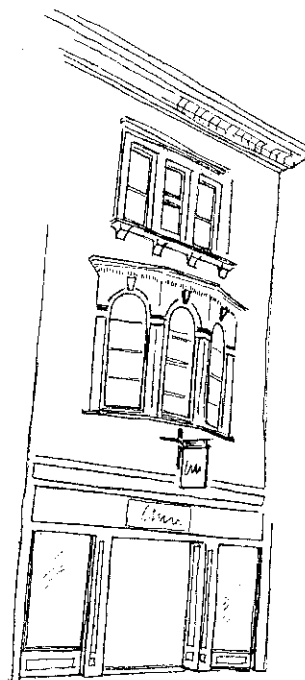


North Hertfordshire District Council



design guide  
for a  
shopfront



in  
Hitchin



## History

Hitchin is an important historic centre. The town has developed as a result of its market activities and retains much of its medieval street pattern and historic character. The designation of the centre as a Conservation Area and the wealth of buildings which have been "Listed" as being of architectural or historic importance is testament to its quality. Generally there is a uniformity of scale and building materials giving the town an attractive, intimate quality that is welcoming to visitors.

## Design Advice

North Hertfordshire District Council is keen to retain and improve Hitchin's attractiveness and the design and maintenance of shopfronts makes a very important contribution to the character of the town.

## Purpose

The purpose of this design guide is to provide advice to people building new shops or who may be thinking of changing their existing shopfronts, and to explain the importance of new developments being in keeping with the character of the town centre and enhancing its appearance. It is equally relevant to any commercial premises with a display window and/or fascia sign, such as banks, building societies, etc.

The advice in this guide is supplementary Planning Guidance and has been adopted by the District Council.

## Conservation Area

The Council has a duty to conserve and enhance the appearance of the Conservation Area which means that many of the designs for shopfronts and advertisements, found in enclosed shopping centres and larger town centres, are not appropriate.

## Planning Requirements

Any material alteration to shopfronts and the erection of signs are likely to require both Planning Permission and Advertisement Consent from the Council. If the building is "Listed" it may also require Listed Building Consent. Regard must be paid to Planning Policy Guidance PPG15 and in particular Annex C. It is therefore advisable to contact the Council's Planning Services Department, whose Officers will be happy to discuss problems and ideas, before an application is submitted.

The Council has the support of the local community in promoting improvement to Hitchin's town centre. This design advice is consistent with policies in the Local Plan, and will be used by the Council in considering Planning Applications, and where appropriate, Listed Building Consent and Advertisement Consent.

## design of Shopfronts

Any proposed shopfront should be in accordance with the policy on shopfronts within the current District Local Plan.

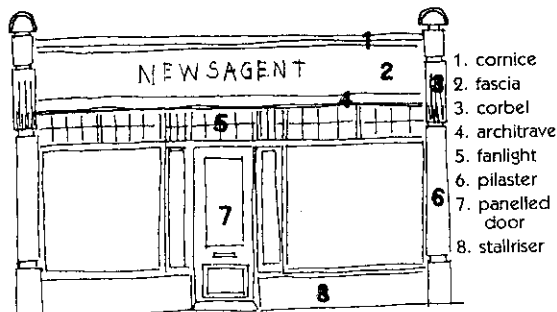
When considering a shopfront installation or replacement the designer is faced with many different and conflicting interests. The diversity in the types and scale of shops, the variety of retailing methods, and the age and character of the building into which the shopfront is being fitted, all have an effect on the design. Whilst the Council does not wish to restrict new design to imitations of past styles, it does expect the basic architectural principles set out in the following paragraphs to be adhered to.

### a) Keep the best shopfronts

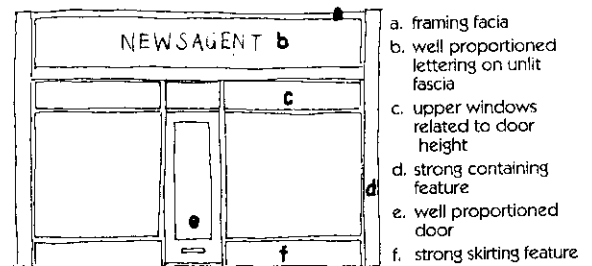
If a property already contains an original shopfront of quality, preference should be given to its retention.

### b) Retain existing features

Original features such as pilasters should be retained where possible, especially where they are uncovered as a result of alteration or removal of a recent shopfront. Where a new shop is being created shopfront designers should aim to include at least some of those features illustrated in the sketch below:



It should be remembered that period style shopfronts may be inappropriate in the context of some modern buildings. In such cases the classic components can be successfully interpreted in a contemporary scheme as follows:



### c) Design in context

The design and materials used should be compatible with the character of the area as a whole. Where adjacent shopfronts are appropriately designed, a new shopfront should be in sympathy with particular attention paid to fascia lines, stallriser heights, bay widths, materials and colours. Also care must be taken to respect the design of the building into which the shopfront is fitted.

Where possible, shopfronts in buildings designed as a group should be treated similarly and shared features retained or restored. A parade should be considered as a whole to achieve harmonious detail and lettering, although this does not mean that individual shops should all look the same.

### d) Pay attention to scale

Hitchin's shopping streets are mostly domestic in scale and character with buildings of generally two and three storeys. The narrow roads and pavements give the streets a pronounced vertical emphasis which is reinforced by the narrow frontages.

The trend towards larger retail units can have a dramatic and detrimental effect on the scale and character of the street scene. The sheer size of the

building, together with the pronounced horizontal emphasis created by long deep fascias, vast areas of plate glass, and blank facades above can seriously disrupt the rhythm and balance of the street.



When designing new shopfronts for big stores, therefore, it is important to avoid over-large, out of scale components on the elevation. This can be achieved by colonnading which sets the shopfront back behind a series of arches and allows large areas of glass to be suitably hidden from direct view. Where a shop is to occupy more than one existing building it can be achieved by preserving vertical sub-divisions through the retention of dividing piers and pilasters and by respecting differences in adjacent fascias and stallrisers. Individual fascia boards should be retained.

#### e) Materials

Materials should be compatible with the rest of the building and the immediate locality. Traditional materials such as natural stone, tiling or wood should be used wherever possible to maintain the established character of the town centre. The use of modern reflective materials is rarely appropriate in Hitchin. In locations where aluminium is selected, bronze or brown surface finishes are preferred.

Careful consideration should be given to the selection of architectural ironmongery such as door handles and letter boxes.

#### f) Security

Closed Circuit Television surveillance (CCTV), introduced into the town in May 1997, should reduce the need for high security measures. Where there is a need to increase the security of a shop in the Conservation Area or on a Listed Building, security measures may be permitted. On Listed Buildings, external steel roller shutters are generally unsuitable and traditional timber shuttered, laminated glass and internal chain-link screens are modern alternatives. Traditional stallrisers are an effective deterrent to "ram-raiders", as are small shop windows between masonry piers. These considerations should also be the first approach to designs for non-listed buildings, particularly where they are related to historic buildings and/or important street scenes. Exceptionally, where external shutters may be considered, they must be sensitively designed in relation to the building and the street scene.

### shop signs and Advertisements

Advertisements and shop signs should be in accordance with the policy on Advertisements in the current District Local Plan. The multiplicity of signs and advertisements on many shopfronts creates an unsightly clutter in the town centre. It is better to aim for simple, well designed signs which are attractive in themselves rather than rely on size and number to attract attention. The following principles should be adhered to in the design of signs and advertisements:

#### a) Fascia signs

Generally the main sign on shop premises is the fascia sign. The dimensions and design of the fascia board and lettering on it are of critical importance to the success of the shopfront. As a rough guide a fascia depth of approximately one

fifth of the total shopfront height, with lettering of up to 60% of the fascia depth, generally works well.

Original fascia boards, surrounds, and associated mouldings and beadings should be retained where possible. In the case of an existing shopfront, with an acceptable fascia panel, the new sign should be painted onto it or individual letters fixed to it rather than erecting a new fascia board. The fascia sign should state only the name and trade of the premises and should not carry extraneous advertisements.

Materials and colour for the fascia should be carefully selected and should be compatible with the rest of the building. Large plastic box fascias will not normally be considered favourably on traditional buildings. New fascias should line up with adjacent traditional or well designed ones. A gap should be left between the top of the sign and lowest part of the first floor window sill and care taken to avoid obscuring architectural details such as string course, friezes, cornices, etc.,

#### b) Hanging signs

Traditional hanging signs were usually made by craftsmen. These were attractive hand painted and



illustrated signs hung from elaborate wrought iron or cast iron brackets. These signs were a source of pride and added colour and interest to the street scene. Particularly good examples are the inn signs and those associated with certain trades such as jewellers, barbers and apothecaries. Hanging or projecting signs are desirable if neat and compact in design and sited at fascia level. Usually only one hanging sign per shop is appropriate. The style of the sign should complement the fascia and brackets should be of a simple design in keeping with the overall street scene. Projecting box signs, particularly if internally illuminated, are generally unsuitable in Hitchin.

#### c) Illuminated signs

Illuminated signs should be designed with care. Individually illuminated letters can be acceptable if designed sensitively but illuminated box signs will be resisted within Hitchin Conservation Area.

Front lit fascias can be illuminated by either swan neck lamps or concealed neon tubes. They need to be carefully designed so that the spread of light and level of illumination is controlled.

## canopies

On Listed Building and buildings in the Conservation Area canopies can add an attractive feature to a



shopfront if well designed. The traditional shop canopy is the straight, canvas, fully retractable type, mounted on a roller. PVC covered canopies are not considered appropriate in Hitchin.

Varieties of pattern and colour are encouraged, where they are compatible with the character of the building and its location. Fancy edging to canopies is inappropriate.

## **planting**

Well tended planting features such as window boxes, hanging baskets or boxes containing dwarf trees or hardy shrubs can make attractive features. It is important that they are well maintained and do not cause inconvenience to pedestrians or obstruct the public highway. They can be fixed with simple brackets in sympathetic materials.

## **corner sites**

Shops on corner sites have great visual impact in a shopping street, the double aspect should be retained wherever possible.

## **access**

When designing new units or installing new shopfronts, the design should take account of special access requirements for people with restricted mobility. Entrances to shops should avoid steps. If the shop floor level is not flush with the pavement then a suitable ramp should be constructed. Consideration should also be given to the surface material to ensure it is not slippery or uneven.

You are advised to contact the Access Officer at North Hertfordshire District Council on (01462) 474508 to discuss requirements. Under the Disabilities Discrimination Act it is the responsibility of individual shopkeepers to ensure that their building is accessible to all users.

## **planning permission**

Any alteration to shopfronts and the installation of signs is likely to require both Planning Permission and Advertisement Consent, and may require Listed Building Consent, from the Local Planning Authority which is North Hertfordshire District Council. Applications should be submitted to:

Head of Planning Services  
North Hertfordshire District Council  
Council Offices, Gernon Road  
Letchworth, Hertfordshire SG6 3JF

Discussions prior to the submission of planning applications is encouraged. Please contact one of the Hitchin Planning Officers on (01462) 474209.

## **check list for applicants**

1. Always establish early contact with the Planning Services Department before submitting detailed proposals.
2. Establish whether Planning Permission, Advertisement Consent or Listed Building Consent is required.
3. Establish whether the site is within a Conservation Area.
4. Always look to good existing examples for a key to the design of new shopfronts and signs.
5. Avoid standard design solutions - ensure proposals reflect and complement the existing character of an area.
6. Any application submitted should include accurate elevational drawings of the shopfront, both existing and proposed. It would greatly assist consideration if adjoining shopfronts were also included.

## design guide

The purpose of this guide is to inform and encourage rather than restrict prospective applicants. It is hoped that it will result in improved designs being submitted for shopfronts and signs.

The Council has duties to improve the quality of the environment. It will therefore refuse inappropriate proposals in order to prevent shops and shopping areas in general from being adversely affected by poor design. This will help ensure the attractiveness of the town centre and therefore help sustain the viability of local businesses.



Planning Services  
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