



Debenhams - Possible Sale?

Current information is that the shop is due to close early in 2021. The building on the site has provoked a variety of reactions over the years; the exterior could do with an upgrade at the very least.

The M&G the owners of the site are understood to be selling the site rather than develop it themselves. It is estimated a buyer would have to pay circa £20-25M for the site.

The Crossroads of the Town?

The site sits on the old 'Cross Road' of the town, by the Town Bridge influencing the lower High Street, the River Wey and Millmead. The site is approx. 0.45HA and the current building has a floor area of circa 21,000Sq/M.

How the site is used in will have a major impact on the Town Centre. The site is not mentioned in the Local Plan adopted in 2019. The recently agreed Guildford Economic Regeneration Programme Masterplan Strategy (Masterplan) does identify the site as a key site for consideration. The Masterplan will take at least 2 plus years to complete, plans for the Debenhams site may come forward far more quickly.

The society believes the site is a unique opportunity to revitalise the Town Centre.

There needs to be a debate **now** about what the population of Guildford would like to see happen to the site.

Options

The site could be turned to be a park beside the Wey, also providing a measure of Flood Protection. The cost of the site makes this a very unlikely option.

The site could be totally redeveloped, with dwellings (Flats) and commercial space. A total redevelopment would need to be tall to be a viable scheme, 8-10 stories has been mentioned. As the site is deep there would need to be careful design to ensure sunlight reached flats. But does this solution provide a gain to the citizens of Guildford?

Re-purposing the building as it stands, has considerable merit. This involves reusing the strong frame of the building, recladding, and reshaping, and adapting it for a new series of flexible uses. Re-purposing also allows Guildford to show its green and sustainability aspirations.

A Cultural Corridor?

The Society proposes that serious consideration is given to re-purposing the site to form a multi-purpose attraction to provide a focus for the town.

This would provide an important element in a 'Cultural Corridor' running from the Museum - Yvonne Arnaud – Community Arts Centre (Debenhams) - Electric Theatre – Guildford Academy of Music.

What might the Building be used for?

In 2005 several organisations proposed a Community Arts Centre in a new building on the Portsmouth Road Car Park. The proposal was for a centre, that although having an artistic theme, also supported a range of other activities. It was aimed at being a major attraction, and resource, for citizens of the borough and visitors.

The Debenhams Building is larger than the proposed building in 2005, potentially the building could provide flexible accommodation for:

- A gym and cycle hire station
- Small Retail Outlets
- Restaurant and Café
- Multipurpose exhibition space – used for visiting exhibitions, loans from other museums etc.
- Interactive Space for the Games industry
- Arts - exhibition spaces, practice, and lecture rooms
- Library (in 2005 the SCC library service were not averse to moving the Library).
- Commercial Space - shared flexible office/commercial space, and meeting rooms.
- Dwellings added to the upper floors and roof; replacing the unused areas and plant rooms on the roof.

The Rebuild

A possible scenario would:

- Retain the existing Garage and Loading Bay.
- Possibly retain the current Escalator Stack
- Re-open the Lower Ground Floor
- Utilise the existing retail space
- Revise the roof space
- Re-clad the Building and restructure the Riverside Façade to provide a better pedestrian environment.
- Better flood prevention including a 'signature' Foot Bridge from the building for access at time of flooding.
- Re-open and widen the pedestrian underpass from the High Street to link the Site, Riverside, Town Bridge and High Street effectively.
- Heating and Ventilation to make a Carbon Neutral building

Is it Viable?

Serious analysis is required on this aspect, but it is worth highlighting.

The 2005 proposals showed that a Community Centre development could be a viable proposition including building a new building.

The Debenhams site could provide circa 40 generously sized apartments with a potential value of £25m approx., covering the basic acquisition costs for the building.

There is potential funding available e.g. the council had agreement for funding to support the recently scrapped scheme to revise the Museum.

The Covid-19 crisis does pose serious problems in determining viability and funding over the short term. Viability may be improved as an effect of the Covid-19 crisis could be the increased use of smaller town centres like Guildford as small hub offices and commercial premises are set up to avoid commuting into cities.

Re-purposing the building is substantially cheaper than redevelopment and quicker.

Next Steps?

Being able to present ideas to whoever buys the site is important; just getting a block of flats or offices built with limited public use does not do justice to the Town or the Site. We also need to avoid the site being derelict for years – another North Street.

The Society has proposed **one** view of what a re-purposed building could provide. We would like to hear your thoughts so please let us know at:

sitecritical@guildfordsociety.org.uk

We would also like to hear views from local professionals in the Arts, Commerce, Architecture.

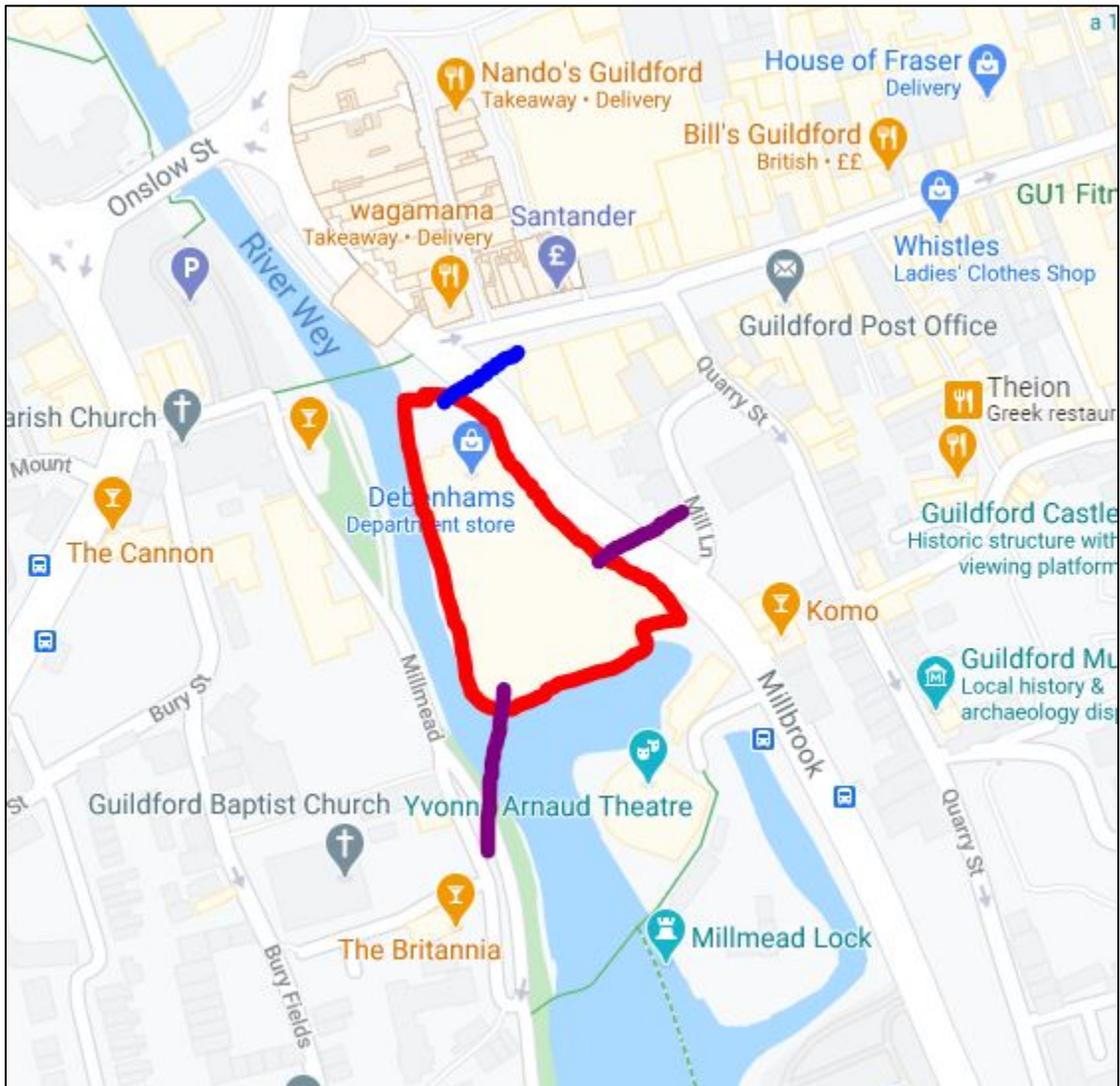
If there is a positive response, the Society will consider a forum to discuss with those interested.

The site is unlikely to be acquired without some indication from the council on its attitude to change of use. We will be seeking to discover what the council are considering.

The Debenhams site, if subject to redevelopment, is an opportunity for the Town we should not lose it.

See Diagrams below for potential Use of Floors and Access to the Building

Potential Access to Site



Re-open pedestrian underpass in a widened and more pedestrian friendly form

Add Foot Access by Bridge to Millmead and Mill Lane

Possible Layout for Site

