

Guildford: A Town in Transition (A view from 2010)

*An extract from our anniversary book
" Making a Difference -The Guildford Society at Seventy Five "*

The remit of The Guildford Society has remained remarkably consistent with the goals of its forerunner, 'Old Guildford Society.' It was established in 1896, spurred on by a letter from William Morris to George Williamson, a prominent local art historian, which urged him to form a *watching committee* to guard against possible threats to Guildford's unique High Street.

The Old Guildford Society was soon engaged in its first campaign to save the Georgian red brick façade of Guildford Old Bank whose owners planned to replace it with a grey granite façade that they felt was more in keeping with their image. In brief, our well connected local antiquarian alerted Princess Louise to the imminent alteration of the 130 year old façade asking if she might like to visit Guildford and view the building on her way back to London from Osborne House.

The happy outcome of the story is that the bank's management was delighted to fulfil Princess Louise's wish to save the façade whilst updating the building. An engraved brass plaque was placed to the left of the entrance door of the bank, now occupied by Lloyds, crediting the Old Guildford Society with saving the façade. Before disbanding in 1902, the Old Guildford Society engaged in a few more campaigns, mainly involving rights of way.

This incident was selected by author and historian Russell Chamberlin (1926-2006) as the opening case study in *Guildford: Town Under Siege*, the book commissioned by The Guildford Society to commemorate its 50th Anniversary in 1985. Chamberlin had a particular interest in how the pressures of modern life affected the fabric of English towns.

As a well known resident of Guildford, he had a front row seat as an observer of how our town with its dramatic terrain bisected by a river, its High Street with its setts, on a hill flanked by historic buildings standing cheek by jowl with utilitarian mid-20th century buildings, was challenged by the need to accommodate an expanding population exacerbated by the town's prominence as a commuter rail hub, increasing development in all categories and the rise of the automobile with its thirst for roads.

By 1960, 57 listed buildings had been demolished, eleven of which were in the High Street. The Guildford Society itself flagged up 160 important buildings that it deemed to be at risk. Clearly, there was plenty of work to get on with for concerned residents committed to The Society's vision of conserving all that is best about Guildford, promoting high standards of planning and architecture, and raising public awareness of the town's heritage.

The final point in *Town Under Siege* concerned the 1972 Local Government Act that made provision for *Neighbourhood Councils* which "*would consist of voluntary urban organisations of up to 10,000 people*" designed to bridge the gap between citizens and "*the frequently remote local authority*".

The remit sounds remarkably similar to the goals of the proposed Localism Bill introduced into Parliament on 10 December 2010 with the aim of "*shifting power from central government back into the hands of individuals, communities and councils*" by the time the annual Budget was unveiled on 23 March 2011, the localism initiative was no longer considered a priority by central government.

A town is always in transition: a work in progress. With the best will in the world, some projects take many years to come to fruition and some planning approvals for large projects are abandoned for a variety of reasons. Such situations can leave land and buildings designated for development and surrounded by hoardings for years. In Guildford, we can point to several examples. The Friary Brewery closed down in 1969, was demolished in 1973, and finally opened as a shopping centre in 1980. The proposed extension to the Friary shopping centre received its first planning approval in 1996 and the development is still awaited .fifteen years later.

Some site clearance has taken place in preparation for the extension and fortunately all the buildings fronting on North Street are still intact and in use. This was an important decision since any demolition in a major shopping street would create a gaping hole, a bit like a missing front tooth. A consequence of the stalled Friary extension is that all proposed improvements to North Street itself in terms of paving, landscape and traffic reduction have also been put on hold.

Several town centre sites awaiting redevelopment have been tarmacked and are in use as temporary car parks: a practical interim solution but certainly not ideal. Another prominent site that has been cleared and awaits redevelopment is that of the former CEBG building on the Portsmouth Road, a few minutes' walk from Guildford Station that this writer believes would be an ideal location for a residential development. One recent success story is the (near) completion of our new Civic Hall, 'G Live', bringing an important town amenity back into use.

As this booklet shows, in addition to submitting comments on planning applications and the many documents that set Guildford's development framework, The Society proactively campaigns on issues affecting the immediate quality of our urban setting such as the maintenance of the setts in the High Street, calling attention to broken paving slabs that need replacing, the removal of redundant signs, suggestions for planting schemes and public art. During the period of my chairmanship, we became involved directly with public art since we decided to donate a work of sculpture to the town as a Millennium gift.

Improvements to the River Wey were the Borough's focus for the Millennium and the Town Wharf in the vicinity of the Treadwheel Crane was suggested to us as a possible site for our sculpture. Since the docking and unloading of barges had taken place on this site for over 300 years, we settled on the figure of the 'Bargeman' that was interpreted splendidly by metal artists Robert Kranenborg and Andy Quirk of Utopia Forge.

Another nearby improvement, championed by Gordon Bridger, is the provision of a street level crossing at Millbrook connecting Debenhams and the town bridge directly with the High Street. The earlier underpass has been closed, and I believe that this direct ground level crossing has provided a much more attractive experience for pedestrians in the town.

Whenever a river runs through a town, the limited number of bridges connecting the two sides is always a problem. In Guildford, it is an acute problem since the gyratory layout provides the only crossing in the town centre. It serves not only local residents wishing to access the railway station or the town centre but is the convergence of several A roads and therefore is a cross-county thoroughfare.

During my period as chairman, Bridge Street, by far the busiest thoroughfare in Guildford, was nominated as a tertiary retail district with no limit placed on food and drink (A3) establishments. The Guildford Society opposed this proposed policy strongly but it was passed by one vote in Council. And so began the era of themed mega-pubs. At the same time as this unfortunate policy was approved, the Council, residents' societies and NGOs were deeply involved with discussions on sustainability, the reduction in the use of private cars, and policies on the sharing of road space between buses, cars, cycles and pedestrians.

A proposal to pedestrianise Bridge Street with the one remaining bridge becoming two-way and at the same time strictly curtailing traffic in Walnut Tree Close was proposed by the Council in 1999. Although, this idea was short-lived, a second proposal was taken seriously that consisted of reducing the traffic lanes in Bridge Street from three to two and creating a cycle lane and widened pedestrian route that would benefit the large numbers of pedestrians accessing the Station. This proposal has been on the books for about 10 years while, interestingly, there are now fewer theme-pubs located on Bridge Street while funding for such schemes has now dried up. Another example of 'a town in transition'!

While reading drafts of articles for this publication that recount some of the campaigns and comments made by The Society over the past 25 years, I have been struck by the sheer mass of work that has been undertaken by The Society. We are certainly not alone in this activity. Many other local residents groups, individuals and statutory bodies comment on planning applications and development guidelines as they appear. The Borough Council is constantly engaged in complying with the various rolling plans and laws that set our development framework as well as producing reports on the thousands of planning applications that arrive on its doorstep, and one of its statutory remits is to consider the comments and objections by third parties.

This process of consultation is essential and I am sure that this Society and other likeminded groups have been instrumental in seeing off or modifying many schemes that would not have benefited Guildford's environment. The system is not static; premises are always changing ownerships and are being rebranded, new technology appears, such as internet shopping, and a vital element of the economy finds it may require less town centre shopping space, and funding for public projects waxes and wanes over time.

It is a wonder that our town remains as attractive as it is. There will be no shortage of proposals for The Guildford Society and others to review in the future. On the other hand, it is also gratifying to reflect on the fact that the red brick façade of Guildford Old Bank (Lloyds) that was 134 years old when it was saved by the Old Guildford Society in 1899 is now 246 years old.

Mrs. Marilyn Spier Chairman 1996 - 2000