>th</sup> century front on an earlier, timber-framed building and no. 88 London Street which has a jettied first floor to Church Street. Nos. 49/51 London Street contains 17<sup>th</sup> century paneling.

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, London Street was one of the fashionable parts of town and many of the elegant houses which lined either side of the road still survive. Though altered, no longer in residential use and devoid of their spacious rear gardens, these are the properties which today add grandeur to the streetscene. Then, as now, the street was unusually wide. Development at the 'top' and 'bottom' of the street, beside the London Road and IDR junctions respectively, is modern.

Until the arrival of the railway, London Street was the main route for coaches from the town centre to London, before they turned left into London Road. Today the street is more

commercial than residential. It contains a high proportion of business and professional services. Despite the pedestrian hazard posed by the IDR which severs the area from Reading's main shopping centre, London Street contains a few specialist retail shops. The width of the carriageway has been re-aligned and re-arranged in late 20<sup>th</sup> century to accommodate lay-by parking, bus stops and pedestrian islands.

South Street contains a row of brick-built terraced houses but its south side, and the west side of East Street, is predominantly modern in character and appearance.

*Character Area 1: Features that make a positive contribution to the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:*

- The unusual width of the street, which rises gently from the River Kennet with a slight eastward curve, creates a visually interesting townscape;
- The high concentration of historic buildings on either side, many of which are listed;
- The mix of architectural styles and periods with an overall majority of late 18<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup> century buildings;
- High quality townscape and well-proportioned relationship between tall building and wide street;
- The predominance of brick with occasional use of stone and stucco;
- The strong vertical rhythm created by regular bays of aligned windows and doors;
- Key buildings: No. 33 London Street, originally the Scientific Institution, 1843, by W.Brown, and Nos 73-79 London Street, described by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner as the “best” of the Georgian houses;
- Side alleys and streets which afford glimpses and views to east and west;
- Wide pavements;
- Ten young street trees which help to soften the otherwise urban environment;
- Prevalence of white-painted vertical sliding sash windows
- The variety of historic architectural detail including pedimented doorcases, iron balconies and railings, timber shopfronts;

*Character Area 1: Features that have a negative impact on the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:*

- Noise and fumes from a constant stream of traffic;
- London Street is severed from town centre by the Inner Distribution Road;
- Modern development at north and south extremities of London Street, adjacent to road junctions, spoils the overall historic appearance of the area;
- Modern alterations to the carriageway and pavement e.g. concrete paving do not always respect the quality of the street's historic buildings;
- Lack of enclosure at northern end;
- Vacant commercial and retail space;
- Loss of original windows and front doors to modern replacements;

- Loss of original slate roofs and other architectural features such as gates and railings;
- Plethora of signs and other street furniture, some of which may be redundant;
- Garish shopfronts that do not respect the host building e.g. no. 45 London Street;

### Area 2: Church Street;

Church Street links London Street to St Giles' church and thereby to Southampton Street. In addition to St Giles' Church, the Friends Meeting House (not easily seen because it is set back behind a modern single storey extension) is a key building with a secluded burial ground to the rear (north).

On the south side of the street is a modern housing development (outside the conservation area) that stands on the site of the Tin Works that made tins for Huntley and Palmer's biscuits. Nos 4-6b, on the north side, is a row of 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, three of which are listed. The eastern end of the street is narrow and confined. It opens out at a road junction between church and historic houses and, unfortunately, modern development and a view northward of the tall multistorey car park dispel the historic character promoted by the old church, vicarage and graveyard opposite. St Giles' Church is one of the three medieval churches of Reading, much altered and 'restored' by J.P. St Aubyn in 1873.

This character area, located between the noise and pollution of traffic in London Street and Southampton Street has a distinctively quiet atmosphere enhanced by the trees and greenery of the churchyard.

*Character Area 2: Features that make a positive contribution to the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:*

- Narrow entrance from London Street with attractive view of St Giles' church spire;
- St Giles' Church and vicarage;
- Friends Meeting House and secluded burial ground;
- Row of 19<sup>th</sup> century houses on north side;
- Prevalent use of brick;
- Tranquil atmosphere;
- Green open space of St Giles' churchyard;
- Remnants of historic floorscape (stone setts and kerbs at edge of carriageway);
- Typical early 20<sup>th</sup> century parish hall (Southampton Street);
- Trees and greenery adjacent to St Giles' Church and Friends Meeting House;
- Pedestrian friendly area with infrequent traffic.

*Character Area 2: Features that have a negative impact on the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:*

- Modern single storey extension spoils the setting and appearance of the listed Friends Meeting House;

- The wide intersection of Church Street and St Giles Close, surrounded by modern development, erodes historic character between the historic buildings of Church Street and St Giles' Church;
- Modern housing development intrudes upon historic character;
- Poorly maintained road and pavement surface;
- Wheelie bins intrude upon the historic streetscene;
- Unsightly security fence attached to north side of St Giles' church.

### Area 3: Duke Street, Jacksons Corner and the River Kennet;

This is the least homogenous of the four character areas but represents the transition from central core shopping area to other uses including hotel, casino and office use as one progresses towards London Street. The area can be divided into riverside development beside the Kennet and urban development around Jacksons Corner. From Yield Hall Place the area is dominated by the bulk of the Oracle Shopping Centre.

High Bridge, built over the Kennet in 1787, stands just upstream from a narrow modern bridge built approximately 200 years later. The close proximity of the two bridges typifies the close mix of old and new development that characterises this part of the area.

Jacksons Corner is a spacious cross-roads where curved late 19<sup>th</sup> century corner buildings such as 1-9 King's Road (Jacksons) and 2 Duke Street/25 King Street (Jacobs) have been designed to take account of their prominent location.

A modern shopping mall (Kings Walk) and modern development on the east side of the Duke Street/King's Road junction is out of character with the historic form and layout of the area.

*Character Area 3: Features that make a positive contribution to the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:*

- Jacksons Corner, a once busy crossroads and locally known landmark;
- Barclays Bank, King Street by Henry and Nathaniel Briant, 1838-9, in an ornate Italian palazzo style;
- The George Hotel, King Street, built around a courtyard with entrances from King Street and Minster Street, first mentioned in 1423 but built and re-built many times;
- 8 High Street, an ornate tiled and terracotta building in Art Nouveau style;
- The former Ship Hotel, Duke Street, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century re-building of an earlier coaching inn;
- River Kennet and riverside views from the two bridges;
- Views up High Street of St Laurence's church tower;
- Holy Brook, glimpsed from Kings Walk;
- Historic stone setted road surface in Thorn Lane;
- Riverside trees.

*Character Area 3: Features that have a negative impact on the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:*

- Noise and fumes from traffic;
- Garish shop signage (e.g. Davina's, 2 Duke Street);
- Nos. 14/16 King Street (Mothercare) is completely out of character with neighbouring historic buildings;
- Historic architectural character is much diluted by a high proportion of undistinguished modern developments;
- No. 22 Duke Street (former Ship Hotel) is empty and boarded up;

Area 4: Market Place and environs of St Laurence's Church and Town Hall.

St Laurence's Church and the adjacent Town Hall complex are the key buildings of this character area. The early 12<sup>th</sup> century church looks down the Market Place and overlooks Town Hall Square. Originally the outer gate of Reading Abbey was attached to its south flank. Along the south side of the church, a covered walkway was built by the mathematician John Blagrave in 1619, known as Blagrave's piazza. Later the parish stocks stood beneath it. The walkway was demolished in 1867.

The collection of municipal buildings in Blagrave Street is arranged around an 18<sup>th</sup> century town hall. In 1785 the old town hall in the upper storey of the Abbey Hospitium was demolished and a new one was built, now known as Victoria Hall. It was rebuilt in an Italianate style in 1864 to accommodate the Father Willis Organ. In 1875 a new building designed by Alfred Waterhouse with bricks from the Reading firm of Colliers was completed. Waterhouse wrapped his new building around the earlier town hall and carefully placed the clock tower for views from Friar Street and Market Place. In the next few years, further buildings were added to the complex. A Public Library and Museum by Thomas Lainson was added in 1883-4 and an Art Gallery by W.R.Howell in 1897. This group of buildings, decorated with a lively display of red and blue bricks and terracotta is one of the defining images of Reading's architecture. The pairing of the stone and flint medieval church tower and Waterhouse's red and blue brick clock tower display a lively contrast of colour and building materials, both in a Gothic style.

The Market Place and its continuation into the pedestrianised space in front of the Town Hall has its origins in the 12<sup>th</sup> century but was described in the 1960s by the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner as a "triangular space of no visual distinction". Today, its potential as a pedestrianised public open space is constrained by the movement of buses and other vehicles through the area and its location out of sight of Broad Street, Reading's main shopping street. Paving, planters and other features within the public realm are tired and dated and Market Place awaits major environmental improvements.

The Market Place was partly destroyed by a bomb in 1943 and the buildings around Market Place show a variety of styles and periods in which, unfortunately, mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Brutalist architecture figures largely. Nos. 27/28 and 29/31 have timber frames (altered) from the 17<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. On the opposite side of Market Place, Nos. 13-16

(NatWest Bank) dates from c1875 in a Renaissance palace style. Facing north, on the lower side of Market Place, nos. 48/49 is a stucco'd mid 18<sup>th</sup> century building.

*Character Area 4: Features that make a positive contribution to the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:*

- The close proximity of St Laurence's Church and Town Hall buildings makes a strong architectural statement;
- St Laurence's Church and distinctive tower;
- The large public open space (part-pedestrianised) composed of Market Place and the area around the statue of Queen Victoria;
- Town Hall complex comprising Victoria Hall, Concert Hall, Town Hall and Museum, Library and Art Gallery;
- The collection of historic buildings looking onto Market Place;
- The monument in Market Place, designed by Sir John Soane in 1804 to commemorate Edward Simeon a mayor of Reading and Governor of the Bank of England, and the statue of Queen Victoria;
- Good views of Town Hall clock tower and the tower of St Laurence's Church;
- Trees, greenery and open space of St Laurence's churchyard;
- Trees in the public realm which soften the harsh urban townscape;
- Natural stone kerbs;

*Character Area 4: Features that have a negative impact on the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:*

- Modern architecture in Market Place is undistinguished and fails to respect neighbouring historic buildings e.g. nos. 19-22 Market Place/2-8 The Forbury, nos 37-43 Market Place and no. 13 High Street;
- Paving of Town Hall square is worn out and poorly patched with tarmac;
- Brick planters which are in need of replacement;
- Uneven surface in pedestrianised areas;
- Litter and rubbish in St Laurence's churchyard is unsightly;
- Vacant commercial properties;
- Conflict of traffic and pedestrians in Market Place;
- Loss of original historic windows and front doors to modern replacements e.g. 10-12 The Forbury;
- Noise and fumes from traffic;
- Loss of original architectural features;
- Poor state or repair of wall around St Laurence's churchyard (The Forbury)
- Plethora of signs and other street furniture, some of which may be redundant.



## **6.2 Architectural and historic character: building methods and materials**

The conservation area contains buildings from the 12<sup>th</sup> century onwards with an obvious preponderance of late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings. Unfortunately, given the historic development of the area, there is much late 20<sup>th</sup> century redevelopment and some modern buildings, because of their design, scale and materials, have a negative effect on the special architectural interest of the conservation area.

St Laurence's and St Giles' churches are the two oldest buildings in the area, the former almost totally rebuilt in 1873. From the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries there are a few isolated examples of timber-framing with typical jetties at first floor e.g. nos 26/27 Market Place, no 88 London Street and nos 3/5 London Road. These rare survivors of Reading's pre-industrial urban development are a surprising find amongst a townscape that is characterised by post-1750 buildings.

London Street, just outside the town centre, hosts examples of elegant Georgian town houses, notably nos 73-79. Around Market Place and Blagrove Street there has been much rebuilding in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The 19<sup>th</sup> century developments display good examples of Reading's Victorian brick architecture, not only the listed Town Hall complex but also modest commercial buildings such as Jacksons, 1-9 Kings Road and 46/47 Market Place.

St Laurence's Church and St Giles' Church are both constructed with local stone and flint. Elsewhere, the use of flint is negligible but natural stone is used for buildings seeking grandeur such as no. 33 London Road and Victorian banks in Market Place and King Street.

Brick is one of the distinguishing features of Reading's architecture and there are examples of good quality brickwork throughout the conservation area. Brick was a popular building material in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and the ready availability of different coloured bricks provided the opportunity for the lively polychromatic brickwork found throughout Victorian Reading. The town had several brickworks, the most notable being S & E Collier Ltd at Water Road and Elgar Road and two brick works in Tilehurst area.

## **6.3 Buildings of Townscape Merit**

A large number of unlisted buildings have been noted on the Townscape Appraisal map as being "Buildings of Townscape Merit".

Buildings identified as having "townscape merit" will vary, but commonly they will be good examples of relatively unaltered 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings where their style, detailing and building materials provides the streetscape with interest and variety. Most importantly, they make a positive contribution to the special interest of a conservation area.

Buildings of Townscape Merit help create a conservation area's distinctive and interesting historic townscape. As recommended in Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning and the

Historic Environment, the general presumption should be in favour of retaining buildings which make a positive contribution to the character or appearance of a conservation area.

#### **6.4 Public realm**

Road and footway surfaces are predominantly modern i.e. tarmac, concrete and brick products. The pedestrianised surface in Market Place and around the Queen Victoria statue is poorly patched with tarmac and in need of replacement. A scheme of environmental improvements in the Market Place was well underway in March 2007. Footways close to the Town Hall are paved with a herringbone pattern of red brick pavements to compliment the exuberant brickwork of the Town Hall itself.

There are lengths of granite stone kerbs in Blagrove Street, the Forbury and Market Place. Thorn Lane has a carriageway of stone setts and Church Street's tarmac carriageway is flanked by two rows of square-section stone setts. Examples of historic paving are confined to privately maintained areas such as the courtyard of The George Hotel (which has a cobbled entrance), and stone-paved alleys beside no. 41 and no. 114 London Street. These small areas of historic floorscape should be preserved.

Street lighting columns, signage and street furniture are modern.

#### **6.5 Local details and features**

Four local features are of particular note: the Simeon Obelisk in Market Place by Sir John Soane (1804), the Queen Victoria Jubilee Statue sculpted by George Simmonds (1857), the Gothic-style drinking fountain on the south side of St Laurence's tower (c1850) and the wall enclosing St Giles' Vicarage garden in Church Street. Their significance is marked by their status as listed buildings but there are lesser features that enhance the conservation area and cumulatively help to give the conservation area a sense of place, notably:

- Historic railings beside the Quaker burial ground (east side), in St Laurence's churchyard and in front of nos. 73-75 and nos. 54-58 London Street;
- Bollards in Church Street;
- Cast-iron street name signs in Yield Hall Lane, Broad Street and elsewhere;
- Projecting clock on Jacobs jewellery shop in King Street;
- 'Jacksons Corner' sign attached to Jackson's shop;
- 'Charter for 2003' set in paving outside the Town Hall;
- Lamp fittings (restored) on High Bridge;
- Historic lamp column (re-used) in St Laurence's church yard.

## 6.6 Historic shopfronts

The conservation area contains some 19th/early 20<sup>th</sup> century shopfronts, or parts of shopfronts, that make a positive contribution to the special interest of the area. The two most notable are no. 103 London Street which is an original early 19<sup>th</sup> century shopfront with two flat bows with frieze and moulded cornice over (obscured by modern fascia) and no. 8 High Street (Oxfam) which has a tiled and terracotta façade in Art Nouveau style of 1904. The following premises, mostly in London Street, retain historic shopfronts or significant elements of a historic shopfront that should be preserved. The list is not exhaustive:

- 54 London Street;
- 82-84 London Street;
- 90-94 London Street;
- 103 London Street;
- 114 London Street;
- Blagrove Arms, Blagrove Street;
- Jackson's, King's Road;
- 24 King Street;
- 5 Buttermarket;
- 27/28 Market Place;
- 46/47 Market Place;
- 8 High Street.

## 6.7 Green spaces, trees and other natural elements

Green spaces are uncommon in this urban conservation area. The three most significant green areas, softening an otherwise harsh urban environment, are the enclosed burial grounds of St Laurence's Church, St Giles' Church and the Friends Meeting House.

The River Kennet is a notable feature of the conservation area, a reminder of the town's original location at a river crossing place. Holy Brook, originally a natural branch of the River Kennet but later harnessed as a serial millstream serving early industries such as dyeing and tanning flows, largely underground, through the conservation area but it can be glimpsed from a window in the Kings Walk shopping arcade.

Trees are few and because of their scarcity they make a significant contribution to this urban conservation area's special character and sense of identity. Significant tree groups are to be found in the area's three burial grounds. Significant individual trees and small groups in the following locations are of special note: Market Place and outside the Town Hall, young street trees in London Street, riverside trees by High Bridge. These and other significant trees in the townscape are marked on the Townscape Appraisal map. It has not been possible to identify every notable tree and lack of a specific reference does not imply that it must not be of value.

## 6.8 Historic associations

In 1822 Joseph and Thomas Huntley began to bake biscuits at No. 72 London Street, cleverly taking advantage of a ready market from the coaches that passed through London Street en route to London. This small venture was the beginnings of the huge biscuit manufactory of Huntley & Palmers, a major employer and influence on the town's economic fortunes.

Charles Dickens read Pickwick Papers at No. 33 London Street, formerly a Primitive Methodist Chapel but in fact built in 1843 as a Literary, Scientific and Mechanics' Institute.

No. 73 London Street was the home of Dr Addington, physician to George III, father of Henry Addington, Prime Minister from 1801-1804.

In the 1690s the Quakers worshipped in Sim's Court, behind no 39 London Street and William Penn, founder of Pennsylvania, USA, was a frequent visitor.

## 6.9 General condition of the area

The wall around St Laurence's churchyard is propped up by scaffolding and in urgent need of attention to secure its long-term preservation.

Otherwise, the general state of repair of buildings in the conservation area is good but there are a number of vacant retail and commercial premises. In particular the former public house at no. 22 Duke Street is boarded up and its condition needs monitoring.

## 6.10 Issues

### *Design of new development*

Many 1960s and 1970s developments pay little heed to their context and some have a notably negative effect on the character and appearance of the conservation area. More recent development within the conservation area has shown a marked improvement but design of new development remains a major issue.

### *Traffic noise and pollution*

The character and environmental quality of the main streets are spoiled by noise and pollution of traffic.

### *Loss of original architectural details*

Many of the unlisted, and some of the listed, buildings in the conservation have been adversely affected by the use of inappropriate modern materials or details. Common faults include:

- the replacement of original timber sash windows with uPVC or aluminium;
- the loss of original panelled front doors and their replacement with stained hardwood, uPVC or aluminium doors;
- loss of chimney stacks and clay pots;
- the replacement of clay tile or Welsh slate roofs with concrete tiles;

#### *Street clutter*

Historic streetscape and local distinctiveness is under threat from the requirements of traffic management and public amenities.

#### *Vacant commercial and retail space*

There appears to be a large amount of vacant property in the conservation area. Whilst this is not of itself a cause for concern, it could lead to neglect of routine building maintenance, repair and upkeep.

## **7.0 Areas for further work**

### **7.1 Consideration of conservation area boundary changes (to be the subject of a public consultation exercise)**

1. The IDR, which is of no historic or architectural interest, cuts this conservation area in half. In terms of historic development and prevailing architecture, the northern (Market Place) section has a completely different character to the southern (London Street) section. Consideration might be given to creating two separate conservation areas.
2. Changes in Yield Hall Place that have taken place since designation have resulted in an awkward boundary that no longer makes sense ‘on the ground’. The existing boundary should be re-aligned to accord with the current course of Yield Hall Place passing over the new bridge to join the lower end of London Street opposite the Queens Road junction.
3. There is considerable historic and architectural interest to the west and east of Market Place and Town Hall Square. Rather than extend the existing conservation area to include these additional areas, which might create an unwieldy conservation area lacking in overall cohesion, consideration should be given to designating a new conservation area to the west, based on the 19<sup>th</sup> century re-development of the town centre (i.e. Friar Street and Broad Street), and a new conservation area to the east based on Forbury Gardens and the site of the former abbey.

As a minimum, consideration should be given to extending the existing Market Place/London Street Conservation Area to include open space and buildings, most of which are historic, at the east end of Friar Street thereby ensuring that all buildings with a visual impact on Town Hall Square and the fine pairing of St Laurence’s and the Town Hall lies within a conservation area.

### **7.2 Opportunities for enhancement**

The floorscape and street furniture in the Market Place and Town Hall Square is in need of updating. A scheme of environmental improvements was well underway in March 2007.

### **7.3 Monitoring and review**

This document should be reviewed every five years in the light of the Local Development Framework and emerging government policy. A review should include the following:

- A survey of the area to identify changes in its character and appearance;
- An assessment of whether the various recommendations detailed in this document have been acted upon, including proposed enhancements;
- A building condition survey;
- The production of a short report detailing the findings of the survey and any necessary action;
- Publicity and advertising.

**Appendix 1 -Bibliography**

*The Story of Reading* Daphne Philips Countryside Books, 1999

*Victoria County History*, Berkshire vol. III 1972

*Reading Streets and Their Names* Adam Sowan, Two Rivers 2000

Reading History Trail <http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/radstock/rht/index.html>

History of Reading: Reading BC [www.reading.gov.uk](http://www.reading.gov.uk)

Royal Berkshire History [www.berkshirehistory.com](http://www.berkshirehistory.com).

Reading Museum [www.readingmuseum.org.uk](http://www.readingmuseum.org.uk)

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## **Appendix 2 – Relevant Local Plan Policies**

The following policies from the Reading Borough Local Plan (1991-2006) are relevant to the preservation and enhancement of the conservation area:

### **POLICY CUD 6: DEMOLITION OF UNLISTED BUILDINGS IN CONSERVATION AREAS**

*CONSENT TO DEMOLISH IN A CONSERVATION AREA WILL NORMALLY ONLY BE PERMITTED WHERE IT CAN BE SHOWN THAT IT IS WHOLLY BEYOND REPAIR, INCAPABLE OF REASONABLY BENEFICIAL USE, OF INAPPROPRIATE STRUCTURE OR DESIGN, OR WHERE ITS REMOVAL OR REPLACEMENT WOULD BENEFIT THE APPEARANCE OR CHARACTER OF THE AREA. DEMOLITION WILL BE MORE FAVOURABLY ASSESSED WHERE THERE ARE APPROVED DETAILED PLANS FOR REDEVELOPMENT AND A CONTRACT FOR CARRYING OUT THE WORKS HAS BEEN ENTERED INTO.*

### **POLICY CUD 7: NEW DEVELOPMENT IN CONSERVATION AREAS**

*AS APPROPRIATE NEW DEVELOPMENT IN CONSERVATION AREAS SHOULD MAKE A CONTRIBUTION TO THE AREA BY RESPECTING OR ENHANCING ITS ARCHITECTURAL AND VISUAL QUALITIES AND ACHIEVING A HIGH STANDARD OF DESIGN. DEVELOPMENT WITHIN CONSERVATION AREAS WILL NORMALLY BE PERMITTED ONLY WHERE THE PARTICULAR HISTORIC OR ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER OR APPEARANCE OF THE AREA WILL BE PRESERVED AND THERE IS NO LIKELIHOOD OF HARM BEING CAUSED TO THE AREAS CHARACTER OR APPEARANCE.*

*THE BOROUGH COUNCIL WILL AS APPROPRIATE SEEK TO PRESERVE THE EXISTING BALANCE OF USES IN CONSERVATION AREAS.*



**POLICY CUD 8: EXISTING AND NEW CONSERVATION AREAS**

*THE COUNCIL REAFFIRMS ITS COMMITMENT TO THE BOROUGH'S EXISTING CONSERVATION AREAS AS LISTED IN APPENDIX 3 AND SHOWN ON PROPOSALS MAP AND WILL WHERE APPROPRIATE WILL REVIEW ITS EXISTING CONSERVATION AREAS AND DESIGNATE NEW CONSERVATION AREAS. WHERE SUCH AREAS ARE IDENTIFIED, THE COUNCIL WILL ALSO PROTECT OR WHERE APPROPRIATE ENHANCE THE ENVIRONMENTS OF SUCH CONSERVATION AREAS.*

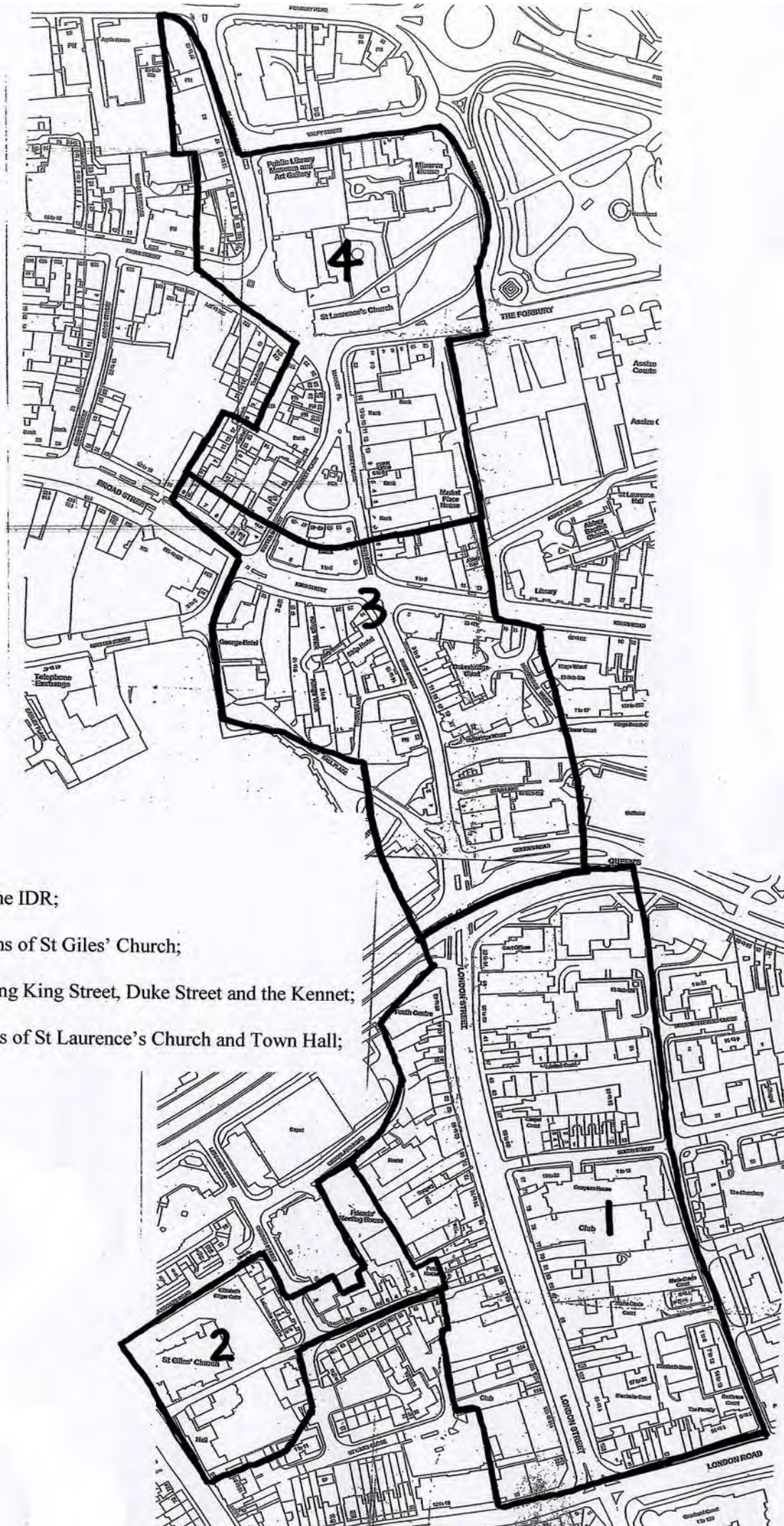
**POLICY CUD 9: OTHER MEASURES TO PROTECT BUILDINGS**

*THE BOROUGH COUNCIL WILL SEEK TO PROTECT BY APPROPRIATE MEASURES INDIVIDUAL BUILDINGS OR GROUPS OF BUILDINGS PARTICULARLY WORTHY OF PROTECTION TO PREVENT THEIR ALTERATION.*

**POLICY CEN 1: TOWN CENTRE CONSERVATION AREAS**









*THE BOROUGH COUNCIL PROPOSES TO REVIEW AND EXTEND EXISTING TOWN CENTRE CONSERVATION AREAS, AND WILL EXPECT DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS TO CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS PRESERVING OR ENHANCING THE ENVIRONMENT AND CHARACTER OF THESE AREAS.*





## Market Place/London Street Conservation Area

### Key to townscape appraisal map

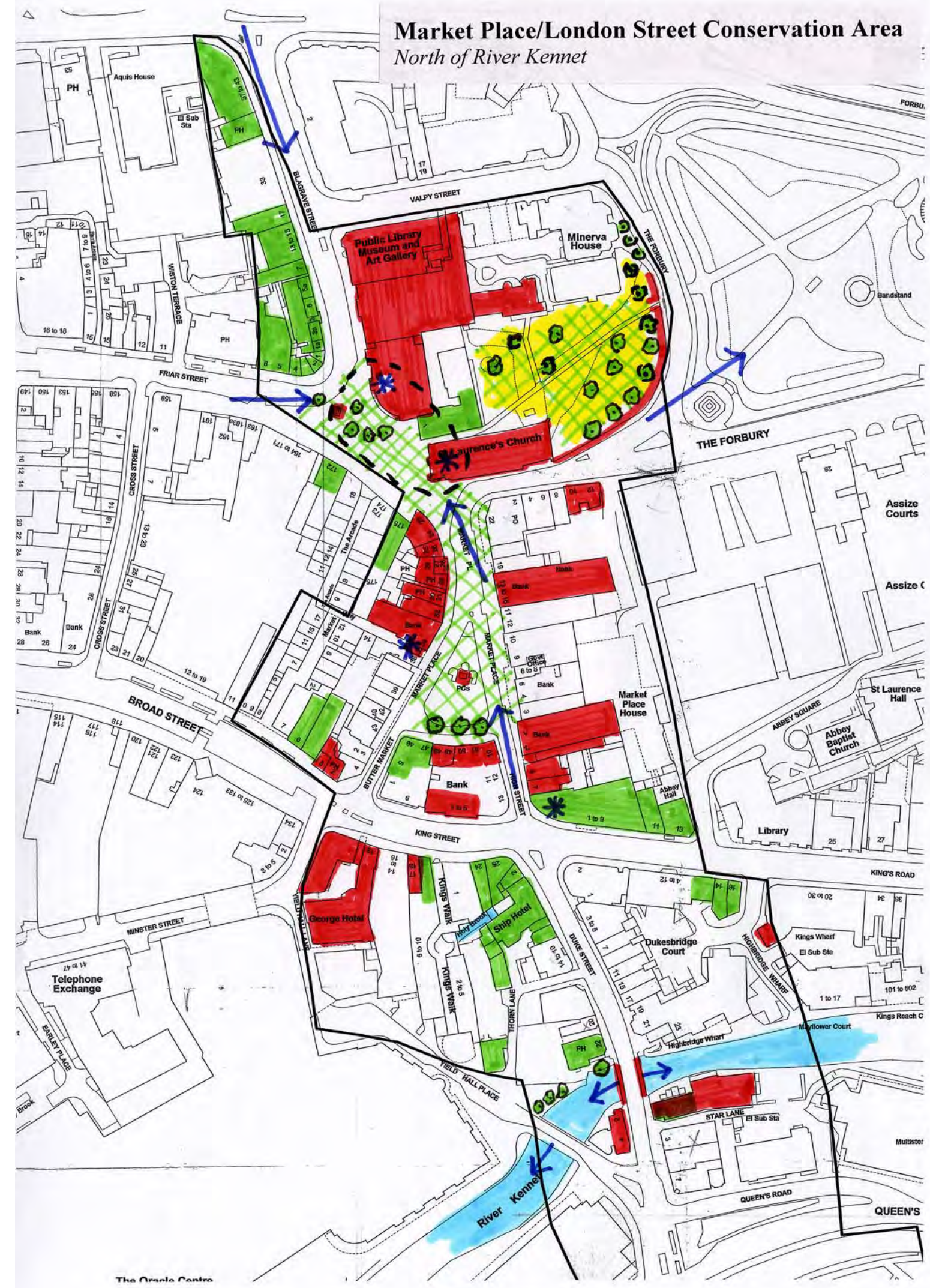
-  Conservation area boundary
-  Listed Buildings
-  Buildings of Townscape Merit
-  Important views
-  Significant trees
-  Landmark buildings
-  Significant open space
-  'Green' areas
-  Focal point
-  Water

### CHARACTER AREAS

- 1: London Street, south of the IDR;
- 2: Church Street and environs of St Giles' Church;
- 3: Jackson's Corner including King Street, Duke Street and the Kennet;
- 4: Market Place and environs of St Laurence's Church and Town Hall;



**Market Place/London Street Conservation Area**  
North of River Kennet



**Market Place/London Street Conservation Area**  
South of River Kennet

