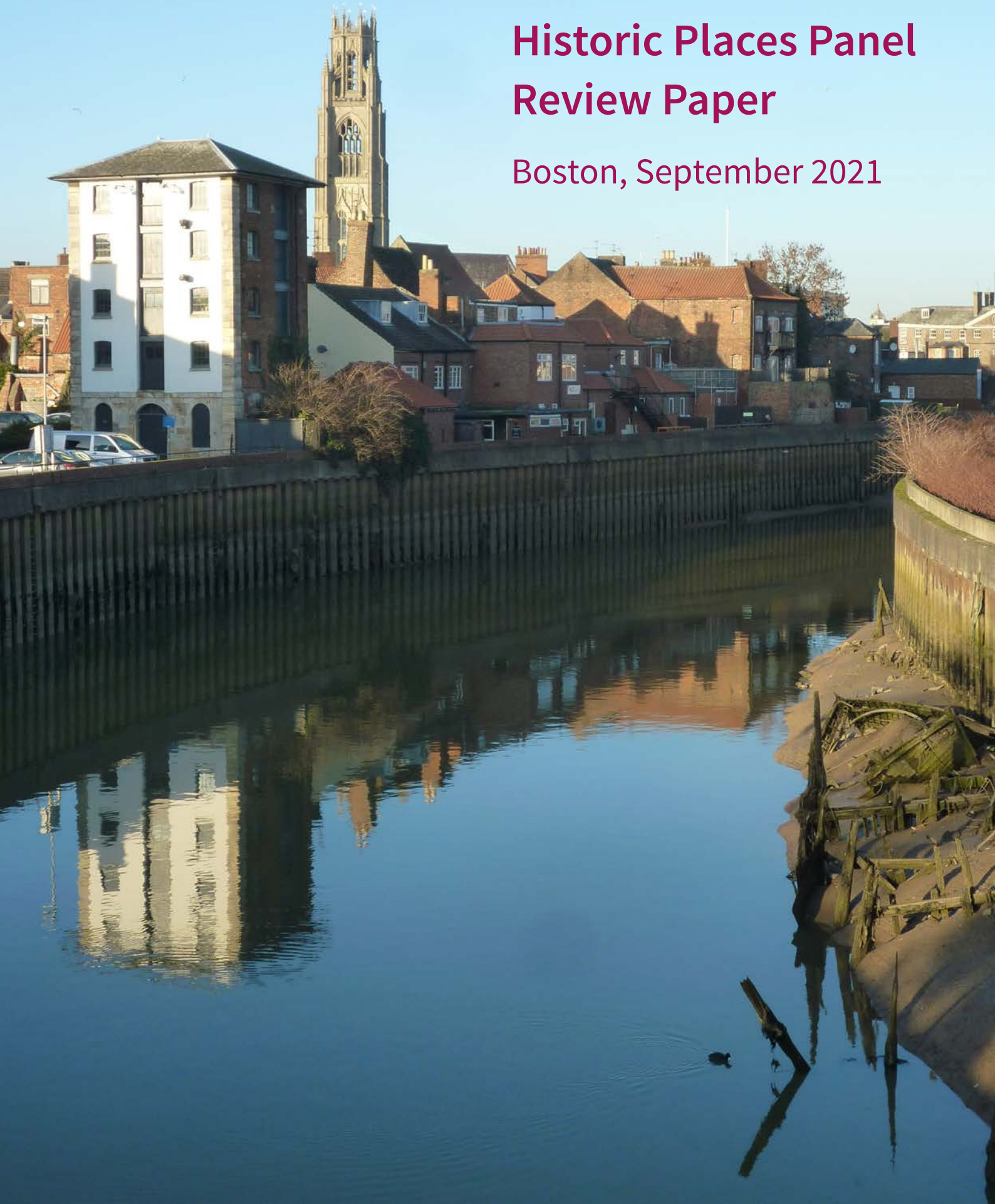




Historic England

Historic Places Panel Review Paper

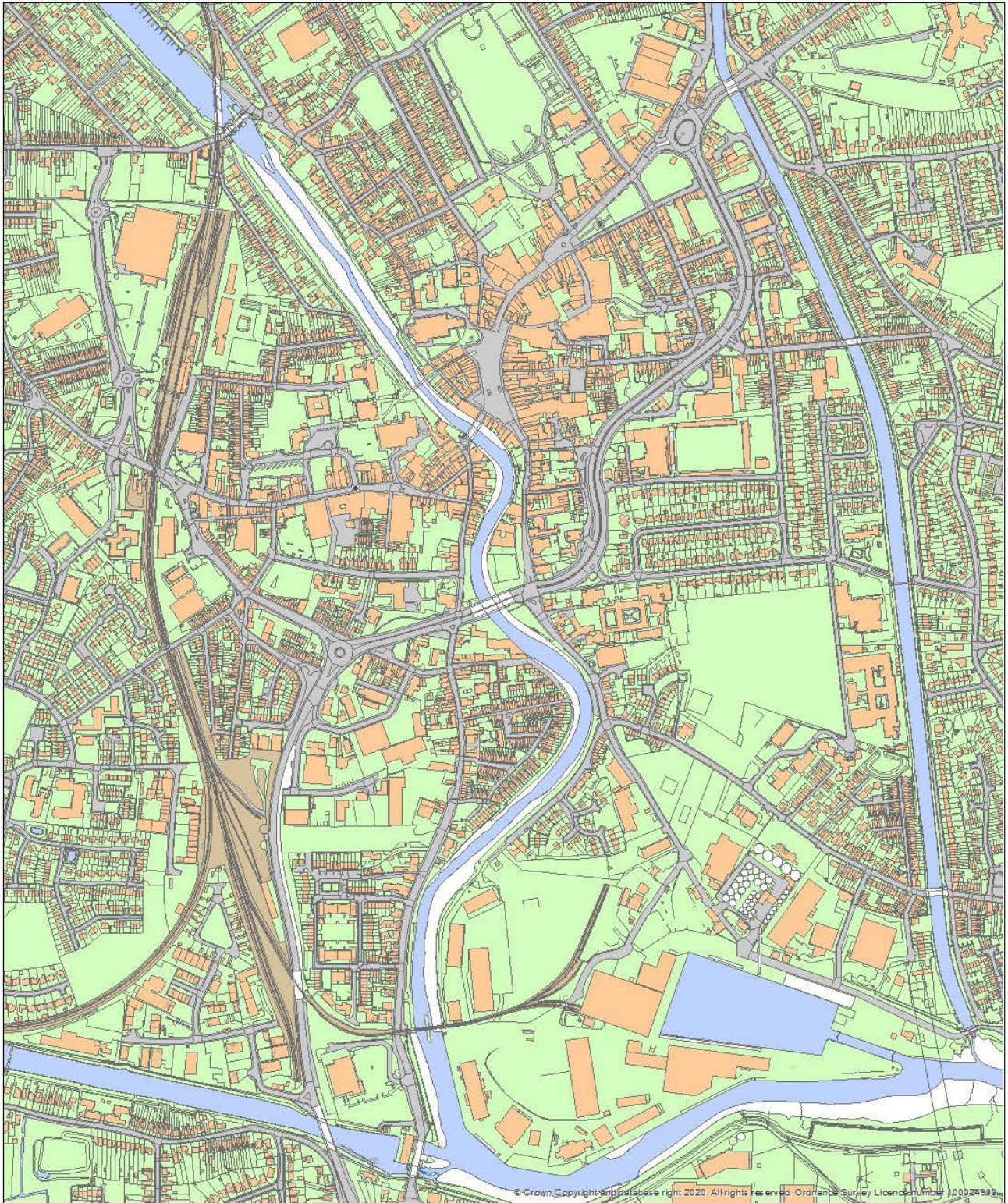
Boston, September 2021



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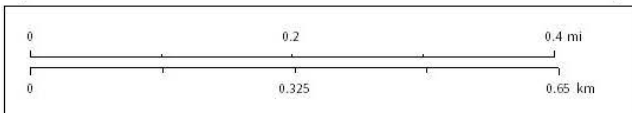
Boston



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Date: 20 January 2022



The Historic Places Panel Visit to Boston

Introduction

The Historic Places Panel's visit to Boston took place on two fine late September days that showed the town at its best, with the Wednesday market in full swing as it has been for generations. Much though has changed in Boston in recent years. It has one of the largest migrant populations in the UK and is enjoying a modest economic renaissance. Indeed, as several of the Panellists observed, few places they have visited have been as vibrant and full of activity on a weekday.

Boston's place in the world was established over seven hundred years ago when it rivalled London as a sea port, with trade and cultural links reaching East, far into Europe and beyond. This importance, which led to its name being bestowed on that other, now more famous Boston, has left a legacy of buildings and spaces that evoke not only another time, but also another country. Boston is on the very edge of England, with a church spire 'The Stump', that is as much a landmark to seafarers as it is to those on land with a setting largely reclaimed from The Wash and its coastal marshes.



Boston from above in the 1950's. ©Historic England



Chief Executive Rob Barlow and Deputy Chief Executive Michelle Sacks welcomed the Panel in the historic Municipal Buildings with an explanation of what an exciting time this is for Boston. During the past decade there has been a great deal of concerted effort to restore to the town a sense of its history, and to allow it to fulfil its role as the largest settlement in South Lincolnshire. It remains however under-visited, under-appreciated and has until now lacked the resources to achieve its potential. The exciting projects promoted through the £21.9m Town Deal bring the prospect of a step change that, it is hoped, will address previously intractable viability issues on a number of sites and stimulate the economic and cultural life of the town.

The size of the migrant population, many as vital agricultural workers, and the challenge of social integration are well documented, as is Boston's resounding vote to leave the European Union. The sheer popularity of Boston with those wishing to come and work in the UK has had a significant effect due to the numbers involved and 26,000 people have applied for settled status in a town which in 2011 had a total population of 56,000.

The cultural and economic impact has also been substantial. Grocers, continental delicatessens, cafes and other small businesses have proliferated and the demographic has become younger. With the children swelling local schools however, the Panel heard that this may for the greater part be a generational issue and that integration will hopefully follow.

Nevertheless, as Deputy CEO Michelle Sacks explained, Boston includes some of the most deprived wards in the country. There are places where the average wage is £130 a week less than the national average.

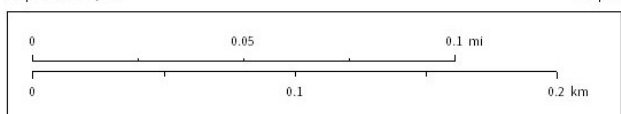
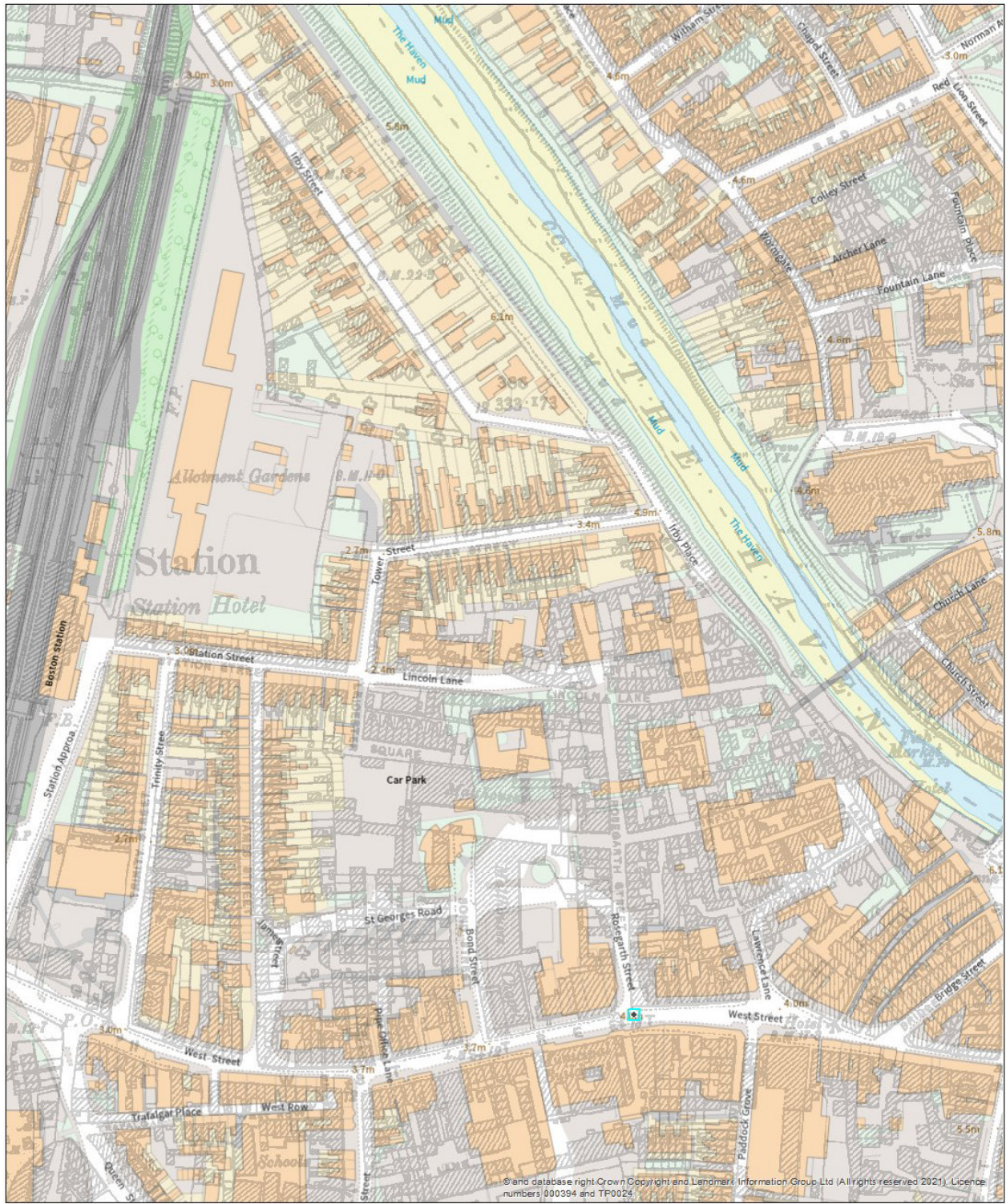
The Panel also learned of the "South Lincolnshire" Partnership with the neighbouring authorities of South Holland and East Lindsey and the strategic ambitions for rail, road and the port. In few places has the Panel been presented with a strategy that covers such a range of scales, from historic building restoration right through to strategic infrastructure. The Panel could see though that now is the time for Boston to put flesh on the bones of this strategy to determine not only what its interventions look like, but how they will be delivered at the pace required. It is with this object in mind the following recommendations are offered.

The Panel has seen a refreshingly optimistic mood in Boston and the dynamism and energy amongst the Borough's officers was impressive, as was their openness and ambition. This Panel Report will be the start of the process and there will be subsequent conversations through the Historic England Midlands Team.

The PE21 Development

Mike Gildersleeves, Assistant Director for Planning and Strategic Infrastructure described the aspirations for the PE21 site, which has been the subject of a great deal of consultation locally. The Panel were astonished by the rarity of a 12 acre development site in a historic town centre and the opportunity it represents. Owners include the local health trust, Boston Borough Council, Scarborough Group, Lincolnshire County Council and the Crown Estate. For the Town Deal, there is a deadline of July 2022 for bids with a need to spend as soon as

Boston PE21 Development Site C19 Map with C21 Overlay





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possible and completion by 2024 and the use of a CiC for PE21 is a helpful solution to the tight spend timetable.

This new addition to Boston's townscape should be drawn from Boston's exceptional character – it should *be Boston* and to do this a thorough assessment of Boston's character is necessary. Boston has outstanding townscape and great public spaces – these should be the touchstone. Grantham's Townscape Assessment is a great example of this: <http://www.southkesteven.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=8711>

The original masterplan by AR Urbanism was more successful than the current proposals in this vein, but we understand that the desire for car parking and concerns about moving the bus station ruled it out.

As it is in many places, parking is a thorny issue. It is critical that Council leadership is shown here, because although Boston has a large rural constituency who rely on the car, there seems to be a significant over supply of surface car parking around the town centre. The evidence of car park coverage and under-use should therefore be used to justify an alternative strategy, as this is a town centre environment – not a conventional development site.

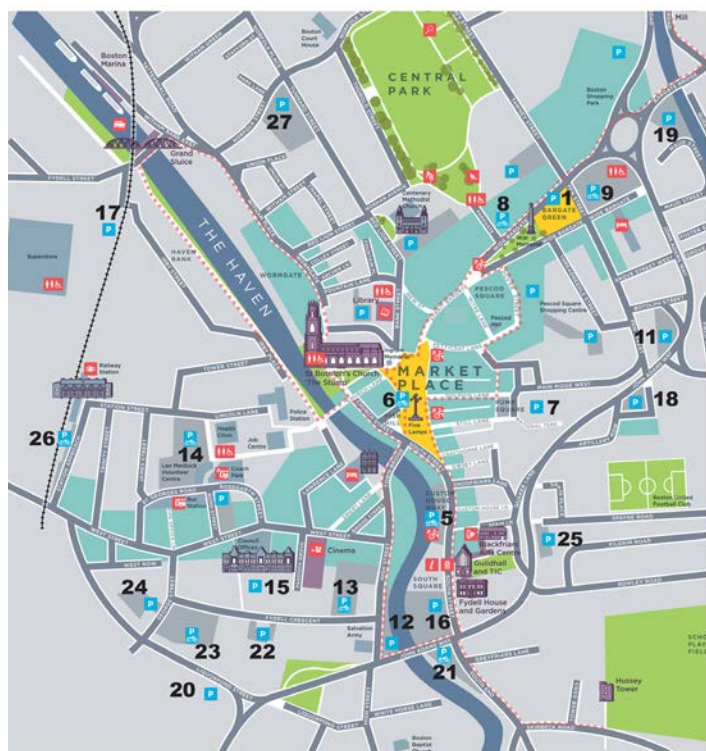
Perhaps, as with other towns such as Lincoln, the creation of a multi storey car park next to the station would provide part of the solution to parking in PE21, and it is understood that discussions have been had with East Midland's Rail Investment about plans for the area. In terms of how the site could contribute to a change in transport habits, the integration of a mobility hub would help with cycle facilities. More information here:

<https://como.org.uk/shared-mobility/mobility-hubs/what/>

and here:

<https://mclife.co.uk/the-hub/>

The Panel was sceptical about the idea that a volume housing developer would be able to deliver the sort of development that this site requires. Careful selection of a partner will be critical to success, and a more active role for the Borough Council in procurement beyond soft marketing to providers will be necessary. Perhaps the first job is to consider a name evocative of the surroundings and history.



Boston's car parks. ©Boston Borough Council



Dolphin Lane. Narrow streets and lanes are part of Boston's medieval character. © Historic England

The higher weighting given to social value over financial value is laudable and how this translates on the ground needs careful consideration. The worst-case scenario would be the requirements of the health provider (including increased parking) being offset against the viability calculations of a volume house builder, which would result a poor “anywhere” suburban environment in the heart of the old town.

Providing a setting that gives the market confidence by laying out the new spaces and installing the public realm first would give the Borough the best chance of attracting a suitable development partner and with Scarborough Group on board there may be more chance of pump priming investment in this. A linear park in this location would be unlikely to be successful and would be expensive to maintain, but a sequence of smaller urban spaces can have the same impact on wellbeing at a lower cost if well thought out. Creating more intimate spaces would also allow more land for development, improving density and feasibility. In Boston the character of the townscape lends itself to this approach.

It is difficult to create a good connection from the river and site to the station as the key desire line unfortunately lies across the police station, which is outside the site. Neither the railway station nor the bridge can be seen from within the site either, so using the Stump as a landmark is very important. However, there is a need to more fully understand what opportunities could be created now and in the future. To do this a movement and legibility



plan is required, as it's important to see how the public spaces fit with others in the town, via mapping and plan for 10-20 years ahead. The police station may even move in this timescale which would bring various opportunities including in establishing a sight line with the railway station. Moving the "red line" of the study area to include the Police Station therefore would have merit.

As far as uses are concerned, the Panel advises that any retail should be cut to the minimum to avoid it diluting demand for Boston's traditional shopping streets, as has happened with the Pescod Square development.





Shodfriars © Historic England

Heritage Led Regeneration

The sheer numbers of partners already involved in heritage led regeneration is impressive. A legacy of delivering conservation projects via the Historic England funded partnership scheme and now the Townscape Heritage Initiative has culminated in the impressive sum set aside for heritage under the Healing the High Street project. During its tour the Panel were introduced to a range of finished and potential projects including the Black Sluice Pumping Station, the Stanley and Quayside hotels, and County Hall, the last three of which are listed buildings.

The team at St Botolph's is good at fundraising and play a big role in the town. The major National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF) project at St Botolph's includes work to the medieval library including training in conservation skills and a community garden to support mental health.

Shodfriars

Shodfriars Hall is arguably the most distinctive building in Boston after St Botolph's and it is of natural concern to all that it lies unused at the present time. The building, which is on the Historic England Heritage at Risk Register, has been in need of urgent repairs to the roof, but the Panel understand that since the visit it has been sold to a local entrepreneur with a track record of heritage projects.

Boston Borough Council should be commended for keeping the building in the Town Deal after the withdrawal of the Blackfriars Arts Centre from the Town Deal project, which allows a certain amount of agency in discussions about its future. Most pressing is that the urgent repairs to the roof valleys are completed, to prevent any acceleration in its decline.

A town the size of Boston needs a venue of this scale and is fortunate it is to be found in such a distinguished building that also has an array of other flexible spaces. In addition to use as a theatre, the



large auditorium could be used for a range of activities - for example music gigs and a pop-up cinema - and should be retained as one space. The scale of the hall complements the smaller Blackfriars and the larger Gliderdrome and if/when that is back in public use it would give Boston an excellent range of venues. The conversion of the theatre part to residential uses should therefore be ruled out for this reason and because it is wholly unsuited to it in terms of both its significance and its form.

Comparable examples include the Orange Box, Halifax and Chester Story House.

<https://orangeboxhalifax.org/>

<https://www.storyhouse.com/>

There will be a need for openness to different ideas and to test uses with different partners. The Panel note for instance that Lincoln College have taken on Lincoln Drill Hall and possibly a partnership with educational uses could provide at least part of the answer.



The Maud Foster Drain and Windmill © Historic England

“Be Boston”

There is a lot of civic pride in Boston, as evidenced by the fascinating book, *Boston, the Small Town with a Big Story* published by Cllr Richard Austin, with chapters from an array of local contributors. The ‘Be Boston’ campaign has been recently launched and is seeking to celebrate Boston and what is good in the town – the “Boston Trumps” cards are an impressive reminder of an aspect of this. The £5m included in the Town Deal for high street heritage projects is a clear indication of the value placed on the historic environment.

Every new addition to it is a chance to reinforce this character, but it will not happen by good intentions alone. A policy framework based upon characterisation is necessary, covering its buildings, public realm, green infrastructure and arts and culture. This would be an aid to developers and planners alike.

Engagement

The Town Deal has provided an excellent opportunity for stakeholder engagement and community input, and indeed Boston had the highest number of ideas from the community on the My Town website. There are however two sides to Boston, with harder to reach communities and high levels of non-integration. This even has a geographic split in the town,



east – west (across the River Witham) with the west seen as being more eastern European. The Council should build on the existing participatory ways of integrating and empowering diverse communities, seeking to create a sense of belonging and understanding in one another. Cllr Richard Austin has for instance been developing engagement with different communities through tree planting, which could be more effectively linked to a Green Infrastructure strategy maximising local and strategic potential.

Another key to this is place making and heritage. The Panel heard of the mixed response to the wonderful, award winning Boston Buoys project led by the Arts Council-funded Transported programme run by the University of Lincoln. Art can provoke strong reactions, particularly in locations where it has not traditionally featured and the Council should not be put off – this is about long term change. Nevertheless, the Panel suggested more of a participatory approach to engagement to allow diverse communities to feel more a part of the outcomes and more invested in the process.

The historic links with Eastern Europe over time (particularly through the Hanseatic League), the universal appeal of archaeology and the inherent interest of development projects happening “on your doorstep” provide a fertile environment for engagement. The online approaches to the Town Deal made during the pandemic have been highly successful with high levels of take-up and this can be the first plank of broader outreach.

The process of consultation can have as many benefits as the finished product, with the delivery of skills, community cohesion, wellbeing and social prescribing possible via history projects, characterisation, design charrettes and community digs. Funding for these types of activity can be provided by the Architectural Heritage Fund and the NHLF. The Heritage Trust for Lincolnshire would be ideally placed to lead on this in partnership with the Borough, Boston College and local schools. An urban room would help – Nottingham has one at 38 Carrington St which is used as a hub for engagement and learning. Perhaps a pop-up facility could be started, for example in a repaired Shodfriars Hall? The University of Lincoln are interested in engaging more deeply with communities and specialises in community heritage.



Skills

Boston College's 'Top 5' UK status makes it a powerful agent for change, but for this to benefit Boston more widely its pupils need opportunities locally, something best identified through collaboration with the business community and Boston has a strong one. It could partner with local businesses in identifying job opportunities and career paths locally. The 'Primary Engineer' project connects local businesses with engineers to schools. The talent shown by the students of Boston College who provided the catering for the dinner begs the question, "is there an equivalent for food?" The planned centre for food and logistics involving Boston College and the University of Lincoln and the arrival in Boston of Plant and Bean, the largest vegan products supplier in Europe, leads us to hope so and could have a beneficial knock on effects on the food offer in the town and its agricultural hinterland alike.

Flood Risk and Development

Eighty percent of the Borough is in a flood zone, making housing delivery a problem as it is impossible to deliver the required new homes to Environment Agency (EA) guidelines, even though there is a desire from house builders to work in Boston. The EA require new housing to be raised by 0.5-1.4m to alleviate flood risk in spite of the new flood barrier, as they factor in the risk of failure. This is having a knock-on effect on the town centre, as Boston has high rents and low income which leads to the creation of HMO's. The impact of flood risk on new development is affecting the delivery of even small, brown field developments necessary to stitch the townscape back together. Clearly a pragmatic solution is needed. Do other eastern local authorities have the same issues? Perhaps a combined approach to the EA and



Winning entry - Living with Water: Flood Resilient Housing for Hull. ©Harper Perry Architecture



Department for Levelling-up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) would start a dialogue on this. The panel suggested that innovative thinking is required embedding nature-based solutions for climate change adaptation within a green infrastructure strategy. An alternative is to use the upper floors in the town centre for residential accommodation as well as in the PE21 area which would avoid flood risk and bring more footfall and surveillance into the town centre.

Questions of Capacity

The ambitious place making agenda in a partnership of three local authorities brings with it the chance to increase the capacity available for delivering place-making, an opportunity that emphatically needs to be taken and the desired unitary status would take this even further. There is a clear passion for place making in the Council, but also evident was an acute need for specialist place making and design skills. A shared urban design post would strengthen the Council's position as client, providing the expert peer to peer challenge necessary to get the best from partners and contracted design professionals and deliver high quality place making. They could also engage in enhanced pre-application advice for planning applications, write development briefs for key sites and lead on research on the issue of development, climate change resilience and flood risk. The opportunity should also be taken to involve the regional design review service Design Midlands on larger developments - www.designmidlands.org.

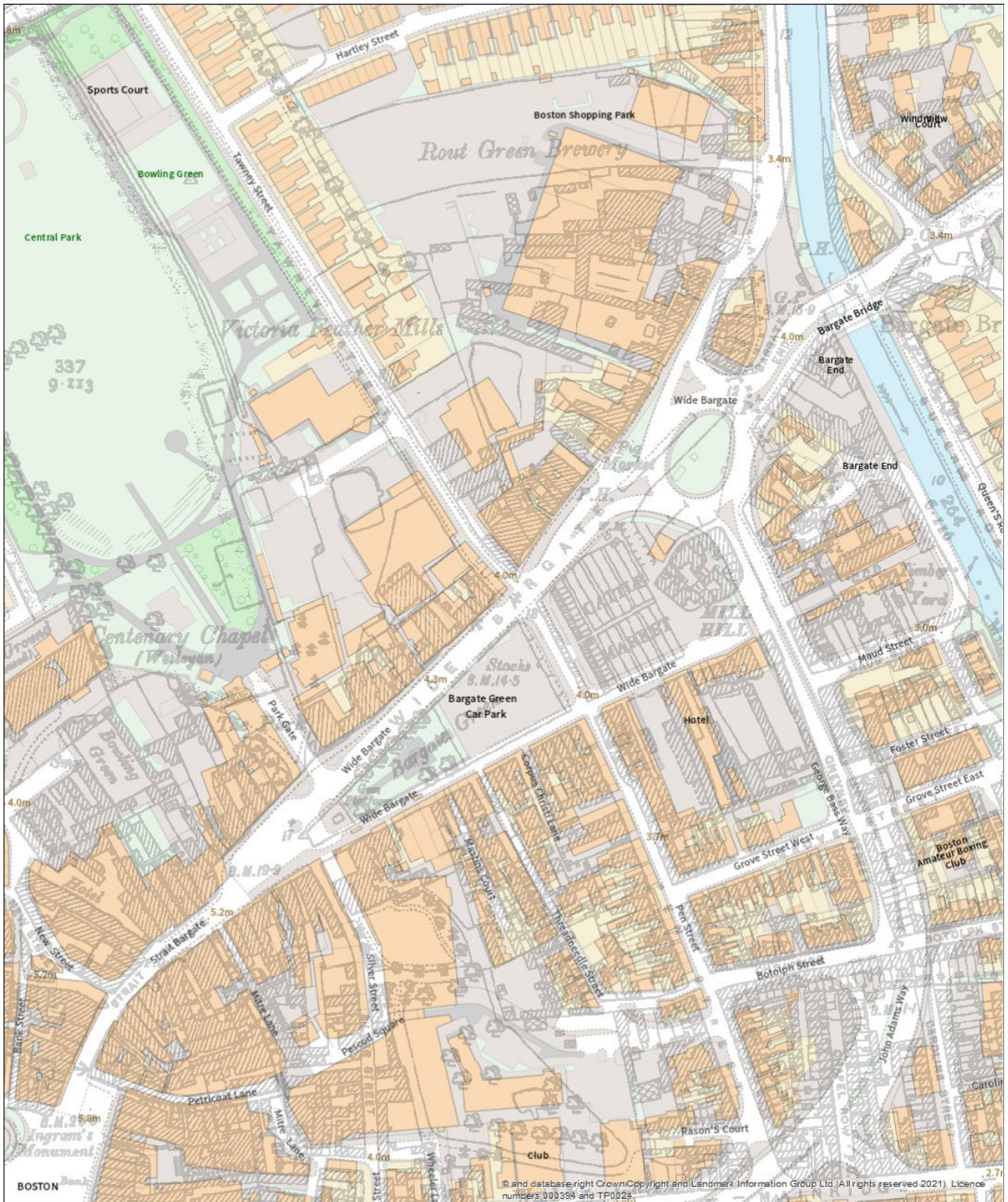
Public Realm

The Panel were impressed by the quality of the Market Place public realm, which at the time of its construction was the largest York Stone public realm project in the country and provides a fitting foreground to St Botolph's. During the Panel's visit car drivers seemed to treat the Market Place with the caution necessary in what is essentially shared space, and its grandeur was apparent even when the market was taken down. The Panel therefore advise that radical changes to the Market Place are not warranted – in fact the extent of planting indicated in the masterplan would make full appreciation of it difficult. Rather a more nuanced approach to changing how the Market Place feels and is used would be more successful and cost effective, with events, street food, street trees and perhaps a water feature to animate the space.

Whilst people don't want to engage with shutting down routes, roads are closed for the markets and the Market Place itself is closed during the fair and the town doesn't grind to a halt. We understand a continental market is being considered for Wide Bargate - could trial shutting down therefore be linked to events that would test the impact of such measures and show people what is possible? Jan Gehl demonstrates how this can be done and examples include Norwich, Bury St Edmonds and Antwerp, which hosts festivals. This could also lead the way to a permanent reduction or elimination of car parking in this space.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_x5Hor2MP8

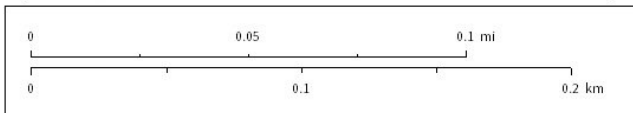
Boston Wide Bargate C19 Map with C21 Overlay



Map scale: 1:1,654

Map centre: 532,992 344,419

Date: 20 January 2022





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Characterful, contemporary housing: Marmalade Lane, Cambridge by Mole Architects. <http://www.marmaladelane.co.uk/>

Other small public spaces were memorable, Pump Square among them – a wonderfully intimate square more continental than English in feel, the Panel felt that its use solely for car parking was a missed opportunity – the two small street trees gave a hint of the space it could be.

The Port

As Boston's original *raison d'être*, there is a shared understanding of how integral the port is to the town, and appropriately the Port Director sits on the Town Deal Board. Imports through the port have increased following Brexit, especially given congestion elsewhere and there is interest from the significant farming community and food processors to use the port more. Steel, paper, cardboard and timber are imported through it and waste plastics are also shipped.

£5million has been invested in the port in the last 18 months and there is the potential to take more goods when upgrades are finished that include the widening of the lock gates. This however brings questions of capacity in the road and rail networks that serve it.

Road

Unless this capacity issue is addressed it will affect how both the town and port function, putting future growth at risk. Most businesses won't relocate to the north side of Boston due to traffic problems and a link road between the A16 and A52 is in the early stages of being sought. Three bridges are required overall and justifications will have to be carefully

articulated to capture the additional benefits it would bring, including green infrastructure and climate change adaptation, biodiversity, housing, flood protection and port activity. To this the Panel would add the amenity of the town centre, which in itself needs careful consideration and planning to capture the full scope and magnitude of the change it could bring. The three authorities together strengthen the case, and we understand the Borough have reached out to Cambridgeshire and Peterborough local authorities to help make a “whole region” case for the A16, a sensible move.

Rail

Rail connections are poor, but there is a strategic aim to connect Boston by rail to the main heavy goods line from London to northern England. That would also provide a more direct line to Peterborough and on to Cambridge and airports for example and a direct line to London. Encouraging conversations have taken place with Network Rail, who are now considering connecting communities as part of their drivers for investment. This would



The Haven, with the Railway Swing Bridge in the foreground and the fishing fleet behind © Historic England



be a significant economic opportunity for Boston with a cost of £100million. A Spalding rail terminal has also been proposed related to agricultural markets. The improved rail connections would also help the port.

Town Centre Traffic

The presence of so much infrastructure devoted to the car is one of the key issues facing Boston in its place making ambitions, as managing the impact of the car is a key way of making places more “liveable”. Most, if not all of its car parks, are on land that was previously occupied by buildings and the same is true of John Adams Way. The Boston Transport Strategy only tackles car use indirectly by measures promoting alternatives (and only those aspects which the Council can control), so doesn’t really tie into the broader issues of place making. Getting a handle on this will require a strategic, phased, whole place-based approach.

Rationalising car parks needs to be tested and doesn’t in every instance mean closing them. Wide Bargate for instance, an enormous space at an entrance to the town centre, would be improved immensely if it was de-paved to make more porous in line with best practice sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS), integrating key green infrastructure features.

The A16 through Boston is a shockingly damaging road. One only has to look at maps published prior to the construction of John Adams Way to see how much more connected and coherent the area around its route was prior to its construction.

De-engineering it should be seen as a priority if this can be realised, but planning can be started in advance of this and used in the justification for the strategic road proposals and implementation through incremental change. Appropriately given Boston’s history, the Woonerf principles of urban design, founded in Holland may provide the best exemplars:

<https://citygreen.com/the-rising-popularity-of-the-woonerf-design-a-living-street-concept-for-shared-city-spaces/>

In a town so close to the water, what is the connection to it and to nature for people? There are some beautiful spaces and routes that could lead people to explore very easily given the right wayfinding. The interlinked themes of drainage, the soil, agriculture and ecology could inspire an approach to new green infrastructure that is inherently of Boston, as part of the “Keep it Boston” initiative – it could even inspire a new John Adam’s greenway in years to come. Central Park, the coastal RSPB sites, the River Witham, South 40ft Drain and the agricultural hinterland form part of an environment that sits alongside the heritage which is little publicised. The health benefits of walking and cycling, particularly given the flat landscape are also there to be harnessed and the Boston Bikes initiative is to be commended, not to mention the enhanced biodiversity, air quality and climate change mitigation.

Examples of this include Grey to Green in Sheffield, which is transforming the city’s connectivity north/south and Sunderland Riverside Masterplan, which turns the A183 dual carriageway into a tree-lined avenue.

Vacant Sites

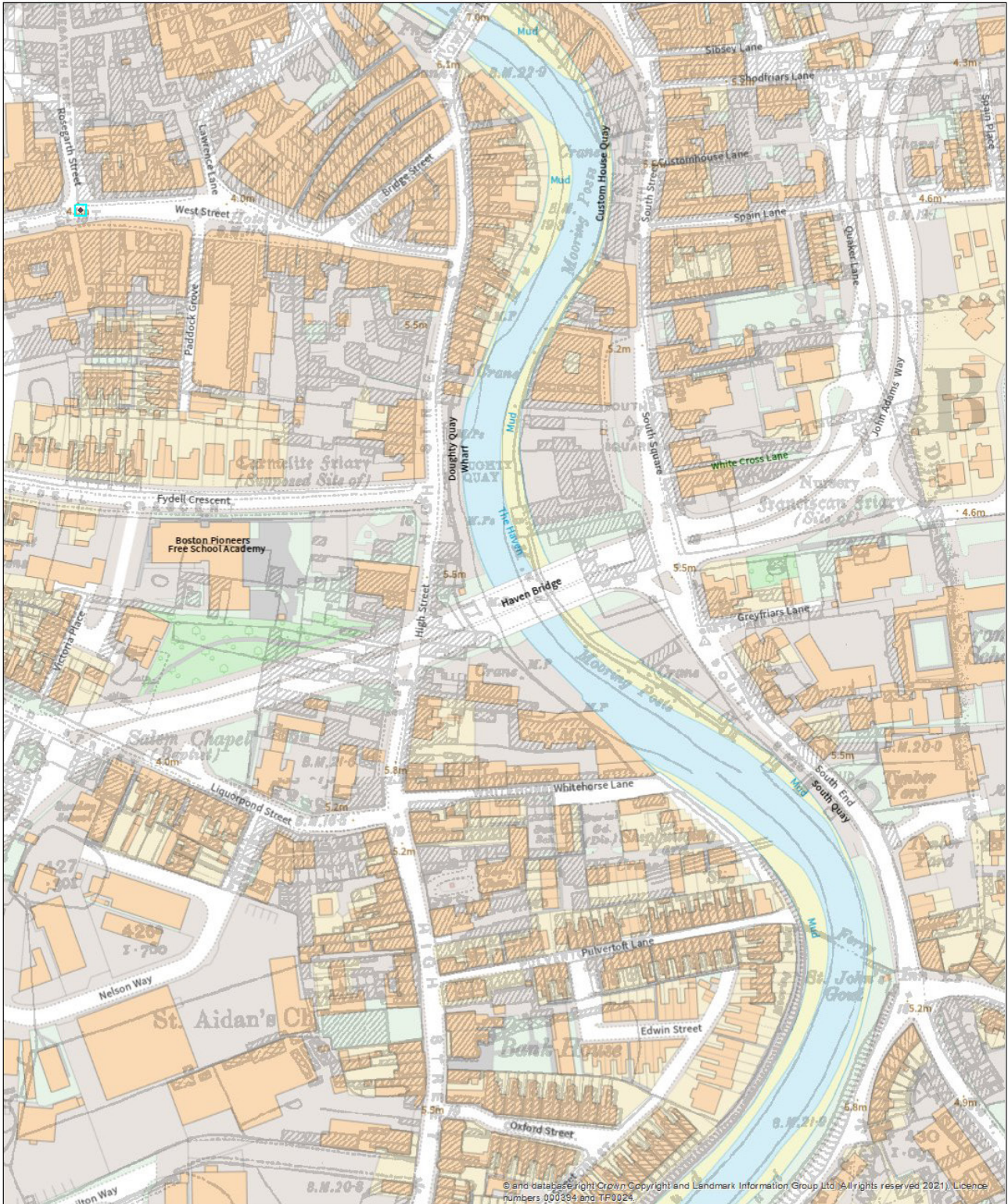
There are a number of surface car park sites in Boston, but on their walkabout two stood out as being strategically important in place making terms. One, PE21, is dealt with earlier in this paper and is already the subject of much discussion. The other is what is known as Chalky's Car Park. This site lies on South Street between South Square and John Adams Way. The absence of any building here reveals some beautiful listed buildings in views from the Haven Bridge and Doughty's Quay, but in doing so creates a wasteland environment that actually increases the impact of the A16. Issues with flood defence and easements have previously made development of it problematic and we understand that the owner is content with the revenue from car parking, which are both things that militate against anything changing. However, perusal of historic maps show development set well back from the river, with only a lightweight timber loading bay at the water's edge, which may provide a clue to its future. Perhaps a development appraisal here would be a chance to start a dialogue with the owner, with the added benefit that any research regarding development and flood risk, and integrated green infrastructure would have wider application and benefits.

Dilapidated Buildings

The panel saw the transformations that have been made using HE and NLHF funding and were impressed by the extensive use of S215 notices to tackle dilapidation. The difficulty contacting absentee landlords is however a common problem and it is suggested that rather than the usual approaches using standard headed letters that are ignored, writing to these owners using un-headed stationary with a clear offer can yield results.



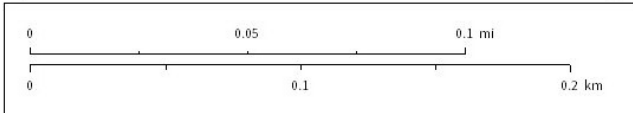
Boston Haven Bridge C19 Map with C21 Overlay



Map scale: 1:1,654

Map centre: 532,766 343,742

Date: 20 January 2022





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Conclusion and Recommendations:

Creating the strong partnerships necessary for place making requires leadership, something Boston has amply demonstrated. Implementing change to best effect, satisfying the desires of the existing population, while making changes that attract the movers and shakers takes this to another level, and requires technical expertise, lateral, strategic thinking and good engagement and communication. The Panel found a town that has all the ingredients to become a great place to live in, that has taken some significant steps towards achieving that goal. It has also seen the potential pitfalls caused by tight timescales, conflicting requirements and the limitations of capacity. With this in mind it has the following recommendations:

1. Consider employing an Urban Designer jointly with adjoining authorities. A qualified design professional will be of benefit across the full range of place making activity (including delivering a number of the recommendations below) and would represent excellent value for money. At the same time, more use could be made of the services available from the regional design review service Design Midlands.
2. Develop a Green Infrastructure Strategy addressing flood resilience, SuDS, urban farming, green skills, contact with nature, biodiversity, heritage landscapes, cycling and walking in partnership with the local groups. A movement hub would help to get people onto bikes for commuting, improving health and wellbeing, achieving goals set out in the Boston Transport Strategy.
3. Make a study of your car parks, including ownership. Map usage to inform the future rationalization of parking provision, provide evidence to support the design approach for PE21 and to identify opportunities to mend the townscape elsewhere.
4. Ensure that the Arts Council-funded route map to a cultural policy aligns with the existing Heritage Strategy, and includes measures to allow the full activation of spaces and buildings currently under-used.
5. Write a characterisation study to get a better handle on what it is to “Be Boston”. This will help with many aspects of design and make a conservation area appraisal straightforward. This should include a study of movement, legibility and a strategy for integrated green infrastructure.
5. Create a list of small, medium and large projects to be delivered over the short, medium and long term as part of a Green, Blue and Grey infrastructure strategy, including wildlife, biodiversity and climate change adaptation.
6. Communication and partnership is a fundamental of good place making and Boston has made great strides in this. To derive even greater value from this, the Panel recommends that the Borough does a quick relationship and stakeholder mapping exercise which may reveal common interests that were previously unrealised and establish relationships that would otherwise not happen.

7. Ensure urgent repairs happen at Shodfriar's Hall. It is, strategically, the building in Boston with the greatest un tapped potential and it should play a leading part in the town's cultural regeneration.
8. Build an engagement approach focusing on heritage, harnessing every phase of the development process including design, archaeology and construction. This will deliver on community cohesion and skills and improve outcomes.
9. Economic analysis is necessary to underpin the PE21 strategy. Commission a development appraisal to provide the essential evidence to put the Council in a strong position in its negotiations with delivery partners and planning, as well as to ensure the full potential socio-economic impact of the site is realized.
10. Seek a meeting with the Environment Agency and DLUHC to explore ways of unlocking development as the knock-on effects of the housing shortage have implications for the Town Deal. Perhaps an architectural design competition could be promoted to provoke innovative thinking in this field.



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The Historic Places Panel provides a broad spectrum of independent expertise to help local authorities and others engage in the regeneration and revitalisation of historic places.

A list of current panel members and previous review papers can be found on our website:

historicengland.org.uk/about/who-we-are/committees-and-panels/historic-places-panel.

For more information on the Historic Places Panel please email: governance@HistoricEngland.org.uk.

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Johanna Gibbons

Julian Hill

Nigel Hinds

Rosemarie MacQueen

David Ubaka

Katie Wray