

# Wigton

*Conservation Area*



## Shopfront Design Guide

# Wigton Shopfronts

## Introduction

Wigton is one of Allerdale's Key Service Centres and fulfils a commercial role to a significant sized surrounding rural area. It is a historic market town whose centre is still based on its medieval street layout. The whole of the town centre has been designated a conservation area due to its historic character, but the shopping centre is at its heart. Shops clearly contribute a huge amount to the distinctiveness and attractiveness of a town. They are also very important to the social and cultural life of the town and provide a strong link to its history.

Following the 2013 English Heritage 'Heritage at Risk' survey, Wigton's Conservation Area was designated as being 'at risk'. This is not a reflection of the quality of Wigton's main assets and does not suggest that it shouldn't be a conservation area. It is an assessment of its current condition based on a number of different factors. One of the main factors causing the 'at risk' designation was the quality and condition of some of the shopfronts and their signs. As a result it was felt that it would be helpful to produce this shopfront guide in order to help shop keepers and building owners to understand how they could make their shopfronts more attractive and help them to contribute to the overall commercial health of the Town.

## Policy Context

The National Planning Policy Framework provides a basis for all planning policy. The paragraphs relevant in this context are:

- Paragraphs 56 and 58 under the chapter Requiring good design
- Paragraphs 131 and 137 under the chapter Conserving and enhancing the historic environment.

Allerdale Local Plan (Part 1) adopted July 2014 refines this policy framework and sets out policies for Allerdale. The Local Plan policies that substantiate the requirement for good shopfronts in Wigton are:

- S2 Sustainable Development Principles (economic, social and environmental)
- S4 Design Principles
- S6(d) Wigton Area Policy
- S16 Town Centre and Retail
- S27 Heritage Assets
- S32 Safeguarding Amenity
- DM7 Town Centre Development
- DM11 Advertisements

## Historic context

Wigton is sited very close to a roman cavalry fort which was situated on the Roman road from Carlisle to Papcastle. It is the main town on the Solway Plain and became the early centre for markets. It was given its Market Charter and so obtained the legal right to hold a weekly market (& Annual Fair) in 1262.

Until the industrial revolution, the Town's main economy was as the commercial hub for the surrounding farms and area.

From the C18 onwards it became a cloth production centre including cotton and linen weaving, dyeing, printing and tanning as well as finished garments. Other trades including clock making, gunsmiths, nail makers and blacksmiths. Most of Wigton's industries declined in the latter half of the C19 and the population also declined at this time.

The railway opened in 1842 and Wigton Station in 1843. This allowed for much easier transport of raw materials and products.

St Mary's Church at the south end of the High Street was built in 1125, but by the C18 was in a very poor state of repair and the new Georgian church was completed in 1788. Trading in Wigton began in the markets, of which there were a number. The main household Market was at Market Place at the site of the Market Cross, between King Street and West Street at the junction with High Street. The grain market was in front of St Mary's Church, livestock Market at Market Hill and the Goose Market was in front of what is now Thomlinson Junior School.

The creation of shopfronts as we would recognise them today really began in the C19 around the time of the creation of the railway (in 1842) which meant increasing travel options and increasing commercial competition.

## Shopfronts in Wigton

The purpose of a shopfront is to be appealing to shoppers so that they want to enter the shop. It is the shopfront itself as well as the window display that will help to do this. An attractive and well used shopping centre will attract people to spend time in it even if they do not have specific shopping objectives in mind and will encourage visitors and tourists. Conversely shops with unattractive or poorly kept frontages will discourage visitors and shoppers.

From the C18 but particularly in the C19 most shops were designed or remodelled with an integral shopfront at ground floor level, based on the proportions and detailing of classical architecture. Great importance was placed on the framework and the vertical proportions of the building as a whole as well as the doors and windows.

Whilst many of the building plots in Wigton date from before the C18, many of the present buildings in the High Street, Market Place and King Street have a Georgian style frontage in some cases attached to an older or part older building.

Shopfronts from the Georgian era tended to be smaller than Victorian or later designs due to the cost of glass. They were also made up of much smaller panes as the techniques to produce large panes hadn't been developed.

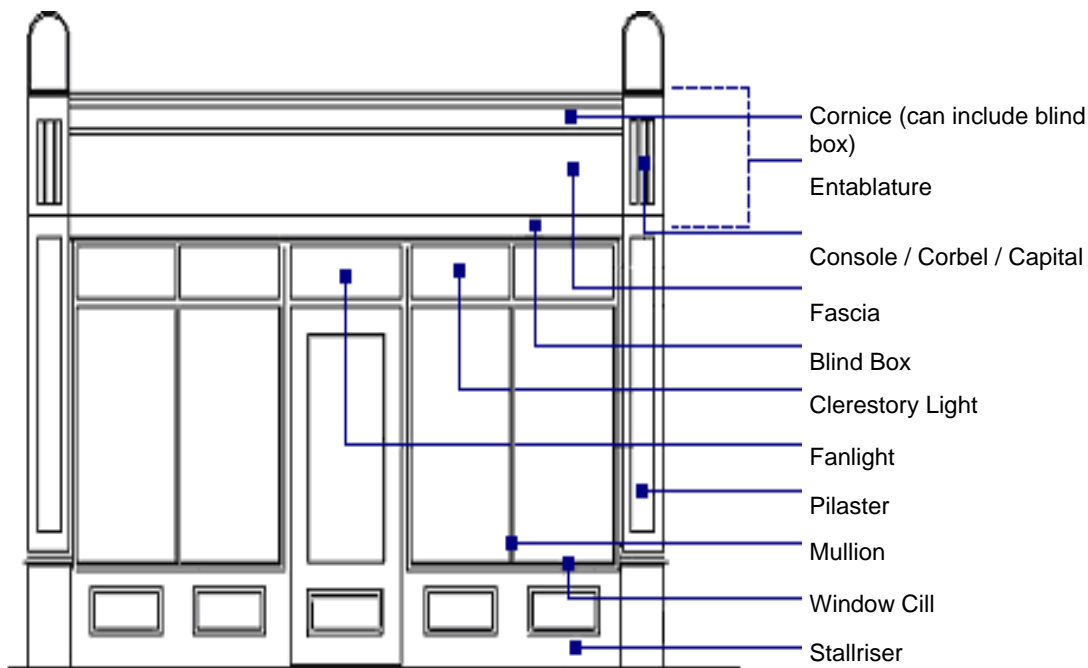
There don't appear to be any original Georgian shop windows remaining in Wigton, but there are a few Georgian style shopfronts with later, replacement windows:



These shopfronts have Georgian style shop windows, although the windows themselves are later replacements.

The Georgian style of building is based on the proportions of classical architecture and as such the classically proportioned shopfront fits very appropriately within the architecture of the buildings.

One of the essentials of shopfront design, regardless of the details, is to ensure that there is a visual framework to the shopfront that appears substantial enough to physically support the building above it. This framework also acts like a picture frame around the window display.



The essential components of a classical shopfront consist, in basic terms, of a base (stallriser), sides (pilasters) & top (entablature), as shown here.

Unlike domestic windows, shops have the mouldings of the glazing bars on the external face and the putty fixing on the inside and this practice is still an important detail of good shopfront design.

Shopfronts in some towns can have a fairly uniform appearance because plot widths were regular, openings were restricted in width for structural reasons and glass manufacturing technology restricted pane size. However, Wigton has quite a variety of plot widths and so shopfront design has been less uniform than in some towns. This variety is an important part of its character.

Although still based very much on classical lines and with a strong framework, Victorian shopfronts showed greater variations. Advances in glass technology and the introduction of plate glass in the 1820's allowed larger window panes and from about 1840 horizontal glazing bars (transoms) tended to disappear (but reappeared in the early C20)





Heavier mullions were required to hold the larger and heavier sheets of glass. Windows were divided into two, three or four lights (panes). A large number of shopfronts of this period have been lost, although some have simply been re-glazed without their mullions

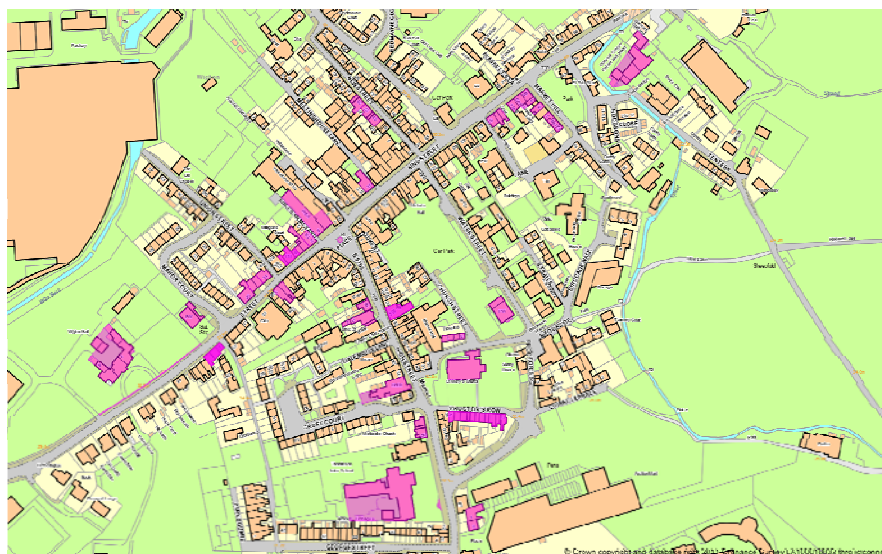


In the Edwardian period and up to the 1920's, taller shopfronts appeared with lower stallrisers. These sometimes featured dipped or angled fascias, thinner pilasters, curved glass, decorative clerestory lights and deeply recessed doorways with mosaic tiles displaying the shop name. Mullions tended to disappear and larger shop windows with a reduced vertical emphasis resulted. A number shopfronts from this period survive .



Many attractive traditional shopfronts have been lost since the 1960s onwards but there are still many good examples surviving, often those of local firms with a long-standing presence in the town. These contribute very positively to the character of the conservation area.

Shopping (outside of supermarkets) has become much more of a leisure activity and so the quality of the experience and therefore of the immediate environment is ever more important, and particularly now when competing with the internet. There has been a rising awareness of design issues nationally and growth in support for the conservation movement. Wigton's town centre is all within its conservation area and some of the buildings are also listed.



Map showing listed buildings (in pink)

Conservation Area and listing designations as well as a greater appreciation of local distinctiveness have helped the growing recognition that the historic character and quality of a shopfront is a trading asset.

Detailing is as important to the quality of the shopfront as the proportions and materials. Poor quality detailing can be very damaging to a shopfront's character and the local environment

## Designing a shopfront

- Take account of the age, history, scale, style, materials and colours of the whole building and keep referring to these as the design progresses
- Try to align some elements of the shopfront with those above. This may mean centralising the shopfront, but it is not always necessary to use the whole ground floor of the building so centralising may not be appropriate.
- Where the building is wider than the shopfront needs to be, it is desirable to ensure that the remainder of the ground floor walls match those of upper storeys.
- Respect the scale and proportions of the building and its neighbours so that the new shopfront will harmonise with the street scene.
- Consider the entire design, including finishes, colours and signage.
- Use appropriate, sustainable and good quality materials such as painted wood. Upvc or aluminium will not normally be appropriate for listed or traditional buildings in the conservation area. Lead should be used to protect the top of the cornice above the shopfront.
- Consider longevity in respect of the building's maintenance as well as the style of any detailing/decoration.
- Consider the design in three dimensional terms eg mullion profiles, and show such details on any plans. The shopfront needs to look like a substantial structure rather than a façade with no depth. The more substantial the shopfront, the better it will be for strength & security.
- Consider how the design fulfils the functional requirements of the shop, including ease of access. The Disability Discrimination Act requires new shopfronts to have level or ramped access and a door of a metre wide if possible (however this may not be possible, particularly in listed buildings).
- Avoid shopfronts and fascias cutting across two buildings. Two separate shopfronts with matching colours and signage will look considerably better.



- Consider the number of elements introduced; detailing, signs and features add interest and vitality as long as they have a purpose.
- Large expanses of plate glass should normally be avoided as it will make the building above appear unsupported and floating.
- Design-in any necessary security or shading measures from the outset.

The appearance of the remainder of the building will clearly also have an impact upon the appearance and image of the shopfront. Traditional Georgian and Victorian frontages in town centres tended to be lime rendered with a smooth surface, which was often 'lined out' – to give the appearance of large stone blocks. Where this was the original surface, it looks far more appropriate than any modern render or finish. Modern cement renders (particularly pebble dash and other thicker textures surfaces) do not look as good even when new, but as they age they crack and let water in, but not out, so often cause significant long term and internal damp problems. Impermeable and glossy paints also trap moisture in which also looks unsightly.

## Key elements

Although the individual style of elements varies, almost all good quality shopfronts incorporate the same basic elements:

- Large, preferably vertically emphasised windows for display
- Pilasters made of wood providing the appearance that the remainder of the building is supported by them and providing a vertical separation between shops. These should be topped with a corbel (or capital) to hide the edges of the fascia and provide a continued vertical.
- A wooden cornice providing framing and weather protection, topped with lead (or zinc).
- A wooden fascia providing advertising space, with cornices to hide the structural support beams. However, these should not be too deep (max of 300mm?) such that they dominate the remainder of the shopfront. The top should normally be well below the sill of the first floor windows and should not overhang the shop window.
- A stallriser providing internal and external protection and a solid base at ground level, so that the building above does not appear to 'float'. A stall riser of between 350mm and 500mm constructed of solid masonry is recommended.
- Good quality construction materials were normally used to provide durability and the business with an image of quality. The choice of colour for the

shopfront is important. Normally the same colour is applied to the stallrises, pilasters & entablature in order to unify and distinguish the shopfront.

- Design elements should be structural rather than applied eg panelled doors had fielded panels with mouldings, not mouldings applied to flush doors
- In most windows the putty was on the outside and the moulded glazing bars on the inside, for shop windows the decorative mouldings are traditionally on the outside as it is the outside that is designed to look attractive and impress potential customers

## Signs

Many of the inappropriate shopfront signs that damage the character of town centres, are those of national chain stores which have a corporate sign that is applied regardless of the character of the area, the building or the design of the shopfront.



Historically, sign writing and manufacture was an art form and a skilled craft. This meant that each sign was bespoke to the business, architecture & town and as such helped to provide distinctive town centres. A creative and bespoke approach to signage will be encouraged. However, appropriate signs do not necessarily cost more. Painted or stencilled lettering can be very effective.



All new signs should respect the age and character of the building in terms of size, materials and detailing, regardless of any company image. This does not mean that a sign cannot reflect a company image, or must look historic, but its size, materials and quality of detailing must be appropriate to the Conservation Area. Simple, easy to read fonts are more readable and provide a better image. A contemporary image can be created whilst still respecting the principles of good shopfront design as well as local character.



Signs can be flat boards or individual letters fixed to the existing fascia, or where fascias don't exist, the wall of the building. The signs should not dominate the building, and the lettering or board should not extend to the edge of the fascia.



Carefully designed individual letters or symbols applied to the glass may be acceptable if they are of the highest quality. Etched glass can be very effective, but etching historic glass with signs will not be acceptable (as the occupant is unlikely to last as long as the building).



A good quality hanging sign carefully placed to avoid interfering with architectural features in addition to, or in place of a fascia sign, will normally be acceptable if it is of an acceptable scale and design, however this will depend upon the surrounding architectural features.

Signs and letters should normally be of painted timber although good quality metalwork can be more appropriate in some circumstances where it reflects the design or nature of the shop. Plastic and plastic-coated signs and letters are not acceptable in the conservation area.

Wall-mounted or hanging signs above fascia level will only be allowed where these are of high quality and the design of the building above allows space for the sign without interfering with windows and other architectural features.

The number of adverts should be kept to a minimum ie a fascia sign plus (where appropriate) a small hanging sign. Too much advertising will defeat its purpose and create a cluttered, confusing appearance to the detriment of the business, architecture and the character of the Conservation area.

To avoid clutter, the information contained on the sign should be kept to a minimum, normally the name of the trader/business and the street number. If it is not obvious from the name, then the nature of the trade can be included.

Wigton seems to particularly suffer from signs and stickers that obscure or block the shop window. These provide a very poor image and intimidating street scene, particularly at night, and do not allow viewing to encourage passers-by to enter.



Large expanse of blanked windows discouraging custom and detracting from the Town







In order to protect visual amenity, vehicular and pedestrian safety and to reduce light pollution and minimize energy consumption, unnecessary illumination of signs will be resisted. Internally illuminated signs will not be allowed and any external illumination equipment, if required, must be as small and unobtrusive as possible.

## Colours

Colours are an important part of any building or architectural feature. The colour of the shopfront framework, ie the Stall riser, Pillasters and Entablature, will have the greatest impact on the image of the shop and the impact on the street scene. However the colours chosen for signage and their relationship with the main shopfront colour is also important as well as the relationship between these and the colour of the whole building.

A mix of colours and colours that have not been planned in conjunction with neighbouring colours can look confusing and provide a poor image for the business and the Town.



An attractive traditional shopfront but one which suffers from a lack of strong image due to mix of colours and from unfortunate neighbouring colours



## Security

- The extent of security measures should be in proportion to the level of risk in the particular location and should, if needed, form an integral part of the shopfront design.
- Stallrisers, mullions and transoms can contribute greatly to shopfront security and reduce the costs of replacement glazing following any breakages. These can be internally reinforced without visual detriment.
- Where historic glass does not exist, then laminated glass can be used to aid safety and security.
- Any additional security devices, if necessary, should be positioned behind the glazing, minimising any restriction of views into the shop, for example by the use of perforated grilles and shutters.



- External roller shutters and grilles will not be acceptable in the Conservation Area. Apart from their modern appearance which is out of keeping with the age and architecture of the buildings, they create a closed, unfriendly and less interesting environment out of keeping with the purpose & character of a shopping street and preventing out of hours window-shopping. This can also convey the idea that the area is in decline.

## Canopies

Shading from the sun is desirable where the sun hits the shop window directly in order to reduce glare & unwanted solar gain. Canopies are a low energy way of doing this. The canopy will only be required in certain weather conditions and certain times of year. For this reason, permanent canopies are not considered acceptable as they obscure the shopfront and architecture above as well as views along the street.

Traditionally, canopies were made of canvas and were fully-retractable into 'blind boxes' which were carefully designed to be integral to the shopfront as can be seen in this example.



It is still possible to get traditional blinds and boxes repaired, or new ones manufactured locally. These were traditionally hand operated with winders but can sometimes be made with motor operation if desired. The blind boxes should not extend beyond the width of the fascia.

Modern flat canvas retractable blinds may be an acceptable alternative on some unlisted buildings. However, these often have plastic blind boxes, and although these can be fitted with timber covers, they often have frills which do not fully retract and can look unsightly, particularly as they get dirty. These modern versions are often motor operated and the operating mechanism makes them more bulky than the traditional blinds.

Modern plastic or plastic-coated fixed 'Dutch blinds' (like a pram hood) are not acceptable in the conservation area as they do not look traditional and they permanently obscure the fascia.

## Shopfront improvements

Improvements to shopfronts can make an enormous impact upon the appearance of a town and how popular it is as a place to visit and shop in. It can be difficult to persuade individual shopkeepers to invest in improvements as the returns in increased profits cannot be accurately predicted or guaranteed. However, if all the poor shopfronts that are currently detracting from Wigton's appearance were to be improved, the overall benefit to the town and the shops concerned would be considerable. Currently the good quality shopfronts are providing a disproportionate benefit in attracting shoppers to Wigton.

Examples are given below of the difference that has been made to a number of shopfronts in Cockermouth following the 2009 flood.



Similar improvements could be made in Wigton, and an impression of improvements to a few shopfronts (and upper floor windows and colours) in the High Street is shown below.





Sketch scheme courtesy of Red Raven Design

2013 Improvements to the former Kings Arms Hotel and The Original Factory Shop, whilst still not perfect, have made a significant improvement to the appearance and image of this very prominent part of the Town Centre



## Conclusion

The design and quality of shopfronts contribute fundamentally to the appearance of a shopping street but they also significantly affect its character and image, and therefore the economic confidence of the whole town. As such it is important that shopfront design is recognised as a very important part of the character and prosperity of the whole of Wigton.