



the town centre: history and description

18th century view of Dawlish from Lea Mount Grounds



*Bird-watching colonels on the old sea wall,
Down here at Dawlish where the slow trains crawl:
Low tide lifting, on a shingle shore,
Long-sunk islands from the sea once more:
Red cliffs rising where the wet sands run,
Gulls reflecting in the sharp spring sun;
Pink-washed plaster by a sheltered patch,
Ilex shadows upon velvet thatch:
What interiors those names suggest!
Queen of lodgings in the warm south-west...*

John Betjeman

4.1 Location

Dawlish is a seaside town in a favoured location in south Devon. A small town with a **population of 13,500**, Dawlish is 12 miles from Exeter and a similar distance from Torquay. There is total population of around **400,000 within 30-45 minutes drive time** of Dawlish.¹ Despite some notorious pinch-points which cause seasonal congestion on the A379, Dawlish is easily accessible by road; there are regular train services to Exeter and Torbay and frequent bus services to nearby towns. Exeter airport is about 35 minutes drive from the town.

¹ ONS Mid-Year Population Estimates 2006: Teignbridge 125,500; Exeter 119,600; Torbay 133,200.



4.2 Dawlish described

The origins of Dawlish lie in **two settlements**: a cluster of houses around the parish church, and a small fishing village. In the Georgian era the town began to develop as a resort; at the beginning of the 19th century the Strand and Brunswick Place were laid out around a lawn, and the river – Dawlish Water - was straightened. Brunel's South Devon Railway arrived in 1846, sweeping past Dawlish on the sea wall that separates the town from the beach. These **key elements** continue to define the character of the centre of the town today, and the shape of the town that grew up in the first half of the 19th century survives largely intact.

Dawlish has continued to grow, with suburbs spreading north and south of the town centre, but the **heart of the town** is contained in the steep-sided valley of Dawlish Water. The town centre proper is at the seaward end of the valley, ranged around the Lawn. The principal **shopping** street is the Strand, with secondary retail in Brunswick Place and Queen Street. Park Road and Old Town Street still retain some neighbourhood shops and services. Piermont Place, which looks onto the eastward extension of the Lawn known as Tuck's Plot, retains the character of a traditional seaside resort, with an amusement arcade and a parade of cafes and take-away food outlets.

The Lawn and the Strand in 1840



The town centre provides a number of other **services** (including banks, solicitors, financial advisers and estate agents) and **facilities** including a tourist information centre, the Shaftesbury Theatre and the library. The town Museum is located close to the town centre on Barton Terrace, which is also the site of the modern health centre and community hospital. The Lawn is the town's principal **open space** and is popular with visitors; to the west, the Manor Grounds is an attractive community park.

Dawlish Station is an important building in a poor state of repair; **bus and coach stops** are ranged around Tuck's plot. There is on-street **parking** on all the principal town centre streets, with public car parks at Barton Hill and the Strand. There is all-day parking next to the railway station. There appears to be ample parking space at all but the busiest times, but the main car park at Barton Hill is hard for visitors to find. Traffic on the A379 generally flows freely through the town although there are some seasonal delays during the peak summer period. Traffic circulates around the town's dense network of narrow streets which can become congested when vehicles are unloading or manoeuvring.

The Lawn is Dawlish's most unique and distinctive feature: a generous riverside open space at the heart of the town. It is a priceless asset, the **green heart of the town**, but our consultations have confirmed that the condition of the



early 20th century view of Tuck's Plot
seafront and station in stormy weather



Lawn is a source of **frustration and disappointment** to the residents of Dawlish. Fundamental challenges need to be addressed:

- the horse chestnut **trees** which are a defining feature of the space are over-mature and, in some cases, diseased; selective removal has already compromised the integrity of the original design, but wholesale replacement will be contentious and emotionally charged
- there are **unresolved conflicts** over the use of the Lawn which has been damaged by the increasing demands of the Carnival and, especially, the fun fair.

Aesthetically, the Lawn is a disappointment. Much of the landscape design has an old-fashioned **municipal character**, the lighting scheme is messy and the wildlife enclosure on the south side of the river needs to be replaced.

4.3 Character areas

The architecture of Dawlish is not generally of great distinction, but there are a number of important buildings and groups of buildings, and the town has a **rich and distinctive townscape** made more memorable by its topography and attractive situation. Three **character areas** are worth noting:



- the **regency/early Victorian resort** laid out around the Lawn, and the villas and terraces climbing the hillsides overlooking the town
- travelling west along Barton Terrace there are more **19th century villas and houses**, some of which cluster around the church which was itself rebuilt in the 1820s
- on the north side of Dawlish Water, Brook Street, Regent Street and Park Road are attractive, intimately scaled streets of **artisans' houses** and commercial premises.

The town's **seafront** is something of an enigma. Cut off from the town by the railway embankment, it is approached through a gloomy tunnel leading off Tuck's Plot. The beach

here has a shallow gradient and is safe for bathing, but at spring tides it can disappear entirely; there is another popular bathing beach at Coryton's Cove. The lack of traffic and commercial activity, the passing trains and the uncompromising character of the sea wall give the seafront a quirky appeal and are an important part of Dawlish's distinctive identity.

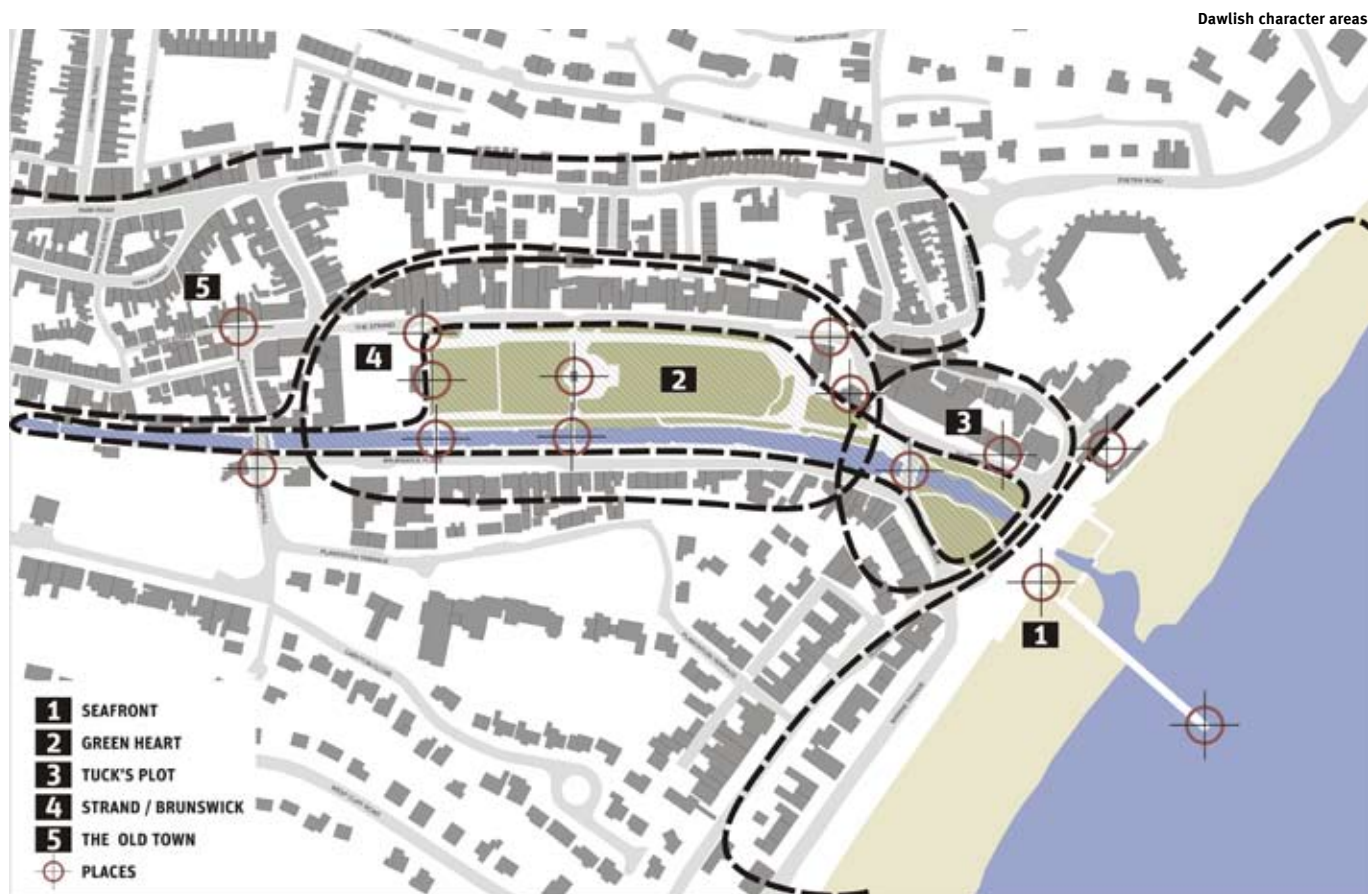
4.4 Faded glory

Dawlish today is a somewhat **faded seaside town**. It has certainly not lost its appeal: it is a place of **strong and distinctive character**, but the last 20-30 years have not been kind to the town centre.

It is by no means unusual for a town to be a popular place to live even though the town centre is in decline. **Demand for small town lifestyles is strong**: people like the housing, environment, schools and freedom from crime and anti-social behaviour that they offer. But even while the population of small towns has been growing, the retail and service centres of these towns have been **squeezed by the competing attractions of nearby large towns and cities, and by out of town shopping and leisure centres**. In an age of unprecedented prosperity, mobility and choice, people on average and above-average incomes have been **voting with their feet**: abandoning traditional town centres in favour of more attractive alternatives.

19th century view of Dawlish and the Lawn in winter





Dawlish does not have a good quality large supermarket, so the level of **retail expenditure leakage** is very high. About two-thirds of households make their main food shopping trips to stores outside the town, mostly in Exeter and Newton Abbot. We can safely assume that higher income residents are more likely to travel outside the town to shop and that the proportion of retail *expenditure* leaking out of the town will therefore be substantially higher.

Many town centres now depend on a low income **captive market** of people who are too old, too young or too poor to choose other places for shopping and leisure. In Dawlish, like other coastal towns, the effects of these changes have been exacerbated by the **decline of traditional tourism**; many businesses in the town still depend on visitors, but the town's "cheap and cheerful" offer is increasingly anachronistic.

The cumulative effect of these **profound economic and social changes** has been a diminution in the number and quality of shops in the town centre. The number of vacant units has been relatively low, at least in the prime locations, but several businesses have failed in the past year and other units are occupied by charity shops and businesses selling low quality bargain goods. In the past few years, a number of shops in Park Road and Old Town Street have been converted to residential use.



Shopping in Dawlish is not an encouraging experience: some good, well-presented businesses survive, but the quality and choice on offer are generally poor. Because the Strand is not trading well or generating sufficient footfall, many businesses depend on the additional trade provided by visitors. But this has been a mixed blessing: seasonal trade helps marginal businesses to survive but, because **the town centre has been “trading down”** to cater for low-income visitors, the retail, food and drink offer is generally disappointing, and falls far short of the expectations of discerning consumers. This is a vicious circle: businesses that are not trading profitably cannot invest in their premises, and this contributes to the down-at-heel appearance of many local shops.

All this is very discouraging to those businesses which recognise that Dawlish needs to broaden its appeal and to capture a larger share of discretionary local and regional expenditure. To succeed, they need a **lively and attractive trading environment**, but the pervading tackiness of modern Dawlish is at odds with their ambitions. The situation is not helped because – despite its splendid, south-facing situation overlooking the Lawn – **the Strand is not a comfortable street for pedestrians**. Pavements are narrow and congested and the street is car-dominated.

It is important to stress that this situation is not “somebody’s fault”. The problems faced by Dawlish town centre are **endemic throughout the UK**, and they are a

consequence of the way we live in the early 21st century. Whatever we may think of the social and economic forces that have driven these changes, we cannot turn the clock back. If we want our town centres to prosper we need to recognise that they need to be **competitive, attractive and useful places** that people of all ages will *choose* to visit.



left to right: Victorian and Edwardian views of the Strand, the Lawn and the seafront