

the  
design  
of shop  
fronts

WITHIN THE HISTORIC CENTRE



**CITY OF DURHAM**  
CITY PLANNING OFFICE

PLANNING THE NEW CITY OF DURHAM





## 1.0 Introduction

The form and design of shop fronts can influence the character and quality of shopping areas both in city centres and within village streets. In city centres shops compete with each other to provide commodities and services which we require. Shopkeepers need to make their whereabouts known and to display their merchandise. All this helps to create the busy atmosphere that we associate with town centres. Where shops exist in the historic areas of cities we must still recognise these commercial requirements but at the same time we must continue to care for and respect the architectural heritage that has been handed down to us.

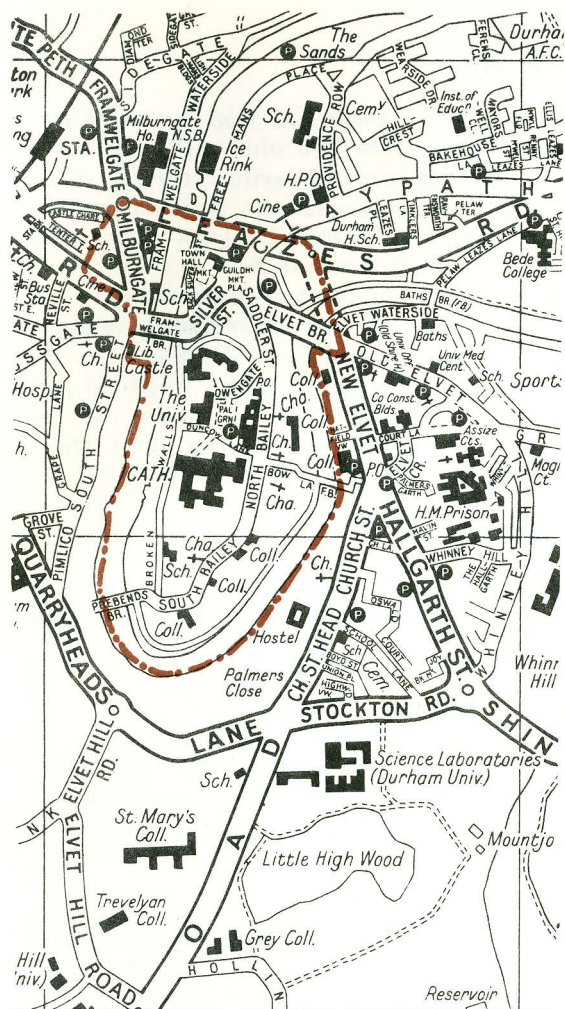
This chapter in 'Planning the New City of Durham' discusses the design of shop fronts. Much of the advice given will be appropriate for many parts of the new enlarged city area, but specifically, the guidance provided here and the policy outlined relates to the historic area of the city centre. We shall come to the area in which the policy operates shortly. Initially it may be helpful to define what is meant by the term 'shop fronts' within the context of this guide.

## 2.0 Shop Fronts

All shopping premises vary in form to a lesser or larger degree. Shops may have sales floors occupying several storeys, or more often be ground floor premises only, with store rooms or offices above. Sometimes upper floor uses do not relate to the shops below. Occasionally shop windows are simply 'holes' within a solid facade of a building.

In the historic area of Durham city centre the fronts and display windows of most shops extend to the full width of the premises, and the shops themselves are strung together side by side. The 'shop front' is therefore generally defined as being the full width of the shop unit and the height of the ground floor as expressed in the facade. The shop front itself is normally quite independent of the structure of the building and accordingly can be positioned in front of, in line with, or behind, the face of the building. Canopies, together with other projections, mouldings, and columns, are all considered as integral parts of the shop front. So too are stall risers, steps and rails, and also architectural ironmongery and fittings such as letter plates, door knockers, letter boxes and other items giving embellishment to the premises. With older buildings it is frequently a question of preserving or enhancing these features, whereas with new shop front construction there is a need to achieve harmony of design and to perpetuate the attention to detail that the historic buildings were given. Fascias, name-boards and signs of all types are all important components and come within the definition of shop fronts even though these items may require separate planning permission or be erected without other changes to the shopping facade itself.





The Policy Area

### 3.0 The Policy Area

The area in which this specific design policy of the Council operate is indicated in diagram opposite, and comprises The Baileys, Saddler Street, Fleshergate, Elvet Bridge, The Market Place, Silver Street, Framwellgate Bridge and the Millburngate Shopping Centre. The area approximates to that where priority has been given to pedestrians. In addition further controls will operate within the new Millburngate development.

### 4.0 General advice relating to shop fronts

The Council of the City of Durham through its Development Services Committee has resolved that 'new and altered shop fronts must be designed in sympathy with their historic street setting and the architectural character of the area'. By this means we shall be able to maintain and enhance the historic character of individual streets and areas, and avoid any distraction to the eye in general views.

When shops change hands or owners wish to improve it is likely that the shop front will be affected. Such alterations will almost certainly require planning permission, so it is important that at an early stage the shop owner or his agent visits the City Planning Office. Together with officers, he can explain his ideas, discuss the alternatives and assess their suitability. He may only wish to repaint the existing front or alternatively to replace it completely. In both cases early consultation is vital to avoid abortive work.

The central problem of designing a shop front stems from the way we look at our surroundings. Shops in Durham City usually occupy the ground floor of a narrow frontage building of three or four storeys. The emphasis is strongly vertical, yet in a street of buildings of different styles and periods, we tend only to 'read' the shops as a long horizontal band and forget the buildings above. It is important in shop front design to emphasise the relationship between the shop and the building it is part of, rather than try to achieve uniformity in design with the adjoining shops. The result creates a variety of fronts with differing stall riser heights, window designs and fascia boards which greatly contributes to the complexity and interest of the City streets. Shop fronts, therefore, cannot be considered in isolation and their design, whether it be modification or complete renewal must be handled with great sensitivity.



Shop fronts should not destroy the individuality of buildings .....



but should compliment them and emphasise their differences.



#### 4.1 Existing shop fronts

Durham City possess very few examples of shop fronts prior to 1800; of the nineteenth century there is a wide variety of fronts ranging from slender ironwork to robust, heavily decorated woodwork. It is important that these examples are retained as they contribute much to the character of Durham. Even some early 20th century fronts warrant retention due to their high standards of design. Where alterations may be allowed, these should avoid changing the character of the design. Aluminium framing inserted in a heavily decorated timber front is unlikely to be successful. Nineteenth century woodwork was often deeply modelled and modern work is frequently weak and thin by comparison. No attempts should be made to open up existing shop fronts where to do so might destroy the whole proportions of the design.

#### 4.2 New shop fronts

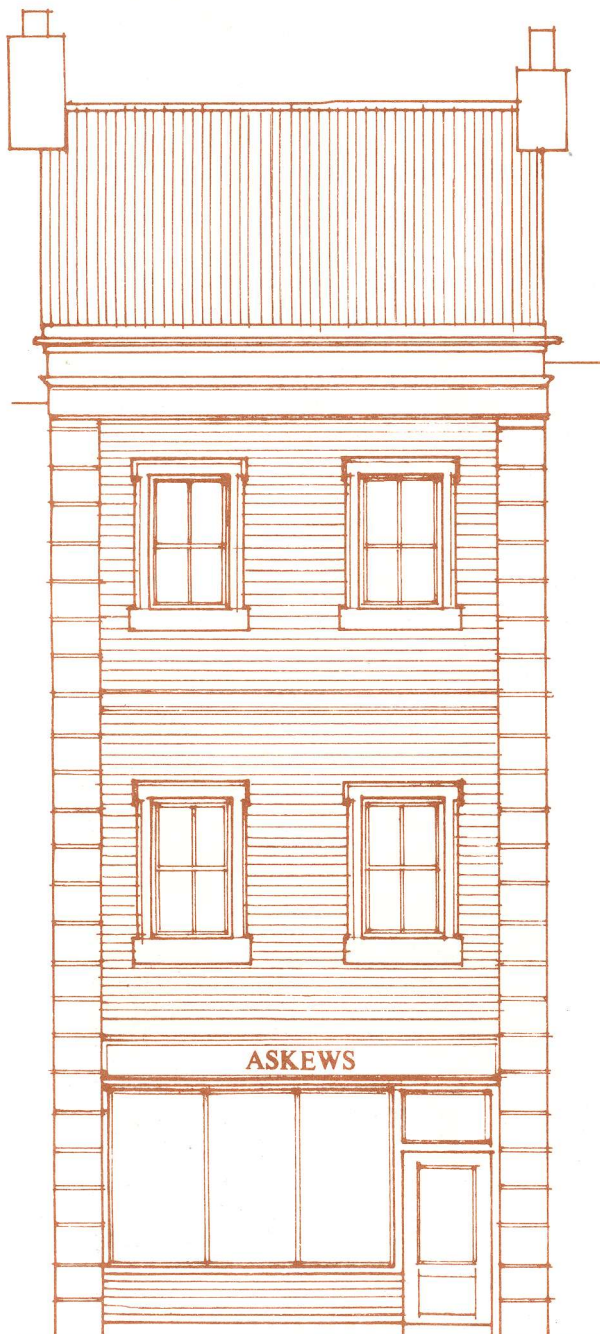
Where existing shop fronts are of no special merit, total renewal is acceptable and if sensitively handled will greatly improve the appearance of the whole area.

Modern retailing methods generally demand large expanses of glass to enable goods to be displayed to as many people as possible. However, with the pedestrianisation of the City Centre the need for large displays is questionable as the 'scale' of movement past shop windows is reduced as people are more free to walk and wander at their leisure.

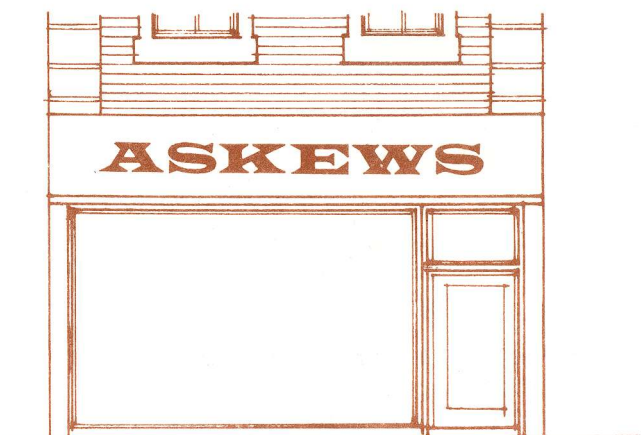
Nevertheless it is possible to reconcile this need with the restraints of designing in the historic core of Durham City, and there are already several good examples of this within the centre. In order to conserve and improve the quality of shop front design one should avoid large expanses of undivided glass which are alien to the scale of the surrounding buildings. By subdividing windows into traditional proportions the overall display space is maintained and architectural harmony can be achieved.

Where different panes of glass meet along the length of the shop fronts, or at corners, the use of a vertical framing members added for visual emphasis will contribute to the overall appearance and help to achieve a feeling of greater solidity and permanence.

The use of stallrisers is a feature of the majority of shops in the central area and these contribute to the traditional character of the area. Most of these stallrisers are in brick or other non reflective materials and this characteristic is to be encouraged and maintained. Window and door framing should be exposed and emphasised to give a solid appearance thereby blending in with existing shops.



New shop fronts in existing buildings need not rigidly follow the lines of the facade above ....



...but failing to acknowledge the relationship of one to the other and the 'spirit' of the whole building can lead to unsympathetic design.



## 5.0 Shop Signs

The design and location of shop signs is most important. Well designed signs coupled with pleasing shop fronts can add to the quality of the area, whereas poor design will detract.

Even small signs if badly designed can have a detrimental effect over a large area. It is important to realise that each shop front and each element in that front contributes to the whole character of the City Centre. Individual shop owners can play a vital part in ensuring that the beauty of our City is maintained and enhanced. Large nationally known shops who occupy premises in the City Centre should be prepared to adapt their standard sign if it is felt that it is out of character in its particular location.

### 5.1 Illuminated Signs

The use of illuminated signs in the historic centre of the City detracts greatly from the fine architectural character of the area. In general this visually disruptive element must be avoided. Where a shop is heavily over-shadowed by a canopy or another building the Planning Office may consider the use of illuminated signs and in these circumstances individually illuminated letters could be used but limited to a height of 200mm (about 8") although it may be that a smaller letter size would be more in keeping with the design of a particular shop front.

A sign which projects outwards from a shop front and is spotlighted is also classed as an illuminated sign. This type of sign can serve a useful purpose in advertising premises which are open to the public at night such as public houses or restaurants and as such will usually be restricted to buildings of this nature.

### 5.2 Projecting Signs

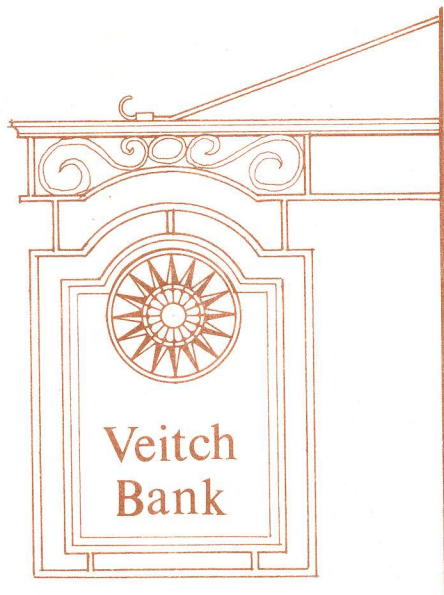
In the past, projecting signs have been associated with certain trades, for instance banks or public houses. Where these are to be considered traditional painted timber signs are recommended with appropriate lettering and design.

### 5.3 Chemist Shop Signs

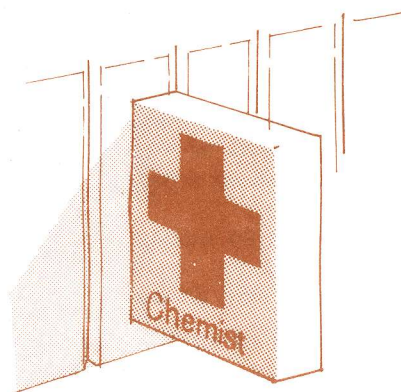
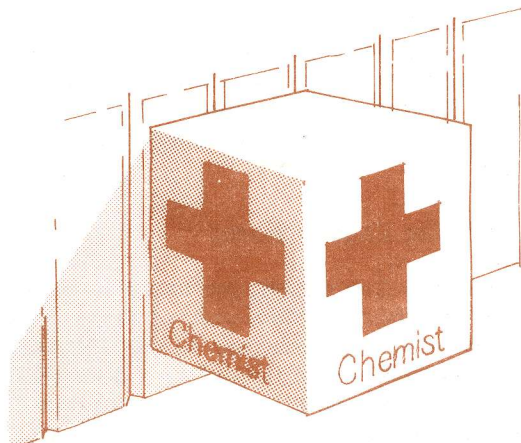
In general chemist shops do not require consent to display an illuminated sign to indicate that they are open for the sale of medicines and for the preparation of prescriptions. At present there are a wide variety of illuminated signs in the centre and in an attempt to minimise the effect of this in the future it is recommended that the international green cross symbol be displayed.



Individually illuminated letters could be considered in certain heavily overshadowed locations.



Where appropriate, traditional hanging signs greatly add to the character of the street.



Recommended chemist signs with illuminated green cross.



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## 6.0 Shop Fascias and Name Boards

Most shopkeepers want to display their names somewhere on the premises and there are a number of ways in which this can be done for example by hanging a name board in the window or by applying individual letters directly to the pane. However, the most popular method is to use a fascia board, but unless careful consideration is given to the design, unsympathetic results occur. Firstly, fascia boards should be designed as an integral part of the shop avoiding both reflective materials and fluorescent colours or lettering. Harsher 'loud' colours such as bright red or yellow must be avoided for both fascias and lettering and more subdued colours used that would harmonize more satisfactorily with most surroundings.

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*Wilkinson & son Ltd.*

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Neat, simple lettering compliments the composition rather than challenges it.

## 7.0 Advertising at Upperfloor Levels

The continued and increasing use of upper floor for business purposes in the centre is very welcome because it adds extra vitality to the City. However, an over-abundance of advertising on upper floors can result in unnecessary clutter on building elevations destroying their character. In the interests of avoiding this, all lettering on upper floors ought to be in either black or gold lettering and applied directly to window panes. Also, all advertising above ground floor level should relate solely to the use on that floor rather than commercial uses below.

## 8.0 Millburngate

The Millburngate scheme is by far the largest development of this nature within Durham City. It is a high quality scheme which has been specifically designed to supplement existing development within the 'Outstanding Conservation Area'. Consequently any form of advertising which would have a deleterious effect should be resisted. In general this means that parts of the development which are adjacent to areas of particular merit should not contain signs, e.g. on the sides and rear of any shops or offices or on the waterfront of the scheme. In addition there are several other considerations which are relevant to maintaining a high standard of design within Millburngate.

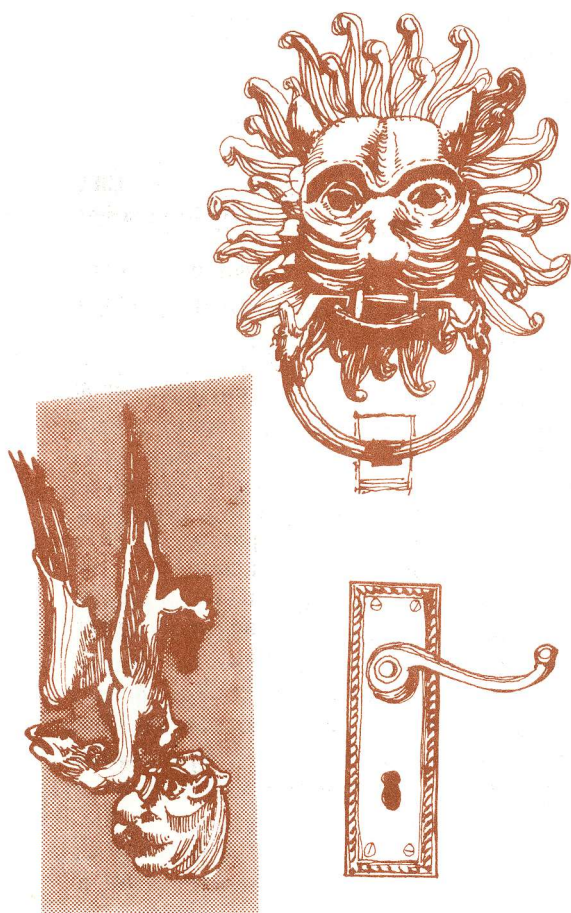
This section of the guide was originally produced as a separate policy for the initial tenants of the Millburngate Development. As tenancies change the same design guidelines will remain operative. The following four sections deal with specific areas of the development in detail.

### 8.1 78 - 83 North Road (The Annexe Block)

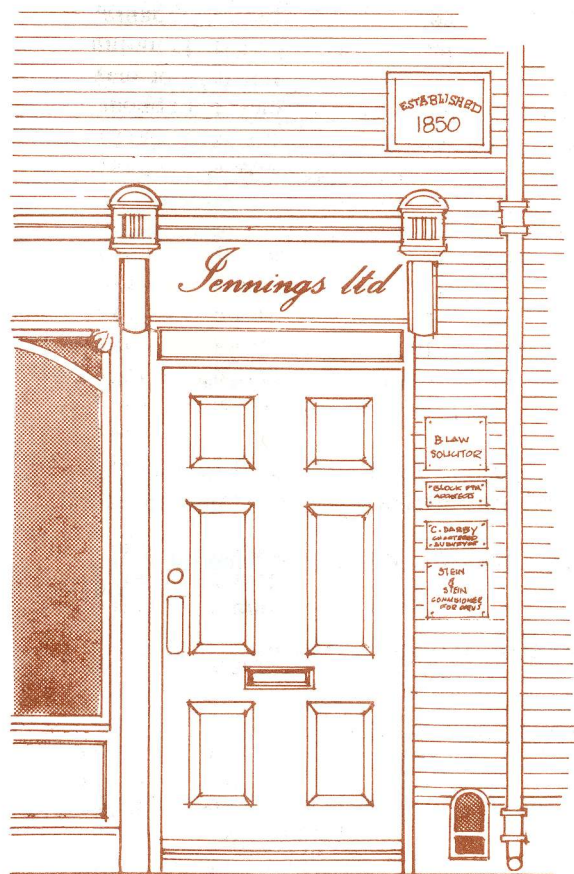
As with most locations within the City Centre, the use of illuminated fascias is not desirable. However, the arcade of shops is overshadowed and it may therefore be necessary to use illuminated individual letters. These should be limited to a general height of 200mm (8") and as on shops elsewhere in the centre the use of harsh colours should be avoided.

The fascia boards and windows should also be carefully designed avoiding fluorescent colours and projecting signs and incorporating a brick, rendered or similarly constructed stallriser to a





Examples of Door Furniture.



height of at least 700mm. Mosaics, standard laminates and marble are not appropriate materials for stallrisers in this development. Shopfronts generally should be recessed at least 75mm behind the face of the brick piers between the units. The windows and door frames of all units except unit 13 should be exposed and of solid appearance. To this end timber or hollow section metal framing in a permanent dark finish would be considered appropriate. Unit 13 should have softwood framed, dark stained window frames to the Millburngate elevation.

## 8.2 Offices in Millburngate

In order to contain advertising and avoid unnecessary clutter office signs should be in one non-illuminated panel either on the wall or in the glazed entrance hall to the offices. As with offices elsewhere in the centre gold or black lettering on window panes would also be acceptable.

## 8.3 84 - 88 North Road (External shop fronts)

The requirements for these units are similar to those in the Annexe but with the following amendments for 83 - 88 North Road.

- (a) All fascias should have a non reflective finish.
- (b) The lettering on signs should not be illuminated.

## 8.4 1 - 15 Millburngate (shop fronts within the Mall)

Although there are no specific recommendations on design for these units, applicants should recognise the need to maintain the quality of this development and the surrounding Conservation Area.

## 8.5 2 - 5 Framwellgate Bridge (Restored Properties)

When the Old Millburngate properties are restored they will form a key transitional stage between the older established shopping areas and new Millburngate. Consequently the type of requirements for this development closely approximate to those existing elsewhere in the Conservation Area.

## 9.0 Door furniture

The secret of good design, it is said, lies in the detailing. Having once established the basic framework it is important that all the aspects of the designs are approached with a sensitive single mindedness to achieve a unified solution. This is particularly true of shop fronts. Signs and fascias are all crucial to the appearance of the shop front. So too are door handles, letter boxes, knockers and name plates.

Generalisations about door furniture are difficult, as for each design problem there may be more than one solution. Look at the door or shop front, look at the building, understand its character. Does it require a delicate touch or a more robust approach? Can modern fittings be used or would the more traditional brass handles and letter boxes be more suitable?

Nameplates should be tidily grouped, not necessarily in neat regimented rows, but neither sprawling over the face of the building detracting from its general appearance.

## 10.0 Exception to the Rule

It is a common criticism of design guides that they are unnecessarily restrictive, laying down a dogmatic design standard, smothering individual flare or invention. This guide has attempted to be more positive by avoiding detailed statements, laying down only guidelines and stressing that the way to enhance our City lies in a total understanding of the building and its design



problems and a sensitive approach to its solution. It may be that in seeking to do this a designer prepares a scheme which substantially differs from the advice offered here. This would not mean it is unacceptable, but such a solution would need to satisfy higher design standards than might normally be used, in order to justify its suitability.

## **11.0 The Policy Area and Planning Permission**

The provision of new shop fronts and alterations to existing fronts are strictly controlled by the Town and Country Planning Act 1971. Almost any material change will require planning permission.

Signs and advertisements on buildings are controlled by the same Act and the Town and Country Planning (Control of Advertisements) Regulations 1969. Though there are a few signs which can be put up without planning permission, most require it. In addition most of the policy area is designated an Area of Special Control which permits further control of advertisements. Extra controls operate where a shop front is part of a Listed Building - special application forms and consultations with Department of Environment are necessary.

As can be seen the legislation covering shop fronts and advertising is too complex to attempt to explain in such a short guide. The best advice is that anyone considering changing the appearance of their shop front, irrespective of whether it may or may not require planning permission, should contact the City Planning Office at their earliest convenience to discuss their proposals. The necessary forms can also be obtained and advice given on how to complete them.

## **12.0 Conclusion**

Shops are designed to attract our attention, to persuade us to buy their various products. Advertising is part of their nature and the shop front is their battle line. But it is also a crucial element in the street scene of Durham City and the balancing of these two demands is central to an understanding of the problem of shop front design.

Most of the points mentioned in the preceding paragraphs are concerned with integrating new developments both in form and detail with existing shops thereby continuing a traditional theme. Although many of the points made may appear restrictive or very minor, the cumulative effect of allowing discordant design elements would secure to destroy much of what has been designated as an Outstanding Conservation Area.

## **13.0 References**

The following publications may be of help in the design of shop fronts.

- \* Shop Front - pamphlet by Civic Trust 1962 (a little dated in terms of lettering styles but contains some sound principles).
- \* Lettering on Buildings - Nicolette Gray, Architectural Press 1960.
- \* Townscape, Gordon Cullen, Architectural Press.
- \* Lettering in Architecture - Alan Bartram, Lund Humphries 1975.