

Sidmouth Town Centre Conservation Area – Shopfronts Practice Notes

1. Introduction

These notes on shopfronts are published to encourage applicants to produce attractive designs and do not remove the need for skilled architectural advice. The preservation and enhancement of elements of Sidmouth's historic town centre, which still retains much of the atmosphere of its Regency and Victorian prime, is of vital importance to the character of the town and its continued prosperity. Shops and shopfronts are major elements in the town centre. Individually many are small units but together they create a character which has a major impact on the centre. A large number of outstanding shopfronts survive from the mid to late 19th century many of which form part of buildings of special architectural or historic interest. Every building, whether listed or not, has a contribution to make to the character of the street and of the town centre. Proposals affecting buildings in the town centre will be judged on the positive contribution they make to the protection and enhancement of the area. Where the opportunity arises improvements to any previous unsympathetic alterations will be sought. The policies have been updated in this version of the Practice Notes to reflect the policies of the 2003 Revised Deposit Local Plan.

2. Historic Shopfronts



A fine example of a traditional shopfront

Some shopfronts in listed buildings are of architectural and historic interest in their own right and every effort must be made to preserve them intact. Trumps Store in Fore Street is perhaps the most impressive. Other important examples are number 20/21 Fore Street, both shops occupied by Potbury and Sons Ltd in High Street and 47 High Street.

3. Proposals for New Shopfronts



The shop on the right has lost its decorated cornice and original windows. It seeks to rival the dominance of the fascia on the central shop by the use of a deep indented fascia but only looks dull by comparison and damages the composition of the three units. Restoration of the original blind on the shop on the left would have been preferable to the new awning which clutters the building.

Before the renewal of a shopfront is proposed consideration should be given to the quality of the old front and the possibility of restoring it. Many of Sidmouth's traditional shopfronts date from the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth century and were inserted into much older buildings. They are nevertheless of considerable interest and relate well to the older structure.

When replacing or restoring a traditional shopfront the details should be determined as far as possible by the evidence of the building itself and of any original joinery and features. In many cases where shopfronts have been altered or destroyed some original features remain and these should be maintained and restored and missing parts reconstructed and incorporated into the new design.

4. The Building in the Street Scene

Where a new shopfront is required the process of design should begin with a visual assessment of the street scene and the hierarchy" of buildings- a ranking of greater or lesser importance in the scene. A building may be grand and important" by virtue of its size, use and design, or humble"- smaller, less formal or imposing. It is generally a mistake to upset this hierarchy and the design of a new shopfront should reflect a building's position. The second stage is to consider the individual building, its general shape and proportions. Materials, window shape, colour, entrance points and overall character should all be noted. Finally, looking closely at building, finer details and decorative features worthy of retention will be appreciated. The building should provide interest and harmony at each stage. The process of attracting the customer should flow smoothly through without either dullness or jarring. A good shopfront will not only satisfy the shopkeeper's aims but will also enhance the street scene. Texture and colour of materials are important in this respect and the general tendency to try to shout more

loudly than the neighbours only results in everyone shouting and no one person being heard at all.

5. The Need to Modify Standard Designs

Some national firms wishing to present a corporate image propose a standardised design for shopfronts, regardless of their location. Such designs will rarely be able to harmonise properly with individual buildings and Sidmouth's unique character without appropriate modification.

6. Consider the Building as a whole



The two columns or pilasters on this shop are a dominant part of the design of this building. The right hand column has been severed below the fascia and the building gives the uncomfortable impression of a heavy structure resting on glass and slender wooden supports

The whole front elevation of the building should be included in the design. In particular a new shopfront must be related to the upper floors of the building and the uncomfortable impression of a heavy upper structure resting on a flimsy sheet of glass avoided. A display window framed by a visually robust surround will give the appearance of firm support to the upper floors and appears structurally logical.

The use of a cornice or stringcourse above a shopfront can provide a valuable break between the shopfront and the building façade above. However, unnecessarily deep fascias covering architectural details or the sills/part of the first floor windows can visually slice a building in two and mar the street scene. A new shopfront should respect the scale, design, materials and colours of the building above although not necessarily the style. Most buildings into which a new shopfront is to be inserted are built of matt and non-reflective materials.



An elegant traditional shopfront

7. Maintain a Vertical Emphasis



The deep fascia on this shop obscures part of the first floor windows and gives a strong horizontal emphasis. It runs across the facades of two buildings ignoring the division between them and their different character and place in the hierarchy of buildings in the street scene

The town centre is characterised by two and three storey buildings with narrow frontages, usually with tall, narrow sliding sash windows, and this gives a strong vertical emphasis in design. Shopfronts of traditional design harmonise with this verticality with columns or pilasters at the sides, sub-divided windows and often a recessed doorway. Modern shopfronts, often with a single large sheet of plate glass in a slender, visually weak surround and an excessively deep fascia, have a horizontal emphasis which can destroy the character of a street.

If a shop occupies the ground floor of two or more buildings a continuous fascia running across the facades of all the buildings, regardless of architectural detail and decoration, will not be acceptable. It is more important for a fascia to be related to the building in which it is set than to line up with those on neighbouring shops. The cheerful irregularity of an old established shopping street is preferable to an over zealously planned uniformity.

8. Maintain Interesting Detail



Interesting detailing - decorated brackets and cornice on Fields

As shopfronts are available for close scrutiny, design and detailing are of great importance. Modern shopfronts can be simple and unfussy but should not be dull. Good design can be smart, elegant or even witty and should enhance its surroundings. Any existing details should be incorporated into the design and careful use of new ornamentation and detailing can add interest.

9. The Traditional Shopfront



A rare survivor of a domestic front used as a shop

The first shops were open stalls built into the ground floors of buildings. By the end of the seventeenth century shops in towns were enclosing the open area above the stall with a glazed screen, windows and door. This pattern of stall riser, windows, door and fascia above formed the basis of shopfront design in the 18th and 19th century with designs being gradually refined and elaborated. Later in the 19th century the elements of the shopfront become heavier and more ornate. Pattern books for shopfronts were available from the end of the 18th century and the task of the local joiner was to modify these, often grander designs, to suit the local site. With new developments in the manufacture of glass, larger and larger panes were used until the plate glass windows of this century were received. A traditional shopfront gives strong visual

framing to the window and visual support to the upper floors. Ornamental detailing of the pilasters, corbelling, stall riser and glazing bars provide visual interest and depth to attract the eye and discourage attention from wandering. The angled fascia directs its message downwards towards the onlooker with the lettering seen free from perspective distortion. The stall riser raises the display to a convenient level for inspection and protects the base of the window from damage. The whole design holds the eye within a strong frame leading to the recessed door with its invitation to enter.



The boxed fascia detracts from the proportions and classical" detailing of the shop front. A painted wooden fascia would be more appropriate



A robust early C20 shopfront with tiled piers and stallriser and scrolled brackets to the cornice

In a modern shopfront the materials, colouring and character are often at odds with the traditional building above. The slender, visually weak, surround has little effectiveness in framing" the opening. The flat fascia misdirects its message to a point above the observer's head and, with the window glass pane close to that of the fascia the effect can be dull and bland. The hard, mechanical, glossy materials are out of place against the mellow, hand-

wrought traditional materials of the older building. Whilst the traditional shopfront is interesting in its own right, the poor modern” example is often of no particular interest in itself.

Far from being an irrelevant antique therefore, the traditional shopfront is not only of historical interest, but a skilled and sensitive design, difficult to improve on, and still the best option for a traditional building in Sidmouth Town Centre.



The traditional shopfront gives robust visual support to the upper floors and a strong frame for the windows. Decorative detail adds interest and attention is focused on the door with its invitation to enter



A flat featureless shopfront fails to give visual support to the upper floors or frame the window. It fails to interest, hold or retain the eye and is a boring design.



A wholly inappropriate shopfront and fascia. Lack of attention to maintenance- in this case to the gutters and downpipes, can lead to damage to the structure of the building requiring expensive repairs

10. East Devon Local Plan Policies

D7- Shopfronts

D8- Applications for Display of Advertisements

D9- Advertisements within Areas of Special Control of Advertisements and Advance Advertisement Signs

EN16- Preservation and Enhancement of Conservation Areas

11. Statutory Approvals and Consent

Planning Permission

New shopfronts, or alterations to existing ones, and changes to the external appearance of a building require planning permission.

Listed Building Consent

Listed Building Consent is required for alterations (however minor) which affect the character of a listed building.

Advertisement Control

Certain types of non-illuminated advertisements are regarded as having deemed consent depending on the type of premises and subject to restrictions of size, position and height above ground level. These may be displayed without reference to the Local Planning Authority although they can be challenged on grounds of amenity or highway safety. Information on the classes of deemed consent can be obtained from the District Council Environment Directorate.

Food Hygiene Regulations

Where proposals affect any food premises, applicants may wish to consult with the Local Environmental Health Inspector in the District Council Communities Directorate who will advise on the appropriate food hygiene regulations.

Offices and Shops Act

Standards are laid down under this Act for natural lighting and ventilation. The Local Environmental Health Officer will advise on these requirements.



The existing features of this building have been retained and adapted in its conversion to a shop. The original moulded brick dentil cornice had perished but it has been replaced in wood to maintain an interesting detail and the character of the building



In this twentieth century example the whole front elevation of the building has been designed as a shopfront.

12. Good and Bad Examples





13. Policy for advertisements in Sidmouth Town Centre Conservation Area

The historic core of Sidmouth is also the commercial centre of the town. The quality and extent of advertisements significantly affects the character and appearance of the area; they can contribute to life, vitality and colour which enhances the environment, or they can equally destroy or diminish the quality of individual buildings and whole streets. It is recognised that advertising is important to the commercial success of the town and good design can make a positive contribution. Proposals for new advertisements will be considered in the light of the policies and principles set out below. Existing commercial undertakings could improve their image and benefit the character of the town if they were to examine their premises in the light of these guidelines.

Advertisements should be in harmony with the character of the building on which they are displayed and the overall street scene having regard to the following:-

advertisements should be appropriately positioned in relation to the design of the building and be of an appropriate scale

advertisements should be constructed in sympathetic materials and colours

advertisements should be kept to the minimum to avoid clutter which would detract from the character of the building and the street scene.

Where advertisements are lit, the type and level of illumination should be appropriate to the situation.

a) Advertisements should be appropriately positioned in relation to the design of the building and be of an appropriate scale

there is seldom any need for advertising above ground floor level and this should normally be incorporated in the shopfront. First floor advertising may be required when upper floors are

occupied separately. In such cases great care must be taken in its siting and in particular any conflict with any architectural feature of the building should be avoided.

Advertisements should be in scale with the buildings on which they are displayed and should not dominate or appear insignificant. The size and design of lettering is also an important consideration in this respect and the advertisement should form a satisfactory composition in itself.

b) Advertisements should be constructed in sympathetic materials and colours

Traditional painted wooden signs are the most appropriate in Sidmouth Town Centre. Glossy plastic signs and the use of strong primary colours would be out of character with the area. Fluorescent paint should not be used.

c) Advertisements should be kept to the minimum to avoid clutter which would detract from the character of the building and the street scene

Even when advertisements are well designed and positioned too many of them on a building can be visually disturbing. This will also damage the street's character and if other shops adopt the same approach is counter productive.

Additional signs or writing to advertise particular brand names of goods will not be acceptable.

In some locations a projecting or hanging sign may be appropriate. In these cases a small traditional painted wooden sign on, for example, a wrought iron bracket, will usually be adequate. The general criteria for advertisements apply and only external illumination will be permitted unless the sign contains essential information not of a commercial nature.

Projecting signs are by no means always necessary and in some situations would be quite inappropriate.

d) Where advertisements are lit, the type and level of illumination should be appropriate to the situation

A well lit and well designed window display is probably the best illuminated advertisement for a shop and adds to the character of the street. Where illumination is permitted it is generally better if external to the sign but in some cases internal illumination of individual letters (but not

neon" style letters) may be appropriate. Box signs illuminated as a whole from within will generally not be acceptable. The effect of illuminated signs by day must also be considered in relation to the criteria already outlined. Care must also be taken where spotlights are used for external lighting, that these do not clutter a building. Illumination need not be brighter than to make a sign readable to shoppers at night.

14. Glossary

Cornice - a projecting ornamental moulding along the top of a building, wall, etc. finishing or crowning it

String course - a continuous projecting horizontal band set in the surface of a wall and usually moulded

Fascia - the wide board over a shopfront, carrying the name

Sash window - a window formed with sashes i.e. sliding glazed frames running in vertical grooves

Column - an upright shaft, generally rectangular or round in plan and usually tapering

Pilaster - a shallow pier or rectangular column projecting only slightly from a wall and in classical architecture, conforming with one of the orders

Scroll Bracket - an ornament in the form of a scroll of paper partly rolled

Stall riser - the vertical surface of polished granite, armour plate glass, tile or wood, marble etc. from the pavement to the sill of the glazed portion of the window.

Corbelling - projecting blocks, usually of stone, supporting a beam or other horizontal member.