Introduction

The objective of the Tonbridge Conservation Area Appraisal is to analyse and record the special character of the Conservation Area, which was originally designated in 1969 with further extensions in 1981, 1985 and 1990. Following an assessment of these earlier conservation area boundaries, the Borough Council updated them in 2008 to include new areas and exclude others. The appraisal covers the area within the revised Conservation Area boundary and provides further details to assist with the interpretation and use of planning policies. It will help guide the Council in making planning decisions on planning applications and to this end has been adopted for development control purposes.

It is intended that this appraisal will inform and influence the activities of the Council and other bodies (eg Kent County Council and other statutory agencies), where these impact on the Conservation Area. It will also assist in the identification of any programmes of action that are considered appropriate by these bodies, subject, of course, to financial limitations and other priorities they may have.

Importantly, it is hoped that the appraisal will prove to be of help to residents, businesses and landowners. For anyone proposing new development or changes within the Conservation Area, the appraisal should be read in conjunction with the Borough Council’s Conservation Area Advice Note. This includes guidance on the broad issues to be considered and the special controls that apply in Conservation Areas.

As the purpose of this appraisal is to describe the character of the area, it does not include a detailed description of every feature or building. Omission of any particular building, feature or space should not be taken, therefore, to imply that it is not of interest or similarly that there are no opportunities to improve the character of the area.
Location, Setting and Physical Form

Tonbridge is situated at a crossing point of the River Medway about 6 km north of Tunbridge Wells, 10 km south-east of Sevenoaks and 20 km south-west of Maidstone. The old settlement stood on the north side of the river which was less prone to flooding but, protected by flood control barriers, the town now extends across the floodplain.

The town is narrow at this point and consequently the countryside setting is never far from the town centre. To the west, the low-lying, flat countryside penetrates into the centre as the river and its floodplain extends up to the motte. Views of the countryside unfold along riverside walks to the west and are visible as an expanse of open space when viewed from the raised motte. The river and low lying countryside with mature trees acts an important setting for the historic motte and castle and the town centre as a whole. The gently rising ground occupied by Tonbridge School playing fields and grounds also acts as an important setting to the school buildings and the conservation area as a whole. The wooded, hills and ridges of the Greensand Ridge and the High Weald rise sharply to the north and south of the town creating an attractive long distance back drop to the town. This landscaped setting is important to the character of the conservation area seen as it is from a number of vantage points including the motte.

The Conservation Area covers an area of the town from the River Medway in the South to Yardley Park Road in the north incorporating the ancient castle and historic High Street. To the south and north of the Conservation Area mainly 20th century housing developments fan out onto higher land giving the town its characteristic dumb bell shape. Maps 1a and 1b (opposite) show the extent of the Conservation Area. One of the characteristics of the Conservation Area is its diversity. The Conservation Area can be divided into areas of similar character (see Map 2).
Area A – This covers the medieval core of the town. It has been divided into four sub-areas:

- **Sub-area A1** – The 13th Century castle and grounds are a unique historical feature and dominant landmark in the Conservation Area.
- **Sub-area A2** – The historic High Street has a busy commercial character and contains many buildings of medieval origin and several historic inns.
- **Sub-area A3** – This mixed use area incorporates the small scale streets of the old market. The area is evolving with the creation of a new high density residential development on the former cattle market.
- **Sub-area A4** – The area is characterised by a large number of substantial listed 18th and 19th Century buildings set within large plots. The Church of St Peter and St Paul is of medieval origin and stands within an extensive landscaped churchyard, creating a green oasis just off the High Street.

Sub-area A5 – This area comprises the landscaped area around the River Medway.

Sub-Area B – A mixed use area which has seen considerable redevelopment but retains some important Saxon and medieval elements. The wharf area of the Medway reflects the industrial heritage of the town.

Sub-Area C – A group of historic buildings clustered around the medieval Mill Pond lie at the heart of this predominantly 19th Century residential area. A small parade of Victorian shops fronts the Hadlow Road.

Sub-Area D – The Slade Area is a Victorian residential neighbourhood of tight knit terraced and semi-detached houses which have retained many original features.

Area E – The northern part of the Conservation Area lies outside the medieval defences and has a spacious, predominantly Victorian character. It has been divided into three sub-areas:

- **Sub-area E1** – Tonbridge School and its grounds dominate the townscape of the upper High Street. The Gothic style 19th Century sandstone buildings create an impressive frontage on the High Street and the chapel tower is a landmark feature visible from many parts of the Conservation Area.
- **Sub-area E2** – The London Road/Shipbourne Road junction is wide and spacious and framed by trees and listed buildings. The Shipbourne Road is narrow and enclosed and the historic buildings retain many original architectural details.
- **Sub-area E3** – Dry Hill Park was developed in the late 19th Century. Substantial houses surrounded by mature trees stand in large plots in an elevated position with long views northwards towards the Sevenoaks Ridge.

These sub-areas of special architectural and historic character are not intended to be precisely split, as there will inevitably be some overlapping of characteristics of the various areas due to the diversity of the character of the Conservation Area.
TONBRIDGE TOWNSCAPE
CHARACTER ANALYSIS - SUB AREA

Key to sub-areas

A1 Castle
A2 High Street
Including
East Street (w)
A3 Market Quarter
Including
The Market
Bank Street
Castle Street
Castle Fields
Stafford Road (s)
A4 Church & Bordyke
Including
The Bordyke
East Street (w)
Church Street
Church Lane (e)
A5 River Walk
Including
River Lawn Road
Bradford Street
B Lyons Crescent
Including
Lockdown Road
Stafford Road
East Street (part)
Church Street (s)
C Mill Stream
Including
Mill Crescent
Mill Lane
Charlton Crescent
Mill Bank
D Slade Area
Including
Stafford Road
Hawden Road
Houselands Road
Fosse Road
Lodge Road
The Avenue
Havelock Road
Lansdowne Road
The Crescent
E1 Tonbridge School
Including
High Street (m)
E2 Shipbourne Road
Including
Auburnham Road
Manor Grove
Old London Road
London Road (e)
Portman Park (w)
E3 Dry Hill Park Road
Including
Dry Hill Road
Golden Road
Mill Road
Heath Road
Sidley Park Road (w)

Map 2
**Design Guidelines**

- The scale, massing, height, form, alignment, density and layout of any new development should respect the character of the area within which it is proposed as described in this Appraisal. Within the central sub areas of the High Street, Bank Street and the Slade, Lyons Crescent and Shipbourne Road, development should be tightly arranged to adjoining buildings and close to the road with narrow frontages to give a clear vertical emphasis. Buildings should generally be 3 – 4 storeys in height although parts would only suit 2-3 storeys. This would also be appropriate in the Riverside Walk sub area. Within the Dry Hill Park Road sub area, development should be more loose-knit, set back from the road and giving space around buildings for substantial landscaping. Within the tight-knit domestic scale of the Slade and Mill Stream sub areas development is generally limited to 2 storeys in height.

- There are a number of isolated properties which are out of keeping with the general character of the Conservation Area. These properties may remain largely unchanged over time but there may be opportunities for new development. When assessing development proposals within the Conservation Area, the Borough Council will seek improvements to the character of the area by focusing on these areas of opportunity where new development should aim to enhance the character of the area through high quality design.

- Good quality design relies, amongst other things, on the choice and combination of materials. This is crucial to the success of a scheme. A richness of design and texture can be achieved through careful detailing and use of materials, and through a fine balance between variety and uniformity in a building or development. The number of different materials used should generally be kept to a minimum. New buildings should consist of materials which respect the character of the sub-area within which they are proposed. The materials listed in the Physical Fabric section and described in the relevant sub area section are appropriate.

- Extensions and new outbuildings should be well designed and be subordinate to the original building. Where buildings are set back a consistent distance from the street along a common building line the visual integrity of a whole street should not be compromised by porches or front extensions. For corner buildings, careful attention to the design of prominent side elevations will be necessary.

- It is important that new buildings respect the alignment of buildings in order to fit well within the local context. This not only applies to the front building line but also to the width of the development within the plot. In areas of loose-knit development such as the Dry Hill Park Road sub-area, there should be sufficient width within a plot to locate the building(s) and provide adequate separation between them. There are considerable pressures to maximise the use of sites but this should not be achieved at the cost of an erosion of the distinctive character of the sub area.

- Within the central sub areas and Dry Hill Park Road sub area, roofs should follow the rich and complex mix of roof forms, should be steeply pitched and should consist of peg or plain clay tiles. Within the smaller scale residential environments of the Slade and Mill Stream sub areas, unified, simple roof lines fronting the street should be protected from dormer windows and slate should be retained. Concrete tiles should not be used.

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**Origins and Development of the Settlement**

The name Tonbridge is derived from the Old English tun brycg which means ‘the bridge of, at, or near the manor or settlement. It is thought that the town evolved at a clearing in the great Andredsweald forest at a point where several tracks from the North Downs to the Weald met at a ford in the river Medway. The first bridge and church of St Peter and St Paul are thought to have been constructed between the 9th and 11th centuries.

After 1066, William 1 granted land in the Tonbridge Area to Richard FitzGilbert who built a Motte and Bailey castle to defend the river crossing. Tonbridge at this time was a small roadside town standing on the higher more defensible land to the north of the river. The only significant building south of the river was the Priory of St Mary Magdalene which was founded in 1192.

By the mid 13th century the castle had a sandstone three storey gatehouse and a high stone curtain wall. In addition, a defensive fosse was built around the north, west and east perimeters of the town. The wide ditch and bank started and ended at the river and enclosed the castle, church and main street. The Medway formed the southern defense for the town. The Gatehouse and sections of the castle wall and fosse still stand today.

Medieval development was enclosed within these defenses giving the town a compact form. It was only well into the post-medieval period that the settlement expanded beyond them. The High street formed the principal axis of the town. There were houses on each side of the High street from the Great Bridge to the North Gate with small side streets leading off to the east and west. The church, castle (which also served as the manor house) and Tonbridge School were the only stone buildings in the town. The settlement remained principally north of the river as the south side was still frequently flooded. There was a weekly market in the town and shops, inns and other trades based around agriculture, mills, cloth making and iron working became well established.

The market originally lay outside the castle gate between Bank Street and Castle Street. It flourished and in the 16th century the market place was moved to the east side of the High Street between East Street and Church Lane and houses and shops were built on the old site. The pens and stalls of the markets and fairs stood where the High Street broadens out by the Chequers Inn. The general market ceased in the early nineteenth century but a cattle market (granted in 1671) continued. Due to the congestion it caused it was relocated behind the Corn Exchange. The site is now being redeveloped.
In 1553 Andrew Judde, Master of the Skinners Company and Lord Mayor of London, founded and endowed a free grammar school at Tonbridge. The school buildings stand north of the town walls on the west of the High Street. Today it is a private school and the 19th Century Gothic frontage dominates the townscape of the upper High Street.

The earliest inns were established in the Tudor period, possibly as a result of the Priory ceasing to offer accommodation. During the 18th and 19th Centuries the number of inns increased rapidly. By 1672 Tonbridge had become a post town with a post master. It was on the main road from London to the coast and was also on the main postal route from London to France. Tonbridge was an important staging post for coaching and carrier services connecting between London, Hastings, Maidstone, the Wells, Brighton and Rye. However, road conditions were poor. The river at that time ran through five channels and the road ran over a series of hump-backed bridges across land that frequently flooded.

In 1740 the River Medway was made navigable and a town quay was constructed. The following year the Upper Medway Navigation company started to ship out timber and iron and bring back coal, stone, gravel and lime mainly to make bricks (with local clay) for the growing town. Tonbridge became the port for the upper reaches of the Medway and an important trading centre. Tonbridge formed the focus of a large agricultural hinterland and the town acted as a centre for processing and trading agricultural products.

During the 17th, 18th and early 19th centuries, many new buildings were constructed within the confines of the town defenses, particularly in the High Street, Bank Street and East Street, often replacing earlier structures or infilling gaps. Bricks were made from the good quality local clay and began to replace timber as the main building material in the town. The 18th century weather boarded wooden houses, shops and inns were either replaced with brick houses or had a ‘brick skin’ put over them and featured tiled roofs. Today large parts of the town feature mid 18th century exteriors enclosing internal structures dating from much earlier in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Rose and Crown which remains in the High Street was one such Tudor building which was given a brick frontage. The town began to expand beyond the Fosse. Much of the bank and ditch on the east side of the town was levelled and filled in, and houses were built along the Bordyke.

After the arrival of the railway in 1842 and a more direct line to London via Sevenoaks in 1868, there was rapid increase of housing and population. Tonbridge grew from what was predominantly a farming community and became a market town centre of commerce and light industry. Small terraced housing for the poor and light industry were built on the frequently flooded land to the south, while fine houses were built for the middle classes on the higher, drier land to the north and east. The demand for trade, shops, public buildings and services increased markedly. The Dry Hill Park suburban area and Slade community were built during the late 19th Century.

Tonbridge continued to grow in the 20th Century with the expansion of residential estates particularly to the north and east of the town. A trading estate developed on the low lying land east of the town centre.

**Enhancement of Medway Wharf Road and Town Lock**

The protection and enhancement of the riverside is a key issue for the Conservation Area. To the east of the Big Bridge there has been a lot of new development both north and south of the river. In order to improve public accessibility to, and the visual appearance of, this area the river bank and adjacent areas need attention.

The Council has approved an enhancement scheme for the Town Lock area which will provide an opportunity to significantly improve its appearance. The design will need to reflect the urban riverside and link areas together. As a major project it will need to set high standards of design and use of materials that others might follow.

It is being funded by a partnership between the Borough Council, the Environment Agency and developers of sites in Medway Wharf Road.

**Traffic**

A number of traffic calming measures have been introduced into the High Street and Dry Hill Park Road. As well as the shorter term opportunities for further traffic calming within the Market Quarter, there is a longer term proposal for the London Road – Hadlow Road link which aims to reduce traffic in the High Street by providing a more direct traffic link. The alignment is safeguarded but funding is required through the Local Transport Plan.

Following the introduction of the new road there may be opportunities for further traffic calming measures in the High Street.

There will be a need to ensure that the new road and design of the Shipbourne Road/ London Road junction do not detract from the character of the conservation area. Signage and street clutter should be kept to a minimum with any new street furniture selected from within the Borough Council’s Street Furniture and Surface Materials Guide.
During the 1960s, in an attempt to reduce traffic congestion, two rows of historic buildings had been demolished on the western side of the High Street just north of the Big Bridge and at the Bordyke junction. This raised awareness of the pressures and threats facing the historic town centre and in 1969, following the introduction of the Civic Amenities Act, Tonbridge Conservation Area was designated.

**Enhancement of Bank Street/ Castle Street area**

The Market Quarter is currently something of a backwater to the High Street and contains a number of vacant or underused buildings. The pedestrian environment is compromised by traffic and poor quality surfaces and the street furniture is uncoordinated. Following the completion of the Lansdowne Road Link Road, Castle Street and Bank Street will experience a reduction in traffic and there is a significant opportunity for a comprehensive enhancement scheme for this area bringing new life to old buildings and creating an attractive, pedestrian-friendly environment. Co-ordinated street furniture to include replacement lighting and seating should be introduced. A shared surface street with vehicles subordinate to the pedestrian should be created with a new public space created in front of the former fire station. The Borough Council will review the provision of public toilets in this area.

Once the Lansdowne Road Link is complete the Borough Council will cost a set of enhancement proposals as part of the works required to the public realm within the town centre and will seek contributions from development towards such improvements. Contributions resulting from development will be pooled in the Tonbridge Central Area Fund.

**Enhancement of the Fosse**

The historic Fosse, part of the town’s medieval defences, which has influenced the layout of the town so strongly has been submerged by development and self sown saplings and trees. Adjoining The Slade, boundary treatment of chespale fencing is also utilitarian.

The Borough Council will work with English Heritage, and through the development proposals encompassing the Fosse alignment (including those set out in the Central Area Action Plan), to bring forward proposals for improvements along the remaining visible lengths of the Fosse and will consider positioning uniquely designed metal plates to depict the original alignment of the former town boundary. An interpretive board should be placed at strategic points to explain the origins, position and influence of the Fosse in the development of Tonbridge. A trail of this unique feature may supplement visits to the motte and bailey and castle.