

LOUTH CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

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Appendix One

QuBE³

APPENDIX I

The Design of Shopfronts

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The Design of Shop Fronts



Louth has some very good examples of old shop fronts but there are many others that are rather poor and the improvement of shop frontages within the town is a major target for the THI. This guidance is offered to assist in understanding the historic development of shop fronts and the nuances and subtleties of their design.

In many cases, old photographs will illustrate the original frontage and where available these should always be used as a guide to the detailed design of the new frontage.

Historical Background



Classical architecture is in many ways ideally adapted to shop front design, not least because the frieze (fascia) provides a place to write the name of the shop, and the cornice gives protection to the windows from the weather.

Before the eighteenth century shop buildings were not generally considered as an important part of the tradesman's investment and, indeed, many served only as artisan workshops.

It is therefore only from the mid-eighteenth century that shop fronts, as we know them, survive in reasonable numbers. Their greater elaboration coincided with a definite acceleration in commercial activity and trade, particularly connected with an increase in what we now call consumer goods – articles of luxury and fashion rather than necessity. The appearance of the shops in which such things were bought became increasingly important through the 1700s and beyond.

Within the limits of the typical fourteen to twenty-foot burgage plot frontage the physical conditions governing shop front design from c. 1750 to c. 1840 remained remarkably constant, and this makes it hard to date individual examples precisely.



A fine bow window survives to this day at 20 Mercer Row

Although protruding bow windows were contrary to strict classical taste, they were a favourite device in the second half of the eighteenth century for making the display more conspicuous, and for getting more light into the shop.

With bow windows, the cornice is generally delicate and slim with a reduced projection. This avoided the reduction of the shop front's overall width by around 2 feet, which would have been necessary if the cornice had returned in the conventional fashion. Thus the neoclassical Adam style, with its miniaturised cornice and pilasters, was a favourite as it permitted liberties to be taken with the proportions of the architectural orders.

The effect of the Greek revival from c. 1810 onwards on shop design was to encourage a return to the use of classical architectural orders. Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite orders were all used in attempts to add dignity to individual shop fronts. The appearance of such shop fronts was further enhanced at this time by marbling and graining. As one contemporary wrote:

"The shopkeeper prides himself on the neatness of his shop front, his little portico, and the pilasters and cornices are imitations of Lydian, Serpentine, Porphyry and Verde Antico antique marbles."



Console Brackets are often very decorative

The use of console brackets to block off the ends of the cornice was quite rare until the late nineteenth century. If they are appropriately detailed, such features can add much to a shop front's appearance and, indeed, when first encountered just prior to Queen Victoria ascending the throne, they were considered by some contemporary architectural commentators to be 'very handsome'.

From the above, it can be seen that the majority of eighteenth and nineteenth century shop fronts were designed very much on an individual basis, utilising a variety of architectural detailing and styles. As the importance of the shop in its own right was recognised, this led to their being purpose-built with increasingly larger frontages.

During the same period, the general appearance of our high streets underwent a marked change as a direct result of the building of the Crystal Palace in 1851. This necessitated a substantial increase in the capacity to produce plate glass and manufacturers were therefore able to provide glass panes of varying sizes for the 'new' type shop fronts far cheaper than ever before. Thus there was a move away from the small-paned bow windows towards large, plate glass windows of varying types, although there was a brief return to small-paned windows with the revival of the 'Queen Anne' architectural style around the turn of the last century.

The advent of these new plate-glass windows introduced a different scale to the design of shop fronts, with the stall-riser at the base of the window virtually disappearing, and the front being carried much higher up, thereby increasing the natural internal light. Rural Louth is unlikely to have been at the forefront of shop design but some good examples of this type can still be seen in the town.



It is difficult to trace the evolution of shop front design past the general introduction of plate glass in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, as so few examples of everyday shop fronts survive. George Smith and Scott's Jewellers are two surviving examples of 20th century shopfronts in the town.



Some 20th Century Shop fronts survive in Louth and make their own contribution to the streetscape of the town.

Another practical aspect of shop front design liable to be forgotten is the use of shutters, which were a universal, if troublesome, feature of the shopkeeper's life. Shutters would have been a necessity both for security and in order to prevent 'accidental' damage to the glazing and the contents of the windows which they protected.



The old Post Office on Eastgate is a good example of a small shop front which still has its shutters.

The shutters, normally carried in and out by the apprentices at the beginning and end of each day, generally comprised a wooden framework with panels. They were slotted into position in a groove under the architrave and located on the sill with pins. The metal plates with holes for these pins can often be found under the paint on old shop fronts. The whole set of shutters would then be held in place by an iron strap, the fixings for which can also often be found. In some cases, the design of the front permitted the shutters to be kept outside during the day, often hinged and folded back into the boxes to the sides of the windows. Doors also had a panel which could be placed over a glass upper panel.

As well as shutters, shops often had blinds or awnings. Old photographs suggest that many were fixed awnings stretched over the pavement and supported by posts set in sockets in the kerb. However, another innovation, probably early on in the nineteenth century, was the introduction of roller blinds on springs which were useful both for shading the customer and reducing reflections and glare in the windows. They could easily be fitted to the cornice, with metal stays fixed to the pilasters on either side, and operated by a long boat-hook.

The Design of New Shop Fronts



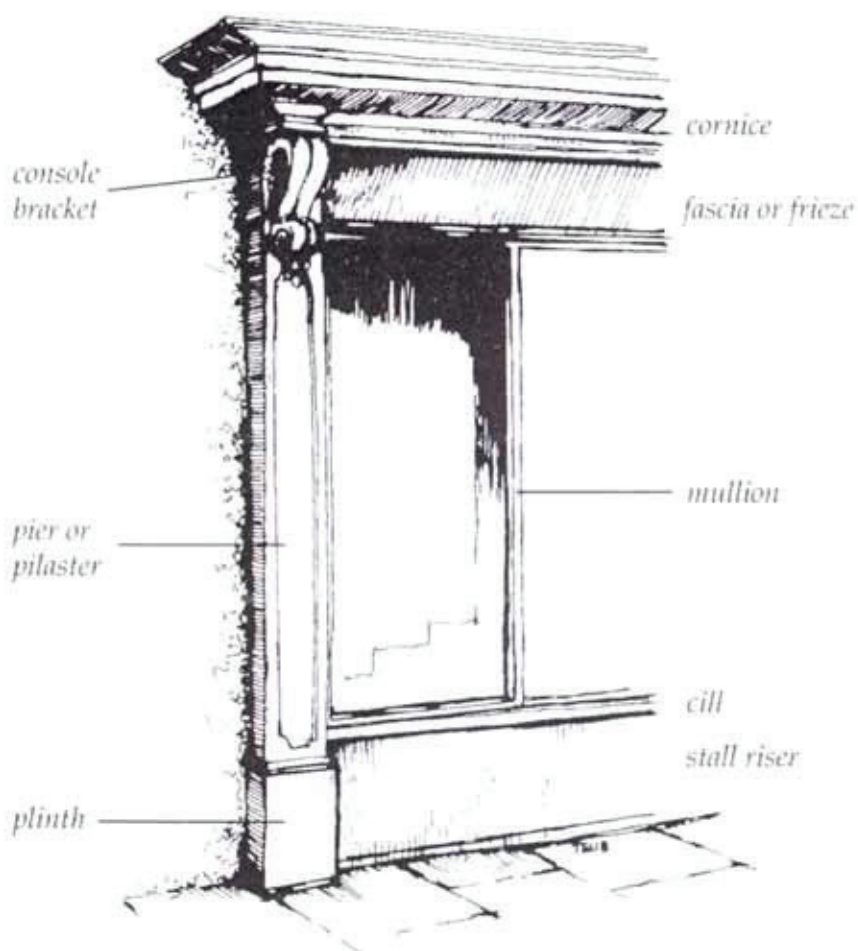
A shop front serves a number of purposes – to provide an attractive frame for the goods displayed, to advertise the presence of the shop, and to project an image for the business inside – cheap and tatty shop fronts suggests that the goods and services offered will be cheap and tatty. The same is true collectively for the town as a whole, with well-designed, well-maintained shop fronts projecting an image of quality for the town.

In approaching the design of a shop front, a number of guiding principles should inform the process:-

The Importance of the Frame



A shop front acts as a frame for the goods displayed and for the void in the front elevation of the building. Most 18th and 19th century shop fronts use a freely interpreted version of the Classical Orders for the main components of the frame - stall risers and cill at the bottom, pilasters and consoles at the sides, and cornice and fascia along the top.



Each
of

these components represents an opportunity to introduce quality of detailing into a design. However free the past interpretations of classical forms were, care was almost always taken to incorporate a level of detail which is usually lacking from modern pastiches of traditional shop fronts.

The following points should be borne in mind:-

- Being close to the ground, the stall riser is vulnerable to damage and attack by water and salts. As a result, stall risers are probably best in durable materials, often brickwork; a late tradition of using glazed bricks in different colours can be very attractive. Many modern shop fronts have used applied timber panels on the stall riser. These decay and become unattractive very quickly and are certainly best avoided.
- The rest of the shop front should usually be constructed of timber. Wood can be finely detailed, moulded to different profiles, durable, repairable, and can be freshened up with a re-paint.
- The stall riser is topped by a cill. Care should be taken to ensure that it is fairly chunky rather than under sized, a common mistake in modern shops. A sub-cill on top of the main cill supports the window frame and mullions.
- The sides of the picture frame are formed by pilasters, which support the frieze (fascia) and the cornice. The cornice projects over the whole shop front and helps to throw rain-water away from the window; it is often inadequate in modern designs. In later shop fronts, the frieze and cornice are finished off with console brackets rather like book-ends.
- Within the frame, the scale of the window was reduced by mullions and transoms, which divided it into smaller panes better related to the upper floor windows. This division also has the advantage of reducing the amount of glass that has to be replaced in the event of breakages.
- Mullions and transom should have an elegant, rather than chunky, profile. The strength to support modern glass should be obtained from depth rather than width. The point where they join the main frame, known as a spandrel, is often used to incorporate decorative elements.
- Wherever a blind is required, care should be taken to properly integrate it into the shop front; the cornice is usually the best place. Blinds should be fully retractable and made of canvas rather than plastic. Dutch canopies are not acceptable.
- Doors, door furniture, fanlights, and tiled thresholds are all opportunities to introduce interest and quality into the design.
- Modern steel roller shutters result in a dead and lifeless appearance outside of normal opening hours and are not acceptable in the Conservation Area. Internal grills are not much better.

- Any separate access to the upper floors should always be retained and its provision should be carefully considered in any new design where the use of the upper floors is separate from the shop.



'Forbes' on Eastgate is a splendid example of a traditional and well-detailed shopfront which illustrates the points made above. Note the detail in the pilasters, consoles and cornice, the chunky cill, the sub-division of the windows with mullions, and the attractive signage. The shopfront projects a high quality image for its business.

The Importance of Colour



The colour of a shop front can have a strong influence on the impact of any shop front. Rich dark colours (blue, green, maroon for example) provide a greater depth and lustre than light colours and give a visual 'strength' to the frame.

A single colour should be used for the shop front although, with care, a second colour can be used to pick out decorative elements.

White or light colours may be suitable on smaller shopfronts where areas of walling already extend from the upper floors to the ground.

The Importance of Signage



Businesses are obviously keen to advertise their presence and the goods and services that they offer. Imaginative, well-executed signage can be an attractive component of a shop front in its own right and should be considered as an integral element in the design process.

Painted lettering has a depth and quality that shiny plastic lettering and boards cannot match.

There are a number of places where signage can be incorporated. The fascia board is the main place but other possibilities are the rear of the window glass, the stall riser, and hanging from the front wall of the building.



Pocklington's Bakery shows the various options for signage – on the fascia, the glass of the windows, and the stall riser. It is unfortunate that the Dutch blinds detract from such a good shop front.



Wrights has restrained signage, using a traditional serifed font, which gives a very 'classy' appearance whilst still clearly conveying its name and the nature of the business.

Different typefaces can send subliminal messages and again care should be taken in their choice. Traditional fonts with serifs convey qualities such as 'Traditional', 'Longevity' and 'High Quality'; -

Louth Trading Company

whilst fonts without serifs project more of a 'Modern' and 'Exciting' image: -

Louth Trading Company

Other possibilities include the use of italics, less formal 'handwriting type' lettering, and shadowed lettering.

Louth Trading Company

Louth Trading Company

Louth Trading Company

What should be avoided in all cases is the fake Olde Englishe gothic script: -

LOUTH TRADING COMPANY

The use of humour is often effective and signs, particularly hanging signs, can use images as effectively as words to convey a message. Signs can be shaped to reflect the goods and services offered - good examples in Louth include Robinsons, Venus, and Handyman - but any rectangular ones should be 'portrait' in shape and 'Golden Section' in ratio (1:1.6)



Hanging Signs began life as a visual symbol for the illiterate and they can be particularly attractive when their shaped reflects the goods and services offered.

The issue of illumination of signage also needs careful thought. In almost all cases the illumination is not really required for the advert and is specified without any real thought to its impact on the building and street-scene



The lighting units on this shop front hinder appreciation of an otherwise very fine historic shop front. Who even appreciates them after dark? All the lights do is damage the buildings and increase the running costs for the business

The Importance of Context



Shop fronts are never seen in isolation and new ones should always be designed to respect the building of which they form part and the wider street scene.

The scale of the building clearly influences the scale of the shop front. Smaller buildings will have shop fronts which are smaller and in most cases simpler than tall buildings.

It is particularly important that, when shops have spread from one building into the adjoining one, the treatment of the shop front respects the original division. Louth has some examples of very poor practice in this regard and also some good ones.



This row of shops stands in a prominent position facing the Market Place. It demonstrates the impact that poor quality shop fronts can have on otherwise good quality buildings. The Nottingham Building Society's shop front extends over two different buildings and ignores the distinct qualities of both. The dead hand of corporate image and of signage designed many miles from Louth is all too evident.