



Enhancing Guildford's riverside – a position paper by The Guildford Society

Overview

The River Wey runs through the heart of Guildford. While in its outskirts the river provides green space, in the centre it has become hemmed in by buildings of disparate styles as poor planning decisions over many years have resulted in significant damage to this environment. Of particular concern is the preponderance from the second half of the 20th century of monolithic structures, brutalist architecture and ugly surface car parks. These provide an unpleasantly stark contrast with Guildford's county town vernacular and the rural environment that the river provides in the heart of The Town, undermining its value to the community.

The National Trust owns the River Wey Navigations and is responsible for maintaining it as a working waterway. This affords a level of protection to the river itself and its adjacent towpaths and today is principally used by pleasure craft (rowing boats, canoes, narrow boats), walkers, cyclists and fishermen. However the river is also a major part of Guildford's industrial heritage and is surrounded by a number of historic buildings which are variously in the ownership of GBC and private landowners and which should be conserved and protected from future redevelopment.

Further, the river is a rich source of pleasure to residents of Guildford, providing a green corridor in the heart of The Town. The adjacent Shalford Park and water meadows are critical for absorbing floodwaters and protecting the town centre from flooding while providing a haven for wildlife.

Society position

The Society's focus is on the riverside between Ferry Lane and Stoke Mill. Its position is to recognize the distinct stretches of river - regenerating and preserving the built-up area in the town centre and conserving the rural areas of the river. Specifically:

1. There should be no further development between the River Wey and A281 from Ferry Lane to Guildford Rowing Club to preserve the rural environment that currently extends into the heart of The Town. This land should be preserved as part of the green belt to the south of Guildford and provision made to encourage wildlife and wildlife watching and so it can fulfill its historical role of absorbing flood waters and protecting the town centre.

Where redevelopment of existing properties on the west bank takes place, such development should be low-rise, have due regard to enhancing existing scenic views and existing architectural styles. In particular, there should be a presumption against large apartment-style developments in this part of The Town.

2. The developed area of the riverside from Guildford Rowing Club to Dapdune Wharf should be re-zoned for leisure use while conserving the existing heritage buildings and public open spaces in this area. A plan should be established for this area setting out a long term programme for its transformation. In particular:
 - ▶ This area could be a leisure destination for residents and visitors, creating new dining and drinking experiences and facilitating a "café society" that might become the pulsating heart of The Town. It should meet the tastes, needs and budgets of all ages and social groups and include landscaping, open spaces, sculpture (eg the Society's "Bargeman") and galleries to promote the arts, creating a focal point for culture and cultural events in The Town.

- ▶ Many of the existing buildings in this area¹ are part of the Borough's industrial heritage and should be conserved for predominantly leisure use. All new development in this area should be sympathetic to this heritage and its architectural style. Cities such as Birmingham and Manchester provide good examples of how this can be achieved.
 - ▶ Buildings that do not fit this template² should be redeveloped as they approach the end of their lives and be replaced with more sensitive properties. In the interim period, owners should be encouraged to take steps to ensure that these buildings are less obtrusive and better blend in with the proposed use for this area. The Yvonne Arnaud Theatre has made some positive changes with its outside café in this respect.
 - ▶ Parking should be sited away from the riverside area and in particular existing surface car parks at Millbrook, Park Street and Bedford Road should be re-sited or built under ground, freeing up this land for more efficient use, for example leisure related-activity.
 - ▶ The environment should be re-landscaped, removing railings where possible and hiding unsightly bins that are currently visible and negatively impact the perceptions of visitors.
 - ▶ Interpretation boards should be located sensitively to explain the historic context of buildings.
3. The river between Dapdune Wharf and Stoke Mill already flows in an urban area. Sites in this area should be re-zoned for housing, with existing green sites preserved. For example Walnut Tree Close should become a new waterside community. This would enable the greenbelt to be protected while removing the existing unsightly industrial and commercial buildings from this stretch of river. Such development should not be high-rise in nature, but be flood resistant and sensitive to its riverside location; premises with river frontages should be well presented.
 4. Wey Navigations infrastructure which is the responsibility of the National Trust should be well maintained to avoid negative perception of poorly maintained infrastructure by residents and visitors. Existing pedestrian bridges at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre and Guildford Rowing Club should be replaced with permanent structures that are in keeping with other Wey Navigation infrastructure and provide stepless access.
 5. Traffic infrastructure and in particular the gyratory has one of the most significant impacts on the riverside area. Detailed consideration of this is beyond the scope of this paper. However, where possible there should be a presumption in favour of minimising the impact on the riverside area of major highways that parallel or cross the river and priority given to pedestrians. The existing historical Town Bridge and Onslow Bridge should be re-integrated with the regenerated riverside area and colour schemes co-ordinated.
 6. The riverside area should enjoy safe, attractive connections to key locations in The Town including the railway and bus stations, High Street, North Street, University and Castle. These should be greened and access provided for able bodied and disabled people at street level. Signposting should be clear, unobtrusive and in keeping with the character of the riverside area.
 7. A continuous foot path including new bridges in contemporary or canal vernacular architectural style should be created along each side of the river from land already in public or National Trust ownership and from land provided as part of future development and regeneration opening up frontages to the river. Where residential properties back directly on to the tow path, walls (in bargate stone) or wooden fencing should be well maintained and consistent in style.

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¹ Eg Rodboro Building, The Billings, Town Mill, Dapdune Wharf, Electric Theatre, Onslow Street quay, Treadwheel Crane.

² Including Debenhams, Connaught House, Wey House and Friary Court.