



Preserving and enhancing Guildford's historic High Street – a position paper by The Guildford Society

Overview

Guildford's historic High Street provides the images by which the Borough is universally known. It is designated as The Town's primary Conservation Area and contains several listed buildings. Its adequate care, conservation and vitality have been a priority to The Guildford Society since its re-formation in 1935, and to its predecessor, the Old Guildford Society¹.

However it faces many pressures including: new shopping priorities; wear and tear; the impact of weather on services, surfaces and buildings; commercial demands; competition from proposed new developments; and competing demands for funding. These all present challenges to its survival.

Maintaining High Street premises as economically productive is the best way to ensure the long term preservation of its historic buildings. Consequently the Society's position is to balance the desire to encourage the vitality and general liveliness of High Street while conserving the characteristics that have made it iconic. This includes encouraging smaller specialist traders to High Street and its gates to create a balanced offer with major chains and "services" premises – banks, 'phone shops etc; and working with masterplanners to make the High Street fully pedestrianised. We are also keen to avoid developments elsewhere making High Street premises economically unviable while High Street premises should be able to participate in a wider range of activity, for example the night time economy, markets and art.

Street paving

The granite setts make a major contribution to High Street's character. They were laid over a century ago on a flexible sub-base adequate for horse-drawn traffic but were re-laid in the 20th century with a rigid construction which has proved incapable of bearing the load of heavier and faster vehicles of today. This has been exacerbated by inexpert re-laying after maintenance of buried services with lifted setts frequently mislaid and replaced with asphalt.

A similar situation applied to the footways/pavements of York stone paving slabs which have suffered from both heave from vehicles mounting the kerb and maintenance of buried services. The traditional cast-iron rainwater ducts across the pavements have been allowed to disintegrate with shallow concrete surface channels being considered.

The Society's position is that:

1. Suitable specifications and method statements are developed and made mandatory for all relaying work including the currently planned relaying of the setts in High Street.
2. Matching replacements are sourced to cover any setts or York stone slabs lost.
3. Only craftspersons correctly trained in laying setts and York stone paving are employed to work on this key heritage asset.
4. A clearly designated officer with responsibility for oversight and checking should continue to be appointed, the findings of that oversight rigidly enforced and all contractors be required to give notice of operations to that officer.
5. A programme of systematic like-for-like replacement of the cast-iron rainwater channels across the pavements is established (for example when shop fronts are renewed).
6. There is adequate funding and a committed budget to cover the above.

¹ "What Makes Guildford High Street Special?" by Doug Scott, Nov. 2010

7. A weight limit be imposed on HGVs using High Street to protect setts and stone flags.
8. The iconic High Street be listed to match the buildings which benefit from this status or given "Scheduled" status by English Heritage.

Street furniture

The Society expects all street furniture² and signage on High Street to be: appropriate to the character of its location; simple; consistent; and for all signage to be clear. This is particularly appropriate to The Town's historic streets. The Society's position is that:

1. A high standard of design, sensitive to location, is required for all items of street furniture.
2. Design and colour of bollards, bins and posts to be consistent.
3. Signs to be clear, informative, sensitively placed and unobtrusive.
4. An appropriate "heritage sensitive" barrier gate.
5. Utilitarian barriers which break the visual link with Town Bridge to be removed/replaced.

Shop fronts

Over the years the Society has done much to encourage good shop front design through its Design Awards. Many of the points made have been built into the Council's own shop fronts policies. The Society's position is that within the High Street conservation area:

1. Fascias should show good and appropriate design (both "retro" and clean modern), be in "traditional" colours and respect the architecture of the stories above.
2. Hanging signs should be no larger than (600x600mm); fascias and signs should not be internally illuminated.
3. Windows should not contain garish long-term posters.

Upper stories

High Street premises used for shops at street level frequently use the upper floors for storage or appear to leave them unoccupied. Windows are frequently blanked off or left uncleaned. None at present appear to be used for their original residential purpose, due to the difficulty of separate access. The Society wishes to encourage:

1. Proper maintenance, including window-cleaning, and removal of unsightly clutter.
2. Occupants to re-plan and open up "dead" windows.
3. Creative design by owners to allow uses including residential or small professional office and connecting adjoining premises together.

Street lighting

Existing street lighting is appropriate to High Street with a range of replacement "heritage" posts and fittings being currently available which is generally acceptable. The Society will continue to monitor the appropriateness of lighting, applying the same standards as for street furniture. The Society is also keen to encourage good design for special displays such as Christmas lighting.

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² The Society defines street furniture to include seats, benches, bollards, telephone connection boxes, lamp posts and floral posts, pedestrian signposts, historic plaques, parking restriction signs, significant sculptures (two currently) and the barrier gate to exclude vehicles at "pedestrian only" times.