

**DARLINGTON PEDESTRIAN HEART**

**16 NOVEMBER 2004**

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**ORNAMENTAL STONEMWORK, STEPS, BALUSTRADING,  
RAILINGS ON HIGH ROW**

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**Purpose of this Appendix**

1. To consider the Pedestrian Heart proposal to remove the 1901 re-design of High Row and return to a simpler and more elegant design based upon a balanced assessment of conservation issues and of the requirements of all members of the community; and taking in to consideration issues in relation to functionality, pedestrian movement, modern standards and guidance and design.

**The Proposed Design of Pedestrian Area and the 1901s Re-Design of High Row**

2. Since the consultation period finished, Darlington Civic Trust has lobbied widely for the retention of the layout of High Row/West Row/Prebend Row introduced in 1901, and the associated steps, balustrading and railings.
3. The general reasons for the proposed design are set out in the Cabinet report. The following paragraphs set out in more detail the reasons for removing the 1901 re-design of High Row and go back to a simpler and more elegant design.
4. The Council will need to seek the necessary consents under Planning and related Acts and, as a matter of course, a Conservation Area Consent application for demolition of the existing walls and balustrading has to be referred to the Secretary of State. High Row is within the Town Centre Conservation Area, and applications will need to include an assessment of the impact of the proposals on the character of the Conservation Area. Prior to referring an application to the Secretary of State it would be considered by the Council's Planning Applications Committee. This meeting cannot, therefore, take any decision which would fetter the decision of Planning Applications Committee in due course.
5. Gillespies, in designing the scheme, have been in consultation with English Heritage. English Heritage have welcomed the proposed improvements and said that it is clear that works desperately need to be carried out in order to improve the image of Darlington as an important historic market town. English Heritage have said that they understand the proposed rationalisation of levels, that the plans are well detailed and have commended the aspiration for a high quality scheme. Overall, they have been supportive of the design concepts. They have had some reservations about the choice of paving materials in the conservation scheme and they wish to have further involvement in that.
6. Gillespies were chosen as designers because they have extensive experience of designing in historic setting. Indeed, Gillespies were chosen by English Heritage to write their 'Streets for All' documents providing regional guidance on good design practices, and Gillespies' designs are frequently quoted by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) as best practice.

7. Both English Heritage, as the national guardians of the historic environment, and Gillespies, with their national reputation for design in conservation areas, recognise that conservation is different from preservation. The 1901 scheme was a substantial change from the design of High Row in previous times and fitted the conditions of its times. It substantially changed the environment and the setting of older buildings. In some ways, Gillespies' designs seek to re-capture some of the simplicity that the street had in a former age.
8. The proposed scheme aims to provide a new chapter for the main pedestrian space, providing a modern interpretation of the historical precedents. The scheme does not set out to produce a pastiche version of the Victorian town, and is viewed as more than just a restoration project.
9. The proposals look to interpret the essence of what makes Darlington unique- the change in level. The grand set of steps proposed celebrate this change in level; reflecting the pre-1901 streetscape in its simplicity and boldness, whilst also reflecting the current layout with its formal terrace arrangement.
10. The concerns over the removal of some of the features of the town have been carefully considered, and it is felt that there are a number of reasons why the existing steps, balustrading and railings should not be incorporated into a new scheme. These are as follows:
  - (a) The original design philosophy behind the balustrading and railings was partly to act as a barrier between the pedestrian space and the busy Great North Road, but was mainly a result of the removal of the Cattle Markets from the cobbled slopes to the current Cattle Market site. Today clear segregation is less relevant as Prebend Row and West Row no longer serve as a key through route. It is even less applicable in the new proposals where much of the space will be pedestrian focused and there is no need for segregation of the space at all.
  - (b) In creating more pedestrian space for the town centre, the existing balustrading and railings will actually hinder pedestrian movement and permeability within the town centre. By opening up the space through a simple set of steps it allows for greater movement around the town centre and more accessible, usable space for everyone.
  - (c) Access and movement around the town centre is further hindered by the current layout. The design ethos behind the existing layout did not incorporate any access for wheel chair users or push chairs which led to the later insertion of two ramps to the lower tier. The design of the ramps had to be compromised by the existing layout so they are too narrow, too steep and do not cater well for disabled needs. The proposed set of steps will have two, longer and wider ramps situated on key pedestrian desire lines to improve access further.
  - (d) The detail design of the proposed scheme will aim to minimise the use of handrails. It is likely that the proposed scheme will have handrails along the outer edge of the two ramps and handrails at key points along the length of the steps for protection and to aid the elderly and infirm. These will in no way create the kind of physical or visual barrier that exists at present.

- (e) Gillespies believe that reusing the steps and balustrading is likely to compromise the integrity and overall quality of any new scheme proposed. Repairs and replacements to the urns and balustrading over the years has left the remaining elements of this feature patchy in terms of heritage quality; and also the granite steps are badly worn. If these elements were to be incorporated into a new high quality paving scheme of any kind they would look out of place and most likely 'unattractive' in appearance, because of the contrast between the old and the new. However, the detailed design process is also reviewing the possibility of re-using the granite blocks and steps as kerbs ensuring the sustainability of materials and an element of historical continuity within the town centre. Where it is not possible to re-use materials such as the balustrading, these features will be removed and new locations for their use/display will be considered.
  - (f) The existing steps along High Row are in some ways hazardous and would not comply with modern standards and guidance. Retention of the steps would conflict with guidance in 'Part M' of the Building Regulations 2002 and the DFT guidance on 'Inclusive Mobility' due to the steepness of the steps, the riser ratios, the uneven finishes and the lack of delineation at the top of the steps for visually impaired pedestrians.
  - (g) The railings are not particularly rare, nor key to reflecting Darlington's heritage. However, Gillespies will look at the potential to reuse the existing railing within the new scheme and incorporate them into the overall street furniture palette.
  - (h) The levels were not well executed in 1901 and now are beginning to look untidy due to general subsidence and wear and tear. Under the new proposals there is the opportunity to re-look at these levels in their entirety and reform the contours to provide neater, crisper paving details and levels that will create a more formal space and pedestrian environment that enhances the quality of the townscape. It would be more difficult to readdress these levels and details effectively if the proposed scheme works around the existing ballustrading and terrace arrangement.
  - (i) With regards to Joseph Pease, Gillespies are proposing to relocate, subject to the necessary permissions, the statue to something approaching his original position, overlooking High Row. This is a prominent and focal location that reflects the importance of the statue in the town's history. The scheme is using the historical precedent for its location, and it is felt that to position the statue on top of the public convenience, as proposed by Darlington Civic Trust, is not appropriate.
11. As part of the scheme's consultation, Darlington Borough Council met with Darlington Civic Trust to discuss the concept scheme. The Council have extended further meeting invitations to Darlington Civic Trust.
12. Darlington Civic Trust has requested that the Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) to consider spot listing the High Row balustrading. English Heritage have inspected the site and will prepare their recommendation to DCMS. We expect a decision to be made by DCMS this year.

## **Restoration of the ornamental railings and stonework, High Row (1992-1996)**

13. Up until the end of the 19th-century the carriageway of High Row consisted of a cobbled surface sloping down to Prebend Row and the Market building. In 1897 Darlington Council held a competition to improve the area. The approved scheme involved removing the cobbles, levelling the High Row roadway and erecting a length of ornamental railings and stonework along the eastern side where a new, stepped, change of level was created. The project was completed in 1901.
14. From its inception the scheme became a focal point for the town, featuring on countless Edwardian views. The main features were four sections of ornamental grey-granite, classical-style, balustrading topped with stone urns and resting on large granite coping stones and blocks. The latter ran for a full 170 metres and were topped elsewhere along their length with distinctive iron railings, interspersed with several flights of massive pink granite steps linking High Row with the lower level.
15. Over the years the ornamental elements suffered gradual degradation through vandalism, damage by vehicles, general wear and tear and through being adapted as supports for bus shelters and a noticeboard. The accumulation of other ad hoc items of street furniture such as a bus company hut further detracted from the appearance of this prominent part of the town centre conservation area.
16. By 1992 parts of the stonework constituted a potential hazard and Durham County Council (as the highway authority) allocated funding for the Borough Council (as agent) to carry out essential remedial work such as re-bedding dislodged base blocks. The Borough Council added some further funding to enable a comprehensive restoration of the iron railings. Modern accretions such as the remnants of former bus shelter stanchions and the advertising board were removed. Missing boss posts and intermediate uprights were salvaged from elsewhere, replica rails were provided and the whole ironwork was repainted. This phase of the work was completed in 1993. The restoration coincided with the pedestrianisation of High Row from 10.30 - 4 each day by the two Councils, and the introduction of seating and planting.
17. The dominant features of the 1901 scheme - the sections of stonework - were, however, still in a severely dilapidated condition. Only the longest section, which surmounts underground public toilets, was anything like intact, missing only three of its four granite urns. The other sections needed almost 60 new balusters or half-balusters and seven (out of an original ten) urns, plus numerous other items such as die blocks and capping pieces. Reference to old photographs enabled the original designs to be established, an application for grant was successfully submitted to English Heritage and the Borough Council made available the necessary additional finance with the aid of European regional development funding. Work on the stonework (and the removal of remaining later features such as the bus company hut) commenced in April 1995 and was completed at the turn of the year.
18. It is therefore the case that almost all the stone balustrading and all the urns currently seen on High Row were made in the 1990s, and are features that had not been present for some time before then. The urns are not stone, but are concrete and resin moulds. A large proportion of the uprights in the iron railings were brought onto High Row in the 1990s from other parts of the town. All of the horizontal rails are not original cast iron, but are 1990s steel.

## **Summary**

19. It is proposed that the Council seek the necessary consents under Planning and related Acts, including a Conservation Area Consent application for demolition of the existing walls and balustrading. Prior to the referral of an application to the Secretary of State, it would be considered by the Council's Planning Applications Committee.