

Shopfronts & Signs



Key Issues

- 1. Shops change frequently. The planning system is designed to facilitate this while ensuring each shop is a good neighbour that does not have to shout for attention.**
- 2. Shops that contain frontages or interiors of special historic or architectural interest should be sympathetically conserved.**
- 3. Restoration is appropriate where shops contain elements of interest but parts are missing.**
- 4. Shops that are badly altered may be restored on the basis of sound evidence; if this is lacking, a contemporary approach may sometimes be appropriate.**
- 5. Local authorities give advice on the requirement for listed building consent, conservation area consent and other permissions.**

INTRODUCTION

This is one of a series of guidance notes on managing change in the historic environment. The series explains how to apply the policies contained in the *Scottish Historic Environment Policy* ([SHEP](#), PDF 312K) and *Scottish Planning Policy 23: Planning and the Historic Environment* ([SPP23](#), PDF 192K).

This note sets out the principles that apply to the alteration of shops in listed buildings and in conservation areas. It replaces the equivalent guidance in *The Memorandum of Guidance on Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas* (1998) and should be afforded equal weight in drawing up planning policies and determining applications relating to the historic environment.

WHY ARE SHOPS IMPORTANT?

'Britain is a nation of shopkeepers' (Napoleon). Shops are the lifeblood of a town centre and indicate the vitality of a place. They are barometers for the commercial health of a town. The Scottish Government is committed through its planning ([SPP8](#), PDF 112K) and other policies to support the retail function of town centres. A walkable mix of shops, cultural facilities and businesses makes a sustainable and healthy place, and this is the characteristic of traditional retail cores. If windows are the eyes of a building, the shopfront is the smile. Its purpose is to draw the shopper into the building and to achieve sales.

IDENTIFYING THE INTEREST IN A HISTORIC SHOP

Shops evolved from medieval luckenbooths in the main street to more formal street frontages (17th century) within buildings that displayed goods through increasing amounts of glass. Small panes gave way to plate glass from the 1840s, and curved glass came later. Regional variations and functional shop types are identifiable in their form and details.

A shop may demonstrate a combination of aesthetic, associated, historical and evidential value:

Aesthetic value: in for example its architectural form. Most shops draw their details from the classical vocabulary of architecture: pilasters, consoles and cornices framing the window.

Associated value: a shop or café might be valued for the collective memory or association it inspires in a group of people for a place.

Evidential value derives from the potential of a place to yield evidence about the past. This archaeological value is most likely to be attached to physical fabric, such as the horizontal division in fish shop windows.

Historical value derives from the ways in which past aspects of life can be demonstrated through the place. For example the prevalence of the



Braco's Banking House (1694), High Street, Elgin. In the late 17th century a number of Scottish burghs adopted a continental model of arcades at the ground floor to house shops.



Buchanan Street, Glasgow, one of Scotland's premier shopping streets. Initially a residential street of Glasgow's second 'New Town', it was developed with shops from the 1820s.



73-77 Union Street, Aberdeen. This design of 1929 by George Watt was one of a number of stores built in distinctive Art Deco style throughout Scotland for the retail chain, Burton's.



Gardner's Warehouse, Jamaica Street, Glasgow. Now in use as a bar, this pioneering iron-framed building was constructed as a retail warehouse in 1855-6 for A Gardner & Son, cabinet makers and upholsterers. The original lettering was kept at first floor, and new lettering in a similar style fitted to match the new name at the ground floor.

Hanover Street, Edinburgh. These copper sculptures were designed to advertise a travel agency. That function has ceased but the artworks add value to the new shop and to the streetscene.

cooperative movement is evident across many small Scottish towns, shown by carved symbols of beehives and clasped hands.

For more information, see the Historic Scotland publication *Historic Retail Buildings: a Short Guide for Shop Owners* (available late 2009)

GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR ALTERATIONS

Healthy shopping streets often see a high turnover of occupants that need to signal their presence. The consents system accommodates this but a balance needs to be struck between the commercial imperative to attract shoppers and the visual amenity and historic character of a place. It can easily be damaged by uncontrolled competition for attention. Therefore attention in this guidance note will focus on:

1. conservation of historic fabric that forms part of the character of the building;
2. management of minor changes to shops, like signage;
3. more fundamental change which may entail:
 - restoration to a known earlier form, or
 - new design as a shop, or
 - adapting a shop to another purpose.

1. Conservation of historic fabric that forms part of the character of the building

Shopfronts of definite quality should be retained. Good examples of Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war shopfronts have become scarce and should be carefully conserved. Even a newer well-designed



shopfront which relates well to the building as a whole should not be lightly discarded.

Where a projecting fascia has low intrinsic merit it is best practice to promote an investigation of what lies beneath. Where historic details such as pilasters, capitals, console brackets, entablatures or cast-iron columns are found, the earlier shopfront may be at least partly recoverable. Even if only the cornice survives, this should be retained as a valuable demarcation line between the shopfront and the facade above.

Stallrisers similarly contribute to the balance of a shopfront by providing a solid base for the display window. Good examples in stone, timber, tile, iron or toughened glass (such as 'Vitrolite') should be kept.

The thresholds and door reveals of some premises, particularly those of dairies, fishmongers and butchers, occasionally display decorative tiles of high quality. These are now rare and should be conserved.

Historic shop interiors are rare but well worth efforts to keep and display any good features which survive.

2. Management of small changes to shops

Signage

Good lettering on fascias, windows and doors should be retained even where not an original feature. Trade emblems such as chemists' mortars and pestles and fishmongers' carved wooden fish were common until recently but are now becoming rare. New lettering should be carefully designed to respect the character of the building and the appropriate location at fascia level. Traditional hand-painted sign-writing should be encouraged and will often not require consent if otherwise fabric is retained.

Blinds and canopies

Traditional sun blinds or awnings are often found where the display window contained perishable goods. A traditional blind is a length of woven canvas attached to a folding metal frame and a roller which fully retracts into a box. These can sometimes be refurbished.

A blind box should not mask or cut across detailing which contributes to the interest and quality of the building. Where an external blind cannot be neatly accommodated, the problem of solar gain may instead be overcome by installing internal filter blinds or clear screens to cut the transmission of uv rays.

Modern fixed 'canopy' blinds are not a traditional feature of the street scene and would intrude upon listed buildings and upon unlisted buildings within conservation areas. They often fall foul of local planning policies.

Even where there may be practical reasons for a canopy, care should be taken to avoid fixings into polished ashlar that cut across architectural



A traditional mortar and pestle symbol outside the chemist in the High Street, Haddington, East Lothian.



One of the cast-iron shopfronts that came to light during recent refurbishment of Dundee's Improvement Act streets.



Replacement fabric attached to the traditional awning mechanisms at McEwens, St John Street, Perth.



Enforcement was successfully taken against these intrusive fixed canopies on a listed building in a conservation area.



Cockburn Street, Edinburgh. Original later 19th-century timber panelled security shutters that slide down into slots beneath the windows during the day. © N Haynes.



These modern removable external grilles by an artistic blacksmith were put into shops in place of less attractive fixed mesh as part of the Bo'ness Townscape Heritage Initiative.



An 18th-century house in Culross, Fife, converted to a shop in the late 19th century, and converted back to a house in 1989. © N Haynes.

detail or that sit uneasily against the form of the entrance or the surrounding facade.

Security

Planning authorities often offer planning guidance on appropriate shop front security measures avoiding the need for externally mounted roller shutters that are obtrusive and have a deadening effect on the street scene. Alternatives to screens, such as clear security film or laminated or toughened safety glass, may offer assurance if there is a security need.

Other items

Other items which attach to, pass through or project forward of the facade can affect the character of a building. The number, design, illumination and siting of projecting signs is therefore controlled. Cash dispensing machines (ATMs) may fit within existing openings. New openings for these should avoid cutting through architectural features or disturbing symmetry. Lights and cabling should be located so as to minimise physical damage to the fabric.

3. Conversion and restoration of shops

Most Planning Authorities offer design guidance on new shopfronts. This section supplements this by considering the interface with existing fabric.

Where shops were integral to a building from its first construction, good-quality shopfronts of any period will contribute to the architectural quality of the building as a whole. They should remain in retail use wherever possible. If conversion to another use must be accepted, the work should fully respect the existing shopfront. This may present challenges where there are large areas of glazing. Rather than attempting to fill the former shop window with masonry it is normally better to consider a set-back mezzanine behind tinted glass.

Restoration

Where the shopfront is unsympathetic and there is reliable evidence of what was there before, it may be appropriate to re-create the earlier frontage. Where the shopfront has quality, even if not original, it should be retained.

If the fascia is excessively deep or encroaches upon the first floor, the opportunity should be taken to create a fascia of more appropriate depth and height. A lowered ceiling should chamfer upwards to meet the fascia rather than be carried forward to shut out natural light.

Living over the shop

Shopfronts which straddle two separate buildings should acknowledge the architectural and structural divisions above. If shopfronts extend across the doors or pends that access upper floors, the inevitable consequence will be unoccupied upper floors, less maintenance or complete neglect. The pends should then be reinstated.

Rehabilitation

Where a shop is clearly not going to retain its retail use, having failed to attract a tenant, conversion to another function such as a flat may be considered. Normally a set-back mezzanine behind tinted glass will work better than filling the former shop window with masonry.

The enlargement of windows to suit a commercial use can diminish the way the building 'reads'. A shop does not always need a fully glazed frontage. Many banks are now cafés, restaurants or pubs, where high window sills give some privacy to diners and internal spaces may be impressive. It is usually possible to find a use which does not need irreversible change. It only requires the right use to match the building in question.

Enhancement

It is often possible to restore shopfronts on the basis of sound research and physical evidence (see *Historic Retail Buildings: a Short Guide for Shop Owners*).

Some repairs and restorations of shopfronts have been supported by grants from local authorities or City Heritage Trusts. If the shop is in a conservation area this may be through a Townscheme, Conservation Area Regeneration Scheme or Townscape Heritage Initiative. Although Historic Scotland is sometimes a partner in these schemes, initial enquiries should go to the local authority. Priority for support would be:

1. The repair of existing historic fabric
2. Restoration where supported by good evidence

Where the evidence does not exist, a new shopfront may be appropriate that conforms to Council planning guidance, but this is not often considered grant-eligible.

CONSENTS

Listed building consent is required for any work to a listed building that affects its character. The character may include its interior. The local authority determines the need for consent.

Where listed building consent is required, an application is made to the local authority. This should include accurate scale drawings showing both the existing situation and proposed works in context. It is normally helpful to provide detailed technical information and photographs.

Shops do not have permitted development rights. Therefore most changes to shops require planning permission unless considered 'de minimis'. Planning approval may be needed for advertisement or a change of use. Other regulations such as health and hygiene, building standards and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 also have implications and appropriate advice should be sought prior to undertaking any works.



A shopfront restored through the Arbroath Townscape Heritage Initiative.



A contemporary shopfront at King Street in the heart of Stirling's city centre conservation area. Modern materials and detailing reinterpret the traditional local shopfront pattern.



Argyll Arcade, Glasgow, designed by John Baird I in 1827 as a covered shopping link from Buchanan Street to Argyle Street. The shopfronts are modern, but in keeping, and the framework is original. © N Haynes.

Other selected Historic Scotland publications and links

Historic Retail Buildings: a Short Guide for Shop Owners (forthcoming, late 2009)

[Inform Guide: Ceramic Tiled Flooring](#) (2007) (PDF 469K)

[Inform Guide: Graffiti and its Safe Removal](#) (2005) (PDF 454K)

[Inform Guide: Fire Safety](#) (2005) (PDF 339K)

[Conserving Scotland's Retail Buildings Seminar](#) (September 2008) (transcripts of talks given at this seminar).

For the full range of Inform Guides, Practitioner Guides, Technical Advice Notes and Research Reports please see the Publications section of the Historic Scotland website.

Other selected publications and links

Kathryn A Morrison, *English Shops & Shopping* (2003, Yale University Press).

Tiles & Architectural Ceramics Society: www.tilesoc.org.uk

FURTHER INFORMATION AND ADVICE

Details of all individual scheduled monuments, listed buildings, designated gardens and designed landscapes, and designated wrecks can be obtained from Historic Scotland (see contact details below) or at: www.pastmap.org.uk. Details of listed buildings can also be obtained from the relevant local authority for the area.

Advice on the requirement for listed building consent, conservation area consent, building warrants, and other permissions/consents should be sought from local authorities.

Historic Scotland Inspectorate
Longmore House
Salisbury Place
EDINBURGH
EH9 1SH

Tel: 0131 668 8981 or 8717 Fax: 0131 668 8765

E-mail: hs.inspectorate@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

Web: www.historic-scotland.gov.uk

Advice on technical issues is available from Historic Scotland's Technical Conservation Group at the above address and website or at the following:

Tel: 0131 668 8715 or Fax: 0131 668 8669

E-mail: hs.technicalconservationgroup@scotland.gsi.gov.uk

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Art Nouveau glass in a shopfront of circa 1900, Main Street, Callander, Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Park.

Tiled entrance to a former Buttercup Dairy shop (circa 1910), Warrender Park Road, City of Edinburgh. The tiles were designed by James Duncan Ltd of Glasgow after a painting by Tom Curr. © N Haynes.

Interior of a late 19th-century chemist shop.