

The Beaney, Canterbury: The proposed 'greening' of the façade using trees, window-boxes and climbing plants

1.0 The historic context

Best Lane is a narrow, winding street with building frontages at back of footway providing strong enclosure and visual interest. The medieval street pattern is characterised by an absence of trees and other plants. Greenery in this historic townscape is often 'borrowed' from private gardens, small enclosed public gardens and larger open spaces.

2.0 Functional, technical and aesthetic issues of introducing planting to the Best Lane frontage of the museum extension

2.1 Aspect

The Best Lane frontage faces north-west. It will be in shade for most of the day in summer and all day in winter. The narrow street will channel and accelerate cooling and drying winds. The immediate footway space outside the extension represents a challenging environment in which to establish and maintain vigorous and attractive plant growth.

2.2 Tree planting

The footway space immediately in front of the museum is very limited. The need for occasional high-sided vehicles to use Best Lane and the close proximity of the building façade mean little space exists for new tree planting. If trees are to be planted they will need to be small at maturity and artificial in form. They will need to be un-naturally upright and columnar in appearance with non-invasive roots.

The presence of a tree in such a restricted space will further constrain pedestrian comfort and movement. Trees themselves are fragile living entities and easily damaged by vehicles if planted too close to traffic routes.

2.3 Climbing plants

Climbing plants will need to be self-clinging species such as ivy or Virginia creeper. It would be inappropriate to contemplate installing a wire support system to the façade to support other species in such a historic context.

Typically, self-clinging plants are vigorous and need regular annual pruning to prevent window and door openings becoming obstructed. They support themselves using small aerial roots or sucker pads. These will inevitably attach themselves to mortar joints (especially where lime mortar is used as in this case) and cause damage when removed.

Climbing plants also provide nest and roost sites for birds. In this instance the presence of birds will give rise to the problem of bird droppings above a public entrance.

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2.4 Window boxes

Decorative additions to the facades of buildings in the form of window boxes and hanging baskets are commonly associated with domestic scale dwellings. It would appear inappropriate and fussy to add such decorative additions to a public building given the aspect and historic context already described.

Very few people focus on the upper part of tall buildings when walking close to the façade in the narrow streets. The objective of using planting to 'soften' built-form will be difficult to achieve in this situation; window boxes will not provide the impact required.

If window boxes are installed they will need to be accompanied by a sophisticated irrigation system. Window openings will need to provide access for the removal of weeds, litter, bird nests, dead plants etc which may not always be practical nor safe.

2.5 Proposals for the wider public realm at Best Lane

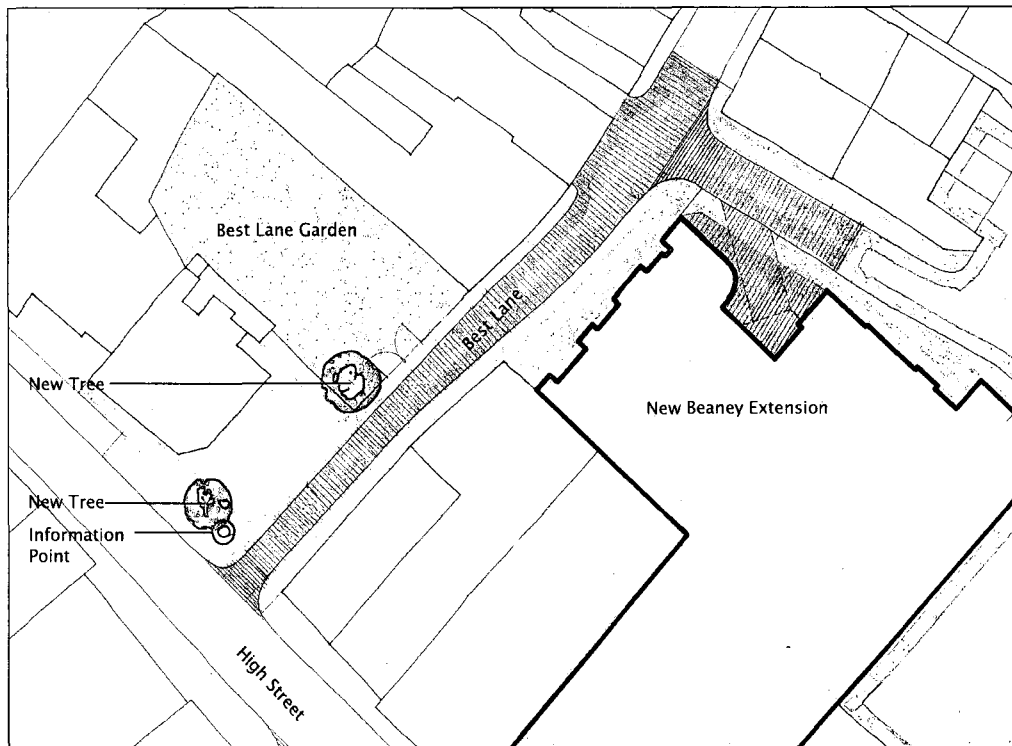


Fig 1. Plan showing proposed enhancement of public realm adjacent to the Beaneys

Outline proposals to enhance the Best Lane frontage to the Beaneys include the planting of two specimen trees. One in the urban square at the junction of the High Street and the other in the enclosed Best Lane closed churchyard.

Both spaces will allow medium to large sized specimen trees to be planted and develop to provide a meaningful long-term townscape impact.

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Associated improvements will include: natural stone paving to the road surface and footways, and improved drainage, lighting and signage, including the possibility of a 'Whats On' advertising point at the High Street junction. The public realm upgrade will follow on from the completion of the Beaney in 2011/12.

The Canterbury Commemoration Society, responsible for the statues of Ethelbert and Bertha at Lady Woottons Green is keen to look for funding to provide a statue of Chaucer. The Best Lane frontage of the new Beaney has been put forward as a favoured location.

One suggestion is that it might be a wall-fixed relief 'statue' rather than a three-dimensional figure. Discussion concerning this proposal is at a very early stage, but a location somewhere on the external frontage of the Beaney at Best Lane would seem appropriate at this stage.

3.0 Conclusion

The proposal to 'green' the front on the new extension is understandable given the strength of public opposition at the time of the planning application.

However, when considered in greater detail, it is evident that adding planting directly to the façade of the new building is problematic and inappropriate in this particular situation. Current advice from the Commission for the Built Environment (CABE) and the Kent Design Guide is to minimise unnecessary clutter in urban space. The belief is it is always much easier to fill and over-complicate urban spaces with signs, bins, seats and trees than to respect townscape character and show restraint.

Entrances to public buildings are busy, vibrant events in the public realm and require unimpeded space for ease of pedestrian movement. If the entrance is to receive a 'Chaucer relief' at some point in the future the importance of a simplified setting will be even greater.

The wider improvements to the public realm provide an opportunity to incorporate meaningful tree planting which will not be so constrained by available space and will be able to exert an impact on the immediate setting of the new Beaney. It is this opportunity, which in urban design terms is far more important than using planting in an artificial manner to disguise a building, which should be pursued.

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