

Ptolemy Dean. Streetscapes: Historic Routes through English Towns: Navigating Historic English Towns. Lund Humphries Publishers Ltd, 2024

Review by: Adrian Green

Ptolemy Dean's *Streetscapes* provides a vivid account of twenty-six English towns, including Newcastle upon Tyne and Durham. The book seeks to celebrate and promote the conservation of historic English streetscapes. Dean highlights the introduction of Conservation Areas since the 1960s and laments recent Local Authority austerity, 'now beginning to morph into serious neglect and civic embarrassment. With planning authorities run down and understaffed, the threat of further weakening of planning controls bodes badly'. Yet, the resilient sense of place that Dean's book captures perhaps gives hope that England's historic towns can weather yet another storm. Durham is fortunate to be undergoing a thorough Conservation Management Plan led by the Local Authority. One might hope that this volume, supported by Historic England, will be eagerly appreciated by those working in planning.

Dean has developed a unique mode of illustration. Ink drawings of buildings made *in situ* apply a wiggly line to architectural detail, finished with a colour wash. These pictures claim to evoke a sense of streetscape that photographs cannot. Yet even intensely familiar sets of buildings were rendered strange to me. Judgements on place and perspective are inevitably subjective. While the approach from Durham railway station to the Cathedral is well described, there are elements along the way that Dean experiences more subjectively. His view from the top of Elvet Bridge on Saddler Street omits the green landscape beyond the town which is arguably this vista's chief delight. As a 19th Century specialist, Dean finds visual satisfaction in St Nicholas' church on Durham Market Place and the gothic former law court buildings at the junction of Owengate. While these Victorian buildings were likely designed with a sense of placing in the streetscape, it is ahistorical to describe St Mary le Bow as intended to be appreciated as it is today from North and South since this scene is the result of very many historic changes to the street. A survey of so many towns inevitably involves errors, and North and South Bailey are mistakenly referred to as North Bow and South Bow, while Newcastle upon Tyne is oddly described as a former Roman town when the specific streets depicted are built on reclaimed land along the medieval Quayside below the Norman castle and Tyne Bridge. But the book is well researched, citing Douglas Pocock's *The Story of Durham* and Martin Roberts' *Durham – A Thousand Years of History*, as well as the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner and the influential post-war planner Thomas Sharp. Each town is presented with a map from John Speed's Jacobean atlas alongside a Victorian O.S. map of the same area. The coffee table format of this handsome book is a somewhat awkward fit with the endeavour to promote a walking route through each town. But all efforts to celebrate the character of England's historic towns, and the conservation efforts that have achieved their preservation to date, are to be welcomed.