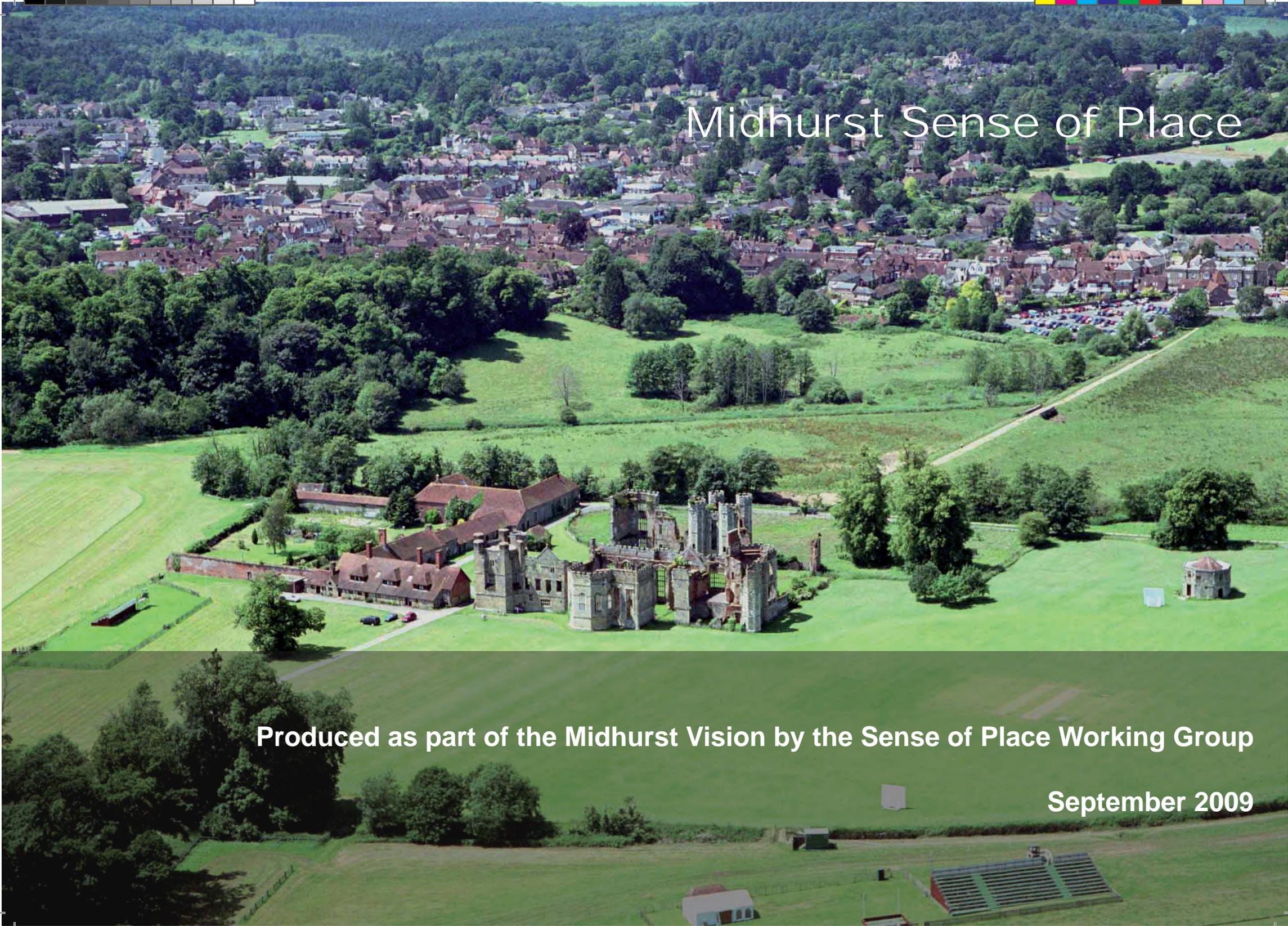




Midhurst Sense of Place



Produced as part of the Midhurst Vision by the Sense of Place Working Group

September 2009

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Foreword

Like many towns throughout the UK, Midhurst has a range of unique qualities. Yet as a result of social and economic change it faces competition from neighbouring destinations like Chichester, Petersfield, Haslemere and Guildford. Chichester District Council recognised this problem and through a series of projects (aimed at supporting the local economy), engaged with the community to help identify key areas of development and regeneration.

Whilst residents may have strong emotional links to their town or village, it is becoming increasingly important to understand and reveal the innate qualities and character of a place to attract visitors and compete with other towns in their region. However, it may be difficult to express what defines a 'place', but it is important to do so, to ensure that any support given by way of physical improvement or economic development, is appropriate and does not lead to the loss of individuality and regional identity.

Understanding that Midhurst's future prosperity is dependent on finding a way to manage change whilst maintaining a genuine and authentic sense of place, it became clear that a process was required to capture and articulate these unique aspects to help develop plans for the future.

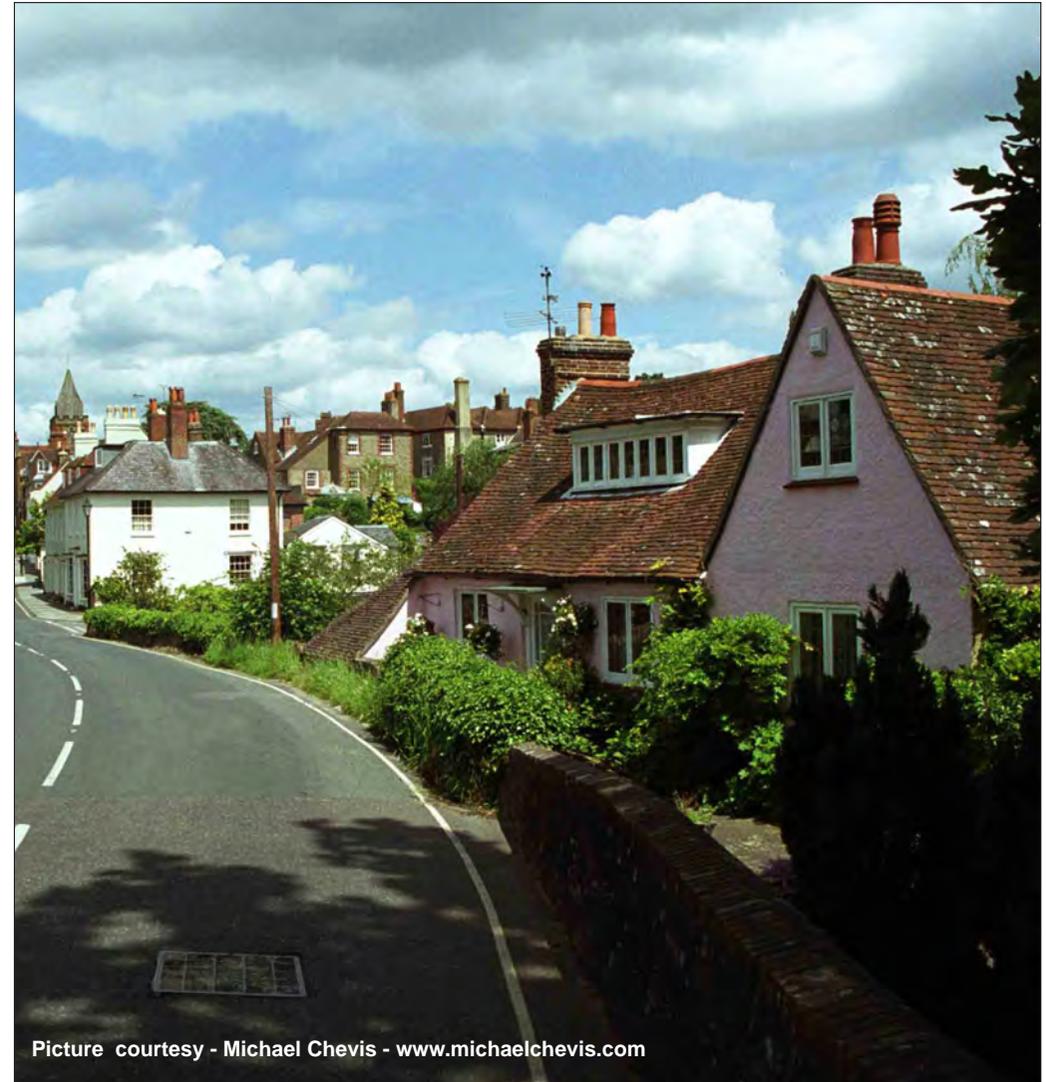
Having mobilised local support resulting in the Midhurst Vision, this Sense of Place exercise was identified as one key action and has been informed by local knowledge from Midhurst residents and business people. Then to ensure a degree of viability and compliance, Chichester District Council and West Sussex County Council have provided technical expertise.

The process has been engaging and relatively swift, already delivering projects into the business community in the form of grants and training. Overall there is a clear and single aim - *to ensure that Midhurst has a bright future and despite necessary change, will retain its historic character.*

Councillor Myles Cullen

Council Leader and Portfolio Holder for the Economy and Regions

December 2009



Picture courtesy - Michael Chevis - www.michaelchevis.com

View along South Street looking towards Market Square and the Church

Introduction

It is widely accepted that there is a direct and quantifiable link between the quality of the public realm and the economic success of a community or town. This view is supported by many studies at home and abroad and endorsed by groups including CABE – (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) and English Heritage.

Understanding this link, in May 2008, Chichester District Council published the Midhurst Town Centre Improvement Study. It set out to pull together four previous reports including: Chichester District Local Plan (1999), Retailing in the Chichester District (1999), Midhurst Town Plan (2006) and Midhurst strategy and sustainable opportunities – (2007) CACI.

The improvement study identified ways to develop the local economy through the following:

- i. Improving the retail environment and retail mix
- ii. Enhancing the public realm.
- iii. Leveraging the local character and heritage of Midhurst, thereby emphasising its appeal.

Following a series of public meetings held soon after publication, it was clear there was both an appetite and commitment from local residents and businesses to support the Town Council in developing a vision based on the recommendations of the improvement study.

Within a matter of weeks the steering group had been formed and by late autumn of 2008, the steering group had identified a number of key projects to form the basis of the Midhurst Vision. By December, a survey of shop fronts was being conducted, to help create a package of support measures to improve shop fronts, signs and canopies. Another project was identified, aimed at ensuring that the innate local character and heritage of Midhurst was reflected in any aspect of improvement and future development. By November 2008 a sub-group had been formed with the remit to define a genuine sense of place for Midhurst. This in turn led to the appointment of BroomeJenkins in March 2009 to work with the sub-group to explore and articulate Midhurst's sense of place. This document explains the process undertaken between March and June 2009, the outcomes and proposed actions.



South pond and South Street leading to Red Lion Street and Edinburgh Square

Exploration





Context

Set within the area that will become the South Downs National Park, Midhurst is a market town of around 5,000 people on the northern edge of the Chichester District in West Sussex.

Located on the River Rother and what is now the A272, Midhurst developed as a convenient trading centre between Winchester and Chichester possibly during the earlier medieval period. The original nucleus of the town formed around a church and market square at the centre of a network of streets, forming an interlocking grid pattern as part of an elaborate defence system which included a ditch 11 metres wide and 3 metres deep. This period of considered development, is the only time Midhurst has been 'masterplanned', as subsequent development although possibly strategic in nature, could be described as organic and less formal.

After the Norman Conquest, Midhurst's strategic position probably led to the construction of a motte-and-bailey castle on St Ann's Hill. Its ruins, a scheduled ancient monument, features 20th century 'enhancements' to show the position of the 12th century manor house built by the De Bohun family.

From the earliest settlement, what we know today as Midhurst Town Centre has been shaped by expansion around previously existing tracks leading west from the castle at St Ann's Hill, and north out of Chichester.

As Midhurst began to thrive the once open market square became enclosed by 'burgage plots', granted for the building of houses. The areas north and west of Market Square became developed, enclosing the market. As the once open space became restricted the town began to spread along West Street towards Bepton Road and beyond the town ditch.



A copy of a 1632 map of Midhurst - North is to the left

Context

The building of a new house outside the town to the north, by Sir John Bohun in 1284 triggered another phase of development. Called Codreya – (Norman-French for hazel grove - in which the house stood), the new house encouraged the growth of activity along what is known today as North Street. With the extensive rebuilding of the house by Sir William Fitzwilliam between 1529 and 1540, it became the magnificent Tudor mansion of Cowdray. The widening of North Street and increased activity close to Cowdray, altered the structure and layout of the town decisively.

Celebrated by gentry and nobles of the time, Cowdray was visited by Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. But in 1793 the house was partially destroyed by fire and left in ruin until the formation of the Cowdray Heritage Trust in 1996. Following major conservation work in 2006 it has been open to the public since 2007. It has become an important heritage attraction, frequently staging re-enactments and guided tours.

Midhurst's historic phases of development are evident in the street layout, historic buildings and key landmarks seen today. But what defines a place is its activity. This is especially true in the case of Midhurst – an ancient market town.

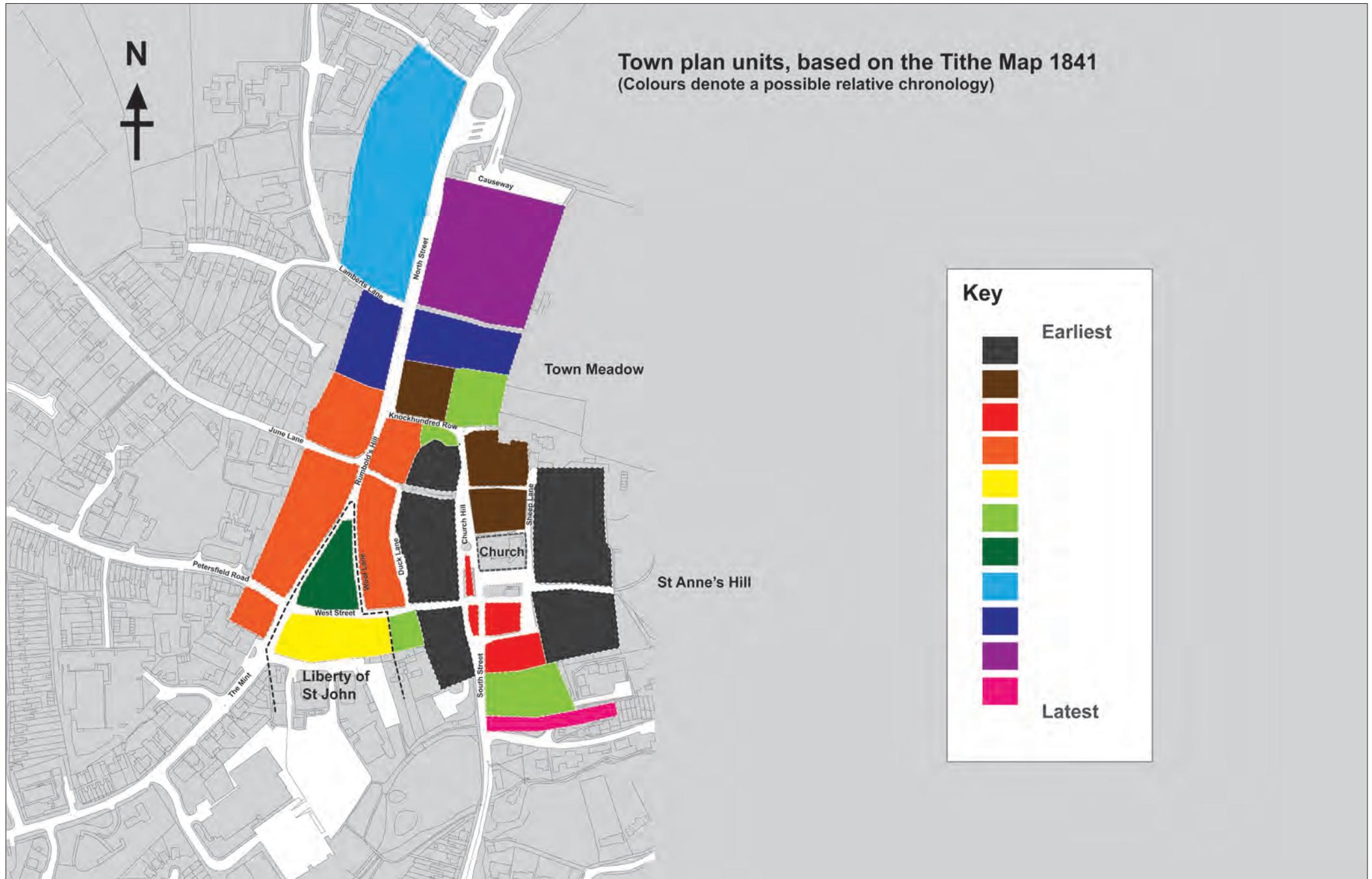
It became a market town because of where it is – between Winchester and Chichester. As a result it had defences built around it and both the town and its commercial centre grew.

Whilst Midhurst is known today for many cultural reasons including being the home of H.G Wells, those passing through on the A272 can easily miss the historic and ancient streets. But through the work of local groups like the Midhurst Society and Midhurst Town Trust, its origins and heritage are well researched and documented. In working towards a defined sense of place, it is vital that this historic context and strategic importance as a meeting place for commerce is understood and revealed.



Entrance to the once grand Cowdray House

Context - Map showing chronological phases of expansion



Sense of Place Aims

Members of the Vision steering group shared the concern that whilst the local economy is a constant and pressing issue to address, their focus had to be towards identifying those physical issues that have a detrimental impact on the attractiveness of the town.

Although the underlying character of Midhurst, shaped by the past is very evident, there is a genuine need to ensure that any future development or management of the town is sensitive and informed. In that, the steering group recognised the need to celebrate and reveal the past without overstating it, and combine contemporary needs to ensure the town remains viable and attractive for future generations.

On a practical level, there will always be the need for running repairs and integrating changes in legislation, to make (for example) the environment safe for road users. But this trickle of interventions can have an erosive effect on the character of a town. Given the historic context of Midhurst, it was felt that any future works needed to be connected, authentic and subtle. Towns can be well maintained as an urban space, but the concept of 'places' rather than 'spaces' emphasises the importance of 'belonging' and a sense of emotional attachment.

Dealing with genuine physical improvements and repairs is just one aspect. The attachment felt by members of the group needed to be shared with those people they want or need to attract to benefit the local retail economy. So whilst there is plenty of scope for physical improvements, without understanding what Midhurst means, it would fail to realise its potential. Therefore a formal 'sense of place' process had to be undertaken. It was also agreed the process should be facilitated by an external but local consultant, to help the group express and articulate their thoughts, insights and views. Having captured as much as possible, the facilitators would then work with the group to define a clear direction and set of actions.

To guide the process, the following aims were agreed:

1. Improve the overall appeal of the town by reflecting and leveraging the inherent qualities of Midhurst including: locality, heritage, built form, attractions, retail, etc.
2. To that end, reduce street clutter and better manage necessary signs and infrastructure (such as highways and walkways) in a way conducive to the historical context of Midhurst.
3. Improve welcome, legibility, permeability and heritage interpretation in an appropriate and contextual way to benefit the user and to not crowd the built environment.
4. Provide a technical reference for any future improvement or interventions that references current best design practice for historical towns and villages in line with English Heritage's 'Streets For All' initiative.
5. Establish a clear and consistent voice to promote Midhurst with a single identity that makes full use of existing material, content and information services.

Sense of Place - Process

Having produced the Midhurst Town Centre Improvement study in 2008, BroomeJenkins (based in Chichester) were invited to meet with the sub-group to discuss their aims and expectations plus ways to develop a genuine sense of place.

The group consisted of local residents and businesses, representatives of the Town Council, Midhurst Society and Cowdray Heritage Trust. In addition representatives from Chichester District Council, West Sussex County Council and their engineering consultants Amey also joined the group.

The process used, brought together a number of methods to enable the group to express ideas and validate them technically. Central to the process was the work of Edward Relph, who in his book of 1976 – Place and Placelessness, had developed the ideas of a ‘sense of place’ and identified the three elements that define it, namely:

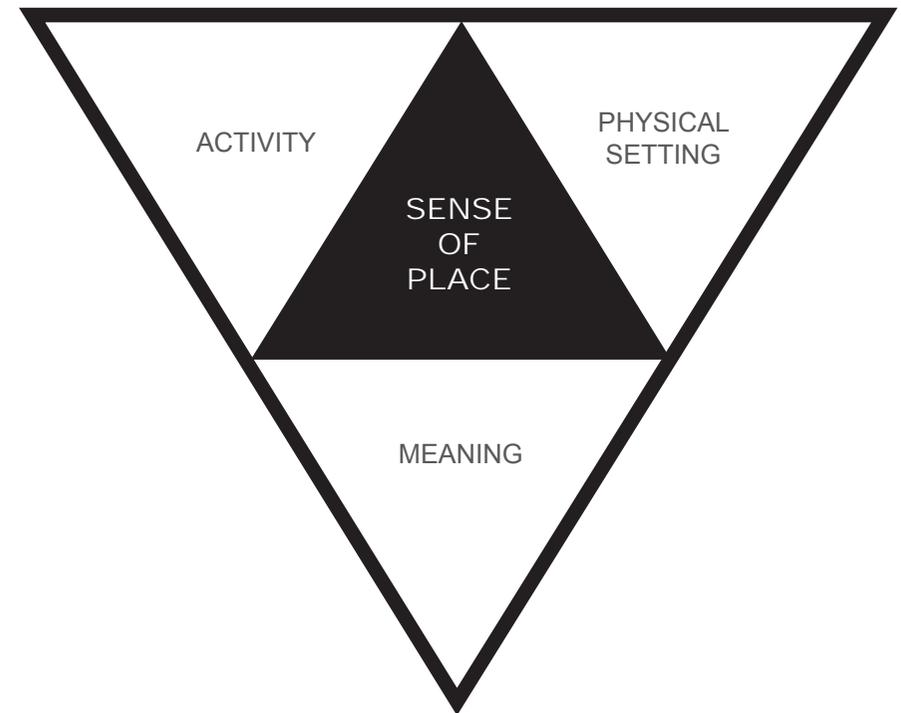
Physical setting - Townscape, Built form, Permeability, Landscape, Furniture

Activity - Land uses, Pedestrian flow, Patterns, Noise and smell, Vehicle flow

Meaning - Legibility, Cultural associations, Perceptions, Attractions,
Qualitative assessments

Although there is no denying the logic in this understanding, Relph also points out that:

“A sense of place does not reside in these elements, but in our interaction with them”.



Sense of Place - Process

The process undertaken, explored each of the headings in turn through workshops and open discussion with the group. Although time for each session was limited, the value of local insight proved to be a very useful and efficient resource.

In preparation for each session, the team were set tasks to provide content for the subsequent workshop. In each session the interaction between the three different elements became clear as suggested by Relph. One particular issue here is the choice of appropriate surface materials for Market Square. Considered as an improvement to the physical setting and in view of the historical context, high quality materials are advised in line with being an important historical setting. But then also consider its use as a market and the serviceability of high quality stone. Physical setting and activity interact to determine the outcome.

Decisions like this call for different levels of technical advice. But with the focus on delivery, the group had the support of Chichester District Council's design and implementation advisors and engineering support from West Sussex Country Council and their engineering consultants – Amey.

With specialist technical expertise forming part of the group to anticipate implementation, the sense of place exercise is the start of a three stage process which can be described as: **Definition, Development and Implementation.**

