

BEXHILL TOWN CENTRE

Conservation Area Appraisal



ADOPTED BY COUNCIL
24th February 2004

BEXHILL TOWN CENTRE Conservation Area Appraisal

BEXHILL : GROWTH FROM VILLAGE TO FASHIONABLE SEASIDE RESORT

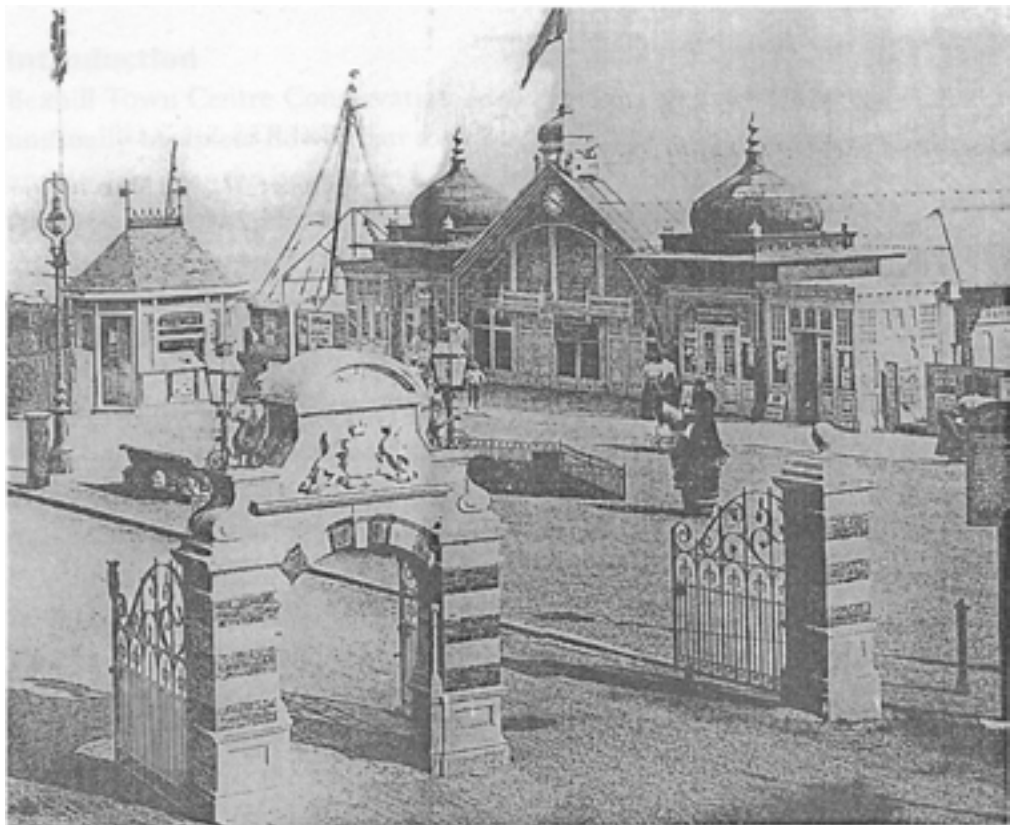
1. Introduction and short history of the area

- 1.1 During the 1880's the 7th Earl De La Warr began to create the modern seaside town of Bexhill, as we know it today, renaming it *Bexhill-on-Sea*, and seeking to promote it as a fashionable health resort. In 1882 the cattle arch beneath the railway line was widened, thus opening the way for the development of the land to the south. In 1883 the Earl contracted a London surveyor and builder, John Webb, to build a seawall to provide much-needed protection from flooding, and to layout a new promenade from Galley Hill to the bottom of Sea Road, which connects the Old Town to the beach. In part payment Webb received land south of the railway line from Sea Road to the Polegrove which he developed as the Egerton Park Estate, and by 1886 he had also built the West Promenade, continuing the earlier, more easterly development along the sea shore. Webb also built Western Road and the Devonshire Hotel, becoming its first licensee. To serve the increasing population, a new station was built in 1891 facing Devonshire Square (then called Station Square), this being replaced in 1902 by a new, larger station fronting Sea Road.
- 1.2 However, most of the buildings in Bexhill town centre were built between 1895 and 1905, under the patronage of Viscount Cantelupe, who became the 8th Earl on the death of his father in 1896. He had married a local heiress, Muriel Brassey, from Normansfield Court in Catsfield, in 1891, and they lived in the old manor house until they divorced in 1902. The 8th Earl built The Kursaal overlooking the beach as a centre for local entertainment, and financed the construction of the Sackville Hotel, a high-class establishment, where he encouraged his aristocratic friends to stay. In 1895 the new Town Hall was opened and in 1902 the town received its Charter of Incorporation. By this date most of the streets, shops, and hotels which now form the town centre had been built. However, further expansion took place in the next few years with the opening of a second railway line (the Bexhill to Crowhurst line) and the building of a new Police Station. In 1901 Bexhill was the first seaside resort in the country to allow mixed bathing. Slightly later, the Corporation began the Central Parade, virtually linking the eastern and western sections, and this was completed in 1910. The Colonnade, at its centre was opened to commemorate George V's coronation in 1911.
- 1.3 The 1899 Second Edition Ordnance Survey map shows the town centre almost complete, with terraces of houses and shops lining the streets. Notable are the gaps along Sackville Road, Marina, and Marine Parade. St. Barnabas' Church in Sea Road has been built, but not the Grand Hotel.
- 1.4 Throughout the 20th century, the many private schools in Bexhill provided education for the children of ex-patriots who later retired to the town.



Ordnance Survey 2nd Edition 1899

- 1.5 The influence of the De La Warr's continued with the 9th Earl becoming Bexhill's first socialist mayor between 1932 and 1935. He promoted the building of the De La Warr Pavilion which was opened by the future King George VI in 1935 as a 'peoples' palace' to provide entertainment for all.



The Kursaal, demolished in 1936

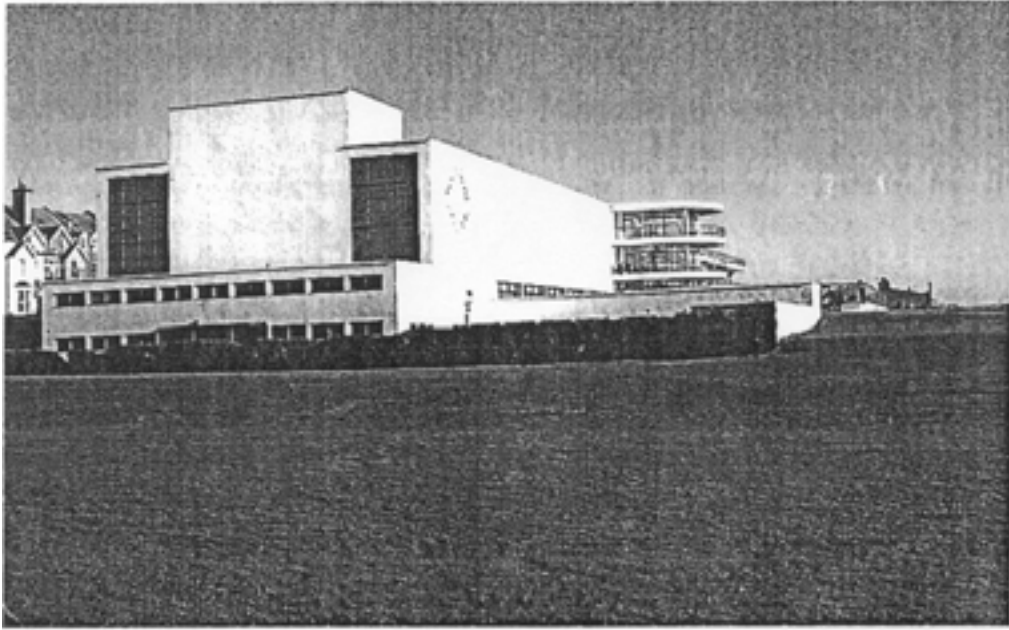
The building was designed in the 'International Modernist' style by two foreign architects – Erich Mendelsohn, a German, and Serge Chermayeff, a Russian, and cost £80,000. Soon after the completion of the Pavilion, The Kursaal was demolished.

- 1.6 Since World War II, Bexhill has struggled to maintain its role as a popular seaside resort and many of the small private schools have closed. The town centre, however, still provides a range of modern shops with a limited number of national stores being represented. It has continued to be a favoured retirement location although the number of hotels continues to decline. Within the last year The Grand Hotel in Sea Road has closed.
- 1.7 In 1989, attention was drawn to the qualities of the planning and the late Victorian/Edwardian architecture of the town centre by the publication of the *Bexhill Town Centre Design Guide*. This was followed by designation of the Bexhill Town Centre Conservation Area in 1992. The Conservation Area boundary is shown on the plan attached to the end of this Appraisal. The area includes the core of John Webb's commercial centre bounded to the north by the railway, as much a physical and psychological barrier now as then. To the west is Egerton Park and to the east Sea Road; the boundary with Earl De La Warr's development area. The promenade defines the southern boundary.
- 1.8 The opportunity has been taken to reassess the 1992 boundary and consider whether any revisions are needed. Although the areas alongside the defined boundary contain individual buildings which continue the architectural themes used in the Town Centre itself, they lack the distinct sense of place it retains and for that reason alone suggests that the original boundary has been correctly drawn.

THE CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE OF THE TOWN CENTRE CONSERVATION AREA

2. Topography and plan form

- 2.1 The mainly terraced buildings lie on flat land between the railway line and the beach, with a grid pattern of streets, which mainly lie at right angles or parallel to the shore. The Old Town of Bexhill lies to the north-east, on a low hill which provided protection from flooding before the sea wall was built by Webb in the early 1880's. The main commercial streets are Sackville Road and Devonshire Road, which run north-south and Western Road and St. Leonard's Road, which run east-west. Devonshire Road is particularly wide with street trees in places and was clearly laid out as the principal shopping street for the town. In between are lesser streets with two or three storey residential houses. Along the seafront are more prestigious buildings, some of them in commercial uses, with the De La Warr Pavilion providing a dramatic focal point. This is surrounded by open, grassed lawns and contrasts with the smaller scale development in Marina Court Avenue and Marine Parade.



The De La Warr Pavilion opened in 1935

3. Architectural styles and building materials

- 3.1 Because of the short building period of most of the buildings in the town centre the architecture of the area is particularly homogenous, with a variety of examples of competent late Victorian/Edwardian architecture. The most important individual buildings are the De La Warr Pavilion (grade I), the Grand Hotel in Sea Road (grade II), Marina Court Avenue (grade II), Marine Arcade, the Library in Western Road, St. Barnabas' Church in Sea Road (grade II) and the railway station (grade II) also in Sea Road. The listed buildings are shown on the plan of the Conservation Area at the end of the Appraisal.
- 3.2 The buildings are typically two, three or four storeys high, terraced, with ground floor shopfronts along the main commercial streets. In the more secondary residential streets, such as Linden Road or Albany Road, the houses are attached (but built to look like semi-detached pairs) or have narrow gaps between them. The houses tend to be varied in design with some groups of matching properties, such as in Sackville Road and facing Egerton Park. Materials are usually red brick, with stone or stucco decoration, with some painted render. Sadly, many of the original slate or clay tiled roofs have been recovered using concrete tiles. The strong vertical emphasis of virtually all of the buildings built between 1895 and 1905 is created by the narrow plot widths but also accentuated by the use of bay windows, corner turrets and Moghul domes. The simple sash windows to each bay often have four or six panes over a single pane in the typically late 19th century manner.
- 3.3 In Devonshire Road, the most important street in the area, a wide variety of buildings can be found. Whilst the plot widths tend to be universal, the materials and detailing are very varied. Small groups of two or three buildings have a similar design, suggesting that the overall development of the road was

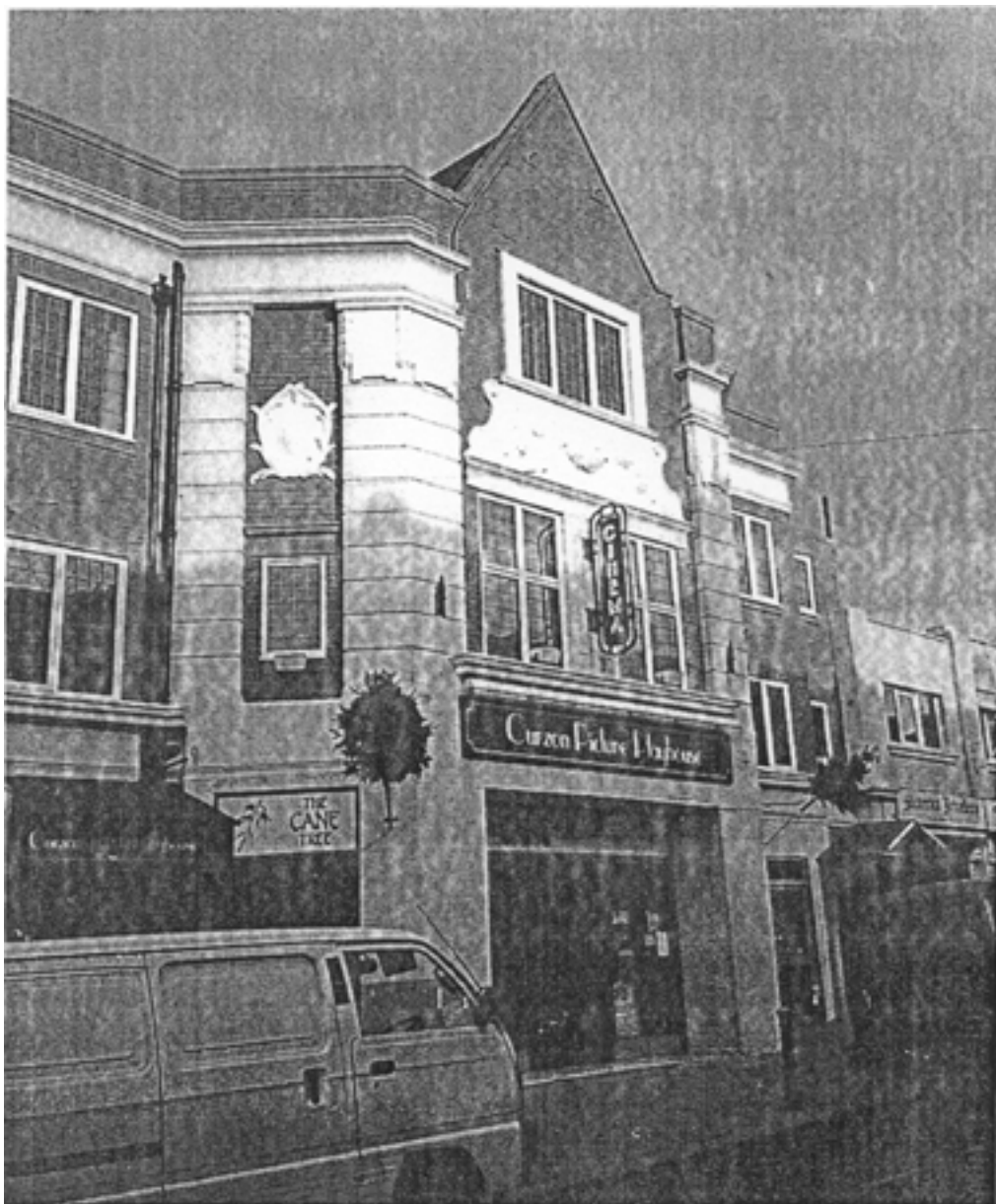
carried out by a number of different builders who were free to design each small group of buildings slightly differently. Commonly, these buildings are built from red brick, with stone string courses, copings and other embellishments, triangular or 'Dutch' gables facing the road, and sashed windows. Painted render is also used with decorative details such as swags and urns at high level. Canted or curved bay windows are another common feature, often at first floor level. This provides a broken silhouette to the streetscape when the buildings are viewed obliquely along the road. Most of the shopfronts are modern.

- 3.4 Sackville Road has more groups of buildings of a matching design with banded stucco breaking-up the red brick, prominent first and second floor bay windows, and large 'dormers' at third floor level, punctuating the roof line. Many of the shopfronts appear to be original or have been only slightly altered.
- 3.5 Western Road is lower in scale than the other two principal streets. It was clearly considered to be of secondary importance commercially and was largely residential when it was built. The buildings tend to be three storeys high, with pitched roofs facing the street and a continuous eaves line unbroken by dormers or gables. Red brick or painted render predominate, with sash windows and some canted bays at first or second floor level. Many of the shopfronts retain elements of their original details. Some of the roofs are covered in concrete tiles but most of them retain their prominent chimney stacks and light brown clay pots, important in views along the street.



Western Road

- 3.6 Along the north side of the street, the buildings are more varied with the Library of 1898 sitting on the corner of the junction with Sackville Road. This two-storey building is built from red brick with Gothic detailing to the four-light windows and stone window surrounds. A decorative first floor brick band and a single large gable at first floor level are the most important architectural features. This building fortunately retains its original plain red clay tiled roof. Further east, a group of 1930's buildings provide variety with a parapeted first floor and some Art Deco features. This group is now a shopping mall and separate shops. Immediately adjacent, the Curzon Picture Playhouse dates to c.1910, is painted yellow and green with plaster cartouches to the front elevation and a prominent single gable. Many of the shopfronts along Western Road are original or contain original elements including cast iron decorative friezes above the fascia (e.g. Bloomers No. 5 Western Road).



The Curzon Picture Playhouse, Western Road

- 3.7 St. Leonard's Road provides a more varied streetscape and has both commercial and residential properties. Red brick facades, decorated with stone stringcourses and keystones, predominate, with some painted render. Of note are the varied roof profiles with differently shaped gables. Corner turrets, ball finials, circular windows, and contrasting brick and stucco all give a sense of liveliness and interest. Many of the shopfronts are original, most notably no.16 which is listed grade II and dates to 1889.



St. Leonard's Road

- 3.8 Sea Road has a greater variety of building types with two or three storey terraced groups on the west side. To the east, the building form is irregular with the Grand Hotel and St. Barnabas' Church breaking up the line of buildings. The Grand Hotel was built to the designs of Durwood Brown in 1901 in a Queen Anne Dutch style, with red brick elevations enlivened by terracotta dressings. The clay tiled roof and prominent chimneystacks are particularly notable. It has recently been listed grade II. The church, which is also listed, was designed by Sir Arthur Blomfield and built in 1891 with substantial additions in 1908-9 and 1939. It has Gothic details and is faced in beach cobbles with stone dressings. To the north, the railway station is listed grade II and was built in 1901 and designed by the then Chief Engineer Charles Morgan.
- 3.9 Along Marina, the De La Warr Pavilion (grade I) with its white painted stucco and simple, Modernist details contrasts with the lavish decoration of the earlier buildings nearby. The scale of this monolithic building is also completely at odds with the two adjacent terraces – Marina Court Avenue and Marina Arcade.



Bexhill Station

Marina Court Avenue was built between 1903 and 1907 to the designs of Durwood Brown and others and is also listed grade II. Both groups of buildings have 'Moghul' details including exotic onion roofs and decorative chimneys. These have a distinctively 'seaside' character with tourism-related arcades and shops in Marina Arcade.

4. Open spaces, trees and vistas

- 4.1 Most of the town centre is composed of narrow streets, lined with terraced three storey properties. The most important open space is around the De La Warr Pavilion, with links with the promenade to form a long, seaside walk. The adjoining putting green and The Colonnade are important constituents of this space and provide an appropriate setting for the pavilion. The large public car park in front of the pavilion, facing Marina, is a less attractive (but practical) feature.

Devonshire Square was planned as a more formal 'square' fronting the earlier railway station, but the demolition of the Station building and modern encroachments, including advertising hoardings, have robbed this space of its townscape value. Other detrimental features – car parking, recycling bins and poor quality street furniture are also evident. Devonshire Road, once again graced by trees, could provide a more 'civic' space but is currently lacking in character and cohesion.

- 4.2 Throughout the conservation area, trees are hardly evident although street trees were a significant part of the original streetscene in Devonshire Road and Sackville Road. A recent repaving scheme in Western Road has added some useful street trees although these are currently too small to provide any real impact.



Recently completed landscaping in Western Road

- 4.3 Views along the seafront are both dramatic and attractive, with vistas along the coast to Hastings to the east, and Eastbourne, and Beachy Head, to the west. The De La Warr Pavilion is such a focal point that all views along Marina are dominated by it. The whiteness of the painted render and its stark, plain facades are of particular merit, punctuated by the graceful staircase tower. Other important views are provided by the roads which lead down to Marina, so that the sea can be glimpsed from along Devonshire Road and Sea Road.

5. Other features of Interest

- 5.1 Throughout the Conservation Area can be found a number of features of interest. These include:
- Traditional red cast iron pillar boxes
 - Wide granite kerbs
 - Granite setts to some gutters (e.g., Western Road)
 - Original shopfronts
 - Corner turrets and gablets



Original shopfronts in Sea Road

6. Detrimental features

6.1 A number of detrimental features are evident in the conservation area because of a lack of investment, which can be seen in:

- Badly maintained, varied concrete paving
- Poor quality or damaged street furniture (seats, litter bins, bollards)
- Modern concrete street lights
- Poor quality railings facing the beach
- Altered or modern shopfronts with incorrect details
- Overhead telephone/electricity cables
- Vacant or under-used shops/properties
- Badly maintained buildings (e.g. The Grand Hotel)
- Buildings with lost architectural features
- Use of modern materials for roofs, windows etc
- Advertising hoardings and poorly designed public conveniences in Devonshire Square

7. Management of Change

7.1 The appraisal has identified the key components which provide the Town Centre with its special identity. The features which combine to create its sense of place have survived the passage of time and some thoughtless alterations remarkably well. This is especially so since an area like Bexhill Town Centre has not until quite recently been recognised as being special in any way. Since its designation as a Conservation Area development proposals in the Town Centre have been subject to closer scrutiny and guidelines drawn up to provide advice on the key elements defining its appearance as well as new shopfronts and security grilles. Using its development control powers the Council has begun to reverse the erosion in character which has occurred. At the same time a three year programme of grant aid has been made available jointly by the Council and English Heritage starting this year (2002) to provide positive assistance to repair buildings in the town Centre's commercial streets and restore lost character. (Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme – HERS).

7.2 Adverse changes have taken two main forms. As parts of the buildings have worn out they have either been replaced with unsympathetic modern materials such as interlocking concrete tiles in place of clay tiles or slate, or poorly designed plastic windows in place of double hung sliding sashes, or in the case of ornamental details such as corner roof turrets, simply not replaced. The other area of change involves periodic modernisation and has affected shopfronts more than any other aspect of the Town Centre, though works to the public realm have been equally harmful with the loss of street trees and original lamp columns.

Roof Coverings

7.3 Regrettably some changes like the wholesale replacement of roof materials have been so extensive that even though it would be possible to take a firmer approach which required the submission of a planning application to change a roof covering from say slate to concrete interlocking tiles, the practical effect would be minimal and do little to restore the visual integrity of the area's roofscape windows.

7.4 Other alterations are however recoverable, the use of planning controls to insist on an appropriate design of plastic window when replacement is planned could do much to improve the principal street elevations. The provision of grants through the HERS to replace unsuitable windows, both plastic and wooden with new well detailed purpose made wooden windows could encourage owners to undo past harm.

Shopfronts

7.5 For a number of years the Council has sought to improve the standard of new shopfronts which have been proposed in the Conservation Area. The objective which the Council has adopted seeks to restore the architectural unity which formerly existed in the Town Centre. The guidelines which are attached to this document have been adopted for development control purposes. The Council will consider expanding the guidelines into a design brief in due course in the light of experience with HERS.

- 7.6 With the adoption of the guidelines and their stricter application than has been the case in the past it is anticipated that a higher standard of proposal can be achieved. This, together with the application of HERS grants to suitable cases, could show a marked improvement in the quality of new shopfronts in the area and, by the completion of the Scheme, serve as exemplars for the future.

Losses from Partial Demolition

- 7.7 Loss of architectural features through demolition raises special difficulties and can result in some of the most harmful changes to the townscape of the Conservation Area. Although demolition in a Conservation Area is controlled, recent decisions in the courts have meant that only the total demolition of a building requires Conservation Area consent. Most minor examples of demolition, for example the removal of a bay window, gabled dormer or corner turret will be dealt with as straightforward development which affects the exterior appearance of the building.
- 7.8 It will be the Council's intention to resist such alterations and where appropriate take the necessary enforcement action to secure the reconstruction of a demolished part of the building where it has been removed without permission and contributes in a significant way to the appearance of the Conservation Area.

The Public Realm

- 7.9 There has been a gradual and remorseless erosion of character in the streets and public spaces in the town centre coupled with a corresponding lack of maintenance which has resulted in its present poor appearance. Highways are primarily the responsibility of the County Council who, with this Council, published in 1995 proposals and guidelines for improvements in the appearance of the Town Centre's streets. The proposals set out ideas for recapturing the charm which the town centre's streets formerly possessed and have been used to guide improvements in the public realm such as the recently completed works in Western Road.
- 7.10 Where opportunities arise, the Council will encourage the restoration of original character by reinstating appropriate cast iron lamp columns, street trees and footway paving slabs. Contributions towards suitable schemes may be available from the Council's HERS and other sources of local funding.

HERS Priorities

- 7.11 The total funding available through the three year HERS programme is, however limited and it will be necessary to focus attention where the maximum impact can be made. Recent proposals by the County Council to make improvements for pedestrian circulation in the Town Centre has allowed plans to upgrade the appearance of Devonshire Square to be considered. The Square is the Town Centre's only true urban space and its improvement could do much to revitalise this important part of the Conservation Area.