

# Why does colour matter in Greenwich Town Centre?

The Royal Borough of Greenwich has recently published a new Colour Guidance Note for Greenwich town centre. But why is guidance on the use of colour necessary?

Colour can enliven buildings and enhance the quality of the urban environment. But it can also erode and degrade that quality, especially – in an area of high historic importance such as Greenwich – where colours are used to highlight one set of premises at the expense of its neighbours. Whilst retailers' need to attract custom is of course recognised, attention-grabbing colour schemes tend to undermine the very characteristics that make the town centre attractive in the first place.

Greenwich town centre lies at the heart of the Maritime Greenwich World Heritage Site.

As such it is internationally recognised for its outstanding historic significance. The town centre also contains a high concentration of buildings listed for their special architectural and historic interest. The Royal Borough has a statutory duty to ensure the special character of the area and its buildings is preserved and enhanced for future generations, which is why in 2002 a measure known as an 'Article 4 Direction' was introduced to bring the colour of commercial buildings under planning control. This means that planning permission is required for the application of colour to shop-fronts and upper storeys. A list of affected properties is given in the Guidance Note.



**Fleet Street in 1886, illustrating colours in use during the late Victorian period**

The guidance note recommends a specific palette of colours for use on both shop-fronts and upper storeys. Given that colour choice is relatively transitory and often subjective, how has this colour range been selected? The recommended colours are based on historical precedent and were selected in consultation with Dr Ian Bristow, a leading authority on historic paint colours. The majority of the town centre building stock is of later Georgian, Regency and Victorian date (the period c. 1780-1900), and the colours chosen have been derived from the range of colours commonly employed during this period. The colour palette reflects the fact that within this date range, the painting of external joinery was subject to changing fashions, for example ranging from off-white around c.1800 to dark reds, greens, browns and greys during the later 19th-century, although the historic palette was generally quite muted by modern standards. Today's brilliant hues – including 'pure brilliant white' – were made possible only by 20th-century developments in paint technology and will appear overbearing and inappropriate in the town centre.

It should be noted that these colours are recommendations and not strict requirements, since it is not the Royal Borough's intention to impose a single canon of taste or to create a blandly conformist environment. On the contrary, the imaginative use of colour that harmonises with the colours of the prevailing local building materials and is in sympathy with historical practice will be encouraged. Applications that adhere to the suggested colours are very likely to be granted; other proposals will be considered and assessed on their adherence to the principles and guidelines set out in the Guidance.

In summary, the overarching aim of the Guidance is to promote a more sensitive approach to retail design so as to ensure the continued preservation and enhancement of Greenwich's distinctive and exceptional character, to the benefit of residents, retailers and visitors alike.

The 2016 Colour Guidance Note can be found on the Royal Borough of Greenwich's website, within the section on Article 4 Guidance areas: [www.royalgreenwich.gov.uk](http://www.royalgreenwich.gov.uk).

**Rebecca Duncan, Conservation Policy Officer  
Royal Borough of Greenwich**



**An early-Victorian view of Nelson Road, Greenwich, showing light-coloured stucco upper storeys and shop-front divisions and dark painted window joinery**