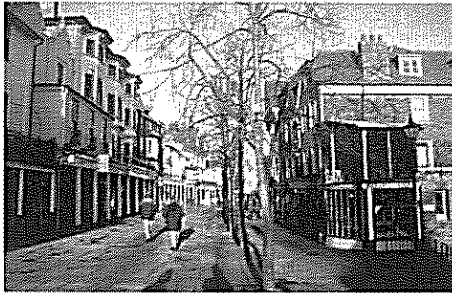


5 THE PANTILES

5.1 Context

Setting

- 5.1.1 The Pantiles owes much of its character to its setting within the distinctive topography of the Tunbridge Wells area. The area nestles at the lowest point of the spa valley within the town centre. To the north west, the heavily wooded part of Tunbridge Wells Common rises from 70m to 120m and provides a dramatic backdrop to this part of the town centre.

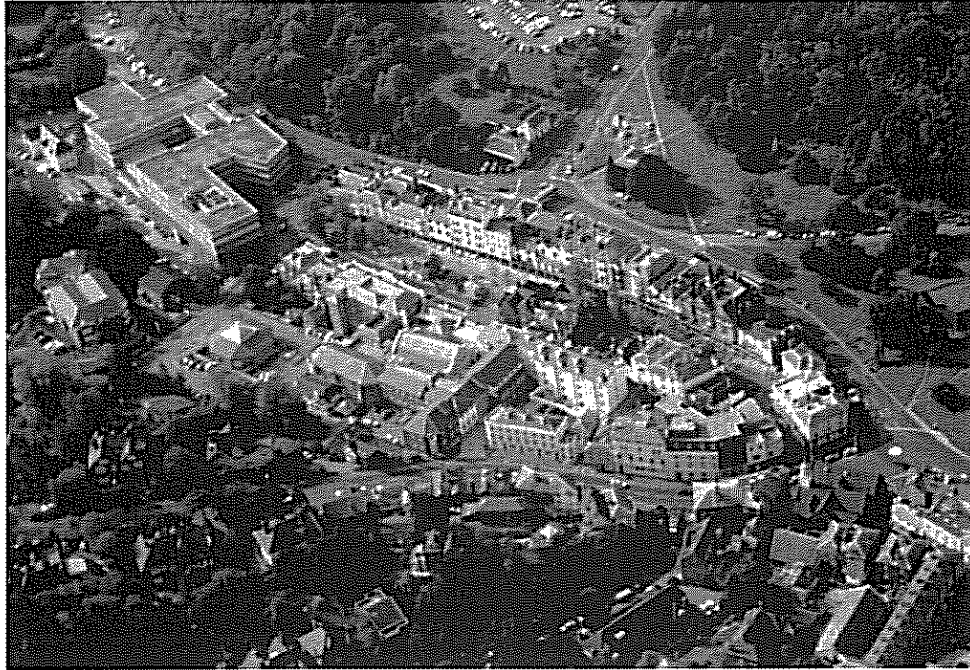


Upper Walk, The Pantiles

- 5.1.2 To the east, the dwellings on the fringes of the Mount Sion and Madeira Park overlook The Pantiles. Views of both these areas are glimpsed from a number of points within The Pantiles themselves. This distinctive context reinforces the sense of enclosure felt whilst walking within The Pantiles.

Historical background

- 5.1.3 The Pantiles grew up around the town's Wells located at the north eastern end of the development. In 1638 a bank stretching away from the Wells in a south westerly direction was levelled and planted up with a double row of trees, the Upper and Lower Walks were created and over the coming years the buildings on either side of the Walks were constructed. 'The Pantiles' themselves were the diagonally laid paviments which were used to surface the Walks.
- 5.1.4 Originally built from wood, the buildings were consumed by fire in 1687. In the following years they were rebuilt and the distinctive colonnades which now characterise The Pantiles were added. Mostly constructed by local builders, ordinances ensured that building heights were restricted to keep the air clear.
- 5.1.5 In 1697 visiting writer, Celia Fiennes remarked on the growth of the new buildings close to the wells; "...there are two large coffee houses for tea, chocolate etc., and two rooms for the Lottery and hazard boards. These are built with an arch or pent house beyond the shop, some of which are supported by pillars, which is paved with brick and stone for the drye walking of the company in the raine; else they walke without which is a clay and sand mixt together."
- 5.1.6 The defining year for The Pantiles came in 1739 when The Rusthall Manor Act secured forever that the Walks, the Wells and the Dipper's Hall should be free to the public and that no more buildings be erected upon the Common.



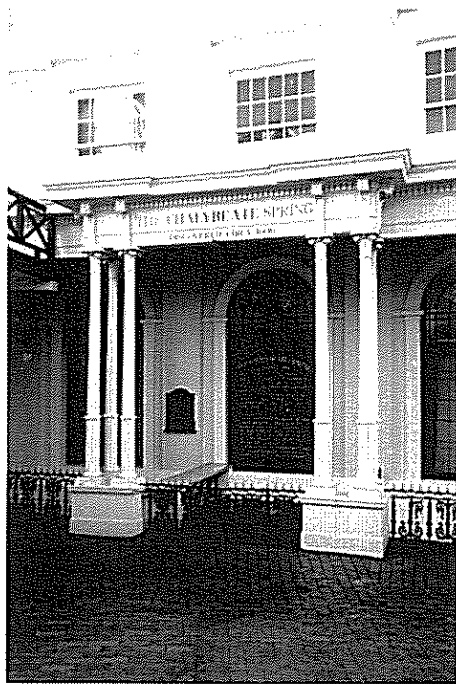
An aerial view of The Pantiles

Architectural and historic qualities

- 5.1.7 The Pantiles is a varied collection of buildings from the 17th century, which taken together with the linear 'Walks', form a harmonious, distinctive whole.
- 5.1.8 The harmony of The Pantiles and its separateness from the rest of the town centre is reinforced by the introverted nature of the development, which focuses inward onto its central public spaces. The terraces on either side of Upper Walk and Lower Walk turn their backs on the adjacent London Road, Linden Park Road and Nevill Street. Indeed one of the defining elements of The Pantiles is that, with the exception of a small stretch of the Lower Walk, the area is not accessible to vehicles. The colonnades and linear structure of The Pantiles instantly evoke the image of the promenading polite society of 18th century Tunbridge Wells.

5.2 Northern Walk and Chalybeate Springs

- 5.2.1 The linear spaces of the Upper and Lower Walks link a number of separate spaces which provide a sequence of foci running along the central axis through the development. Entering from the northern end at Frant Road, the enclosure created by the three and four storey buildings on either side of the entrance walk is deliberate. The narrowness of this entrance is characteristic of the streets and spaces within the vicinity of the Church of King Charles the Martyr. The crowding together of buildings creates an unavoidable nearness of detail; a dense visual texture is created by the brickwork, the delicate transoms and mullions of window frames and, in the case of the chemists building, the impressively large curved windows adjacent to the doorway.
- 5.2.2 The Chalybeate Spring stands at the northern end of The Pantiles and is the symbolic heart of The Pantiles. Set below its grand portico is the well itself, which is overlooked by the Dipper Hall. In the centre of the adjacent space, is an unattractive stone planter, which stands on the site of an original sundial. Looking north from this space, the strong visual relationship is evident between the Church of King Charles the Martyr and The Pantiles.



The Chalybeate Spring at the Bath House

- 5.2.3 The vista along this northern section of the walk is terminated by the double gabled end of the church which, because of its alignment at an angle to Frant Road, leads one's eye to the white painted weather boarded clock tower and cupola of the church.
- 5.2.4 The enclosure at this point creates a distinctive microclimate, which ensures that sunlight only really penetrates this stretch of the walk when directly over head. This enclosure contrasts with the internal open space of the small piazza adjacent to Chalybeate Spring. Moving into this space from the entrance walk is akin to entering a room. At the same time the eye is led further into The Pantiles by the subtle curving of the building line and the continuity of the white painted colonnades along the Upper Walk.

5.3 The Upper Walk

- 5.3.1 The central row of Lime trees, that run along the Upper Walk acts as a perfect foil to the adjacent buildings. By following the same subtle curve they enhance enclosure and cleverly obscure the spaces beyond. The spaces themselves are defined by their subtle changes in level and direction, a factor which significantly contributes to the character of the area. The juxtaposition of steps, retaining walls and paving layouts is visually pleasing and assists in reinforcing the linearity of the spaces.
- 5.3.2 Throughout this section, a variety of surface materials is used and assists in defining the individuality of the various spaces. The Upper Walk is primarily surfaced in a Purbeck Flagstone and bounded on the eastern side by the locally distinctive Ragstone Spalls which are used to effect in creating a dished drainage channel running the length of the Upper Walk. Unfortunately, the tree surrounds of half battered modern bricks impinge upon the historic character of the Upper Walk.
- 5.3.3 The retaining walls, built from the local Sussex sandstone, are intermittently punctuated by steps linking to Market Place and the Lower Walk. On the other side, Upper Walk is linked to London Road by Woodside Walk and Swan Passage, both arched passageways which afford glimpses of the activity of London Road and the Common beyond.

- 5.3.4 Walking from the London Road into the Pantiles via these passageways one is struck by the contrast between the traffic noise/activity and the relative tranquillity of the pedestrian areas within The Pantiles. This is in direct contrast to the traditional roles of the two areas. Historically, the markets, shops and restaurants would have created hustle and bustle of activity within The Pantiles. In the 20th century, with the shift of primary retail activity away to the north, The Pantiles came to support more 'sedate' retail uses with an emphasis on high quality goods and services.
- 5.3.5 In addition, office and residential uses have started to be reintroduced to the upper floors of many buildings; this has helped to increase levels of pedestrian activity within The Pantiles throughout the day. Uses that enhance pedestrian activity within The Pantiles should continue to be encouraged. Interestingly, it is the very nature of the high quality comparison goods sold in the shops below that adds to the character of the area.
- 5.3.6 Antiques, jewellery, art and gift shops provide visual interest and encourage people to linger outside shop windows. Such shops tend to lend themselves to a more appropriate style of traditional shop front design and signage, and the shops within The Pantiles are no exception. Pilasters, stall risers and traditional casement windows have been retained throughout. Darker colours and blacks are used to good effect, complementing the white of the colonnades and in most cases considerable thought has gone into the restrained style of signage and window displays.
- 5.3.7 Many of the smaller more detailed elements along the Upper Walk add greatly to the historic character. The Pantiles Clock above Nos. 26 – 28 is a distinctive focal point, mounted on a projecting room built out onto the balcony. The juxtaposition of the linear balcony and the colonnades with the projection and recession of the building elevations is visually exciting. Without the white painted colonnades this frontage would appear much more fragmented and less harmonious.
- 5.3.8 Further south, the replica Victorian hexagonal post box outside No. 39 and the wall mounted painted crest of The Gloster Tavern (the former name of Nos. 39 and 41) are important historic elements. Of the more eccentric structures within The Pantiles, the exquisite Musick Gallery above No. 43 is a key feature and important landmark. Constructed in 1739, the bow window frontage and arching roof ensures that the building stands out from the others in the vicinity.



The Musick Gallery, Upper Walk



Victorian letter box, Upper Walk

- 5.3.9 Further south, the Upper Walk opens out into a wider pedestrian area which has as its focus at the octagonal bandstand structure located above the Lower Walk. At this point, the historic character of the area starts to diminish as views of the 1960's Union House development to the south of Linden Park Road become a dominant feature of the visual scene. The uncompromising modern style and massing of the development sits uncomfortably with the intimate scale and detailed elevations of neighbouring historic buildings (see 5.4.3 below).
- 5.3.10 The external appearance of The Pantiles on London Road does contrast with the internal facades. This rear flank was traditionally the 'back' of the development. Although not as attractive as the elevations on the Walks, the rear accesses, stairs, railings and utilitarian threshold spaces do have an important historic value which emphasises the unique layout of the development.

5.4 Lower Walk

- 5.4.1 Despite, or perhaps because of the level changes, the Lower Walk has a less impressive character than the opposite parade. The buildings on this side are no less grand however with the former Corn Exchange and the former Royal Sussex Hotel located next to each other. It was not until 1888 that the sloping bank between the two walks was replaced by the stone retaining wall to accommodate public conveniences. Before that time the space adjacent to these impressive buildings was a much wider, more appropriate setting.
- 5.4.2 Moving north, Lower Walk connects with the Market Place whose centre piece is the Fish Market building established in 1745. It is likely however, that fish was sold in the vicinity of the existing site up to a hundred years before the construction of the building. Once again, the contrast between the tightly enclosed spaces of Lower Walk and Pink Alley further north with the open square of Market Place is a pleasing juxtaposition.
- 5.4.3 Modern large scale office redevelopment at Union House below the Pantiles has impacts upon the historic character of this part of the area. Although the redevelopment has been executed making some architectural references to The Pantiles (e.g. the use of slender columns to support overhanging upper floors), there has been a diminution of historic character. The main issues are the horizontality

of the "banded" brick and glass design of the upper floors, and the lack of modulation and variation of architectural details, materials and ground finishes. In practice, the attempt to extend the space of the Walks into the new development has failed to overcome the natural break-point that Linden Park Road creates as it joins London Road.

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

Key Building Groups

- 5.5.1 Because of its historical significance and architectural character, The Pantiles forms one of the most significant building groups in the Tunbridge Wells conservation area. The key group includes all buildings on both sides of Upper and Lower Walks. The upper walk is particularly notable for its continuous colonnade that provides strong visual unity to a façade that exhibits surprising variety above ground floor level.
- 5.5.2 A second key group, forming the junction of Nevill Street onto London Road, includes three storey buildings each side of Nevill Street and the church of King Charles the Martyr. These form a significant focal group in the south part of the town, that are visible in approaches from both directions along London Road, and mark the northern entrance to The Pantiles themselves.

Key spaces

- 5.5.3 The Walks themselves form one of two primary spaces in The Pantiles area, and their relationship to the historic frontages on both sides is strong and crucial. The second key space is the open area in front of King Charles the Martyr, so important for the setting of the Church. Its character is broad and open, contrasting with the narrowness of streets and passages bounding the other three sides of the building.

Alleys

- 5.5.4 An additional subtlety in this area is the contrast in spatial character provided by the linking passages to London Road (Woods Passage, Flat House Passage and Swan Passage) and to Nevill Street (Coach House Passage, Market Street, including Pink Alley). Buildings bridge the passageways, and their narrow space contrasts with the breadth of the Walks. Glimpses to areas beyond the Pantiles (especially to the Common through Woods and Fullaways Passages) add to the variety of experience that the Walks create.

Views

- 5.5.5 The topography of the area lends itself to the generation of attractive vistas and panoramas throughout the area. In particular, the inter-relationship between the openness of The Common and the enclosed network of narrow streets is particularly distinctive. Within the area there are numerous glimpsed vistas.
- 5.5.6 The clock tower of King Charles the Martyr is a significant focus in views from beyond the immediate Pantiles area, particularly from High Street and Chapel Place. As elsewhere in the town, roofscapes are important, and behind the main frontage buildings tile hanging to the pleasing complexity of back-additions is particularly distinctive.

Roofscape

- 5.5.7 The roofscape of the Pantiles is particularly significant in views because of its lower level compared with surrounding areas of the town. The variations in rooflines and roof forms are augmented by the interplay of gables, hips, dormers and tile-hung upper floors, and by the visual punctuation provided by chimneys.

Colour

- 5.5.8 White paint finishes to many of the buildings provide a unifying theme, on both weather-boarded and stuccoed elevations. Building details, such as window surrounds, are generally black or white, and subtle punctuation is provided by the use of restrained dark colours on shopfronts. At higher levels many elevations are in contrasting warm red-brown brick and tile-hanging.

Contribution of green spaces, trees and hedges

- 5.5.9 This part of the town is densely developed as a result, street trees are only to be found along the main thoroughfares. This scarcity means that where the trees are found, they are particularly noticeable.
- 5.5.10 The Lime trees which follow the line of the Upper Walk within The Pantiles are particularly important, for historic as well as visual reasons, since such trees were planted from the earliest years of the development of The Wells as an amenity for promenaders. The tree group at the southern end of The Pantiles helps to soften views of the Union House development and enclose the southern space.
- 5.5.11 The Common also has a significant bearing on the setting of The Pantiles and King Charles the Martyr. A constant theme throughout Tunbridge Wells, the setting of trees, woodland and greenery is a contrasting backcloth to the built environment.

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

- 5.6.1 The Pantiles area has been well preserved, and there are few areas of obvious loss or damage.

Intrusions

- 5.6.2 Intrusions into the setting are generally the result of motor traffic, particularly heavy volumes on London Road and the area of carriageway given over to the roundabout adjacent to The Church of King Charles the Martyr. The restrictions to the pedestrian environment of narrow pavements and kerbside barriers create an unnecessarily cramped setting.
- 5.6.3 The Union House development south of Linden Park Road is intrusive, affecting the historic character of The Pantiles area.