

# WORCESTER:

## *Walking Tour*

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Historic England

# WORCESTER:

This short 1km tour follows the ancient streets of Worcester city centre, exploring the inherited character of one of England's most strategic settlements. The city has an intriguing story to tell, one that underpins its historic significance as a market centre serving an expansive rural hinterland. Phases of development survive as expressions of the ebb and flow of the city's economy for over half a millennia. Places and spaces have been repurposed time and again, and modern buildings now sit shoulder to shoulder with their Tudor counterparts.

Adapting historic townscapes for the needs of future generations is a challenging task. The way we develop and build in the historic environment is becoming increasingly more informed and proactive, recognising the potential roles that heritage assets have to play in regeneration. Understanding the historic significance of areas, buildings, spaces and archaeology is an important first-step in the place-shaping process. This tour investigates some of the key techniques and principles for doing just that. Along the way we'll evaluate some of the contributions that recent developments have made, and see how the heritage of the area is being celebrated and harnessed.

You can navigate the tour by following the map and the key points along it. Short descriptions with images are provided for each.

## A NOTE ABOUT SAFETY!



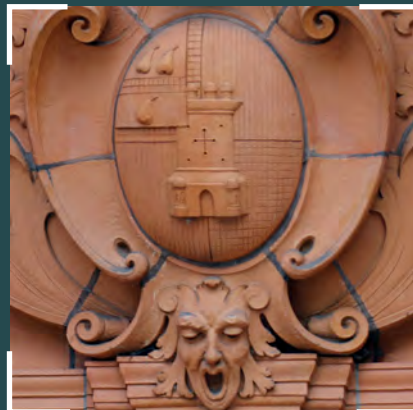
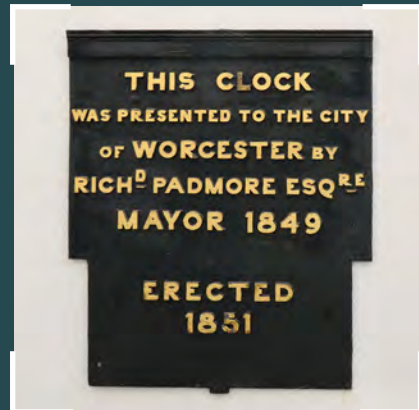
*The walking tour follows a number of busy streets of Worcester City Centre and special care should be taken when crossing them. Many view points along the tour are taken from the carriageways themselves and each point does not necessarily present a safe place to stop. If you're following the tour on foot, find a safe place to pause before continuing with the tour. Following the tour as a pair or small group of people will be more fun and safer!*



# WORCESTER:

## INTRODUCTION

The settlement of Worcester has its origins in the Roman period, although traces of settlement date back deep into Prehistory. From early times the settlement was a strategic crossing point of the River Severn, a quality that saw it emerge as one of the most powerful and wealthy cathedral cities in England. The distinctive character and appearance of the area is well-guarded, not just by upstanding Roman and medieval fortifications, but by a fleet of Conservation Areas and Listed Buildings that cover a significant amount of the city centre's spaces and buildings. Our tour starts at one of the most dramatic and opulent landmarks in the city, Worcester's Guildhall (Nearest Postcode WR1 2ES).





10 m

## WORCESTER GUILDHALL:

A guildhall holds special status in a townscape. Worcester's was originally built as a meeting place for merchants around 1227, later becoming the centre of civic administration. The present hall was begun in 1721 - 22 by Thomas White, a local stonemason and pupil of Sir Christopher Wren. He is said to have carved the figures of Queen Anne over the entrance, as well as those of Charles I and II.



Another carving, beneath Queen Anne, is a head with ears pinned back. Thought by some to be Oliver Cromwell, the statue reflects a punishment once afforded to criminals - having their ears nailed to a pillory.

The status of the building is seen in its ornate style, with lavish gildings and stone dressings. It provides a narrative of Worcester's political and civic history, particularly its long standing support for the monarchy. As such, the building's significance is mainly derived from its high 'Aesthetic' and 'Historical values. Find out more about valuing heritage here.

Broader in width but similar in height to surrounding buildings, the presence of the Guildhall partly stems from a simple feature - one that's often used to emphasise buildings of status. Unlike others on High Street, the main façade is set back, creating a private courtyard.



**B** 52 m

## HIGH STREET:

High Street once formed part of the main road to London. Buildings along its length illustrate successive phases of growth and redevelopment, with different architectural approaches used to highlight their presence. Within the street scene there are both shared characteristics between buildings as well as clear attempts to differentiate and demark one from the other. There are also some emerging patterns in built character associated with status, use and age.

As we move along High Street we'll begin to unpick these coherences, variances and underlying patterns in character. The approach is called characterisation and it helps understand an area's sense of place and local distinctiveness. It helps to consider how a place can continue to evolve in a way that not only reflects its inherited character, but harnesses its potential in regeneration and urban design.





## COMMON CHARACTERISTICS:

Our first step is look at the characteristics common to the majority of buildings.

EXERCISE: Looking at the building line, pick out some common architectural elements. They don't have to be on every building, but if you feel they are typical of the area, then you should include them. Try starting with larger characteristics, such as the overall scale and position in plot, and work your way down to windows, building materials and decoration.

ANSWER: Buildings are 3 to 4 storeys in height and are located at the front of their plots at the back of the footway (i.e. with no setback/forecourt). Ridgelines run parallel to the street and properties typically have parapets extending the front wall above the roofline, where you would normally expect to see the join between the roof and the front elevation. Buildings have active frontages with tall vertical timber multi-paned sash windows with stone cills facing the street. The overall level of decoration is restricted, but often appears as moulded cornices or string courses at the top or bottom of the parapet, which is where the roof meets the front elevation. Decoration also appears around window openings and as small details on façades, such as clocks or sculptures. Shopfronts are timber, with low stall risers and large display windows typically flanking a central entranceway.



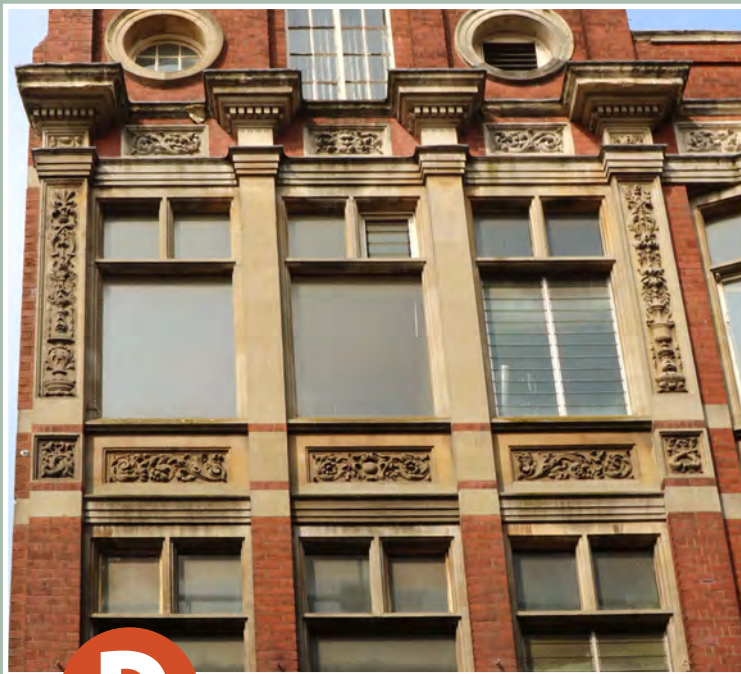
63 m

## VARIATIONS IN CHARACTER:

The characterisation process also shows how buildings along High Street differentiate themselves. On Worcester's High Street these are often quite small scale changes, such as slight shifts in the orientation of properties in their plots and small steps in the height of rooflines. These emphasise the plot-by-plot development of High Street over centuries. Buildings have different finishes ranging from bare or painted brick to render. The detail of decoration is also used to distinguish buildings from each other.

Over time, factors such as the availability of materials, advances in construction techniques, changing fashions and levels of prosperity have all influenced architectural expression. These variances bring intrigue to the street, and serve to distinguish one building from another. By looking at the differences between buildings

along a street, you can begin to understand the degree of individuality and expression. Under close scrutiny seemingly uniform streets can be revealed as diverse, with subtle expressions seen within decoration, often at the roofline and around doors and porches. Similarly, streets made up of a wild variety of buildings can often be shown to employ only a handful of different forms of decoration overall. Understanding how buildings differentiate themselves in this way helps future development both respond to local character and also take contextually in keeping but innovative design approaches.



1.63 m

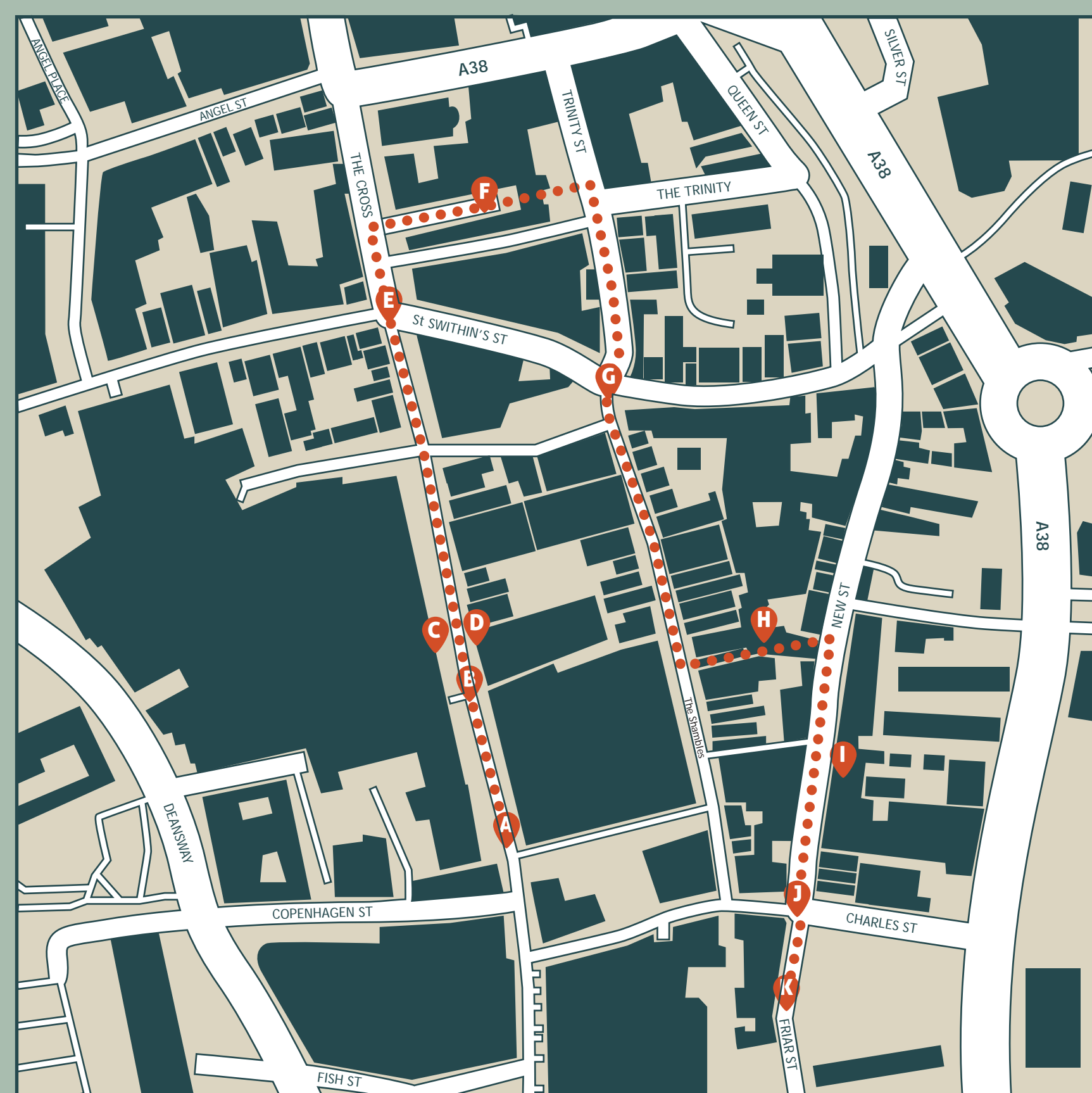
## DEVELOPING WITH CHARACTER:

A relatively recent addition to Worcester's High Street is a new glazed extension to the building occupied by Marks & Spencer. On initial inspection the building appears quite incongruous with the prevailing character of High Street, and it's easy to see why. The façade is almost entirely glazed. The block of windows is framed by a narrow light stone band with a dark black stone central bay, both of which contrast with the warmer Cotswold stone seen elsewhere. Unlike other buildings it has a strong horizontal emphasis and is relatively plain in appearance, lacking any clear decorative features.

However, the extension also responds to the inherited character of High Street in a number of ways. The scale and position of the building matches those along High Street, retaining the building line. It has an active frontage,

contributing to the street scene on all floors. Its horizontal façade is divided into 3 vertical bays, demarked by black stonework to the top of the façade and entranceway as well as by tall glazed fins. This pattern is seen on many buildings along the street and reflects the series of narrow plots that front onto High Street. Window lights are vertical in orientation, responding to the form of traditional sash windows of buildings in the vicinity.

It's up to you whether you feel the end result is a success or not! Perhaps the design could embrace more of the surrounding characteristics or differentiate itself further? The rationale for development, set out within an application for planning consent (e.g. Design and Access statement), should be clear in this respect.



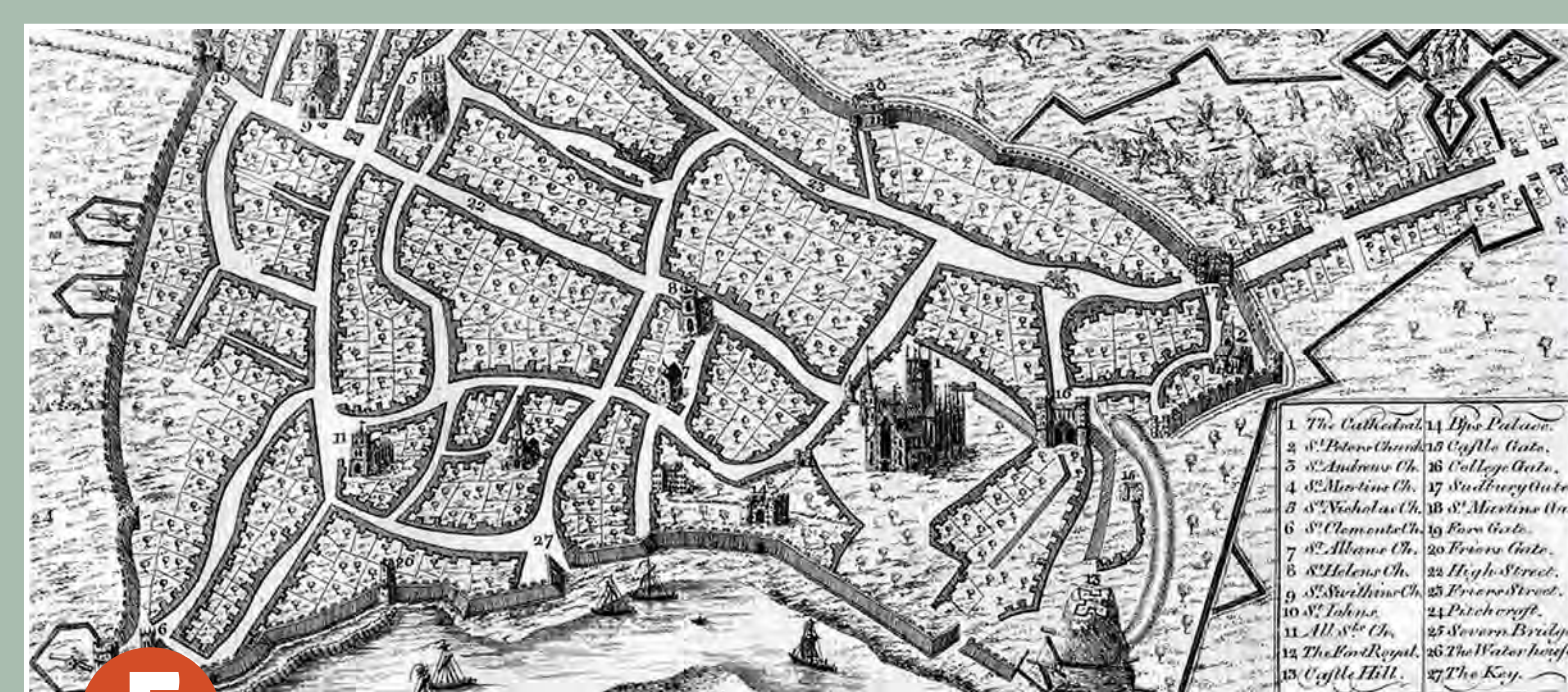
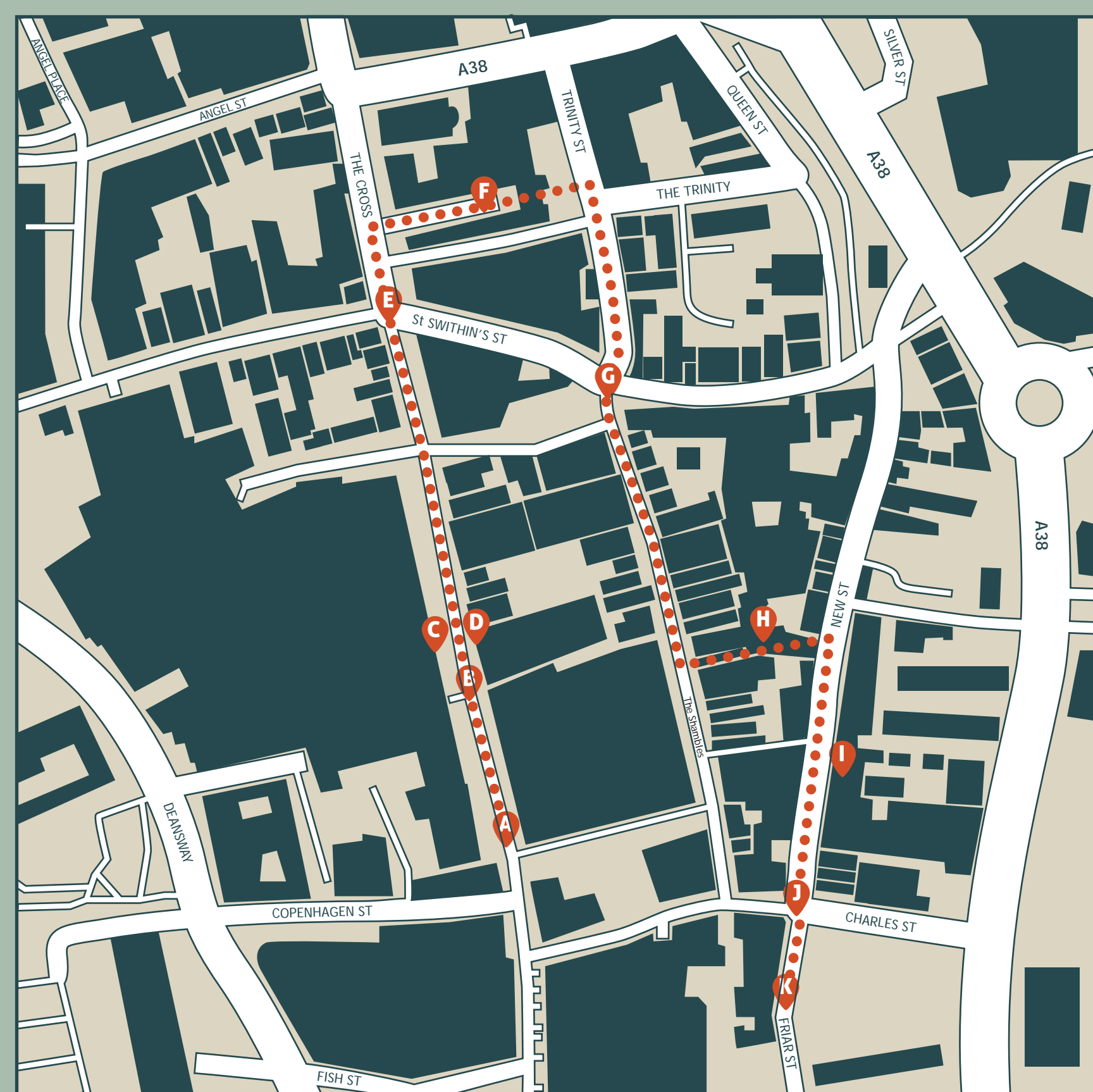
201 m

## PATTERNS IN STONE:

In historic townscapes we can often detect underlying patterns in character. These patterns can emerge for a wide variety of reasons and, if undetected, they can be unknowingly eroded or lost.

A typical example seen in historic townscapes is an increase in scale and prominence towards junctions. Corner plots are desirable positions to locate shops and services. We can see this in Numbers 59-60 at the corner of High Street and St. Swithin's Street. The building is a tall 4 storeys in height with a corner turret punching through the roofline by a further storey. A fine example of Edwardian commercial architecture in the Queen Anne Revival style, the building is highly ornate with an array of terracotta dressings to its bands, architraves, friezes, parapets, urns and gable coping, and a copper dome to its turret to name a few!

Further along High Street we can see another underlying pattern common to historic townscapes, this time associated with the use of stone. Looking at the eastern building line we can pick out a group of three buildings built largely or entirely out of stone. Closer inspection shows the buildings to have previously been banks and a church, creating a clear relationship between the use of stone and civic /religious architecture. Thinking back to the Guildhall, we can see that stone was used effectively there too, reinforcing the underlying pattern. It's an important consideration that future developments should respond to. Cast or reconstituted stone is now a readily available and cheap building material, increasingly appearing on high streets to create prominent retail units. In Worcester and elsewhere it must be used judiciously, so as not to distil the underlying relationship between stone and buildings of high quality and status in the townscape.



245 m

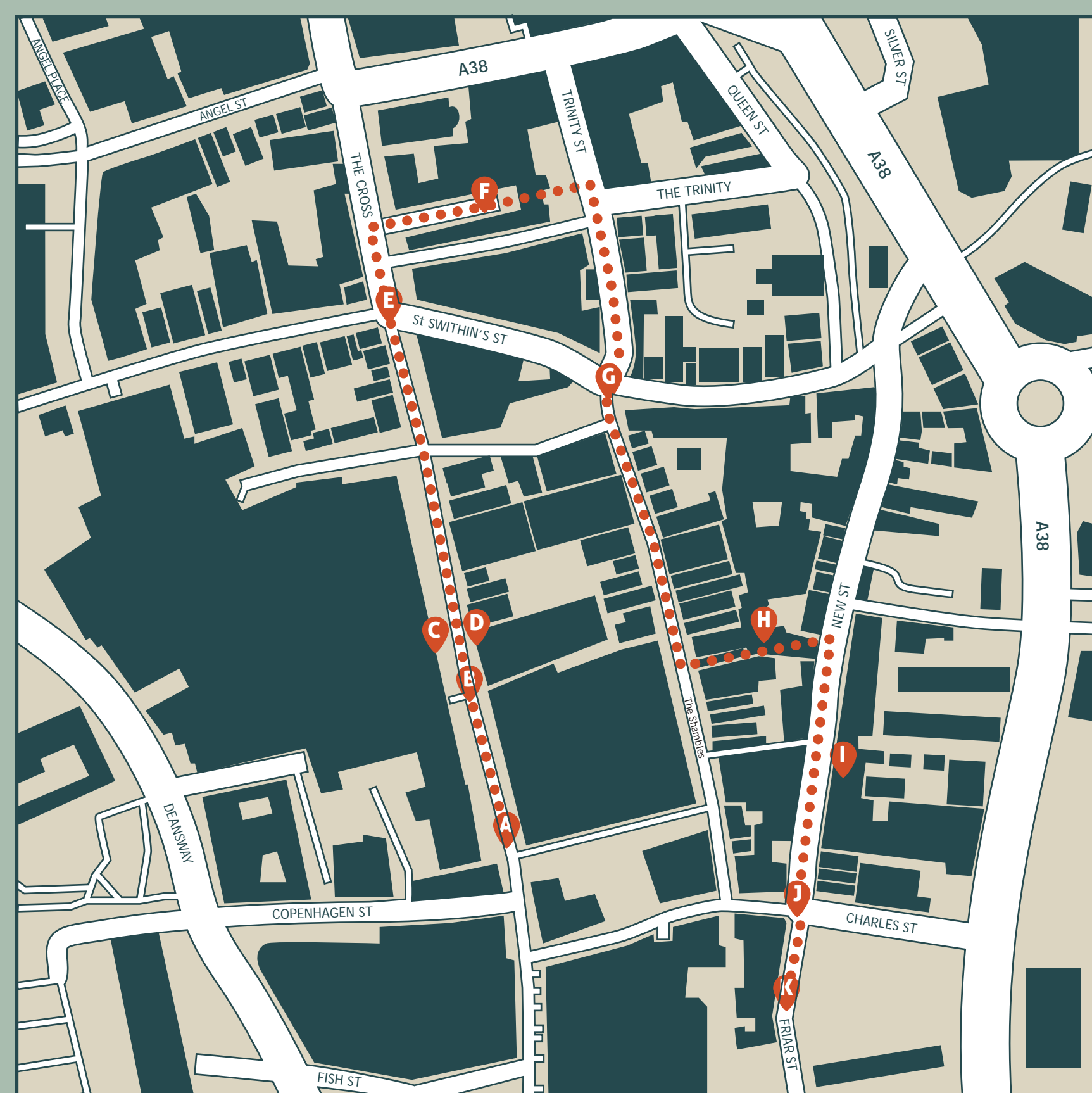
## MEDIEVAL FOOTSTEPS:

The historic environment is about more than just buildings. Streets, open spaces and how we move between them are important. They influence how we experience an area, from the views we enjoy, the sense of enclosure we feel and how we navigate around.

Moving off High Street, we head through a narrow passage to Trinity Street. Ginnels are a characteristic way we move about the area and they have ancient origins. Passageways unite High Street with Trinity Street and The Shambles at numerous points. They follow the lines of old medieval burgrave plots, ancient parcels of land consisting of a building on a long thin plot with a narrow street frontage. They would have been a hive of activity, with goods moving from the rear service streets through to the bustling market stalls and shops on High Street.

On a broader scale, the urban blocks that make up the city centre have early origins too. Many of the roads that define them were laid out in the Roman and medieval periods. The historic map shows the arrangement of urban blocks in 1651. Moving around the city today we follow the footsteps of people walking almost 2000 years ago.





366 m

## THE SHAMBLES 1:

Heading south along Trinity Street we come to The Shambles. The name derives from an ancient term which denoted a place where animals were slaughtered. The meat butchered here supplied shops and restaurants throughout the city, as well as the tables of its residents. Buildings have a different character to those along High Street, and many plots have been redeveloped, yet there are a handful of shared characteristics between the two.

**QUESTION:** Looking at the older buildings along the street, can you pick out some characteristics that are shared with High Street?

**ANSWER:** Buildings are brick of built, are set at the back of the footway and the majority have their ridgelines running parallel to the street. Parapets at roofline level are common and smaller changes in height accentuate one build unit from

another. Properties face the street and have vertical wooden multi-paned windows. Similar to High Street, the orientation of buildings often shifts slightly from one plot to the next. Plots are narrow with their short sides facing the street.





366 m

## THE SHAMBLES 2:

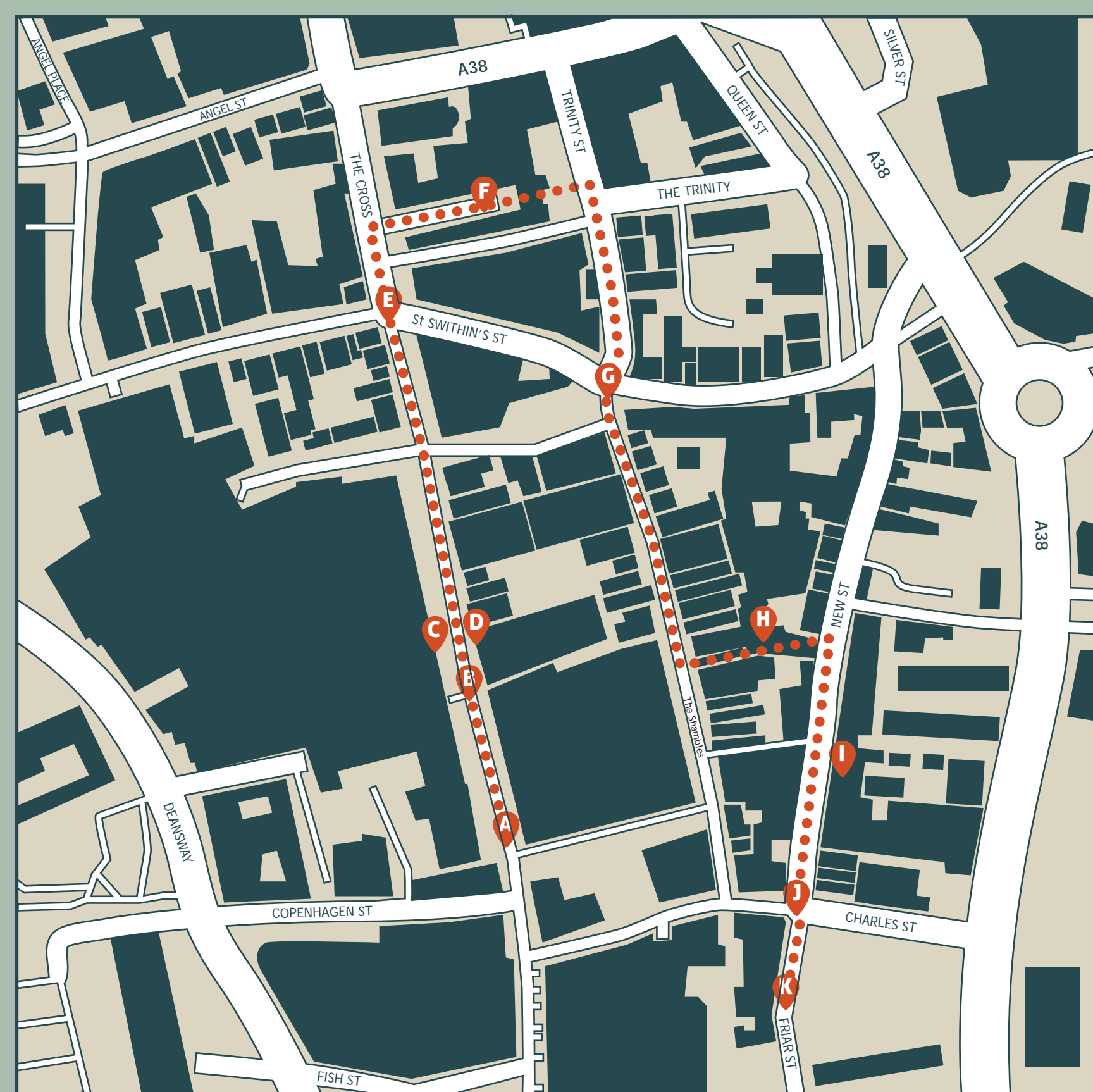
However, when we move between High Street and The Shambles there is a clear change in character. By comparing the inherited character of the two streets we can also highlight the differences that existing between them.

**QUESTION:** Identify some of the characteristics that differ between High Street and The Shambles .

**ANSWER:** Buildings are comparatively smaller in scale and this is true both to the vertical height and width of properties but also to the size of windows. The width of the street is much narrower, creating a more enclosed feeling despite the fall in building scale. Decoration is rare, with plainer facades and eaves, alongside an infrequent use of stone or any of the sculptures or detailing that we saw on High Street. Shopfronts are narrower, and doors have

moved to the side rather than being located in between shop windows.

By comparing the character of the two streets, we can appreciate the story and historic role of The Shambles as a service street. The exercise shows how, when applied to localised areas in towns, characterisation can help manage the distinctiveness of smaller places in relation to each other. In so doing we can consolidate and promote the historic interrelationships that exist across entire townscapes.



476 m

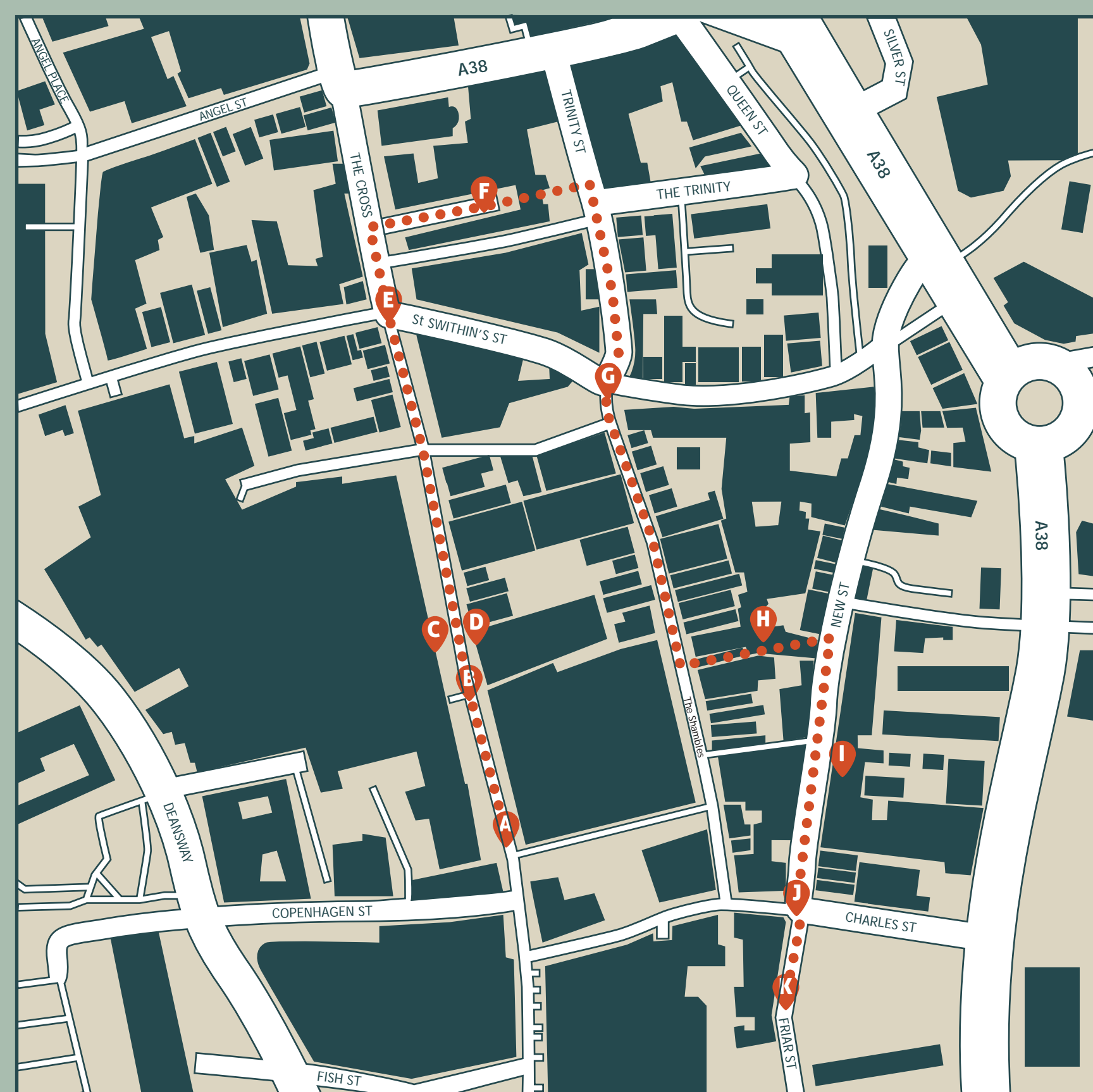
## REINDEER COURT:

We turn left into Reindeer Court. During the late 19th and early 20th century many courts to the rear of buildings were destroyed. Poor and cramped living and working conditions coupled with outbreaks of disease led to a succession of Public Health Acts. These ensured people had access to key amenities such as ventilation, sanitation and light.

Today Reindeer Court is a covered shopping centre that has adopted the narrow yards and passageways for a bespoke retail space. Small floorplates now house boutique shops and restaurants, and the intimate spaces have been exploited to provide covered spaces. It's a good example of heritage-led regeneration, one that adapts the existing character of a place and develops it as a unique selling point. The small, simply designed shops continue to tell the story of a once downtrodden part of Worcester, one

that is representative of many former courts and the people that lived within them.





561 m

## DESIGN IN CONTEXT:

Reindeer Court leads out to Mealcheapen Street and New Street, and we follow the passageway leading to the latter. New Street is narrower than The Shambles and its sense of enclosure is heightened by an increase in scale, with buildings varying from two to four storeys in height. Townhouses, shops and a market show modest levels of decoration, indicating a relatively higher status than The Shambles, but not High Street. Opposite the entrance to Reindeer Court are two different approaches to designing in context. It's a useful point to consider how the developments have responded to the defining characteristics of the street.

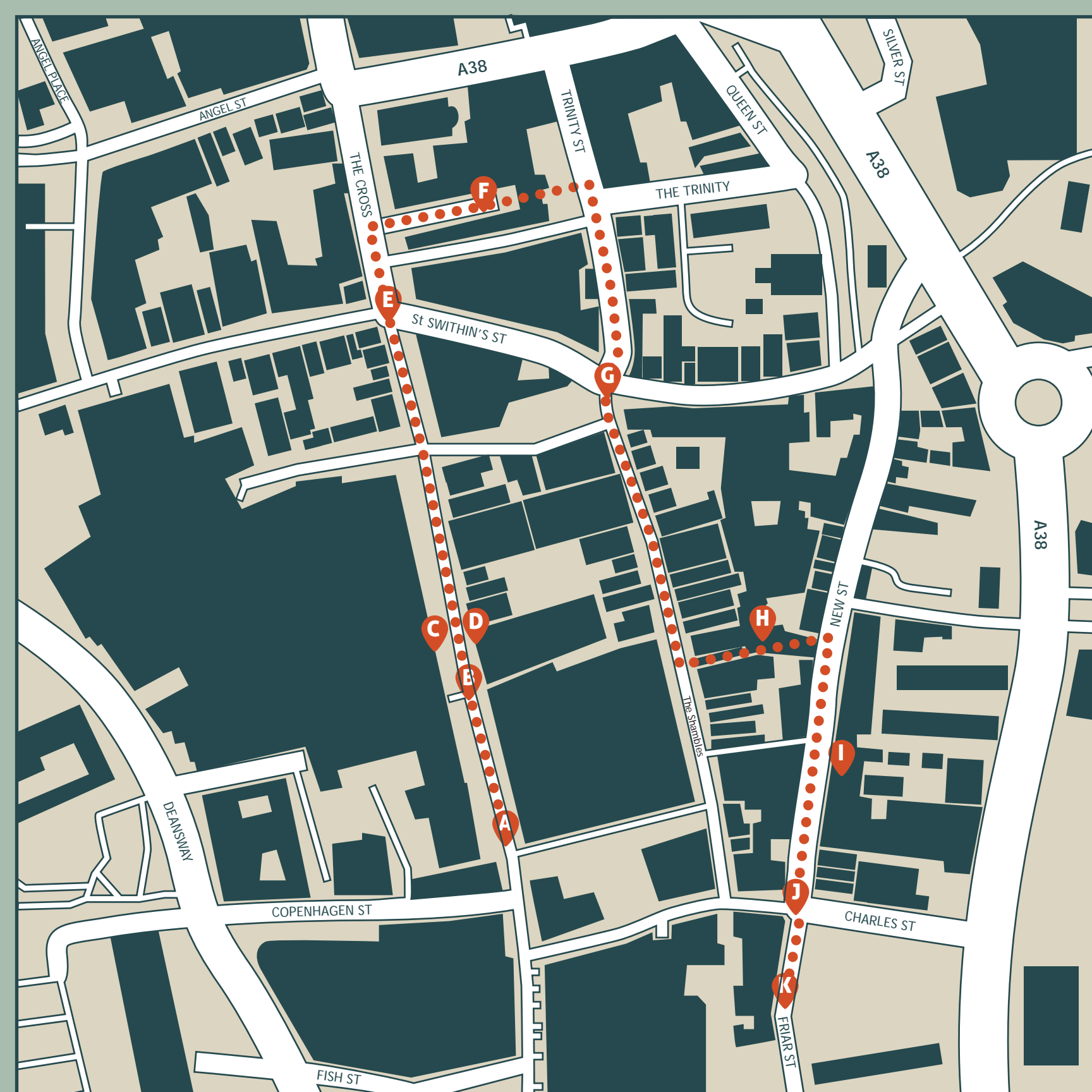
Number 19 New Street (Strands) (above left) has taken a conservative approach, with many characteristics of the street faithfully replicated within the façade. From the brickwork bond to the fenestration and salvaged stone porch and cornice at eaves level, the building has worked hard to celebrate the inherited character

of the street.

The development at Nash and Wyatt's Court (above right) has also responded to the character of the street, retaining the prevailing scale, position and material construction of other buildings along the street. However, the building sets itself apart by the lack of windows at ground and second floor level, creating an inactive façade with a high solid to void ratio (the proportion of 'solid' surfaces to openings, such as windows and doors 'void'). The oriel windows at first floor level are vertical in orientation, but the metal cladding is not characteristic of the street and their utilitarian character contrasts with the lightweight timber painted windows and decoration seen elsewhere.

When compared with Marks and Spencer, this development shows that where the design of development deviates strongly from the defining characteristics of a place, only high-quality design solutions are likely to succeed.





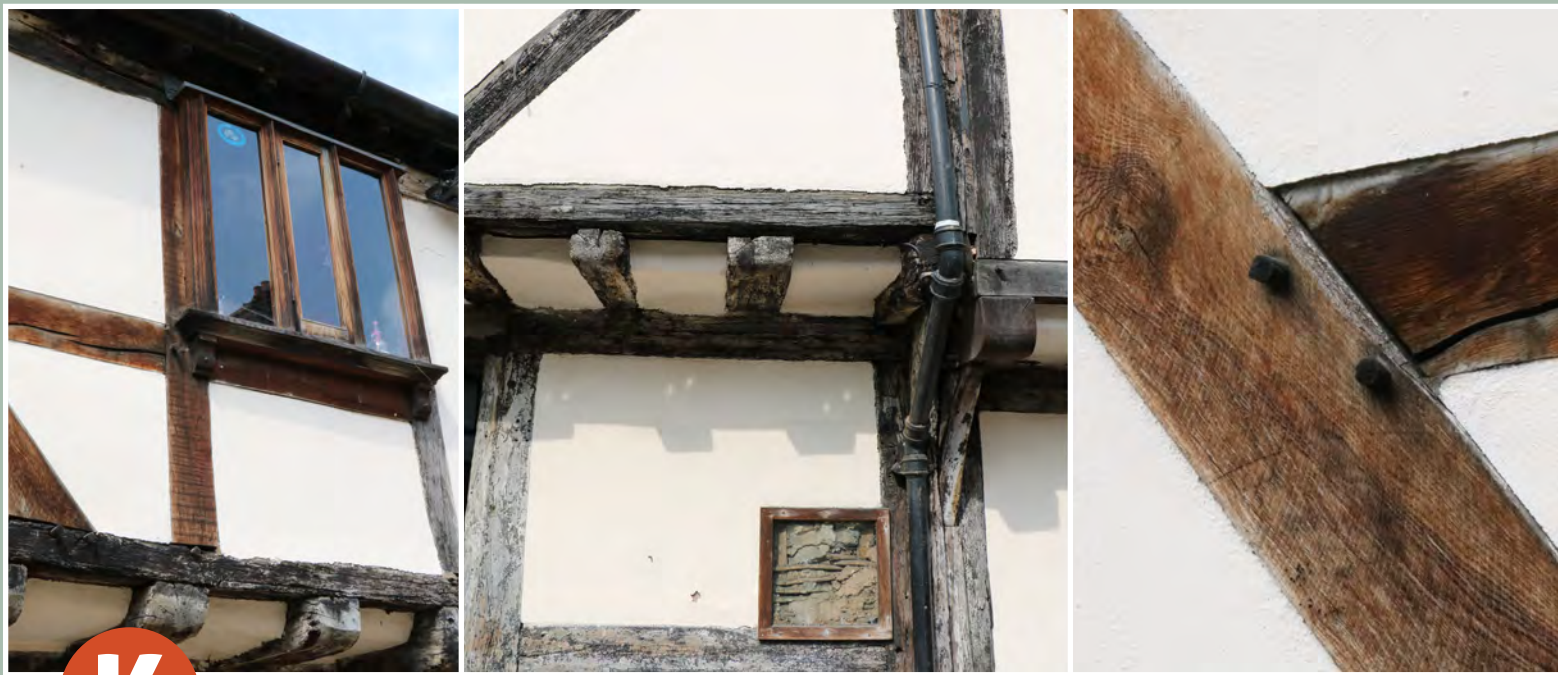
638 m

## VIEWS AND SETTING:

Heading down New Street we reach the junction of Pump Street, Friar Street and Charles Street. Ahead lies one of the finest medieval streetscapes in England. The gable ends of jettied timber framed houses poke out between the eaves lines of later brick built buildings, accentuated by the gentle curve of Friar Street. The groups of timber framed buildings here represent an early phase of Worcester's history, affording the palette of construction materials and the distinct style of architecture a special prominence in the city's character.

The character of the street is highly prized, attracting boutique shops and restaurants. Walking down the street the view gently unfolds, revealing an eclectic array of architecture spanning over five centuries.

Looking above the rooftops we can see that a more recent addition to the street scene has not fully considered the way the buildings, both individually and as a group, are experienced. It's a useful opportunity to consider the contribution that setting makes to a heritage asset's significance. Here the aesthetic qualities of buildings and the Conservation Area are harmed by the blue car park access ramp rising clear above the rooftops (see above), providing a prominent backdrop to views. The shape, material construction and colour of the structure appears alien to the street. Its elevated height also pushes it forward of the building line at times, competing with the steeply pitched jettied gable ends of the timber framed buildings.



665 m

## SEEING THE VALUE:

Moving towards the junction of Friar Street with Union Street there's an example of another type of Heritage Value that contributes to the historic significance of assets. 'Evidential Value' refers to 'the potential of a place or structure to yield evidence about past human activity'. In this case it's the wattle and daub infill of the timber framed building at Number 32 Friar Street that can be seen through a window built into the wall.

The building has undergone a series of restorative works, which on close inspection can be identified within its façade. Well-preserved timbers have been maintained and those that have come to end of their useful lives replaced with 'like for like' materials. Considering the view along Friar Street the benefits of the restoration extend well beyond the footprint of the building itself, securing the street's distinctive character for generations to come.

There's a clear message about the special value placed on the historic environment in this area. Heritage is often understated with untapped potential. Understanding the inherited character and historic significance of buildings and areas is key to the place-shaping process. Once understood it is a driver for regeneration, one that generates confidence in our ability to deliver high-quality development that has economic, cultural and environmental outcomes.



# Acknowledgements:



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