Free School Lane

Free School Lane is a quiet lane running off much busier streets and is the location of laboratories where some of the greatest scientific discoveries of the C19 and C20 were made.

A long lane of medieval origin running from St Bene't Street to Pembroke Street. The rear and sides of the medieval buildings and boundaries of Corpus Christi College and St Bene't's Church form the west side of the lane, giving it a quiet, back street, feel and a strong historical character. The east side of the lane is formed by a series of late Victorian and Edwardian laboratories built in the Tudor Revival and Renaissance style reusing elements from the C17 Perse School, after which it is named.

View along Free School Lane

SIGNIFICANCE - HIGH

General Overview

The lane is a survival of the town's medieval street plan, running from the vicinity of the market place at Bene't Street to the town's boundary at the King's Ditch, now Pembroke Street. The medieval buildings of Corpus Christi's Old Court (built 1352–77) and the eastern extension of its chapel (1870) form its west side south of the churchyard of St Bene't's Church and are a prominent feature of views north along the street where they terminate, providing an important experience of Cambridge's oldest college buildings.

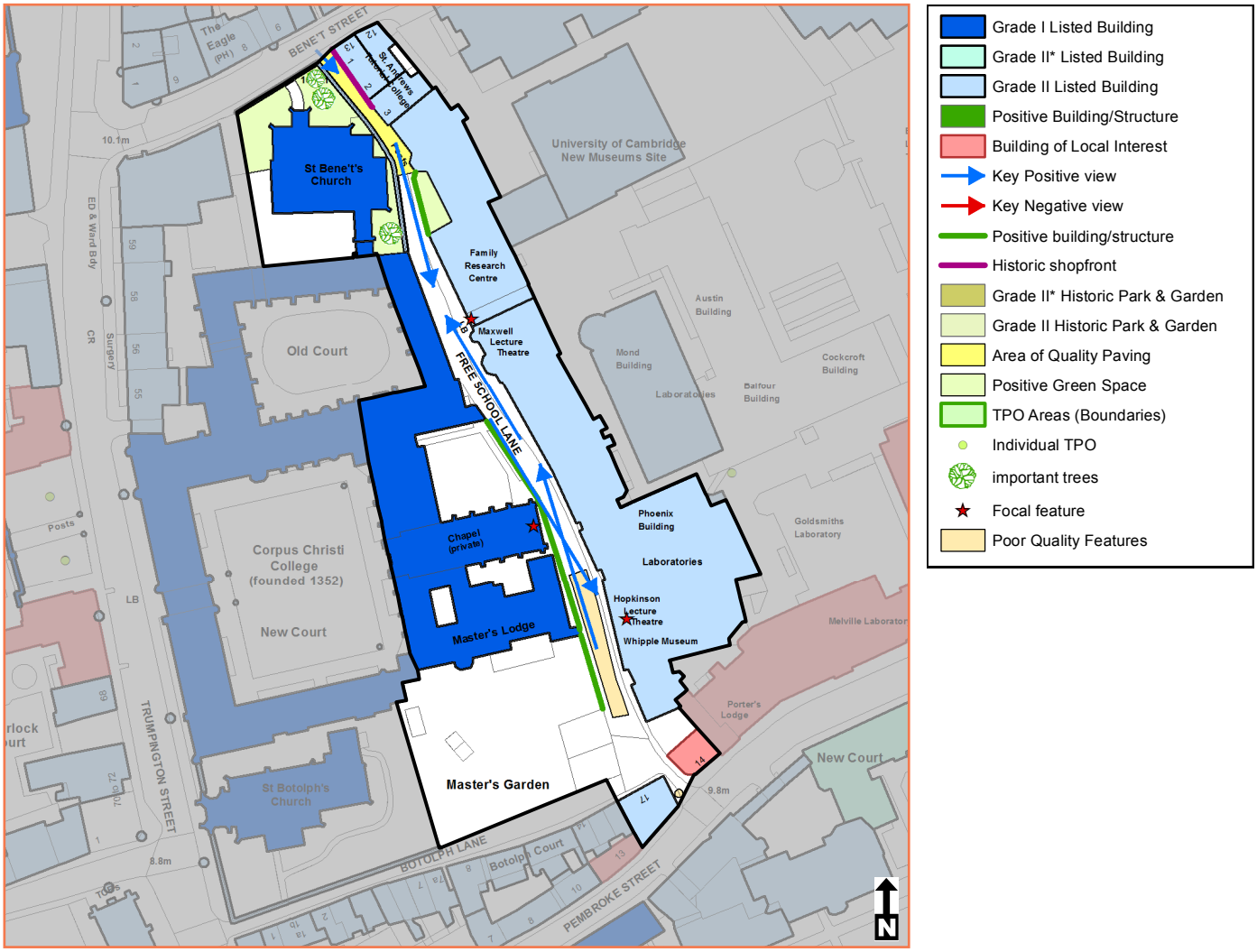
Corpus Christi College

Braun's map of 1575 records it as Lutburne Lane, when it ran between Benett's College (Corpus Christi) and the grounds of the Augustinian Friary. The Perse School was established at the south end of the lane in 1615. Its stone door surround survives as part of the Cavendish Laboratory, whilst the hall has been incorporated in the Laboratory of Physical Chemistry. In 1761 the botanic gardens were established on the former land of the Friary (an area of five acres), although this was moved in 1846 (only a small triangle of garden survives near the north end of the street) and the lane became a residential street. However, Nos. 6-11 and 13 were demolished in 1866 to make way for the New Museums and Cavendish Laboratory, the location of J.J. Thompson's discovery of the electron and Rutherford's splitting of the atom. The Laboratory of Physical Chemistry was built in 1893-4 and the extension to the engineering laboratory was built in 1899 (named after the physicist and electrical engineer John Hopkinson), creating a continuous and detailed frontage of academic buildings in Tudor Revival or Renaissance style.

Laboratory of Physical Chemistry

The lane remains narrow with a gently sinuous course that is suggestive of it historic origins. It is well enclosed by buildings of two tall storeys with attics or high brick walls. The buildings provide considerable overlooking but the street retains a back street character due to the small number of entrances. The curving line of the lane and continuous buildings lines cuts across views out of the area, further contributing to the sense of enclosure and isolation and making the buildings a focus of the view. At its northern end, the lane narrows considerably between the yard of St Bene't's Church and Nos. 1-3, which are timber framed and jut out over the street. This area is also notable for the survival of well-worn flagstone paving. In the south, Botolph House stands in line with the street, with a narrow entrance to Pembroke Street to one side, further contributing to the sense of enclosure. The roofscape on both sides of the lane is notable for the pattern of closely spaced dormer windows.

The northern end of Free School Lane



Townscape Elements

- Narrow, pedestrianised entrance from Bene't Street with cast iron bollards and area of age-worn York Stone paving. This area is bounded by churchyard railings and an active frontage of historic shopfronts at Nos. 1-2 Free School Lane, with timber framed buildings and churchyard greenery leaning over the street.
- The building line is at the back of the footway with a consistent tall two storey scale with attics, creating a strong sense of enclosure and a unified sense of place.

- Well detailed frontages with large bay windows stepping forward into the street scene, and monumental doorcases to large entrances to buildings or passages creating drama.
- A mix of building materials including clunch, ashlar stone and both red and Gault brick. The Tudor and Renaissance Revival style detailing of late C19 and early C20 buildings complements the detailing of medieval college buildings.
- Small areas where the building line is set back provide opportunities for greenery in the streetscene, including the small garden next to the Rayleigh Lecture Theatre (a survival of the historic University Botanic Garden) and St Bene't's churchyard.

Small garden next to the Rayleigh Lecture Theatre

- Plaques enhance the historic interest of the lane by recording the history of the building's use as laboratories of great scientific importance as well as dedication plaques recording their construction.

Engineering Laboratory wing plaque

- The view south has the Laboratory of Physical Chemistry, including its lantern vent at skyline level, as a focus.
- The view south towards Botolph Lane is partially stopped by Botolph House.
- A series of views north have the chapel of Corpus Christi College, the bay window of the Cavendish Laboratory and the rear wall of Corpus Christi Old Court as focal features.

Streetscape Enhancement

- The paving in front of the Cavendish Laboratory is predominantly concrete slabs which could be replaced with a more traditional material to complement the existing York Stone.
- The paving in front of the Master's Lodge is broken and loose and needs repairing.
- The missing railings between No. 3 and the laboratory could be reinstated and the concrete replaced with a more appropriate paving material.
- The unsightly barbed wire along the top of the rear wall of Corpus Christi College should be removed.
- The road surface is in very poor condition contributing to a neglected character.
- The railings of St Bene't's churchyard are in need of repair and maintenance.

Traffic improvements

- The motorcycles and car parking should be removed and the remainder of the lane pedestrianised.
- If complete pedestrianisation is not feasible, the double yellow lines should be reduced in width.
- The street can be a dangerous area for pedestrians due to the many cyclists. A more pedestrian friendly street would also include a more carefully defined bicycle zone

Building No./ Name	Status	Age	Height (Storeys)	Wall Materials	Roof Form / Materials	Architect	Notes
13 Bene't Street	Listed Grade II	early C17	3 + attics	timber-framed & plastered	clay tiles		
1							
2 and 2a					slate		
3	Listed Grade II	late C16	3 + attics	timber-framed & plastered	clay tiles		
Cavendish Laboratory of Experimental Physics	Listed Grade II	1874, 1896 & 1908	3	stone facing	tiled	W M Fawcett	atom first split here by Lord Rutherford 1929
Laboratories of Physical Chemistry	Listed Grade II	1893-4	2 + attics	red brick, stone dressings	tiled	Marshall	on site of Perse School & incorporates its hall of C1600. Listed on this account
Porter's Lodge New Museum Site	Positive building	C19	2	ashlar / red brick	tiled		
Master's Garden & College garage	none	C19	2	gault brick	hipped / slate		Corpus Christi
Master's Lodge	Listed Grade I	1823-27	2	gault brick	hipped / slate	William Wilkins	Corpus Christi
Chapel	Listed Grade I	1823-27	N/A	ketton stone ashlar	slate	William Wilkins (alterations by Sir Arthur Blomfield in 1870)	Corpus Christi
Old Court	Listed Grade I	1352-76	2 + attic	rubble, clunch dressings	tiled		Corpus Christi
St Bene't's Church	Listed Grade I	C11 origin Enlarged C14	N/A	local limestones	clay tile / lead / slate	JP Brandon & AW Blomfield in C19	possibly oldest church in Cambridge (Tower C1020)
Churchyard railings & gates	Listed Grade II	C19	N/A	cast iron railings, brick wall		2 pairs of gates	
14 Pembroke Street	BLI	C19	2	ashlar stone	tiled		
17 Botolph Lane, Botolph House	Listed Grade II	C1790	4	gault brick with stone bands	parapet		