

Far Gosford Street Conservation Area Brief History & Character Statement

1.0 History and Character of the Street

- 1.1 Far Gosford Street lies on the edge of the city centre, just beyond the inner ring road. It is – and has been since the early 20th century – an inner-city shopping centre, bounded by the ‘Gosford Gate’ roundabout to the west, the Sky Blue Way relief road to the north, Gosford Green to the east and residential terraced streets to the south.
- 1.2 The street has its origins in a medieval ‘extra-mural’ suburb; that is, one situated outside a town wall and its gates. Coventry’s wall was built relatively late in the medieval period (from the second half of the 14th to the early 16th century) and did not necessarily include all of the built-up area. The extra-mural suburbs, which also included Spon and Hill Streets, may have continued to grow throughout the remainder of the medieval period. Far Gosford Street was the main route out of medieval Coventry towards Leicester and London. There were already houses fronting the street as early as the 12th century and there is a possibility that the medieval suburb was laid out in a planned manner, at least on the north side.
- 1.3 Metalworkers and locksmiths dominated the street in the thirteenth century, with weavers and drapers taking over in the 14th and 15th centuries. Thus, in the medieval period, the street was already crammed with a variety of trades and crafts, most notably of the woollen industry. These included weaving, wool combing and dyeing, and fulling. There were also shearmen and tailors, who had their company’s chapel next to Gosford Gate. During this period, the immediate surrounding area was the site of several historic events, such as the duel between Henry Bolingbroke (later Henry IV) and Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk, and the execution of the brother and father of Edward IV’s queen, Elizabeth.
- 1.4 By the 16th century, Far Gosford Street (and Coventry) was in decline, and in 1642, during the Civil War, houses adjacent to Gosford Gate were demolished to give Coventry’s Parliamentarians a clear line of fire from the town walls.
- 1.5 The late 18th and early 19th centuries saw the growth of silk and ribbon weaving, which came to be the predominant trade in the street, as elsewhere in the city. The distinctive ‘top shops’ associated with this trade appeared in various parts of the street and the grade II-listed row at Nos. 67-72 remains as a good example of this building type. As the weaving industry declined (after 1860), cycle manufacture (ten local factories) and later the car industry took over. The city was at the heart of the rapid development of the motor vehicle in England, and this area boasted several of the early cycle-turned-car factories (XL to Calcott to Singer, Townsend Bros. to Humber).

- 1.6 By the time of the 1851 Board of Health (Ordnance Survey) map, parts of the street remained undeveloped and many of the buildings were in residential or industrial use. It is only in the late 19th century that Far Gosford Street began to fill with shops and take on its present appearance.
- 1.7 Over the centuries, slow and piecemeal change has helped to preserve much of the historic fabric of the street, which largely avoided the devastating air-raids of the Second World War, whilst post-war redevelopment has generally passed it by. As a result, Far Gosford Street is one of the few early Coventry streets that retain anything like their pre-war character. There are 14 statutorily listed buildings (all Grade II), including a number with medieval timber frames (in varying states of completeness). Timber framing is, in fact, still coming to light in buildings that give no external evidence of timber-framed construction (for example, No. 142). There are, in addition, 17 buildings on the City Council's 'Local List' and 13 other buildings which have been identified as possessing some degree of historic and architectural interest and which are important in the street-scene. The 'group value' of these buildings is high and this was a prime factor in deciding to give the street conservation area status in 1992.
- 1.8 Local authorities have often been criticized for declaring conservation areas without sufficient research and assessment of the character or appearance that they are intended to preserve or enhance. As a result, there can be a lack of consistent advice and guidance on planning issues within such areas. In the case of Far Gosford Street Conservation Area, however, it was understood from the beginning that the past would be the key to explain and manage the present streetscape, so a considerable amount of research was conducted to understand how, through the centuries, Far Gosford Street came to look the way it does today. This research also resulted in the production of a number of high-quality display panels and a 52-page illustrated publication, originally produced for the public consultation exercise prior to declaration of the conservation area. The latter document includes a fuller history of the street and description of its key buildings, and this is appended to this application.

2.0 The need for a conservation area

- 2.1 It is ironic that a degree of neglect can aid preservation, but it is equally true that a point can be passed beyond which too much neglect leads to accelerating deterioration and, eventually, demolition and redevelopment. This point had been reached in parts of Far Gosford Street by 1992. Even since the declaration of the conservation area, some historic fabric is still in great danger of being lost (for example, No. 41) and dilapidation is all too apparent. Shortage of finance in the street has caused "bargain basement" alterations, which remove historic details such as roof materials, original timbers, window frames, doors and shopfronts, and replace them with concrete interlocking tiles, metal and plastic windows, and shopfronts of inappropriate design, with solid metal shutters and projecting shutter boxes (although current policy is to require new shutters to be at least 50% open, with concealed shutter boxes). Architectural detail is often needlessly obscured by a layer of anonymous render, gravel-dash or by over-sized signage.

- 2.2 Preservation of Far Gosford Street as we see it today is, therefore, not a sensible policy. More than in many conservation areas, enhancement is the inescapable way forward. A number of changes to the street's infrastructure have been carried out via Urban Programme / City Council-funded enhancement schemes, such as new paving, lighting and street furniture and the marking of historic sites, but it is the buildings that are most in need of enhancement. Planning controls can help in this process to a degree, but without a good deal of investment in the buildings, dilapidation and inappropriate changes cannot be arrested and Far Gosford Street will not work as a conservation area. Large-scale grant aid to encourage improvements is essential, and therefore a scheme such as the Townscape Heritage Initiative is seen as an ideal way forward.

† 1,159 words – limit is 1,000

Problems faced by historic buildings in the area and the reasons for them

1.0 Dereliction, disrepair and demolition

- 1.1 The cost of repair or restoration of the medieval buildings in the area far exceeds their market value, which is partly due to their size. Buildings are currently being repaired in the cheapest way possible, on a temporary basis, until funding becomes available – or until demolition becomes the only option. Several buildings are seriously at risk, the prime example being No. 41, which has already had to be partly dismantled and shrouded in sheeting for public safety reasons.
- 1.2 Owners and occupiers of such buildings lack both the expertise and the financial resources needed to repair their buildings in an appropriate manner and to a satisfactory standard.

2.0 Inappropriate alterations – mutilation of historic buildings

- 2.1 Most owners and occupiers are small businesses with borderline viability. Enforcement of planning controls against unauthorized and inappropriate changes to buildings in the street has largely broken down, due to the inability to offer financial incentives and the understandable reluctance of the City Council to carry the risk of taking over the burden of maintaining these buildings without funding.
- 2.2 Inability to enforce has created an environment of decline. Local owners have little knowledge or understanding of the history and architecture of their buildings, or of the heritage aims of the local authority, so they tend to replicate previous damage and destruction.

3.0 Loss of pride

- 3.1 In the 1940s and 1950s Far Gosford Street was a thriving shopping centre and many shopkeepers took pride in the appearance of their premises. In the 1970s, plans to construct a relief road over much of the street resulted in an understandable reluctance on the part of affected owners to invest in maintaining the fabric of their properties. A complete change of policy came with the construction of this road as a bypass to the street in the 1980s and the designation of the street as a conservation area in 1992; but today, after years of planning blight and the decline of the street's popularity with shoppers, many of the businesses are on the fringe of viability and it is reported that some owners even lack the motivation to maintain regular opening hours, let alone keep their buildings in a good state of repair.
- 3.2 Efforts have been made by the local community in the past to raise the vitality of the area and the funding for its rebirth. Lack of success has created an attitude of acceptance, or even cynicism.

4.0 Gap sites and poor pedestrian linkage

- 4.1 The creation of the Sky Blue Way dual carriageway to bypass the street has left gap sites and extensive highway land at the main 'gateway' to the conservation area. It also exposes derelict rear elevations to public view. Several gap sites still remain in the street frontage.
- 4.2 Pedestrian links from the street to the Coventry University campus and the city centre are poor, dominated by busy roads, narrow pavements, gap sites and poor streetscape.

† 1666 words in total to this point, = 502 words in this section – limit is 500



ABOVE: Nos 28 & 29 in 1991. There is nothing to betray their timber-framed origins on the street frontage...



...but from the rear, as seen from Sky Blue Way, N° 28's rear wing still has the frame exposed to view. It is not currently known how much (if any) timber-framing evidence survives inside N° 29.



*ABOVE: A mid-1970s view of N° 28, showing the older timber casement windows with leaded lights.
BELOW: N° 31 as it appeared in 1991. This is another building with likely timber-framed origins*





ABOVE: Nos 64 & 64A as they appeared in 1991. The various later modernizations to the frontage have hidden all vestiges of the building's 16th century, timber-framed origins.

LEFT: In the mid-1970s the building had already long had a brick refronting, but at that date it still presented a 19th-century upper storey and an early 20th century shop front.



ABOVE: The rear elevation of Nos 65-66 (ex-Pitt's Head PH) in 1992. Note the added bay window.
 BELOW: Nos 84-88 (ex-Coronet/Humber cycle works) in the 1970s, before the rear section was removed.



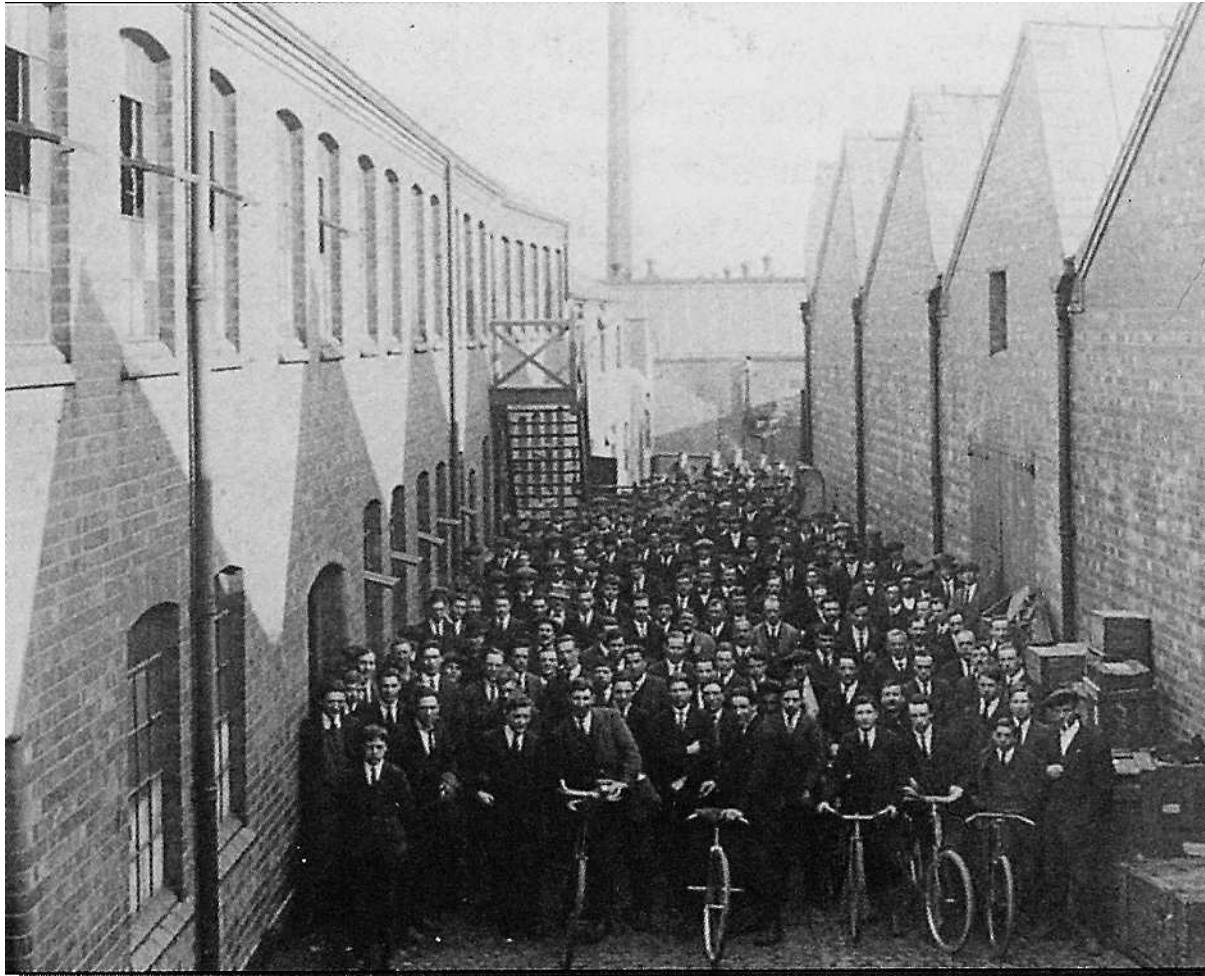


ABOVE: Another 16th century timber-framed building, N^o 117 (1970s); BELOW: Timber-framing inside N^o 142





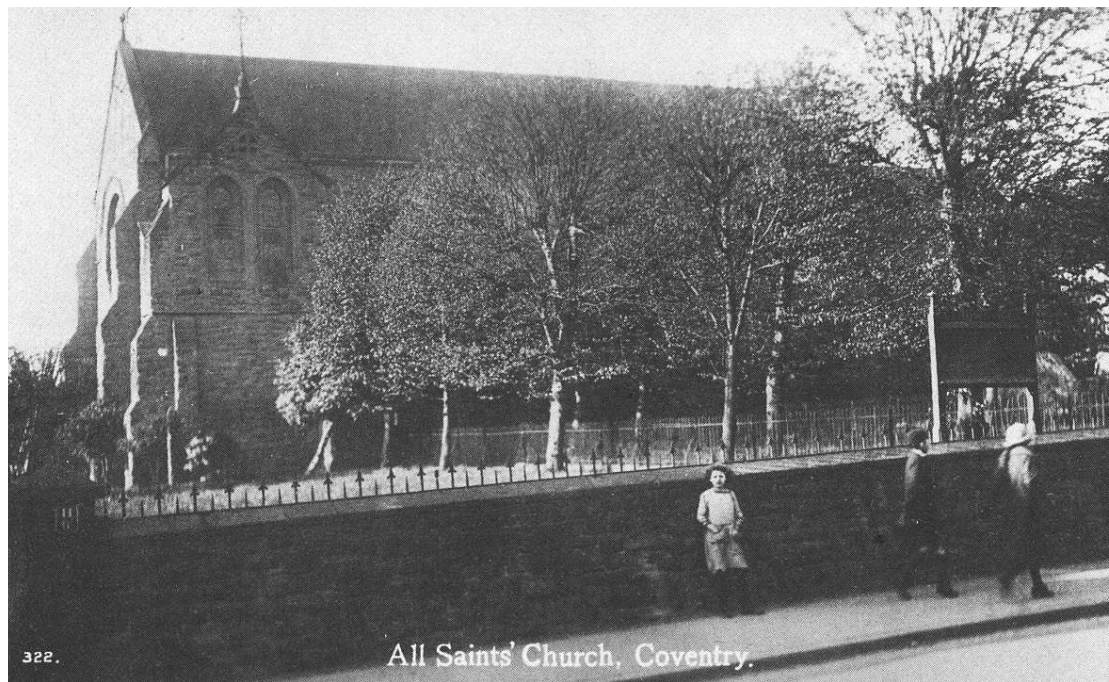
A fine photograph of the Calcott Brothers' car factory, taken in April 1921, showing two examples of Calcott cars outside. (For an attempted recreation of this scene in 1995, see page 92!) Although the building as it stands today still largely resembles this scene, a number of changes are apparent when this photograph is compared with the one on page 28, viz.: the first ground floor bay window on the left has been removed to create a new carriageway entrance to the rear yard; the double doors on the right have been removed and the opening has been infilled with a modern window and brickwork below. The 'Goods Entrance' sign (far left) has been covered over and the 'Calcott Bros. Ltd.' Carved over the main entrance has sadly been defaced by an attempt to cut away the letters, but they are still legible. Leaded glass in the toplights of the windows has also disappeared (except on the second floor windows).



ABOVE: Another 1921 photograph, this time showing the assembled Calcott workforce in the rear yard.

BELOW: The 1927 showrooms at Astley's, built for Singer & Co., but designed in 1914 for Calcott Bros. Ltd.!





All Saints' Church, c. 1926. The stone wall in the foreground still remains, but the low decorative railings have long since gone. The trees lining the church path are also still there, now grown much larger. The church never had a tower or spire. (HHT Premier postcard)



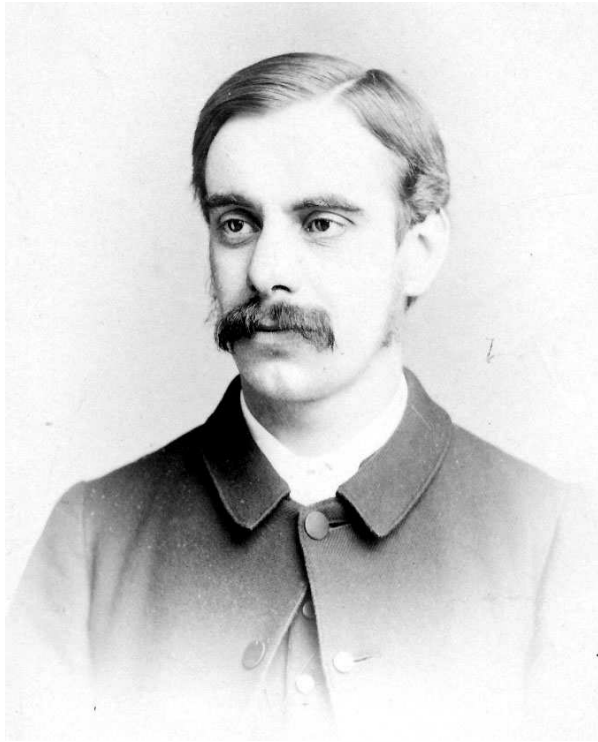
An early view of the church (c. 1889) from Lowe's volume of newscuttings on Churches. The original gates and iron spikes topping the wall can be seen, along with the young trees bordering the church path. Note also the low Windsor-style lamppost in the foreground!



The church interior, also from Lowe's volume of newscuttings on Coventry churches, c. 1889. Note the elaborate roof construction and the decoration to the capitals of the arcade piers.

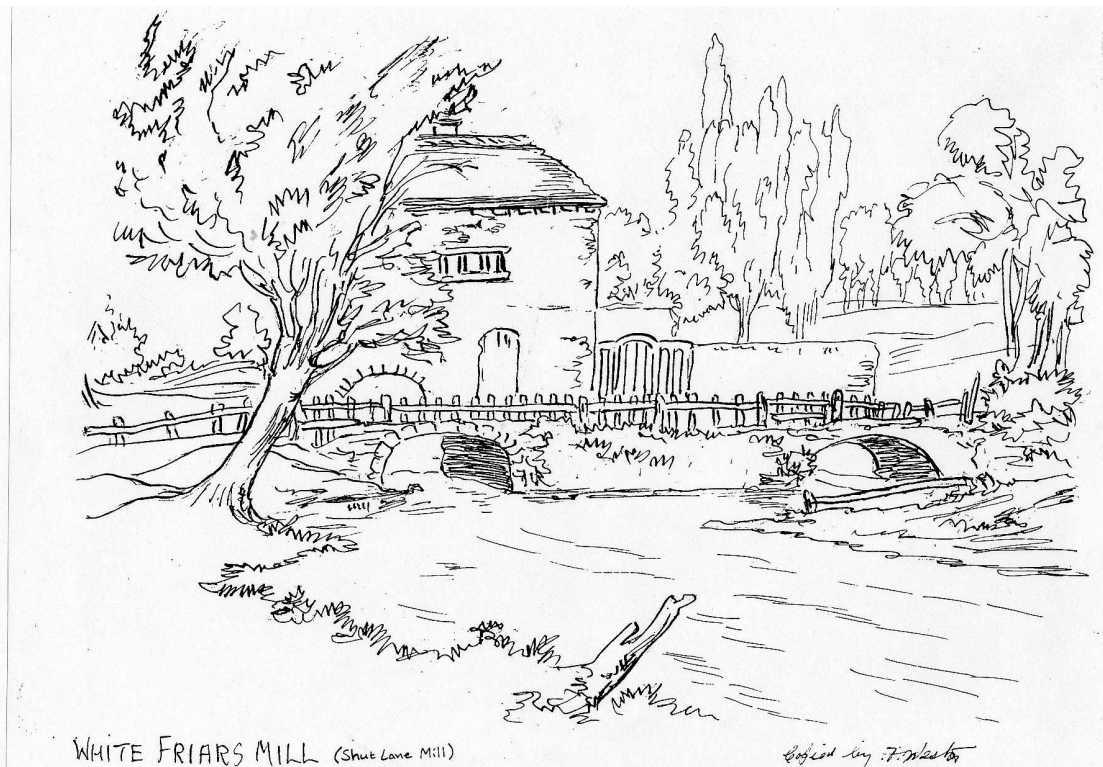


A view of the church as it appeared from the south, c. 1970, shortly before its closure. The trees have been severely pollarded; otherwise, the churchyard looks much as it does today. Note the distinctive round windows lighting the clerestory level of the nave and the gabled south aisle. The old British Thomson-Houston / Lucas Aerospace factory can be seen on the far left.



ABOVE LEFT: The Revd. G. C. Vecqueray, Vicar of All Saints' parish from 1879 until 1903, after whom nearby Vecqueray Street was named. ABOVE RIGHT: Shut Lane in 1991; not long after the lane was literally 'shut' as a public right of way and now serves only the adjacent industrial premises.

BELOW: Shut Lane or Whitefriars Mill as it appeared a century ago.



WHITE FRIARS MILL (Shut Lane Mill)
Florence Weston, undated (early 20th century)

Signed by F. Weston

Local Studies Library



Views of the Anchorsmith Tavern timbers during removal (left) and while still in situ in the lean-to structure at the side of Bridge Buildings (right) (1991)



A general view of the entrance to the Conservation Area at the western (city centre) end in 1991. Bridge Buildings (next to Astley's) was under demolition at the time. This photograph gives a good idea of how the Sky Blue Way relief road has affected Far Gosford Street.



A traditional shopfront surviving at N° 142 Lower Ford Street. Note the deeply recessed central door, the glazed tiles on the stallrisers and the decorative motifs below the fascia (instead of transom lights) and on the consoles (see diagrams on page 46 for explanation of technical terms).



Another view of timber-framed buildings on the site of 26-27 Far Gosford Street under demolition in 1927 (compare similar picture on page 14). Note the presence of sandstone blocks adjacent to the pavement and the distinctive coats and hats worn by the children.



These are the buildings that replaced those shown above in 1927 – N^o 142 Lower Ford Street, on the left, is the only one retaining its original design, albeit marred by the billboard at first floor level. The irregular jumble of mainly mediæval buildings begins immediately to the right – one of the features that gives Far Gosford Street its distinctive character.



N^{os} 30 to 34 are seen here; N^{os} 32 & 33 are grade II statutory listed buildings, betraying elements of their timber framing; N^{os} 31 & 34 may have had similar origins, but have undergone much alteration. The carriageway at N^o 34 formerly led into Harnall Row, now mostly obliterated by Sky Blue Way.



This building at the back of N^o 33 Far Gosford Street is the sole survivor of the tenements that once lined Harnall Row, typical of the many 'court' dwellings that sprang up in the former rear gardens of properties fronting Far Gosford Street during the industrial 'boom' period of the first half of the nineteenth century.



ABOVE and BELOW: Two perspectives on the mediæval group of timber-framed buildings at 38-41 Far Gosford Street, as they appeared in the early 1990s, before advancing dereliction at N^o 41 forced partial demolition for safety reasons. N^{os} 38-40 are statutory listed buildings, grade II; N^o 41 is unlisted, yet is contemporary with N^o 40 and still contains much timber framing, which is visible internally. It is hoped that this building can be rescued and restored as part of the proposed Townscape Heritage Initiative scheme. N^o 37 was also originally part of this grouping, but disappeared as a result of wartime bomb damage.





ABOVE: Another view of Nos 37-41, showing the rear wing and other later additions to No 41, which have subsequently had to be demolished. Note the tall central chimneystack on the front block. The rendered wall hides a brick refronting, probably of 18th or 18th century date, to the original timber-framed structure. BELOW: All Saints' Churchyard as it appears today, seen from the Sky Blue Way side. The trees need pruning!





ABOVE: Nos 52-60 comprise a modern block of shops, with flats over, the older No 58 (see below) and all that remains of Nos 59-60, which once had an upper floor. These premises are now derelict, but an attractive traditionally styled shopfront, with stained glass in the transom lights, is hidden behind the external display clutter in this 1991 photograph.



This recent picture shows that No 58 is now empty and semi-derelict. Whilst not an exceptional building, it retains its original, small-paned sash windows on the first floor and, unusually for this street, presents a gable end to the street frontage, which gives it a certain quirky interest. It also retains the skeleton of a traditional shopfront. Refurbishment should be considered as an alternative to redeveloping this property along with the derelict Nos. 59-60 and the gap site at the former Nos 61-62.



ABOVE: This view shows Nos 61-63 in 1991; Nos 61-62 have more recently been lost as a result of an arson attack. Despite alterations and the loss of their 'topshop' storey, these properties retained an historic 'feel'.
 BELOW: the grade II statutorily listed Nos 67-72 began life as weavers' houses with the 'topshops' above.





ABOVE: Nos 65-75 in a recent view, shortly after the refurbishment of Nos 75-76. Nos 74-76 also originated as weavers' 'topshops'. BELOW: Nos 67-72 as they appeared in the 1970s. Note the (lost) door surround at No 68.





ABOVE: Another view of the row of 'topshops' at N^{os} 67-76 in the early 1990s. Note the frontage to N^o 67, largely unaltered since the early 20th century. BELOW: the rear elevation of N^{os} 67-72 around the same time. Most of the original 'topshop' and first floor windows still survived. It was important to have as much light as possible in the weaving workshops, so that the weavers could continue working at their looms for as long as the light lasted!





LEFT: This 1970s view of the rear of N^{os} 73 & 74 shows the original 'topshop' window at the back of N^o 74 (now covered or infilled) and a smaller version above the carriageway arch at N^o 73. The passage formerly led into Court N^o 11.

BELOW: A recent view of Ashville Terrace, showing the shops that were built over the front gardens of these former houses in the early 20th century. The original elegant uniformity of the shopfront fascias and pilasters has been compromised by the numerous alterations, in particular the use of new fascia boards of varying depth. Changes to window designs and roof coverings have also contributed to the decline.





ABOVE: Another view of Ashville Terrace; BELOW: the traditional style shopfront at N^o 83, recently replaced similarly





ABOVE & BELOW: These two views of c.1910 and 1991, looking from the old line of Binley Road westwards towards the eastern end of Far Gosford Street, were taken from roughly the same perspective, except that the top picture is taken from a point further back. The background detail is enlarged on the second plate after page 10. The most notable changes are the maturing of the young trees and the disappearance of the tram lines and poles! It is also notable that streetlamps did not extend very far into Binley Road in 1910!

