

ST MARY'S BUTTS / CASTLE STREET CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL



Reading Borough Council

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ST MARY'S BUTTS/CASTLE STREET CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Purpose of the appraisal

This appraisal seeks to record and analyse the various features which give the St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area its special architectural and historic interest. The area's buildings and spaces are noted and described, and marked on the Townscape Appraisal map (Appendix 2) along with listed buildings, buildings of townscape merit, significant trees and spaces, and important views into and out of the conservation area. There is a presumption that all of these features should be "preserved or enhanced", as required by legislation.

This appraisal builds upon national policy, as set out in *Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 (PPG 15) - Planning and the Historic Environment*, and local policy, as set out in the *Reading Borough Local Plan 1991-2006*, and provides a firm basis on which applications for development within the St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area can be assessed.

This appraisal follows the suggested format contained in Appendix 2 of the English Heritage document "Guidance on Conservation Area Appraisals" August 2005.

1.2 Summary of special interest

The St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area was designated in 1972.

The special interest which justifies designation of the St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area derives from the following features:

- Its position at the Saxon centre of Reading at a cross-roads of the main east-west and north-south routes through the town, just north of an original crossing point across the River Kennet, upon which river the town grew.
- The Grade I listed Church of St Mary in St Mary's Butts, a Reading landmark, originally Norman, and mentioned in the Domesday Book, but now mostly Medieval in origin, which is the focal building of the Conservation Area.
- St Mary's Churchyard, an important open space in the centre of town.
- Other important landmark buildings including the Grade II* listed St Mary's Church in Castle Street.
- The architectural and historic interest of the area's other buildings, with examples dating from the sixteenth century to the present day,

but the majority of which show a coherence of scale within their various architectural styles.

- The presence of some of the oldest surviving buildings in Reading, including 3 existing public houses (“The Allied Arms”, “The Horn” and “The Sun”) dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, and the former “Shades” public house at 15 Gun Street dating from the 17th century. “The Sun” is also reputed to be on the site of the former Reading Gaol.
- Important Grade II* listed buildings at 15 and 17 Castle Street (both 16th century), 19 Castle Street (early 18th century), 63 Castle Street (circa 1750) and the Church of St Mary, Castle Street (1798).
- 35-37 St Mary’s Butts (“County Delicacies”) and 57 St Mary’s Butts (“The Allied Arms”), which also date from the 16th century.
- The Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain in St Mary’s Butts, a local landmark.
- The Grade II* listed Holy Brook Culvert to the rear of numbers 1-31(odd) Castle Street, plus the remainder of the Holy Brook which links the rear of the properties on the south side of the conservation area.
- A high percentage of listed buildings, listed individually and for their group value, dating from before 1875.

2.0 The planning policy context

2.1 National planning policy

Conservation Areas are designated under the provisions of Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. A conservation area is defined as *“an area of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance”*. It is the quality and interest of an *area*, rather than that of individual buildings, which is the prime consideration in identifying a conservation area.

Section 71 of the same Act requires local planning authorities to formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of any parts of their area which are conservation areas. Section 72 specifies that, in making a decision on an application for development in a conservation area, special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.

This document should be read in conjunction with national planning policy guidance, particularly PPG 15 - Planning and the Historic Environment. The layout and content of this conservation area appraisal follows guidance produced by English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the English Historic Towns Forum published in February 2006.

2.2 Local planning policy

The Reading Borough Core Strategy was found to be “sound” in December 2007 and was formally adopted on 29th January 2008. Policy CS33 provides a strategic level policy which indicates that the historic environment, including its setting, will be preserved and enhanced. Proposals will also have regard to the provisions set out in PPG15.

Policies which seek the preservation and enhancement of archaeological sites, historic parks and gardens, listed buildings and conservation areas are also set out in Chapter 6 of the *Reading Borough Local Plan 1991-2006*, which was adopted on 14th October 1998. Most of these relevant policies remain “saved” following the adoption of the Core Strategy. The “saved” policies of particular note are Policies CUD 6 (Demolition of Unlisted Buildings in Conservation Areas) and CUD7 (New Development in Conservation Areas), which outline Reading Borough Council’s approach to development in Conservation Areas. Copies of these policies can be found at Appendix 1 of this document. Because of the high percentage of listed buildings in the Conservation Area, Policies CUD 1 ((Works Affecting Listed Buildings), CUD 2 (Change of Use of Listed Buildings), CUD 3 (Maintenance of Listed Buildings) and CUD 4 (Setting of Listed Buildings) also apply.

The Local Plan’s conservation objectives are stated as:

- (i) to conserve or enhance the Borough's stock of listed buildings and other buildings of architectural quality or historical significance;
- (ii) to identify, protect or enhance areas of character;
- (iii) to identify and conserve areas of archaeological significance and to protect or enhance finds and sites for the education and enjoyment of Reading residents.

3.0 Location and setting

3.1 Location and context

The boundaries of the St Mary’s Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area are shown at Appendix 2. It is situated immediately to the south of properties fronting Reading’s traditional main shopping street, Broad Street, from which it is accessible via the northern end of St Mary’s Butts and Chain Street.

It lies north west of the Oracle Shopping Centre, to which access can be gained at either end of Gun Street.

Two main road links cross the area, St Mary's Butts/Bridge Street north to south, and Castle Street/Gun Street/and a small section of Minster Street west to east. Only the south side and a small stretch on the northern side of Castle Street (eastern end) lie in the Conservation Area. The remaining northern side of Castle Street comprises the Magistrates Court/Police Station Complex, behind which are the Civic Offices and the Hexagon, and to the north-east of which lies the Broad Street Mall Shopping Centre. The latter also faces the northern end (western side) of St Mary's Butts. This whole area is a 1970s redevelopment; however, that part of this area centred on the site of the Hosier Street Market and land to the west is currently under discussion for further redevelopment and presents considerable potential to improve the appearance and setting of this part of the Conservation Area.

The western end of the Conservation Area is marked by the line of that part of the town's Inner Distribution Road which separates the St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area from the Castle Hill/Russell Street Conservation Area to the west.

The southern boundary of the Conservation Area is demarcated by the Holy Brook, south of which are more recent housing developments and offices accessed from Bridge Street on part of the former Simmonds/Courage Brewery site to the west of Bridge Street. The aforementioned Oracle Shopping Centre (a large part of which was also part of the former Simmonds/Courage Brewery site) also lies to the south of The Holy Brook to the east of Bridge Street.

The John Lewis (formerly "Heelas") department store marks the eastern boundary of the site, and south of that, on the opposite side of Minster Street, is a main Telephone Exchange, with the "Oracle" beyond this and to the south.

The Conservation Area therefore represents an historic oasis surrounded on three sides by post 1970s and later developments, and only to the north by the more historic Broad Street, which however backs on to the Conservation Area, often in the form of rear service yards and parking spaces which are accessed from St Mary's Butts adjacent to St Mary's Church.

3.2 General character and plan form

Essentially the Conservation Area lies at the crossing of two north/south and east/west roads. Except for St Mary's Church and Churchyard, which form a key open space and landmark building in the north-east segment of the cross-roads, the character of the area is one of two and three storey buildings built right up the back edge of pavements. This character is

reflective of the medieval street pattern of this part of Reading, which is recognised as being the original core and market place of the town, before the advent of Reading Abbey “drew” the centre of gravity of the town and its market place to the western end of Friar Street. More recently, the market has moved to its current position, in Hosier Street, once again close to its original home.

With this background in mind, it is not surprising to find that St Mary’s Butts was shown as “Old Street” on older maps of the town, whereas Friar Street was shown as “New Street”.

The cross-roads lie immediately north of the original fords/bridging points of the River Kennet upon which Reading grew, providing the main route south to places like Winchester and Southampton and north to Wallingford (historically a very important town) and Oxford. The Minster Street/Gun Street/Castle Street axis was originally the main east-west route between London and Bath.

Originally, there was a row of back-to-back houses running down the middle of the southern end of St Mary’s Butts and on the outside of the churchyard. The latter were actually almshouses, built in the late sixteenth century, rebuilt in the late eighteenth century and demolished circa 1865, when they were “relocated” to the western end of Castle Street. A plaque on the wall of the latter testifies to the original almshouses in the Churchyard.

The cross-roads should therefore be seen as a busy centre of life in Saxon and medieval times, centred on the market, St Mary’s Church, the churchyard and the cross-roads. Historically, there have been at least 4 public houses (inns) and 2 or 3 churches in this small area, and before it was redeveloped, a number of industries were situated in the area immediately surrounding the Conservation Area, for example early mills based on the River Kennet, and latterly the now relocated Courage/Simmonds Brewery.

4.0 Historic development

4.1 Archaeology

Although previously thought to be a wintering place for the Danes, Reading is named after a Saxon tribe, the *Readingas*, who settled in the area in the 6th century. Work on development sites in Reading has uncovered evidence of early Saxon occupation.

The Domesday Survey for Reading, undertaken in 1085-6, described a large estate formerly held by King Edward and a church and estate held by the Abbot of Battle, evidence of a thriving urban community in the eleventh century. This was centred where the main north-south and east-west roads crossed to the south west of the current site of St Mary’s Church.

4.2 Historic development

The turning point in Reading's history came in 1121 when Henry I founded Reading Abbey, later to become one of the richest religious houses in England until the Dissolution in 1539. The enormous abbey church now lies under the present Forbury Garden and Abbots' Walk, to the east of Reading's Market Place/London Street Conservation Area. This area became the centre of Reading following the building of the Abbey, taking over from the St Mary's Butts area.

During the medieval period Reading developed rapidly, based on the manufacture of woollen cloth, leather goods and silk weaving. This was encouraged by its good location on the crossing of major historic land routes, and by the proximity of the two waterways - the River Kennet and the River Thames.

4.3 The effect of historical development on plan form; settlement pattern

The old Saxon Borough of Reading was centred on the Old Market and Old Street, which early maps indicate was what St Mary's Butts was originally called, where the two main roads (Oxford to Winchester and London to Bath) crossed above the then lowest bridging point of the River Kennet. St Mary's Church, mentioned in the Domesday Book, faced the market and originally occupied a corner at the cross-roads, now obscured by the southern extension of the graveyard which deflected Minster Street south towards properties in what is now Gun Street.

As mentioned above, the foundation of the Abbey to the east of the town resulted in a shift of economic balance from the area round St Mary's Butts to the gates of the Abbey. This was also a shift from the unplanned original centre of "Old Street" (St Mary's Butts) to a more planned new centre towards the end of "New Street" (now Friar Street), incorporating a large new market place and a grid of streets between Friar Street and Broad Street. London Street and a new bridge over the Kennet were part of this plan.

St Mary's Butts can therefore lay claim to be the oldest part of Reading, dating from Saxon times. The current street pattern dates from medieval times, when the St Mary's Parish was the original heart of the town. St Mary's Butts takes its name from the range where local men were obliged by law to practice archery. Apparently this lasted until the seventeenth century, when guns became the weapon of war, and speculation is that Gun Street takes its name from the location of gun retailers in the street.



St Mary's Church

The main building, then as now, was St Mary's Church, essentially a sixteenth century re-build on the Saxon site, but incorporating remnants of the early church and also using materials from the by now dissolved Reading Abbey.

Another notable building in the area was the Oracle, built as a place of work for the poor, with its entrance adjoining 15 Gun Street (and now an entrance to the recently developed Oracle Shopping Centre, from which it takes its name). This existed until about 1850.

Therefore, Reading grew up around the lowest point at which the River Kennet could be crossed. The original crossing place, the natural place for a town to be started, seems to have been at the bottom of today's Bridge Street. Towards this crossing place came roads from Oxford, Southampton, Bristol and London. The earliest main south-north route followed Southampton Street and Bridge Street to St Mary's Butts where the medieval St Mary's Church still stands.

As the influence of the Abbey grew, the early route along the course of today's Southampton Street, Bridge Street and St. Mary's Butts was rivaled by a south-north road leading directly to the newly established market place by St Laurence's Church via a new bridge over the Kennet. This new road followed London Street over the Kennet at High Bridge and led along Duke Street to the Market Place i.e. the backbone of the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area.

The earliest map of Reading, published in John Speed's atlas of Great Britain in 1611 shows that the plan of the town in the early 17th century resembled a triangle with a church roughly at each corner: St Mary's, Greyfriars and St Laurence's. The two long roughly north-south sides of the triangle are formed by the two old rival routes mentioned above. The River Kennet, spanned by two bridges (one over each route), flowed through the centre of the town. The northern side of the triangle was Friar Street. The most developed area is shown to be north of the Kennet and west of the site of Reading Abbey.

Reading was mostly contained within the medieval limits of the 'triangle' until the end of the 18th century when the town began to expand as a result of improved transport links and industrialisation. Rocque's map of the mid-18th century shows some development westward from Castle Street as well as the beginnings of development eastward along London Road. Tomkin's map of 1802 is far more detailed and shows many buildings that are still standing today.

The most significant changes to Reading's historic street pattern, are fairly recent and were caused by the construction in the 1970s of the Inner Distribution Road (IDR) around the western and southern parts of the town centre. This forms a physical and visual barrier to the west and south of the St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area (see 5.1 Key Views and Vistas).

The newer 1970s redevelopment of the Police Station/Magistrates Courts/Civic Centre/Hexagon/Broad Street Mall and, later, The Oracle Shopping Centre, have already been cited as enclosing the Conservation Area, but there is an opportunity to improve the modern face to the Conservation Area with the proposed redevelopment of the Hosier Street Market site and land to the west.

5.0 Spatial analysis

5.1 Key views and vistas

The Conservation Area basically lies at the top of an incline from the Kennet river crossing, but because of the tightness of the properties at the northern end of Bridge Street to the back edge of the pavement, views of St Mary's Church are not readily apparent until one is quite close to it. The same applies when approaching the site from other points of the compass. Nevertheless the tower of St Mary's Church itself provides good views of these approaches (important historically to defend the church). The similarly named, St Mary's Church in Castle Street is also another local landmark, but again, is more prominent close up and from views from either end of Castle Street. It is, however, less prominent nowadays, because it is missing the "pepper pot" (bell tower) feature which once adorned the plinth which still stands above the building.

A minor local landmark structure is the Victorian Fountain situated on the "island" in the middle of St Mary's Butts, as is the facility provided by a refreshment kiosk adjacent to it. At the southern end of the island were once subterranean Victorian toilets, which are now closed/sealed off.

The main historic views out of the area are: to Greyfriars Church to the north along St Mary's Butts and West Street; up Castle Hill to the west,

although this is interrupted by the Inner Distribution Road and the large roundabout above it at the western end of Castle Street; and south to St Giles Church down Bridge Street and Southampton Street (but again interrupted by the Inner Distribution Road). Views to the east are foreshortened by the closeness of buildings on this boundary.

The Conservation Area is therefore very much an historic enclave surrounded by much more modern developments which do not provide significant views out of the area, but which generally benefit from good views in to it. It is situated at the centre of some very active parts of the town, which people walk across and often rest in, and (apart from the grassed area outside the Civic Offices) provides the only public green area at the western end of the town centre.

Within the Conservation Area there are potentially interesting views to and from the west from St Mary's Church along the important east-west pedestrian axis via the site of the Hosier Street Market from the Civic Offices/Hexagon/Broad Street Mall southern entrance to St Mary's Church. Currently the views to St Mary's Church are significantly better than those from it. However, the previously mentioned development of the Hosier Street brings with it considerable potential for improvements to this part of the Conservation Area, its wider setting and views to and from it.

5.2 The character of spaces within the area

The Conservation Area is, generally speaking, a tightly knit urban area composed of continuous frontages of two- and three- storey buildings to the back of the pavement edge, fronting streets of varying length and width, with one major public open space, that of St Mary's Churchyard, surrounding the area's major landmark building, having pedestrian links around it to the wider area. This well maintained open space, based on St Mary's Church, is surrounded by walls on its east, south and west sides, and provides a good focus and setting for the area's historic buildings, although Castle Street runs westwards from the south-west corner of this area and therefore has a



Almshouses, Castle Street

character of its own. It is a popular oasis where people can stop and relax from the bustle of urban life which surrounds it.

The Castle Street Almshouses at its western end do, however, contain an

attractive open space running between the parallel terraces of which the Almshouses comprise. This leads down to the Holy Brook, which is an open linking feature at the southern end of this part of Castle Street until it disappears into the Grade II* listed culvert behind numbers 1-31 (odd) Castle Street, only to reappear intermittently behind properties in Gun Street. In parts, Castle Street presents a wide thoroughfare, but remains a major vehicular traffic route with narrow footpaths and few pedestrian resting spaces.

St Mary's Butts itself is also a wide thoroughfare, with fairly narrow pavements, but has an interesting traffic island at its centre. As previously mentioned, this contains a commemorative fountain, popular refreshment kiosk, and was formerly the site of subterranean Victorian toilets. Opposite St Mary's Church to the west, across St Mary's Butts, is the fairly open site of the town's four times weekly market. Although currently poorly defined and lacking character, and just outside the Conservation Area, this space will be redeveloped in the near future as part of the aforementioned Civic area redevelopment

The Churchyard, Almshouses and Holybrook open spaces display a much quieter character than the extremely busy St Mary's Butts and the Gun Street/Castle Street axes which, although subject to some day-time traffic restrictions, are very busy, major bus routes through the centre of the town, affecting the character and appearance of these streets with the plethora of street furniture associated with this function.

Apart from St Mary's Churchyard there is, therefore, limited green public open space in the area. With the exception of the Castle Street Almshouses, former back yards or gardens of properties fronting the conservation area have been developed or are used for car parking, reflecting the generally commercial function of this town centre area.

6.0 Definition of the special interest of the conservation area

6.1 Definition of character areas

The Conservation Area can be divided into three character areas:

- St Mary's Church and Churchyard,
- St Marys Butts, and
- The Gun Street and Castle Street frontages.

Area 1: St Mary's Church and Churchyard

St Mary's Church lies at the heart of the Conservation Area, and is situated within its largest public open space. It is the most pedestrian-friendly part of the Area. The area is defined by walls round three sides and part of the

fourth (north) side, with buildings facing it at the eastern end of the north side. The Grade 1 listed church, the open, people-friendly character of the churchyard around it, and the pedestrian routes through and around the space, are a marked contrast to the close-knit buildings beyond heavily used roadways outside the churchyard.

The churchyard was not always open to view as it is now, because from the sixteenth to the mid nineteenth centuries there were originally almshouses on its southern and western boundaries. Their removal clearly benefited the now open character and appearance of this part of the Conservation Area.

Character Area 1: Features that make a positive contribution to the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:

- The site of the Minster Church of St Mary and its walled churchyard, which dominate the very core of the historical centre of Reading as well as the Conservation Area itself;
- Good pedestrian links through and around the site, and pedestrian links via Chain Street to Broad Street to the north and The Oracle to the south;
- Some potential to stop and sit in the churchyard;
- The generally well-maintained character of the site.

Character Area 1: Features that have a negative impact on the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:

- Noise and fumes from a constant stream of vehicular traffic to the south and west of the Churchyard;
- Unattractive, if well-used pedestrian links to and from the west of the site across a heavily trafficked St Mary's Butts.

Area 2: St Mary's Butts

This broad thoroughfare is dominated by traffic and has potential for improvement, hopefully retaining the commemorative fountain in the central traffic island. The refreshment kiosk also provides interest as well as a local facility, but the erstwhile removal of the Victorian toilets from the southern end of the island means that it now lacks the character that it once had, and despite the presence of the refreshment kiosk, is not a pedestrian-friendly area at this point. The island is situated between two carriageways (effectively providing a north to south turning head for vehicles unable to progress north past a traffic restriction). Bus traffic dominates the western carriageway for a considerable number of routes travelling from the east, west and south, and the accompanying infrastructure, in terms of road layout, materials used and amount of street furniture pays little regard to the position of St Mary's Butts in the Conservation Area or its setting in relation to St Mary's Church.

The properties fronting St Mary's Butts within the Conservation Area represent a genuinely historic part of the town, notwithstanding the relatively new buildings at numbers 32 and 34. These are some of the oldest surviving buildings in the town and, in terms of scale and architectural style relate to their neighbours to the south, particularly in Castle Street, with which some are contiguous. Pavement treatments in this locality are however generally poor.

Reading's four times weekly market is held in Hosier Street, to the west of St Mary's Butts and just outside the Conservation Area.

Character Area 2: Features that make a positive contribution to the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:

- The traditional 16th century buildings at the southern end of St Mary's Butts (numbers 35-37 St Mary's Butts and "The Horn" adjoining them to the south), and at 57 St Mary's Butts, the latter retaining its cobbled access and passageway and cobbles in front of the building;
- The Victorian Fountain and kiosk, which are local landmarks on the "island" in the centre of St Mary's Butts;
- Views to St Mary's Church and Churchyard.

Character Area 2: Features that have a negative impact on the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:

- The relative dominance of large modern buildings to the north (Broad Street Mall) and smaller buildings to the west (32-34 St Mary's Butts, the Electricity Sub-Station) and the Civic Centre complex beyond these to the west;
- The wide, vehicle dominated thoroughfare of St Mary's Butts itself;
- Modern carriageway and pavement materials (concrete and tarmac) which do not respect the historical importance of the street;
- A plethora of street furniture associated with the function of the street as an important vehicular, particularly public transport, route.
- The current unattractive appearance of the Hosier Street market area immediately adjoining and affecting the setting of the Conservation Area.

3. The Gun Street and Castle Street frontages

The buildings in these streets, and the south/south-western end of St Mary's Butts already referred to, are typically two and three storeys built right up to the back edge of pavement. This character is reflective of the medieval street pattern of this part of Reading, being the original core of the town, with good examples of buildings dating from all periods from the sixteenth

century (indeed some of the oldest in the town). Despite the range of ages of buildings here, there remains a coherence of scale and massing throughout these streets, which has been maintained right up to the most recent developments. The main exception to this scale within the Conservation Area is St Mary's Church in Castle Street, a landmark building in this street, and to a lesser extent the former Congregational Chapel, now "Dogma" at 11 Castle Street.



Again, the dominance of vehicles travelling east and west along Castle Street and west along Gun Street spoils the ambience of these streets, as does the

quality and materials used to form pavements and carriageways. The presence of parked cars and street furniture also gives a cluttered feel to this part of the Conservation Area, despite the attractive character of the building frontages themselves, which comprise an attractive sweep when seen from a number of viewpoints at either end and along the street - this is despite the visual intrusion and physical juxtaposition of the more monolithic Magistrates Court and Police Station buildings at its western end.

Character Area 3: Features that make a positive contribution to the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:

- St Mary's Church in the centre of the northern part of Castle Street within the Conservation Area is a local landmark building even without its missing "pepperpot";
- The corner buildings at Gun Street/Bridge Street, Bridge Street/Castle Street and Castle Street/St Mary's Butts, at the crossroads of the Conservation Area are local landmark buildings;
- The "Sun Inn" is now also an important corner landmark building representing the western limit of the Conservation Area on the north side of Castle Street;
- The 16th Century survivors at numbers 15 and 17 Castle Street, the former retaining a cobbled passageway;

- The gentle curves apparent in the building frontages to Castle Street are also a key feature of the buildings here, giving further coherence to the matching scale of the buildings along the frontage;
- Traditional shop frontages in Gun Street;
- The open space between the almshouses between 51 and 55 Castle Street providing a unique green space seen from the frontage of this part of the Conservation Area;
- The Holy Brook which links the rears (albeit partly in a listed culvert) of the properties in Castle Street and Gun Street on their south sides, and which at its western end is an attractive landscaped foil to the generally built up of this part of the Conservation Area;
- Railings at the front of several properties on the south side of Gun Street and Castle Street.

Character Area 3: Features that have a negative impact on the historic character and appearance of the conservation area:

- Noise and fumes from traffic;
- Modern highway and pavement materials and a plethora of street furniture associated with this important east-west vehicular (public transport), probably worst at the Gun Street end;
- Parked cars at various points along the Castle Street frontages also provide a visual distraction from the character and appearance of the Conservation Area;
- The historic and architectural character and appearance of Castle Street is diluted by the dominating presence of the Police Station and Magistrates Court on the north side/western end of Castle Street (outside the Conservation Area, but directly facing the “sweep” of Castle Street opposite);
- The Castle Street roundabout above the IDR which cuts off physical and visual links with historic parts of the town to the west;
- To some extent, The Oracle development also dominates behind properties in Gun Street, as does the “Fobney” office development behind properties in Castle Street, but these are less obvious when seen from street level;
- Although an important pedestrian route from the west, this is not an attractive pedestrian route, with pedestrian/traffic conflicts along it;
- Non traditional shop fronts in Gun Street.

Generally.

Apart from the much more contemporary buildings immediately outside it, the conservation area itself and the buildings in it have a somewhat medieval scale and appearance, and changes which have taken place (within the building street frontages of the Conservation Area itself) since those times have generally respected this character. Opportunities should

however be taken to redress the negative impacts referred to on the peripheries of the Conservation Area, and to floorscapes generally.

6.2 Activities and uses

The Conservation Area is essentially a mixed use commercial area with some residential properties at the western end of Castle Street and the western end of Minster Street. There are however few residential units above ground floor uses throughout the Conservation Area. Retail and catering uses predominate at ground floor in Gun Street and St Mary's Butts and at the eastern end of Castle Street, but elsewhere offices predominate. This mix has proved beneficial to high occupancy rates and the routine maintenance of properties in the Conservation Area, and there have only been isolated examples of neglect in recent years. Currently, buildings in the Conservation Area indicate high occupancy rates and good maintenance.

6.3 Architectural and historic character: building methods and materials

The Conservation Area contains buildings from the 16th century onwards with an obvious preponderance of late 18th and 19th century buildings. Fortunately, within the Conservation Area itself, newer redevelopment and more modern buildings have generally respected the design, scale and materials of the original buildings, and do not have a negative effect on the special architectural interest of the Conservation Area.

St Mary's Church, a Reading landmark, is one of the oldest buildings in the town. The current church dates in part from the 16th century, although there has been a church on this site since Norman times. This is a unique building in Reading, built in a distinctive chequer work of flint and ashlar with a tiled roof.

There are also a number of surviving buildings from the 16th and 17th centuries within the area, such that the St Mary's Butts/Castle Street Conservation Area shares with the Market Place/London Street Conservation Area the distinction of housing some of the very few surviving examples of Reading's pre-industrial urban development, including timber-framed buildings, some with typical jetties at first floor level. Falling into this category are: 15 and 17 Castle Street, 2-6 Castle Street, and 35-37 and 57 St Mary's Butts, some retaining cobbled access passageways to the rear. 17th Century buildings include: the rear of 8 Castle Street, 14-16 Castle Street ("The Sun") and 15 Gun Street.

Save for the obvious exception of the "grander" architecture and materials used in the two churches in the Conservation Area, and the aforementioned timber-framed buildings, the buildings in the Conservation area are

generally of brick, which is one of the distinguishing features of Reading's architecture and there are examples of good quality brickwork throughout the conservation area. Brick was a popular building material in the 18th and 19th centuries and the ready availability of different coloured bricks provided the opportunity for the lively polychromatic brickwork found throughout Victorian Reading. The town had several brickworks, the most notable being S & E Collier Ltd at Water Road and Elgar Road and two brick works in the Tilehurst area.

6.4 Buildings of Townscape Merit

Most of the buildings in this Conservation area are listed as being of architectural or historic importance, both in their own right and for their group value. These are "Buildings of Townscape Merit" in their own right, particularly the churches and corner sites, but the unlisted former "Cross Keys" public house (now "Sahara") on the corner of Gun Street and Bridge Street is also considered worthy as being a "Building of Townscape Merit".



Buildings identified as having "townscape merit" will vary, but commonly they will be good examples of relatively unaltered 19th century and later buildings where their style, detailing and building materials provides the streetscape with interest and variety. Most importantly, they make a positive

contribution to the special interest of a conservation area. The former "Cross Keys" displays all of these attributes, not least in the use of decorative and patterned brickwork, as well as a particularly striking bay window at first floor level. "Cross Keys" motifs also appear throughout the building.

Buildings of Townscape Merit help create a conservation area's distinctive and interesting historic townscape. As recommended in Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning and the Historic Environment, the general presumption should be in favour of retaining buildings which make a positive contribution to the character or appearance of a conservation area.

6.5 Public realm. Floorscape, street lighting and street furniture.

Road and footway surfaces are predominantly modern i.e. tarmac and concrete products, with some brick at the Hosier Street crossing of St Mary's Butts. Whilst generally in good repair, these surfaces are not attractive and not "traditional" in conservation area terms e.g. there is limited use of stone and brick paving.

St Mary's Church has benefited from floorscape improvement by creating pavements along historical pedestrian "desire lines", but only uses traditional stone flags in front of the church itself.

Cobbled passageways remain at 17 Castle Street and 57 St Mary's Butts as part of the 16th century buildings on these sites, and there is a cobbled access area in front of number 57 St Mary's Butts. Small areas of "cobble" survive in front of "The Horn" and "County Delicacies" in St Mary's Butts and "The Sun" and "The Brewery Tap" in Castle Street. Any areas of historic floorscape should be preserved.

Stone flagstones remain outside St Mary's Church in Castle Street, but even here, repairs to the steps appear to be of concrete. The attractive Almshouses between numbers 51 and 55 Castle Street also do not benefit from traditional paving materials.

Brick pavements and some stone kerbs have been used in the area of the bus stop and parking lay-by at the western end of Castle Street, but generally this is not an attractive area.

Railings are to be found in front of some properties in Castle Street, including numbers 17, 19, 43, The Almshouses, the redeveloped number 57 and number 63 Castle Street. However, whilst these are attractive features adding interest to the Conservation area, they are not typical of the Conservation Area and, except for number 57, these appear to date from the 19th century.

Street lighting columns, signage and street furniture are modern, and this is another area with considerable potential for improvement. There are no examples of traditional lighting except in the Almshouses and in St Mary's Churchyard.

As already stated elsewhere in this report, there is considerable potential to "improve" floorscapes throughout the Conservation Area.

6.6 Local details and features

The Queen Victoria Jubilee Fountain in St Mary's Butts (1887) is a significant local landmark and is marked by its status as a listed building. Its setting on a tarmac island in the middle of the busy St Mary's Butts is not however attractive. The aforementioned refreshment kiosk on the island is also a well-used feature of the island.

There are two groups of tombs and a Jubilee Cross within the churchyard which are also listed, plus a local landmark tree, which are lesser features of the Conservation Area but which, together with the aforementioned list, add local character and a sense of place to the Conservation area.

6.7 Historic associations

Despite its place at the original heart and crossroads of the town, the Conservation Area is a little short on personalities who have graced the Area. However, local associations include: Sir Thomas Vachel, after whom the Almshouses in Castle Street are named (he founded the original almshouses at St Mary's Church in 1634); William Henry Woodman, architect for the "new" (1864-7) almshouses; C R Hurrell, watercolourist, who lived at 39 Castle Street; Dr Hurry, historian of Reading Abbey, who lived at 43 Castle Street; R Billing, architect of St Mary's Church, Castle St, originally a simple Georgian building, but embellished with a hexastyle portico in Greek Corinthian style by local builders/architects Henry & Nathaniel Briant, who were also responsible for the King Street Bank and the Royal Berkshire Hospital.

St Mary's Church, Castle Street stands on the site of the former Reading Gaol, and a "Norman Arch" in the grounds and the cellars of "The Sun" are also reputed to be part of the gaol. The Church has an interesting ecclesiastical history as a breakaway from St Giles in Southampton Street, and the former Congregational Chapel at 11 Castle Street was also itself a later breakaway from St Mary's.

The long history of the Minster Church of St Mary is of course inextricably linked with the history of Reading itself, and has been referred to elsewhere in this report.

The origins of the street names in the Conservation Area have been discussed elsewhere in this report, but to this day no one can be sure that Castle Street (and Castle Hill) actually led to a Castle!

6.8 Green spaces, trees and other natural elements

Green spaces are uncommon in this urban conservation area. The three most significant green areas, softening an otherwise obviously urban environment, are the Churchyard of St Mary's Church, the walkway between the Castle Street Almshouses and the Holy Brook where it appears behind properties on the south side of Castle Street and Gun Street.

The space which is occupied by the Hosier Street Market, although actually outside the Conservation Area, has a bland appearance, but has the potential to become an important and attractive linking space between the Conservation Area and the new Civic Centre complex proposed to the west.

The Holy Brook is a notable linking feature on the southern boundary of the conservation area. Originally a natural branch of the River Kennet, it was later harnessed as a serial millstream serving early industries such as dyeing and tanning, and whilst it flows underground through the conservation area, it can be glimpsed from several places along the boundary of the Conservation Area. Behind numbers 1-31 Castle Street it flows through a grade II* listed culvert some 160m long.

Trees are few and because of their scarcity they make a significant contribution to this urban Conservation Area's special character and sense of identity. Significant tree groups are to be found in the area's three "green areas" mentioned above. There are no other significant individual trees and small groups outside of these areas. St Mary's Churchyard has recently benefited from additional planting, funded by local businesses as part of the "Trees for Cities" initiative.

6.9 General condition of the area: The extent of loss, intrusions or damage i.e. negative features.

The general state of repair of buildings in the conservation area is good with few retail and commercial premises remaining vacant for any length of time.

The open spaces are also generally in good repair, without necessarily having a truly traditional feel about them, for example in the use of more appropriate floorscape materials and "furniture".

It is the highway environment (roads and footways) which detracts most from the character and appearance of the Conservation Area as a whole, as has been discussed elsewhere in this appraisal.

All of these areas would benefit from continued monitoring, and the seizing of opportunities for improvement as they arise, not least in relation to the

proposed Civic Quarter proposals which will have a considerable impact at the Hosier Street junction with St Mary's Butts within the Conservation Area.

6.10 Problems, pressures and issues

Design of new development

Within the Conservation Area newer developments have generally respected the character, scale of buildings and materials used in the Conservation Area, thus maintaining its character and appearance. However, a small number of buildings within the conservation area lack attention to detail and are poorly related in architectural terms (e.g. numbers 32 and 34 St Mary's Butts). It is the larger 1960s and 1970s developments immediately outside the Conservation Area which pay least heed to their context adjoining or near the Conservation Area, and have a notably negative effect on its character and appearance (and views out of it). The design of new development within and adjoining the Conservation Area therefore remains a major issue, and particular attention will be called for in the interface between the new Civic Centre complex and the Conservation Area in the Hosier Street/St Mary's Butts area.

Numbers 20-23 St Mary's Butts, to the north of Hosier Street, together form a coherent group (effectively one building), but their character and scale is quite different to that of the Conservation Area. Their scale is actually more akin to that of the adjoining Broad Street Mall. There may however be some opportunity to incorporate this corner into the new Civic Quarter proposals.

Numbers 60 onwards St Mary's Butts, on its east side, immediately north of the Conservation Area are also poorly related to the Conservation Area, and if the opportunity arose to redevelop these sites, such redevelopment should better reflect the scale and massing of the adjoining listed buildings in the Conservation Area, taking a lead from newer developments in Castle Street.

Loss of original architectural details

As previously stated, the majority of the buildings in the Conservation Area are actually listed in their own right, which will help to explain why in general terms the loss of original features, particularly frontage features is fairly limited. Certainly there are very few examples of non-wooden windows having been removed from buildings in the Conservation Area, but more recent developments, usually of non-listed buildings in the Conservation Area do display a greater variety of fenestration and wall treatments, detracting from the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. The more obvious examples are numbers 32 and 34 St Mary's Butts and, in general, the non-listed buildings in Gun Street (numbers

1-6), with the notable exception of the former "Cross Keys" public house on the corner of Gun Street/St Mary's Butts, already mentioned as having "Townscape Merit". Should these properties come forward for development (not necessarily redevelopment), the opportunity should be taken to re-introduce more traditional frontages in terms of windows, doors, shopfronts, etc and of a scale in keeping with their listed neighbours. There is a clear issue here in terms of respecting the setting of individual listed buildings as well as enhancing the character and appearance of the Conservation Area, in accordance with advice contained in PPG15 and policies contained in the Reading Borough Local Plan.

Traffic noise and pollution

The character and environmental quality of the main streets are spoiled by noise and pollution of traffic.

Street clutter

The St Mary's Butts and Gun Street/Castle Street axes represent major public transport routes through the very heart of the Conservation Area, which is reflected in the apparently unavoidable paraphernalia of traffic management and other street furniture, which unfortunately detracts from the overall character and appearance of the Conservation Area as a whole.

Vacant commercial and retail space

There does not appear to be a large amount of vacant property in the conservation area, which helps in the routine building maintenance, repair and upkeep of buildings in the Conservation Area.

7.0 Areas for further work

7.1 Consideration of possible conservation area boundary changes (to be the subject of a public consultation exercise if taken forward)

Only minor suggested changes need to be considered, as follows:-

1. The boundary of the Conservation area as originally drawn in 1972 included the grade II listed Reading Dispensary Building which was subsequently demolished as part of the then Heelas/now John Lewis department store redevelopment. Consideration could therefore be given to amending the boundary here to follow the front line of the John Lewis store, as the historic, architectural and group value of the former Dispensary Building to the Conservation area has been lost.

2. Similarly, the buildings at 30-40 Minster Street have also been redeveloped since the Conservation Area was designated in 1972, and the replacement buildings for the previously unlisted buildings on this site appear to be more in scale with the John Lewis building to the north and buildings in Minster Street to the east. Arguably they are not in keeping with the general scale, character and appearance of the Conservation Area, such that again consideration could be given to amending the Conservation Area boundary to exclude these buildings.
3. A minor extension to the Conservation Area could be considered on the south/south eastern boundary, to take in those parts of the Holy Brook, and its culvert, which are not already included. No further extensions to the boundaries of the Conservation Area are considered necessary. Numbers 20-23 St Mary's Butts (immediately north of Hosier Street) and numbers 60 northwards St Mary's Butts were considered as potentials for inclusion in paragraph 6.10 (*Design of new development*) above, but are not considered to be appropriate for inclusion.

7.2 Opportunities for enhancement

A major enhancement opportunity exists in the Hosier Street/St Mary's Butts area with the proposed Civic Offices redevelopment to the west of the Conservation Area, but which will affect this area, and will require any new buildings to respect the scale and context of buildings in the Conservation Area. It should also allow the enhancement of (the setting of) local features such as the Victorian Jubilee Fountain and the refreshment kiosk. Major floorscape and street furniture improvements should also be considered in this area, incorporating improvements to pedestrian crossings and links at this point.

Consideration should be given generally to improving floorscapes and pedestrian friendliness throughout the Conservation Area.

It should however be noted that paragraph 4.14 of PPG15 requires Local Planning Authorities to consider the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a Conservation area as a material consideration in considering development proposals which are outside the Conservation Area but would affect its setting, or views into or out of the area.

7.3 Monitoring and review

This document should be reviewed every five years in the light of the Local Development Framework and emerging government policy. A review should include the following:

- A survey of the area to identify changes in its character and appearance;
- An assessment of whether the various recommendations detailed in this document have been acted upon, including proposed enhancements;
- A building condition survey;
- The production of a short report detailing the findings of the survey and any necessary action;
- Publicity and advertising.

Appendix 1 - Relevant Local Plan Policies

The following policies from the Reading Borough Local Plan (1991-2006) are relevant to the preservation and enhancement of the conservation area:

POLICY CUD 6: DEMOLITION OF UNLISTED BUILDINGS IN CONSERVATION AREAS

CONSENT TO DEMOLISH IN A CONSERVATION AREA WILL NORMALLY ONLY BE PERMITTED WHERE IT CAN BE SHOWN THAT IT IS WHOLLY BEYOND REPAIR, INCAPABLE OF REASONABLY BENEFICIAL USE, OF INAPPROPRIATE STRUCTURE OR DESIGN, OR WHERE ITS REMOVAL OR REPLACEMENT WOULD BENEFIT THE APPEARANCE OR CHARACTER OF THE AREA. DEMOLITION WILL BE MORE FAVOURABLY ASSESSED WHERE THERE ARE APPROVED DETAILED PLANS FOR REDEVELOPMENT AND A CONTRACT FOR CARRYING OUT THE WORKS HAS BEEN ENTERED INTO.

POLICY CUD 7: NEW DEVELOPMENT IN CONSERVATION AREAS

AS APPROPRIATE NEW DEVELOPMENT IN CONSERVATION AREAS SHOULD MAKE A CONTRIBUTION TO THE AREA BY RESPECTING OR ENHANCING ITS ARCHITECTURAL AND VISUAL QUALITIES AND ACHIEVING A HIGH STANDARD OF DESIGN. DEVELOPMENT WITHIN CONSERVATION AREAS WILL NORMALLY BE PERMITTED ONLY WHERE THE PARTICULAR HISTORIC OR ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER OR APPEARANCE OF THE AREA WILL BE PRESERVED AND THERE IS NO LIKELIHOOD OF HARM BEING CAUSED TO THE AREAS CHARACTER OR APPEARANCE.

THE BOROUGH COUNCIL WILL AS APPROPRIATE SEEK TO PRESERVE THE EXISTING BALANCE OF USES IN CONSERVATION AREAS.

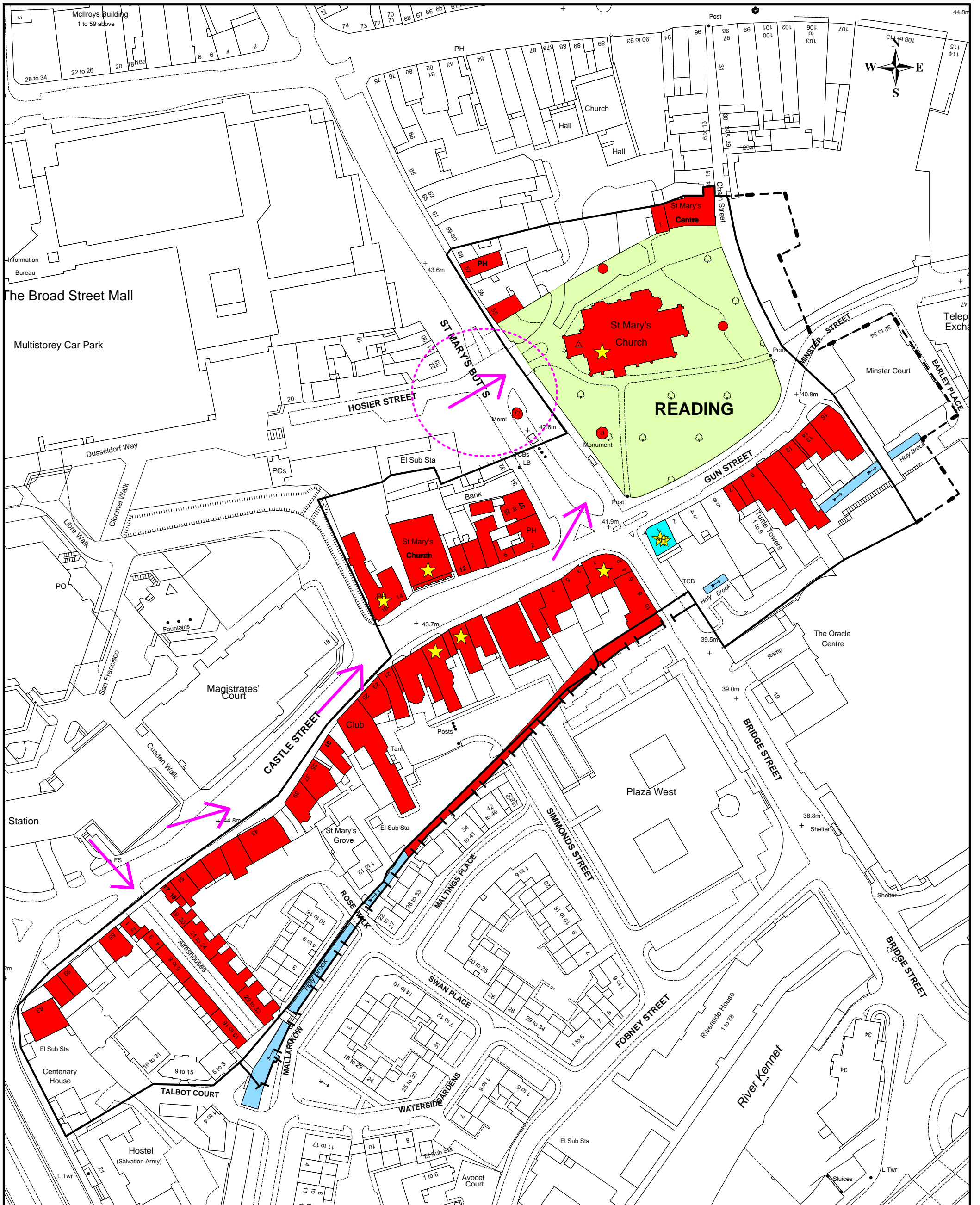
Because of the high percentage of listed buildings in the Conservation Area. Policies CUD 1 ((Works Affecting Listed Buildings), CUD 2 (Change of Use of Listed Buildings), CUD 3 (Maintenance of Listed Buildings) and CUD 4 (Setting of Listed Buildings) also apply.

Appendix 2 - Townscape Appraisal Maps

Map 1: Appraisal Map

Key

	Conservation Area Boundary
	Proposed Area for Future Addition
	Proposed Area for Future Deletion
	Listed Buildings
	Buildings of Townscape Merit
	Significant Open Space / Green Area
	Holy Brook
	Landmark Buildings
	Significant Views
	Focal Point / Opportunity Area



Title: Saint Mary's Butts Castle Street Conservation Area

Drg.No.:
Produced by Planning Section

Scale at A3 : 1:1350
Ref : LAP33291

Date: 04/08/2008



Map 2: Character Areas

1. Saint Mary's Church & Graveyard
2. Saint Mary's Butts
3. The Gun Street and Castle Street frontages



Title: Saint Mary's Butts and Castle Street - Character Areas

Drg no:

Date: 31/07/2008

Scale at A4 : 1:2000

Produced by Planning Section

File: LAP332291/

