

Historic Development of the Pubic Realm

Ashford is named 'Esshetesford' in historic documents, meaning 'the ford near a bend in the river with ash trees'. Situated at a point where several routes cross, a market was established in Ashford in 1243.

Growth in Ashford was initially based on the High Street and Bank Street with the town becoming an industrial town servicing the railways by the mid 1800's.

The gradual growth of Ashford was accompanied by improvements in streetscape with footways being provided in the town centre at the end of the 18th century. The carriageways remained un-surfaced until the beginning of the 20th century. Street lighting was introduced in 1825 at first with oil lamps, but later replaced by gas lighting. There is little information available as to the historical use of materials in Ashford and few historical materials surviving in Ashford today.

Public realm improvement measures appear to have been added over time without a larger vision for the town centre. This has resulted in pockets of improved public realm that sit uncomfortably within a neglected streetscape.

However the relatively recent pedestrianisation scheme of the High Street and the works along Elwick Road, Bank Street and West Street has raised the quality of the public realm. These schemes employed a combination of york stone, granite flags/setts and clay pavers.



Lower High Street - pre First World War

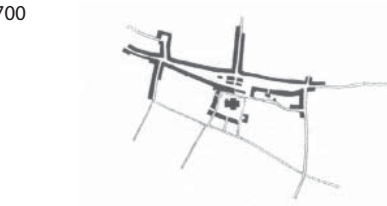


Lower High Street - 1976



Lower High Street - 2005

1700



1871



1907



2009



Streetscape Audit

A general assessment of the different elements that make up the streetscape has been completed and a full version of this can be found in Appendix B.

The quality of the streetscape was assessed against commonly accepted set of indicators:

- Comfortable: a street should provide a comfortable and safe environment for pedestrians and the disabled.
- Function: a street should not be dominated by any one function but rather should accommodate a range of functions.
- Visually simple, and free of clutter.
- Well cared for: a street should be well maintained, and not degraded by utilities or extraneous advertising.
- Appropriate to local character: where there is a clear local vernacular, street design should acknowledge these traditions.
- Providing for access, deliveries and storage of vehicles.

In undertaking the audit, an overall picture of the streetscape and wider public realm has been built up. The findings of the audit are presented in a diagram summarising the main findings overleaf.



Poor quality existing floorspace



Inadequate and poorly integrated signage



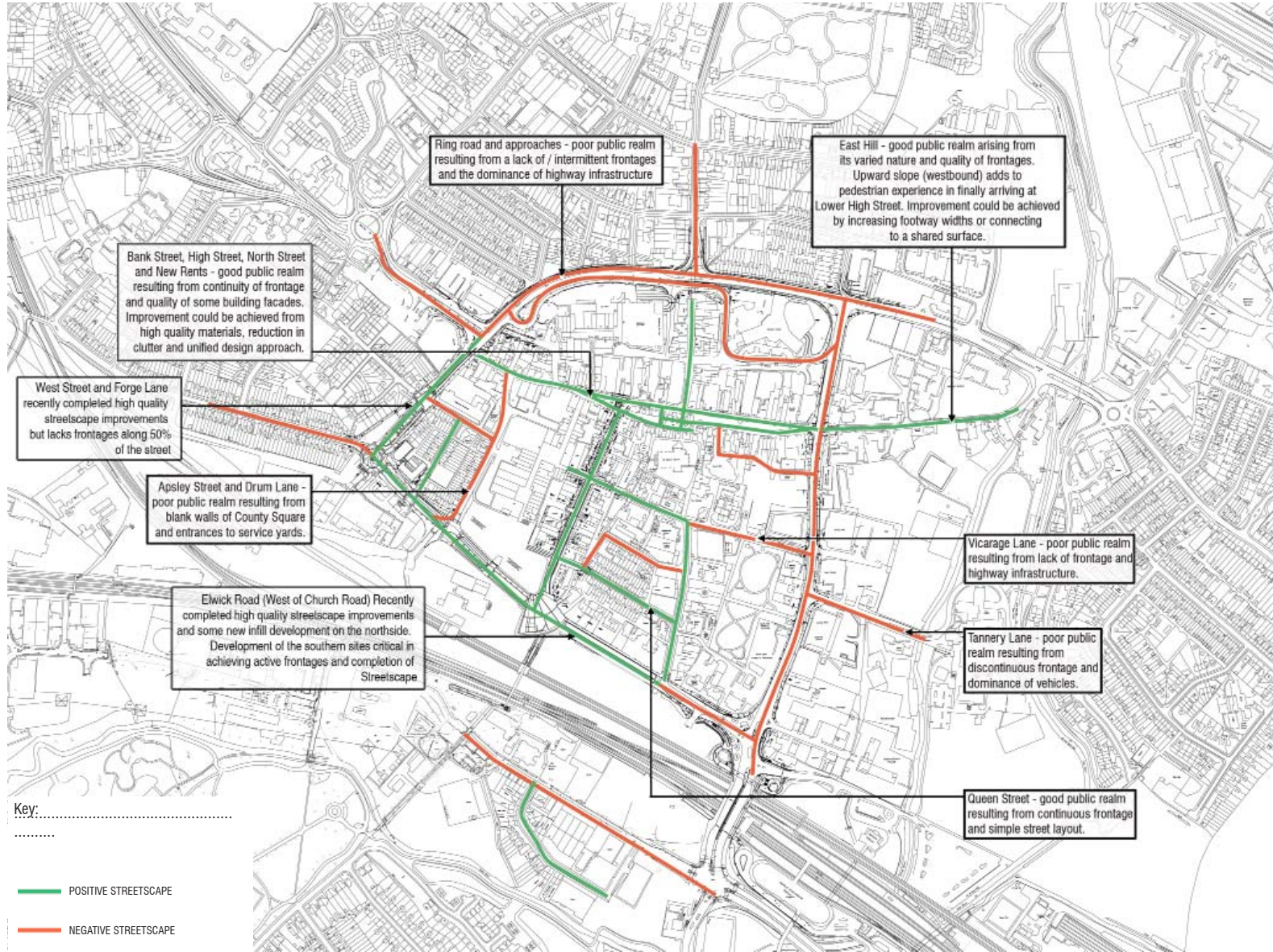
Existing blank walls and service access



Cluttered arrangement of existing town centre street furniture



High quality co-ordinated materials in Elwick Road



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Areas covered in audit

Streetscape Summary Findings:

Floorscape:

A combination of clay pavers and granite setts defines areas around High Street, Bank St and Elwick Road: lack of coherent materials palette elsewhere; poor reinstatement and replacement; lack of recessed utility covers

Open Space:

Churchyard and Memorial Gardens highly valued existing green space; important hard landscaped open space at Elwick Sq and the High Street; other open space limited to surface carparks ; lack of access to local countryside and River Stour

Pedestrian Facilities:

Poor connectivity between the town centre and the surrounding residential neighbourhoods; some recent improvements to pedestrian crossings along Station Road and Somerset Road; Removal of under pass and guarding rail; more direct crossings; courtesy crossings and shared space principles facilitates movement along Elwick Road/West Street/Forge Lane

Street Furniture:

Heritage style furniture in the High Street contributes to general visual/physical clutter; coordinated stainless steel and timber palette used in recent improvement schemes; recently installed cycle stands, well used

Pedestrian Signage:

No coordinated strategy or style; isolated existing signage and difficult to follow

Traffic Signs:

Historically, standard highways signage used with little consideration to scale, character and local context; a more restrained approach is evident in the recent former ring road scheme

Private Forecourts:

Dead walls, car parking and service zones create unfriendly streetscape in a number of locations

Advertising:

A lack of managed control of 'A' board advertising adds to clutter within the town centre core

Planting:

Very little footway planting; trees at the edge of property lines often form canopy to streets; trees in the church yard and memorial gardens are a positive townscape characteristic

Street Lighting:

Traditional style columns used in the High Street; distinctive , bespoke curved columns and the use of white light luminaires define the new shared space scheme; standard highway lighting used elsewhere

Issues and Challenges

To achieve a public realm which is unique to Ashford an examination the issues and challenges which influences the design of the public realm must be explored.

Movement and Connectivity

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, traditional approaches and strict adherence to highway guidance has dominated the design of streets in Ashford. Too much emphasis has been placed on a single user (predominately traffic) rather than street design which accommodates a full range of users.

The former ring road and railway also forms barriers to movement between the town centre core and it's residential periphery.

This is underlined by the work undertaken by Space Syntax which analysed the existing spatial structure of Ashford to establish how well the town is spatially integrated and suggests ways in which this could be improved. A summary of their findings can be found in Appendix ???

The challenge of how to connect Ashford thought a coherent , legible public realm will be addressed through:

- the creation of a clear movement hierarchy which reconnects the town centre with it's surrounding urban fabric(existing and proposed)
- A radical approach to how the public realm is designed and used which fully integrates movement and the public realm to challenge the boundaries of traditional streets.

Built Form

The scale, massing and arrangement of built form creates the edges to the network of spaces and routes within the town.

The Ashford Area Action Plan (AAP) establishes a framework for development based on the principles of :

- conserving and enhancing the existing locally distinctive fine grained urban form, characteristic of the town centre core.
- an extended urban form that gives expression to the hierarchy of movement and spaces and facilitates the mending or creation of interconnected routes
- The creation of six urban quarters have been identified from the Ashford Town Centre Development framework.

Within this framework, a more fine grained built form will evolve through the next stage of design which will contribute to the modelling of the spaces which will form the basis of the public

Use

The changing needs of society and economic climate affects how we use and perceive space. We only have to look at the impact that the relocation of the Market has had on the centre of Ashford. The creation or upgrade of streets and spaces in Ashford will need to clearly demonstrate their adaptability through design that can easily respond to changing circumstances and accommodate a range of users and uses. There is also a close relationship between the design and use of public space and a cultural strategy which vitally contributes to the animation and sustainability of these outdoor areas.

Art & Culture

Ashford has defined a future agenda and identity which involves a much stronger role for arts and culture. While Ashford has not historically been recognised or defined by its commitment to cultural investment, the GADF has repositioned culture as a key priority. Cultural ambition and achievement is integral to the economic success of Ashford and is an essential component in raising the regional and national profile of the town. The development and improvement of the public realm is mandated with embracing this challenge. The public realm is tasked with setting new precedents for courage, innovation and ambition within the artistic and cultural vocabulary nature of Ashford.

Design

Good quality public realm can simply evolve as shown in the High Street Lanes and alleys of the Medieval core. Only de-cluttering, traffic management and quality materials are required to upgrade these spaces. However, in cases where indiscriminate /misguided development has occurred, there is, as defined in the GADF a need to 'mend' and, where new development will occur, create quality places.

Management

How activities and uses are co-ordinated and managed together with ongoing maintenance is crucial to the delivery of successful

Public Realm Today-Summary

Historic Development of the Pubic Realm

- Ashford has it's historic roots in a market town in the 11th century
- The industrial revolution brought rapid expansion of the town centre
- Recent changes in the public realm have brought pedestrianisation along with some pockets of improvements to the quality of the streetscape.

Streetscape Audit

An assessment of the quality of the public realm has been carried out under the following headings;

- Floorscape
- Open Space
- Pedestrian Facilities
- Street furniture
- Private Forecourts
- Advertising Street
- Lighting Planting
- Pedestrian Signage
- Traffic Signage

With no obvious streetscape strategy, a lack of poor connectivity, standardised highways

engineering sitting along side some recent improvements, the streetscape is of mixed quality with opportunity for improvement.

Issues and Challenges

In setting out a framework to achieve a public realm for Ashford, the following issues and challenges were examined:

- Movement and Connectivity
- Built Form
- Use
- Art and Culture
- Design
- Management