

# Totnes

Conservation Area  
Appraisal

The AREA as a  
Whole

## 1.1 Setting the Scene

Totnes is undoubtedly the most important historic settlement in the South Hams. It was founded as a fortified town (or burh) by the Saxon King Edward early in the 10<sup>th</sup> century to defend the southern kingdoms of England against the Danes (who controlled much of northern Britain). It developed quickly as a trading port and market centre and by the time of the Norman Conquest had become the second largest and richest town in Devon (after Exeter). It's fortunes peaked around the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when its population was 'top heavy' with rich merchants. In a 'great age of rebuilding', the houses they built transformed the appearance of town's centre and provided a setting for one of the age's finest collections of plasterwork ceilings.



The town is strategic in its location, being at the lowest crossing place of the river Dart (by ford at first, and then by bridge) and just within the tidal limit of its navigable estuary (some ten 'meandering' miles from the sea). The valley of the Dart, from Dartmoor to Dartmouth, is a major landscape feature that cuts through a countryside of rolling hills. Around Totnes the valley sides create an enclosing natural backdrop [above], helping to characterise the town as 'small', and one still dominated by its landscape setting.



- The older parts of Totnes occupy a ridge that projects out into the Dart Valley and descends to the river's crossing point (The '-nes' in Totnes actually refers to this distinctive feature). An ancient trackway followed the line of the ridge up from the crossing to avoid the tidal marshes on either side. This then ascended the steep slope out of the valley before branching west to Plympton and south to Kingsbridge. In all probability, Bridgetown Hill in the east, then Fore Street and High Street [shown above, from the church tower] and finally Cistern Street and Harper's Hill, deviate little from the line of the trackway which, en route to Kingsbridge, soon passes Halwell and the nearby site of the original Saxon burh that Totnes superseded. On the highest contours of the ridge the oldest parts of the town, around the castle mound and church tower, rise above the neighbouring suburbs and proclaim the town as ancient indeed. The most striking landmark feature is, of course, the castle keep, which is visible from around the town and along its approaches [below].



■ Although more easily appreciated from the air, street layouts and property boundaries throughout the Area (including building frontage lines) are exceptional in the way they preserve and define the pattern of the town's beginnings and early growth. The most distinctive feature is the oval 'drawn' by North Street, Rampart Walk and South Street which fossilises the circuit of the main 'ditch and rampart' defences that were built at the time of the town's foundation early in the 10<sup>th</sup> century [right].



■ The signs are that a much larger enclosure was also built at the time the town was founded. Both the enclosures shared the same boundary along much of South Street, but towards its east end they parted company with the larger one following the line of the Grove and Victoria Street before turning north to cross Fore Street towards its lower end. Here its circuit can only be guessed, but it seems to be picked up again beside the property known as The Priory and along the line of Belmont Terrace before visibly sweeping round the castle in the form of a large 'ditch and bank' earthwork [above].



■ The narrow tenements (known as 'burgage' plots) running off the main thoroughfares are very significant too. Their 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century boundary walls are often well preserved and closely, if not precisely, follow the pattern of property divisions laid down in Saxon and Medieval times. Most of the plots were divided along their length, with domestic uses at front and subsistence behind. Some on the fringes were subsistence only, but whatever their original use, where they survive today they characterise the street scene with a distinctive pattern of mostly narrow frontages. [above]

■ Only one historic house in the Area has more than 3-storeys plus an attic, and only a very few other old buildings are as tall or taller (like one of the converted warehouses on the Plains). The vast majority are 2- or 3-storeys, and with their roof spaces mostly uninhabited and their roof slopes largely clear of skylights and dormer windows, this helps characterise Totnes as a small and unpretentious historic town. Its skyline is therefore dominated by the towers of its two parish churches and its 'raised-up' castle keep [right].



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■ The views from the Castle Keep give reason enough to climb to its battlements. Each gap (or crenel) between the 33 merlons (the raised parts of the parapet) creates a different focus of attention, but in every case the roofs of the buildings below – their form, alignment, materials and features – are a significant, and very conspicuous, aspect of the Area's interest and character [above].



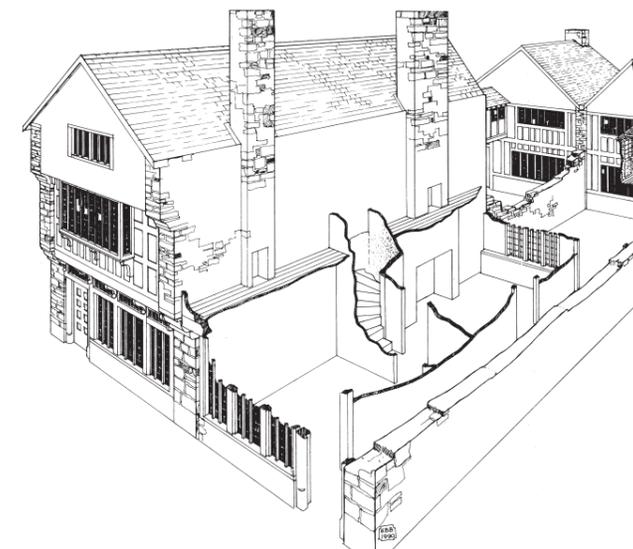
■ Found in Totnes and a few other Devon towns, but rarely elsewhere, are houses built in the form of a main block on the street, with a first floor corridor or gallery link to at least one detached block behind [right]. Probably an idea 'borrowed' from northern France, most examples date from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries when the merchants of Totnes were wealthy enough to adopt it. While much evidence has been swept away in waves of 'improvement', a good many examples still survive to be valued for their exceeding rarity. On the ground floor of their narrow, one-room wide, frontages an extra side passage entrance leading to the courtyards and buildings behind is usually an essential characteristic.



■ While plenty of 're-fronting and re-fashioning' was done to modernise the town's appearance during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, very few new buildings entered the scene. It's for this reason that so much fabric of so many buildings in the centre dates from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, since 'new build' projects would have meant clearing the old buildings first. Rare, therefore, because of their 18<sup>th</sup> century completeness, and uncommon too for the materials used, both 36 and 47 Fore Street give an inkling of how Totnes might have looked today if 're-build' and not 're-front' had been the order of their day [above]. Particularly interesting is the way both are set back from the highway, not simply for the visual impact this has, but for it reversing the practice of earlier times when encroachment forward was more often sought! With both built to 'reside in' and not 'trade from', they clearly show that the town's diminishing fortunes hadn't affected its attraction as a place to live.



■ The upper floor fronts of buildings in the Area, including those in its commercial heart, nearly all retain the authenticity of their age. Most, too, are uncluttered by later additions like hanging or projecting signs, or historically incongruous alarm boxes and hanging baskets [above]. That these are largely absent is a particularly significant characteristic of the Area, as well being an aid to the enjoyment of its architecture and visual amenities. (Nearly all the hanging signs that do exist are on public houses or inns where their siting follows tradition).



■ Although more than half the buildings in the centre date from the town's great age of rebuilding during the prosperous 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, because they were nearly all 're-fronted' or 're-fashioned' in the less prosperous 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they have a kind of hybrid appearance which is very appealing. It combines the form, scale and proportions of the earlier era with the polite, classical style and detailing of the later [above]. With so many fronts masking early 'timber-frame' fabric, however, all the buildings in the centre need to be treated with the utmost caution to ensure features like this 'griffin' [left] aren't lost or go unrecorded. The 'griffin', in fact, is a carved bracket that once supported the corner of a Tudor oriel window (like those restored at the Museum in Fore Street) that was not quite entirely 'modernised away' in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

- Totnes came to life again in the earlier part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly as a result of road improvements and the construction of the new bridge over the Dart in 1828. The approaches to the bridge, and the river alongside, were the focus of much 'new-build' activity, with Bridgetown and the Plains having their appearances totally transformed [the Plains **before** below and **after** right]. At the top end of town the focus for change was Plymouth Road where several new town houses and villas were built to create both 'urban' and 'suburban' settings typical of the age.



- New buildings in the town were again a rarity during the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup>. Notable amongst them, however, were the former Post Office at 25 Fore Street [above] and 34,36 and 38 High Street [middle right]. While all four were clearly designed 'in the vernacular' to complement the character of the street scene, the first three are actually listed in recognition of their most respectful qualities.



- Historic ground floor frontages along the main shopping streets are far from being characterised by continuous glazing. Rather, the pattern of shop frontages is generally broken, not just by thick party walls and side-passage doorways that separate one building from another, but also by the mixing-in of other passage openings (like Atherton Lane, Ticklemore Street and Church Passage[right]) and domestic and other 'non-shop' fronts (including house, inn, bank and church). As well as creating tremendous variety in the street scene there is a sense of intimacy too that identifies Totnes as very much a small, historic, country-town.

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## 1.1 ...Setting the Scene

Render is the most prevalent wall finish in the Area and only occasionally loses its dominance to slate or natural stone. Although the more 'rustic' treatments like rough-cast and pebble-dash are evident, the majority of render coatings are smooth, and the majority of these are painted. A few, like those to Seymour Terrace in Bridgetown, remain un-painted. [below].



Perhaps consistent with both their age and their location in a small, country town, the rendered suburban villas, town houses and cottages of the 19<sup>th</sup> century are generally rather plain and restrained in their ornamentation. Probably the most unrestrained examples of the period are in the short terrace which occupies the age's most prestigious town site; facing the Plains opposite the Bridge [above].



A century or so earlier, however, vernacular 'translations' of national styles produced very inventive designs, none more so than on the pair of rendered elevations at 26 and 28 High Street [28 above]. Their ornamentation is in a different league to that on the Plains, but nevertheless they sit just as comfortably in their immediate setting. This says much about the differing characteristics of each setting, with 'variety' creating cohesion in the High Street location, and 'similarity' doing likewise in the Plains.

## Key Conservation Components Map

### 1.2 The Conservation Area

A Conservation Area was first designated in Totnes by Devon County Council in July 1969. It was one of the first in the County and included the majority of the town's historic buildings that were then considered important. Its focus was the continuous thoroughfare across the River Dart that joins Bridgetown to Cistern Street via Fore Street and High Street, but it also covered a number of adjacent areas including the Castle and Castle Street, the Guildhall and North Street, the Rotherfold and Leechwell Street and parts of South Street and Plymouth Road.

The boundary has since been extended by the District Council: on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1985, to include buildings added to the statutory list at Plymouth Road, Moorashes, Warldans, and New Walk; on the 7<sup>th</sup> May 1992, to include an area of warehousing near the railway following the spot listing of a pair of them; and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1992 to include a number of warehouse and cottage buildings alongside the boundary at South Street, Coronation Road and Weston Road (the latter location also including the adjacent graveyard). Plan 1 identifies the boundary proposed based on up-dated versions of the Ordnance Survey Plans and taking account of the findings of this Appraisal. It supersedes all previous boundary designations.

In a study published by Devon County Council in 1972, Totnes was described as "probably the most outstanding town of historic importance in the County. Previously, though, the national significance of the town had been made clear by the Council for British Archaeology when, in July 1965, it included Totnes in a shortlist of 40 of the most important historic towns in England. These, it believed, were "so splendid and so precious that the ultimate responsibility for them should be regarded as a national concern". The special features that gave reason for the town's inclusion in the list are all located in the Conservation Area and include:-

- An ancient town plan (Saxon and Medieval) that is well preserved in the pattern of the town's streets, buildings and boundaries.
- The approaches and remains of an ancient bridge crossing, together with its Georgian replacement.
- An historic waterfront
- A 'motte and bailey' castle precinct
- Walls, ditches and gateways associated with the town's historic development
- Many buildings of 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> century origin worthy of preservation, and many others too from the later Georgian and Regency periods.

This appraisal will play a continuing roll in informing proposals for new development and planning decisions.

### 1.8 Cautionary Note

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

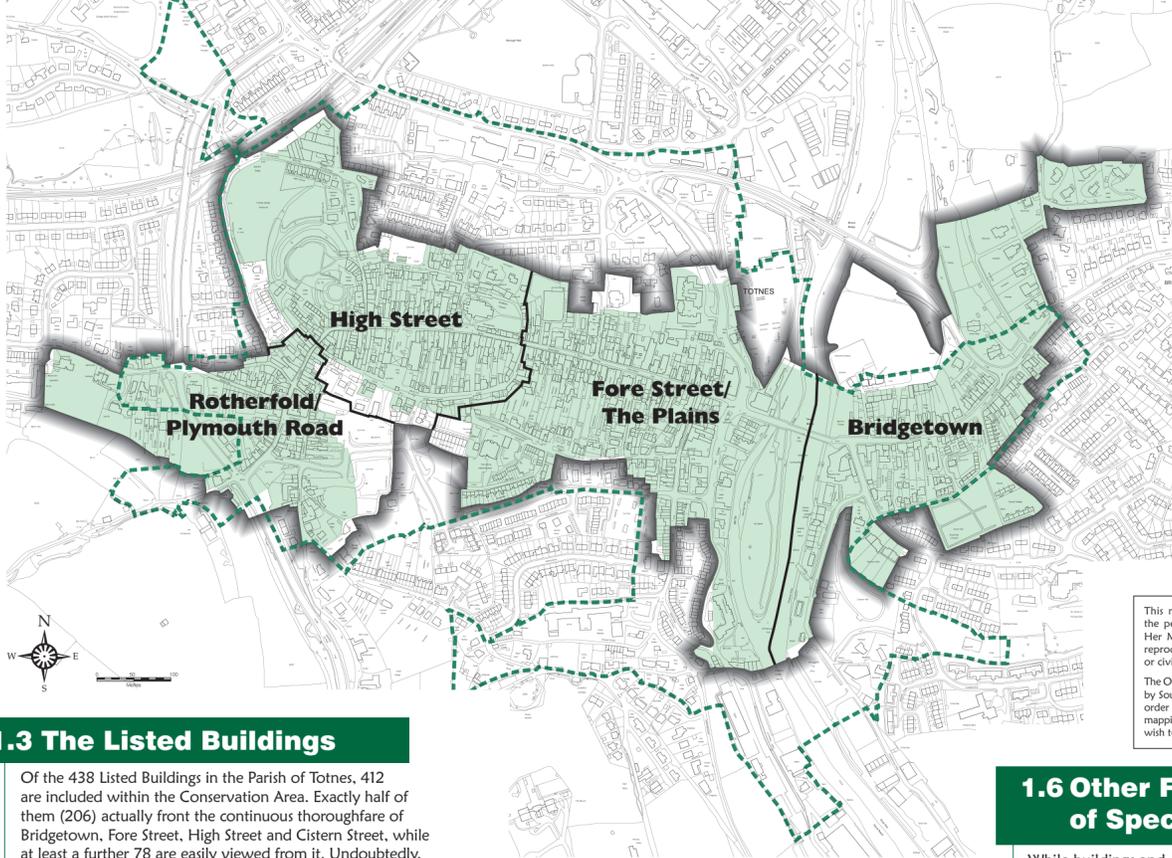


An unusually large number of traditional shopfronts survive in the Area and contribute immensely towards its interest and character. While many aren't exactly in their original form, a high proportion are nearly so, and like the one at 20 High Street [above], still retain a side-passage entrance as part of their design. These 'extra' entrances are indeed precious, not only for the convenient access they provide to the rear or to upper floors, but also in establishing a building's age and origins. At 55 High Street it's not only the survival of the passage entrance that helps confirm the building's age but the survival of its original door too, which is possibly the oldest in the street and dates the building in the late 1500s [right].



Most historic shopfronts are 19<sup>th</sup> century or later and follow a traditional, classical, style. This one in High Street [above] is typical, with a 'stall-riser' beneath the display window and pilasters and window mullions creating vertical emphasis and giving visual support to the entablature above. (The entablature being the horizontal architectural feature which includes the fascia sign-board, the projecting cornice above it and the narrow architrave along its bottom edge)

### Plan 1. Totnes Conservation Area



### 1.3 The Listed Buildings

Of the 438 Listed Buildings in the Parish of Totnes, 412 are included within the Conservation Area. Exactly half of them (206) actually front the continuous thoroughfare of Bridgetown, Fore Street, High Street and Cistern Street, while at least a further 78 are easily viewed from it. Undoubtedly, these high numbers represent one of the most, if not the most, impressive concentrations of listed buildings in any English country town. Of those in the Conservation Area, 6 are Grade I, namely St Mary's Church, the Castle, the Guildhall, the Eastgate, the Museum at 70 Fore Street and Bogan House at 43 High Street. 28 others are Grade II\* (2-star), including the Georgian bridge and the 'more complete' (and therefore best preserved) merchant's houses in Fore Street and High Street that date from the town's great age of rebuilding between about 1550 and 1650. The 'less complete' that were altered in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, and most of the houses built entirely in these later years, make up the majority of the other 378 listed buildings in the Area which are Grade II. These also include several 'non-domestic' buildings, like the warehouses in Collins Road, The Plains, St. Peter's Quay and Coronation Road, the Mill next to Safeway and the old Ticket Office on The Lamb, as well as a range of other structures like the Wills Memorial on the Plains, the ancient well on Leechwell Lane and the telephone kiosk near the Civic Hall Square in High Street.

While all the listed buildings are special in their own right, their architectural and historic qualities contribute immensely towards the Area's interest and character. The Maps for each of the Appraisal's four sub-areas identify all the list items, which sometimes include more than one building or property.

### 1.4 The Scheduled Ancient Monuments

There are four in the Conservation Area and each is identified on the respective sub-area Maps. They are Totnes Castle, the site of Totnes Priory, the Leechwell and the remains of the Medieval Chapel at Warland.



Although slate hanging isn't the most common of wall finishes in the Area, it is certainly the one that contributes most towards the town's local distinctiveness and its claim to national fame. Only adjacent to the Civic Hall square, where all but one of the Butterwalk buildings are so clad, can it be said to be dominant [above]. Elsewhere in the Area, away from High Street and the top end of Fore Street, examples of its use are relatively few and sometimes entirely absent from the street scene – an established pattern that adds interest in itself.



Natural stone is used to such an extent in the Area that few buildings don't have it in at least part of their structure. This is very much more than meets the eye, however, and in many parts of the Area its occurrence is hardly noticeable. The reason is that nearly all the houses and cottages in the Area have their stone walls hidden either under a render coat or 'out of sight' in party walls. For the most part, therefore, it is the 'grandest' and 'least grand' buildings that have it exposed, including the churches, the Bridge, the Castle Keep and the Guildhall [above] amongst the former, and warehouses, factories, mills and other non-domestic buildings amongst the latter. The most local stone is a volcanic tuff which is generally thin-bedded, dark in hue and in various shades of brown. This was supplanted around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by some 'not-quite-so-local' limestones that have a more rounded form and a light grey-blue or grey-pink colour. Less local still are the imported red sandstone (maybe from the Paignton area) and pale limestone (from Beer) used in parts of St Mary's Church, and the granites used in the Bridge and St John's Church in Bridgetown.



Throughout the Area, and no more elegantly or prominently displayed than on Birdwood House next to the Civic Hall square. The fine lines of its hips are particularly noteworthy, being finished in the traditional way using mitred slates [above].

Vertical-sliding, painted-timber sash windows are prevalent in almost every part of the Area and impart a tremendous visual harmony to the street scene, whatever the form, scale and materials the buildings themselves might have. The 'classic', six over six, glazing pattern is most commonly found, but because the windows are positioned and grouped in so many ways, they never create monotony. Indeed, there are some that can't fail to astound or impress, like the restored 2-storey one at 59A High Street [right]; the largest in the town.



The key to understanding the town's early history lies in grasping the rare opportunities for archaeological investigation that new development creates. Such was the case here in North Street [below] where, for the first time, a true picture of the original Saxon defences was gained. At this point they were at least 17.5m across, with a V-shaped ditch on the outside 6.5m wide and 4.5m deep, and a mound on the inside at least 11.0m wide and 3.5m high. (The outer edge of the ditch was about 2.5m inside the edge of North Street)



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### 1.6 Other Features of Special Interest

While buildings and other man-made structures are dominant in creating the special interest and character of the Conservation Area, other features are important too, not least certain of the undeveloped spaces and the trees that comprise and share their setting. On the sub-area Maps the more significant spaces are identified in such a way as to explain their particular importance.

As far as trees are concerned, there are a good many in the Area that have a positive impact on visual amenities, especially those in groups or in hedges that help define boundaries, enclose spaces or frame direct views. Of particular value too are those that form an integral feature of the space or area they occupy and help characterise an important aspect of Totnes' historic development. The sub-area Maps show where the more significant groupings in and adjacent to the Conservation area are, including those on Vire Island and the several in and around the gardens that supply an appropriate and characteristic setting for the town's 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century suburban villas in Bridgetown and along Plymouth Road.

### 1.7 Areas with Archaeological Potential

The antiquity and continuity of Totnes' occupation as a settlement is very much an aspect of its special interest. This is particularly represented in its standing buildings and structures, partly through the dateable features they possess, but more so, perhaps, through their alignment and arrangement and the pattern of the sites they occupy. The Town Map identifies the parts of the settlement within or close to the Conservation Area where these features are particularly noteworthy and where also the below ground archaeology has the greatest potential for recording the earlier phases of Totnes' development.

### 1.5 Other Buildings and Structures of Special Interest

In addition to the historic buildings and structures that are listed, many others are considered to contribute positively towards creating the special interest and character of the Area including, in particular, the houses and cottages of the late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that are locally distinctive and possess many of the features of their listed neighbours. The sub-area Maps identify the buildings which have this impact, although some amongst them could have their positive contributions enhanced by the replacement of incongruous features (like aluminium, plastic or obviously modern windows and doors), the reinstatement of lost features or finishes (like cast-iron rainwater goods and natural slate roofs), or the repair of characterful features before they fail (like historic windows and doors).

The structures with a positive impact are so numerous, however, it is practical only to describe what the more significant of them are, including stone boundary (especially burgrave-plot) walls, the surviving stone walls of the quays, ironwork railings, gates and gate piers, granite roadside kerbs and gutters, stone, brick and cobbled pavements, free-standing and wall-mounted letter boxes, the particular walls that line Leechwell Lane and the railway bridge at Malt Mill.