

9 TOWN CENTRE

9.1 Context

Setting

- 9.1.1 The town centre character area includes the main spine of Mount Pleasant Road and Grosvenor Road, with streets on the west side as far as the Common, and Calverley Road and Crescent Road on the east side. The Pantiles and High Street are dealt with separately in sections 5 and 7 above.
- 9.1.2 The most striking topographical feature of the town centre is its elevation above the High Street. Mount Pleasant Road falls from 112 metres above sea level at the town hall to 94 metres at the station, contributing to a sense of separation between the main modern commercial shopping areas and the smaller scale areas of High Street. The Common provides a very clear edge to the town centre on the western side, and Calverley Grounds sets a limit on the east side. To the north, town centre functions blend out into edge-of-centre, and the residential areas along Camden and St. Johns Roads, although the Kent and Sussex hospital and Royal Victoria Place in more recent years are major single-development areas that create significant boundaries.

Historical background

- 9.1.3 Now and historically, the most important route into Tunbridge Wells was the London Road, or St. Johns Road as it has been called north of the town centre since the late 19th century. The turnpike created in 1710 brought travellers through the area, but the focus of their attention was the Wells south of the present town centre, and there was originally little development here on the hill. Houses fringed the east side of the Common, and up onto Mount Ephraim, where the views made for pleasant lodging houses for visitors to the Wells. Rock Villa at 85 London Road, once briefly occupied by William Thackeray, is a surviving example from the mid-17th century. The route of Church Road existed, then called Jordan's Lane after Jordan's Tunbridge Ware manufactory, which was sited in the western area of the present town centre, but there was little other development before the 19th century.
- 9.1.4 The Calverley Estate extended to the east of Mount Pleasant, developed from the 1820s onwards. Decimus Burton's Calverley Parade and Calverley Terrace occupied key positions where the civic centre complex now stands. Burton was also responsible for The Holy Trinity Church and The Priory. In this early period, the lower part of Mount Pleasant remained undeveloped.



Mount Pleasant Road c. 1890

- 9.1.5 West of Mount Pleasant other designers, such as William Willicombe, picked up Burton's lead. Clarence Road was developed with large villas in spacious grounds, including sites on London Road overlooking the Common. North of Church Road, denser building schemes by speculative developers got under way. The Mount

Ephraim Road and Hanover Road areas were developed in the 1830s and 40s. In the 1840s the Gothic Belvedere Terrace in Church Road and York Road were built.

- 9.1.6 Contemporary with these fine middle class developments were of course also working class areas, and the block between Calverley Road and Victoria Road, now the site of Royal Victoria Place, developed in this way. By 1867 all of the area north of Calverley Road and Mount Ephraim Road was built up from Mount Ephraim to Lansdown Road with the whole social spectrum of housing. It is recorded that streets like Varney Street and Ely Lane (off Calverley Road) were densely populated slums of large families with occupations such as vendors and sweeps (1881 census).
- 9.1.7 There were still gaps, however, and centrally located streets such as Monson Road and Lime Hill Road were developed as late as the 1890s and 1900s. Some redevelopment of earlier villas started at this period in the western parts of the town centre. The lower stretch of Mount Pleasant was not developed either, until the late 1870s on the east side, and the 1930s on the west side.
- 9.1.8 Since the early 20th century, most new building has been redevelopment of earlier property. The most notable example is the late 1930s civic centre complex, which has recently been listed by the Secretary of State. Changing economic conditions have led to significant changes of use, many of the large older houses being too big to maintain in modern conditions. They have become offices, or flats. The impact of car traffic, too, is seen in the centre with the introduction of multi-storey parking buildings.
- 9.1.9 Social and economic changes in the late 20th century have had significant effects on activity in the town centre. A significant change, socially, has been the adaptation of The Holy Trinity Church from religious use to an arts centre and theatre. The arrival of the Royal Victoria Place shopping mall has also had its consequences. Many small-scale shops have gone from this part of town, but there has been an increase in the number of cafés and more recreational uses of former business premises.

Architectural and historic qualities

- 9.1.10 The town centre of Tunbridge Wells exhibits examples of all the architectural types to be found in the town. Early "cottage" styles still remain, typified by timber framed houses with tile-hanging or weather-boarding. Most examples date from the late 17th century and appear on the west side close to or on the Common frontage: Thackeray's and Jordan's House are good examples.
- 9.1.11 On the east side there are examples from the 1820s onwards of Decimus Burton's classical sandstone or rendered villas, but more lie beyond the east side of the town centre in the Calverley Estate (q.v.). Later examples by Willicombe and others exist in the Clarence Road area on and behind the Common frontage. These are more often rendered and less severely styled: extensive landscaped gardens are an important part of their concept.
- 9.1.12 Speculative terraces of town houses occupy much of the town centre area. There are two basic groupings built from the 1840s to the first years of the 20th century: those in classical stucco styles, and others in brick adopting more "arts-and-crafts" details. Enormous variation exists within the broad category of "town house", such as the Gothic of Belvedere Terrace, or the classical terraces with their first floor balconies in York Road, but the binding characteristic is the tight townscape form of conventional urban streets that is created.



Opera House

- 9.1.13 A first period of redevelopment is related to the heavy 1930s architecture of the civic centre. It is a very unadorned style, to express its civic dignity (see 9.5.3 below). Earlier landmark buildings are perhaps more exuberant: notably the late 19th century Great Hall and the Opera House (completed 1902), both in highly decorated classical forms of French and Baroque inspiration. The station is a less imposing but similarly cheerful composition in the same spirit, from 1914.
- 9.1.14 The two main churches, now both in other uses, are also important landmark buildings, but contrast greatly in style. The former Congregational Church is a splendidly handled stone temple, in the Doric style, which has been described as presiding like a Roman Forum over the space in front of it. The Holy Trinity Church is an early 19th century Gothic design set in a green churchyard.
- 9.1.15 Later redevelopment has introduced office blocks and retail developments from the 1960s onwards. They are characterised by a utilitarian expression of structure and/or function, generally with very limited variety or interest at street level. At roof level their structural frames tend to create massive solids rather than the varied roofscapes of traditional constructions, and they can be very intrusive on the skyline especially where plant and equipment are visible: both Royal Victoria Place and the Safeway supermarket are of this kind.

Special identity areas

- 9.1.16 Overall the town centre is the result of sporadic development from the early establishment of Tunbridge Wells. It does not exhibit the steady expansion from an early core that is typical of historic towns, in a concentric pattern. Skill is required to assess the particular context in which development is taking place within the town centre to ensure its satisfactory integration with the existing urban setting.
- 9.1.17 Inevitably, the town centre is a very lively mix of uses, architecture, townscape and quality. It is this mix, and the prominent elevated position of the town centre that distinguishes it from neighbouring areas. Within it are five distinct sub-areas (and even these could be further divided) set out in sections 9.2 to 9.6 below.

9.2 Northern Town Centre

Northern gateway – St. John's Road

- 9.2.1 The northern area of the town centre within the conservation area is a triangle bounded by and including Grosvenor Road, Mount Ephraim Road, and the northern end of Mount Ephraim. Its quality and character is very mixed, but it has special importance as the gateway into the centre of Tunbridge Wells.
- 9.2.2 St. John's Road brings most visitors to Tunbridge Wells to the northern apex of the Conservation Area, where it meets the forked junction of Mount Ephraim and Grosvenor Road. This is a key location in the town, which creates first impressions of the centre. At the junction the Mount Ephraim is well defined by the villas on the western side and St. Andrews large brick church and hall on the east. Beyond

this, however, the street scene is broken open severely by the entrance to the Kent and Sussex hospital and the forecourt of the motor-dealer's premises opposite.

- 9.2.3 The junction of St. John's Road, Grosvenor Road and Mount Ephraim forms a key triangular space where a choice has to be made between the route down the hill into town, and the route up along Mount Ephraim to by-pass it via the Common. It is a busy traffic junction, controlled by a mini roundabout. The width of the black tarmac is visually dominant, although the breadth of the space is a good feature. The apex site, No.1 Mount Ephraim is a gabled three storey brick building related to the church set back behind a curving railing. It is not a strong feature, but there is perhaps the opportunity to express the space as a gateway to Tunbridge Wells (see below). The junction is also a gateway out of Tunbridge Wells, and there is an important view from it northwards to St. John's church tower.
- 9.2.4 The original character of the street can be seen in the painted stucco terrace of 2-12 St. Johns Road, and the paired villas opposite. They are characterised by the strong rhythm of full-height three-storey bays and horizontal storey courses. Originally residential, all of these buildings are now in office use, and have lost their front gardens and boundaries to parking forecourts. Some buildings have been lost to insensitive 20th century office redevelopment, e.g. the concrete framed building of Westcombe House (just outside the Conservation Area), now re-clad with ungainly "retro" detailing.

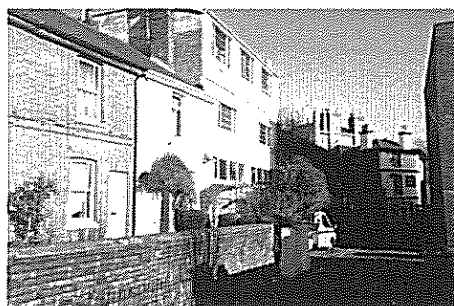


Grosvenor Mount, Grosvenor Road

Grosvenor Road

- 9.2.5 Grosvenor Road leads sharply downhill from the junction, with views of a receding roofscape. Roofing materials and chimneys are important in many views from elevated areas in Tunbridge Wells. There is a remarkable mix of buildings here on both sides of the road. Initially the focal point is Grosvenor Mount, a 3 storey building recently restored in cream painted stucco with its classically proportioned fenestration wrapping around the curve, and its overhanging slate roof pitched to a shallow pointed cone.
- 9.2.6 The street width is narrow, and on the east side the buildings form a strong line along the pavement, meeting it in a variety of ways. No. 88 is an exuberant 3 storey red brick and terracotta block, set back with an elaborate retaining wall that creates a raised terrace that has now been glazed over with a modern conservatory-style lean-to. 84 and 86 are brick with a rendered Dutch-style second floor and gable, built right on the street with modern shop fronts: the signage is very intrusive, and again distracts from its surroundings. 80 and 78 are two simple 19th century buildings, set slightly back but with ground floor shop fronts on the pavement line. Then no. 76 is a surviving early 19th century house deeply set back in gardens (now car parking for offices in the building). Importantly, it retains its sandstone boundary wall on the pavement line. Another early 19th century house remains at no. 58: this one a neat two storey stuccoed villa, with a tiled path leading to its central door from railings and a gate under an elaborate wrought iron arch, all on the pavement edge and reinforced with a garden hedge. Its neighbour at 56 is part of another row of early houses extended to the street in single storey shop fronts.

- 9.2.7 When so many parts of Tunbridge Wells are distinctive for the completeness of their period architecture and consistency of appearance, the variety of the upper part of Grosvenor Road is notable. However, it is visually cluttered because of intrusive elements like poor shop fronts and street furniture, damaged street surfaces, and traffic.
- 9.2.8 The character of Grosvenor Road changes at the crossroads with Upper Grosvenor Road. The street widens, and the visual impact of traffic increases as a consequence of the one-way régime south of this point. There is less interest in the buildings on the street here: the proportions of narrow shop fronts in tall building façades are not maintained, weakening the strong sense of enclosure that exists in the northern part of the street. The quality of the buildings on the eastern side is better than on the west.
- 9.2.9 A 1920s parade of shops (which includes Noakes' store) occupies the block from the post office on Goods Station Road to its sweeping corner on Upper Grosvenor Road. A regular rhythm of shop-fronts and two neo-classical brick upper storeys provide an acceptable background for street activity. Behind the block a glimpse of the latticed tower of the Baptist Tabernacle gives some relief beyond the bland modern development of the Meadow Road car park. Opposite, however, the brutalist impact of the Tesco's corner block dominates. With three lanes of one-way traffic and the pedestrian barriers around the junction, this is an uncomfortable environment.



Rock Villa Road

Hanover Road and Rock Villa Road

- 9.2.10 The heart of this northern part of the town centre is very much a workshop area, uniquely in the Tunbridge Wells conservation area. Hanover Road provides a short link back to Grosvenor Road. Its use as a service route to Tesco's and office buildings in Mount Ephraim Road gives it a utilitarian character, dominated by the stark flank of the supermarket. The north side nevertheless retains a complete row of simple 1830s houses sitting cheek by jowl with workshop and store buildings.
- 9.2.11 Rock Villa Road is even more mixed, its simple row of two-storey red brick cottages squeezed between some very utilitarian works buildings. The backs of buildings in Hanover Road and open ground behind them leave an untidy outlook for cottages on the north side, but regeneration is taking place, as witnessed by the four storey depository building that has undergone conversion to loft-style apartments. This is typical of the variety of form and mix of uses that contribute to the metropolitan neighbourhood character. It is important that new uses are introduced by sensitive adaptation of historic buildings and limited new building, rather than by "purpose built" redevelopment.
- 9.2.12 Culverden Street consists almost entirely of single storey workshops related to the motor dealers. Much of the area is degraded, but it possesses great townscape potential, provided by abrupt changes of level and a street pattern of angled junctions creating wedge-shaped corner buildings and sites.

Mount Ephraim Road

- 9.2.13 Mount Ephraim Road consists of large classically designed villas, which have been converted to office use. On the northern side they are arranged in a gentle stuccoed crescent, with deep set-backs that are now exploited as car parks where there would have been gardens. The buildings are all well renovated, but the lack of trees and planting gives the street a stark and clinical air.

9.3 Town Centre West

- 9.3.1 Streets between Lime Hill Road and the station on the west side of Mount Pleasant Road share origins in 19th century residential development. Many of the original buildings are lost, and most of the others are converted to offices and flats, that now provide the typical range of non-retail town centre accommodation. Nevertheless, those that remain do provide the distinctive context and scale of the area, and so are important. Church Road is the major street in the area, and other streets are of a secondary status.

Lime Hill Road and Dudley Road

- 9.3.2 Lime Hill Road curves to meet the five ways junction with Mount Ephraim Road at a new civic space that represents the centre of the modern commercial area of the town. The 3 storey end of no. 2 Mount Ephraim Road now figures strongly in the setting of this space. Behind it, the office and forecourt of a car hire business create a serious gap in the street scene; parked vans and bill-boards intruding garishly. The site diminishes the character of the location, and particularly the setting of a discreet group of 19th century brick Villas at 1-9 Lime Hill Road.
- 9.3.3 The remainder of the street is intact, with three storey brick terraces of ca. 1900, and they provide a strong street character. They form three groups; nos. 12-34 are in an unusual cottage style and were built in 1914 with steep orange tiled roofs and dormer windows that reduce their apparent overall height; nos. 36-50 and 29-51 (opposite) have basement floors and prominent timber framed gables in a late 19th century arts-and-crafts style. The large corner houses on London Road take this detailing to an enthusiastic extreme with the whole palette of timber framing, stone carving, patterned tile-hanging and turned joinery, on a red brick construction with blue-brick details.
- 9.3.4 Dudley Road has a more varied and higher quality range of architecture. Many of its buildings have been taken over for business uses, but the south side is still in strong residential occupation. Like Lime Hill Road its strongest characteristic is its tight linearity, given subtly by its curving alignment. At its eastern end there is a very fine view of the Opera House, on the axis of its central entrance portal and dome (see below). At the east end the street also contains some notable individual buildings, such as the pair of two-storey red-brick villas at 4 and 6, and Webster House, opposite. This is a strikingly detailed red and buff brick villa in a Venetian style with deeply overhanging corbelled eaves, formerly the Mechanics' Institute. The houses adjacent to it are in simple two-storey stuccoed terraces with window bays and railings to basement areas. They have been compromised with boxy roof dormers and strongly coloured paint schemes.



The former Mechanics Institute, Dudley Road

- 9.3.5 The threats to these streets are the erosion of the integrity of the building line and front areas, particularly as office uses spread in from Mount Pleasant Road. There is some unsympathetic alteration including the loss of original joinery, but poor street detailing is more intrusive in many places – i.e. utilitarian street lighting, broken surfaces, and a dense overhead “wirescape”.

York Road and Church Road

- 9.3.6 York Road is marked at its junction with Mount Pleasant by the former Congregational Church (now Habitat – see below) and extends to London Road in the slightest of curving alignments. The north side is lined by three storey stucco houses, of which the most impressive group is no’s. 2-14, with a classic arrangement of semi-circular headed doors and windows, a continuous balcony line at first floor, and wrought iron railings to basement areas. A most distinctive feature is the single slab of York stone that spans the width of each house over its coal cellar, forming the pavement in the street. Elsewhere the surface is of Tunbridge Wells’s classic red brick.
- 9.3.7 Again, the continuity of the building line is the key, but it is broken on the south side by Trinity House, a mid-19th century school building in the grounds of the former Holy Trinity Church, and the rear of the Telephone House site. Both these sites extend through from Church Road. Trinity House is a pleasant single storey building in gothic style using rustic stonework. Its iron railings are an important element in maintaining the line of the boundary on the street, particularly in view of the open sites each side.
- 9.3.8 Church Road itself acquired prominence when Burton’s Holy Trinity Church was completed in 1829. Contemporary houses remain, such as The Priory (no’s. 2 and 3), but elsewhere much has been lost. Telephone House, a five storey 1960s concrete framed office building is a major intrusion: its slab-like mass offers a crude roofline compared with the delicacy and interest of the gables and chimneys of earlier buildings, and its mechanical elevations have none of the human scale modulation of its neighbours’. Nevertheless, the form of the earlier street can still be seen, with set backs from the front boundary line to the building line, and the modern developments do observe this. Boundary walls, too, remain in places: the sandstone piers and enclosures at the Holy Trinity, and original street surfaces associated with them, are important. There are still trees at the western end opposite Clarence Road and around the church and The Priory, but in the middle section the planting has been lost. This factor further emphasises the bleakness of modern alterations to the street.



Church Road

- 9.3.9 Significant earlier buildings remain at nos. 16-22, and on the south of the street there is the Gothic 4-storey Belvedere Terrace at no's. 11-29 which retains most of its original features. The modern framed building east of this terrace (Europa House), has been refaced in a kind of post-modern classical manner. This may be an improvement on the earlier crude frame, but the blocky roofline remains undisguised (especially in views from the south), the detailing is "big" compared to the finer textures and subtleties of its neighbours, and it sits uncomfortably with them.
- 9.3.10 At the western end of Church Road the street narrows to pass between buildings, forming an excellent gateway onto the Common with glimpses to its trees and green slopes. A slight change of angle as the street meets the junction emphasises the gap, presenting the painted flank of the corner building on London Road (no. 58). The gap itself is framed by The Charles Stapley pub and no. 1 Clarence Road, which provide an effective visual stop to Church Road.

Clarence Road area

- 9.3.11 South of Church Road the key older elements are the remaining mid-19th century stucco villas in Clarence Road and the 1890s brick villa developments of Lonsdale Gardens and Clanricarde Gardens. Clarence Road has a mature leafy character: the unadopted road takes an informal line, falling to London Road at its south end. It is still occupied by very large classical villas in extensive grounds, such as Calverley Hill designed by William Willicombe in the 1850s. High walls and overspilling vegetation from the villa gardens create strong feelings of seclusion and containment, with few glimpses out of the immediate surroundings.
- 9.3.12 Some 20th century infill has taken place in the gardens of these villas, and most of the villas themselves are now divided into flats. Rosehill Walk is the main example – an unattractive 1960s development, but whose mature and steeply sloping grounds mitigate the quality of its architecture. The most intrusive elements are its poorly planned garage blocks.
- 9.3.13 Dense planting separates Clarence Road from neighbouring areas to the east, making an important buffer between its leafy surroundings and the more utilitarian business area of the town centre. Narrow footpath connections from Clarence Road break through it into Lonsdale Gardens and Clanricarde Gardens: the character of these streets is entirely different, with broad and open street spaces now unfortunately occupied by car parking for the offices which occupy most of the buildings. There is a strong relationship to buildings on Mount Pleasant, for which Clanricarde Road provides service access. Open yards and parking lots diminish the townscape quality of the area significantly.

9.4 Calverley Road and Royal Victoria Place

- 9.4.1 The heart of the main retail area of Tunbridge Wells is Calverley Road. With Monson Road and the southern part of Camden Road, it is a compact area of

shopping streets in a traditional townscape. The Royal Victoria Place shopping centre, however, provides a huge area of retail floor space in an internal mall, which takes up capacity that would otherwise be available to town centre street frontages.

Calverley Road

- 9.4.2 For pedestrians, Calverley Road is one of the most important streets in the town centre, linking the Five-Ways junction to Carr's Corner: these are both key focal locations on main approaches into the town, by which people using the town orientate themselves and describe locations of places. The crossroads with Monson Road and Camden Road is similarly a key location in the town.



Mount Pleasant Road looking towards Calverley Road

- 9.4.3 The pedestrianisation of the western half of Calverley Road has interrupted these interrelationships, particularly the continuity of Calverley Road along its whole length, which is now expressed more as a static space than part of the street network. It would be possible to return to a more street-like character with design that avoided the obstructions of elements like planters and phone boxes, and with surfacing that re-emphasised the linearity of the street by, for example, distinguishing its original kerb and pavement lines. The visual importance of the crossroads at Camden Road is also diminished by this loss of linear street character, as well by the lack of presence of the present corner buildings.



Calverley Road

- 9.4.4 Despite the development of Royal Victoria Place, it is important that shop fronts have been retained on both sides of the street. None of the building frontages is of particular note, but they maintain a steady three-storey scale, and the north side does have some interesting variety. Shop fronts and signage are dominated by the corporate images of national retailers, and some co-ordination could help to restrain their impact and allow the street character to be expressed.

Royal Victoria Place

- 9.4.5 Royal Victoria Place occupies a large quarter of the town, and a glance at its white expanse on the map shows the impact it has inevitably had in obliterating the texture of the earlier townscape of densely populated narrow streets. Now the

north of the area is dominated by car-parking buildings on Victoria Road and Meadow Road, whose lifeless and unattractive façades render the street scene bleak and threatening. Except for its Calverley Road frontage, Royal Victoria Place is outside the conservation area, but its proximity and presence on the signposted traffic route into the town centre has an impact on the conservation area.

Monson Road and Newton Road

- 9.4.6 Monson Road and Newton Road provide secondary residential and service access: Newton Road is effectively a Mews to Calverley Road and Monson Road, and it has developed shops and café/bars of its own.



Monson Road

- 9.4.7 The most distinctive feature of Monson Road, indeed one of the most distinctive features of the town, is the curving filigree iron balcony that runs above the shops at nos. 10-36, beautifully following the sinuous line of the street. It gives access above the shop fronts to a terrace of maisonettes, formed as a perfect Victorian three storey street, with brick façades and stone detailing. A similar but less elaborately executed detail exists on the return elevation of the Opera House. Together, these elements create a strong uninterrupted façade on the north side of the street.
- 9.4.8 The south side is more fragmented. The Tunbridge Wells Adult Education Centre is a tall red brick building to a complex and attractive Queen Anne revivalist design, but there are few viewing angles that allow one to stand back far enough to appreciate its main elevation. The blocky form of the museum on Mount Pleasant limits views to its tall gable, and to the east of it modern offices challenge for attention with the unnecessarily chamfered corners of their plan form.
- 9.4.9 The outer curve of shops at the eastern end of Monson Road is an unassuming 3-storey brick elevation that effectively closes views from Mount Pleasant, in which its slate-hung gable is prominent. It appears that originally the building line continued to the terrace of Victorian houses that take a tangential angle from the curve of the road to what is now Monson Way. It seems that it was disrupted and the original road line was closed off to make way for redevelopment, and broken through to gain access to the Crescent Road car park – hence the slated gable to cover the exposed party wall. The area is now poorly resolved, leaving single storey development to fill the remaining triangular site on the street, although the redeveloped conservatory building adds sparkle. The original terrace has little visual impact and a compromised setting.

Camden Road

- 9.4.10 Camden Road forms the eastern boundary of Royal Victoria Place, retaining most of the previously existing shop buildings. Consequently it has kept much of its traditional shopping street character through the scale and detail of the buildings. As a secondary shopping street to Calverley Road and Royal Victoria Place, it has also retained many local and specialist retailers.



Camden Road, 1908

- 9.4.11 It is predominantly three-storey, with some two-storey buildings between Garden Street and Grover Street on the north side. It is important to retain this relatively consistent height: the mews of single storey shops at Ely Court, leading to Royal Victoria Place, appears as a weak gap in the frontage. Otherwise, Royal Victoria Place has little presence on Camden Road and is not intrusive.
- 9.4.12 The office building on the corner of Calverley Road (east) is a massive block, formerly a 4 storey red-brick mansard roofed court from the 1960s, but now refaced in white render: it has a strong but severe presence, anchoring a key street corner. In contrast, Camden Road has a reputation for small-scale interest and individuality, particularly in some of its older shop fronts. Within the conservation area, the elephant heads on the old Friendly Society's Club and Institute, and the corner shop at no. 51 are of note; but the wealth of idiosyncratic detail is greater further north, outside the conservation area.

9.5 The Civic Area and Crescent Road

- 9.5.1 The section of Mount Pleasant from Five-Ways down to the junction with Church Road is in many ways the "centre of Gravity" of the town centre. Its civic function is of self-evident importance, and it links the main shopping area with the lower town centre.



Tunbridge Wells Town Hall

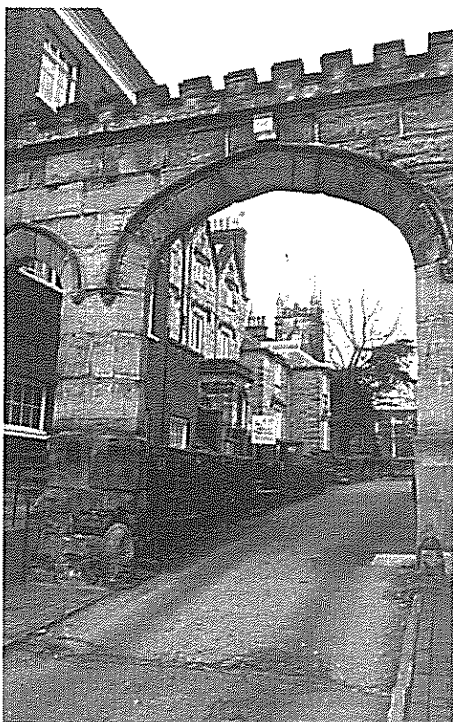
The Town Hall

- 9.5.2 Although dominated by the relatively recent development of civic buildings in the 1930s, it owes its form strongly to the layout of Decimus Burton's Calverley Parade and Calverley Terrace constructed a hundred years before. This established the relationship of buildings at a level above the main street, separated by gardens and accessed via a carriage drive: now represented by Civic Way and the memorial gardens. Even the plan format of the buildings, with the main entrance at an angle to the street corner, closely reflects Burton's layout, with Calverley Mount at the end of the Terrace turned in this way. The architectural style, however, is in deliberate contrast to the decorative taste of the earlier century, in a severe modernist style, with restrained classical and art-deco references. The entire civic

complex, which includes a library, the town hall, an assembly hall and law court, is now listed, as much for the completeness of the range of the buildings as for its intrinsic architectural interest.

Mount Pleasant

- 9.5.3 The change to a public use alters the potential of the area in front of the new buildings from private gardens to a civic status. This part of Mount Pleasant is now spatially unsatisfactory, because the level separation of Civic Way is hindering both physical access and the expression of the breadth of the public realm, without effectively promoting the setting of the Town Hall buildings either. In fact, the focus of the Town Hall group is on the corner, leaving little activity or interest on the main Mount Pleasant front. Nevertheless, the building group provides a very robust and distinctive edge to development.
- 9.5.4 North of the Town Hall block, the Opera House, opened in 1902, similarly provides a very robust block of buildings, handled in a quite different but equally distinctive architectural way. Its central dome is a landmark in views from high ground outside the town centre, while its lower corner domes create strong and memorable street corners. Diagonally opposite, the magnificent Doric portico of the former Congregational Church (added in 1866 to an 1848 building) is another major landmark in the town centre, which terminates the westward view from Monson Road. These buildings provide essential visual support to the civic spirit of the centre of Tunbridge Wells.



Decimus Burton's arches on Mount Pleasant Road

- 9.5.5 The buildings opposite the Town Hall are less effective in these terms. They were developed contemporarily with the Calverley estate, but have been replaced and/or much altered since. They have forecourt areas covering basement cellars, which extend on to the street. This provides useful breadth to the pavement, but level changes and low boundary walls inhibit their use as part of the street space and create an untidy appearance. The stone arches which mark the entrance to The Priory on Mount Pleasant Road are an interesting element and give way to views of the Holy Trinity Church's tower.

Crescent Road

- 9.5.6 Crescent Road provides a southern extension of the civic complex, to include the assembly rooms and the Police Station and Court. It is all in the same minimalist style as the Mount Pleasant frontage, and indeed the completeness of such a large complex in a consistent style has influenced the listing of the whole group by the Secretary of State.
- 9.5.7 The immediate street frontage is again given over to an access road separated by a low brick wall. This again affects the relationship between the buildings and the street, although here there is not the same degree of level change. However, street levels drop abruptly to the crossroads, and a broad flight of steps from the corner up to the building entrance contributes an appropriately formal air.
- 9.5.8 The crossroads itself is an important location in Tunbridge Wells, as the main north-south east-west node in the town centre. In plan form, the cinema development opposite mirrors the angle of the town hall entrance, and to some extent its architecture, but lacks sufficient height to have presence. The low profile of the street frontage also leaves the plain and bulky brick box of the auditorium exposed to view.
- 9.5.9 On the south side of Crescent Road, the 1970s office block is an expression of the typical approach of the period to site planning. It is set well back from the road, with parking in front and underneath. As a result, it has little human interest or activity at ground level, with poor townscape consequences. In mitigation there is some landscape planting, and the original stone boundary wall is retained.
- 9.5.10 Even in Burton's time the south side of Crescent Road had an open aspect, so that the form of the street has not changed entirely. A key eastward view is to the spire of St. Peter's Church on Bayhall Road, visible from the crossroads at Mount Pleasant Road.
- 9.5.11 The rear of the civic centre complex is occupied by the Crescent Road car park building. The creation of the site has caused severe disruption to the earlier townscape of Monson Road and the little square of Cadogan Gardens, off Calverley Road. This little quarter of Tunbridge Wells was formerly a neighbourhood of small cottages, known as Hervey Town. On Crescent Road the set-back of the building has left a gap where buildings have been removed between no's. 21 and 30. A new office building adjacent to the car park compromises the setting of no's. 9 and 10, a pair of Decimus Burton houses that survived the civic centre redevelopment.



Crescent Road c.1915

9.6 Mount Pleasant

- 9.6.1 The lower section of Mount Pleasant makes the change in level from the commercial retail town centre down to the older established areas of the High Street. It is the slope that primarily defines this character, and its generous breadth and avenue tree planting lend the upper section the character of a promenade. The slope also allows good views up and down the street. This is visually a successful section of the spine road of central Tunbridge Wells, and its boulevard character could be extended northwards.

Corner developments

- 9.6.2 At the top, the dominating building is the rather plain 1930s cinema, more or less contemporary with the town hall diagonally opposite and angled to the crossroads in a similar way. The blank bulk of the auditorium is set back into the site, leaving low, flat-roofed shop buildings fronting the street. While this may have been a deliberate design ploy to limit the visual impact of the cinema hall, the resulting street frontage is very plain and has very little townscape presence.
- 9.6.3 The corner bank building on the opposite side of Mount Pleasant Road has much greater architectural interest: it is a three-storey brick building with abundant stone detailing in a gabled Gothic style and a spiky silhouette of tall chimneys. It cannot be said, however, that it challenges the cinema as a local landmark – perhaps because of the different functions of the two buildings or the clearer visual relationship of the cinema to the Town Hall.
- 9.6.4 The north-west corner of the crossroads is relatively weak. The terrace of shops and offices at nos. 73-79 in front of The Priory stop short of the corner itself, and the forecourt and pavement space in front of them is disrupted by small changes of level and poor surface treatments. The houses of the Priory itself are set back and face northwards, with gardens and stone walls forming the street frontage: trees in the garden are important in providing three dimensional form to the street space here.



Mount Pleasant Road

Mount Pleasant terrace

- 9.6.5 The eastern side of Mount Pleasant is formed by a strong line of three and four storey white stucco buildings with ground floor shops set two or three metres forward onto the pavement line. Evidently they were built like this originally, but the shop fronts have been modernised and many have been degraded with garish and inappropriate signage. Nevertheless they provide good containment of the street space, and the set-back of the façade above ground floor level enhances the feeling of breadth of Mount Pleasant Road.
- 9.6.6 A short time after the development of these shops, the Great Hall was completed, in 1872. Its rather Gallic style is suited to the wide promenade of the pavement in front of it, and it is one of the landmark buildings of the town centre. It has particular significance sited opposite the station, where it is the first major building to be seen by many visitors to the town.

Relationship to Calverley Grounds

- 9.6.7 Mount Pleasant Avenue runs behind the eastern side of Mount Pleasant Road, providing mews access. It also provides the boundary between the town centre and Calverley Grounds, which otherwise would penetrate the town centre (and until the 1860s did so). There are important glimpses into the park at the break in the terraces on Mount Pleasant (between no's. 62 and 64), and to the south and most importantly to the north of the Great Hall. Here there is a fine vista of the well-manicured landscape of the public park rising up to Calverley Park itself.
- 9.6.8 The mews street itself rises particularly steeply, cut into the slope on its east side and retained by sandstone walls. Mature trees behind the office block on Crescent Road screen the car park on the bank above the street, and the backs of the Mount Pleasant Road buildings: this otherwise might compromise the setting of the west side of Calverley Grounds.

Station area

- 9.6.9 The west side of Mount Pleasant Road is uninspiring. Its main feature of interest above the station is the pair of weatherworn stone entrance columns to the private Lonsdale Road Estate, and behind those the tile hung stone building of The Barn restaurant. There is potential here, but there are many compromises, such as the fenced service yard below the terrace of The Barn restaurant.
- 9.6.10 The railway at Tunbridge Wells was completed in the late 1840s. The Central Station building was reconstructed in 1911: it is a neat design in red brick and Portland stone, with a central stone clock tower (that apparently once had a spire). Its large semi-circular entrance arches are evocative of the engineering ethos of the railway, although disrupted by the addition of a horizontal canopy. This building, too, is a key landmark in the town centre, and stands out on the west side of Mount Pleasant Road in the absence of significant buildings beside it. Possibly the alignment of the railway tunnel north of the station has inhibited the development of any more than the single storey buildings that form this side of the street.
- 9.6.11 The station setting on the west side of the railway is affected by development of the Safeway supermarket, which has left the approach as an unattractive cul-de-sac (see 9.6.15 below). This and the whole of the junction area with Grove Hill Road and High Street is compromised by traffic and highway engineering. In particular it is very difficult for pedestrians to cross the broad width of the carriageway, whose alignments have been "smoothed out" to ease vehicle movements.



Tunbridge Wells Railway Station

Vale Road

- 9.6.12 There are valuable townscape elements here that deserve a better setting. The railway bridge, widened in the 1920s, has interesting end piers and contain space visually, and the sandstone wall that curves down to the station approach is worthy of protection. The row of simple two storey buildings on the south side of Vale Road, starting at the Bedford pub, have colour and interest, and provide a good stop to views into the space from uphill. The entrance into High Street is well expressed: a distinct gateway is formed by the Bedford and an elaborate timber conservatory at first floor level over the street frontage of the restaurant at no. 1 High Street, that frames the vista into the street. Even Hoopers on the corner of Grove Hill Road provides a strong urban form, despite its plain architecture and some unattractive 1960s extensions.

Office blocks

- 9.6.13 Between Vale Road and London Road lies the uninspiring townscape of office blocks built since the 1960s. The area is characterised by steep falls southwards to London Road, and in Clarence Road mature tree cover. Almost all the buildings are designed to use the levels with large undercrofts for car parking. In Vale Road there is no tree cover, and in consequence there is no interest or activity at ground floor level. The streets have one function only, to provide vehicle access to individual sides. There is no through movement because Vale Avenue gives access only to car parks.
- 9.6.14 The largest intrusion is from the modern block of the Safeway supermarket and the car parking that occupies its upper floors. Its main elevation is onto Vale Road, following roughly the existing line of buildings from the Post Office. It has a key position on the westward view from the junction with High Street and Mount Pleasant, and its height makes it very visible from all the higher parts of the town (see Clarence Road below).



Station Approach

Station approach

- 9.6.15 At street level the Safeway development has finally closed off any other possible link to the station. The retaining wall to properties in Lonsdale Gardens is very high (supporting a fall of some 10 metres) and dominates the end to the station approach. The position of the new buildings completely closes the space to provide service access to the back of the building. The station approach is now a cul-de-sac with townscape and circulation problems as the main arrival point at the station. The ground level environment is entirely dominated by highway issues, where it might have been an interesting townscape space. The supermarket itself does not address the space, and only the station buildings provide any interest.

9.7 Summary of elements that contribute to the area's special character

Key building groups

- 9.7.1 The consistent characteristic of the town centre is its network of streets, which are defined in most cases by continuous development frontages without particularly strong focal points to draw the eye from the general street scene. Notable groups such as the Opera House, Great Hall or Town Hall complex are the exception rather than the rule, and it is important that new additions or alterations to the street scene retain reserve and do not try to compete unnecessarily with their surroundings.
- 9.7.2 Nevertheless, each street has a character of its own to which all the buildings in it contribute. In the northern area of the town centre, Grosvenor Road and the streets on its west side, such as Culverden Street, area characterised by narrow widths, steep gradients, and an eclectic variety of building forms. The east side of Grosvenor Street has a very varied building line including important early houses set back; spoiled by poor shop fronts and intrusive signage.
- 9.7.3 While the mix has allowed these less sympathetic elements to creep in, its character might be described as robust and practical. Individual terraces, such as the mixed group of bow-front houses in Hanover Road and the red brick workmen's cottages in Rock Villa Road should be considered as a group should alteration be proposed. Further south, the streets are more strongly dependent on the unified architectural character of their frontages.- viz. Mount Ephraim Road's stuccoed crescent, York Road's classical terraces and first floor balconies, and Church Road's Belvedere Terrace (nos. 11-29) and Clarence Terrace (nos. 16-22). In these streets the urban quality provided by front boundary railings and walls is important.
- 9.7.4 In Calverley Road the retail buildings on the north and south sides provide continuity essential for a successful townscape. In Monson Road, Monson Colonnade's curved balcony access maisonettes, (extending to and including the Opera House) similarly creates continuity above the shopping street. At ground level, the colour and vitality of the shops themselves are the strongest ingredient of the street scene, but care is needed to preserve the distinctive quality of the buildings against the ad hoc garishness of shopfronts that could overpower it.
- 9.7.5 The character of the shops on the west side of Camden Road, retained in front of Royal Victoria Place shopping centre, is a good example of lower key treatments retaining something of the distinctiveness of the local retail character, compared to the chain stores of the "prime" retail frontages.
- 9.7.6 Outside the main retail areas, building groups create a more dignified character. The whole Civic Centre group, including the museum, town hall, assembly rooms and police station are a prime case, and it is important that they remain and are treated as a group. The east side of Mount Pleasant Road – from Barclays Bank down to the Great Hall - is an important continuous frontage that contributes to the generous proportion of the street, with lively shops on the pavement but a set-back at higher levels.

Key spaces

- 9.7.7 Tunbridge Wells is essentially a town of streets and landscapes – whether natural or planned – but the urban character of the town centre generates a number of key spaces of incidental and potential civic value.
- 9.7.8 One group of such spaces relates to junctions of roads. St. John's Road, Grosvenor Road and Mount Ephraim form a key entrance location into the town centre from the north. Five Ways is a nodal location in the local geography that has been much enhanced by a recent landscape and public art scheme. Camden Road crossroads and Church Road crossroads are also nodal locations related to partly to the shopping and cinema functions with which they are respectively associated.
- 9.7.9 A second group comprises street spaces that are created by the buildings that adjoin them. The main shopping street, Calverley Road, is such a space by virtue of the activity that it supports. Potentially one of the strongest street spaces in Tunbridge Wells is in Mount Pleasant Road, created by the frontage of the Habitat building, the end of the Opera House block and the civic centre. At present, levels are divided by the inherited change of level in front of the town hall and the roadway dominates the area, but it has many of the ingredients to be a memorable public space.

Views

- 9.7.10 Views in the town centre are primarily street vistas, contained by building frontages. The key ones are typically associated with a steep change in level, such as from the junction of Grosvenor Road and Mount Ephraim down Grosvenor Road, over roofscape, and from upper Mount Pleasant Road down to High Street, (and vice-versa).
- 9.7.11 A second important group of views are glimpses from the main streets into adjacent areas: for example from Dudley Road to the Opera House, or into Lonsdale Road and into Calverley Grounds from Mount Pleasant Road.
- 9.7.12 Other glimpses are of more distant features: from the junction of Grosvenor Road and Mount Ephraim to the tower of St. John's Church (Southborough Road), from Crescent Road to the spire of St. Peter's Church (Bayhall Road), or from Church Road to the Common, through a pinch point at the Charles Stapley pub.

Local details

- 9.7.13 Constant redevelopment in much of the town centre has led to the loss of more traditional materials and details. There are some efforts to replace them in more modern material (e.g. red brick pavements). Wherever such details do remain in the secondary streets, it is most important that they are retained and repaired.

Contribution of green spaces, trees and hedges

- 9.7.14 The town centre is densely developed, and trees and planting are much less widespread than in surrounding areas. However, this can even focus the importance of planting and landscape where it forms part of the townscape. The avenue tree planting in lower Mount Pleasant Road is a prime example, and it lends the quality of a pleasant promenade to the street that perhaps reflects that of the Pantiles, and certainly is a model that might be extended elsewhere in the main town centre streets. In Church Road, some street planting survives in front of Clarence Terrace (nos. 16-22), and further trees could be re-introduced into the street.
- 9.7.15 Mature planting behind the main streets is also of importance in the town centre. In Mount Pleasant Avenue, for example, mature trees screen the back of Mount Pleasant Road and the PPP car park from Calverley Grounds. In Church Road, tree planting in the grounds of the Holy Trinity and The Priory provide a green backdrop to the street. The Clarence Road area is notable for its surviving

mature garden planting, high boundary walls and overhanging greenery. In Lonsdale Road and Clanricarde Road heavy planting remains to screen the back of the street space from Clarence Road, but there is a noticeable lack of planting otherwise.

9.8 Summary of elements that detract from the area's special character

Intrusion, loss and damage

- 9.8.1 Inevitably in a working environment like the town centre there have been compromises to the historic fabric of the townscape. In summary, the main pressures are from the growth of traffic, and from potentially insensitive work to buildings and shopfronts as new business sets up. These issues are best dealt with through the Borough Council's specific policies.
- 9.8.2 Traffic impact is at its worst in the northern part of the town centre. Vehicles dominate Grosvenor Road, the speed of traffic around the Goods Station Road gyratory severs pedestrian links to the town centre, and the bleak wall of the Royal Victoria Place car park is a further consequence of catering for the car.
- 9.8.3 The pressure of retail commerce is evident in different ways. For sheer brutal ugliness, the Tesco store is hard to rival. The loss of a traditional street pattern under Royal Victoria place is regrettable. Shop signage leaves much to be desired, especially in Grosvenor Street, but the national multiples are becoming more sensitive in this regard: and there have been some good conversions of earlier buildings, such as Habitat and the former bank at 101 Mount Pleasant Road.