

# Dover Town Centre

## Conservation Area Character Appraisal

1. Dover Town Centre Conservation Area was first designated 19 February 1988.
  - 1.1. Under Section 69 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Local Planning Authorities have a duty to designate as Conservation Areas, *“Any areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance”*
  - 1.2. This Statement should be read in conjunction with the Dover District Local Plan (2002) and national planning policy guidance, especially PPG 15 “Planning and the Historic Environment” (1994).
  - 1.3. The Dover District Local Plan requires that “Character Assessments are drawn up for each conservation area. The assessment is based on certain criteria and is intended to be used to determine whether conservation area status is, and continues to be, appropriate.”

## **2. Location**

- 2.1. Map 1 shows the conservation area boundary.
- 2.2. Dover town centre is located in the river valley between Western Heights and Castle Hill. The valley of the River Dour forms the only gap in more than 20km of nearly vertical cliffs rising 100m or more. Dover also lies at the shortest crossing point between Britain and the continent and has served as a port for more than 2000 years. Castle Hill has been involved in the strategic defence of Dover as a port, dating from prehistoric times to the recent World Wars. The Western Heights has only been in use as a fortification since early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The town centre has consequently evolved in a narrow ribbon development on the lower ground, following the level ground and water source.
- 2.3. Dover Town Centre Conservation Area is centred around Cannon Street and Biggin Street, which today form the main commercial centre of Dover and run south east to north west. Biggin Street and Cannon Street themselves form historic links to the sea front through King Street and Bench Street to the south. To the north is High Street and Maison Dieu, a mediaeval hospital, which is now part of the Town Hall. To the south west of Cannon Street the conservation area boundary incorporates part of Worthington Street, Queens Gardens and New Street. Here it is bounded by York Street, which once containing rows of terraced houses, but now forms a major arterial route through the town. The north east boundary of the conservation area runs behind the buildings in Biggin Street and Cannon Street down to St Mary’s Church and church yard and stops short of Market Place at the south east end of Cannon Street.

### **3. Origins and development of the settlement of Dover**

- 3.1. Archaeological evidence suggests that that the River Dour opened into a wide estuary, that encroached considerably further in land than today.
- 3.2. Dover has acted as a gateway to England from pre-historic times. Its Roman forts, imposing mediaeval castle and later fortifications underline its strategic role.
- 3.3. Neolithic stone tools and Bronze Age artefacts have been found on the valley floor. An Iron Age hill fort was possibly built on the Eastern Heights, where the castle now stands.
- 3.4. During the Roman occupation Dover (or Dubris as it was known then) developed as a port and as a base for *Classis Britannica*, the Roman Fleet. Evidence of the town of Dubris were discovered in 1971 during major excavations to the west of the Market Square, prior to the redevelopment of war damaged property, the walls of a fort were discovered together with the remains of the now famous “painted house”. A later Saxon shore fort, which partly overlay the earlier one, was a defence against Germanic raids, which increased dramatically from the third century.
- 3.5. Despite raids over the centuries from main land Europe, Dover continued to develop as a prosperous town. From the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century major changes occurred with the growth in transport improving links to local towns as well as London. Trade and defence at the port once again improved and the town prospered as a result. At the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, major fortifications and associated accommodation were built in and around the town, especially at Western Heights, as a defence against a possible invasion by Napoleon.
- 3.6. The two World Wars focused significant attention onto Dover and the harbour was again armed. During this period the town suffered from significant hostile attack, with destruction of much of the old town, followed by significant redevelopment after the War.

### **4. Conservation Area Analysis**

- 4.1. Dover Town Centre Conservation Area contrasts strongly with the neighbouring Conservation Areas of the Western Heights and Dover Castle. It is an urban town centre location compared to historic fortifications and greenery set far above the town which have a significant visual impact on the atmosphere of the town below. As a town centre it has altered significantly over the years, reflecting the changing fortunes of the town.
- 4.2. Despite Dover’s long history, the majority of buildings that can be seen today in this particular area only date from Victorian, Edwardian and later periods. However these buildings generally follow earlier building lines and plot widths, which reveal that Cannon Street and Biggin Street are an established arterial route from the port to the rest of the country. The current buildings reflect a period when the town’s prosperity had improved again. This wealth is evident in

the high quality of architecture and rich detailing, which can still be seen in the upper storeys. There is only one Listed building, St Mary's Church, which dates from the 12<sup>th</sup> Century. Although much later, the majority of buildings are still of significant historic interest and retain most of the original detailing on the upper floors. As the buildings date from a similar period they give the area a cohesive character.

- 4.3. There is a strong relationship between Dover Town Centre and Dover Castle and Western Heights, which lie on high ground to either side of the valley and which can be appreciated from the long distance views up to these monuments. This gives a sense of the unique past of Dover, when the port was defended and the growth of the town extended between these two hills. Dover Castle in particular dominates the skyline, as it over looks the town.
- 4.4. Dover Town Centre Conservation Area can be divided into four key areas for analysis. See maps 2 and 3.

## **5. 1- Biggin Street and Cannon Street**

- 5.1. Biggin Street and Cannon Street form the main shopping precinct in Dover. Here, tall enclosing Victorian and Edwardian buildings are set within small groups or individual narrow frontages, within terraces. The majority of the buildings are set directly at the back of the pavement, and are typically four/five storeys in height, in Cannon Street, reducing to three storeys or less in Biggin Street. The scale of the buildings, even in relation to the width of the street, provides a high vertical backdrop and tight street enclosure. The roofs are not easily seen behind high parapets, but are mainly steeply pitched or mansard slate roofs with elaborate dormer windows which can be seen.
- 5.2. The land level increases gently from the Market Place up to Cannon Street and Biggin Street. Cannon Street heads north west, but veers towards the west at the junction with Biggin Street at St Mary the Virgin, thus slightly deflecting views. Cannon Street was widened in 1883 to ease traffic congestion. In 1894 nine shops were built on the east side of Cannon Street, following a competition for their design.
- 5.3. Although many properties were built in identical terraces, the plot widths for units at ground level are narrow. Only the national chain stores have spanned several units. At upper floor level there is a strong sense of rhythm, through repetition of window patterns and decoration.
- 5.4. For the most part, the height of the buildings restricts views out of the precinct, creating a tight street enclosure. However, the intersecting roads, such as Worthington Street, Pencester Road and New Street, punctuate the street allowing views out and up towards the raised land at Western Heights and Castle Hill. These green hills contrast strongly with the urban town centre. The restricted width along New Street provides a pinch point between Cannon Street and York Street beyond.

- 5.5. The ground floors of the buildings are in various commercial uses, typical of the town centre location. Approximately half the buildings provide either living accommodation or office space on the upper floors. The larger chain stores tend to be concentrated in Biggin Street and more specialist local stores in Cannon Street
- 5.6. Local materials in this area are predominantly red brick or decorative painted render with timber sash windows. Detailing is often highly decorative above ground floor level. Biggin Street and Cannon Street are pedestrianised, except for the northern end of Biggin Street, where Pencester Road and Worthington Street join Cannon Street.

## **6. 2 -St Mary's Church and the War Memorial**

- 6.1. A second identifiable area is that around St Mary's Church and the War Memorial. The church, a Grade II\* Listed Building, dates from the 12th Century and forms an important focal building within the Conservation Area, particularly its impressive flint and stone tower fronting Cannon Street.
- 6.2. The church is angled at 45 degrees to Cannon Street. It is set back from the road within a grassed churchyard enclosed within tall iron railings, this breaks the tight street enclosure and building line of the main street. This contrast to the main streets gives the area a special sense of place. The churchyard is also bounded on two sides by narrow pedestrian paths, Dieu Stone Lane and St. Mary's Passage, which give a noticeable change in scale, compared to the width of Cannon They also give a pinch point between the open space around the church and the open space of Pencester Gardens and Stembrook car park beyond.
- 6.3. This area is more open in character than Cannon Street. The area of open space around the church allows views out towards Stembrook car park and up towards Dover Castle, which is set high above the town, adding a sense of drama to the precinct.
- 6.4. The open spaces and trees around St Mary's Church are of significant townscape value.

## **7. 3- Worthington Street and Queen's Gardens**

- 7.1. The area including Worthington Street and Queens Gardens can also be identified as having a distinct character within the conservation area, with smaller scale properties on the fringe of the main shopping area.
- 7.2. Worthington Street is a wide road, but only permits traffic, one way. The buildings are predominantly three storeys, plus attic, with visible chimneystacks. The roofs are steeply pitched slate roofs behind parapets with small arched roofed dormer windows. The ground floors are again in commercial use with potential living accommodation or office space in the upper floors. Although still attractive, the decoration on the buildings is

noticeably less ornate than in Cannon Street and Biggin Street, reflecting its status as secondary location off the main precinct.

- 7.3. Queens Gardens leads off Worthington Street and contains terraces of small scale brick warehouses leading to a short terrace of narrow, two storey Victorian cottages. Some of the commercial buildings are now standing vacant. New Street leads off Queens Gardens and links back around to Cannon Street. It is a narrow street and does not contain any significant building frontages except the Prince of Orange PH, which is a large and decorative building and is visible from York Street.
- 7.4. Although this part of the conservation area is somewhat run down, there have been a number of recent applications for redevelopment and new housing units which suggest that the situation may be improving.

## **8. 4 -Market Place**

- 8.1. A final distinct area can be identified at the southern end of Cannon Street before it opens up to the Market Place. Market Place is enclosed by buildings on all four sides, but is intersected by Castle Street and King Street, giving it an open character, with many views into and out of the space. Although it is not actually within the Conservation Area, Market Place forms a natural terminus beyond the end of the conservation area and provides a large plaza for people to meet and rest. The atmosphere changes from the tight street enclosure of Cannon Street to a large public open space, with seats on the periphery and a large fountain in the centre. Not only does it allow for a change in atmosphere from the precinct, but it also serves as an entrance to the conservation area, funnelling pedestrians into Cannon Street.

## **9. Negative aspects**

- 9.1. There are a few modern buildings within the conservation area that do not reflect the established pattern of buildings, both in their use of materials and pattern of the fenestration. However, their layout does follow the typical tight street enclosure and building line and so, at first glance, these buildings are not particularly conspicuous.
- 9.2. A more noticeable change at ground floor level is the influx of modern shop fronts and signs, often spanning more than one unit. Frequently these reflect the corporate image of the company rather than complementing the style of the building. Gradually this has resulted in the ground floor of the buildings appearing visually divorced from the upper storeys, in character, design and proportions. The erosion of historic character tends to focus attention downward towards these modern alterations and away from the impressive architecture above.
- 9.3. The increased demand for security measures has led to an increase in the number of roller shutters over the shop fronts. These are most obvious at night when their appearance often creates an undesirable impression of fortification. A guidance note on Security Shutters has now been introduced which gives

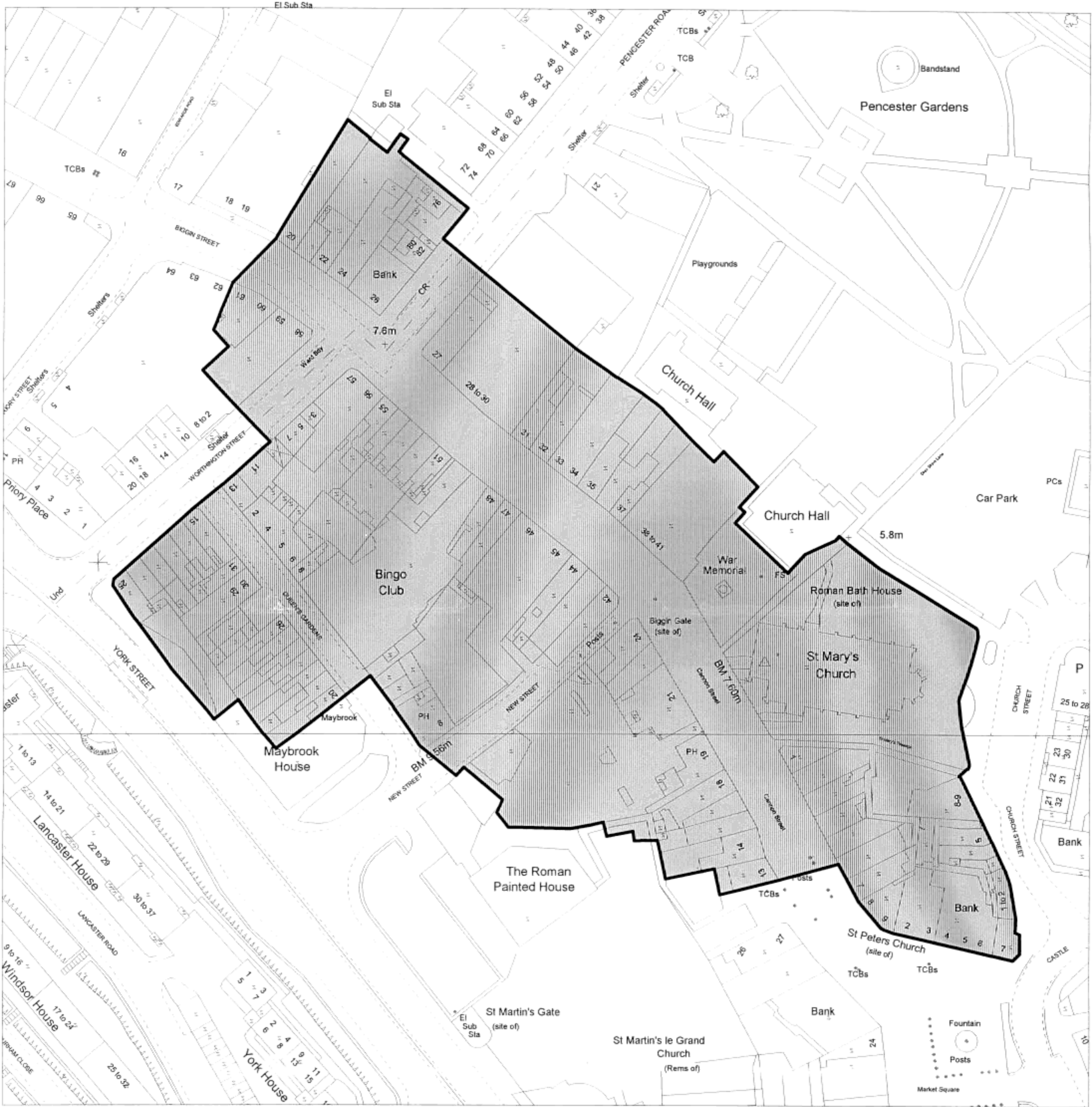
clarity on the appropriateness of different types of shutters in conservation areas.

- 9.4. Around Queens Gardens and New Street the increased number of vacant units give an air of neglect and abandonment on the fringes of the main commercial area.
- 9.5. Biggin Street and Cannon Street are obstructed with a significant amount of street clutter in the form of telephone boxes, advertisements, light columns and goods displayed for sale on the pavement. Whilst some of these could be said to give some vitality to the area, without structure they can give the appearance of the pavement being rather crowded.

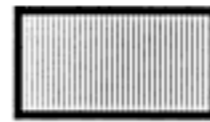
## **10. Potential for enhancement**

- 10.1. Well-designed shop fronts can contribute to the positive enhancement of the conservation area. A new shop front should reflect the character of the existing building, giving regard to the design of the upper floors as well as the area in which it is located. Well designed signs, coupled with sympathetic shop fronts, can add to the quality of an area, whereas poor design will detract. However, attention should be given to ensure that both new shop fronts and signs respect the individuality of the building and are not merely repeating a standardised design. This lack of variety could lead to the area appearing stale and lacking visual interest. Further advice on these matters can be found in the Council's Advice leaflets on Shop Fronts, Advertisements and Security Measures for Commercial Premises.
- 10.2. The pedestrianised areas appear rather dated. The central area has been laid with dark paviers and the "pavements" have been delineated by the use of small buff coloured slabs. There are also areas of granite sets laid in circular patterns within the central strip. There is very little in the way of soft landscaping to break it up. Due to the width of the street these large areas of paving give a monotonous visual aspect and do not enhance the quality of the area. This appears less so in the roads off Cannon Street and Biggin Street where the granite kerbs and road camber remain to give a more pleasing 3 dimensional feel to the streets.
- 10.3. The planting is limited to a number of tall wooden planters that contain nondescript planting that has the air of neglect. The atmosphere could be enhanced by the introduction of better quality planting containers that reflect the character of the area, with perhaps a planting theme to give more cohesiveness to the precinct. The introduction of more street trees would give a human scale to the precinct as well as making more shade/ shelter and intimate space. These would need to be introduced in containers, as it is not possible to plant directly in the ground due to the location of services and archaeological remains. It would also be beneficial to integrate planting and seating areas to create secluded areas. The use of an individual style to planters, seats, lighting etc could give a cohesive appearance particular to this area, rather than using standard, pastiche designs which can be found in most town centres.

- 10.4. Where appropriate, encouragement should be given to the use of vacant upper floors for either commercial or residential uses, which will help to give more security to shop owners and sustain activity in the town centre out of normal working hours.
- 10.5. Despite these negative issues, Dover Town Centre remains a vibrant and important commercial centre, whilst still retaining the special historic and architectural integrity of the conservation area.



Dover Town Centre Conservation Area



**Map 1**  
**Conservation Area - Dover Town Centre**



**N. Aziz B.Sc MBA C.Eng MICE**  
**DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND TECHNICAL SERVICES**

**District Council Offices**  
**White Cliffs Business Park, Dover Kent CT16 3PG**  
**Tel: Dover (01304) 821199**

**PLANNING DIVISION**  
**M. G. Dawson B.Sc Dip.T. & C.P. M.R.T.P.I.**  
**Chief Planning and Building Control Officer**

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From O.S. Sheets: TR3141 & TR3241

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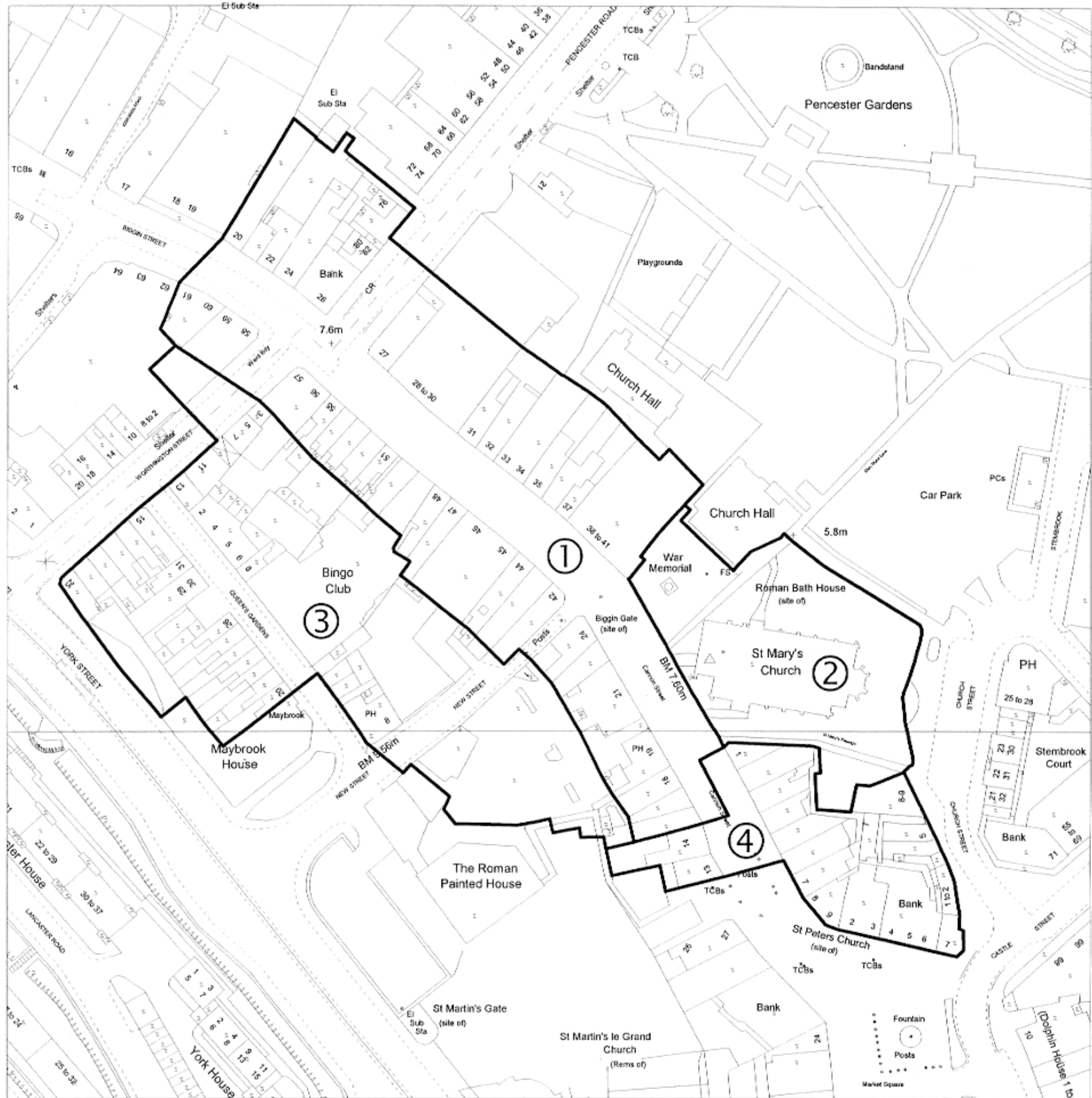
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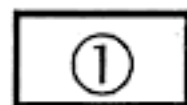
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Dover Town Centre Conservation Area - Identified Areas



## Map 2

### Dover Town Centre Conservation Area - Identified Areas

**DOVER**  
DISTRICT COUNCIL



N. Aziz B.Sc MBA C.Eng MICE  
DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND TECHNICAL SERVICES

District Council Offices  
White Cliffs Business Park, Dover Kent CT16 3PG  
Tel: Dover (01304) 821199

PLANNING DIVISION  
M. G. Dawson B.Sc Dip.T. & C.P. M.R.T.P.I.  
Chief Planning and Building Control Officer

Scale 1:1500

From O.S. Sheets: TR3141 & TR3241

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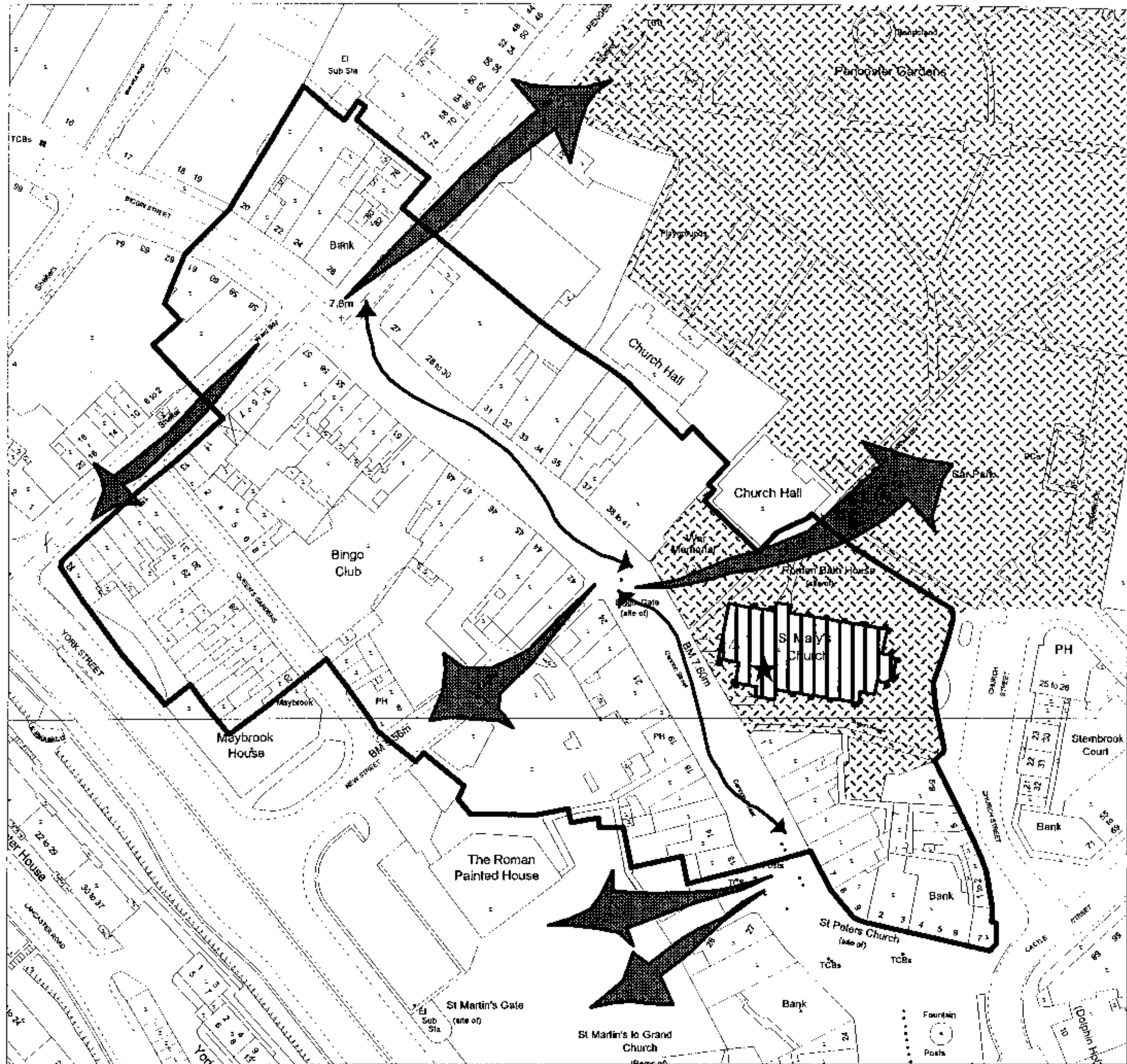
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|-------------------|---|--------------------|---|-----------------|---|
| Conservation Area |  | Important Landmark |  | Open Space      |  |
| Enclosed Views    |  | Distance Views     |  | Listed Building |  |

**Map 3**  
**Townscape Appraisal**

**DOVER**   
**DISTRICT COUNCIL**

**N. Aziz B.Sc MBA C.Eng MICE**  
**DIRECTOR OF PLANNING AND TECHNICAL SERVICES**

**District Council Offices**  
**White Cliffs Business Park, Dover Kent CT16 3PG**  
**Tel: Dover (01304) 821199**

**PLANNING DIVISION**  
**M. G. Dawson B.Sc Dip.T. & C.P. M.R.T.P.I.**  
**Chief Planning and Building Control Officer**

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