

Agenda Item No:	7	
Committee:	Cabinet	
Date:	22 January 2024	
Report Title:	Wisbech High Street Update	

1 Purpose / Summary

To provide Cabinet with a monthly update regarding;

- ongoing work related to 24 High Street, Wisbech.
- 11-12 High Street options

2 Key Issues

2.1 24 High Street Construction Progress

Etec, the main contractor, continues the construction work on 24 High Street with works remaining below street level.

As reported to the last Cabinet meeting, piling works at 24 High Street had paused for 2 weeks to consider the impact on adjacent buildings. Piling works recommenced in December following a considered review by Etec and their contractors. This slight delay has put the project back a few weeks but is unlikely to have a significant cost or time implication.

Completion of piling is expected in early January.

This will then allow the base slab to be poured and the building should then start to appear above ground in February and March.

Sign-off of all final Planning Conditions is anticipated in late January.

2.2 11-12 High Street

As Cabinet will recall, the National Lottery Heritage Fund has insisted that the Council commissioned a third-party consultant to develop an options appraisal for the 11-12 High Street Site. Any further support from NLHF is contingent on the report and the Council's decisions regarding our approach now that the report has been received. The report is attached in the Appendix.

This report does not consider cost but assesses which approaches to 11-12 would be most suitable to consider from a townscape perspective, given the conservation status of the High Street.

A green space approach appears unacceptable as do a larger 5 storey building, a 2-storey building and a temporary shopfront.

That leaves the highest scoring option of a new 4 storey building, a new 3 storey building or the building that has already received planning permission in 2019. A façade also remains a possibility.

Without costing these options – and adding a substantial contingency to any estimated cost - a decision is not possible at this time. That said, it is worth noting that any building at 11-12 High Street will cost in excess of the cost of the development of the new building at 24 High Street opposite, which has a considerably narrower street frontage and is not as deep.

3 Recommendations

- 3.1 That Cabinet notes the current position in relation to the 24 High Street construction project in Wisbech High Street.
- 3.2 That Cabinet reviews the consultant’s report and instructs officers to obtain estimates for the options contained in the report that Cabinet deem appropriate for future consideration.

Wards Affected	Medworth Ward	
Forward Plan Reference	KEY21APR22/01	
Portfolio Holders	Cllr Chris Seaton Cllr Ian Benney Cllr Chris Boden	Portfolio Holder for Social Mobility and Heritage Portfolio Holder for Economic Growth Leader of the Council and Portfolio Holder for Finance
Report Originator	Phil Hughes	Head of Service
Contact Officers	Paul Medd Peter Catchpole Mark Greenwood	Chief Executive Corporate Director and S151 Officer Head of Property, assets and Major Projects

Planning & Heritage options appraisal
11/12 High St, Wisbech

November 2023

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Jon Burgess
jon.burgess@turley.co.uk

Client
Turley

Our reference
FENC3000

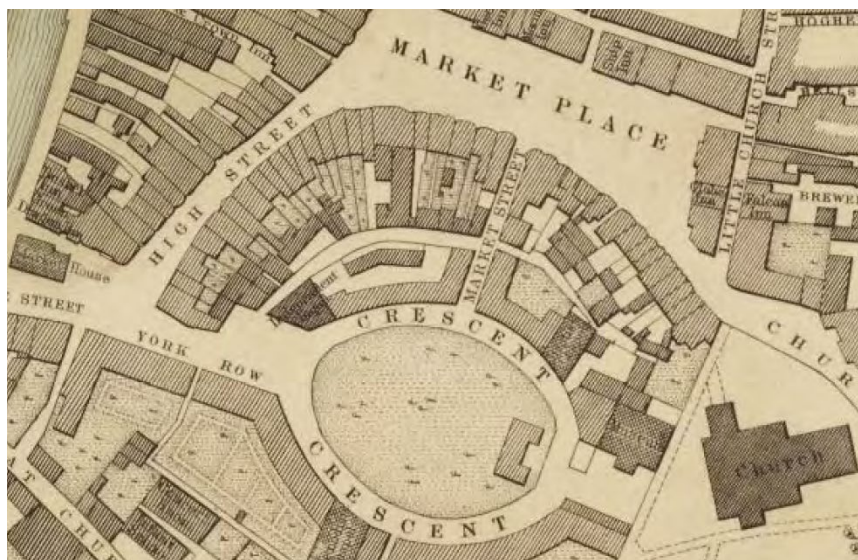
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1. Introduction

- 1.1 This report has been produced by Turley at the request of Phil Hughes, Head of Leisure and Open Spaces at Fenland District Council (FDC). Turley were appointed in November 2023.
- 1.2 Nos. 11/12 High Street in Wisbech now forms a 'gap site' in an otherwise continuously-built frontage. The street is identified in the Fenland Local Plan 2014 as being part of the primary shopping area within the Town Centre.
- 1.3 The properties were demolished in 2019 for safety reasons after many years of dereliction. Planning permission and listed building consent were approved (application nos. 19/0509/F and 19/0510/LB respectively) and the building demolished. However, despite the granting of planning permission, the replacement scheme is no longer financially viable (despite the potential for grant assistance).
- 1.4 FDC have been working with National Lottery Heritage Fund who have assisted with schemes (including No.24 which is almost opposite) as part of their 'high streets' funding. They are keen to help with Nos. 11/12 too but have requested an independent assessment of potential options from a planning and heritage perspective to understand the implications of different approaches to the site. This will then help them to justify maintaining an appropriate level of funding for the site. It is understood that the original funding package for the previous scheme expired at the end of March 2023.
- 1.5 This report considers how the plot might be developed and what are the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches. It does not seek to offer advice on the financial or any other form of viability of any option, this would need to be sourced from others if required.
- 1.6 Preserving and enhancing the character or appearance of a Conservation Area is a statutory duty under S72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990. It is therefore a matter which attracts 'great weight' in the determination of planning applications.
- 1.7 This duty is reflected in Policies LP 18 and LP 16 of the Fenland Local Plan 2014. The latter is supported by the 'Delivering and Protecting High Quality Environments in Fenland' SPD.
- 1.8 The contents of this report have been discussed with both the Fenland DC Conservation Officer and Historic England.

2. Brief History of the site

- 2.1 The list description suggests that No. 12 was built in the late C18 / early C19 as a four storey brown brick shop with accommodation over. The windows had cambered brick arched heads and stone sills. The upper floor ones survived as 6/3 sashes at the time of listing; the first and second floor were replaced by plate glass sashes probably in the C19. The building was topped by a plain brick parapet with the roof drained by a central downpipe. In later years, the building was painted.
- 2.2 No.11 is suggested to have been built slightly earlier, probably in the early C18. This was of reddy-brown brick and similarly of two bays, four storeys and with a central downpipe. There were expressed plat-bands between the floors and a stone-topped parapet. The windows openings again had cambered brick heads, though all the windows were plate glass sashes at the time of listing (though the original sash boxes remained).
- 2.3 In fact, it appears that the buildings were constructed as a pair in the early C19, but the façade of No.12 was rebuilt in the late C18 or early C19. The plans of both buildings were very similar. The front ranges had shallow pitched hipped roofs, hidden behind the parapet, but to the rear was a cross range with coped gable ends. That to No.12 can be seen on the historic photographs later in this report. Historic England, when inspecting the buildings in 2006 suggested that this more vernacular rear range could have been built c1700, with the street frontage perhaps thirty years later¹.



Utting's 1850 Survey of Wisbech

- 2.4 The plan above shows the High Street as a fully built-up street of buildings right against the carriageway edge. Nos. 11 and 12 are the fifth and sixth properties from the west ,

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<https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/5525/Nos11and12HighStreetWisbechFenlandDistrictCambridgeshire>

both with long slim rear wings which link with blocks fronting onto what is today Castle Mews.

- 2.5 By the time of the late C19, it seems that both buildings had extended to the rear and No.11 linked to a much larger block on Castle Mews (presumably the four-storey red brick property which still survives).
- 2.6 This later plan shows the change in levels down from Castle Mews, with steps from the street and from No.12 which access the sunken yard area. The yard to No.11 is particularly small.



1887 Ordnance Survey: Wisbech- Cambs VII 3.14

The photograph below is said to date from 1854 and shows Nos. 11&12 as four-storey blocks. The rectangular front block raises above the much older timber framed building to the right and impressive chimney stacks (so that the flues would draw) are particularly notable. However, to the rear of the frontage block, the gable end of the rear cross block can just be seen (it is clearer on the photographs below).



- 2.7 By 1897, the form of No.11 & 12 appears the same and the rear gable is particularly notable. The gabled dormers of the adjacent building have become catslide dormers and the thatched roof has been slated. By the early 1920s (second photograph below) the property adjacent to No.12 has been replaced with a three-storey brick commercial premises.



- 2.8 Throughout the C20, Nos. 11 & 12 continued as commercial premises; their shopfronts displaying the changing fashions in displaying goods. Also during the C20, the ground floor display area was extended through the rear blocks and filled the majority of the depth of both plots.



Shopfront at No.11 High Street c.1930.



Nos. 11& 12 in early 1970s

- 2.9 In the photograph above the structural issues in No.11 can be seen by the twisting brickwork at second and third floor levels whilst the poor condition of the brickwork at higher level is evident in No.12.

- 2.10 No.11 was likely painted to improve the appearance, but by the early years of the C21, the condition of both buildings was seriously deteriorating.



Nos. 11 & 12 – early C21



Historic England Archive: DP173667

The properties by 2015

- 2.11 As the photographs above show, the early years of the C21 saw the continued decline of the buildings. They were placed on the Buildings at Risk Register in 2001. Cosmetically, false shopfronts were inserted.
- 2.12 In 2006, Historic England's Structural Engineers visited and produce a report on the buildings' condition following the collapse of part of the roof of No.11. The report suggested that the buildings had been empty for 10 years. It is very clear from the report that the form of construction, with the unusual roof form was inherently weak and rebuilding works had occurred for probably more than a century.
- 2.13 Following the roof collapse, the buildings were seemingly propped as façade and the upper storey of each building removed.² In 2019, the buildings were demolished. Structural reports suggested that the condition of the front facades (the main remaining aspect of the building's heritage significance) was unsafe and would be virtually impossible to retain above first floor level even with significant (and costly) shoring.

² As evidenced by the commentary in the Wisbech Conservation Area Appraisal (2016) p 45

3. Character of the Conservation Area

- 3.1 The Conservation Area Appraisal divides the town into five different character areas; the site falling within 'Character Area No.3 – Commercial Centre, High Street and Market Place'. The appraisal describes the wealth of listed buildings, but also the impacts of vacancy and lack of maintenance of properties on the High Street. As noted earlier, the condition of Nos. 11 & 12 is specifically mentioned.
- 3.2 Important aspects of the description of the architectural qualities (leaving aside the impact of many years of neglect, include:-
- Narrow building plots and good quality frontages (even at higher level);
 - Timber and glazed shopfronts often with tiled thresholds;
 - Brick buildings (usually brown brick) and with tiled or slate roofs and sash windows.
- 3.3 To these could be added the fact that buildings almost universally sit right on the edge of the carriageway; most properties are of brick (occasionally painted), most have a regular pattern of windows to the upper floors. In addition, given the former commercial importance of the street, virtually all buildings are at least three to four storeys high.
- 3.4 The appraisal notes that the area does not contain any green spaces³.

³ Para 4.153

4. The replacement scheme.

- 4.1 In 2019, under reference 19/0509/FUL, planning permission was granted for a replacement building on the site.
- 4.2 In terms of the elevation to the High Street, this sought to largely replicate the original appearance of the buildings. Consequently, they were of red-brown brick and of four storeys with traditional- style shopfronts at ground floor level (though the units were linked and so No.12 did not have a separate doorway). Above, each block was two bays wide with multi-paned sash windows with arched brick heads. The brick banding between the floors of No.11 was to be recreated.
- 4.3 Whilst the window style and head details were not precisely as the originals, and a central downpipe between the two properties was proposed instead of one in the middle of each property, to all intents and purposes, the appearance would have been very similar to the original design but with No.12 left unpainted.
- 4.4 The main change was at roof level, where the double-piled roofs were replaced with a further floor of accommodation, designed as a modern recessive storey glazed and with a metal standing seam cladding and roof.
- 4.5 The rear elevation to Castle Mews was much more contemporary in style though again of brick and with metal cladding at upper levels. Three balconies provided amenity for the apartments, but otherwise the doors were simpler and without brick heads.
- 4.6 The ground floor was proposed as a single commercial unit (with basement beneath). The upper floors were proposed as 15 apartments (11- single bed and 4- two bed units). Access to the apartments was from Castle Mews at the rear where cycle and bin stores were provided.
- 4.7 In consultation on the application, there were no significant objections to the proposals, though Historic England and the Wisbech Society both requested a more faithful recreation of the original appearance of the buildings on the High Street façade. The Fenland Conservation Officer, in her very detailed comments, concluded that both the design and the proposed height were appropriate. She recognised that the additional roof storey made the buildings taller than other properties in the area, but felt that as this was recessed, it would not ultimately harm the character or appearance of the conservation area (further commentary is provided in the next section).

5. Impact of various options on the character and appearance of the conservation area.

The Approved Scheme

- 5.1 The scheme granted consent in 2019 effectively sought to recreate the character of the listed buildings which originally occupied the site, and of which parts of the façade remained at the time. Whilst the proposed façade was not an exact copy, it was a very close approximation.
- 5.2 The upper storey was of course new. It is clear from the assessment made by the FDC Conservation Officer that she was content (because the roof was recessive in style and materials) that the additional height did not harm the prevailing character of the Conservation Area. Her comments appear to infer that any higher structure, would likely have been considered too tall. Whilst both Historic England and The Wisbech Society commented that the detailing could have been closer to the original, they did not object to the proposals.
- 5.3 The approved consent established that the form of the rear elevation was far less of a concern, and that there was no objection to building to the limits of the site footprint. The development did not include any car parking provision, though some cycle parking was included.
- 5.4 A reasonable conclusion to be drawn from the documentation attached to the 2019 scheme would be that the development was at or very close to the maximum that the site will accommodate in heritage / townscape terms and that the form of the front elevation and ensuring that it respects the character and appearance of the Conservation Area, is paramount.

Assessment of Options

- 5.5 As the approved scheme ultimately proved not to be viable, this section will therefore consider different scenarios which would either provide more accommodation and so could potentially raise the yield or build more cheaply either in design terms or by providing less accommodation.
- 5.6 The rest of this section considers potential different approaches to the site and what the impact would be from a townscape and heritage perspective. These options are then summarised in the concluding table. For the options which propose buildings, there are inevitably numerous possible variations. For all however, it is considered that a new building would follow the prevailing building line and that the ground floor will be designed as a pair of shopfronts (even if the space behind is combined) and that any structure above will similarly reflect the narrow building plot divisions which characterise the area (ie it will give the appearance of two buildings). Whilst there may be a slight cost saving from designing a single homogenous building, this is not considered to be outweighed by the negative impact on the conservation area. The approved scheme shows that the degree of differentiation between the two halves of

the plot could in any case be subtle. It is also assumed that the building, particularly to the High Street, will be predominantly of red brick.

Option 1: A larger building

- 5.7 As described previously, at five storeys (plus basement), the approved scheme was a storey taller than the original buildings which were themselves as tall as any buildings in the streets around the Market Place.⁴ The conservation officer describes in some detail where the additional storey will be visible from. From High Street, as the upper floor was recessed, it was not apparent. However, it could be seen from Union Street, Bridge Street and Market Street, though the officer concluded that the extra height would not be overbearing.
- 5.8 From the Castle Estate it was more noticeable, particularly from the Crescent and especially from outside No.8 The Crescent. She also noted that it could be seen from North Brink though 'not with any clarity' and the parish church and Clarkson Memorial would remain the key incidents in the skyline. The 'Key Views' submitted with the 2019 application give some idea of the visibility from the points mentioned and help explain the degree of impact which the officer noted.
- 5.9 Adding a further floor (assuming it was based on the same footprint) could potentially provide a further 2-bed apartment and two more single bed apartments. Leaving aside the practicalities of achieving this structurally, or in terms of providing sufficient amenity space, bike / bin storage etc, the visual impact would be substantial. The Conservation Officer described the fifth storey as 'recessive' and 'rooms in the roof'. An additional storey on top of this would be neither. In design terms the 'roof' becomes far more dominant and reads as a structure in its own right, not as a subordinate element.
- 5.10 An additional floor would be far more noticeable to the extent that it would impact on the previously mentioned views, some of which are amongst the most important in the Conservation Area. The extra height would no longer slightly exceed the norm but would become clearly noticeable as markedly taller. From York Row, this would be very apparent. Whilst a taller, high quality building can often be justified at key 'moments' within streets and spaces, this site sits in a position on the street which requires a building which fits with the established form and scale, not something which becomes obviously discordant.
- 5.11 Before any taller building on the site was seriously considered, I would suggest that an accurate Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment was produced to fully understand the impacts on any key views within the Conservation Area and the possible impact on the setting of the numerous listed buildings in the area.

Option 2: Leaving the site as a landscaped space

- 5.12 As can be seen from historic and modern plans of Wisbech, this area of the town is characterised by streets and spaces defined by buildings. The only gaps are landscape

⁴ Whilst there are 5-storey traditional buildings elsewhere in the conservation area (eg the Horace Friend warehouse) these tend to be industrial in character and relate to the river.

grounds (eg around the Castle and Church), set-piece spaces where streets join (eg the Market Place) or at the ends of streets (eg on York Row).

- 5.13 Whilst it would be possible to create a route through the site between the High Street and Castle Mews, such a route wouldn't be on any particularly beneficial desire-line. Even if the basement was filled in (a significant task in itself), a level change between front and back would still need to be graded out and presumably the adjacent buildings would still need to be supported, as they are by the mass of scaffolding currently occupying the site.
- 5.14 Whilst what appear to be some major practical implications of creating a small area of amenity space are not within the scope of this report, the townscape implications are. In a consistent run of buildings of reasonable scale along what was one of the major commercial streets, a gap site will be a 'missing tooth'. It will be clearly at odds with the prevailing character of the street.
- 5.15 The view from York Row will throw into sharp relief the gable end of No.10 High Street, a façade which was never meant to be seen and which would undoubtedly require some remedial works (even if the scaffolding could be removed / replaced with something aesthetically better).
- 5.16 Leaving the site as a landscaped space is not considered to be an acceptable solution in townscape terms. Practically, it is difficult to see what amenity a heavily shaded space, not on a main desire-line and which does not benefit from natural surveillance from adjacent buildings would serve.

Option 3: A façade

- 5.17 Had the original façade survived, then there may have been some merit in retaining it in the hope that rebuilding behind may one day be possible. As we have seen, today nothing of the original building survives.
- 5.18 The demolition work in 2019 included the removal of the ground floor slab and so now all the basement area is uncovered. This would almost certainly make it extremely challenging (and costly) to prop a façade and would likely mean some of the basement area at least would need to be infilled. The propping to the adjacent buildings would still be required and the rear elevation would still present a derelict appearance (unless rebuilt in some form).
- 5.19 Clearly the street façade could be reinstated and so in townscape terms there would be some benefit. Whilst from York Row the building may appear like a piece of scenery, there are a number of buildings where the facade sits above the flanking walls giving a not dissimilar appearance.
- 5.20 However, this would almost certainly be a costly exercise which would serve no practical benefit. Without continued maintenance (at a cost), the appearance would quickly deteriorate.

Option 4: Shopfront

- 5.21 For some years, the derelict original buildings were fitted with false shopfronts in an attempt to alleviate the neglected and hostile appearance. The photographs earlier in this report show that this was not particularly convincing.
- 5.22 Although it would no doubt be possible to produce very high-definition photographs to give a very faithful appearance of an old shopfront, this would achieve very little. Whilst it may look attractive from immediately in front, this part of the high street curves and so the fact that was just a piece of scenery would be very apparent when walking towards it from either direction. Again, the scaffolding would need to remain, the rear elevation would be unaltered, and it would need to be propped and maintained.
- 5.23 Whilst probably the cheapest of the options, it would serve no practical and minimal townscape purpose.

Option 5: A smaller building

- 5.24 Given the amount of remedial works needed to enable anything to be built on this site, it seems unlikely that a less intensive form of development from that approved in 2019 would be viable. As noted earlier, however, this report does not give viability advice and as the viability assessment produced in 2019 is not available, it is not possible to understand the impact of demolition / remedial works etc to understand whether a smaller scheme could produce significant cost savings.
- 5.25 Assuming they could, then the ideal solution would be to provide a building which largely recreated the original façade to High Street. It would therefore be of four storeys, commercial at ground floor and with residential accommodation above (assuming this remains the most viable use). It may be possible to just reproduce the frontage block (perhaps as six two-bedroom apartments) and leave part of the rear as a semi basement garden area to reduce costs. The rear part of the site would need to provide bike and bin storage.
- 5.26 Now that the original building has been demolished, the need to faithfully reproduce it is less important than it was when parts of it remained in 2019. Whilst some key aspects should be retained – the subdivision into two narrow plots, the regular bays of windows with horizontal proportions, careful choice of building materials etc, with care it may be possible to build slightly more cheaply. The key is that the building should sit comfortably with its neighbours and so anything of too overt a design, or which uses materials not drawn from the Wisbech context will not be successful.
- 5.27 A variation on this would be to build a three-storey building. This could either be a scaled down version of what was there (i.e. after the top storey was removed) or take inspiration from other 3-storey, two-bay buildings in the area. This would mean greater visibility / some remedial work of the gable ends of the adjacent buildings, the existing variation of roof heights means this approach would not appear out of place.

5.28 Whilst there are two storey buildings opposite the site, these are C20 developments and reproducing this scale in this position in the street would make it rather weak in townscape terms and with much more of the adjacent buildings apparent.

6. Summary Analysis

	High St facade	Wider High St impact	Castle Mews Impact	Wider Impact	Notes
2019 Scheme	Very Positive	Neutral	Neutral	Minor adverse	
1. Larger building	Very Positive	Minor adverse	Neutral	Adverse	
2. Landscaped space	Adverse	Adverse	Neutral	Neutral	
3. Façade	Positive	Minor adverse	Neutral	Neutral	
4. Shopfront	Neutral	Adverse	Neutral	Neutral	
5a New 4-st	Very positive	Positive	Minor positive	Neutral	
5b New 3 st	Positive	Neutral	Minor positive	Neutral	
5c New 2 st	Neutral	Minor adverse	Neutral	Neutral	

Scoring key:

Very positive	Positive	Minor positive	Neutral	Minor adverse	Adverse
+3	+2	+1	0	-1	-2

2019 Scheme	3+0+0-1	+2
1. Larger Building	3-1+0-2	0
2. Landscaped space	-1-1+0+0	-2
3. Facade	+2-1+0+0	+1
4. Shopfront	0-2+0+0	-2
5a New 4-storey	3+2+1+0	+6
5b New 3 storey	2+0+1+0	+3
5c New 2 storey	0-1+0+0	-1

- 6.1 The above table shows that the most successful replacement would be a four-storey structure, of similar form (though not necessarily identical) to the original building. This assumes that the Castle Mews elevation will be improved from its current appearance. The scoring given for this element of the scheme relates purely to the impact of the scale of the proposed replacement building.
- 6.2 The second most appropriate form would be a three-storey structure which either replicated the form of the 'reduced' original façade or took inspiration from similar traditional three-storey buildings in the area.
- 6.3 A key aspect of both these proposals, and indeed the scheme approved in 2019, is that the façade should be inspired by the original buildings / other traditional buildings in the locality to have an appropriate appearance in the conservation area.
- 6.4 Options which either leave a gap site, or infill with a structure of smaller scheme are not considered to have a positive impact on the conservation area.
- 6.5 In a 'broad-brush' analysis such as this, the scoring is inevitably based on assumptions. There may be opportunities to score higher if, for example, the High Street façade was faithfully reproduced or a particularly successful elevation to Castle Mews was created. However, this is not considered likely to overcome the overriding conclusion of this study that the High Street needs a frontage of scale if the character and appearance of the conservation area is to be at least maintained.
- 6.6 The option which is the most difficult to score is that for a taller building. Realistically a more detailed proposal would need to be drawn up so that the impact of taller

elements on the wider area can be properly and accurately assessed. What is very clear however is that taller elements would need to be recessive behind the four-storey High Street façade. Adding further floors which are clearly visible above the front elevation would be out of keeping with the area.

Turley Office
8 Quay Court
Colliers Lane
Stow-cum-Quy
Cambridge
CB25 9AU

T 01223 810990