

Derby City Centre Great Townscape Trail

Derby treasure

The Derby Cityscape Masterplan, published in January 2005, makes a general comment on Derby's city centre townscape. It is a comment with which everyone who knows Derby's townscape will agree.

"The quality of the townscape and the significant number of quality buildings make a major contribution to the distinctive character of Derby. The St Mary's Gate, Sadler Gate and Iron Gate areas, in particular, are highly distinctive and are real treasures to be protected and enhanced".

You can see the Derby Cityscape Masterplan by [clicking here](#).

The trail guide

This guide is an invitation to explore and to celebrate the great townscape at the heart of the city centre.

The trail is mainly within the City Centre Conservation Area. It is by no means the only area of great townscape in the city centre or the city as a whole. Other examples are in the nearby [Friar Gate Conservation Area](#), in the [Darley Abbey Conservation Area](#) and [Strutt's Park Conservation Areas](#) that contribute the [Derwent Valley Mills World Heritage Site](#), and in other [Conservation Areas](#) within the City.

The trail guide has been prepared with input from members of [Derby Conservation Area Advisory Committee](#) and Derby Civic Society, and from DerbyCityscape, the Urban Regeneration Company for the city centre. Thanks to them for helpful input to the guide and interesting and insightful points about the townscape. Quotations from our contributors are highlighted by boxes within the text.

Comments on townscape are in upright type. ***Trail directions are in italics.***

The guide is in two parts – this route description and commentary, and a downloadable sketch map of the route.

The trail is about two kilometres, just over one mile long.

Wheelchair and scooter users

The trail is independently accessible to disabled people including wheelchairs and powered scooters. It is generally level apart from the section in St. Mary's Gate.

Townscape

'Townscape' is about the built form of a town or a city. It is about how it has been designed, how it has 'just happened', and how it has grown organically, bit by bit, to take on the appearance that it has now. Townscape covers the design of individual buildings and their relationships with their surroundings, including other buildings. It covers what we do with the 'public realm', the streets and other open spaces that we share and which bind together the groups of buildings to make the City.

For more about townscape and urban design, refer to the [Derby City Design pages](#) on the Council web site.

Curves - a feature of the trail

One feature of this trail is the wealth of buildings of architectural and historic interest. Many are referred to in this trail guide. Another feature is curves. Curves are to be seen in the design of individual buildings, at the top of St Mary's Gate and where the Market Place slips into Iron Gate, for example. They are to be seen in features of the public realm – in the curves of the Market Place Waterfall and the riverside terracing. In particular, curves are a feature of some of our most impressive street scenes, including Victoria Street and Sadler Gate. Looking for the many curves in the townscape is one way of enjoying this trail.

Start of the trail

Our trail starts at the **Tourist Information Centre (TIC)**. The TIC is on the Market Place, within the Assembly Rooms complex. To contact the TIC, telephone 01332 255802 or email tourism@derby.gov.uk . Website: www.visitderby.co.uk

> *With our backs to the main entrance to the TIC, we will cross the Market Place to the left hand corner, toward Corn Market.*

Townscape of the Market Place



Civic squares are important townscape features of towns and cities. Market Place is Derby's largest and most important civic square.



Nick Corbett is Principal Urban Designer for Derby Cityscape and author of "Transforming Cities: Revival in the Square", recently published by RIBA Enterprises. He comments:

"Standing in the spacious Market Place you are in the historic heart of Derby. As well as being the ancient market trading place, this is where proclamations were made, where criminals were punished and where the corporation conducted Derby's civic affairs. The city centre has other public spaces, such as Museum Square, also featured on this trail, but Market Place is at the top of the hierarchy of Derby's public squares.

Looking around the square, the various buildings tell a storey of changing architectural fashions over a 300-year period. Classical Renaissance stone buildings, Georgian town houses, Victorian Arts and Crafts and twentieth century Modernist, all somehow fit together to form a reasonably coherent townscape. The surviving Georgian town houses in red and orange brick (see numbers 2, 4, 33, 35, and 36) provide a glimpse of what the old square would have looked like. Today you can't miss the Assembly Rooms – rather like a monolithic fortress, but remember that lots of activity is going on behind those walls, it's just a shame we can't see more of it from within the square!

The Market Place has been extended over the years and now it's big enough to serve as an event space, with potential to host lots of different activities that add to Derby's public life. But the markets are not forgotten. There is a

prominent entrance into the cavernous and colourful Market Hall, through a colonnade under the impressive campanile, or clock tower, of the Guildhall. This is fitting as the markets have been thriving near this site since King Henry II granted Derby a Charter in 1154”.

> *Having crossed Market Place to the left hand corner, we turn left into Corn Market.*

Nick comments: “As you leave the square and walk up Corn Market you will see the same contrast between different architectural styles continues. Also, look out for the grand old bank and building society premises and the clocks – all reflecting historic Derby trades. The beautifully restored shop-front at the premises occupied by Northern Rock, next to the H. Samuel clock, shows a continuing commitment to preserving Derby’s unique character”.

> *Follow Corn Market to the crossroads and the wide pedestrian crossing at Victoria Street.*

You are now at the southern boundary of the City Centre Conservation Area. Most of our trail is within this Conservation Area. Looking ahead along St Peter’s Street, away from the Conservation Area and toward the city centre’s main shopping area, and left along Albert Street, you will see some buildings of quality and some lively and interesting townscape. But a change in townscape character from the Conservation Area is equally noticeable. There are relatively few listed buildings here, and development from the 1960s and 70s with limited townscape ambition is more in evidence. Before crossing, look right to get the view of Debenhams and the next building along from it.

> *Cross at the pedestrian crossing and turn right along Victoria Street.*

Townscape of Victoria Street

Standing prominently on the left hand side of the street is Debenhams. Here is a post-world war II building that really does make a positive contribution in its own right and as part of the street scene.



Maxwell Craven, of Derby Civic Society and Derby Conservation Area Advisory Committee, describes the scene in this way. With its “majestic curving facade”, the Debenhams’ building and the linked United Reformed Church were built at the beginning of the 1960s “in a restrained modernist style, keeping the proportions in harmony with adjacent buildings and using fine small local bricks, laid to an interesting bond, with minimum exposed concrete. It has matured well into the street scene and shows quality in architecture will always prevail. Looking at it, you would not realise that two separate schemes were at work here – the chapel and shops by Llewellyn, Smith and Waters and the Debenhams’ building by Evans, Cartwright and Woollatt.”

Across Victoria Street from Debenhams, most of the buildings are listed. Relatively large in scale, they provide an impressive frontage. The classical Royal Building (the former Royal Hotel) is prominent. Finished partly in stone, partly in white painted stucco, it wraps into Corn Market to excellent townscape effect.



Curves are a feature of some of Victoria Street’s individual buildings, and they are a feature of the street itself. Looking from Victoria Street, we have the opportunity to admire another of Derby’s finest townscape views.

> *A good place to view it is from near to the first of the bus shelters outside Debenhams.*

We will look at this area in more detail a little later, but the building group providing the views and curves at the end of the street beyond Debenham's, based on the Strand and including the corners with St James' Street and Wardwick, is something special. This is townscape of quality, townscape of which the City is rightly proud.



Managing, protecting and enhancing the local historic environment are important tasks, shared by public bodies, landowners and a range of organisations concerned with heritage matters. Victoria Street is a good place to note a couple of recent projects that set about these tasks - the Townscape Heritage Initiative and Connecting Derby transport scheme.



[Connecting Derby](#) aims to improve transport in and around the city centre for people who live, work in or visit the city. The [Townscape Heritage Initiative](#) (THI) is a partnership scheme funded by Derby City Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund that has provided grants towards the repair, restoration and reuse of historic buildings in a specific area of the city centre.

The two schemes have worked together to great effect in Victoria Street's townscape details. Through Connecting Derby, clutter has been removed from the street scene; the carriageway realigned to put more emphasis on people and less on vehicles; new surfaces have been provided using quality

stone (York stone and Greenmoor Rustic stone – with THI grant support); and new street furniture has been provided using quality metalwork (including brushed aluminium for the lighting columns and stainless steel for other features). Grant aid from the THI has assisted the repair and restoration of the glazed metal canopy on the Royal Buildings, a notable feature of the street scene.

> Follow the sweep of Victoria Street left into The Wardwick.

Townscape of The Wardwick and Museum Square

The Wardwick is one of the oldest street names in the city. On the left hand side, we notice a change from Victoria Street with buildings less grand in scale.



On the right hand side and at the end of the street, trees are an important feature. They help bring seasonal changes to townscape views.

This is one of the few parts of the trail where motor vehicles have their usual priority. We are reminded of the noise, smells and general inconveniences of motor vehicles to people seeking to enjoy city centres as places to be.

> *Cross at the pedestrian crossing in front of the Central Library*



The library is a landmark building within the city centre. It was the outcome of an architectural competition won by R K Freeman of Bolton with his Franco-Flemish design. Opened in 1879, it was financed by Michael Thomas Bass, brewer and philanthropist who was also MP for Derby.

> *Passing the Central Library, turn right into Museum Square.*

Museum Square is another notable feature of the city centre's 'public realm'. With its' relatively quiet and non-commercial character, it provides a contrast in scale and surroundings to Market Place. The statue of Michael Thomas Bass is one of the artworks in our [Heritage in Public Art Circular Walk](#).

> *Cross to the far corner of Museum Square, the corner away from the road, and take the link through to Sadler Gate Bridge. Keep right, turning right into the Strand (not Sadler Gate – that comes later).*

Emerging from Museum Square, to the right is Princes Discount Store. This is an important site for redevelopment within the Derby Cityscape Masterplan, presenting a major opportunity for townscape improvements.

Townscape of The Strand

Earlier, we admired the view along The Strand from Victoria Street. Here, we are entering the street from the other end so we will have all of the views of this Victorian townscape gem!

Sir Abraham Woodiwiss, who was Mayor of Derby from 1880-82, built the Strand including the Strand Arcade and parts of St James's Street in 1878-81 as a commercial venture. The architects were Giles and Brookhouse, except for the Arcade, which was designed by J S Story in what is described as a "debased classical style". It is thought to be based on London's famous Burlington Arcade. Development in the Strand area was facilitated by the culverting of Markeaton and Bramble Brooks.



Most of the interest is on the left hand side of the street. The great curve of the building frontage gives a real sense of ‘anticipation’ – we feel we are being led through to somewhere well worth going to, which of course we are! There is a great deal of rhythm in the frontage, achieved through the fenestration (the pattern of the windows); the balustraded entrances, punctuating the frontage; and the highly decorated stonework.

On the left, linking The Strand with Sadler Gate is the Strand Arcade. We will return to the Strand Arcade, described as “a unique link between different ages and city cultures”, in our visit to Sadler Gate.

> *Turn left into St James’s Street.*

Townscape of St James’s Street

Here we find that although the style is different, the architectural rhythm of the Strand is continued, in the fenestration and the stonework details. Again, most of the interest is on the left hand side of the street, although there are buildings of quality and interest at the top and bottom on the right hand side, and at the street’s ‘end stop’ on Corn Market.

Looking along the street from junction with The Strand, there are opportunities for improvements to shop fronts and shop signage to remove clutter and to better reflect the qualities of the buildings. There is an excellent view of the upper parts of the buildings on the left hand side, assisted by another simple but attractive curve to the building frontage. For the second section of the frontage, red brick replaces the stone used for The Strand group of buildings. The sun on the red brick creates a pleasing effect at certain times of the day.



Toward Corn Market from where the red brick begins, is an excellent 'enclosed vista'. We are looking at 37 and 38 Corn Market, a Grade II listed building of mid-eighteenth century origin, featuring what is described in the listing as a 'rusticated stone coach arch'. A prominent feature of the building, it provides a focal point in the streetscene, growing in importance as we approach, inviting in to us into the hustle and bustle of the Fish Market and Victorian Market Hall beyond.

> *Turn left into Corn Market and keep left, following the building frontage on the left.*

You will notice curves in the building behind the Waterfall, where the Market Place slips into Iron Gate, and in the lip of the Waterfall itself. Viewed together, these two curves form an intriguing three-dimensional presentation.

Do not go along Iron Gate (it comes later), but look up along Iron Gate toward the Cathedral, Derby's major landmark building. The Cathedral set against the curving building frontage of Iron Gate is Derby's joint best townscape view – a status it shares with the view of The Strand from Victoria Street. Looking from the Cathedral back across the Market Place to the tower of the Guildhall and back again gives a grand sweep of townscape, and a sense of the important visual relationship between the Guildhall and Cathedral towers.

Notice also the contrast between the street furniture and surfacings along Iron Gate and those of Victoria Street, and the contrast between these two and Sadler Gate, which we visit next.

> *Turn (left) into Sadler Gate.*

Townscape of Sadler Gate



Peter Leeson, Artist and Urban Designer, is preparing a publication on Derby's townscape. He provides the following comments on Sadler Gate.

"Dating from Mediaeval times, Sadler Gate is a pedestrian route winding down from Iron Gate to Bold Lane. Its wonderfully informal, narrow, curving, way followed ancient property lines and would have offered some protection from wind, rain and sun. These qualities have survived the rebuilding of most of its frontages in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

As we enter Sadler Gate from Iron Gate the slightly taller buildings form a fitting street entrance. The street inclines down to the distant right turning bend. Here, the imposing entrance to Strand Arcade, on the left, encloses the view. This three storey entrance building, set obliquely to the line of walk, marks a pivotal point that can be seen from both ends of Sadler Gate and invites us to explore the parts of the street hidden from our view. But we will return below to the special role of the Strand Arcade.

The buildings lining the way, present a variety of bay widths, heights and historical styles but the continuous frontages and arched side entrances ensure that the visual unity of the street is retained. Within this overall unity there exists amazing and pleasing variety. Above the shop fronts, Georgian red brick contrasts with painted and rendered facades. Where an older building survives, sandwiched between Georgian neighbours (as opposite the Strand Arcade entrance), it adds its own quality to the enjoyable visual irregularity. Shop fascias refuse to line-up visually so that horizontals perform a lively jig along the street perspective!

On the immediate left is the 'Old Bell Hotel', a restored Eighteenth Century coaching inn. The carvings on the wood beams and lintels are good examples of the street's pleasing details.

Returning to the unique importance of the Strand Arcade: we should note that, while we delight in the human "higgledy-piggledy" mediaeval bye-way that is Sadler Gate we can also, in Derby, enjoy the Classical design approach. This takes a whole street façade as a unit of design. To the South of Sadler Gate, the curving, unified, grandeur of the Strand, built in the Classical style, as late as the 1870's, is another of the City's treasures. The Strand Arcade connects the two streets and while its stone, three-storey, entrance at Sadler Gate appears tall and impressive, the same architectural treatment at the Strand end appears as a well-mannered contribution to a "grand design". For those interested in the enjoyment of townscape Derby provides, in the Strand Arcade, a unique link between different ages and city cultures!"

> *At the bottom of Sadler Gate, follow the curve of the street to the right, into Bold Lane. Stay on the right hand side of the Lane.*

In Bold Lane, trees are again an important part of the streetscene. Behind the trees is Bold Lane Car Park. An interesting feature of the car park is that the screens at ground floor level feature two outstanding Derby townscape scenes, designed by Helen Acton, Built Environment Team's Public Art Technical Support Officer. They show how, with imagination and enthusiasm, public art can make a positive contribution to townscape in unlikely and unexpected places.

Views ahead feature new development, in the form of parts of the Magistrates Courts Centre and the Joseph Wright Sixth Form College, positive additions to the townscape and encouraging signs for the city centre's future.

> *Following the curve of the building take the first right into St Mary's Gate.*

Townscape of St Mary's Gate

Entering St Mary's Gate, we are immediately aware of some very fine buildings that have a big impact on the streetscene.



This area has traditionally been the legal quarter of the town and city. Immediately on the left, the former County Hall, built in 1660 is a most outstanding building. Encountering it for the first time, it comes as a surprise, as something of a 'hidden gem'. It is now at the heart of the building group housing the Magistrates Court Centre. The cobbled and enclosed courtyard in front, known as a 'cour d'honneur', is a notable townscape feature. It is flanked by late Georgian buildings, one formerly being the King's Arms Hotel (then a Police Station). The "arms", proudly displayed at the entrance to St Mary's Gate, are those of George III. The presentation of the building group as a whole is stunning.



> *Cross the road to the left hand side, in front of the Magistrates Court.*

The other key building is the Cathedral. It is Derby's major landmark building and provides a most impressive, ever-changing focal point within the street scene as we move up the gentle rise toward it.



The tower dates from 1511-1531 and is all that remains of the former church, demolished in 1723. The architect James Gibbs was commissioned to design a new church. He was renowned for his London Churches such as St Mary-Le-Strand and St Martin-in-the-Fields and had a great influence on church design in the Georgian period. The Cathedral has an exceptional Georgian interior.

St Mary's Gate contains other fine Renaissance buildings and, like other streets on this trail, a fascinating history. This history is recorded for us in a supplement to this trail, available from the web page in pdf, provided by M.A.B. Mallender. Mr Mallender is well placed to set out this history. He is a Solicitor practising from St. Mary's Gate, an Honorary Lay Canon for Derby Cathedral, and a member of Conservation Area Advisory Committee.

In his account, Mr Mallender mentions that "in the 16th century St Mary's Gate ran from All Saints Church ... down to the edge of the now culverted Markeaton Brook the line of which runs under the land to the front of the multi-storey car park.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries both sides of the street were built up with narrow burgage plots running back, on the north to Walker Lane, and on the south side the plots ran back only half way to meet the plots fronting

onto Sadler Gate. The only building that is likely to remain from this period or soon after is No.10, part of the offices of Pinders, Solicitors.

By the 19th century some of these plots had been built over to form long narrow Courts whilst others had been combined to make the sites of substantial residences, so the street became a mixture of Gentlemen's and professional residences on the one hand, and very humble dwellings on the other, alongside the County Hall and Kings Arms Hotel".

Mr Mallender mentions that "originally the Judges would arrive by coach in the Courtyard on the first day of each Assize, preceded by trumpeters, whose trumpets bore the banners of the High Sheriff of the year, and halberdiers, after they had attended the Assize service at All Saints' Church (now the Cathedral). The sight of these Judges who represented the Crown delivering justice was a spectacle to bring the townspeople out onto the street to watch. It was not only the sight of Judges arriving at the Court that drew the crowds into the forecourt, for the steps of County Hall was the place where royal proclamations were made, in particular on the accession of a new sovereign, by the High Sheriff, flanked by Civic and Legal Officials and Magistrates of Town and county, and where (depending on the time of day and weather), the votes of Parliamentary Elections having been counted in the County Hall, the result was announced either inside or outside".

Mr Mallender comments "it can be seen that a street which apart from the Courts now just contains offices, did have vibrancy with a principal Church at one end and a seat of Justice and Government at the other, and its comings and goings would never have lacked interest".

> *At the top St Mary's Gate, by the Cathedral, turn right into Iron Gate.*

Townscape of Iron Gate



Joan D'Arcy represents Derbyshire Archaeological Society on Conservation Area Advisory Committee. Joan points out that, on reaching Iron Gate, "you are now on the ridgeway along which Derby developed, running north to south and running parallel to the river.

To the left is Queen Street and the route north out of the City. The eye is attracted to the far distance and the Roman Catholic Church of St. Mary, built in Gothic style in 1838 to the design of architect A. W. Pugin. Closer to, St. Michael's, now an architects' studio, is a Victorian rebuilding of a church that stood there at the time of the Norman Conquest.

To the right lies Iron Gate and the approach to the Market Place. As you turn into Iron Gate, you are entering the City's traditional shopping area. In the 1700s, the street was described as 'consisting of inns and shopkeepers' and this still applies today. The buildings are interspersed by enticing archways and entrances with wrought iron gates, which once led to stable yards and workshops.

The street was widened in 1869 when the shops and inns on your left were pulled down and, over a period of twenty years, rebuilt. Victorian 'Gothic' was the fashionable style of the day and there are some fine examples but although there is stylistic similarity, each building has individual character.

Look up above the modern shop fronts and you will see capitals embellished with animal heads, fine majolica wall plaques, and arched and mullioned windows. The right hand side of the street has, in contrast, grown organically over time and retains historic elements of the street's medieval origins.

As you approach the Market Head, where the Town Crier traditionally rang a bell to signal the time of day, the buildings on your right retain the dimensions of the pre-Conquest burgage plots on which they were built. Narrow frontages with buildings stretching back are a reminder that competition for a street frontage was as fierce then, as now".

The levels on Iron Gate give good views of the roofscape of the lower part of the street. Roofscapes have not been a significant feature of the trail so far.





> *Turn left into the Market Place and head diagonally across to the top right hand corner, toward the Council House. Follow the paved area to the pedestrian crossing on Corporation Street, in front of the Council House.*

On the right as you approach the crossing is Corporation Street Garden, a memorial garden designed in co-operation with the Derbyshire Association for the Blind. Raised flowerbeds and ramped access ways are practical features included within the formal design approach.

> *Across the crossing, turn left and pass the ceremonial entrance to the Council House.*

The Council House civic entrance is to a grand classical design, providing an important townscape feature. Another feature is the way in which the windows of the long sweep of the Council House along Corporation Street provide a strong rhythm.

Riverside townscape near Exeter Bridge

If you look across the road from the Council House civic entrance, you can see on the corner the former Magistrates' Court building. It is proposed for change of use and refurbishment at the time of preparing this trail guide.

Like the Council House, this building was designed by the Borough Architect, C.H.Aslin, as part of the County Borough of Derby Central Improvement Scheme of 1929. The Scheme was not completed until after the Second World War. Other surviving components of the Scheme - Exeter Bridge, the river terracing and flood defence walls, Markeaton Brook outfall, and the bandstand and Riverside Gardens - give an architectural and townscape unity

to this area, although the gardens have been greatly altered from their original form.



> *Staying on the same side of the road, head along the side of the Council House, away from the Market Place, and toward Exeter Bridge. A good viewing point is from the top of the steps to the Riverside Gardens at the near end of the Bridge. Other good views of the riverside are from the footways on both sides of the Bridge itself.*

An important feature of the view along the river from the top of the steps is the well-established trees. Despite the buildings nearby, they help provide a 'countryside scene', and contribute to the status of the River Derwent as Derby's most important natural history feature.

Peter Leeson is enthusiastic about the "curving riverside edge" and other townscape features of the riverside. He provides this commentary.

“From Exeter Bridge the view East, along the line of the Council House, is of a delightful curving riverside promenade with the green space of Riverside Gardens on the distant bend. The river curves and changes width as it passes through the City Centre and C.H. Aslin, former Borough Architect and designer of the civic buildings and the adjoining promenade, has used these natural features to brilliant effect.

The straight edge of the Council House frontage provides a foil to the curving, balustraded, walkway, which is detailed with a wealth of scroll and spiral decoration. The compound horizontal curves are further emphasised by the terraced effect of the edge, stepping down to the water. In fact, the southern end of the Council House has a reversed-curved corner with circular windows in keeping with the promenade design and contrasting pleasantly with the straight rectangular building frontage. From this southern corner, looking back towards Exeter Bridge, the vertical curve of the bridge span adds a further element to the composition.

To the north of Exeter Bridge, the continued riverside promenade here takes a straight line route, directing the eye towards the intricate tower of the Silk Mill and the right turning bend in the river which close the view.”

Having arrived at the bridge, you may choose to linger at or to explore the riverside.

> *Take the route back to the TIC to complete the Trail.*