

Design matters: Berwick-upon-Tweed, Spittal and Tweedmouth

Roofs, chimneys and rainwater goods

‘Variations in roof form, pitch, materials and tone create a diverse roofscape of great character across all three conservation areas. High ground, the estuary and the Walls allow much of the roofscape to be clearly seen at a distance.....’



Roofs are almost exclusively of traditional dual pitch, but with considerable variation in pitch, form and detail. Offshoots, stepping progressively down from main buildings, roofs with varying lengths, pitches, heights and hips, generate a layered scene enlivened by the variety in tone of the materials.



Most roofs are covered in one of two natural materials: clay pantiles or natural slate. Interlocking clay pantiles are the traditional roofing material for the earliest buildings in the conservation area. They are a natural, traditionally hand-made product with quite wide variations in colour from deep brownish-orange, through warm terracottas, to brighter salmon shades. Variations are from tile to tile as well as roof to roof. Pantile roofs are more conspicuous than slate ones, even though time and weather leave a distinct patina and greater visual texture.

Slate followed pantiles with the arrival of the railways from the mid-nineteenth century. The natural slate used in the area is mainly Welsh, with Scottish and Westmorland slate also used, especially in Berwick. Each has its own character – Scottish slate is rough and thick with strong dark grey and black shades. Westmorland slate has green tinges. Both are laid in diminishing courses. Welsh slate is thinner and more regularly sized, often with blue or purple hints.

The spread varies mainly by age and style, though some areas, like the Pier Road or Castlegate are predominantly slate, while others,

such as the Low Greens are mainly pantile. Within the Walls, there are concentrations of pantile in the oldest building groups but also on many late twentieth century additions. Slate dominates late eighteenth and nineteenth century clusters such as at Bridge End, Palace Green and Ravensdowne. Plain red clay tiles are occasionally used. Typical of the early twentieth century, they are flat and much smaller than pantiles.

The older parts of Tweedmouth have a mixture of pantile and slate, but again clay pantiles notably dominate most of the earlier building groups, e.g. Mill Strand, Knowe Head, Well Square and parts of Church Road. The lower stretches of Tweedmouth Main Street demonstrate well how coverings vary with age. Older buildings on the north side are mostly pantile, whilst newer ones on the south side and up the bank are in slate. In Spittal, slate is the predominant roofing material.



In Berwick, eaves are either simple flat timber boards with a minimal overhang, a few with simple stone corbels, or, more usually, featuring more ornate moulded stone cornices to widely varying designs, some with parapets, dentils or other detailing. In Tweedmouth and Spittal, the simpler type predominates. Verges are mostly plain but there are several examples of crowsteps, characteristic of

Scottish architecture. Especially in Tweedmouth, there are examples of distinctive large triangular verge blocks on older buildings.

Many historic buildings have flat stone watertabling that protrudes above the roof plane to divide roofs, particularly where roofs step down a slope. In Berwick, much of this watertabling is finished with a distinctive volute scrolled kneeler that is



very important to the distinctiveness of late eighteenth and nineteenth century buildings. Later Victorian ones often have flat or shaped kneeler blocks. Ridges vary with the roof covering. Pantile roofs tend to use clay half-pipes, slate ones have red or grey clay tiles, or lead rolls. Valleys are traditionally lead lined.

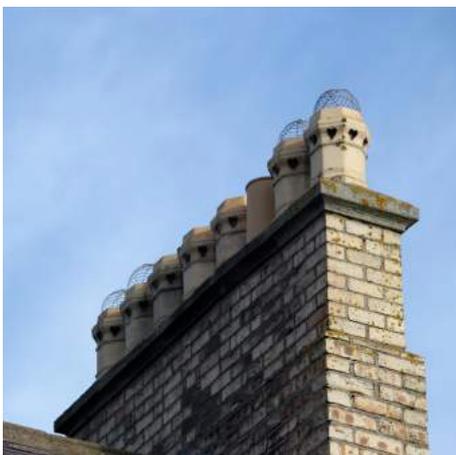
In Tweedmouth, historic commercial building groups have compound roof forms. The former Border Brewery is the best example, a tumbling cascade of shapes, orientations and planes.



Across the conservation areas, chimneys are a traditional feature, enlivening the roofscape and adding to the authentic traditional built scene. Chimney dimensions can also be important to understanding the age of a building. Some of the largest, oldest chimneys in Berwick are at the top end of Church Street, and are sizeable and sturdy. In small red-brown brick, they often have battered (inwardly sloping) sides and

stretch across the depth of the building. They are often prominent on rear slopes and offshoots where they add to the authentic backland scene. In Tweedmouth, chimneys are equally traditional but have suffered considerably from change and loss.

Many other chimneys are small, square and sit at the ridge. Most have been rebuilt or added later in brick, some with decorative



caps. Some of the smarter or later ones are in stone with shaped collars or caps.

One or two historic commercial buildings in Berwick and several in Tweedmouth have large, long ridge vents which can be very descriptive of their history and character, e.g. Maltings Arts Centre, or the former Pier Road maltings.

Rainwater goods including gutters, hoppers and downcomers (drainpipes) are not designed to be prominent features. Two general types exist according to the type of eaves: simple features applied to eaves boards or simple eaves corbels, or (especially in Berwick) smarter gutters concealed behind moulded stone cornices and lead or copper lined.



A few more decorative features can be seen on some commercial and institutional buildings, including square section downcomers, decorative brackets and moulded square or conical hoppers.

Cast iron is the traditional material; however, other metal and plastic replacements are more prevalent in some areas.

New constructions and repair: points to consider



Traditional dual pitch roofs are used almost exclusively, but there is considerable variation in pitch, form and detail, with roofs often being used to add architectural flair to buildings. Older roofs tend to be steeper. Blank gable-ends are characteristic but hips are also common, used to turn corners in grouped buildings, on offshoots, and as a polite feature in later buildings. Many roofs have slightly swept or kicked eaves, a distinctive historic form sometimes unfortunately ironed-out in later re-roofings.

Some newer roofs echo the conservation areas themes well (e.g. the simple low slung roofs of the Tweedmouth Bowling Club pavilion and Nos. 87-89 Main Street) whilst others are atypical and alien in form (e.g. The Estuary).

In general, most vernacular buildings and many built before the 1850s are more accurately suited to clay pantiles, whilst most later Victorian and Edwardian buildings would be best suited to slate. The least sensitive approach is to mix both on a single building, terrace or planned group (unless accurately informed), as it harms the architectural integrity and character of the conservation area.

Concrete tiles do not have the variety or visual liveliness of clay pantile or natural slate, being standard in shape, size, texture and pattern, and usually a dull mid-brown colour. (They are often heavier and can cause roof structures to sag in the long term).

A traditional feature of clay pantile roofs is the use of slates for the bottom two or three 'easing' courses to allow easier construction and flow of water to gutters. Too many courses laid in this way can unbalance a roof's proportions.



Chimneys were not included in the design of many larger later commercial buildings (notably the later additions to Walkergate, Marygate and Golden Square), further harming their contribution to the conservation area. The same is true of much new housing,

where traditional designs would be enhanced with chimneys. Small stylised chimneys are included in late twentieth century housing at Palace Green. Most chimneys in the conservation areas have kept their pots.

Gutters are key to a building's long-term health. Simple maintenance to clear them will prevent water ingress that could lead to damp and more long term problems of rot and decay.

Pitfalls to avoid

Removing or capping chimneys or dropping them in height: this harms the contribution they make to the varied and lively roofscape that is viewed from many vantage points within all three conservation areas, as well as affecting the integrity of the historic buildings.

Over rendering stone or brick chimneys; poor re-pointing and weather proofing details in inappropriate materials like cement based mortars ultimately leads to damp problems, as well as affecting the character of the area. Rebuilding in modern engineering bricks to smaller dimensions and detail also harms their contribution.

Replacement of cast iron rainwater goods (including hoppers and downcomers) with modern plastic ones which can involve the removal of these decorative features. (However it is universally accepted in conservation circles that black painted aluminium is a suitable replacement in some circumstances.)

Peppering modern vent tiles across roofs is a poor detail which goes against the uncluttered nature of roofs in the area.

Replacing natural slate with artificial slate gives a flat, shiny appearance at odds with the rich texture and colour variations of natural slate. Replacing historic clay pantiles with modern machine made pantiles results in a roof that is usually less visually textured and brighter in colour. Natural materials weather over time to create a rich and varied patina that can never be replicated or artificially introduced.

Find out more from

The Conservation Area Character Appraisals for Berwick, Tweedmouth and Spittal.

Guides on technical issues and traditional skills from English Heritage and Historic Scotland.

Northumberland County Council's Conservation Team

This is one of a series of guides to help designers, builders and homeowners. It is based on the official Conservation Area Character Appraisals for Berwick, Tweedmouth and Spittal.

There are other leaflets available or planned on
Doors and windows
Shopfronts
Conservation areas and listed buildings
New builds and extensions in the conservation areas.

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