

Regency Square Conservation Area

Character Statement

Designated: 1973 extended 1977 & 2005

Area: 32 hectares, 80 acres

Character Statement adopted
20 October 2005



Introduction:

The purpose of this document is to describe the history and character of this conservation area in order to provide a context for policies contained in the Development Plan, which will guide future development and enhancements in the area. Policies and design guidance are given in other documents, a list of which is included at the end of this statement.

General Description

The conservation area includes the first expansion of Brighton westwards from the Old Town, much of which was developed in the early years of the 19th century. It is broadly defined by the seafront, from West Street to the boundary with the former Borough of Hove, and by Western Road to the north. It contains five formal squares, several grand terraces and the West Pier. Over 250 of its buildings are statutorily listed.

Historical Development of the Area

Post-mediaeval Brighton was bounded by five large open field systems, or laines. The West Laine extended along the seafront from the edge of the town (West Street) to the parish boundary and considerably inland. The town's population increased in the 17th and 18th centuries, due first to the expansion of trade and then, from the 1730s, due to seabathing visitors. As a result, sporadic development began to encroach onto the West Laine.

However, Royal patronage from the 1780s led to the rapid growth of Brighton, as it became the most fashionable seaside resort. The West Laine was divided up and developed in a series of grand building projects beginning with Bedford Square and Clarence Square in 1807. These were quickly followed by Regency Square (1818), Russell Square (1820) and Norfolk Square (1825). Oriental Place was set out in 1827 as the approach to a proposed oriental garden, which would have included a huge glasshouse and a cultural centre. The project failed and Sillwood Place was developed instead.

Although London fashions strongly influenced the development, much of the design can be attributed to three local architect-builders: Amon Wilds, his son Amon Henry Wilds and the latter's contemporary, Charles Augustin Busby. It was they who adopted the characteristic bow fronts, deep cornices and motifs based on shells and ammonites.

By the 1830s, residential development of the area was virtually complete. Social facilities, such as the Royal Newburgh Assembly Rooms were built, and then the Victorian era focused more attention on the seafront. Hotels were built on an unprecedented scale: The Grand (1864), The Norfolk (1865), The Metropole (1888). The West Pier was constructed in 1865 and, towards the end of the 19th century, extensive civic improvements were carried out to the Esplanade, providing shelters, cast-iron railings and the distinctive octagonal lamp-standards.

The mid-20th century saw the addition of uncompromisingly large buildings, such as Embassy Court, The Bedford Hotel, Sussex Heights and Osprey House although there have been discreet developments also at Russell Mews, Norfolk Mews and on the west side of Western Street.

Definition of the Special Character of the Area

The Conservation Area has a strong grid pattern with streets running downhill towards the sea intersecting others following the contours. It is, however, an irregular grid reflecting the piecemeal fashion of its development, and the major and minor architectural themes are interwoven. The dominant theatricality of the set-piece squares and terraces is less uniform than might at first be apparent. The terraces tended to be developed in short groups of houses and the differences are evident, despite the common use of segmental bays, balconies, verandas and parapets. Most of the houses are now converted into flats or hotels and there is a lively mix of residents and visitors.

There is also a marked contrast between the formal architecture of the grander houses in prestigious locations such as Regency Square, and the smaller scale buildings which have traditionally provided services, such as the artisan housing in Western Street and Castle Street. The various mews bring the further contrast of commercial or light industrial uses. Some of these streets are relatively peaceful compared with the busy shopping and restaurant areas of Western Road and Preston Street.

Traffic, too, has a significant effect on the area. King's Road and Western Road are major east-west routes and, between them, the subdivision of property makes car-parking an issue. Preston Street, which divides the area in half, has been improved by narrowing the carriageway and increasing the pavements in order to reduce the effect of vehicles. Some issues remain however, with the enlarged footways being used for parking and commercial signage.

Spaces and Vistas

The spatial planning of the grand set-pieces evolved from the Georgian squares of London. In Brighton, however, this was often adapted to take full advantage of aspect, by the use of the three-sided square opening onto the seafront, for instance in Bedford and Regency Squares. This makes the north side of the squares the most dominant, architecturally, because they have a commanding position on higher ground and they have the best views. In Regency Square, the axis was extended by the West Pier, making the effect all the more dramatic. The squares themselves lost their railings and much of their formality in the 1940s, although railings have since been reinstated in Clarence and Russell Squares.

While most of the streets leading southwards offer glimpses of the sea, there are few landmarks within the area other than the modern tower blocks. The 17 storey Bedford (now Hilton West Pier) Hotel and Bedford Towers flats closes the view down Sillwood Road and the view along Sillwood Street from the west ends at the Sussex Heights.

In contrast to the grand streets and squares, there are a few intimate spaces, such as the mews, Clarence Gardens, Norfolk Buildings and Regency Colonnade, the alley connecting Regency and Russell Squares. The greatest contrast, however, is the seafront, which offers views eastwards to the Palace Pier and westwards as far as Worthing. King's Road is fronted by the wide pedestrian Esplanade overlooking a series of recreational spaces at a lower level, which in turn form the margin of the beach.

Materials

Flint and pebbles are the only indigenous building materials. They tend to be seen in vernacular buildings or boundary walls, as for instance in Regency Mews or Little Preston Street, and rarely as a more formal finish, although the Christ Church School building (now the New Venture Theatre) in Bedford Place is an example. More often, these materials, with the addition of broken chalk, were covered over with render, or stucco, which had the added advantage of replicating prestigious stone facings.

Before the mid-19th century, bricks had generally to be imported. They were, therefore, expensive and used sparingly for maximum effect, as on the upper floors of houses in Regency and Russell Squares. Similarly, roofing slates were shipped from North Wales, gradually replacing the more-locally produced clay tiles. However, the introduction of railways in the 1840s made it easier to import materials and brick became more common, whether stuccoed or left exposed as at the Metropole Hotel.

Cast-iron was used liberally for railings, balconies and street furniture. The Phoenix and Every Foundries in Lewes were particularly active in the 19th century. Although railings round the squares were removed in the 1940s to provide metal for the war, the ironwork required for safety was allowed to remain. A good deal of the railings round basement areas and the balcony balustrades are, therefore, the originals.

Almost all the paving in the conservation area is now concrete slab or tarmac. There is, however, some evidence of earlier brick paving, for instance in Regency Mews. Clarence Gardens has star-pattern bricks. Kerbs have survived better. In the more important streets, kerbs are wide and granite, often inscribed with the letter 'H'. Elsewhere, they are either narrow granite or limestone.

Descriptions of the Buildings

To describe the conservation area in more detail, it has been divided into seven sub-areas:

- the northeast, including Clarence and Russell Squares;
- Regency Square;
- Preston Street;
- Bedford Square to Cavendish Place;
- Sillwood;
- the northwest, including Norfolk Square; and
- the seafront.

(1) The Northeast

The north side of **Clarence Square** was laid out as Clarence Place in 1807 and is thus one of the earliest of the formal developments on the West Laine. Shopfronts were added to the rear, facing Western Road, and the Clarence Square side is regrettably now very much the backs.

It seems that the other three sides were not completed until about 1850, which explains the later style of canted, rather than segmental, bays and the fact that none of the buildings are listed. The square was requisitioned during the 1939-45 war for military purposes and the railings were removed. In 1952 the freehold was acquired by the Borough Council, but it was not until 2001 that the cast iron railings were reinstated and the gardens restored.

Russell Square was developed between 1818 and 1825 by James Patching who employed the architect Amon Henry Wilds to design four-storey terraces on the west and south sides. These are brick with incised stucco on the ground floor and ornate canopied balconies to the first. The houses are divided by paired pilasters to the second and third floors only, supporting a heavy cornice. Much of the fenestration has been altered and in all but two cases, the brickwork has been rendered or painted.

A pair of similar houses survive on the north side but most houses here date from the 1840s. The east side of the square was demolished in 1964 to make way for Chartwell Court and the multi-storey carpark. As with Clarence Square, cast iron railings were reinstated when the garden was restored in 2001.

Little survives of **Cannon Place**, laid out in 1813, other than a short terrace between Russell Square and St Margaret's Place, and a further pair to the south, while St Margaret's Place serves mainly as a rear entrance for the Metropole Hotel. It has a few lesser 19th century houses on the north side and, on the south side, the imposing pedimented front of A.H.Wilds' Royal Newburgh Assembly Rooms of 1833, once the social centre of the western town.

West of Russell Square, **Russell Mews** has been redeveloped with housing while, to the west of Clarence Square, **Clarence Gardens** is a modest three-storey terrace leading to the Little Theatre housed in the former Clarence Baptist Chapel of about 1830. Further west are **Stone Street**, **Castle Street** and **Regency Mews**, an artisan area of small two and three-storey houses interspersed with commercial and light industrial premises

Of the buildings on the south side of **Western Road** which were added to the conservation area in 2005, there is a robust Victorian Terrace at Nos.87-93, two listed banks, and a series of mid-to-late 19th century buildings with few intrusions other than some of their shopfronts.

(2) Regency Square

In the 18th century, Belle Vue Field was an open site to the west of the town, the scene of military encampments described by Jane Austen in *Pride and Prejudice*. The field was bought by Joshua Hanson, who laid out the square and, from 1818-28, sold individual plots subject to covenants requiring facades of an approved design. Most of these designs were provided by Amon Wilds and his son, and their quality is reflected in their listing at grade II*.

To the sides of the square, the houses are three or four storeys with basement, but the north elevation is a palace front of five storeys, the central pair bearing a pediment inscribed 'Regency Square' in large letters. As with Russell Square, the original materials were yellow brick with stucco dressings, but most have since been painted. A setted crossover in the pavement between Nos.42 and 43 indicates where there used to be a carriage arch leading to the mews, which has since been infilled. The railings are a distinctive design with conical tops.

To the northeast is the Regency Tavern. Established in the mid-19th century in the rear third of the present premises, it has since expanded into two adjoining houses. Adjacent is an alleyway, once called Regency Colonnade, leading to Russell Square. In it are two listed bollards of fluted design. Leading south is Queensbury Mews in which five modern mews houses at the rear of Regency Square properties face the rear of the Metropole Exhibition Halls. At the southern end, however, there is a small redbrick French Protestant Church built in 1887. The only other of its kind is in Soho Square, London. The southern end also has distinctive channels to the carriageway formed of rectangular setts laid at right angles to the kerb.

The West Pier was built axially to Regency Square, and there are wide views over the pier and of the sea beyond. In the 1960s, surface car parking was proposed on the gardens of the square, but this became an underground carpark, opened in 1969, and the present terraced lawns form its roof. As with the other squares, the original railings were removed for the war effort and these were eventually replaced with more utilitarian hooped steel railings. There are also square-tube railings at the entrances to the carpark, which intrude on the landscape. The mid-20th century lamp-posts are cast-iron imitations of gas standards modified with swan-necks for electrification.

At the south end of the square is the Royal Sussex Regiment War Memorial. The bronze figure of a bugler on a tall Portland stone plinth was unveiled in 1904.

(3) Preston Street

The conservation area is divided in two by Preston Street, which runs from Western Road to the sea. Much of its eastern side is the rear of properties on Regency Square. Some of these developed modest but decorative houses facing Preston Street from the 1820s: No79 is an example. Most, however, have more recent shops, such as the bungalow front from Nos.68-75.

The west side is a succession of pairs and terraces generally of three storeys with canted bays. Nos.40-44 have fluted pilasters topped with ammonite capitals. The Casino at Nos.6-8 is a modern interpretation with canted bays and a large intrusive veranda.

Preston Street is a lively centre for speciality shopping and for restaurants, which has led to a more exuberant use of colour than in much of Brighton. The Council has responded to this by widening the pavements (but keeping the original kerb line) and introducing speedtables and modern lighting.

(4) **Bedford Square to Cavendish Place**

Bedford Square One of the earliest squares in Brighton, is open to the seafront like Regency Square. It was not, however, subject to the same regime for enforcing uniformity. It was developed from 1801 to 1814 in phases, and the differences are apparent despite the common plot widths and all the Regency vocabulary of stucco, balconies, bay windows, verandas, and spearhead railings. Some are three storeys with basement, but most have four. Bays are generally segmental on the earlier houses and canted for the later phases, Nos.32-39.

It would appear that the square has always been lawned, with peripheral planting from time to time. In the 1960s there was no planting, so all the present shrubs are more recent. The railings were removed in the 1940s and a temporary wooden paling served until the existing post-war steel hooped railings were installed. As with all the squares, except Clarence Square, Bedford Square became Council property following the Brighton Improvement Act of 1844.

The development of **Oriental Place** is far more uniform: palace-fronted terraces of 3-4 storeys with rusticated stucco to the ground floor, first floor balconies and pediments on ammonite-topped pilasters above. It was designed by A.H.Wilds for the landscape gardener, Henry Phillips. This was to be the approach to a grand conservatory housing an oriental garden, to be called the Athenaeum, until the funding failed. In 1827, the initial part of the project was rescued by Sir David Scott who commissioned Wilds to complete the terraces of Oriental Place. Wilds' characteristic semicircular shell motif can be seen above the first-floor windows of the flanking ranges.

Cavendish Place, also by A.H.Wilds, followed in 1829. This too is a formal composition of four storey terraces, having rusticated ground floors, balconies and Corinthian pilasters. At the head of the cul-de-sac is a pair of much larger houses (formerly the Curzon Hotel, now flats) with pedimented first-floor windows. The lower half of the eastern side was developed as the Bedford Hotel, considered the most distinguished late-Georgian building in Brighton after the Royal Pavilion. It was, however, destroyed by fire in 1964 and replaced with the existing hotel in 1967.

(5) **Sillwood**

When Sir David Scott acquired the Oriental Place scheme in 1827, he also commissioned A.H.Wilds to build him a house on the site of the ill-fated gardens. Sillwood Hall was named after Scott's family estate, Sillwood Park in Berkshire. The three-storey house became an hotel in 1880 and, from the 1960s was part of a former department store fronting Western Road (now subdivided into shops and flats). It has since been converted into flats. To the north of Sillwood Hall was the Gothic House, built by Amon Wilds and Charles Busby in 1822. This became the eastern part of the former department store. Only the upper floors survive above ground floor shop frontages.

The two houses were connected by a short classical terrace built onto the rear of Sillwood House and fronting **Western Terrace**, which leads south from Western Road to a mid-19th century coach house. The terrace has one of the few examples of brick paving in the conservation area. On the east side is the Western Pavilion, a small house designed by A.H.Wilds for himself in an exuberant oriental style, complete with onion dome, imitating the Royal Pavilion.

Between Sillwood House and Oriental Place, is **Sillwood Place**, also by A.H.Wilds. This is an unadopted road of which only the eastern terrace survives. No.9 is remarkable for its oriental details reminiscent of the Royal Pavilion. The western terrace became the Hotel Montpelier until it was demolished in 1967 to be replaced by the present grey-brick Osprey House.

Further east is **Sillwood Road**, known as Western Cottages until about 1870, when Thomas Lainson built the terrace at Nos.32-47. These remarkably well-preserved houses have canted bays on two floors with a further floor of arched windows and a dentilled cornice above. Cast-iron window guards and ground-floor verandas survive, as do most of the stuccoed boundary walls. Other buildings in the street are consistently of stucco and 2-3 storeys, but they are generally more modest and much more varied. The street is notable for the three mature trees which punctuate the western kerb line.

(6) The North-west

This area is defined by three more roads running north-south. **Montpelier Road**, once a through route to Ditchling, emerges at the seafront between the backs of Bedford Square and Oriental Place. Further north, the east side is taken up by the 1970s block, Osprey House, and the rear of the shops on Western Road. However, the west side has a series of stuccoed houses dating from about 1825 onwards. The earlier houses with segmental bays are larger than the later, canted bay houses below, giving a false perspective down the street towards the sea.

Further up, a 1980s housing scheme 'Christchurch' by Michael Blee has replaced a Wagner church, destroyed by fire in 1978. This scheme re-emerges in Bedford Place, to the north of the New Venture Theatre of 1841. The original small Dutch-gabled building fronting **Bedford Place** was built of cobbles with stucco dressings. It was extended in the 1890s with a large two-storey redbrick building behind, also with Dutch gables. To the south are two town houses of contemporary design that close the view from Norfolk Square, adjacent to which is a building converted into a mosque and a modern three-bay interpretation of mid 19th century style with square slate-hung bays. On the corner with Sillwood Street is the three-storey Lion and Lobster public house, an early 19th century building whose render has been replaced with pebbledash painted red.

The west side of Bedford Place has a varied collection of early to mid-19th century three-storey stucco houses of which No.2 is a particularly well-preserved example.

To the west of Bedford Place is **Norfolk Buildings**, which leads to the rear of the Norfolk Hotel. The site of the hotel was previously occupied by Youngs Livery Stables, and the rebuilt arched gateway with horse head decoration is a reminder of the former use.

To the north is Norfolk Square, which was laid out in the 1820s open to the north onto Western Road. Its three-storey houses have bow fronts, rusticated ground floors and first floor balconies. On the south side there are two pairs of flat-fronted houses with Ionic pilasters, cast-iron balconettes and stout spearhead railings. They also retain their black and white chequered tile entrances.

The square was acquired by the Council in 1886. In the 1950s, two pavilions were added on the north side to provide public conveniences and bus shelters. These and the planting of the square were remodelled in 1999. In the southwest corner of Norfolk Square, two modest blocks of flats - Norfolk Court and Dorchester Court - replaced houses lost to wartime bombing.

Western Street leads south with more bow-fronted houses on the west side below which are more modest mid-19th century houses and a new development of mews housing. On the east side, a series of stuccoed villas of about 1825 leads southwards to the corner with Sillwood Street. Then there is a terrace of small three-storey houses interrupted by the Bedford Tavern, a similar building but with mock timber-framing applied. Norfolk Street leads east and south from this point with heavily altered two-storey houses and a modern mews development of brick and slate with barrel-vaulted dormers.

West of Western Street, there are the garage mews of **Little Western Street** on the centre of which is the conservation area boundary.

(7) The Seafront

From west to east, the buildings fronting King's Road include Embassy Court, a 12-storey Modern Movement block of flats designed by Wells Coates in the mid-1930s with, it is claimed, the first penthouses to be built in England. Four much altered 19th century houses are followed by the Norfolk Hotel, built by Horatio Gaulty in 1865 to replace an earlier inn. It is six storeys, stuccoed with Corinthian pilasters and a deep bracketed eaves cornice, surmounted by a lead roof.

146-8 King's Road are part of the Bedford Square development of about 1807. The Brighton Hotel finishes the east side of the square but is much altered. Kingsley Court is a seven-storey, block of flats built in 1985 at the entrance to Oriental Place. On the other side, the King's Hotel is all that was built of the intended return of Oriental Place along King's Road. The three five-storey stuccoed houses, with canted bays and Corinthian pilasters, were converted to an hotel in 1864 by T.H.King. They were considerably restored in 1967 after fire damage.

Cavendish Place is flanked on the west by Cavendish House, a brown brick tower of 1967, which replaced the 1865 Union Club. On the east side is the Bedford (now Hilton West Pier) Hotel, a 17-storey concrete block designed by R.Siefert in 1967 and one of four tall blocks that dominate the western seafront. Controversy over the replacement of the first Bedford Hotel, a distinguished building of 1829, was resolved when it was destroyed by fire in 1963. A pair of bow-fronted houses, now the West Beach Hotel, follows and across Preston Street is Astra House, a ten-storey yellow brick block of flats and shops built in 1938.

On the corner of Regency Square, St Alban's House was designed after the rest of the square by A.H.Wilds in 1830 for the Duke and Duchess of St Albans. It has segmental bays, facing both the square and the sea, with Wilds' familiar shell motif. The ground floor is now a restaurant with a shopfront carried on slim cast-iron columns. On the corresponding east side, Abbots is a plain eight-storey brick block of 1962, while beyond are seven bow-fronted houses (now flats or hotels) of which at least two are by Wilds and Busby. Permission has recently been granted for the rebuilding of No. 128, currently derelict, in a contemporary style.

The Metropole Hotel, opened in 1890, was designed by Alfred Waterhouse in red brick and terracotta. The seven-storey building was then the largest hotel in the country outside London and in 1962 it boasted the first casino, as part of alterations which raised it by 2-3 floors. At the same time, the exhibition halls to the rear and the 24-storey Sussex Heights, designed by R.Siefert were added.

The Grand Hotel was built in 1862 to the Italianate design of John Whichcord. The composition is highly decorative with balconies to each of the first six floors supported on ornate brackets, a console cornice and towers to either side. In 1984, much of the central part was destroyed by a bomb in an attempt to assassinate the Prime Minister, and has since been rebuilt.

While the King's Hotel is named after its original owner, King's Road is named after King George IV who, in 1822, opened the section passing the Old Town and thus effected a connecting carriage drive between the east and west parts, which became a fashionable promenade. The road was widened in the 1850s and again in 1883-7 over the King's Road Arches. Improvements made at the same time include the cast-iron handrails, the promenade shelters and the highly ornate octagonal bandstand. The section west of the West Pier was widened in 1894, and a tarmacadam surface was introduced in 1910. Originally, the carriageway and promenade were separated by large iron railings, but these were removed in 1924. Electric lighting was introduced in 1893, although the present decorative octagonal lamp columns date from the 1930s.

The West Pier was built on the axis of Regency Square in 1863-6 to the design of the famous pier engineer, Eugenius Birch. Its cast and wrought-iron structure supported only a few kiosks until the seaward end was widened in 1890 to accommodate a large pavilion decorated with oriental towers. A central windscreen was added and, in 1916, a concert hall was built at the mid-point. The pier was badly damaged in a storm of 1896 and again by the hurricane of 1987, but it had already been closed to the public by 1975. In 2003 two serious fires further devastated it.

The Lower Esplanade has a modern scheme of hard landscaped areas. There is also a distinctive restaurant of red brick, glass and concrete in a Modern style, which was built in 1953 as a contribution to the Festival of Britain. It was originally intended as the Western Bathing Pavilion with changing facilities for 2000 bathers, but became a café in 1957. It was extended in 1999.

As the Lower Esplanade rises to meet the King's Road, the arches run out opposite Cavendish House. The formal gardens to either side of the octagonal bandstand, known as the Western Lawns, were part of the 1884 improvements. This section of the seafront is to have a continuation of the Lower Esplanade landscaping scheme implemented, in association with the proposed restoration of the bandstand in the near future. Astride the conservation area, and former Borough boundary stands the Edward VII Peace Memorial of 1912, a sandstone plinth bearing a bronze statue of a winged female figure carrying an olive branch.

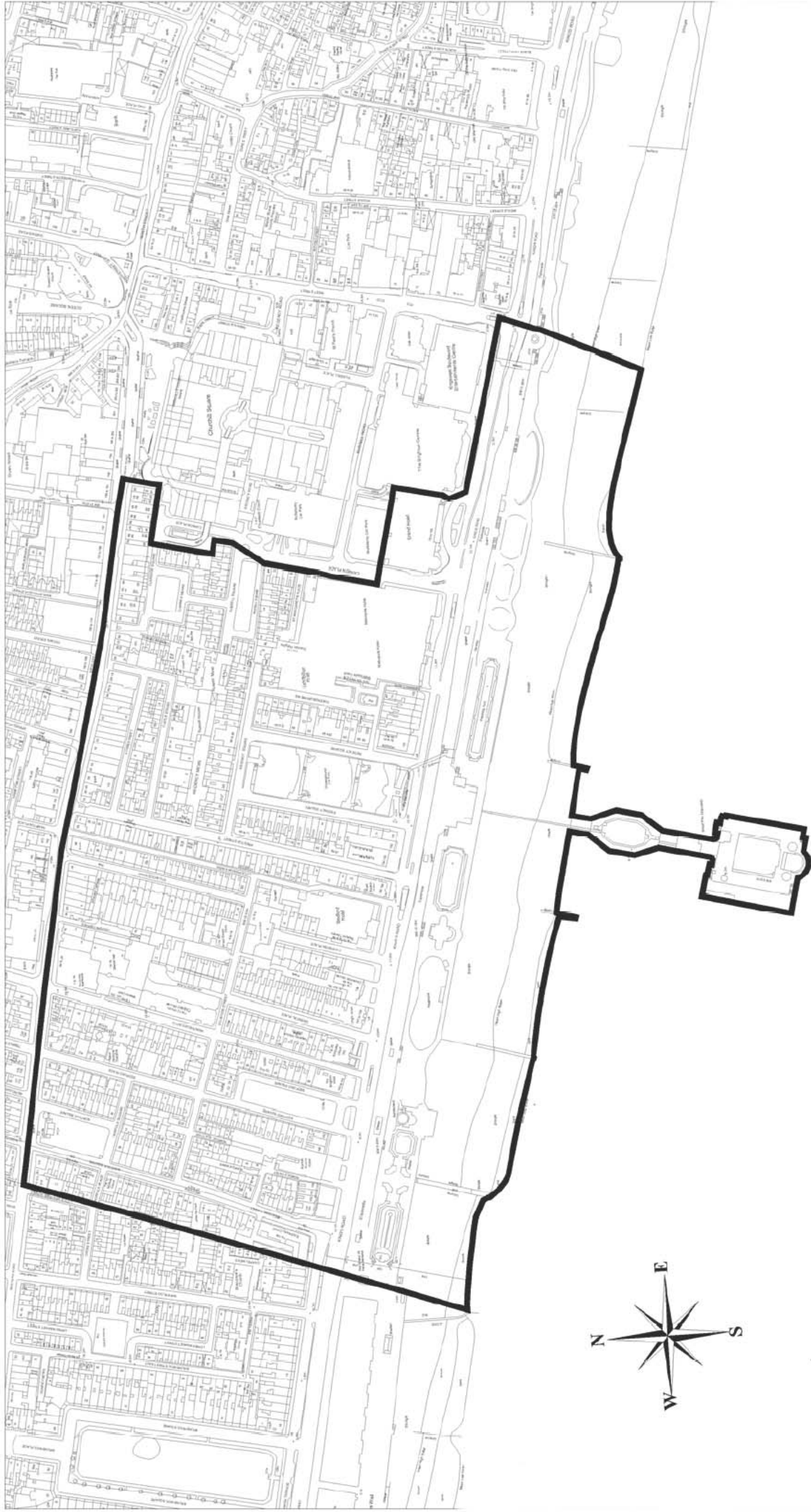
Boundary Review Revision of the irregular northern boundary was approved in October 2005 after public consultation such that it should run for its full length along the middle of Western Road thereby also including all properties between 29 Western Road/47 Clarence Square to the east and 93 Western Road/6 Sillwood Terrace to the west within the conservation area.

Supplementary Planning Guidance

The following conservation related documents may be relevant and should be consulted during the preparation of plans for development in this area:

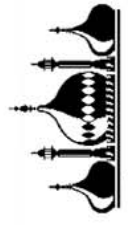
- SPGBH1 Roof alterations and extensions
- SPGBH2 External paint finishes and colours
- SPGBH7 Satellite dishes
- SPGBH11 Listed building interiors
- SPGBH13 Listed buildings - general advice
- SPGBH19 Fire precaution works to historic building
- Conservation Areas in Brighton & Hove - A Resident's Guide

Regency Square



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