

Midhurst Town Centre Improvement Study

Chichester District Council



West Sussex County Council



Midhurst Town Council

Foreword

Like many other rural market towns throughout the UK, Midhurst is affected by social and economic change. Significantly it is the change in retail behaviour, new forms of retail and different consumer expectations, which reflect most on a town's character and prosperity. In addition, society is more mobile than it was fifty years ago, so today a small rural town like Midhurst will be in competition with neighbouring towns instead of being able to coexist happily as it may have done in the past. This is certainly the case with Midhurst, given its proximity to Chichester, Petersfield, Haslemere and Guildford.

Therefore, this study is a positive step towards providing the means to allow Midhurst to address these issues, by engaging the wider community and to articulate their views and ideas.

Following the publication of this study, public meetings will be held as part of the community consultation. It is the intention to then form an action group to take the basis of this study and turn it in to a five-year plan. The ultimate aim being to improve Midhurst physically and nurture prosperity.

Having successfully carried out a similar study in Selsey in 2005, Chichester District Council initiated this study with the support of Midhurst Town Council, West Sussex County Council and Midhurst Economic Partnership.

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Cowdray Ruins, Midhurst



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Aims

The Midhurst Town Centre Improvement Study commissioned in October 2007 follows four important documents, which set out to record the external drivers affecting the district, and in the case of the Midhurst Town Plan and the CACI report understand internal opportunities. The studies were:

- The Chichester District Local Plan (1999)
- Retailing in Chichester District (1999)
- Midhurst Town Plan (2006)
- Midhurst Strategy and Sustainable Opportunities – (2007) CACI

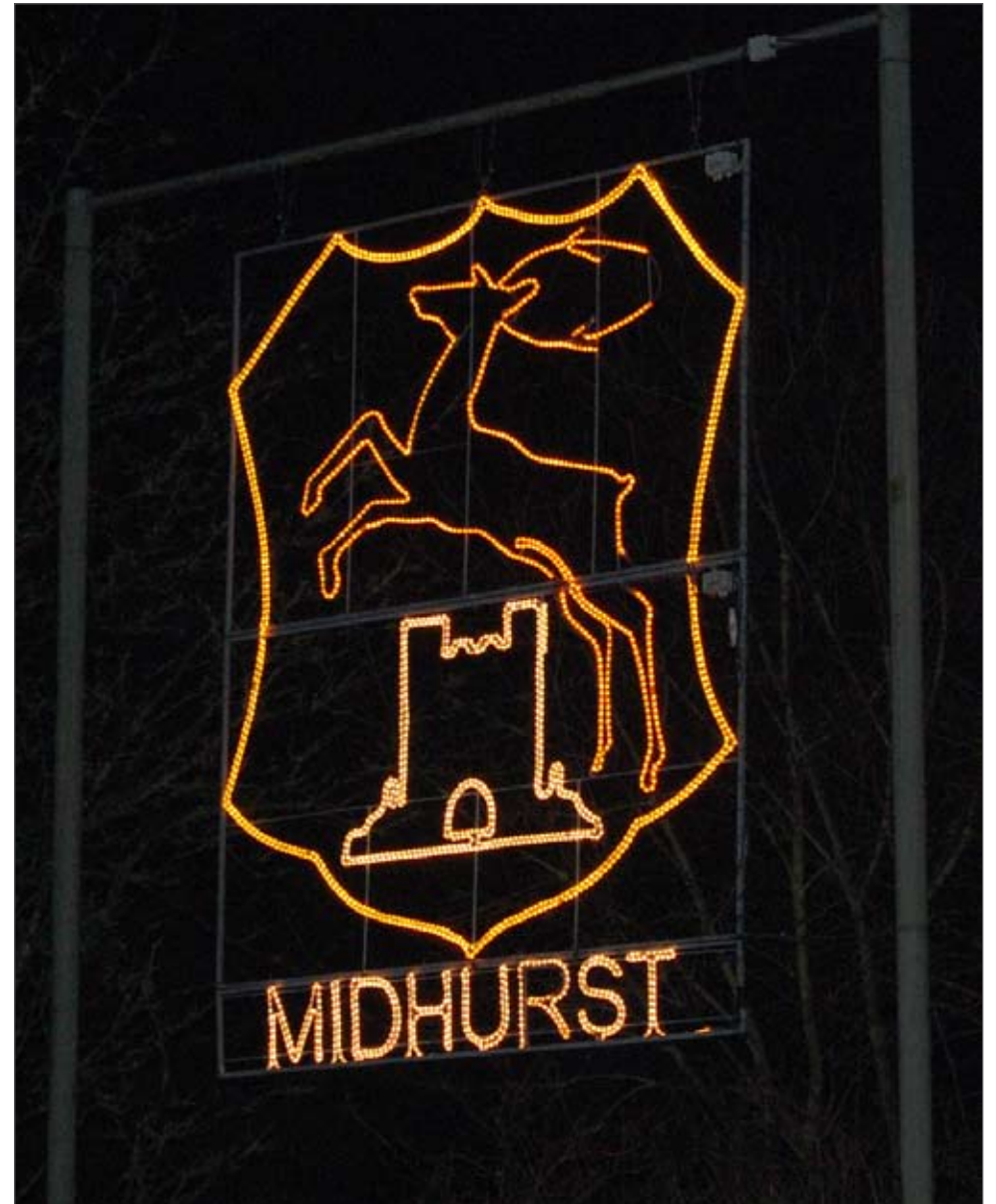
The main aims of this study however, are to identify ways to improve the economic prosperity of the town by addressing the retail environment and the underlying issues, which determine the retail mix and quality. The study will make a number of proposals, including ways of enhancing the quality of the public realm and building on Midhurst's historic character.

All of the proposals resulting from this study will require further development and consultation, possibly through the appointment of specialist consultants, contractors and suppliers. Any proposal that is accepted will also require approvals from relevant authorities as well as securing necessary funding.

The aim of implementing the proposals is to reverse the decline of retail in the town centre. Then if successful, other improvements will spread out beyond the initial study area. However for the initiative to succeed, it will require involvement and a combined effort from Midhurst's active community and associated organisations.

The approach adopted for the Midhurst Town Centre Improvement Study has been successfully applied to Selsey. As a result of carrying out a similar study in 2005, a steering group was formed from local residents, businesses and members of the Town, District and County Council to develop a five-year action plan. Since then a number of initiatives and improvements have started to emerge.

However, whilst the process can apply to both Midhurst and Selsey, they are different in a number of distinct ways. Therefore the response and outcomes will also be different.



Midhurst welcome sign - North Street, Midhurst

Brief and scope of work

The primary focus of this study is to pull together the recommendations of past studies, to draw in opinions and suggestions from the business and residential communities and then to identify viable measures, which will support and promote improvements within Midhurst town centre.

To ensure the process has been informed and the proposals are viable, the study has been completed in three phases:

Survey – To visually record the overall condition of the study area, assessing and commenting on the quality of the built environment and identifying any specific issues that need addressing. We have also reviewed past studies and other proposals such as; the Environmental Improvements - Market Square and the redevelopment of the Grange Centre.

Consultation – A vital element of the study is the gathering of information and opinions from residents, businesses, community groups, Town Councillors, community leaders, members of the District Council and members of West Sussex County Council. Not only does this serve as a source of local thinking and preference but it also acts to engage the community at the beginning of the process and helps sow the seed for future involvement.

Proposals – Building on the survey and consultation processes, a preliminary phase of work has been undertaken resulting in a range of proposals aimed at improving the prosperity of the town.

The proposals fall into three groups; the first group looks at ways to improve the retail economy, the second looks at developing a clear identity for Midhurst and the third is more concerned with the management and co-ordination of Midhurst. In each case, proposals at this stage are recommendations and can be seen listed as a matrix on pages 49 to 51. Where possible, proposals are supported with diagrams, plans, illustrations or visualisations to communicate standards and design intent. Many proposals are indicative and shall require full development and further consideration.



St. Mary Magdalene & St. Denys, Parish Church, Midhurst



South Pond, Midhurst

Context

Midhurst is a small market town located on the river Rother on the northern edge of the Chichester district of West Sussex, England. In the 2001 census the parish covered 333 hectares and had 2,327 households with a total population count of 4,889.

Two main roads dissect the town and merge along Rumbolds Hill and North Street to form the main High Street. The A272 runs East-West and the A286 runs North-South. Midhurst's railway station closed in 1964 under the Beeching reforms, so its only transport link is by road.

Although Midhurst has a ruin of a Norman Castle, it is best known for the Cowdray Estate and the ruins of the Tudor Cowdray House, built around 1520 and destroyed by fire in 1793. The ruins have recently undergone restoration and reopened as a visitor attraction in Spring 2007. The Cowdray Estate is one of the principle landlords, owning many cottages and other premises including shops in the town.

Midhurst has a designated conservation area and over one hundred listed buildings which contribute to its historic character.

Midhurst Grammar School is situated opposite the ruins at the northern end of the high street. Founded in 1672, notable alumni include HG Wells, who also worked in a chemist shop on Church Hill - commemorated by a blue plaque.

Cowdray Park hosts a famous annual polo competition, the Gold Cup, which is often attended by members of the Royal family. The Cowdray estate has a golf course and is home to both rugby and cricket clubs. At the southern end of the town, The Grange Centre offers leisure facilities including a gym, squash and aerobics. Set close to South pond, it is soon to be redeveloped in a new location closer to South pond – thereby improving the adjacent car park and creating a more active link with the old town.



Views of North Street, Midhurst 1900's - images supplied by www.oldukphotos.com



Context

In addition to the studies mentioned earlier, others have been undertaken to highlight specific issues within Midhurst:

- Chichester Local District Plan (1999 – policy P6)
- Midhurst conservation area character appraisal (2000)
- Chichester Area Transport Plan (2006)
- Mott MacDonald parking study (2006, February)
- Environmental Improvements, Market Square, Midhurst (2006, March)
- Mott MacDonald parking study (2006, June)
- Midhurst Town Plan (2006, July)
- CACI strategy and sustainable opportunities report – Midhurst retail opportunities (2007, January)
- An economic impact study of the affect of car parking charges at Midhurst in West Sussex (2007, February)





Survey

Scope

The study covers a number of specific issues across an area, which runs north along A272/A286 from Bepton Road in the south to the Causeway to the north. Then east along West Street to Market Square and through Church Hill to Knockhundred Row.

As described earlier, Midhurst has a historic character and a pleasant setting, which could be described as quaint. Despite this however, a number of factors prevail which give rise to the perception of decline. Some of these issues are visible and are directly connected with the quality and dilapidation of the built environment/public realm. Whilst other issues include town centre management, the changing patterns of retail and other socioeconomic drivers such as demographics. To provide a more coordinated and consolidated approach to support the local economy and enhance the built environment, the survey sets out to record the overall condition of the town centre under the following headings:

Public realm - To assess the current state of the various elements of the public realm and provide a record of the type and condition.

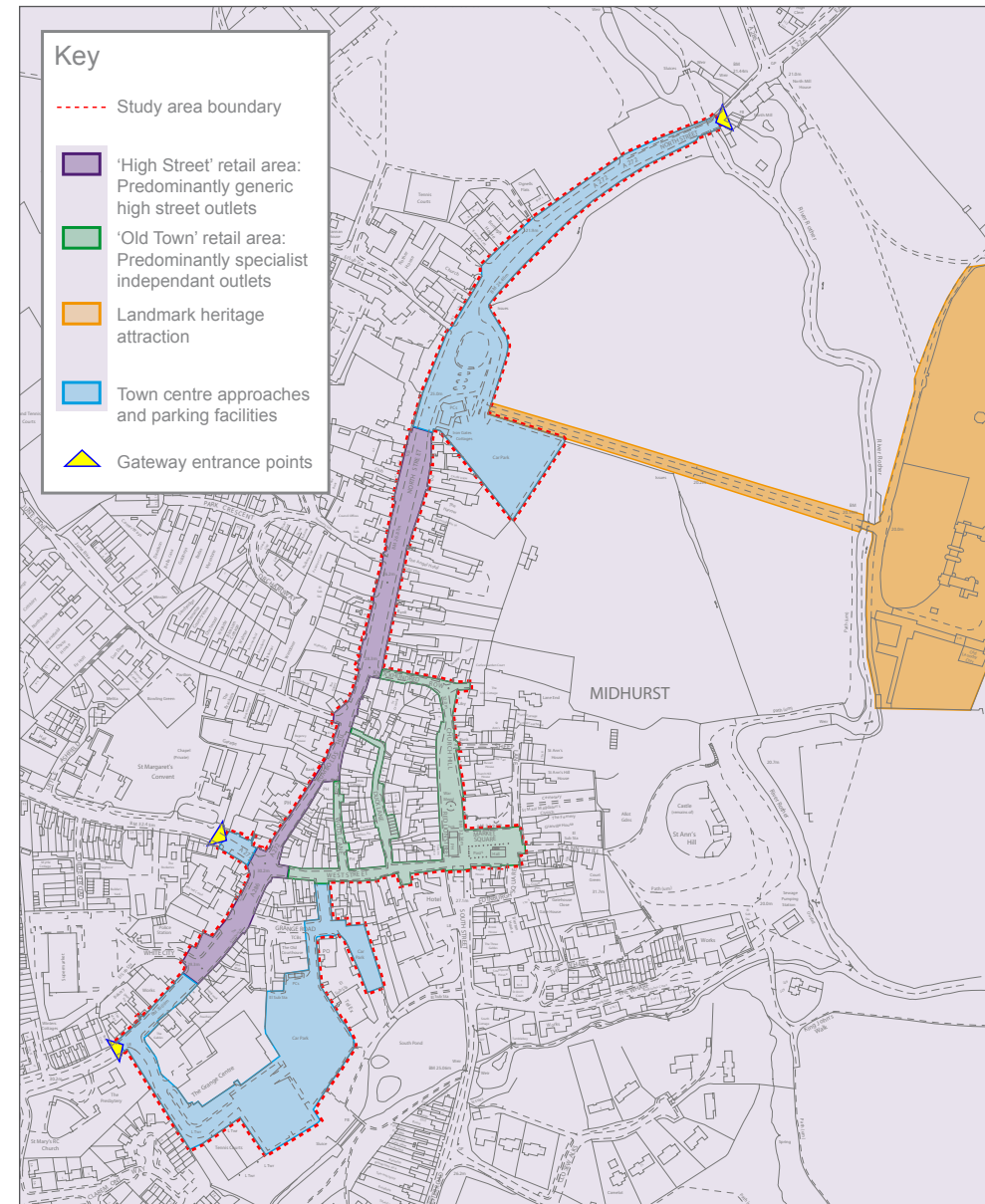
Shop fronts and frontages - To record current conditions of shop fronts and frontages (the area between the shop front and the kerb line).

Traffic and Movement - To identify and record any issues relating to accessibility and movement in the town centre. It is important to understand the options available to traffic and pedestrians and the alternatives that they face.

Public Amenities - To identify the various public facilities and services available to the community.

Heritage - To establish the heritage offer of the town and assess the associated benefits or opportunities.

Planting and landscaping - To record the current provisions for soft landscaping within the town centre.



Study area definition map

Method

The current quality, appearance and condition of Midhurst town centre directly influence the user experience and greatly affects the appeal of the town. Particular issues were highlighted by previous studies and plans, which provided essential background information on a number of issues.

The study area as described under 'Scope' is shown on page 9. In general, retail in Midhurst is divided into two main areas; 'High Street' (North Street) where primary retail operates, and the 'Old Town' around Market Square and the Church, where the narrow cobbled streets defines the historic setting with specialist and independent retailers.

Working under the headings mentioned earlier, each aspect has been photographed and notes made to record the aspect, condition and opportunity. We have also explored different user scenarios arriving through different entry points, from the north, south and west. One important aspect to consider here is the permeability of the town and how easy it is to move and navigate from place to place.



View north from Rumbolds Hill, Midhurst

Findings

The study area predominantly features businesses although there are pockets of residential as well, notably in the 'Old Town' area. Retail spreads across the study area with generic high street retail located in North Street and more specialist independent retailers situated along Rumbolds Hill and throughout the 'Old Town'.

The main High Street runs down North Street, along the A272 and features a reasonable mix of retail including several national banks, Loch Fyne restaurant and the recently opened Tesco Express. The highway and footways widen out as the road descends from Rumbolds Hill and becomes North Street. This width provides on-street loading and disabled parking and gives the High Street a more open feel. The merging of the A272 and the A286 along Rumbolds Hill and North Street subjects the route to continual high volumes of traffic including a considerable number of HGVs and other large vehicles.



View of North Street, Midhurst

Findings: Public Realm

The overall quality of the public realm within the study area is generally of an acceptable standard. The older, varied architecture in the town centre lifts its appearance by providing a historic context for the public space.

There are however a few aspects of the public realm that suffer from lack of consistency; the paving is uncoordinated with no predominant scheme in place. Market Square, Edinburgh Square along with areas of Church Hill and North Street feature cobbles which help to enhance the historic context around the town centre. However, they create accessibility issues with an uneven surface that can be hard to negotiate for wheelchairs or those with restricted mobility. They are also subject to substandard remedial works which detract greatly from the appearance of the town. There are areas of footway that have been resurfaced with Tarmacadam; these are unsightly and need to be repaired with the correct materials.

Other areas of the town centre feature Staffordshire Blue paving bricks, limestone slab and red brick pavements in small quantities. A map detailing the traditional paving materials is shown on page fourteen of the Midhurst Conservation and Character Appraisal, 2000. Conventional concrete slabs have been used elsewhere and a proportion of the footway on the East side of Church Hill has recently been resurfaced using a light, irregular paving. Although this may have been chosen to improve accessibility to the church, it is not necessarily fitting to the surrounding area.

The town features minimal street furniture with benches on North Street, around the South pond and at the entrance to the public library. These vary in type and condition, the example from North Street shown below is appropriate to the town centre. Several bicycle racks around the town are in need of replacement.



Examples of substandard footway remedial works and footways requiring maintenance



Bench - North Street, Midhurst

Findings: Shop fronts and frontages

The quality of shop fronts within Midhurst is generally good. The majority of traders, including the nationals present in the town, have respected the style of premises they occupy and opted for appropriate shop fronts. A handful of notable independent traders have employed very high levels of quality and detail in their shop front designs, helping to enhance the character of the town.

However, there are a few specific exceptions where the design and the quality of finish are particularly poor. Several shops feature undesirable backlit box signs on the main fascia and a small number are in a poor state of repair, but the main problem is the increase in vacant premises. There are currently seven within the study area and they have a negative impact on the appearance of the town. As a result of being vacant, they are poorly maintained and the empty windows blight the local retail landscape.

In general most shop fronts are reasonably well maintained, and although West Sussex County Council's responsibility extends from the highway to the building line, some traders also maintain the footway outside their premises. Basic daily cleaning makes a difference to the appearance of the frontage and should be encouraged throughout the town. The varied mix and quality of paving is the main factor, which impacts upon frontage quality. A consistent and consolidated scheme would improve the quality of the public realm.



West Street, Midhurst

Findings: Traffic and movement

Congestion in Midhurst is a major issue as mentioned in the introduction to this section. The local perception is that it is an acute problem, although generally, traffic flows through the town with only minimal disruption (except when deliveries take place).

The historic pinch point located at Rumbolds Hill, occurs as a result of increasing traffic volumes over the past century which are now exposing old infrastructure as inadequate to current need. Buildings line either side of the route and so widening the highway is not a realistic option. The highway is only just wide enough for two cars to pass and so drivers naturally adopt a 'give and take' approach, which frequently leads to queues in both directions.

Delivery vehicles stopping and loading on the main highway along North Street often exacerbate congestion. Whilst loading bays are provided along the high street, parked cars regularly occupy them. There is currently minimal on-street parking enforcement in Midhurst, which leads to drivers parking illegally on a regular basis. In addition summer events in Midhurst and at Goodwood create localised congestion as very high volumes of traffic pass through the town.

The proposal of a link road or bypass in Midhurst has been discussed for many years and has divided opinions across the community as to the benefits and drawbacks. It is important to appreciate that there are two separate proposals; one is a link road, which would divert traffic around the High Street and the second is a bypass to divert traffic around the town completely. Being such a contentious issue, there are four important aspects, which need to be established and understood:



Views of the pinch point and respective footways - Rumbolds Hill, Midhurst

- The desire within the community to divert traffic using either a relief road or bypass
- The affect on the town in terms of congestion and the impact upon the retail environment
- The availability of funding to implement any such proposal
- The possibility of a relief road to divert large vehicles only

Addressing these issues does not fall within the scope of this study although it is essential to monitor the situation and reassess proposals that may be influenced by new developments.

Wayfinding provision in Midhurst town centre is sporadic with finger posts in questionable locations. Although 'traditional' in style, they do not 'interpret' Midhurst effectively, and guide visitors to attractions, shops and amenities. Both of the main car parks have information boards but they are not always maintained with current information.

Accessibility is generally acceptable apart from the pinch point at Rumbolds Hill as mentioned earlier. Due to the age of some premises, they do not easily provide disabled access. Cobbled surfaces and poorly maintained footways are an issue, especially in some areas of the old town, which are in need of maintenance.



Findings: Public amenities

The public library is situated at the top of Knockhundred Row in a historic 16th century building. The library provides access to the West Sussex resource archive, fax services, internet access and photocopying. It is open from Monday to Saturday and is free to join.

The Grange Leisure Centre is towards the southern end of the town centre, the entrance is on the A286 just south of the junction with the A272. Its facilities include a fitness suite, two large sports halls, outside tennis courts, badminton courts, squash courts, a sauna, a spa, snooker, function rooms and meeting rooms.

Midhurst has two main car parks, North Street Car Park which is located by the bus station and The Grange Car Park which is next to the leisure centre and the South Pond. Both car parks are free with no parking restrictions or charges. The North Street car park services the main high street and the Cowdray Ruins heritage attraction.

Public toilet facilities are adjacent to the bus station at the North Street car park entrance. These comprise of four individual unisex toilets including disabled and baby changing facilities. All of these facilities are free to the general public.

Midhurst Tourist Information Centre, located on North Street, provides services and information to visitors and residents. The facility is open Monday to Saturday and can provide information on accommodation bookings, local attractions, exhibitions, local retail, eating out and local events. The centre also sells a range of souvenir products.

Chichester District Council have an office on North Street adjacent to the bus station and Midhurst Town Council operate from Capron House, North Street. A range of services are provided from these sites including adult and community learning.



Midhurst library - Knockhundred Row, Midhurst



Midhurst Tourist Information Centre - North Street, Midhurst

Findings: Heritage

Midhurst is a town rich in local heritage and should benefit from a major landmark heritage attraction: Cowdray Ruins. The ruins are now into their second season having opened to the public in March 2007. Open to visitors from March through to October, Cowdray Ruins enables visitors to experience the remains of what was once the home of the Montague family.

The Midhurst Society is a registered charity which aims to preserve, protect and improve local features of historic public interest. The Society attracts a large amount of community involvement with over 400 members and meets regularly for discussions, lectures and social functions. The Society publishes a biannual magazine: Midhurst Heritage and a heritage trail leaflet.

Midhurst is linked to HG Wells who attended Midhurst Grammar School and worked in what was once a chemist located on Church Hill. Both premises are identified by a blue plaque which provides details of the historic interest



Cowdray ruins - Midhurst



English Heritage Blue plaque - Church Hill, Midhurst

Findings: Planting and landscaping

The study area features several sections of planting that are prominent from spring through to autumn. There is minimal provision for winter planting.

Hanging baskets are hung from lampposts in North Street which help to enhance the appearance of the High Street from late spring to early autumn.

The South pond, adjacent to The Grange car park and Chichester Road is an area for public use. The grounds surrounding the pond are planted and provide the only open public space in the town.

Further planting is located on and around the Bus station roundabout with plants, flowers and trees providing the backdrop for the illuminated town crest sign which marks the northern boundary of the high street.

Opportunities for appropriate planting in and around the town centre should be utilised where possible. The drinking trough seen below could have been used for planting as opposed to cobbles.



Planting - South Pond, Midhurst



Drinking trough - North Street, Midhurst - filled with cobbles to combat abuse