

## Seventy Five Years of The Guildford Society

This is a celebration year for the Guildford Society, for in 1935 a small group of people concerned about commercial pressures and loss of cherished features of this lovely town met together in a private home. They agreed to set up a body to be called The Guildford Society, its sub-title left blank for further consideration.

Back in the previous century with its booming economic growth and the impact of the railway there were similar concerns about the neglect and loss of old Guildford. The Old Guildford Society was formed in 1896 as a branch of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. While SPAB has survived, the Old Guildford Society had become inactive and was disbanded in 1902.

Happily, those who met 75 years ago had a more forward-looking agenda. Their strapline, when agreed, added that the Society was "for the protection of the beauty and amenities of the Borough", which at some time in succeeding years has been transformed to today's "to promote interest in past present and future of Guildford".

And it is from that interest that the Society's action springs. A key action area is monitoring planning applications for developments large and small which affect the character of the town. Last year for instance we drew attention to the overwhelming impact of a proposed large-scale housing development at Bedford Square on that key riverside site. It was the Council's own proposal, which we are pleased to note has been on hold ever since.

And we claim some of the success in forcing a legal review of the South-East Plan's threat to impose ridiculously high housing targets for years to come. We certainly had some influence on the "Rodboro Square" transformation of Rodboro Buildings and the Electricity Works through a comprehensive presentation in 1991 on possibilities for the riverside sites at the very heart of the town.

We were delighted that our proposals for the Farnham Road site were, with no great alteration, built into Borough's planning brief for the site. The disappointment is that it remains a car-park with recycling bins as its focus.

In the context of the High Street today we are pressing to achieve adequate funding to maintain its disintegrating surface of granite setts as befits a conservation area, a problem arising from its role as a County-maintained highway competing for resources with pot-hole repairs, and the need to check and repair underlying services.

An even more immediate concern is to ensure that the Borough-owned gem of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century town house, Guildford House, at present housing a shop, art gallery and tea-room, remains fully open to the public. Its accessibility is threatened by the Borough's need of funding for a better tourist information centre and art gallery.

In the 1970s Guildford, as many other historic towns, was afflicted by a rash of brash and often cheapjack shops, so the Society set up its then annual Design Awards. They are now biennial, alternating with the Borough's Heritage Awards, and will be made this year. The awards now cover new buildings, conservation projects and environmental schemes too. The Council has been a frequent winner over the years, with its restorations of the Castle Great Tower, Wanborough Barn and Guildford House, and its Guildford in Bloom for instance. It has been noted that nearly every new shopfront today would have been an award-winner thirty years ago – the coveted window-sticker may be seen on some.

A winning project which also scooped the "people's award" voted by the public at large, is the Spike workhouse restoration. We're convinced that the wholesale improvement in standards results largely from greater awareness brought about by pressure from members of societies like our own.

Another regular feature introduced by the Society is its annual Christmas Craft Market on the Town Bridge. We introduced it when the bridge was closed to traffic and – with some ups and downs – it has met with growing success in the hands of able and committed managers. This year it will be held on holiday weekends through the year, and the concept which brings a liveliness to maybe bleak or underused spaces has caught on so well that the town's monthly Farmers' Market fills the High Street.

And we hold regular meetings both social and informative, visits to towns with similar challenges, conferences on topics of concern such as the Night Economy and Transport for Guildford, prestige lectures by senior officers of departments handling local affairs, an annual town-and-gown Architecture Lecture held jointly with the University – last year's was addressed by the then President of the Royal Institute of British Architects – and awareness-promoting events in the High Street. We have such experience, commitment and expertise in our membership that the Society's views are generally held in high respect. We are a completely non-political ginger group, and our wish is to work with rather than against the professionals such as the planning officers whose task is to apply the planning legislation designed to protect our environment as well as encourage a vibrant economy. On occasion of course we have to cross swords.

And what of the next 75 years? The need for expertise and vision will always be there. And the more we represent, the greater the impact we make. So the Society seeks to grow – at present membership is just over the 500 mark – to ensure that its emphasis on the town's past, present and future.

Michael Jeffery  
Chairman, 2008 – 2013

20 April 2010