

Mile Town, Sheerness conservation area character appraisal

(Extract from report to Development Committee 2 August 2000 Agenda item 5C(i) Annex B)

Location

1. The town of Sheerness is situated in the north west corner of the Isle of Sheppey overlooking the Thames and Medway estuaries. Sheerness Mile Town broadly equates with the town centre, whilst Beach Street is a small enclave of terraced housing on the north western edge of the town centre. The former Royal Naval Dockyard, now a commercial port, lies to the north west of the town centre along with a steelworks developed in the 1960s. In most other directions the town centre is surrounded by residential development, sections of which are comprised of a tight grid of streets with terraced houses dating from the late nineteenth century.
2. The town is built on flat, low lying land, and in the past has been vulnerable to periodic sea flooding.
3. The A249 trunk road connects the Island with the national motorway network via a lifting bridge over The Swale at Kingsferry. A branch railway line, using the same bridge, connects Sheerness with the main North Kent Coast line at Sittingbourne.

Historical notes

4. Sheerness town is a place of relatively recent origins having grown almost entirely in the nineteenth century. Initially this was in anticipation of the seaside resort potential of the area, but subsequently its growth was driven by the needs of the nearby Sheerness Naval Dockyard which was then very active.
5. Mile Town began life as a separate entity, being one of three distinctly individual parts of Sheerness. Blue Town, adjoining the former Naval Dockyard site, was the oldest of these areas and in the nineteenth century was a place of pubs, lodging houses and cramped conditions. Mile Town was developed to provide new facilities in a separately laid out area of town at a distance from old Blue Town. The development of Marine Town then followed on. These areas, with their distinctly separate origins, have now merged into a single town.
6. Sir Edward Banks, a self-made man, saw potential at Mile Town, Sheerness for an elegant seaside and spa town of some distinction. He designed and built the Broadway in 1827 together with a large house set in parkland on the sea front. His ambitions were to be thwarted however, the final straw being in 1878 when a serious pleasure boat accident resulted in a slump in the numbers of trippers coming to Sheerness by boat from London. Meanwhile, a development company took over from Banks and built streets of small homes for working people who came to Sheerness as the Crimea War expanded the role of the town's naval depot. In place of holiday resort houses, therefore, basic terraces of dwellings were built for workers.
7. The Sittingbourne to Sheerness railway line was opened in 1860 which improved transport links with the Island despite the line then terminating at Blue Town rather than Mile Town. It was extended to its present-day terminus at Sheerness-on-Sea in 1883.
8. During the 1930s the town took on a new role as a low cost holiday resort, when it became a popular destination for Londoners. This trade flourished for a time after the second world war, but in turn declined in the second half of the twentieth century.

9. Sheerness has a long association with the Co-operative movement. The Sheerness Economical and Industrial Co-operative Society was formed in 1816 and the Sheerness Co-operative Society in 1849. They amalgamated in 1919 and had a registered office at 100 High Street - a building which was demolished in 1998.

10. Sheerness Mile Town continues to function as the main commercial centre of the Isle of Sheppey despite its peripheral location and its position at a distance from Halfway and Minster (where the bulk of post-war residential development on the Island has taken place and where further new residential development is planned).

Broadway and The Crescent

11. Architectural interest in Sheerness Mile Town is focused most obviously on the Broadway. The western part of the street was built in 1830 as a single development with matching three storey yellow brick terraces set along both sides of the street. These terminate at the western end in a half circus known as The Crescent, built around the junction with High Street. Originally built as houses, the ground floors have all since been converted to shops. The original fenestration and brickwork of the upper floors is still largely intact but piecemeal conversions to shops and other uses have caused the ground floor elevations to lose much of their visual continuity. A part of the southern arm of The Crescent was apparently rebuilt early in the twentieth century.

12. Overlooking the junction of Broadway with High Street the bulk of Britannia House provides an appropriate sense of scale to the town centre. It is supported by a number of other lesser, but pleasant, buildings. The space formed by the Crescent is marked by a commemorative cast iron town clock erected in 1902. The clock defines the centre of town in a distinctive and colourful way; a key Sheerness landmark it reflects rather well the nineteenth century origins of the town. This area is, however, dominated by traffic and its associated clutter so that the space functions primarily as a traffic junction rather than as an important public space.

13. The design theme of the Broadway is continued with Holy Trinity church, completed in 1836, which is also built with yellow brick and a slate roof. The green space around the building, which is partly a burial ground, provides an important public area of trees, shrubs and grass in the middle of the town centre and brings welcome contrast to the otherwise urban character of the place.

14. Beyond the junction of Broadway with Trinity Road the buildings are somewhat different in character with more variety in their type, size and design. The vista to the east is nicely terminated by the distant west elevation of the Roman Catholic church.

15. Banks Hotel is an attractively detailed corner property built in red brick. It contrasts with the rather plainer adjoining group of buildings to the east, which is predominantly built in yellow brick and dates from the early 1900s. The Working Men's Club and Institute lies further to the east again and completes the group; its large, somewhat austere, front elevation in yellow brick is set back from the road and is comprised of a large central doorway with tall sash windows set in recessed brick reveals on either side. The private space alongside, although somewhat hidden behind a high brick wall, brings an element of green into the street scene without opening up the street frontage. On the opposite side of the road the former cinema, now a bingo hall is a large, plain rendered building with a strong presence in the street. Its bulk defines the corner with Strode Crescent in an especially positive way. The Methodist Church to the west has a well proportioned front elevation in red brick, with details such as window surrounds in faience work. Beyond Strode Crescent, the frontage is occupied by a row of four Edwardian

buildings, with strikingly detailed front elevations; beyond is a building now used as a doctors surgery, and a nicely detailed hall lies beyond, which is now occupied by the Sheerness County Youth Club.

High Street

16. The High Street is comprised of a variety of frontage buildings dating mainly from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most are sited on the back edge of the footway, although a block of properties in the southern section of the High Street has private forecourts where open air displays of goods bring colour and interest into the town centre.

17. The High Street has just a few examples of older vernacular buildings dating from the late eighteenth century; these are characterised by weatherboarding over timber framing. For the most part, however, buildings date from the late nineteenth century. Taken individually they are fairly unremarkable but together they achieve a pleasant, traditional town centre environment. The street is for the most part rather narrow and the mainly three storey buildings combine to create a fairly solid frontage. These features together create a strong sense of urban enclosure, with planting being almost entirely absent from the street.

18. Immediately north of the clocktower, the road has an attractive curving form comprised of a sequence of individually designed buildings, most of them three storeys high and relatively narrow in width. These rather vertical looking buildings give a pleasant 'rhythm' to the street scene. Buildings are characteristically turn-of-the-century in design and detailing although one or two older vernacular buildings are present, such as nos. 59-61 High Street with weatherboarded upper floors sometimes finished to mimic masonry. Building materials, especially locally-produced yellow and red bricks and imported Welsh roofing slates, have been widely used so that a good sense of visual cohesion is achieved. The Tesco building, which dates from the 1970s, is an exception to this pattern; its bulk and rather horizontal-looking elevation contrasts with the otherwise fine grain of the frontage.

19. The building pattern established in the centre section of the High Street continues more or less without a break to the northern limits of the town centre. However, the buildings tend to be of a lesser quality the further they are from the heart of the town centre. The former Railway Hotel is an exception to this rule, and provides a good solid end to the west side of the High Street. Alterations to upper floor windows, shop windows and other details have occurred almost universally, which have nearly always been to the detriment of the appearance of the buildings. Slate has disappeared from many roofs and been replaced by concrete tiles. The street nevertheless retains a strongly traditional scale and character, and a clear overall sense of visual cohesion, and is for the most part uninterrupted by modern development. At the northern end of the High Street there is an important visual link with the dockyard, with the Dockyard church tower being prominent in the view out.

The area to the west of High Street

20. To the west of the High Street the development once comprised a rectilinear grid of small streets fronted by timber-framed cottages and later 19th century brick-built terraced houses. The entire area was largely demolished in the 1960s; three weatherboarded properties in Rose Street dating from the late eighteenth century survive as exceptions, although even here some of their character has been lost in the course of refurbishment. In the absence of redevelopment, areas of land here are devoted to surface car parking. Parts of the former street layout continue to provide some evidence of former

development. Demolition has exposed to view the often unattractive rear elevations of High Street properties.

Beach Street

21. Beach Street, at the northern end of the High Street, is a small enclave of late nineteenth century terraced houses. The buildings are individually unremarkable, but their layout does create a small space with greenery which has some individuality. The majority of houses have been unsympathetically altered in some way. Beach House is a more substantial property and plays a crucial role in enclosing the space at the north eastern end.

Other comments

22. Sheerness is essentially a late nineteenth town. The buildings and spaces in the town centre are, for the most part, rather modest. They are nevertheless a faithful and proper reflection of the town's developing functions, firstly as a modest seaside resort and then serving the day-to-day needs of the dockyard. The town centre has a practical, almost brash, character; refinement and elegance are not greatly in evidence here despite the early ambitions to promote the town as an attractive spa.

23. The town centre building fabric has undoubtedly been weakened by the demolition of the grid of streets to the south west, and the unsympathetic treatment of many town centre buildings has been damaging.

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