

Activity

In 2004 Country Life Magazine voted Midhurst the most desirable town in Southern England in which to live. Its rural location provides a tranquil setting and plenty of scope for country pursuits such as cycling and walking. However it is fair to say that in attracting visitors and shoppers, Midhurst faces competition from near by Chichester, Haselmere and Petersfield.

The Midhurst Strategy and Sustainable Opportunities Study prepared by CACI in 2007, looked specifically at retailing and consumer behaviour in Midhurst. One conclusion it made was that Midhurst had the capacity to support not only the direct population, but also the hinterland. In addition, the ability to attract custom from further afield was only possible if the already present private and specialist retail sector was successfully developed. But today shoppers have the ability to travel to other destinations and increasingly use their immediate local shops for what the CACI study called 'top-up' shopping.

Considering retail as an activity, the improvement study of 2008 identified that whilst 91% of those surveyed shop in Midhurst, 52% wanted either an improvement in the variety of shops or quality of goods on sale. This would support the view that Midhurst is not currently a retail destination. Therefore people visit for other reasons, including heritage, the polo or as a result of passing through.

Facing the general fall in retailing as a result of the recession, Midhurst is not immune from the economic forces at work. But as a market town, it is consistent with the drive towards defining a sense of place that markets should be held frequently. The promotion of local farmers markets provides vibrant activity in the town and will attract people, who may then use local shops, other amenities and assuming the experience is good, will return. Markets are being re-introduced into North Street, the first was successfully held on 23rd of May 09 with others planned for North Street and Market Square. Market day has always been an important day for most rural communities in continental Europe. In the UK this tradition has declined in most areas, but with changing consumer attitudes and a growing interest in local produce, markets are making a return .



Picture courtesy - Chichester District Council



Picture courtesy - Chichester District Council

Activity

As a result of the way the town developed, Midhurst has two distinct zones. The main thoroughfare is along the A272/A286 forming an important route through to Chichester in the south and Guildford and London to the north. The second zone or what is known as the old town is east of North Street around the Church and original Market Square.

The old town is quaint and reveals the authentic Tudor character. With the Swan Pub and Spread Eagle Hotel in the square and a selection of independent retailers, the atmosphere is congenial and West Street and Knockhundred Row provide an interesting and potentially unique retail offer.

In contrast, North Street has some independent retailers as well as a collection of national chain stores, charity shops and restaurants. The retail offer is more general and due to the width of North Street, passing traffic and a more diverse architecture, it has less of the Tudor character on show.

Due to a lack of adequate enforcement North Street also has parked cars on both sides at most times in the day. In addition there is a perception that traffic volumes are high. However, apart from peak times, vehicle numbers are not exceptional and the perception is due to certain aspects of road layout. Notably localised congestion at the roundabout at the junction of Bepton Road, West Street and Petersfield Road, and then the pinch point at the start of North Street.



West Street and North Street

Physical Setting

With the majority of the buildings in the study area pre-dating the 19th Century and almost every house in the old town being Tudor, the overall physical setting and built form is historic. Entering from the north across the North Mill Bridge, views of Cowdray ruins are seen to the left and the former Grammar School and Capron House are seen to the right.

In most cases the buildings are well maintained and if required have been repaired with sensitivity, thereby retaining the genuine character. But as with any town, it cannot avoid the impact of change and as a result of the motorcar, streets become peppered with traffic signs, road markings and signal. As North Street is the main thoroughfare it has more evidence of this proliferation. The old town through Knockhundred Row and Church Hill, although not free from parked cars and modern infrastructure, has a more authentic atmosphere attracting not only visitors, but also film and TV companies to use it as a period location.

One aspect of a town that establishes a regions character is the use of local materials, crafts and vernacular styles. Whilst buildings often survive, the historic paving or the base on which the buildings stands is generally missing – replaced overtime with something else. Due to the use of random materials for repairs and the implementation of accessibility legislation in the form of tactile paving and ramps, the historic form of the street can be gradually diminished.

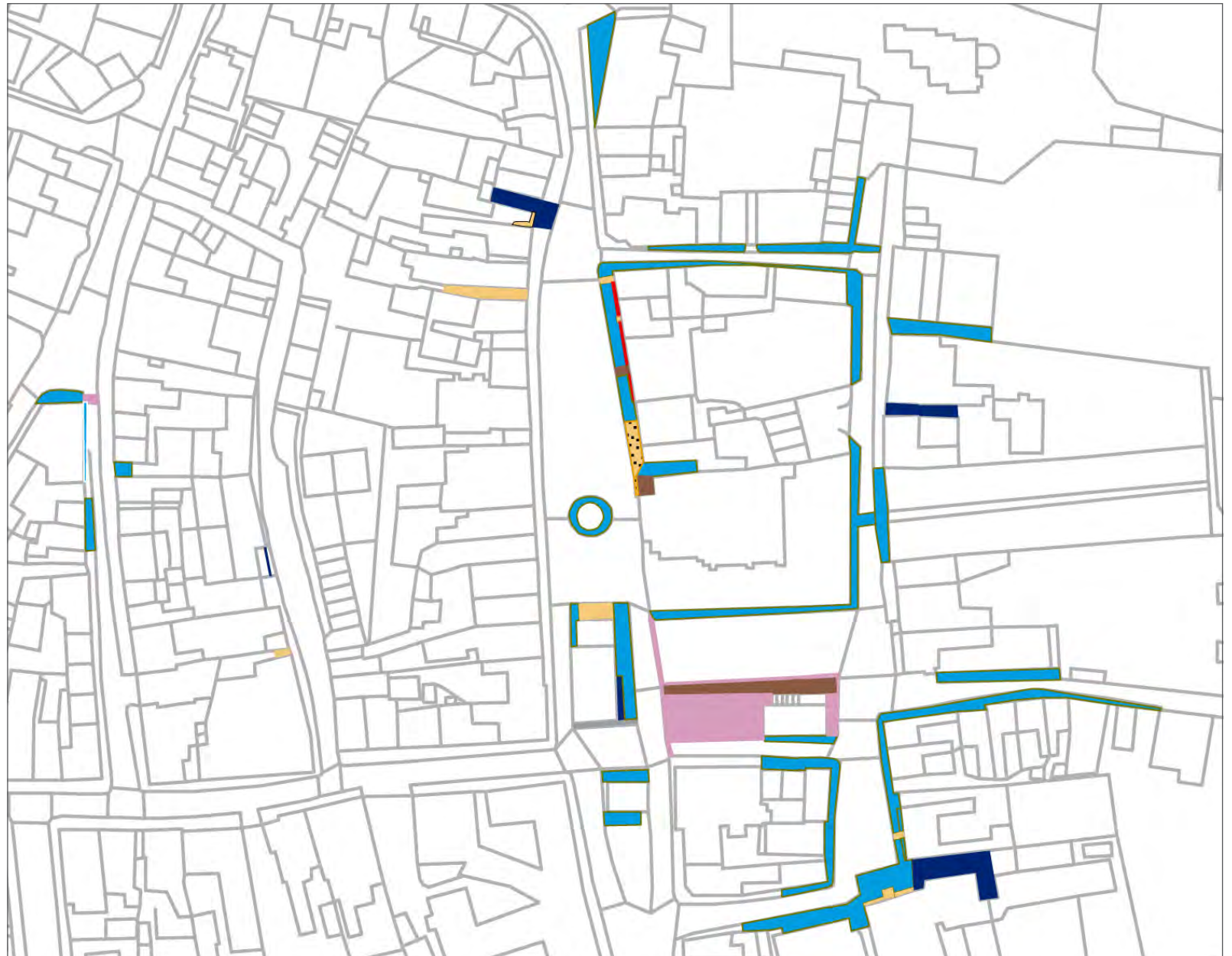
A simple and consistent treatment of the ground surfaces can enhance the appearance of the town. This was recently demonstrated in April 09 when an episode of Foyles War was filmed on Church Hill. To mask the modern road surfaces, a layer of sinter was laid to re-create the 1940's. The visual impact of a unified surface and no parked cars demonstrated how the environment would be improved in historic settings, if we could reduce the visual clutter of parked cars and road markings.

Walking through the town, the sub-group identified how the ground finishes are generally ignored, but of all the issues considered in this study, it is the most extensive of improvements required. A recent survey counted thirteen different finishes. Please see appendix one for a full proposal of surface finishes and conservation.



The 1940's recreated for Foyles War and actor Michael Kitchen on location in Midhurst

Physical Setting



© Crown copyright. All rights reserved.
 Chichester District Council
 Licence No. 100018803 (2008).

Physical Setting

In addition, the group were keen to address the randomness of street furniture, bins, benches, road signs and bollards. The aim here is to remove and rationalise all signs and road markings and in conjunction with a simple and consistent treatment of walkways and carriage ways the public realm will be greatly improved.

Any additional street furniture will be limited to a single classic design of bench and a custom made bollard to provide some degree of subtle uniqueness to the town. Bins are very closely linked to the operational effectiveness of the refuse collection service and so there is little scope to change these.

Other schemes and proposals were discussed to reduce the impact of parked cars on North Street and Church Hill as well as the impact of the redeveloped Grange site, which will open up a new public space through to Grange Road and change the views around South Pond. This development was however outside the scope of this study.



North Street circa 1900 - showing the use of cobbles in front of the houses and close to the carriage way, thereby creating a dedicated walkway. Very little street furniture or signage exists - shown in orange.

Whilst buildings often survive, the historic paving or the base on which the buildings stands is generally missing....

Meaning

People will describe places they enjoy and like by using intangible qualities. They often sum up the whole place rather than individual aspects or landmarks. This is a reflection of their total regard for a place, representing their complete experience of it.

With a town the size of Midhurst, one cannot isolate it from its immediate surroundings and local region. It is clear that people genuinely like to live there and Midhurst is recognised by the popular media as a good place to live. But being an historical town, set within The Downs, less than 15 miles from the sea, creates a quality of life and attachment that extends beyond the town.

Working with the sub-group to extract an understanding of what Midhurst means to them was revealing. Of the group all – not surprisingly, have a deep commitment and regard for the place. Some have only ever lived and worked in Midhurst, whilst others had been attracted to it from elsewhere. Some were nostalgic for a past that no longer exists and others were nostalgic for a past they had experienced in Midhurst. But whilst nostalgia is often derided as a sentimental emotion, it is born out of attachment. As ‘meaning’ is the key element in defining the sense of place, it was vital that the group articulated their individual reasons for attachment and then to include them in the process as a whole.

For many people from outside the town, Midhurst might be associated with Cowdray, the polo or H G Wells’s “Wimblehurst” in his semi-autobiographical novel Tono–Bungay. Following in the footsteps of H.G. Wells, writing in the Times in March 09, Tom Chesshyre wrote that Midhurst was “the most ‘English’ town” he had ever visited. It was this sense of “Englishness’ that became apparent throughout the sense of place process, especially in identifying meaning.



In some form, what Midhurst meant to the group was revealed at each session, but using the headings of Activity, Physical setting and Meaning, an exercise was conducted to capture in words and pictures, aspects and qualities that contribute to the overall and possibly less tangible character of Midhurst.

By a process of elimination this exercise was rationalised as follows:

Activity	Physical setting	Meaning
Heritage Community Friendship Communication Browsing Rural Meeting Exploring Individual Festival Weald town Local shops	Core England setting Unique in scale Historic Traditional Human Downs Compact Heritage Calm Countryside views	Where I would like to live Historic Mature Ticks the boxes Dignified Individual Charming Family Friendship Welcoming

In summary of this stage, it underlined the importance of respectability, heritage, countryside and family. As such Midhurst could be described as: Historic town amidst trees – reflecting the origins of the name mid-hurst, or other more romantic descriptions such as ‘timeless Sussex market town’.

Definition



Sense of Place Definition

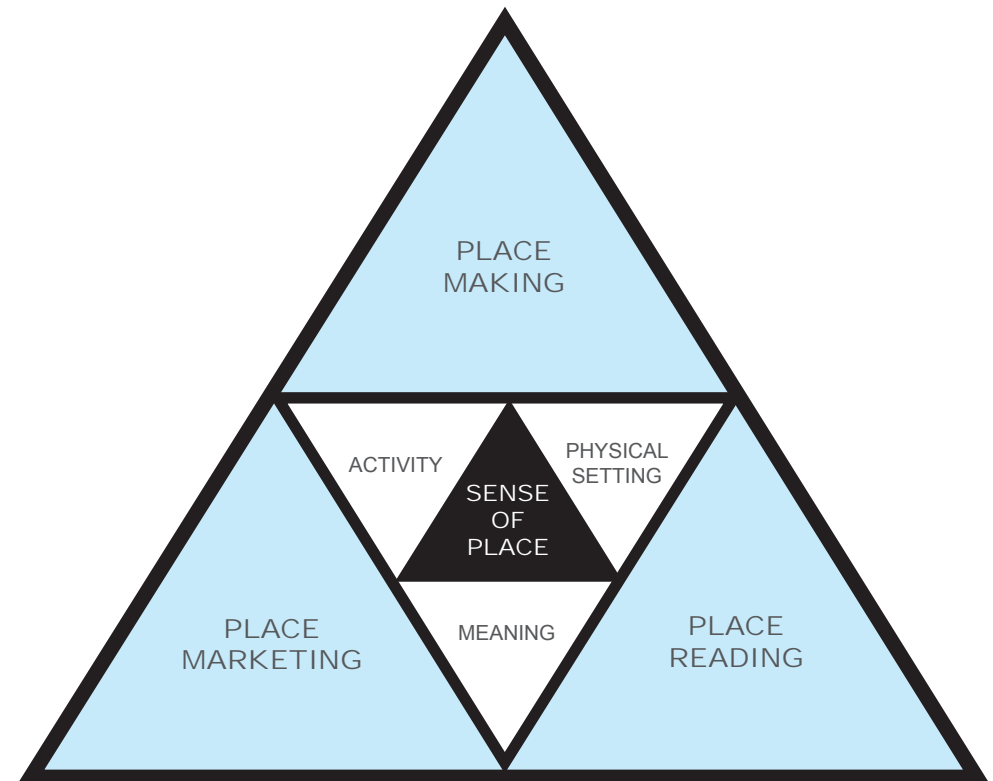
Midhurst is a small town and although has a number of unique assets, it was recognised early in the project that any proposals needed to be informed, authentic and subtle. As such this describes the groups' sense of responsibility for the town, and their commitment to avoid inappropriate and ill-considered development. But as this project is the first part of a possible three-stage process, it can only set the frame of reference for proposals to be developed and eventually implemented. As explained the group included specialist technical expertise to help validate suggestions and enable a balance to be struck between ambitions, best practice and serviceability.

Having completed a number of exercises with the group, the aim was to define Midhurst's sense of place. As a community led project it is connected and informed, but to identify projects for future consideration and development, Edward Relph's sense of place framework used earlier, has been expanded to capture the main areas of work required to improve the town, its reputation and experience for future visitors and residents alike.

In reaching an actual definition, the exercises undertaken by the group were best summed up by Tom Chessyre's description of Midhurst as – "the most English town". Whilst Cowdray is a significant asset to the heritage of Midhurst, it is only part of the story. It would also be premature to anticipate being part of the new South Downs National Park. But from the work done by the group, the intangible qualities they expressed are essentially 'English' values. In many ways *Midhurst is the most English town*.

In taking the sense of place process to the next level, physical setting, activity and meaning have been transferred into a form that translates into tangible actions. The diagram explains this, and shows how the interaction between each element of the sense of place framework creates the need for possible interventions.

The aim is that the physical quality of the town, the way it is understood and enjoyed and the way it is communicated through the media and on the internet must work together consistently to make a successful sustainable place.



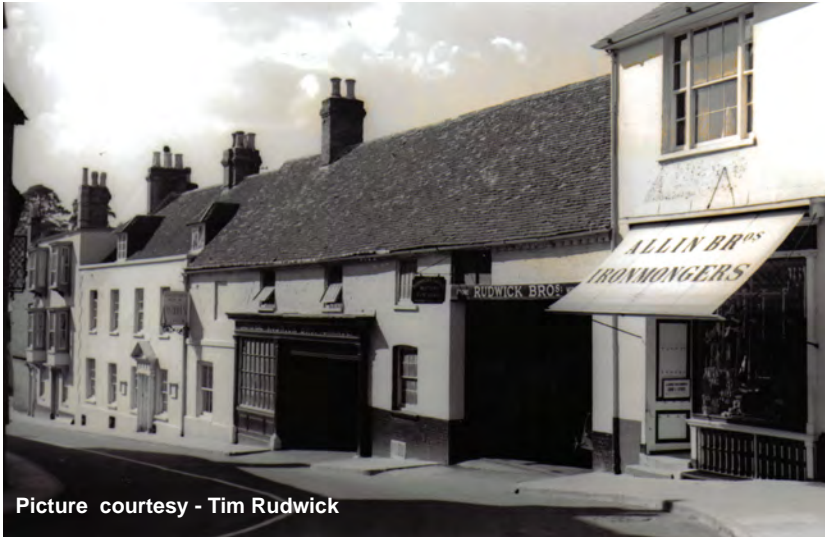
Edward Relph's sense of place framework - expanded

Sense of Place - Definition

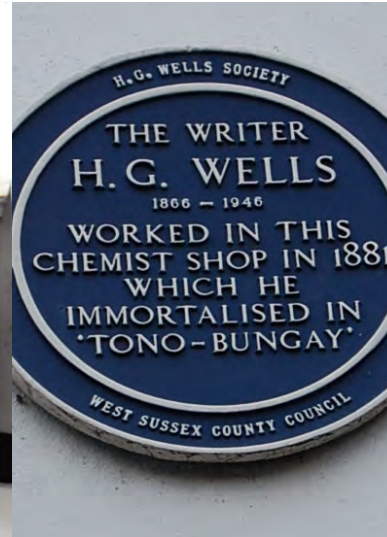


MIDHURST 'THE MOST ENGLISH TOWN'

Sense of Place - Definition



Picture courtesy - Tim Rudwick



Picture courtesy - Michael Chevis - www.michaelchevis.com



Opposite page clockwise:

Veuve Clicquot Gold Cup Polo at Cowdray, views along South Street, Historical re-enactment group planning their next move, Cows crossing the River Rother, Heraldry at Cowdray, St Ann's Hill

This page clockwise:

Knockhundred Row in the 1950's, Blue plaque on the former Chemist Shop in Church Hill, Recreating the 1940's for Foyle's War, Market Square, Tudor gable, views south along Church Hill to Market Square.

Place Making

The character of a place is not only created by the architecture, but relies on the spaces in between the buildings and the public realm as a whole.

The task of 'place making' tries to ensure public spaces work in conjunction with the general architectural styles within a town and define 'the place'. In historic settings, the challenge is always to strike a balance between contextual authenticity and modern day service requirements and compliance with regulations. An example here is the re-building of the Globe Theatre in London's Bankside – requiring a special dispensation to permit the use of thatch for the first time in London since the great fire. This is possibly an extreme example where complete authenticity was necessary and central to the project. The scope of works to be proposed for Midhurst however, provide some opportunity to strike a balance and authenticity can be guided by current practice with regards to historic towns.

As stated, an historic street plan exists in Midhurst with a mixture of Tudor buildings, some with Georgian facades and a small selection of more recent and modern buildings. In general the town is considered to be Tudor in character, although the usual modern road markings and finishes applied to the ancient highway detract from this to some degree.

Place making is concerned with the physical environment and in the scope of this project has considered major works to improve the surface finishes, alterations to road surfaces, markings and signalisation, street furniture and shop fronts. English Heritage have created a point of reference for historic towns in their 'Streets for All', which as a guide sets out best practice on a regional basis, to recognise practical ways to balance authenticity with modern requirements.

The work carried out by the sub-group is consistent with this thinking, and as such recognises the importance of using traditional local materials where possible. Due to cost and serviceability, the public realm in Midhurst should be audited to establish a hierarchy of streets and locations. This is consistent with the guidelines and enables higher quality finishes to be used in the vicinity of important historic buildings, and more practical lower cost finishes in areas of high wear. This approach is viable today but was also applied in the past. North Street circa 1900 had a mix of cobbles, sandstone and Purbeck stone. The use of cobbles directed pedestrians to the centre of the walkways and away from house fronts and the kerb. Due to regional availability, stone used consistently through Dorset, Hampshire and West Sussex is either Portland or Purbeck stone.



Map showing the distribution of local materials in South East of England
Based on a map taken from 'Streets for All' by English Heritage

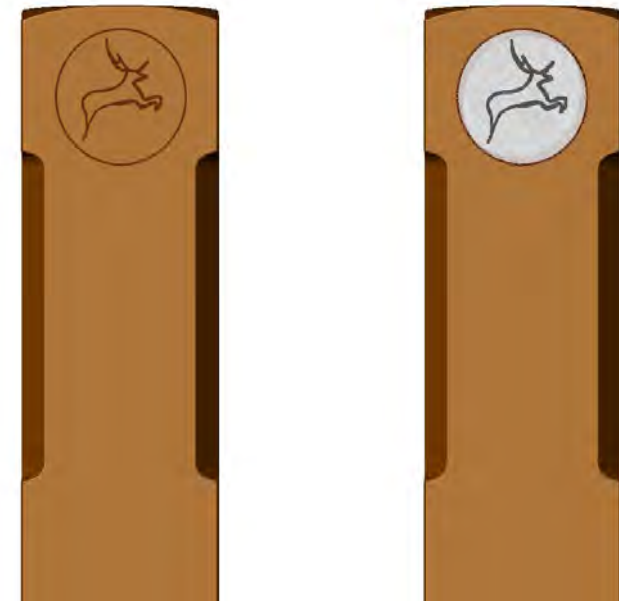
Place Making

With regards to street furniture, signage and other amenities, the groups' aim is to be simple and discrete. Any item should be considered on the grounds of necessity and benefit, and so it is proposed that what exists already should be removed. Only essential benches, bins and bollards should be replaced.

In line with the character of the town, the approach is to be classic – using a traditional style bench made locally from locally farmed hardwood. This subtle approach is in place of using the new Chichester street furniture and pedestrian signs, which were considered to be inappropriate and lacking any contextual reference. Reducing extraneous structures and signs would be the first stage and then to replace simple and uncomplicated items sparingly.

In terms of the highway and other road users, it is accepted that there is a need to be compliant and to ensure the roads, walkways and cycle lanes are safe to use and that the areas of conflict are well managed. But it is also understood that where possible, the change of finishes can be used in place of road markings and obtrusive colours to mark out cycle lanes can also be avoided.

Given the scope and duration of this project, it has only been possible to identify the areas of work required and to establish a direction. All projects are listed in the diagram on page 38, but in each case the proposals need to be developed technically and funding secured in due course. One exception here is the planned improvements to Market Square, which has been on-going for some time and initiated by the Town Trust's report of 2003, it is currently being developed by West Sussex County Council and Amey. Although the scheme proposed re-surfacing Market Square and making Church Hill one way, the group with support from technical advisors have decided that the scheme should be carried out in two phases. The first will be Market Square. It is then advised that an impact study is carried out to monitor on traffic speeds and access to parking. Phase two – Church Hill and Knockhundred Row will then be developed and implemented as a result of the impact study and wide consultation. With events in the refurbished Market Square the road would be temporarily closed up to six times per year. This would provide an opportunity to see what affect there would be on parking and road use.



Use a classic English bench and custom made Midhurst bollards and way markers.

Place Making

Other projects considered include an extension to the Market Square improvement. As West Street should be the prime retail street in the old town a shared surface would be appropriate and could incorporate restrictions or calming measure to prevent access by large vehicles.

Another range of measures would improve first impressions arriving from the north across the causeway. Views of Cowdray are obscured by over grown scrub. This could be simply cleared and the grass verge on the roadside planted and managed to provide a longer season of natural colour. Moving further south into North Street, the current view is dominated by parked cars. Recent changes in the law, have shifted responsibility for parking enforcement from the Police to local authorities. Nationally parking is a highly sensitive issue, and on-street parking is especially an issue in Midhurst. To improve the view along North Street and enhance the rural character of the town, low level planting is proposed in localised planters. Two approaches have been considered. One would be built along the kerb line on the highway thereby removing a few of parking bays - replacing parked cars with shrubs. The other would place planters on the pavement.

Having completed a survey of shop fronts in December 08, most businesses and landlords respect the character and architecture of the façade. Most are well kept and do not use oversized, back-lit signs. However there is room for improvement and this is on-going with Chichester District Council and a package of support funding through SEEDA.

Place making improvements proposed by this study:

1. Market Square plan - underway
2. Proposals for North Street
3. West Street shared surface
4. Improve Causeway planting and hedgerow
5. Street furniture and amenities
6. Shop fronts - underway



Two planter proposals - one to replace parking bay to improve vista and the other to place planter on pavement



Section from West Sussex County Council's development drawing for the Market Square Improvement Scheme.

Phase one will improve authenticity of surface finishes, followed by an impact study to monitor changes in use, parking etc. to inform phase two - Church Hill and Knockhundred Row.

Market square today and the proposed finishes

