

# Craven Arms: Town Centre Audit Analysis, 2023



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## Introduction

An audit of businesses operating in Craven Arm's main shopping streets was undertaken in September 2023 as part of an on-going piece of research reviewing the vibrancy of Shropshire's main market towns and key settlements. Craven Arms centre was first audited in August 2019 and then again in September 2020, 2021 and 2022. The objective of these audits is to provide a snapshot of the vitality of the town by investigating:

- The range and diversity of the retail offer
- The number and types of non-retail businesses operating
- The number and location of vacant properties
- Distinctive characteristics within the town, for example a strong tourism offer or a high penetration of "low end" traders
- The amount, location and type of domestic residences in the centre of the town

The research also aims to monitor change over time. The functionality of the High Street has been changing for some time, and through 2020 and 2021 the coronavirus pandemic has posed additional challenges to High Street businesses. The 2020 audits for all towns took place in September, following the first national lockdown. Non-essential retail and hospitality businesses were able to trade at this time (albeit with strict social distancing measures in place). The 2021 audits also took place when High Street businesses were able to trade. By 2022 High Streets were trading normally with no Covid-19 restrictions, but the cost of living crisis was gathering pace. Inflation was elevated in 2023, which has also impacted people's spending power.

## Key Findings

- 61 commercial units, occupying 11,100m<sup>2</sup> gross floor space
- 12th largest centre in Shropshire, accounting for 2.4% of all Shropshire High Street traders
- Slightly higher than average number of stores per head of population at a rate of 21 units per 1,000 population
- Average store size 183m<sup>2</sup> which is the second largest behind Shrewsbury and significantly larger than the average across Shropshire (147m<sup>2</sup>)
- 157 residential premises in the main shopping area, giving a ratio of 0.4:1 commercial versus residential properties
- Craven Arms had a 10% business churn rate between audits in both 2020 and 2021—this rose to 15% in 2022 before falling to just 3% in 2023.
- 13% of all commercial premises were vacant in 2023, which is slightly higher than the Shropshire average (11%)
- There were four more vacant premises in the town in 2023 than there were in 2019
- A disproportionately large share of commercial units are attributable to finance, professional and business service providers, which account for 16% of all commercial operations. Retail services also have an above average representation
- In contrast, there are comparatively few businesses trading in comparison retail and proportionally there are fewer restaurants/takeaways in Craven Arms than anywhere else in Shropshire

## Methodology Statement

Only the main retail centre of the town was surveyed, as shown on Map 4.

Both retail and non-retail businesses will be operating in other parts of the town.

All commercial premises within the defined area were audited, and classified as:

- Comparison Retail—defined as stores selling non-food/drink/tobacco products
- Convenience Retail—defined as stores selling food/drink/tobacco products
- Retail Service— defined as stores selling a service rather than a product, such as hair dressers or travel agents
- Financial & Professional Services — for example, banks, solicitors, accountants, estate agents
- Health - including dentists, health centres, GP practices, alternative therapies
- Restaurants & Takeaways—including cafés and tea rooms
- Tourism & Leisure—hotels and public houses/bars as well as visitor attractions and cultural assets
- Education & Community Facilities—including schools, colleges, libraries, community centres
- Other Non-Retail
- Vacant

Gross floor space was matched to each premise using OS Master Map. It should be noted, that where two outlets shared the same premise (as shown on Master Map) an assumption was made that both occupied the same amount of floor space. For multi-storey buildings occupied by multiple businesses, it is assumed that all floors have the same gross space. Unless it is clear that a single business occupies more than one floor of a building, it has been assumed that it occupies only one floor. This means that in some cases, gross floor space may be under-estimated as some traders use upper floors for storage. No estimate relating to net floor space has been made.

Businesses occupying above ground floor level premises have only been included in this audit if their presence is clear from street level (by door signs or external hoardings for example). It is likely, therefore, that some non-consumer businesses operating in the area may have been missed.

Premises are assumed to have changed hands if their name or function has changed since the 2022 audit. In some cases though, ownership may be unchanged but the business has been rebranded or renamed.

An estimate of the number of domestic residences in the main retail centre has been made using OS Address Base (complete version) using all residential classification codes.

## Retail Centre Hierarchy

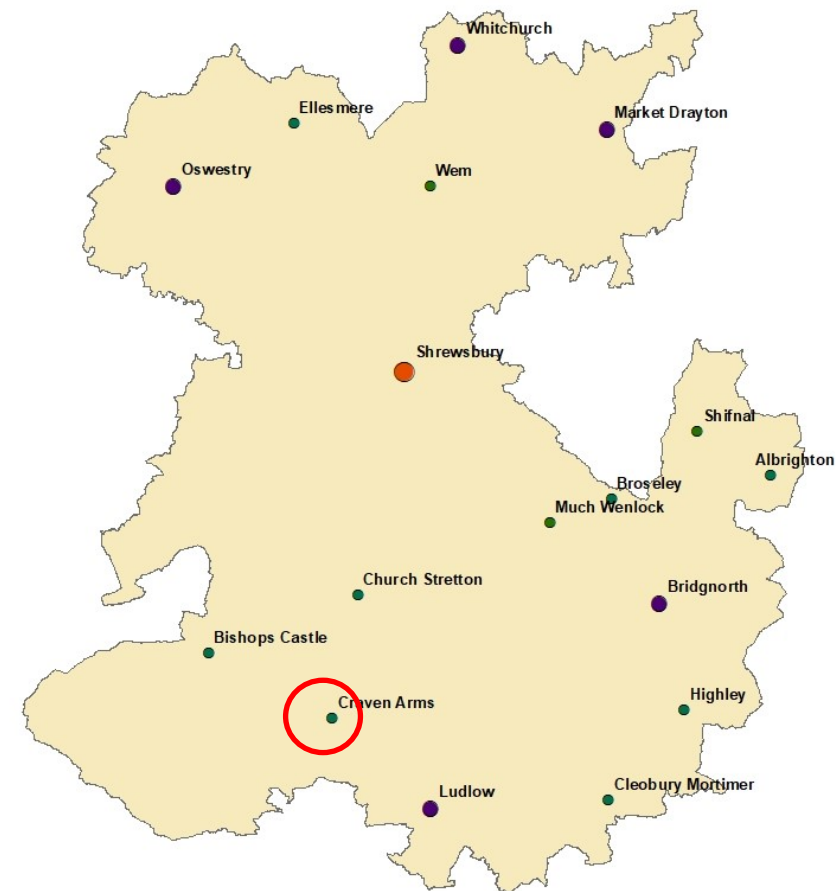
Town centres represent important employment, entertainment and shopping hubs for their local population and hinterland. They also represent an important component of the visitor economy.

However, not all centres have comparable functions. Larger centres tend to attract workers and shoppers from much further afield than smaller centres, and consequently offer a much greater volume and variety of retail trade and consumer and business services.

In order to benchmark Shropshire towns against each other in an appropriate manner, the following hierarchy has been adopted:

- Tier 1: Shrewsbury
- Tier 2: Bridgnorth  
Ludlow  
Oswestry  
Market Drayton  
Whitchurch
- Tier 3: Albrighton  
Bishops Castle  
Broseley  
Church Stretton  
Cleobury Mortimer  
**Craven Arms**  
Ellesmere  
Highley  
Much Wenlock  
Shifnal  
Wem

Map 1: Shropshire's Main Retail Centres



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Craven Arms is not a major retail centre, although it has more commercial enterprises in the town centre per head of population than most tier three towns.



## About Craven Arms

Craven Arms is a small market town located in the south of Shropshire on the A49 south of Church Stretton and to the north of Ludlow. Craven Arms developed as a small rural settlement, and in relation to much of Shropshire is a relatively new town. The arrival of the railway line in the 19th Century led to the town's growth, and today it has a population of 2,562 and 1,139 households (*2021 Census*). The town's population has declined marginally since 2011 (by 33 people). It is one of the smallest key settlements in the county.

The town is located on the A49, with Church Stretton and Shrewsbury to the north (seven miles and 21 miles respectively) and Ludlow to the south (nine miles). Hereford is further south on the A49 (33 miles). Craven Arms is on the national rail network on the Cardiff to Shrewsbury line. The total population within a 10 mile radius is approximately 37,900.

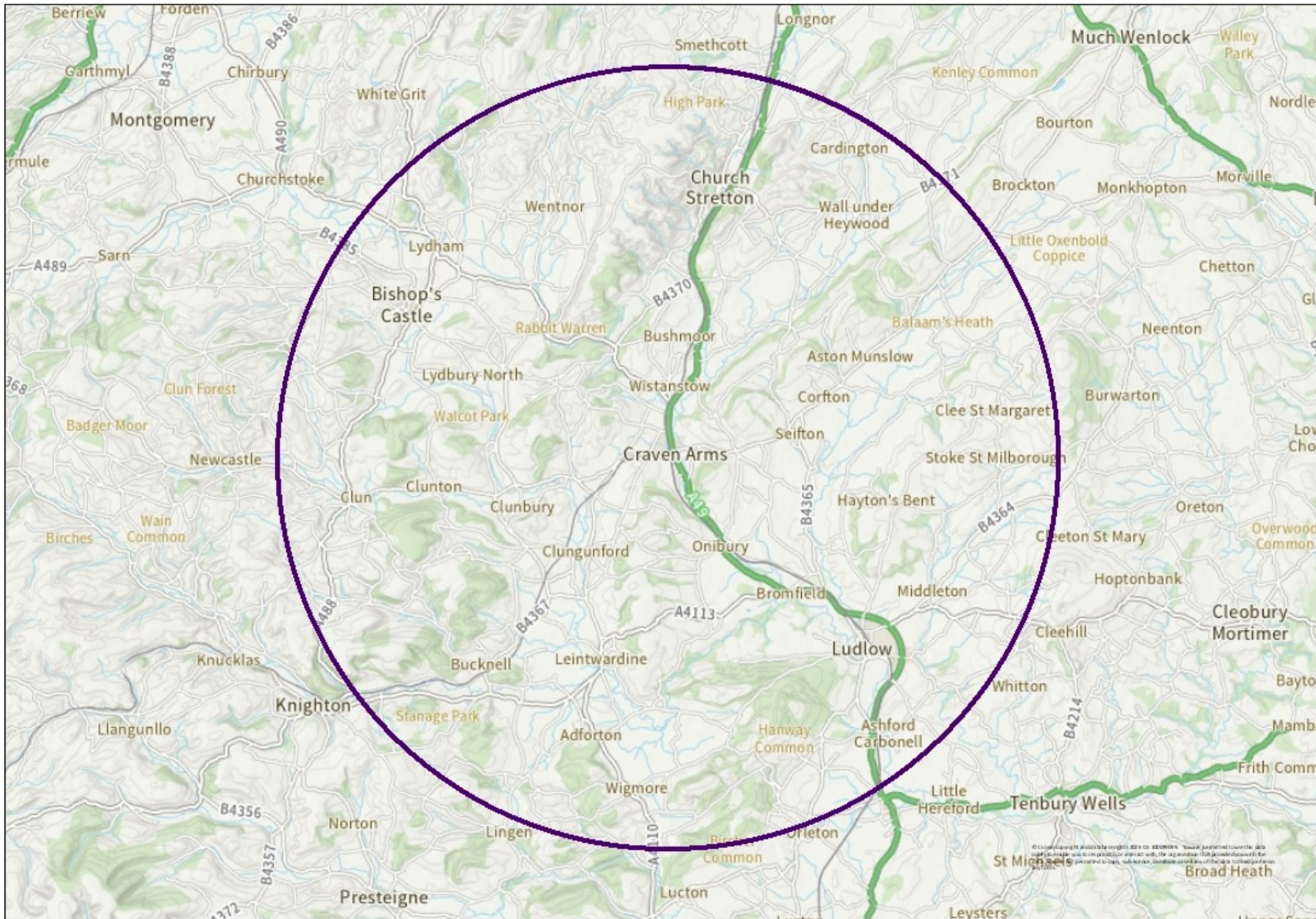
Craven Arms provides approximately 1,500 jobs across the town council area (*ONS Business Register and Employment Survey, 2022*). Key sectors include:

- Property (32.5% of jobs)
- Manufacturing (21.1% of jobs)
- Wholesale (7.1% of jobs)
- Transport & Storage (5.2% of jobs)

Overall, Craven Arms town council area (depicted on Map 3) is large, covering an area of 1,843 hectares. Much of this covers the rural hinterland. The main shopping area (depicted on Map 4) is much smaller than this, at around 7 hectares.

The town is not a main retail hub, with the retail sector accounting for less than 4% of all employment within the town council area. Most retail is independent and there is a significant amount of residential housing stock in the main shopping area of the town. The Craven Arms Farmers' market is held at the Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre on the first Saturday of every month. This is just outside the main shopping area.

Map 2: Location of Craven Arms showing 10 mile radius





Map 3: Craven Arms Town Council Area





Map 4: Main Retail Shopping Area





## Alternative Shopping Destinations

Craven Arms primarily services its own local population, the postcode district SY7. However, residents in this postcode are frequent visitors to other nearby shopping centres which offer a greater choice of comparison retail and more leisure and hospitality opportunities. The charts below show the proportion of the SY7 postcode district which visited Church Stretton, Bishop's Castle, Ludlow and Shrewsbury in each month between April 2020 and February 2022. It is clear that a very high proportion use nearby Ludlow which is within a 10 mile radius of Craven Arms and easily accessible via the A49. 61.2% of the SY7 population had visited Ludlow at least once in February 2022. In the same month, 31.8% had visited Shrewsbury, which is slightly further afield. SY7 represents part of the core catchment for both Shrewsbury and Ludlow.

Chart 1: Ludlow

Postcode Conversion Trend (%)



Chart 2: Shrewsbury

Postcode Conversion Trend (%)



Both Church Stretton and Bishop's Castle are also within a 10 mile radius of Craven Arms. In February 2022, 22.4% of SY7 residents visited Church Stretton at least once, while 9.4% visited Bishop's Castle.

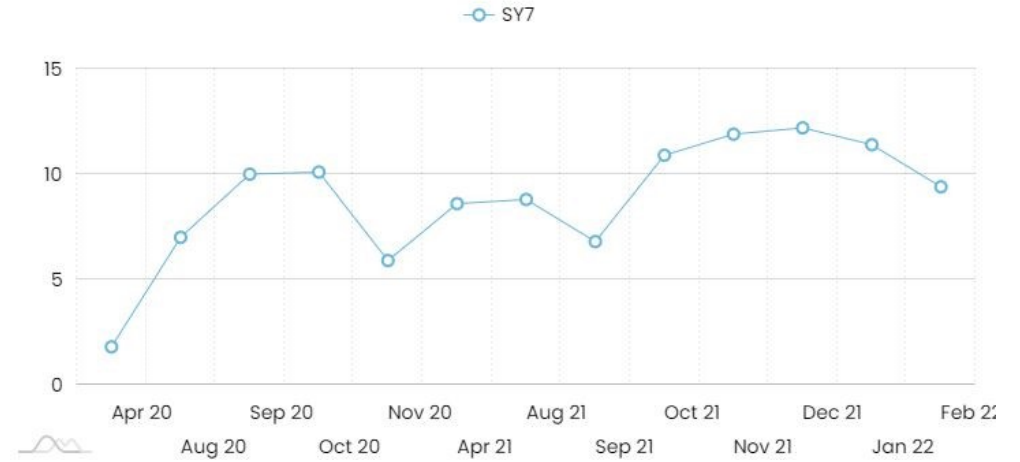
Chart 3: Church Stretton

Postcode Conversion Trend (%)



Chart 4: Bishop's Castle

Postcode Conversion Trend (%)



Charts have been downloaded from the Town and Place AI tool which monitors visitor numbers and footfall across a range of town and city centres across the UK.



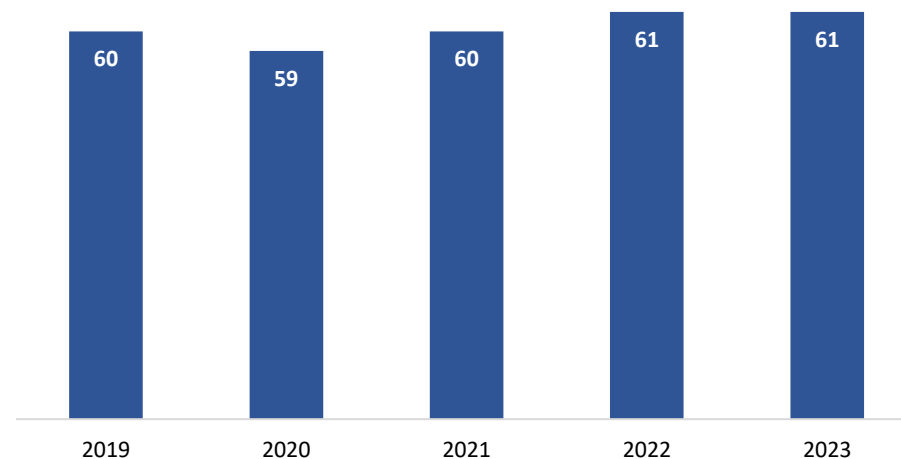
## Key Audit Results

A total of 61 commercial premises are contained within the Craven Arms survey area. These are primarily in Corvedale Road (21 premises), the Auction Yard (13 premises), Shrewsbury Road (10 premises) and Market Street (11 premises) with a small number in Dale Street (5) and Newton Street (1).

Gross floor space allocated to these businesses is approximately 11,100m<sup>2</sup> (two thirds in Corvedale Road and Shrewsbury Road). The average store size is large at 183m<sup>2</sup> with units ranging in size from 31m<sup>2</sup> to 3,240m<sup>2</sup>. The largest store (Harry Tuffins) pushes up the average size considerably.

Businesses on Dale Street are much smaller than the average for Craven Arms (74m<sup>2</sup>) while those on Shrewsbury Road are much larger (each an average of 450m<sup>2</sup>).

Chart 5: Number of Commercial Units in Craven Arms, 2019-2023

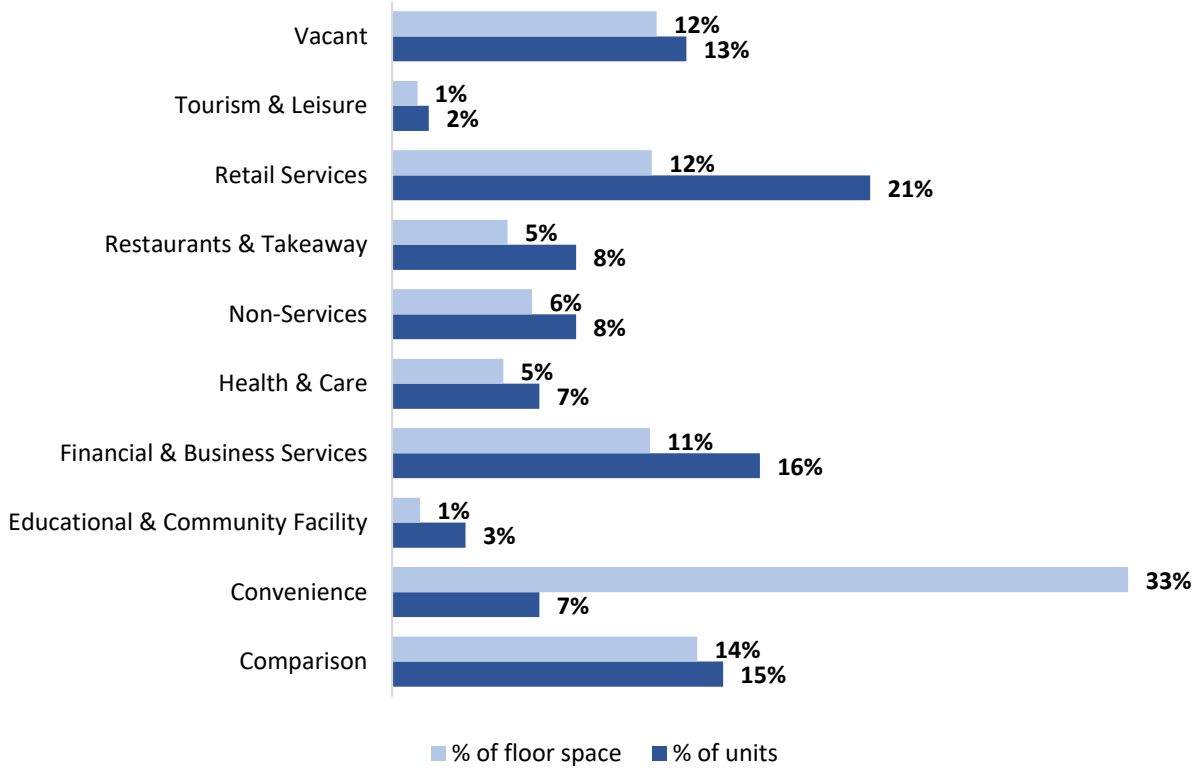


The number of commercial units has fluctuated between 59 and 61 since 2019—reducing by one in 2020 when two units merged into one premise, and increasing by one in 2021 with the opening of a new unit on Shrewsbury Road. In 2022 a further unit was created when the bakery, which occupied two adjacent units, closed. The units are being advertised separately for re-letting. The number of commercial units and floor space remained unchanged in 2023.

The highest proportion of commercial units are allocated to retail services (21%). As they are relatively small in size, they account for a smaller share of floor space (12%). Finance and business services providers are very well represented in Craven Arms, accounting for 16% of units and 11% of floor space. Comparison retail accounts for a fairly low share of units compared with other towns of a similar size, accounting for 15% of units and 14% of floor space. Convenience retail accounts for only a small share of units (7%) but for the highest proportion of floor space (about a third). 8% of units are attributable to restaurants and takeaways. Small numbers of units are filled by tourism & leisure operators and other types of organisations.

There are eight vacant premises in Craven Arms (13% of units), which is the equivalent of 12% of floor space.

Chart 6: Breakdown of Craven Arms Commercial Premises by Classification, 2023





## Change since 2022

There has been only marginal change in the mix of businesses operating in Craven Arms between September 2022 and 2023. There is now an additional operator in health and care, but the tourism and leisure sector has been impacted by the closure of the Land of Lost Content museum. There was no change in the number of commercial units in any other sector.

Overall, business turnover in Craven Arms has been lower than the Shropshire average in recent years, and especially in 2023, when just two changes were recorded, the equivalent of churn of just 3%. This compares with 15% in 2022, and 10% in 2021 and 2020.

Chart 8: Breakdown of Business Churn 2019-2023

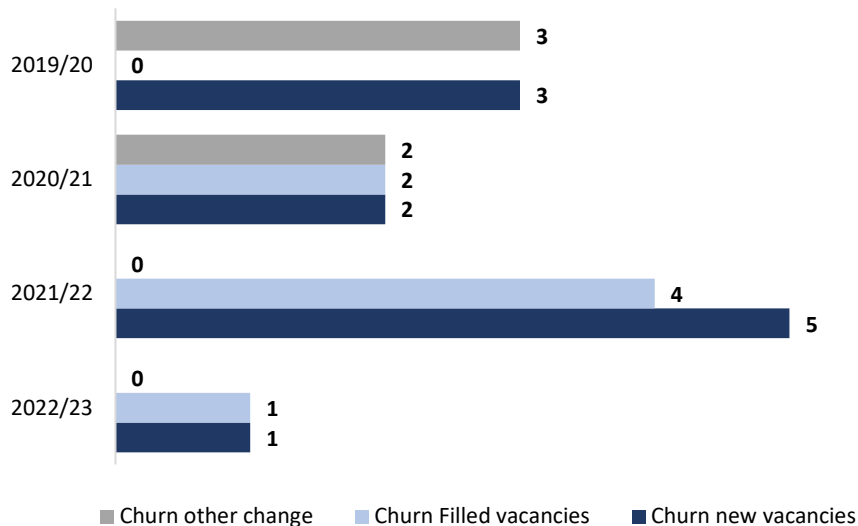
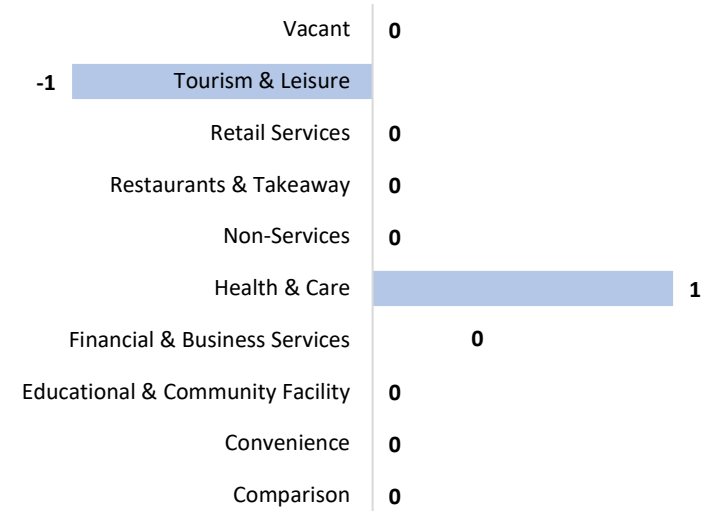


Chart 7: Change in Number of Units by Category, 2022/2023



Of the two business that had changed between 2022 and 2023, one was a new vacancy (with the closure of the museum) and one was a previously vacant premise becoming filled.

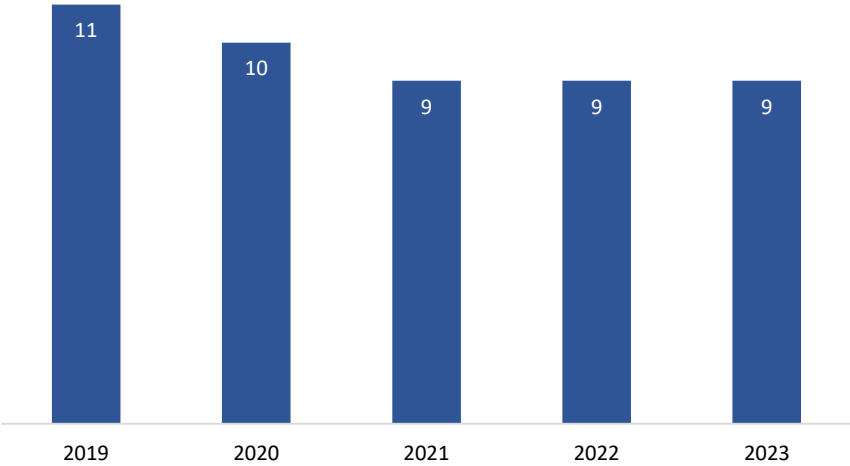
Nine business premises had undergone change in Craven Arms between the 2021 and 2022 audits. There were five new vacant premises, while four previously vacant premises became filled. There was no other change in 2022.

In 2021, a third of all change was attributable to new vacancies, a third to vacant stores becoming occupied and a third to other change.

# Comparison Retail

The fact that Craven Arms is not a main retail hub is reflected in the low number of comparison retail stores that are in operation. There are just nine stores of this type in the town, covering just over 1,500m<sup>2</sup> of gross floor space. This is the equivalent of 15% of all commercial units in the town and 14% of floor space. Only Highley has a lower proportion of comparison retail stores. The town lost one comparison retailer between 2019 and September 2020 and another between 2020 and September 2021 but the count remained stable in 2022 and 2023.

*Chart 9: Number of Comparison Retail Units, 2019-2023*



Within the main shopping area there are two charity shops, which account for a fifth of all units. All other classification types are represented by just one store. These include a gift shop, a hardware store, a furniture store, a pharmacy, a mobile phone shop and a store selling used machinery and another selling windows. There are no dedicated clothes retailers in the town. There has been no change in the comparison offer since 2021.

The majority of stores are independent, although the town is home to Lunts pharmacy, Severn Hospice charity shop and Get Connected (mobile phones).

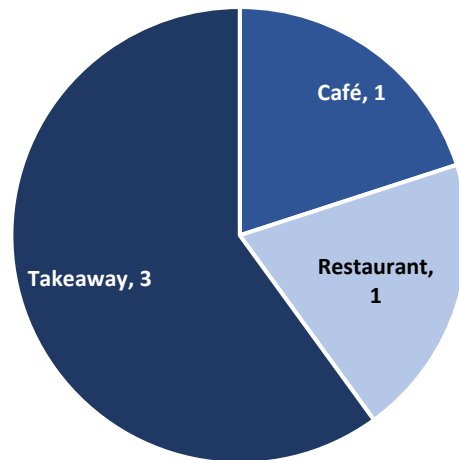


## Convenience Retail

There are four convenience stores within the main shopping area of Craven Arms. These account for just 7% of all units but for the highest share of gross floor space within the town (just over a third). This is primarily due to the presence of the Harry Tuffins supermarket, which is Shropshire's largest independent retailer. This accounts for not only 89% of floor space within the convenience retail sector, but for almost 30% of all commercial floor space within the town centre. As well as Tuffins, there is a butcher, a newsagent and a general convenience store (One Stop). The town's bakery closed in 2022, reducing the convenience offer by one store. There has been change since then.

## Restaurants & Takeaways

*Chart 10: Breakdown of Units in the Restaurant/Takeaway Sector, 2023*



The number of places to eat in Craven Arms is small, and proportionally, this category accounts for a lower share of commercial activity than in any other town. However, there is a further café and takeaway outside the shopping zone along Shrewsbury Road.

8% of units are attributable to restaurants and takeaways, with this category accounting for a slightly lower proportion of gross floor space (5%). The five units are split between cafés (20%), restaurants (20%) and takeaways (60%). There is a fish and chip shop and sandwich takeaway outlet (a branch of Subway).

There has been no change in the restaurant and takeaway sector over the last two years.

## Tourism & Leisure

The museum located in the town centre (Land of Lost Content) closed between the 2022 and 2023 audits. Craven Arms is the Gateway to the Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and offers easy access to key tourism destinations such as Church Stretton and surrounding hills plus Ludlow. The Shropshire Hills Discovery Centre and English Heritage owned Stokesay Castle are just outside the town centre boundary. There is just one public house within the main shopping zone.

## Finance & Business Services

There are 10 commercial operators in the finance and business services category in Craven Arms town centre, accounting for approaching 1,300m<sup>2</sup> of gross floor space. This sector is important in Craven Arms, accounting for 16% of units and 11% of all floor space. Included within this classification are three estate agents, three other property related agents (a housing association, a maintenance company and a developer), two accountants, a solicitor, and a vet. There are no banks within the town. The number operating in this sector reduced by one in 2022 with the loss of an accountant but there was no change in 2023.

## Retail Services

Chart 12: Number of Retail Services Businesses, 2019-2023

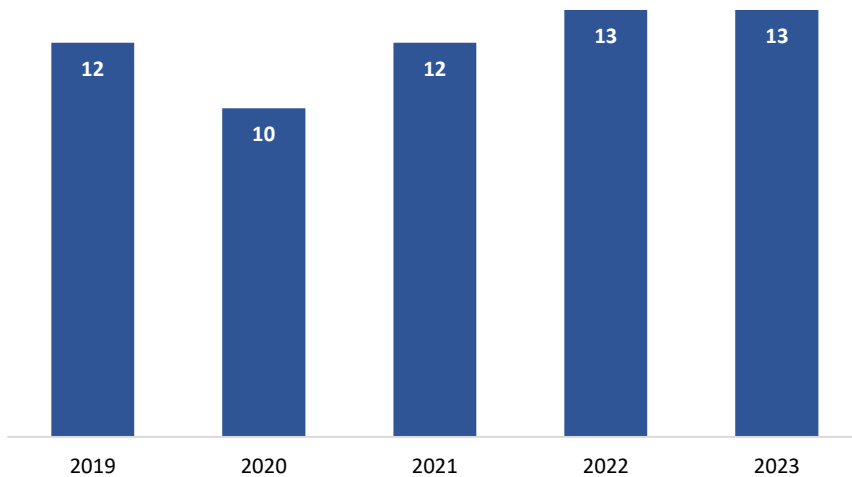
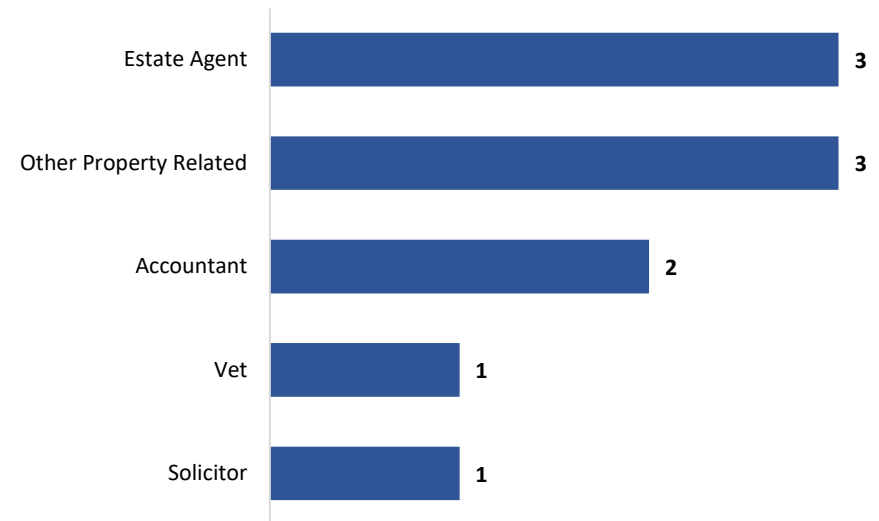


Chart 11: Number of Finance & Business Services Providers by Type, 2023

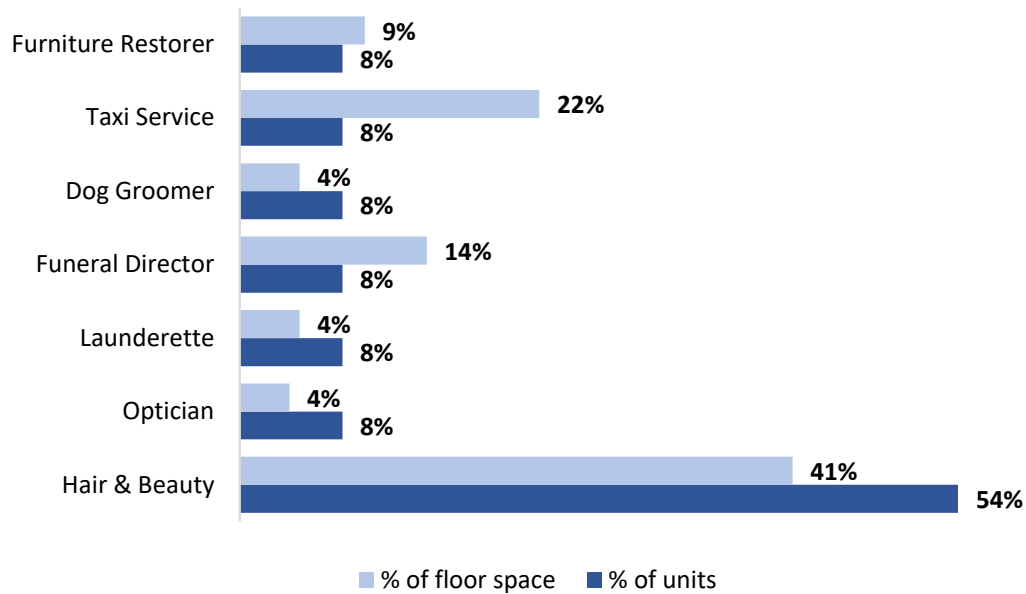


There are 13 retail service businesses operating in Craven Arms town centre, with these accounting for almost 1,300m<sup>2</sup> of gross floor space. There were two more retail service providers in Craven Arms in 2021 than there were in 2020 and the tally rose by another one in 2022. The number was unchanged in 2023 compared with 2022. Retail services account for the highest number of units in Craven Arms, but a much smaller share of floor space (21% and 12%).



The highest number of operators is in the barber and hair & beauty salon classification, with these together representing 54% of units and 41% of floor space. In addition, there is an optician, a funeral director, a launderette, a furniture restorer, a taxi rank and a dog groomer. The taxi rank opened in 2022 in a previously vacant premise. There was no change in the retail services offer in 2023.

Chart 13: Breakdown of Retail Services Businesses by Type, 2023



## Health

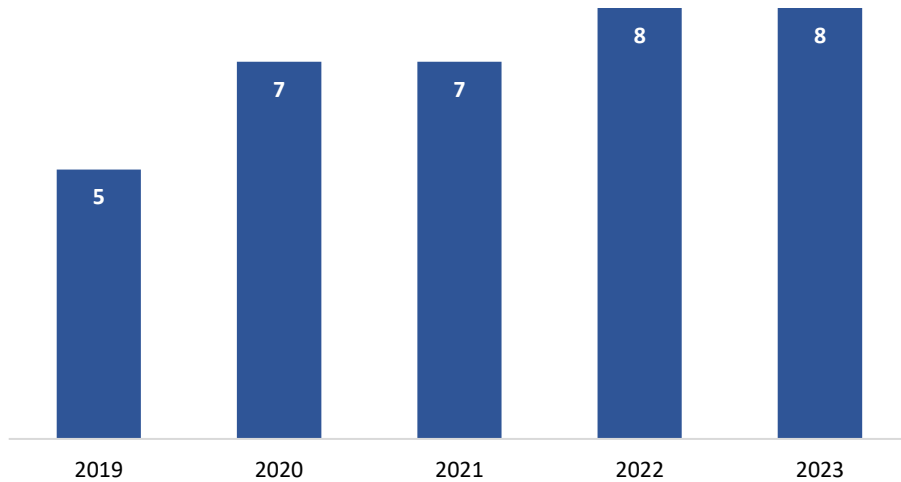
There are four health and care operators within the town – a dentist and a chiropodist plus two home care agencies. One of these was a new trader in 2023, occupying a previously vacant premise.

## Vacant Units

13% of Craven Arms town centre outlets are vacant (12% of gross floor space). This is the equivalent of eight empty units and the rate is slightly high in comparison with similar sized market towns in Shropshire. However, it is slightly below the national vacancy rate, which stood at 13.9% in the second quarter of 2023 according to BRC (data relating to high streets only).

The number of vacant unit has risen from five in 2019 but was unchanged in 2023 compared with 2022.

*Chart 14: Number of Vacant Premises, 2019-2023*



Four vacancies were on Market Street in 2023, two were in the Auction Yard with one each on Corvedale Road and Shrewsbury Road.

Of the eight vacant premises in 2023, just one had become vacant over the last year (12.5%). The town has no very long term vacant premises—none of the premises that had been vacant in either 2019 or 2020 were still unoccupied in 2023.

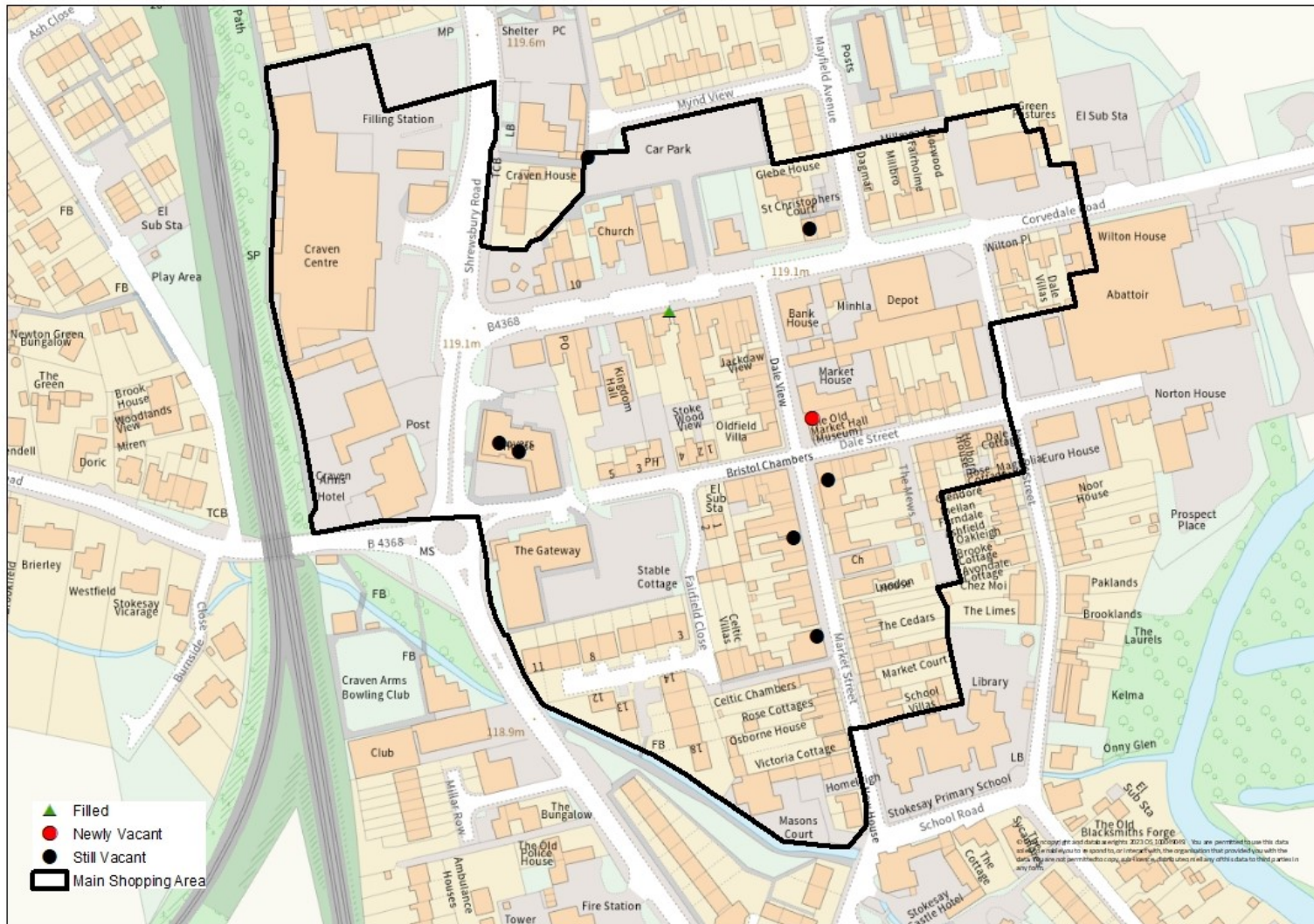
Map 5: Location of Vacant Commercial Premises, 2023





Of the eight vacant commercial premises in Craven Arms in 2023, seven had been vacant in 2022, while one was newly vacant. One premise which had been vacant in 2022 is now filled.

Map 6: Change in Location of Vacant Commercial Premises, 2022 –2023



## Residential Premises

There is a significant amount of residential property within the main shopping centre in Craven Arms—in fact there are more than twice as many residential properties as commercial premises. In total, 157 residential premises are located in the audit area, of which the highest proportion are flats (70 or 45%) which are largely located above retail or other commercial outlets. Much of this stock is along Corvedale Road, Market Street and Shrewsbury Road. There are small quantities of detached and semi-detached housing stock (10 of the former and 18 of the latter), most of which is towards the periphery of the main shopping area. There are 59 terraced houses, which is more than a third of housing stock in the area. There are clusters of terraced housing on Market Street, Dale Street and Fairfield Close. The number of residential premises in Craven Arms has risen by 10 since 2021, although there has been no change over the last year.

Map 7: Location of Residential Premises in Craven Arms Town Centre

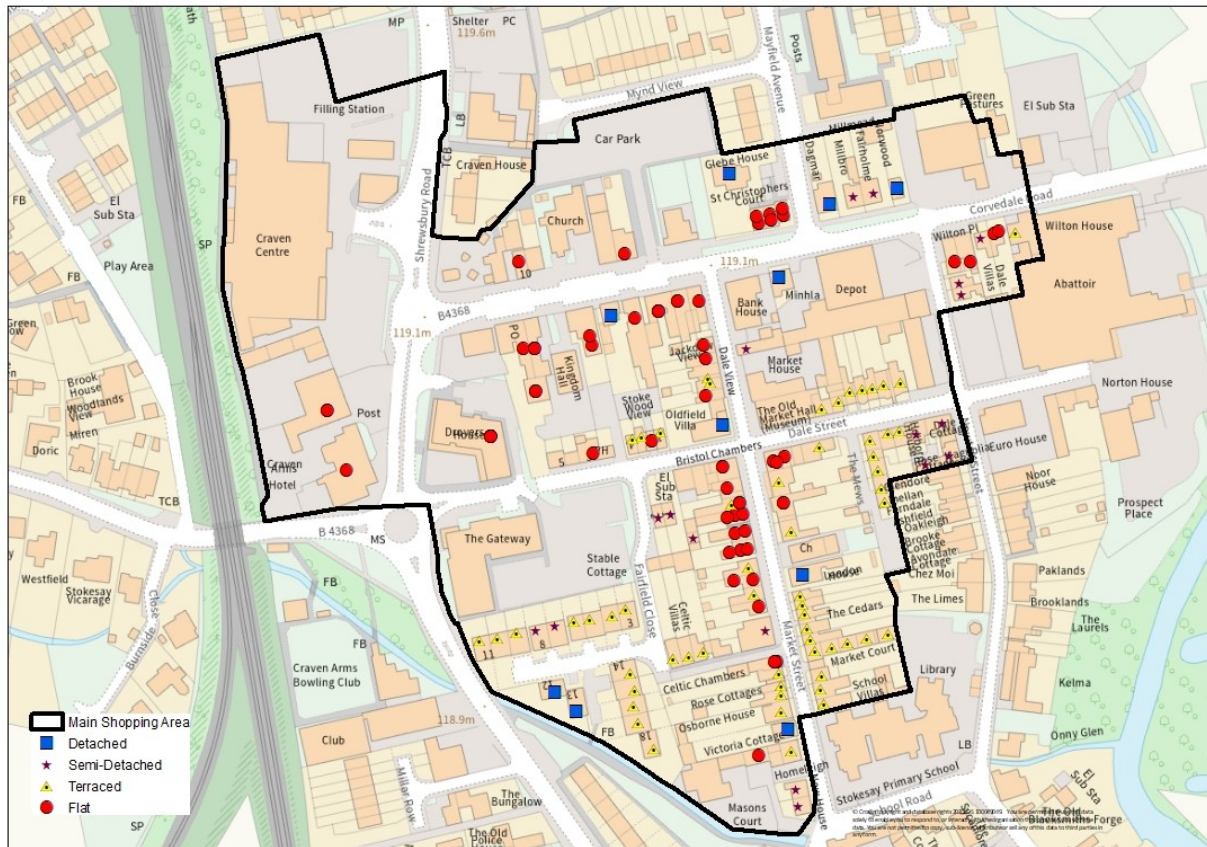


Chart 15: Breakdown of Residential Properties by Type

