



Historic England

Streets for All South East



Summary

In 2017 Historic England published an updated national edition of *Streets for All*, a practical guide for anyone involved in planning and implementing highways and other public realm works in sensitive historic locations. It shows how improvements can be made to public spaces without harming their valued character, including specific recommendations for works to surfaces, street furniture, new equipment, traffic management infrastructure and environmental improvements.

This supplementary document summarises the key messages of *Streets for All* in the context of the South East. It begins by explaining how historic character adds value to the region's contemporary public realm before summarising some of the priorities and opportunities for further improvements to the South East's streetscapes.

This guidance has been prepared by Martin Small, Historic Places Advisor in the South East, and Rowan Whimster.

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[HistoricEngland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/streets-for-all/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/streets-for-all/)

Front cover: Guildford, Surrey

Granite setts have been a defining feature of Guildford's steeply sloping High Street for 150 years. After years of unsatisfactory patched repairs, Surrey County Council recently took the bold decision to re-lay the 115,000 original setts using modern grouting products that reduce the trip hazards and maintain a consistent contour across the road, thus making it much easier for pedestrians to walk on. © Eilís Byrne

The public realm

From Kent to Oxfordshire, the South East of England contains a wealth of historic cities, towns and villages set amidst magnificent landscapes, including England's two newest National Parks. As well as the key cities of Canterbury, Chichester, Winchester and Oxford, its historic settlements include Anglo-Saxon burhs, medieval market towns, military towns, military and civilian ports, seaside resorts, plotland developments and a New Town. Across the South East a variety of vernacular architectural styles are reflected in the range of attractive and historic buildings in each of these settlements.

But it is not only fine buildings that give these places their special character. Just as important are their public spaces – the twittens, streets and paths through which people move and the squares and precincts in which they connect.

Many have evolved over hundreds of years and are rich in inherited character, though sometimes it will have been degraded by neglect or the remorseless pressure of cars and lorries.

Today, the focus has shifted to making the public realm a better place for drivers and pedestrians

alike. As well as improving traffic flows this means placing a greater emphasis on walking and cycling, on the value of public transport, on the safety of children and on accessibility for everyone.

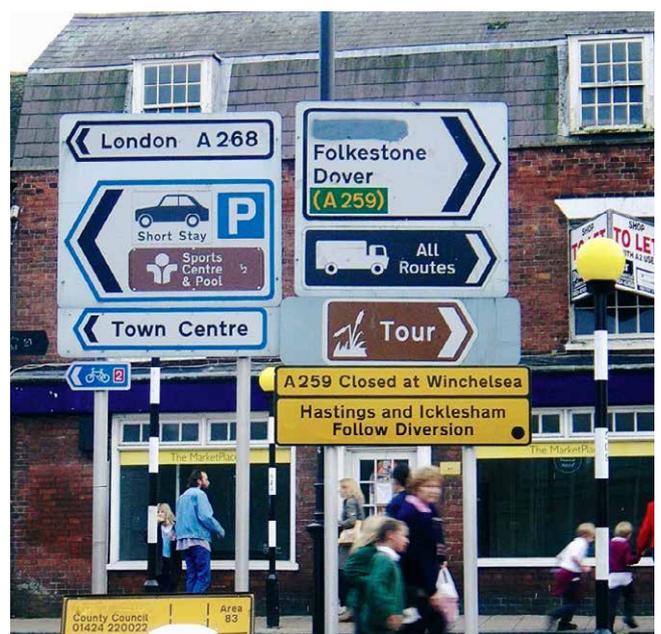
Streets for All shows how practical solutions to common highway problems can be achieved without harm to the valued character of places. The underlying principles are to reduce clutter, co-ordinate design and to reinforce local character, while maintaining safety for all.

Streets for All also demonstrates how opportunities can be translated into action. In a world of scarce resources and competing priorities it sets a clear agenda not only for councils but also for local communities and businesses.

It begins by identifying the elements that make an area distinctive – its landscape, its building materials and its traditional detailing. It then addresses some of the common problems that can diminish the quality of public areas and explains how integrated townscape management can provide answers.



Historic paving often survives in back alleys and adds character.



Poorly coordinated signs which are distracting for drivers.

Identifying local distinctiveness

South East England displays a remarkably rich and varied tapestry of local characteristics, materials and traditions. Fostering this precious resource offers more than mere aesthetic rewards; individuality and distinctiveness provide a vital sense of identity in an increasingly homogeneous global environment.

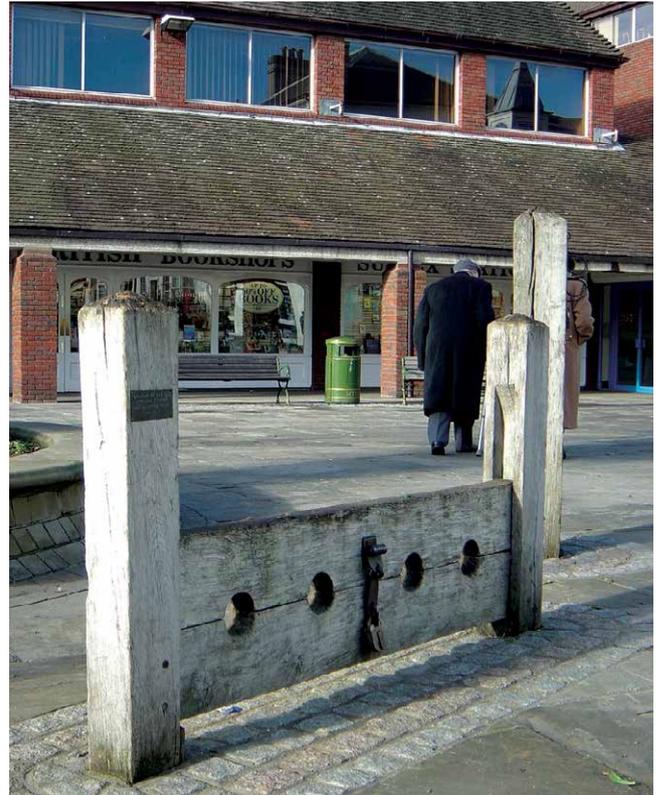
From the cobbled lanes of Rye to the broad medieval streets of Oxford or the contemporary civic spaces of Southampton, the distinctive character of its public spaces needs to be thoroughly understood if they are to be properly conserved.

The protection and enhancement of this distinctiveness helps to foster greater local identity throughout the region. Properly coordinated, it also has the potential to make its historic centres more attractive to inward investment and cultural tourism.

A successful public realm is one in which the differing needs of drivers and pedestrians are served without the need for excessive signs, road markings or physical barriers. Traffic calming measures should be fitted sensitively into the street scene as though they were part of the original design of the area.

Public spaces can also be thought of as 'outdoor rooms' enclosed by buildings. To avoid unsightly clutter, their street furniture needs to be placed with the same care as the objects in an indoor space. Traditional lamp-posts, bollards and seating are all important sources of local character, but high-quality new design can also enrich the public realm and encourage its greater use.

Streets that are safe and attractive places for people to live and work need to be the rule, not the exception. That is why good design needs to be at the heart of the South East's cities, towns and villages. Research also shows that traditional high-quality pavements add economic value to conservation areas. Their existence provides much of the subtle character that attracts visitors to historic townscapes.



Preserved historic furniture can lend character to the most modern of settings



An early Victorian post box, proudly restored. Traditional styles vary and add to local distinctiveness.

Opportunity into action

Throughout the South East, as elsewhere in the country, local authority highways budgets are under increasing financial pressure. One of the most serious consequences is that the traditional surfacing materials that give so many of the region's historic towns their character are in danger of being tarmacked over in the interests of short-term budgetary saving.

A serious issue in the South East's coastal resorts is the conflict between motor traffic and the connections between town and sea on our historic seafronts. There is a need to think about these as iconic spaces that help to define the identity of these towns.

Margate is one such resort that, following a period of decline, has seen a recent resurgence in its fortunes. The Margate Arts Creativity Heritage Project was initiated in 2009 by English Heritage (now Historic England) with the Arts Council in England and Thanet District Council. One of its objectives was 'to enable public realm improvements that combined innovation with conservation'. The 'stepped revetment', known as The Steps, was one such project.



In 2013 Historic England, the National Trust and Aylesbury Vale District Council ran a training day on traditional street surfaces. Supported by a Historic England capacity-building grant for public realm projects, the day included hands-on training in laying Dennerhill Setts, riverwashed cobbles and limestone rubble paving. © Aylesbury Vale District Council



As part of its scheme to improve Margate seafront's resilience to coastal flooding and create new public realm, Thanet District Council constructed a stepped structure from the beach to the promenade. This innovative solution not only avoided the need for a high sea wall, but simultaneously created an excellent public space from which to enjoy views of the beach, sea and Stone Pier. The Steps have won numerous awards, including the national 2015 Civic Voice Design Award for Public Realm.

© Christopher Tipping

Case study: Frideswide Square, Oxford

One of the challenges in the South East is reclaiming its historic market places and other public squares from traffic and creating high-quality, flexible spaces that restore the greater mix of commercial and civic activity that defined their use in the past.

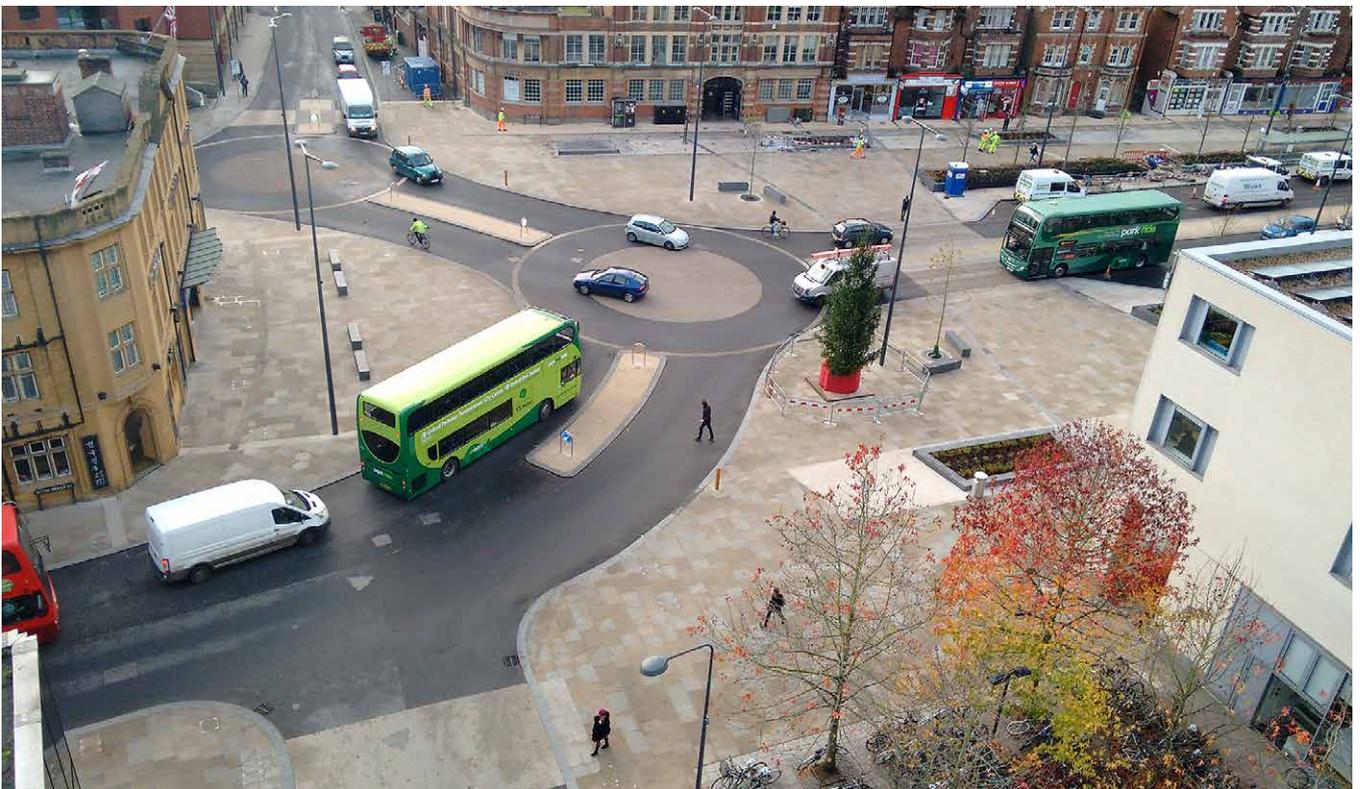
Oxford is one of the South East's premier historic cities, known worldwide for its famous 'dreaming spires'. However, as with many historic cities, it suffers from traffic congestion. Each day there are around 20,000 pedestrian movements during the morning and afternoon peaks in Frideswide Square and 2,500 cycle movements on Botley Road, the western entrance to the city. All of these conflict with the heavy vehicle usage that these roads also have to accommodate.

Oxfordshire County Council decided to redesign Frideswide Square in a way that would avoid the previous segregation of pedestrians and vehicles caused by the multiple lanes of traffic and sets of traffic lights.

The old traffic lights were replaced by three roundabouts, with low kerbs and courtesy pedestrian crossings that replace the old signal-controlled crossings. All motorised traffic now travels along one central boulevard carriageway while cyclists can choose to take on- or off-road routes. Meanwhile, the city's long-suffering pedestrians now have vast areas of space in which to circulate.

Conclusion

The new £6.7m road layout has created a welcoming gateway into the city. There are now only two traffic lanes instead of the original six and pedestrians and cyclists have been provided with a much larger and safer public space in which to circulate.



More than 42,000 vehicles, 20,000 pedestrians and 2,500 cyclists pass safely through the new free-flow St Frideswide Square in a normal day. © Oxfordshire County Council



Historic England

We are the public body that looks after England's historic environment. We champion historic places, helping people understand, value and care for them.

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