

Market/Underbanks Conservation Area

Designated 1974
Extended 2005



Introduction

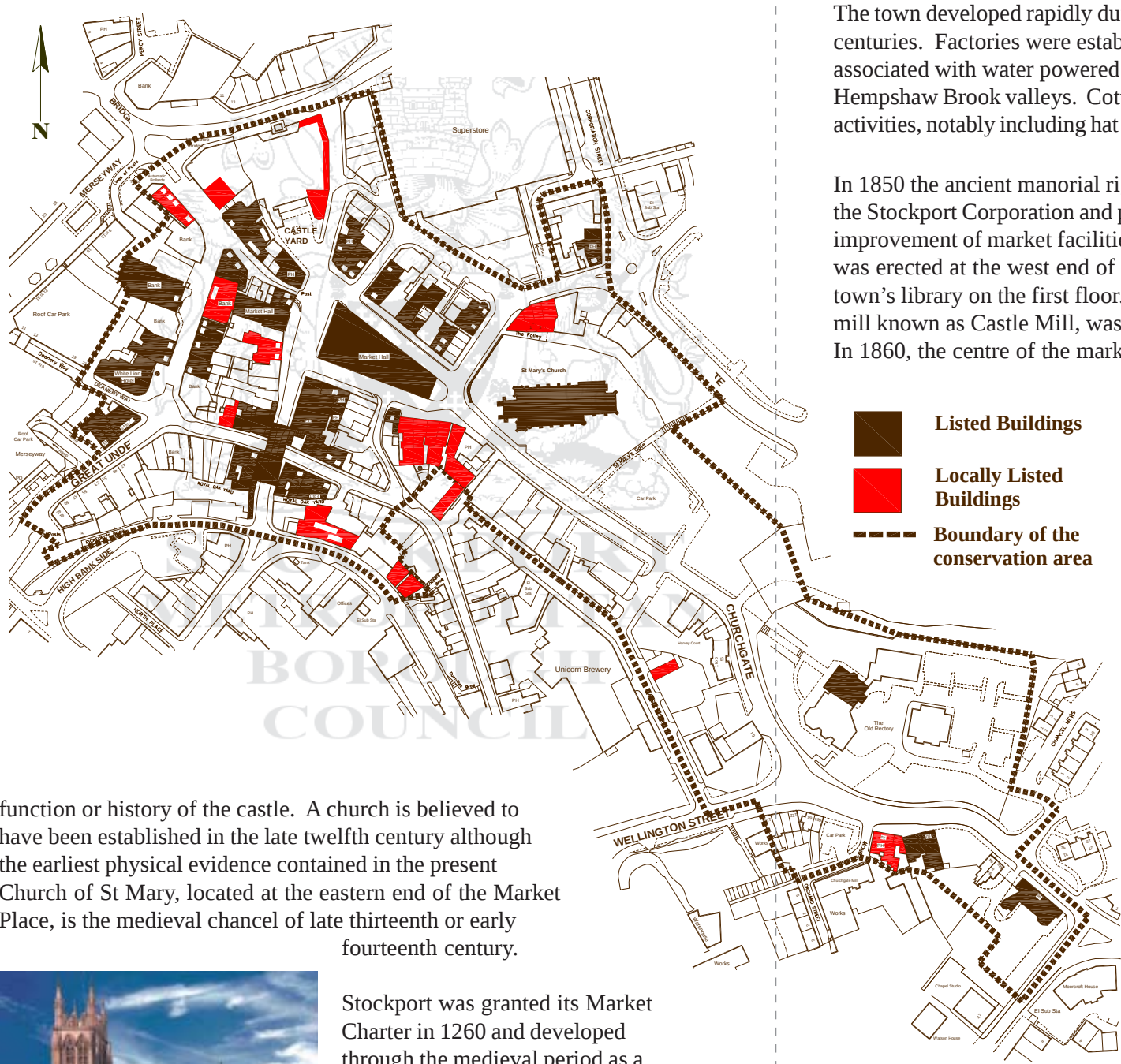
‘Upon one round hill hath this town of Stockport been built, the summit, or top whereof, affords the market-place, and convenient room for the church, and parsonage - the skirt of the hill is beautified with many fair buildings’ (William Webb 1620).

The Market/Underbanks Conservation Area comprises Stockport town centre’s historic core and represents an area of substantial historic, architectural and archaeological interest. The area contains physical evidence, at both above and below ground levels, of the growth and development of the Market Place from a defensive settlement to an important commercial centre from the early medieval period up to the present day.

The existing street pattern and grain of development in Stockport’s historic core has remained little altered for over 300 years. A dense concentration of historic buildings has survived and the area possesses a dramatic townscape of changing levels and memorable views and vistas.

Origins and development

Stockport developed at a strategically important position on a steep sided triangular promontory overlooking the Mersey Valley at the confluence of the Tame and Goyt rivers. The valley was an important communication route and also defined the Cheshire-Lancashire border. A Norman castle was established by the early twelfth century on the site now known as Castle Yard at the north west end of the Market Place. It belonged to the lords of Stockport whose influence extended over a large number of outlying manors and estates. Unfortunately little is known about the detailed form,



function or history of the castle. A church is believed to have been established in the late twelfth century although the earliest physical evidence contained in the present Church of St Mary, located at the eastern end of the Market Place, is the medieval chancel of late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.



the entire length of the Mersey in the medieval period, a factor which must have contributed to the commercial success of the town.

The development of the Market/Underbanks area is clearly shown on two early plans of Stockport : ‘The Mapp of Stockport Town’ (1680) and a map of the Stockport Township prepared for the lord of the manor, Sir George Warren (1770). Both plans clearly illustrate the Market Place, Little and Great Underbanks, High Street, Churchgate, Lower Hillgate and Bridge Street Brow, featuring a dense concentration of narrow fronted buildings along street frontages.

By the late seventeenth century Stockport had become a centre of small domestic industries such as spinning, weaving, leather working, button making and hatting. The market continued to thrive and was famous for its local cheeses and cloth.

The town developed rapidly during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Factories were established close to the town centre, initially associated with water powered silk production along the Mersey and Hemphshaw Brook valleys. Cotton spinning, weaving and other industrial activities, notably including hat manufacture, followed.

In 1850 the ancient manorial rights over the town’s market were bought by the Stockport Corporation and prompted substantial investment in the improvement of market facilities. In 1851 the stone collonaded Produce Hall was erected at the west end of the market place and originally housed the town’s library on the first floor. Castle Yard, formerly the site of a cotton mill known as Castle Mill, was lowered for use as a cattle market in 1853. In 1860, the centre of the market was covered by an open sided structure of glass and iron to provide stalls with protection from the weather. A bridge linking the Market with St Petersgate over Little Underbank was constructed in 1864 to provide an easier approach from the west of the town.

The pre-eminence of the historic core was partially eclipsed by the construction of Wellington Road in 1824-5 and later by the construction of the railway in 1840-42, both aligned to the west of the town centre. These new routeways became a focus for civic, commercial, and industrial development which continued throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This also acted to reduce the intensity of development in the Market and Underbanks area, hence the survival of a large number of historic buildings.

Contribution made by key listed and unlisted buildings

The surviving buildings in the conservation area chart the historic development of the area and the variety of architectural styles, details and materials enhance the visual qualities of the area. Landmark buildings include :

- St Mary’s Church** - commands the whole area with its tower visible from many streets. Heavily restored 1813-17 to designs by Lewis Wyatt in Perpendicular Gothic but retains internally much of the original Decorated Gothic chancel
- Market Hall**, 1860 - a light airy structure of glass and iron with a lively and colourful pattern of gables and glazing bars
- Underbank Hall** - especially good example of Elizabethan timber framing with rich decoration, complemented by timber framed building to west: 30/32 Great Underbank (‘The Three Shires’)
- The Old Rectory** - a 3 storey Georgian brick building which stands on the site of an earlier gabled , timber framed building.



Other landmark buildings include the former Magistrates Courts, the former bank building at 15/17 Bridge Street, the Produce Hall, the White Lion hotel, and Stockport’s first bank building at the junction between St Petersgate and Market Place. The area’s earliest known secular building is Staircase House which dates from 1460 but is concealed behind a modern brick façade - the refronting of buildings is common in the area and other early structures are known to exist behind later elevations.



The overriding character and significance of Market/Underbanks Conservation Area is associated with the quality of its townscape and the group value of surviving historic buildings. The area is characterised by blocks of continuous building frontages that step down to follow the slope of the land, each block consisting of a mix of shops, pubs, public buildings, houses or workshops. This finely grained pattern of development respects the medieval arrangement of long and narrow burgage plots fronting the principal streets in the historic core.



Most buildings are three storey Georgian or Victorian, aligned at back of pavement and constructed of a variety of traditional materials and styles. Market Place features a lively combination of stone, brick, terracotta, stucco, pargeted plaster and half timbered frontages, each facing and partly reflected in the glass of the Market Hall. Brick, slate and simpler architectural embellishment, predominates in Little Underbank and the approaches to the Market Place. Great Underbank is notable for its contrasting styles, materials and architectural detail, reflecting the historic status of this street.

There are a number of unsympathetic developments, notably at corner sites on Little Underbank. Bland and flat roofed modern insertions have harmed the visual interest of the streetscene and roofscape. There are few vacant sites, though sympathetic development of the car park site adjacent to Underbank Hall could enhance the setting of the listed building and strengthen the sense of enclosure along the street. There is a strong integration between the conservation area and its surrounding areas, except to the north behind Shawcross Fold where it is spoilt by the visual impact of delivery and car park areas to retail developments on Warren Street.

Topography

The area’s compact urban fabric, the variety of vernacular styles built up over centuries and its steep hills and brows create a unique and dramatic townscape.

The topography provides major vantage points overlooking the historic town centre and beyond, in particular from St Mary’s Churchyard, Churchgate, High Street and St Petersgate Bridge. The churchyard provides views over the Mersey Valley, High Street affords panoramas of Stockport’s skyline and views from St Petersgate bridge look down on the area’s interesting roofscape and streetscene in Little Underbank.

The steep hills give rise to a series of brows leading up to Market Place. Each brow (meaning the protecting edge of a cliff or hill) has its own character, of which Bridge Street Brow is probably the busiest and Rostron Brow the most atmospheric.

In some places the gradients of the hills are so steep that the underlying red sandstone is exposed as natural cliff outcrops. Walls have been built against the cliffs around the Market Place: these have been interpreted as part of a medieval town wall or part of the castle, yet there is no evidence that they formed part of a complete circuit and their most likely function was as a series of revetments walls to retain the soft sandstone cliffs.



Character and relationship of spaces within the area

The conservation area is urban in character, packed with hard edges between spaces and buildings. It is finely grained, a reflection of the area’s long history and development. Hard surfaces dominate the public realm and traditional natural materials are evident in many of the brows.

The market place acts as a key destination and meeting place in the town centre. The permeability of the historic core allows a wide choice of pedestrian routes to and from the market place although all, with the exception of St Petersgate, involve climbing steep gradients or steps.

Churchgate follows the axis between the Old Rectory and St Mary’s Church and creates an important gateway into the Market Place. There are a number of historic buildings of importance along Churchgate, typically houses, pubs and shops of the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries. Views from Churchgate towards the Market Place and across the town centre are also important.

The quality of the public realm has been enhanced in recent years along the Underbanks and St Petersgate. Traditional materials have been used to reinforce the area’s historic character, and the design has improved pedestrian movement and the management of vehicular traffic.

There is scope to create a stronger sense of arrival in Market Place through enhancement of the public realm. The use of natural materials to street surfaces is essential to reinforce the area’s special qualities.

Uses

Market Place contains one of the most successful markets in the region and consists of 20 stalls in the Produce Hall, 50 in the Market Hall and up to 200 stalls in surrounding streets. However the Market Hall is surrounded by 31 units of mixed use. The large number of public houses in and around the Market Place help to create a busy nightlife.

Great Underbank has adapted to become home to the principal financial service sector in Stockport - most major banks and building societies are represented here giving it an important role in Stockport.

Little Underbank is the area’s main shopping street. It contains a number of interesting and speciality and independent retailers, selling fashionwear, shoes, leather goods, china, bridalwear, theatre clothes and records etc.

The Purpose of Conservation Areas

- *Conservation areas are designated by the Council to protect parts of the Borough which have special architectural and historic character*
- *The purpose of conservation areas is to help prevent the erosion of these special qualities by unsympathetic alterations to existing buildings, insensitive new development or loss through demolition*
- *The aim is to preserve and enhance the character of the area as a whole rather than by simply protecting individual buildings*
- *Conservation area status is not intended to prevent new development because sensitively designed new development can often enhance its character*
- *High standards of design will be expected for new buildings in conservation areas to ensure that the character of the area is maintained or enhanced*

Summary of Planning Controls

- *Most works to the exterior of properties in conservation areas are likely to require planning permission. These may include:*
 - *Roof alterations*
 - *Extensions*
 - *Cladding of exterior walls*
 - *New shop fronts and signs*
 - *Replacement windows and doors*
 - *Satellite dishes, extract flues or air conditioning units*
- *Conservation Area Consent is required for the demolition of buildings with a total cubic content of 115 cubic metres and the demolition of some boundary structures (eg gates, walls or fences)*
- *If tree works (felling, lopping or pruning) are proposed in a conservation area, six weeks notice should be given to the Council to assess the work and give consent or place a Tree Preservation Order (TPO) on the tree. Please contact the Council’s Arboricultural Section (Tel. 0161-217-6111).*

This represents a summary of the works for which planning permission may be required. Precise details may vary according to each building and it is advisable for owners to contact the Council’s Conservation Officer (Tel. 0161-474-2620) for advice when considering carrying out alterations to their property. The Development Control Officer for the Market/Underbanks area can be contacted at Stopford House, Piccadilly, Stockport SK1 3XE (Tel. 0161-474-3569/3541).

Listed Building Consent

Certain buildings have been statutory listed by the Secretary of State for the Environment, as being of special architectural or historic interest. Anyone intending to demolish or partially demolish such a building, or to extend or alter it needs ‘listed building consent’. This is required whether or not the works are internal or external and the application has to be made to the Local Planning Authority. It is a prosecutable offence to carry out work on a listed building without first obtaining this consent. For further information please contact the Conservation Officer (Tel. 0161-474-2620).

A free interpreting service is available if you need help with this information. Please contact the Ethnic Diversity Service Tel. 0161-477-9000, Fax. 0161-480-1848, E-mail. eds.admin@stockport.gov.uk

This information can also be made available in braille, large print or audio. Please telephone 0161-474-2620 for details.