

3.DESIGN STRATEGY

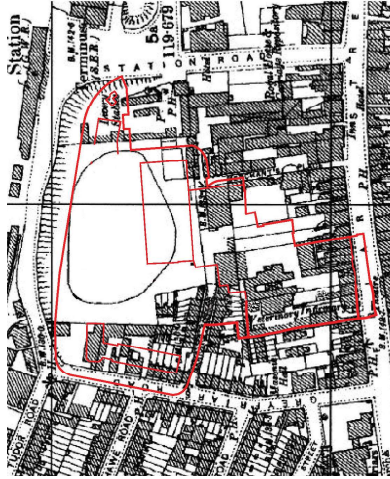
3.2 UNDERSTANDING THE SITE

Reading Town Centre: History

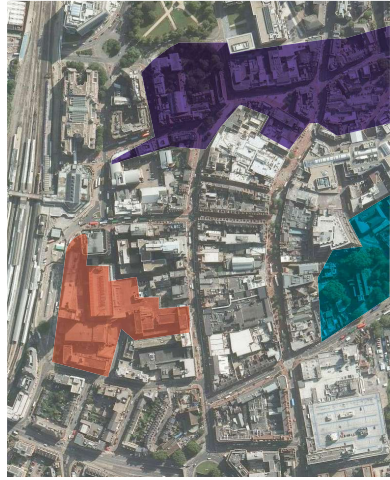
Reading was an established settlement during Saxon and Medieval times with most of its development on land now covered by the existing town centre.

Prior to the construction of the railway in the 1840s, areas to the north of the site were low-lying water meadows and it is believed that parts of the northern edge of the town lay somewhere close to Plots E & F. The introduction of the railway transformed Reading, providing market access to larger urban conurbations and to the surrounding countryside. Reading developed as a strong market town and established itself as an industrial centre with agricultural-related factories producing and packaging ‘beer, bulbs and biscuits’.

The town grew to accommodate factory workers and became the primary administrative town in Berkshire. The industrial base, focused along the banks of the River Kennet, declined during the 20th century and has been replaced with a mix of large-scale developments and uses including The Oracle shopping centre.

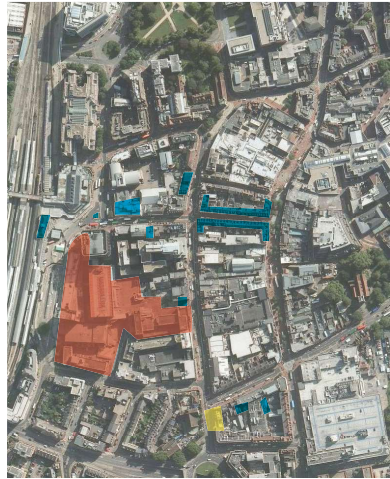


Historic Map from the late-19th century with the proposal site identified in red. Note the close knit urban grain on Friar Street. Garrard Street did not exist. The block was defined by Greyfriars Road, Station Hill, Station Road and Friar Street



Adjacent Conservation Areas

Important historic areas and urban fabric within the town centre have been recognised in conservation area designations. The closest to the site is Market Place and London Street, St Mary's Butts



Nationally Listed Buildings

There are a small scattering of nationally listed buildings within the immediate vicinity of the site



Greyfriars Church, originally built in 1311, is the most complete surviving example of Franciscan Architecture in England, according to Historic England



Reading Town Hall built in 1876 was designed by Alfred Waterhouse, one of the 19th century's leading British Architects

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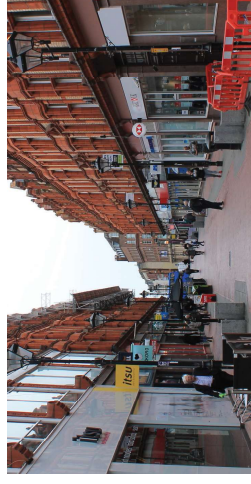
Reading Town Centre: Urban Grain & Form

The urban grain of the town centre reflects its historic development with close-grained, relatively narrow frontages to deep plots. These plots have been transformed and in filled over time and many have been consolidated to accommodate a range of larger uses, notably retail. The narrow alleys and lanes that still cut into these plots testify to its history of access and varied uses within the depth of the plan. These have added a rich texture to the town in terms of connectivity, use and grain.

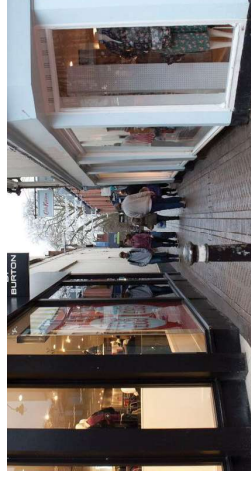
The buildings south of Friar Street are generally two to three storeys high. Queen Victoria Street and West Street have higher buildings. The area bounded by these streets and Broad Street is compact and dense and traversed by narrow alleyways such as Chain Street. To the north of Friar Street the buildings are generally two storeys in height, with the Novotel rising to 14 storeys, and the refurbished Thames Tower to 15 storeys. The Council has set policy objectives for higher buildings within the Station Hill planning framework areas.



Aerial view from the north-east showing the low-lying and compact grain of the town centre in red with higher buildings towards the railway line in blue



Queen Victoria Street, the most significant of the north-south streets in the centre



Chain Street, a small, tight north-south lane through the compact centre



Broad Street, one of the major east-west routes

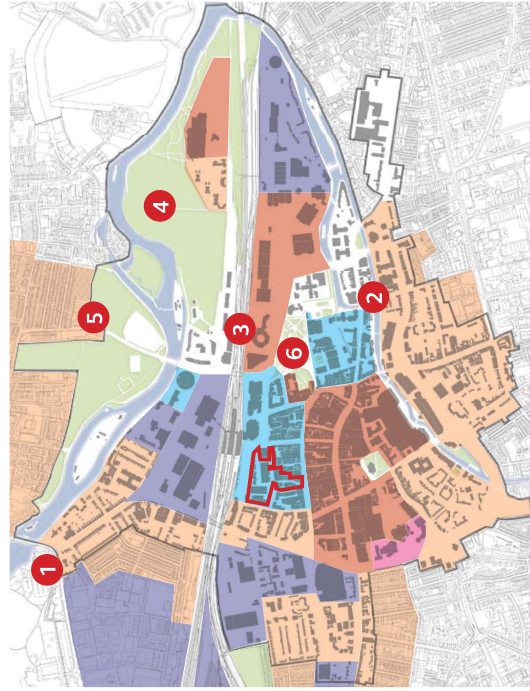
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Reading Town Centre: Uses

The area close to the station is dominated by commercial, retail and car park uses. There is further retail on the streets leading to The Oracle Centre and a large retail park on Vastern Road to the north of the railway line. The area to the west of the site and further west of Caversham Road is predominantly residential terraced housing interspersed with community uses. The streets immediate to the proposal site have commercial uses with a mix of office and retail and some residential accommodation. There are large civic uses to the south-west of the site with the Town Hall to the east end of Friar Street.

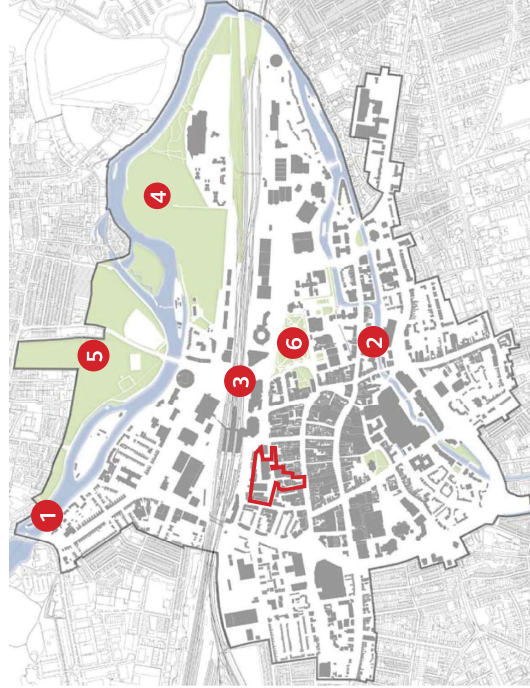
There are major outdoor recreational and amenity spaces to the north of the railway line at Kings Meadow, which lies on the south bank of the Thames and again on the north bank of the river at Christchurch Meadow. Both of these large parks are ten- to fifteen-minutes' walk from the site and have paths that skirt the river. Forbury Gardens, a more urban park, is at the east end of Friar Street which is less than ten minutes from the site. These spaces are part of the residential amenity offer for all residents within Reading town centre.

There are no water features on the site and the closest watercourses are the River Thames, approximately 500m to the north, and the River Kennet, approximately 480m to the south. The Environment Agency's floodplain map confirms that the site is not within an area at potential flood risk.



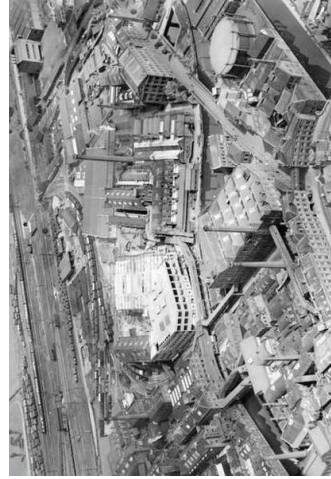
Indicative town centre uses

- Retail Core
- Secondary Retail
- Office
- Predominantly Residential



Indicative recreational open spaces

- 1 River Thames
- 2 River Kennet
- 3 Railway Line
- 4 Kings Meadow
- 5 Christchurch Meadow
- 6 Forbury Gardens



Historic view of central Reading showing industrial uses that have now given way to retail and commercial functions



The Oracle Centre which exploits the River Kennet to create open areas for food and beverage outlets



View of Thames Path leading to Kings Meadow

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Reading Town Centre: Architectural Character

The architecture of central Reading is dominated by late-Victorian and early-20th century buildings. Though there are many examples of later structures, the urban form, scale, grain and architecture of that era provided the context for subsequent development and set the character of the town centre.

The retained architecture of that period is of a prosperous town rather than that of a confident city. It is modest in scale, relatively fine in grain, but not too fine, and is replete with local flourish and styling. It is dominated by bricks of deep orange-reds, silver-greys and a less-attractive yellow buff. These colours are frequently used together in contrasting patterns, horizontal coursing and vertical framing. Terracotta is used to decorate and embellish framing devices, pediments and arches to doorways and windows. It finds particular use as 'lanterns' in the form of raised turrets, expressive roofscapes and decorative entablatures that adorn many buildings, both small and grand.

The cumulative impacts of the orange-red brick, terracotta, the decorative motives and the use of the lanterns motif on modest scaled buildings gives Reading a special and possibly unique identity.



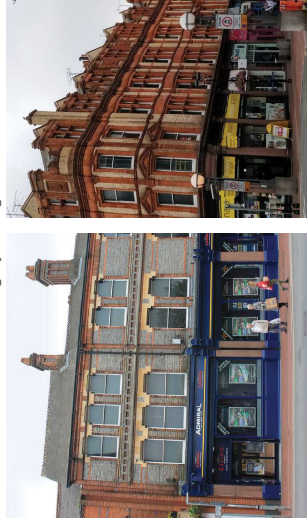
The Oracle overlooking the Kennet River



Sackville Street off Greyfriars Road



The Town Hall: use of red and grey in a rigorous manner



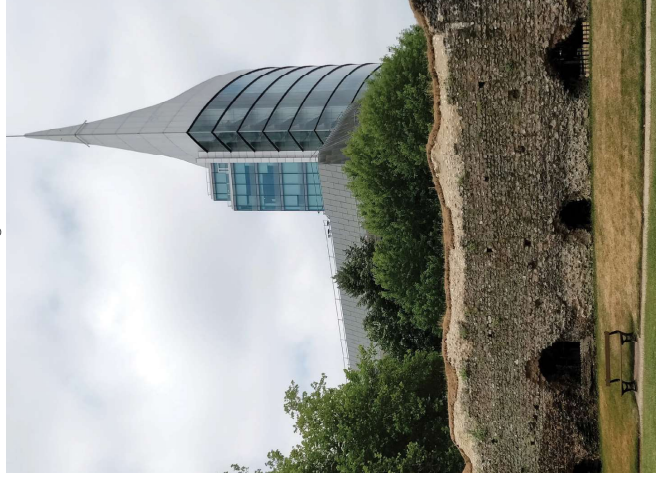
Grey brick façade Friar Street south side



Roofscape on Queen Victoria Street



Late Victorian/Edwardian building on Friar St to the east of the site



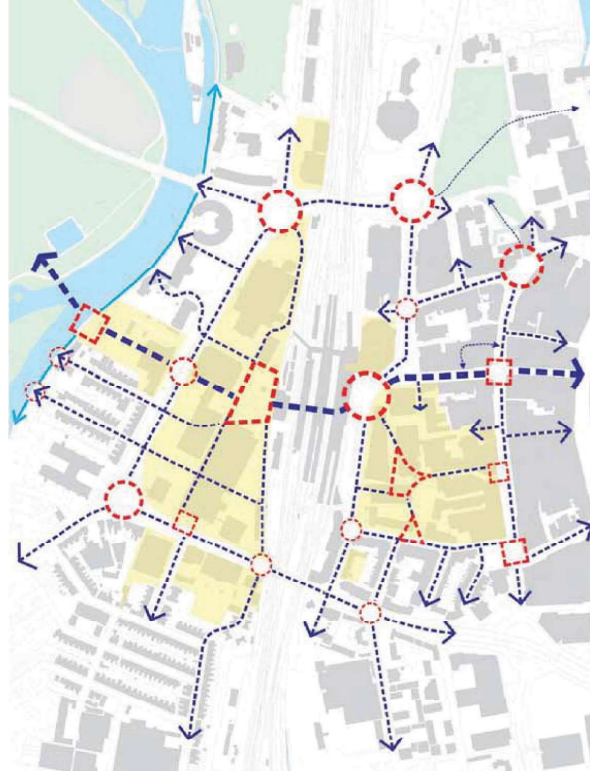
The Blade, a signature building in Reading viewed from the Abbey ruins

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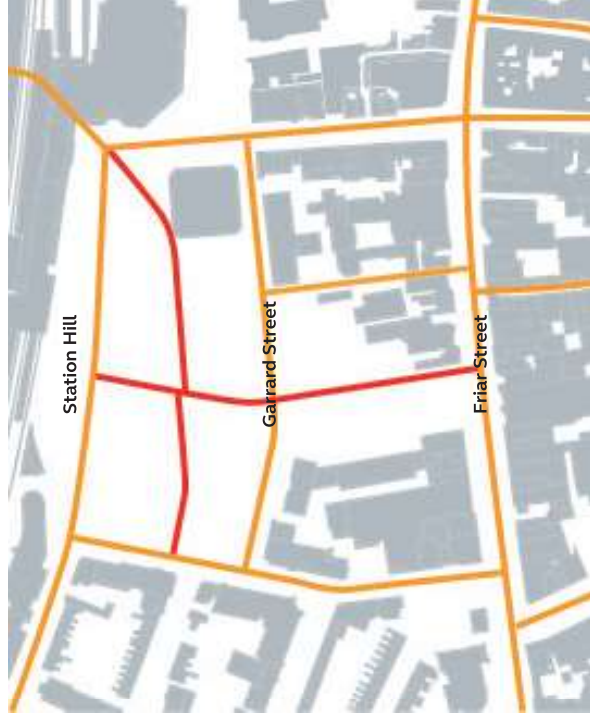
The Site: Permeability & Connections

The existing site is bound by Friar Street to the south and Garrard Street to the north. Since the closure of the Friars Walk shopping centre, the limited permeability through the site has been lost. Taken together with the site to the north of Garrard Street, the redevelopment of Station Hill presents an opportunity to increase permeability, connectivity and integration of the site into its immediate neighbourhood.

One of the key features of the Illustrative Scheme that accompanied the Outline Consented Applications was the proposed network of routes and spaces that separated the individual development plots. These provide permeability and accessibility. They are a key component of the proposal to be taken forward in this application. The consented application introduced two new routes across the site; one running east-west connecting the station to Greyfriars Road and the other running north-south to connect the station with Friar Street.



Abstract from Reading Station Area Framework emphasising that new connections are required through the area



Abstract from Consented Outline Application Design & Access Statement showing new north-south and east-west routes through the site

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The Site: Adjacent Streets

Plots E & F are occupied by disused and dilapidated office buildings and a shopping centre where a small number of units continue to be occupied on short-term leases. The general condition of the site is poor with much of it boarded up. The site is inaccessible to pedestrians.

Friar Street

The site's southern edge is bound by Friar Street which runs east-west and connects the residential streets located to the west with the Waterhouse-designed Town Hall and Forbury Gardens to the east. This secondary shopping street includes office space above retail and cafés uses and is generally between three- to six-storeys high with the exception of the thirteen-storey Novotel Hotel. The street has a mix of building types including some good quality late-Victorian and early-20th century buildings and a more varied selection of mid-to late-20th century façades. The street is generally level and approximately 20m wide with generous footpaths.



View of the site from Friar Street from east

Garrard Street

Garrard Street runs east-west along the northern boundaries of the site. The rear elevations of the disused shopping parade, an associated deck level car park and the rear of Telecom House overlook the street. The remaining parts of Garrard Street are fronted by a mix of buildings, including an office block recently converted to residential use and the refurbished Thames Tower. The service road to Thames Tower provides an exit from the multi-storey car park. The car park overlooks Garrard Street and a separate application has recently been approved for its demolition.

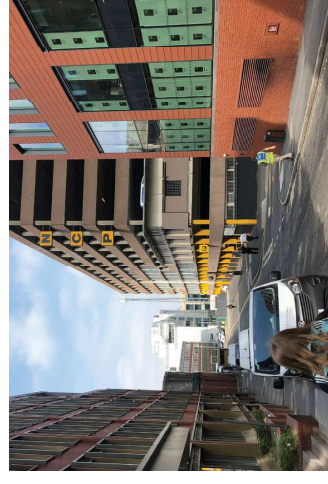
Most of the remaining buildings along this side of the street have been demolished as part of the plans to redevelop the plots between Garrard Street and Station Hill in line with the consented outline applications. Xafinity House which faces Greyfriars Road remains and this will be demolished in due course.



View of the site from Friar Street from west

Also facing Greyfriars Road and the south side of Garrard Street is the McKay Securities building. To the east of the proposal site, beyond its junction with Merchants Place, is Garrard House, a reconfigured and extended office block now in residential use. At Garrard Street's junction with Station Road there is a small vacated office. At the time of writing an application has been submitted for a hotel on the site.

Garrard Street changes significantly in level between Merchants Place and Station Hill. The street is mainly used for access to the car park and the service areas to the rear of Friar Street as well as Thames Tower. It has additional use as a taxi waiting area that gives it a predominant 'service street' character and reinforces its somewhat unsafe and inhospitable atmosphere. Redevelopment presents an opportunity to improve the character and perception of safety along the street with active frontages, good quality pavements and



View of the site from Garrard Street from east

Reading Town Centre: Socio-Economic Background

The site is located in the Abbey Ward which covers the centre of Reading. According to the 2011 Census it has a population of 12,630. This population has grown by 54% since 2001 and is young compared with the average across the borough. It has fewer children. The town centre has an ethnically diverse population with approximately 40% from Black and Asian Minority Ethnic communities. It has a high proportion of well-educated residents working in high skilled occupations with 50% holding degree-level or higher qualifications and 60% of all work in high-skilled roles such as managerial and professional occupations.

There are some 40,900 jobs in the centre, and this makes up 44% of employment within the Borough as a whole. Retail makes up the largest proportion of the jobs with a comparably high concentration of employment within the scientific and technology sector, public administration and defence sector.

The housing stock within the town centre is largely made up of flats and apartments. Private rented accommodation provides the largest proportion of the tenure split with half of households privately rented; about a quarter owner-occupied and the rest social rented and in shared ownership and intermediate tenures. The proposed development of Plots E & F will complement this mix with high-quality new homes required for the working population.