

## Durham City Conservation Area

Durham City conservation area identifies one of the richest and most time-deep historic urban environments in the North East. It was one of the region's first, designated in 1968. Its original focus was the core on and around the River Wear peninsula where Durham Cathedral was founded in the 10th century, but in 1980 was enlarged to take in the wider natural bowl in which the city is settled, and thus much of its later growth and setting. The quality and coherence of the development pattern and architectural wealth, combined with dramatic topography, powerful views and a thick green setting, create an area of exceptional special interest in evidence, history, visual appeal and communal symbolism. It is part-covered by a world heritage site, inscribed in 1986, and contains scores of listed buildings, scheduled monuments and other archaeology.



Durham Cathedral. © Historic England

From the 1960s, the city centre saw substantial opportunity for development as industry left, notably on the riverside north of Framwellgate Bridge. Major through traffic solutions from 1960 to 1976 left a need for major surgery to knit the development pattern back together. Most new development has been retail, leisure and tourism-related, as well as private and student housing and commercial space. The conservation area has been used to guide this in the ensuing decades, some leaving a more successful legacy than others.

The 1990s Prince Bishops shopping centre took part of its design cue from the scars left by 1960s road layouts, creating cliff-like scale in the north east of the peninsula. Although the

centre's outdoor main street tries to reflect local intricacy, the centre's overall weighty character is at odds with the prevailing grain. In contrast, the 1970s Gates shopping centre more successfully hid its riverside bulk with a fragmented form and roofscape; artificial, but understanding the area's historical growth better. In the last two decades, Millennium Square and Freeman's Reach have added more a confident, honest design approach yet, at the same time, the Highgate estate was audaciously historicist, along Poundbury lines. The contrast between these two illustrates well the continuing popular debate on architectural design in historic areas. Today, demolition of the 1960s civil service block Millburngate House is creating the largest development opportunity in the area since designation. This is expected to see some of the area's best informed, most contextualised development, with long term phases of housing, leisure and office space adding quality and depth led by careful analysis.

The strength and longevity of public activity in planning illustrates both the magnetism and frustrations of place-making in Durham. Reactive engagement and proactive project work suggest that local people see the task of shaping Durham's historic environment as both too exciting and too important for planners alone to deliver. Although undoubtedly with a history of tension, community engagement is likely to have led to more popular decisions on growth than might have otherwise been achieved. Two recent examples illustrate this.

In 2012-13, Durham County Council led a major community project to prepare the first adopted character appraisal for the conservation area, using Historic England's Oxford Toolkit. This major collaborative undertaking placed community opinion on the area's special interest at the heart of the adopted guidance, an achievement rarely seen on this scale. The resultant guidance has very detailed character analysis and good management guidelines, hoping to tackle long standing problems such as architectural erosion, commercial pressure and public realm investment.

In 2013, community interests also established Love Durham, a forum to prepare a city-wide Neighbourhood Plan for more than just the conservation area. The forum found itself at odds with parts of the emerging Local Plan, which spurred them to try to strengthen the protection the Neighbourhood Plan would offer key heritage assets and their settings, including the conservation area. The dialogue this created over site allocations and quantum of development, which is now being tested through strategic environmental assessment of the Neighbourhood Plan, is proving valuable in deciding future growth capacity. This will be particularly important because the Local Plan was withdrawn in 2016, making it very likely the Neighbourhood Plan will become the most up to date development plan for the city before a new Local Plan is in place.

The conservation area will have been very important to shaping Durham city in recent decades, but by no means will it have been the driving force behind every case. In policy terms, the world heritage site may have been important as a long term tool to protect the peninsula, even if the conservation area may be more important in day to day development management decisions. The more significant a new development has been

to the city's economy, the greater the impact on the conservation area, and the higher the intensity of planning and design scrutiny needed.

A key unanswered question is whether the conservation area would have fared better if it had had a thorough adopted character appraisal and management strategy earlier on in its life – it survived without one for its first 47 years. Will an agreed reference point on special interest now lead to better informed planning decisions with greater consensus, or will it dull design creativity?

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