

Character Area Ten: The Medieval Streets



Overview

The survival of these streets is both by luck and design. They escaped the fires that consumed other parts of the city but also the extensive 'civic improvement' and street widening which took place from the 18th and 19th centuries in the commercial heart of the city nearer the river. This area has not always been so attractive; several streets contained slums until the early 20th century and those that escaped clearance have undergone extensive restoration.

Today the area is hugely significant for the city as it contains the largest numbers of surviving timber-framed houses and is the principal magnet for tourists. Streets such as Stonegate and Shambles have made York known internationally as a picturesque historic city worth visiting. The footstreet network and wide range of independent retailers offer a unique shopping experience.

Boundaries

This area comprises the streets around the Minster which have a high number of surviving medieval buildings. Some of the back streets, such as Swinegate, still retain their narrow medieval proportions although the buildings are of a much later date. The types of use also distinguish this area from others, mostly being full of independent shops in contrast to the chain stores of the central shopping area.

Historical development

The majority of the surviving medieval streets lie within the site of the Roman legionary fortress and the main Roman routes are still evident today. The line of High and Low Petergate (Via Principalis) ran from the gate at Bootham Bar to that at King's Square. The line of Stonegate (Via Praetoria) ran from the Roman bridge over the Ouse through the gate at St Helen's Square to the Minster area, site of the legionary headquarters (Principia). In the Middle Ages, this was used as the processional route from the Guildhall to the Minster.

The balance of evidence suggests that the city was more or less deserted after the Romans left in 400AD but the walls, buildings, gates and roads survived for several hundred years. From the mid-9th century, the Anglo-Scandinavian settlement of Jorvik was concentrated further to the south east. Relatively few objects from this time have been found in the fortress area probably because it was under the control of the Archbishop.

In the Middle Ages, York was a very successful trading city. Title deeds from the 12th century state there were stone houses in Goodramgate and Stonegate – a sign of wealthy inhabitants. Only fragments survive such as the Norman House behind No. 48 Stonegate. Timber-framed houses were always more numerous as they were cheaper to build. Like other cities, York's prosperity declined after 1450 and did not revive until the end of the 16th century with the establishment of the King's 'Council of the North'.

Maps from the mid-17th century show a lot of open space behind the timber-framed houses. From the end of the century, citizens extended their houses building over these gardens and yards so that by the mid-19th century maps show almost solid blocks have formed between streets.

During the 20th century two substantial interventions changed the street layout of the area. The first was the creation of Deangate in 1903 to provide an alternative traffic route from Monk Bar to the Railway Station (see The Minster Precinct). The second major change was the demolition of Holy Trinity Church in 1937 – it had long been disused and animals were kept inside. This act enabled the creation of King's Square, the only public open space in this area.

Although many medieval buildings survive on Stonegate and Shambles ❶, this is not the case on Swinegate, Grape Lane, and Little Stonegate ❷ (refer to plan on next page). Early 20th century photographs show tumbledown houses and slums. These must have been replaced as Esher's map of the area in 1968 shows plots have been combined and much industrial and warehouse use. Some craft workshops were also present but were cleared in the 1980s.

The most recent change to the character of the area has been the designation of footstreets. Stonegate was the first to be pedestrianised in 1974, followed by the rest during the 1980s.

Ambience and use

The medieval streets have the highest number of independent shops, cafes/restaurants and public houses in the city. These give it a more distinctive character than the more generic shops of Coney Street. Hordes of tourists flock here to sample food and drink and buy gifts. Many properties are owned by City of York Council and the Minster which rent out the upper floors, mainly for residential use. However, office and commercial uses are more commonly found in Swinegate, Shambles and Stonegate.

Outside the footstreet hours (11am – 4pm on week days or 10.30 – 5pm for Stonegate), delivery vans park on pavements and double yellow lines meaning pedestrians struggle to pass by on narrow pavements. Within the controlled hours, pedestrians can wander at will which creates a relaxed and pleasant atmosphere. The streets tend to be fairly empty at night in contrast to the volume of people during the day.

Shambles in about 1900, when shops incorporated shelves to display meat

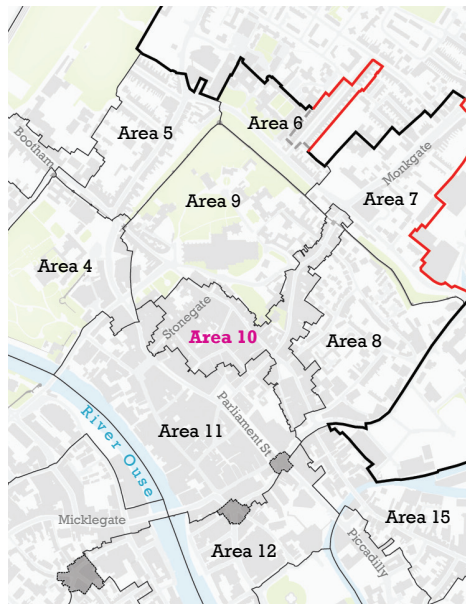


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- 1 Well preserved medieval streets and buildings
- 2 19th / 20th century redevelopment of backlands for shops and offices
- Alignment of Roman roads
- Landmark
- City Wall
- Line of former Roman fortress wall
- Character Area boundary

Area 10 location plan










Introductory Plan

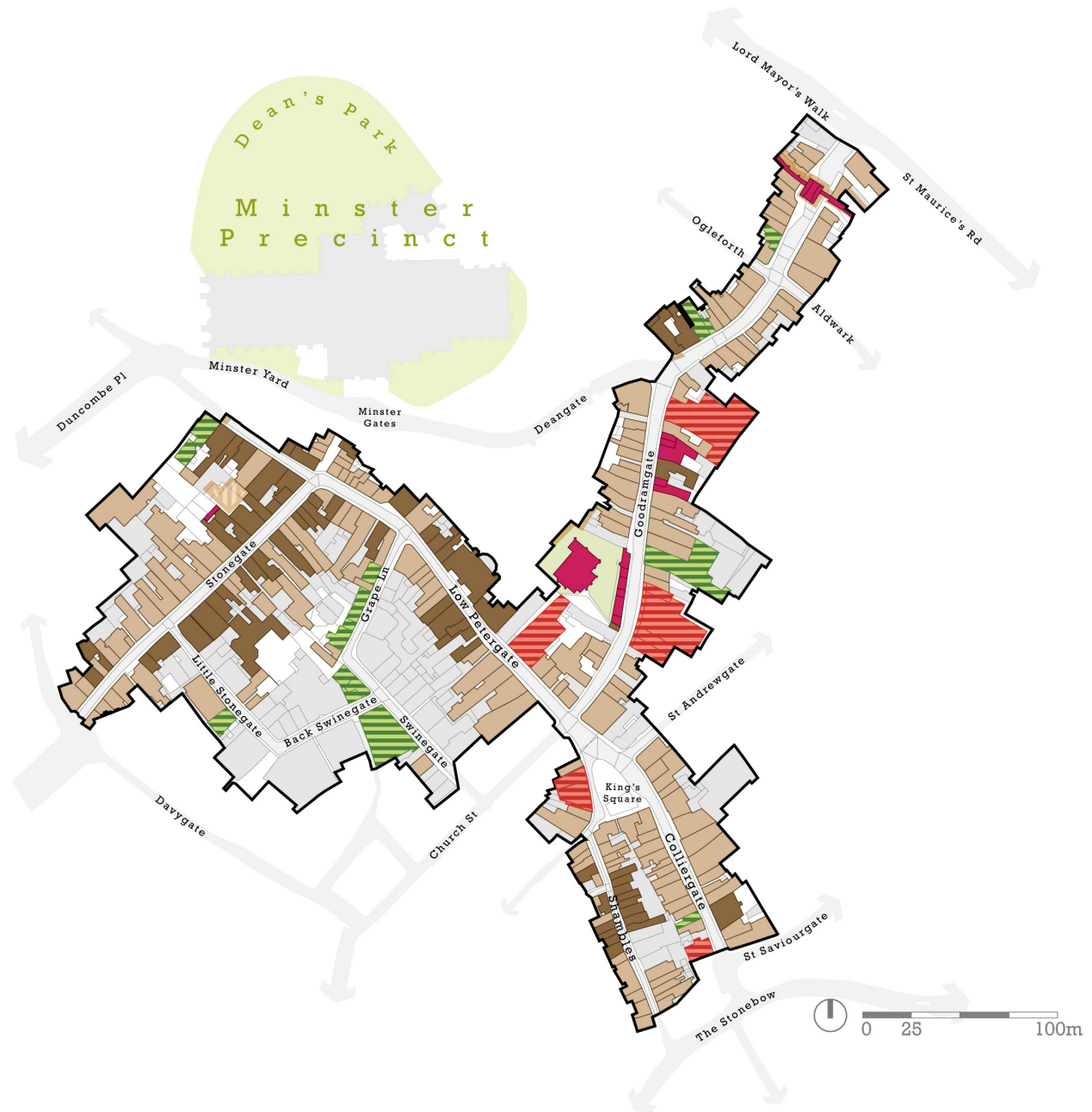
Designations

There are very high numbers of listed buildings due to the survival and extensive restoration of medieval houses. Few modern buildings have been introduced onto the principal streets, but sadly those which have detract from the appearance of these outstanding pieces of historic townscape. Examples include No. 70 Low Petergate (currently Poundland), Nos. 63-75 Goodramgate (currently clothes shops and a cafe) and Nos. 35-37 Goodramgate (currently Boyes).



The majority of buildings on Goodramgate are listed

-  Scheduled Ancient Monument
-  Grade I Listed Building
-  Grade II* Listed Building
-  Grade II Listed Building
-  Building of merit
-  Detractor
-  Character Area boundary



Streets & Spaces

Streets

The **principal streets** are Stonegate and Low Petergate. These have been the most important since the Roman occupation and their prosperity during the Middle Ages is reflected in their width and building types. Shops sold luxury goods and there were many book shops and coffee houses.

Most buildings are at right angles to the street with a narrow front and several rooms behind. Long passageways stretch down one side to provide important access rear yards and upper floors; some of these entrances are open but others have doors.

There is a strong sense of enclosure from the three storey buildings set on a common line. Stonegate lives up to its name and has the best surface materials in the area although there are one or two broken kerbs. A series of good views are possible along these streets and an excellent one to the Minster from Low Petergate.

Colliergate and Goodramgate are both fairly wide but less impressive than the other streets as they have a more fragmented sense of enclosure and some low quality modern buildings. In addition, the tarmac road surface is in poor condition in places and does not reflect the 'footstreet' model of integrated road and pavement surfaces. Another excellent view to the Minster is from possible from the junction of Deangate and Goodramgate.



Stonegate is very well enclosed as the street has been finished in high quality York paving

The **back streets** are Shambles, Swinegate, Back Swinegate, Little Stonegate and Grape Lane. These are narrower than the principal streets and would have had less appealing trades; Swinegate was the site of a swine market, Shambles was the traditional home of butchers' shops and Grape Lane had brothels.

The Shambles is the narrowest street and its three storey jettied houses overhang the pavement make it particularly picturesque. In contrast, most of the historic plots of Swinegate, Back Swinegate and Little Stonegate have been combined. They tend to be shorter than those on the principal streets since they began life as the back ends of those plots. Comprehensive development in the 1980s replaced workshops and subsidiary buildings to the rear. All these streets have high quality stone road and pavement surfaces which signify them as footstreets.

A network of **alleyways** and hidden private yards can be found between and behind buildings. Coffee Yard was a model for the consolidation of this network during the redevelopment of the Swinegate area. These intriguing lanes are a key part of the city's character and include Nether Hornpot Lane and Lund Court. Previous names such as Mad Alice Lane, Cut Throat Lane, Mucky Pig Lane gives some clues as to the sort of role they played in city life.



Historic plots on Back Swinegate have been amalgamated as buildings have been redeveloped



Alley to Barley Hall from Grape Lane

Spaces

There are only two open spaces in this area – Holy Trinity churchyard and King’s Square. The churchyard is entirely hidden from the streets and reached via a main entrance off Goodramgate and a narrow alleyway from Low Petergate. It is a quiet refuge away from the streets busy with pedestrians.

Like other public squares in the central area, King’s Square took on its present form following the demolition of a church and churchyard in 1937. It is a welcome break from the enclosed side streets, containing benches and mature trees. It is sometimes used as a performance space (fire-eaters, musicians etc). However, the space needs an integrated design to harmonise the assorted street furniture.



King's Square provides a valuable breathing space in the otherwise densely built up medieval streets area. Unfortunately, the building to the left detracts from the Square and entrance to Shambles.

Buildings

Timber-framed houses

The surviving houses reflect the city's periods of prosperity and the tendency to re-develop existing properties. The earliest houses from the 14th century are few in number, the largest proportion being from the 15th and 16th centuries. Hardly any date from the 17th century since after the Siege of York, in 1645, there was a Corporation Order directing the "building upright from the ground in brick" instead of timber. The reason for this was a growing shortage of suitable timber for framing, a shortage made worse by the demolition of many timber-framed buildings outside the Walls during the siege in order to deprive the Parliamentary army of cover. Brick was also becoming increasingly fashionable.

The basic pattern of timber-framed building is explained in more detail in section 2.16 of 'Understanding the City'. Most houses have been much altered since they were built. Some had their jetties cut back or bricked up at the front and nearly all have been extended at the back. Bricks were also inserted between timbers to replace the original in-fill material which was thin bricks (known as wall-tiles), laid flat, one on top of the other.



Nos. 17 and 19 Stonegate, originally 15th century two storey houses with another storey added in the late 16th century

The earliest houses from the 14th century were built parallel to the street showing their longest side and only one or two rooms deep. All were originally two storey and had jetties which provided more space on the upper floors.

Although houses continued to be built parallel to the street, from the 15th century onwards house design on the principal streets gradually changed to reflect the centre becoming more crowded. Firstly, they tended to be orientated at right angles to the street only showing a narrow frontage and with several rooms behind reached by a long passage. Secondly, heights were more commonly three storeys. From the late 16th century onwards, floors were inserted into attics to provide even more space.

The diverse mixture of gables and eaves presented to the street contributes to the rich townscape. Roof materials are of warm red and orange hued tiles or pantiles.

*Lady Row, Nos. 60-72
Goodramgate. It was built in
1316 on church land to provide
rent for chantries*



*Nos. 41-45 and Nos. 47-49
Goodramgate are examples
of 15th century three storey
houses. They were built
parallel to the street but were
later been extended at the rear*



Shop fronts

No medieval shops survive, although there are a handful of fragments of shop windows. Complete Georgian shop fronts are very rare but Victorian quite common. This is because many Georgian fronts were replaced after 1840 when plate glass was invented. The best late 18th and early 19th century examples can be seen in Stonegate - No. 37 (currently Jigsaw) has a central doorway with fanlight above set within an elegant door surround and between two large bow windows with small panes; No. 46 (currently Little Betty's) is similar.

Shop fronts in Shambles have a particular design relevant to the street's origins as the place of butchers. Features such as street counters and meat hooks allowed wares to be displayed outside the shop. Only a few of these counters survive but have had windows built out onto them.

Some shops have models or signs outside to show their trade. For example, this elegant model of Minerva (Roman goddess of poetry and wisdom) with a pile of books at the corner of High Petergate and Minster Gates.

A good example of a well designed shop front on Minster Gates



20th century

The modern buildings in this area are mostly along Swinegate and Goodramgate and although all have brick as the main material, take two different approaches to design.

Those on Swinegate take a pastiche approach, borrowing historical features to create a modern building that will fit in with the surrounding buildings. Modern facades also cover older buildings hidden behind which have maze-like interiors and hidden entrances.

Buildings on Goodramgate proudly display their modernity, making more of statement. This approach is a much less successful than that at Swinegate.

*Nos. 63-71 Goodramgate.
Although the curve follows
that of the street, the set
back of the ground floor and
overhanging concrete valance
makes the building top heavy*



*Old and new buildings are
successfully mixed in a
complimentary manner in
Swinegate*



Traffic & Movement

This area is mostly within the footstreet network which has played an important role in enhancing people's shopping experience. The reduction of cars also helps to enhance the setting of the historic buildings. The system was reviewed in 2010 and some problems were identified. These included inconsistent timings through the area, contravention of the restrictions and lack of enforcement. It can also be confusing for pedestrians to know which streets are footstreets since not all are surfaced the same way. Goodramgate in particular suffers as a result of restrictions being flouted.

Service vehicles are a another problem. Vans mounting pavements can block pedestrian access, particularly problematic for people with buggies or wheelchairs. Lorries have also damaged the corners of jettied buildings and hanging shop signs.



Parking dominates the street scene on Goodramgate and road surfaces are of poor quality

Issues & Opportunities

Strengths

These are the finest set of historic streets in the country. The following townscape qualities collectively make the streets a special place, instantly recognisable as York:

- a high number of historic buildings with varied architectural styles
- a hierarchy of streets from the finest stone-paved street to the meanest alleyway
- a number of excellent views to the Minster and several intimate local views
- a good mix of independent retailers making the area a hugely popular tourist attraction.

Weaknesses and opportunities




- A key priority in the area is better management of the footstreets. Extending the hours would help reduce conflict between delivery vans and pedestrians. Harmonising the hours and better enforcement would help reduce the number of drivers not following the restrictions. Lastly, improving surfaces and using them to indicate footstreets would improve the appearance of some streets, whilst helping pedestrians negotiate their way around. This is discussed further in section 6.9 of the Management Strategy.
- King's Square could be improved. At present discarded food attracts pigeons which spoil the space with their droppings. Benches and bins could be upgraded to make it more pleasant and encourage tidiness.

- One of the threats in this area is the loss of historic shop fronts. If a retailer does wish to spread across a neighbouring building, this should be done in an appropriate way with each shop front remaining architecturally distinct.
- Unlike the Central Shopping Area, the medieval streets are more sensitive to change and cannot accommodate radical contemporary design. New buildings should make use of historic materials and forms.
- The medieval streets can be very crowded in the tourist season. The nearby Dean's Park is a good breathing space but is under used. More signage could draw people to the space and relieve congestion.





View to Minster from Low Petergate






Existing

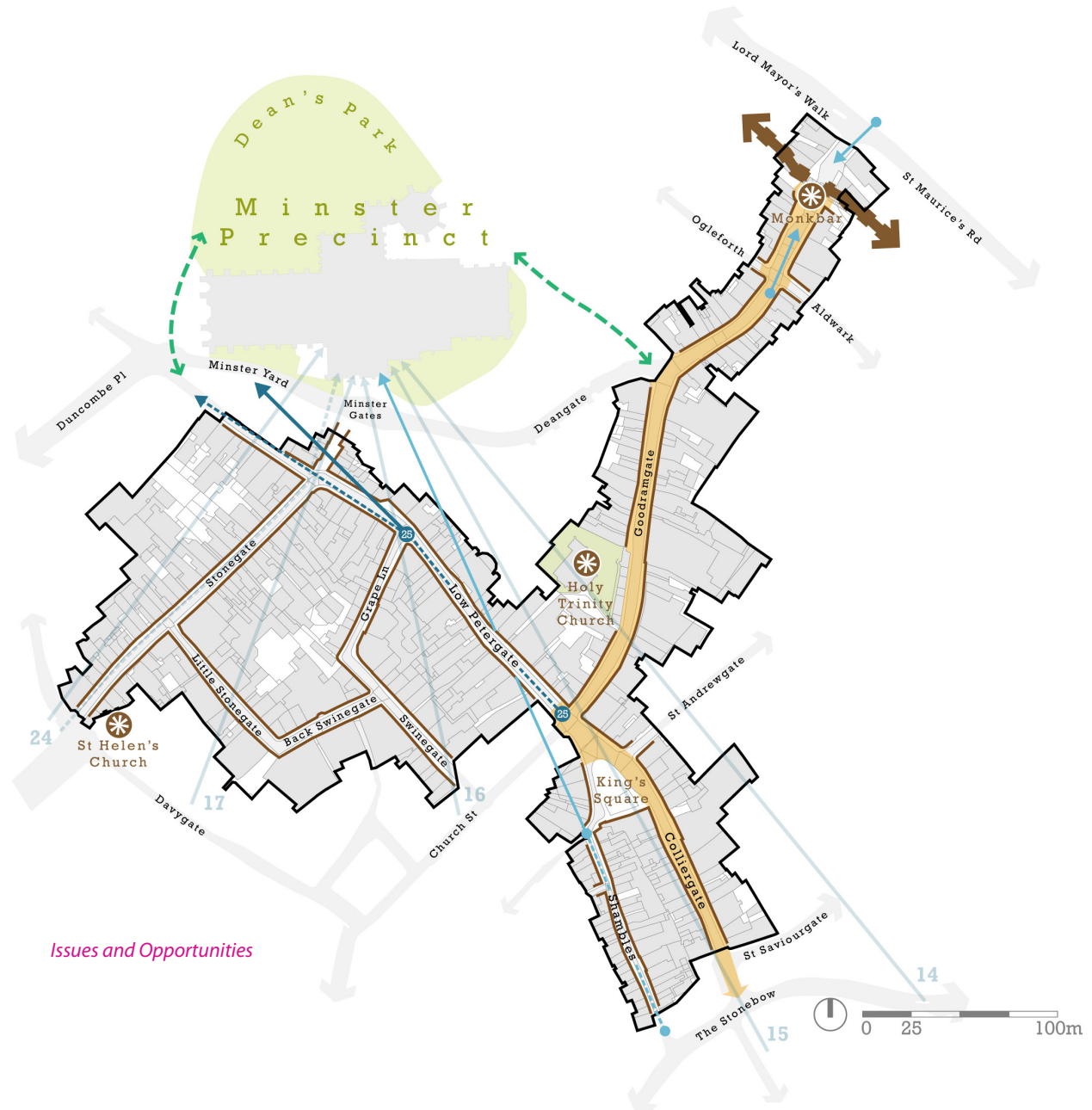
-  Well enclosed medieval street
-  Landmark
-  City Wall

Opportunities

-  Promote pedestrian access to Dean's Park
-  Improvements to road and pavement surfaces to make consistent with other footstreets

Views

-  Strategic dynamic
-  Strategic dynamic with focal point
-  Local fixed with focal point
-  Local dynamic with focal point
-  Key view from outside the character area - refer to section 3.5



Issues and Opportunities