

## **Dudley Town Centre Conservation Area**

The Dudley Town Centre Conservation Area that was first designated in 2004 following completion of a detailed Conservation Area Character Appraisal by Dudley Council's Historic Environment Team. The new boundary took in the whole footprint of the planned medieval town whose layout can still clearly be traced in surviving street layouts although the built form now dates from considerably later. The boundary also included several areas of degraded townscape, considered in the Dudley Area Development Framework to be development opportunity areas, with a view to ensuring any new development would complement the character of the historic urban core.

Dudley Town Centre's special historic interest is multi-layered, reflecting its development from a small market town in the Middle Ages, which served the chief castle of the barony, into the administrative centre of a large urban and industrial district. Each layer of historic interest is reflected in features of the historic environment, whether it is the spatial character of streets and market places, the architectural interest of buildings (including many buildings of special architectural and historic interest) that make the familiar and cherished scene.

However, as a commercial town centre Dudley has seen significant challenges during the past couple of decades, including increased competition from out of town shopping, falling affluence locally, a drop in the number of workers based in and around the town centre and low levels of investor confidence and increasing numbers of vacant properties all of which were affecting its efficiency as a town centre. All of this resulted in Dudley being ranked amongst the 10% most deprived areas in England.

Maintaining and enhancing the high quality environment that Dudley's historic buildings and spaces provide is, therefore, an important focus for the regeneration of the town centre as a commercial and cultural centre for the District. From the inception of the new conservation area it was the intention to make applications for conservation area grant schemes including a Historic England Partnership Scheme in a Conservation Area (PSiCA) and the Heritage Lottery Fund's Townscape Heritage initiative.

In 2008, £1.95 million of grant funding was approved. The first phase of Dudley Townscape Heritage scheme was completed in 2015, through which a total of £4 million was invested, through private and public funding, towards repair and reuse of 17 buildings. The works were undertaken in conjunction with "New Heritage Regeneration", a bespoke town centre regeneration company owned by the Council.

They also collaborated with the Council in the delivery of a £6.5 million public realm scheme funded through the ERDF. This has totally transformed the historic market place and Castle Street, which together form the "spine" of the historic town. The initiative included a newly designed market featuring 74 stalls, new paving in high quality natural materials, feature lighting and street furniture with the Grade II\* Dudley Market Place fountain of 1867 cleaned and put back in water. The paving layout reflects the original

street pattern and incorporates varying street widths that appear to be a natural consequence of the built form and reflect the historic context.

As a result the public realm has been transformed and now provides a strong setting for development also significantly enhancing the trading environment such that increased footfall can be expected.



The Old Glasshouse refurbishment which won the 2017 West Midlands RTPI Award for Excellence was part funded through a HE Partnership Scheme. © Brown Haywood Brown Architects

A second phase of funding of over £1.1 million from the Heritage Lottery Fund has recently been awarded which will allow work to enhance more historic buildings in Dudley's Historic Core. Accompanied by funding through Dudley Council, up to £1.5 million in grants will help enable the repair and reuse of historic buildings and the reinstatement of lost architectural features. The latest investment will enable the restoration of some of Dudley's most historic buildings, alongside a programme of community activities and opportunities.

As part of the current Dudley Town Centre Investment Programme a further initiative, led by New Heritage Regeneration, has seen the recent allocation of considerable funding from the Black Country Local Enterprise Partnership to support Historic Building Improvement Projects. This has the express aim of supporting businesses, creating and protecting jobs and creating residential floor space.

The overarching objective is to increase the economic activity in the town's commercial core by using the historic environment as a positive resource. By bringing vacant historic floor space back into use, and safeguarding and creating employment opportunities while improving the quality of life for the local community and visitors, there will be beneficial knock-on effects for local businesses and traders.

Dudley Town Centre Conservation Area is longer on the Heritage at Risk Register and the designation has clearly served its intended purpose of encouraging "good growth".

Acknowledgement:

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