

# GUILDFORD'S RIVERSIDE SITES



A REPORT PRESENTED BY  
THE GUILDFORD SOCIETY

May 1991

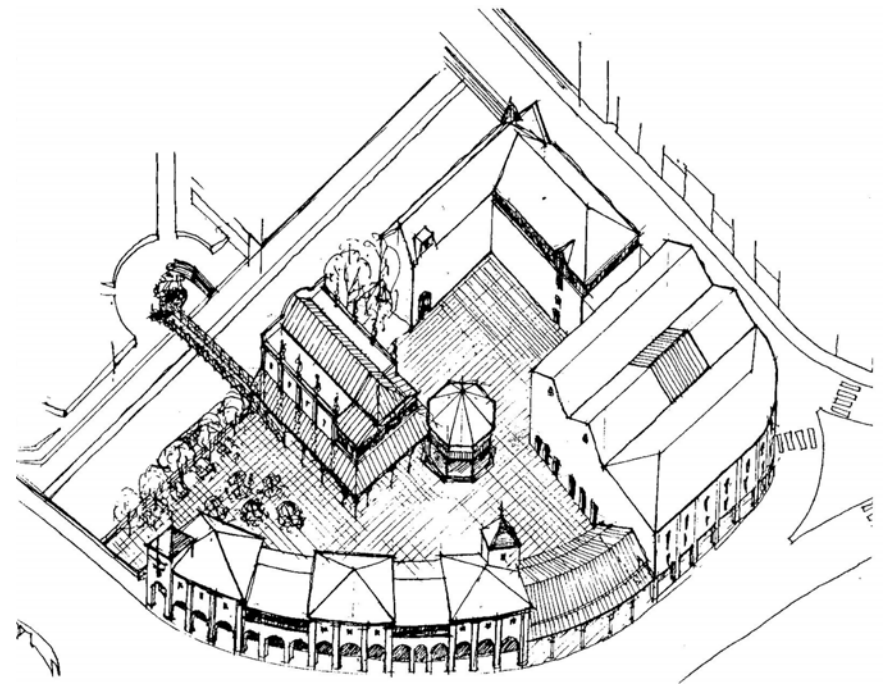
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Aerial view - Rodboro Square and Electricity Wharf

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### Onslow Street + Farnham Road Bus Stations and Rodboro Buildings

A report presented by the Guildford Society on the future use of the riverside sites at the heart of the town.

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*Illustrations and plans by Tim Jeffery RIBA*

*May 1991*

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### Onslow Street + Farnham Road Bus Stations and Rodboro Buildings

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background

Two sites at Guildford's historic heart, the former Farnham Road and Onslow Street bus stations, have been derelict for too long. Both have enormous potential to enhance the visual and social amenities of the town. The Guildford Society believes that decisions on their future development are urgent now.

Both are owned by the town. That means the Borough Council now has the responsibility and the opportunity to ensure development in ways most appropriate for Guildford's citizens and visitors. The Society shares the view expressed by many including the Borough Council that the two sites should be developed as far as possible to provide cultural and community facilities. That view therefore shapes the proposals set out in this report.

Another riverside site owned by the town will become available when the Bedford Road sports centre is replaced by the Stoke Park Leisure Centre. Beyond stressing the importance of its development in a sensitive way enhancing its riverside setting, the Society does not at present wish to put forward any specific proposal for that site.

Over the years the Guildford Society has found it necessary, in the face of proposals based all too obviously on short term expediency or quick financial returns, to stand back on four quite separate occasions and take a new look at the value to the town of its riverside. Out of each such reappraisal grew proposals emphasising the need for a place for people to be able to go, to enjoy the juxtaposition of ancient town, history, riverside, and superb geographical setting.

### 1.2 Earlier proposals

The first of these appraisals was a mid-1970s response to the Thames Water Authority's proposals for flood prevention by canalising the river. We suggested that the Farnham Road bus station should become a public open space with a river widening to create a mooring area, peripheral tree planting to reduce traffic noise, and attractive terracing and paving.

Later, when buses were moved to the present Friary bus station in 1979, the suggestion for Farnham Road was reviewed along with a comprehensive look at the then Napoleon pub site now occupied by Wey House and the YMCA, and also the Onslow Street bus station site. This time the need for easy pedestrian movement was seen as paramount. The openness of the Farnham Road site was to have been retained as an extension of the town's "green lung" through Shalford Meadows and Millmead. On the Napoleon site we proposed fairly dense residential building around an open and "public" square, including a possible hostel. The Onslow Street site was given to some commercial redevelopment - there was then no suggestion of keeping the Rodboro buildings - with provision for a permanent riverside market.

Two years ago and in response to pressure for very intensive development on the Farnham Road site, with "short" term renewal of car-parking use for the foreseeable future, a further look was taken at the Riverside's potential. St. Nicolas' Wharf was born.



And now, largely as a result of the Rodboro Buildings' listing, the Onslow Street bus station/car park has merited another look.

### 1.3 St. Nicolas' Wharf (see Plan, p19)

The Society's proposal for this site was first published in 1989. It acknowledges this time the desirability of an essentially urban character whilst retaining an open and public square in the centre. It stresses the importance of providing buildings for people to enjoy, of easy pedestrian access and of links with the other riverside sites.

The need is to create a space which will attract people. The gap in the High Street frontage would be filled with buildings of an appropriate scale and variety. The Greyhound pub would be retained, the necessary vehicular service access screened from the Wharf. The open square would be screened from the impact of the gyratory and Portsmouth Road traffic by a narrow building block of four stories height with a shop or two at ground level. The upper stories could be small starter homes, with balconies facing the square and a fairly blank back to the traffic - the narrowness of the block essential to retain the open square in front precludes commercial development. Some public or community offices might be sited on the ground and first floors, though.

The central feature of the Wharf would be a restaurant pavilion linked with and served from one of the new buildings on the High Street frontage.

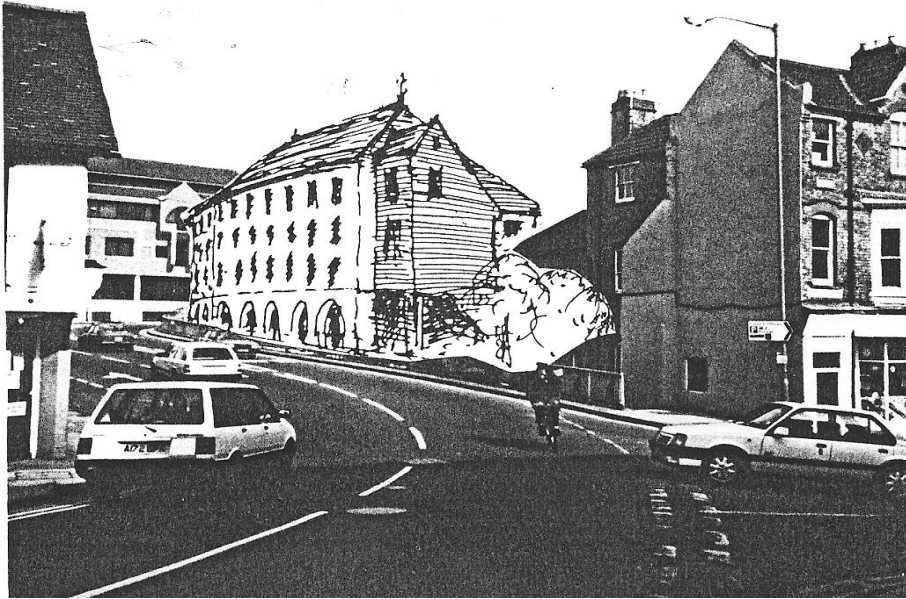
St. Nicolas' Wharf - The High Street frontage



An essential feature is the transformation of the present Park Street underpass, preferably by rebuilding to twice its present width but at the very least by opening up the access at both ends, to create desirable routes through the revitalised Wharf area.

The open square would rise from moorings at the riverside through a cobbled and tree-planted piazza with seats, a setting for music, for good beer and good food, or for just looking at the river.

Thus St. Nicolas' Wharf with pedestrian links via Millmead to the Shalford Meadows, the Town Bridge to the High Street and the proposed new footbridge to Rodboro Square over the river will become a part of the new riverside heart of Guildford.



#### 1.4 Rodboro Square (see Plan, p20)

The Rodboro Buildings/Onslow Street car park site, although cut off from the rest of the town by the traffic gyratory system, is still the visual link between a key part of the town and the river. The Society proposes that the pedestrian links, long mooted in its own proposals and subsequently partly adopted in the Borough's plans, should be wholeheartedly developed.

Two buildings on the site are worth keeping. The listed Rodboro Buildings give a large area of soundly constructed and adaptable space on three levels. The 1913 Electricity Works building is equally sound, and we propose both should be retained and adapted for purposes which will bring life to the site.

The existing offices in Onslow Bridge Chambers will remain, with the rebuilt Armour Building. There is scope for a terrace of shops with small offices over, their backs to Onslow Street and the Friary Bridge approach and fronts to the square.

The Society believes the site can and should be transformed into a lively and attractive place where people will want to go because things are happening at all times of day and evening. That means leisure, cultural and entertainment activities for all age groups as well as some appropriate shops. Over-reliance on commercial shops and offices where staff work nine-to-five would defeat this objective.

Our proposals will create Rodboro Square, open to the river and centred on the old Electricity Works, the future Electric Centre for the Arts. But the key to the area's revitalisation is in good pedestrian access - and in the limitation and control of the deadening impact of the motor vehicle. The site has to become easily accessible on a Friary Street-to-Railway Station route, a route so improved as to form the obvious desire-line for pedestrians crossing the river.

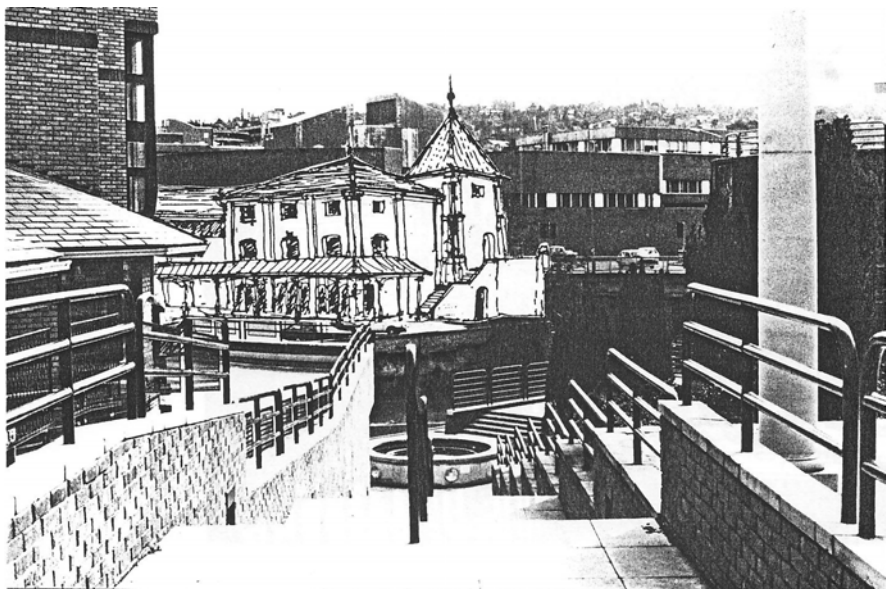


Rodboro Square, seen from the foot of North Street

## 2 ACCESS

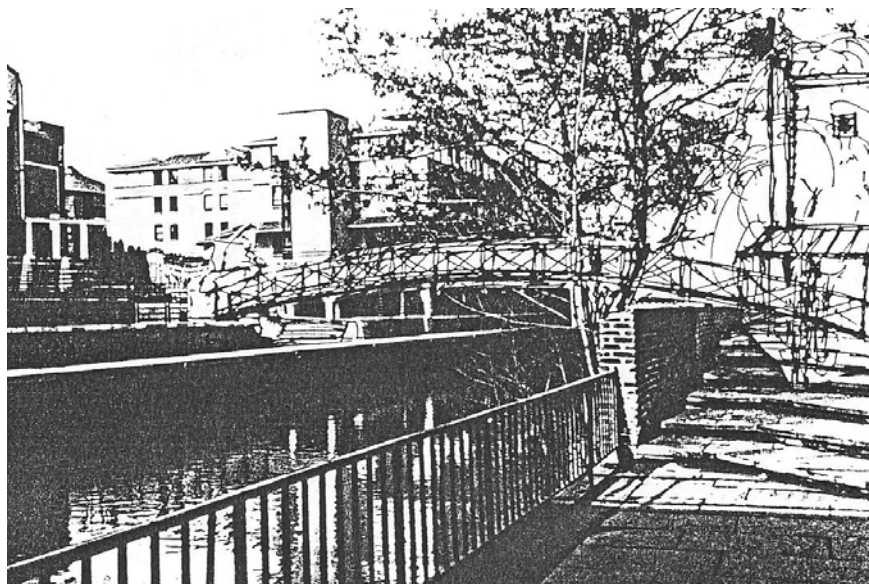
### 2.1 Pedestrian

Most of the proposed pedestrian route already exists. On leaving the railway station entrance, one walks directly to the mural-lined passage to the Wey House/YMCA site, up the other side to a view straight down steps to the fountain (proposed site for the footbridge approach), over to the continuing route where it disappears from sight beneath Friary Bridge on its way to Friary Arcade, the Friary Centre, North Street and High Street.



Rodboro Square and Electricity Wharf - the way from the Railway Station

**2.1.1 The new footbridge** proposed in Society and Borough plans is the key element in this route. We propose it should span from the platform alongside the present Wey House fountain at the foot of the Wey House/YMCA steps leaving headroom for horses on the towpath, to ramps the other side at the southwest corner of the Electric Centre. As a focal feature of the whole scheme it must be well-designed to enhance its setting.



From Electricity Wharf - the new bridge and the way to the station

**2.1.2 The Friary arcade** is just as essential a part of the route. In its present guise as the Tesco underpass, even less inviting since Tesco closed, it is an unhygienic and hazardous route between shops and the Day Centre. Its impact would be equally negative to users of the new bridge. The opportunity must be taken at this change of tenancy to ensure it is made safe. It must be widened and shops, preferably small with varied opening hours, should open onto it. Even the section beneath the road, set at an angle, part hidden and therefore unsafe, needs major work to remove its threat. With this improvement and some cosmetic work to the footway under the Friary Bridge, a really attractive through way is formed. It will be used in preference to the narrow pavements of Bridge Street and the Onslow Street crossings, and once Rodboro Square comes alive will be the obvious route from station to town.

**2.1.2 The Bridge Street Crossing** must be kept to provide access from the Bedford Road car-park and a link with future developments. The Society believes that a virtue should be made of the need for road-widening by bringing the foot pavement adjacent to Rodboro into a deep arcade beneath the Rodboro frontage. The arcade, open at the front though protected by railings and backed by shops, will lead into the Square round both sides of Rodboro Buildings.

**2.1.4 Access for the less able** is inevitably more circuitous than the direct-line route described, as part of the footway by Wey House is stepped. However the passage from the station is ramped to Park Street, so leading both to the towpath and St. Nicolas' Wharf and straight on over the Friary Bridge. Lift access should be provided in the corner-turret of the proposed new row of shops and small offices.

**2.1.5 The pedestrian routes network** is indicated on the plans forming part of this report. These attractive walkways will ensure the square is no longer isolated. They will link Guildford's new riverside centre directly with the shopping areas, railway station and towpath. Three large car-parks as well as the bus station will be in easy reach.

## 2.2 Vehicular

The Society proposes that Rodboro Square should be a traffic-free zone. Motor vehicle movement and the cultural and leisure uses proposed here are incompatible, and grandiose decking-over schemes designed to conceal vehicle parking and movement areas would divorce the Square from the river, its essential and historic *raison d'être*.

We accept some limited parking provision for the existing users of Onslow Bridge Chambers and the Armour Building. This should be made available to disabled users of the Centre outside office hours. Emergency services must have access, and the new shops and users of the proposed facilities in the Electric Centre and Rodboro will have delivery and some collection requirements. **We propose such vehicular access must be very strictly controlled** within defined and limited hours. It works in the High Street, and it works on a much larger scale in Guildford's twin town of Freiburg. **Rodboro Square must be motor-vehicle-free.** To this end, and to remove the temptation to pedestrians to make the hazardous Onslow Street crossing, it is essential to close the Onslow Street entrance. We would retain a view into the Square between Rodboro Buildings and the new row of shops, under a glazed canopy but as a visual link only.

All vehicular access should be by the Bridge Street entrance, between Rodboro Buildings and the rebuilt Armour building which should be set back to allow some widening.

Rodboro Square will be paved as a pedestrian space with the permitted parking very clearly marked.

## 3 THE BUILDINGS

### 3.1 The 1913 Electricity Works

The old power-centre of Guildford on the river front is a dominant feature and the centre-piece of the proposed Square. It is substantial, sound, currently used as theatre props and scenery store, and proposed for conversion to a small theatre.

The Society suggests it should become the Electric Centre for the Performing Arts. It can be readily adapted and extended to house stage with flyspace, dressing rooms and storage, foyer and 200-seat auditorium. It could house a wide range of the amateur arts activities so needed in Guildford – theatre, choral, film, music and dance. It can be run in association with other rehearsal spaces in the nearby Rodboro Building.

To be a worthy central feature of the Square, the alterations must sensitively keep its industrial monumentality and reflect the new activities to be housed.

### 3.2 The Rodboro Buildings

It was the Rodboro Buildings' listing, as the oldest surviving purpose-built motor factory in the country, which primed the renewed interest in the Onslow Street site. Their character is plain and sturdy industrial, as befits Guildford's working past. Their structure is sound and at present undergoing major repair to keep them wind and watertight pending later adaptation works.

Some 2500 square metres or roughly 25000 square feet of high, fairly unobstructed floor space is available on three floors. This superbly flexible accommodation lends itself to a variety of uses. While not yet wishing to be dogmatic about its future as further work is needed to find the most suitable among many demands for such space, we set out our current preferences to include:-

**On the ground floor** – we endorse the proposal to set back the ground level street facade as a wide shops arcade, and propose small shops (including a crafts shop to market the artefacts of resident craftspeople) onto arcades on all but the west side, a coffee house or wine bar (perhaps non-alcoholic to permit use by under-18s), a fitness suite and a crèche. And toilets will be needed.

**On first and second floors** – a specialist museum which should include exhibits relating to the former use of the building (if Dennis offer their vehicles perhaps the ground floor would be more suitable), an art gallery, an exhibition area, small workshops to rent to local craftspeople, rehearsal rooms and clubrooms.

We propose attractive entrance arrangements on the Square side of the building, to line with other activities in the Centre. A projecting canopy over the ground floor frontage facing the square will continue the arcade from the street front, and form a visual and practical link to a similar canopy to the new shopping terrace.

### 3.3 Onslow Bridge Chambers and Armour Building

Onslow Bridge Chambers were refurbished around 1980 and fit well on the site (better use could perhaps be made of the flood platform beneath the building). On the other hand Armour Building is overdue for redevelopment, which should permit another storey like the adjoining Onslow Bridge Chambers, in exchange for say 2 metres less frontage to give a wider service access to Rodboro Square. Offices would be acceptable here, with shops opening off the Square at the lowest level, or off Bridge Street above or both. There would be very limited parking for users of both buildings.

### 3.4 New Shops and Offices

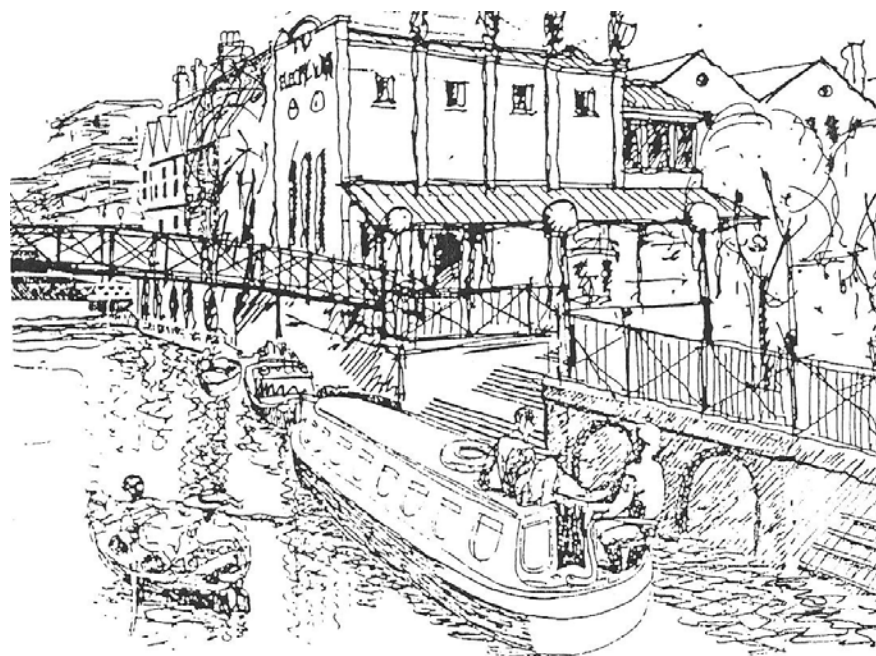
To enclose the Square and shield its users from traffic noise from the Friary Bridge approach, a short row of small shops facing inwards is proposed. The buildings should be of varied height, not more than three storeys, with small “starter” offices and studios above. There would be no access from the rear, the bridge approach, and no parking provision. Size would be limited to minimise intrusion into the open square. A glazed canopy over the shopfronts would link them with the Rodboro Buildings arcade. Behind, the roadside footway would rise towards the Friary Bridge crossing within the depth of the building as another arcade. It should be linked by lift to the lower level at the corner nearest the bridge. A wine-bar could occupy the shop at this corner.

At the Rodboro end the canopy would roof over the full depth of the shops, a covered market area extending to the Rodboro Buildings façade.

## 4 RODBORO SQUARE AND ELECTRICITY WHARF

### 4.1 The River Frontage

The river frontage, once the unloading wharf for coal for the Electricity Works, has to be made accessible and care given to rebuilding the river wall. Moorings should be provided, possibly for a restaurant or a boat available for functions. Here the new footbridge will be the most significant feature, so its design quality is crucial. Its access will give the pedestrian thoroughfare from the station to the shopping centre, and so define the divide between Electricity Wharf and Rodboro Square.



The Electric Centre and the Wey Footbridge

### 4.2 The Open Square

The heart of the site should become an attractive paved area with seating and mature tree planting, open to the river. It could become a centre for mime, morris dancing or outdoor shows. Sculpture could find a home here.



The Square is in fact a distorted triangle or quadrant, its north side dominated by Rodboro, its west side the river from which the Electric Centre obtrudes, and its south-east defined by the shops, high enough to exclude traffic noise and fumes but low enough not to cut out sunlight. The glazed canopies to Rodboro's south façade, the Electric Centre and around the south-east shops will give a unity to the concept, as well as vital shelter.

Deliveries should only be permitted early in the day, as in the High Street but with no vehicles in the evenings. The surface should be cobbled or paved. As a feature on the site, perhaps an invitation could be given to the craftspeople of Guildford's twin town to incorporate the arms of Freiburg and Guildford in the paving.

### **4.3 The Market**

As soon as people are drawn to the site it will become attractive to tradespeople. At the same time open market stalls will contribute to the liveliness which draws people. Stallholders could be encouraged to set up in the open square in sunshine, or under the roofed area in showers. This roofed but not walled area provides the visual link with Friary Street and the shopping centre.

## **5 TIMETABLE**

We are pleased that work is under way on renovating Rodboro Buildings, the obvious first step in bringing them into beneficial use. We hope that this will be the catalyst for decisions about the overall shape of both the Farnham Road and Onslow Street bus station sites. These decisions should be taken as soon as possible. In the case of the latter, it is important to make some of the decisions very soon to enable work to begin on the proposed new building along Onslow Street and the Friary Bridge approach when road widening works are started. Likewise the future of the riverside sites depends on making provision now to widen and develop Friary Passage to create the Friary Arcade, and to enter negotiations for the wider Bridge Street entrance to the site.

A clear brief is needed so that work on converting the Electricity Building can start as soon as possible.

However we do not think all the decisions on Rodboro Buildings need be taken at once. If these proposals for their future, envisaging largely artistic and cultural uses, are accepted then it is not necessary for all to be implemented at once. Flexibility in use, facilitating a multiplicity of different uses, should be the guiding principle to ensure the accommodation can be changed to match changing needs, as has been successfully achieved at the Farnham Maltings (see Appendix B).

At this stage the need is for decision on the initial uses of the ground floor, the form of the arcade and adequate entrance arrangements with access and escape routes so that the necessary construction work can be put in hand. First and second floors need renovating and servicing, but not necessarily specific fitting out.

Space allocation will follow from considerable further discussion.

The major decisions though must be on sources of finance, and the method of management to be adopted for running a Centre of the sort proposed in the report.

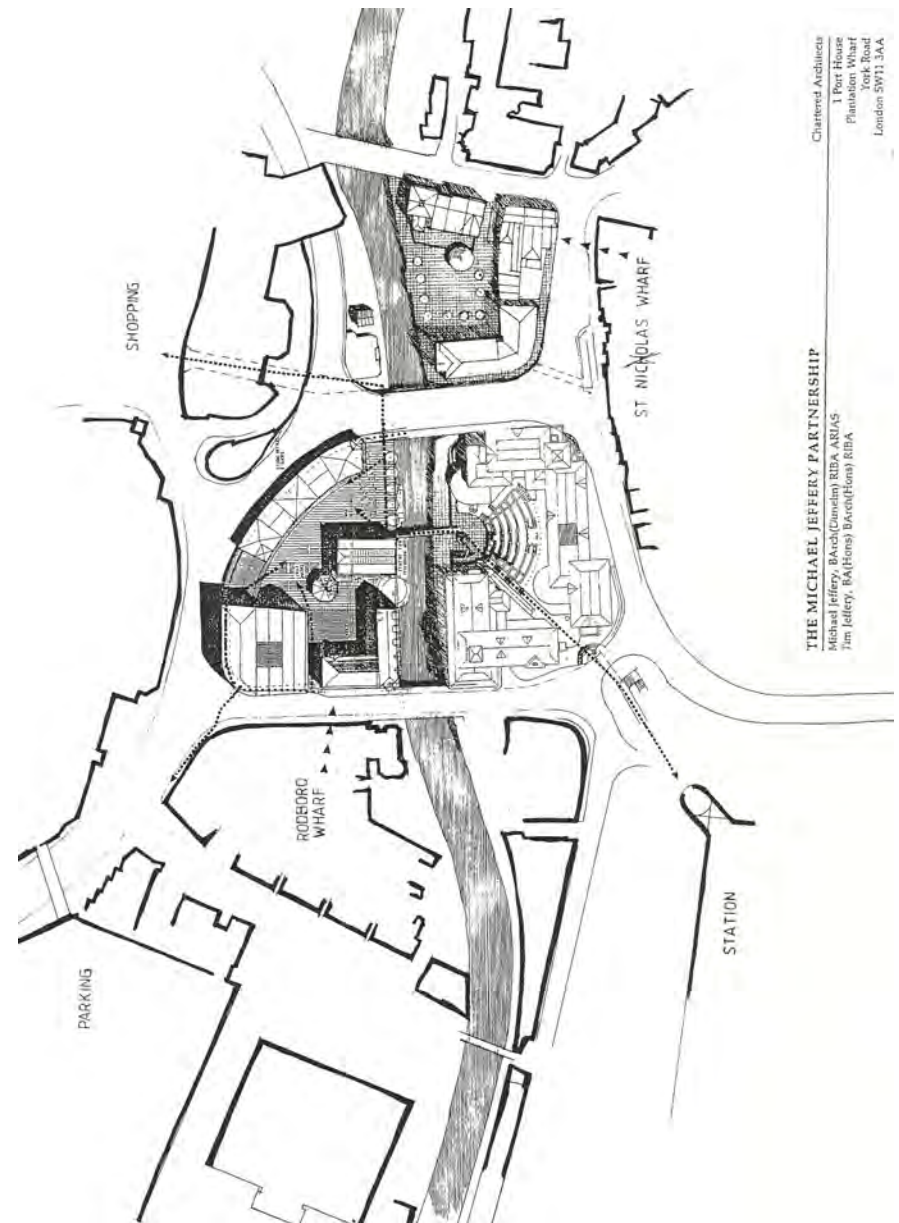
## 6 SUMMARY OF PROPOSALS AND CONCLUSIONS

In Summary the Guildford Society's proposals are:-

- 1 Easy and attractive pedestrian station-to-town route with new footbridge from Wey House/YMCA fountain, Friary Passage widened and straightened to become Friary Arcade, shops in former Tesco store to open onto it.
- 2 Rodboro Square to be a vehicle-free zone as the High Street, with strictly limited parking for existing users only.
- 3 An attractive paved square with seating, some mature trees near the riverside, and sites for craft/market stalls.
- 4 New row of small shops appropriate to a centre of leisure and cultural activities, open where possible in evenings.
- 5 The Electricity Works to become the Electric Centre for the Performing Arts, for amateur groups in theatre, music, dance, film.
- 6 Rodboro Buildings with shops on ground floor to house Arts/Crafts centre on upper floors and possibly art gallery, exhibition space, museum, dance studios, craft workshops etc.

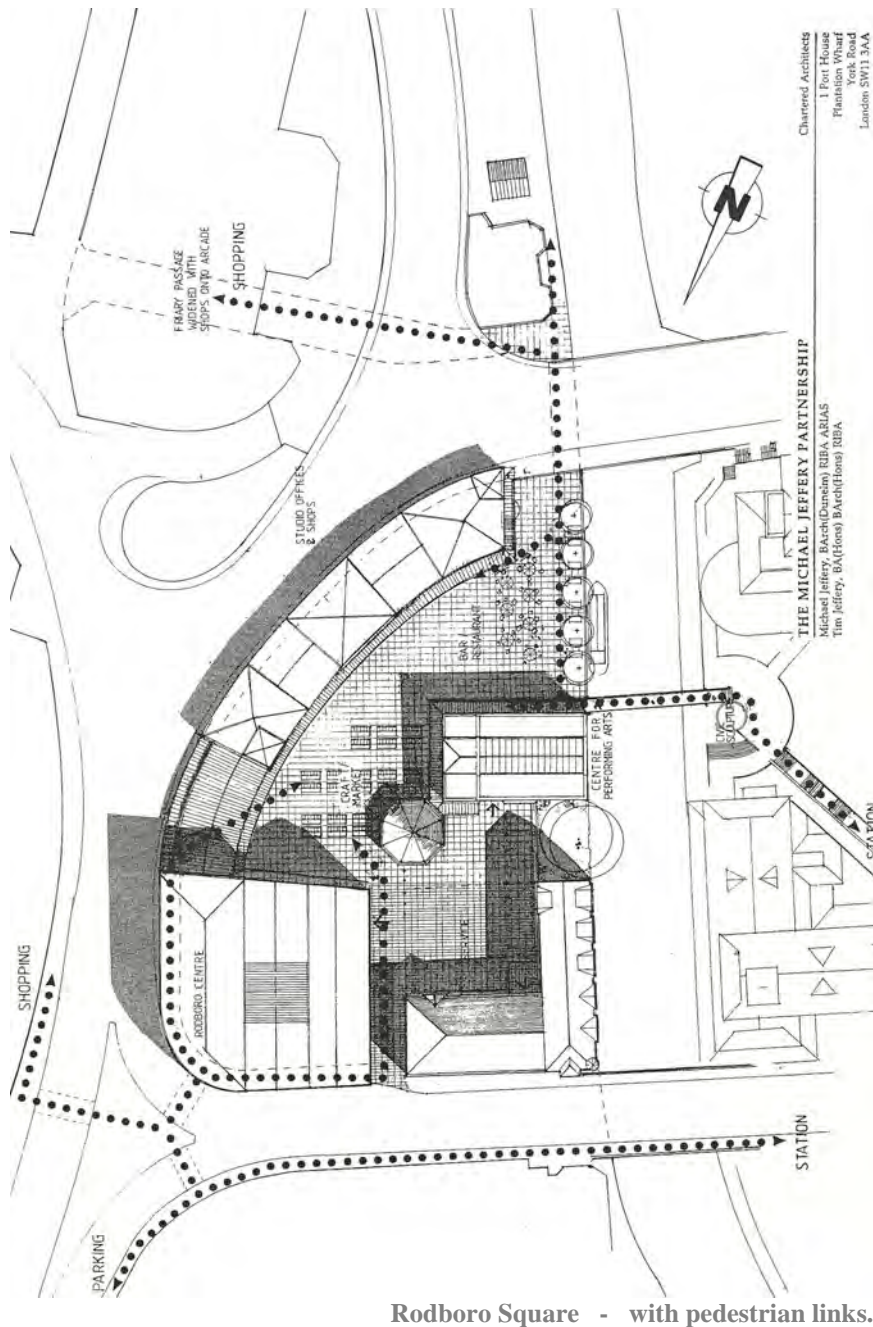
The Riverside sites at the heart of Guildford offer a unique opportunity to provide facilities for citizens and visitors which will complement and enhance an already fine array of amenities. Our view is that the sites should be a contrast to the commercial busy-ness of the town and its ever-growing traffic stranglehold. At the same time we would want it to reflect an investment in people, - young people with talent and enthusiasm to harness, people of all ages on whom the town depends for its cultural vitality, those who will enjoy it better if they can talk over a glass of wine or a cup of coffee in the sun.

While we recognise that the short-term commercial return from the proposals put forward for both Rodboro Centre and St. Nicolas' Wharf must be limited, the Guildford Society calls on the town and on the Borough Council to take imaginative and visionary action now. Perhaps the sometimes-heard complaint the "Guildford isn't like it used to be" will become a statement of rejoicing.



St. Nicolas' Wharf and Rodboro Square

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Rodboro Square - with pedestrian links.

## APPENDIX A

### Access Route Proposals

This report makes specific proposals for access to the site – the new footbridge and its siting, the Friary shopping arcade and the Rodboro arcade – believing them to be the most practical available as well the absolute minimum to fulfil the stated objectives for the site. We have looked at several alternatives however, all found wanting for various reasons of which the strongest could be their considerably greater cost and so lesser likelihood of achievement. And two are much less attractive.

**1** The proposed through pedestrian way built into the Borough's planning brief for the YMCA makes provision for a footbridge from the YMCA restaurant terrace to the north-west corner of the Electricity Works building. This was on a route then proposed to be linked with the Friary Centre crossing Onslow Street at high level, with access on the Rodboro side of the street by way of a stair and lift tower. It is felt that the recent Friary Centre redevelopment has pre-empted this. Also, access via the Centre, locked up as it is outside shopping hours, would negate the whole intention of free and attractive all-hours access. The stair access would have been unattractive too, and the visual impact of such a structure hard to accommodate. Comparisons have been made with the Bedford Street car-park link further north. The footbridge position proposed for that link is now irrelevant as it is off the desire-line for station-to-shopping centre traffic.

**2** The former open pavement area in front of the Friary Centre suggests itself as a suitable site for access to a shopping mall beneath Onslow Street, leading to the Rodboro site. However the pavement area is now much reduced by the Friary Centre redevelopment, and any form of development beneath the road before it rises to the Friary Bridge approach level is likely to meet with mains drains and other services, besides requiring expensive precautions against flooding.

**3** New high-level road crossings have been mooted, to link the site directly with the lower end of North Street as part of the Midland Bank site redevelopment. But this link would of course not be direct. Traffic clearance above the road would put it at second floor level, well above any riverside activities on the Electricity Wharf site, with staircases and possibly lifts as for **1** above. People do not select routes which need mountaineering feats as their first choice to reach a destination.

## APPENDIX B

### Other Arts and Crafts Centres

*Peter Slade, 8<sup>th</sup> May 1991*

**B1 Other arts centres**, some fairly near to Guildford, may provide useful experience of what might be provided in Guildford. Three examples are The Maltings at Farnham, South Hill Park at Bracknell and The Arnolfini at Bristol.

The Maltings and The Arnolfini are converted industrial buildings. The latter was a tea warehouse and, like Rodboro, is located next to a waterway and also lacks parking on the site which appears not to affect its popularity. South Hill Park is an 18<sup>th</sup> century mansion, with new theatre and art gallery built on.

The Maltings and South Hill provide a very wide range of artistic and cultural activities. The Arnolfini contains an excellent art gallery often used for major exhibitions, a cinema, a bookshop and a restaurant only, thus being much more specialised. The Maltings is owned by a charitable trust which runs the centre. South Park is owned by the local district council and run by a charitable trust with some of its running costs paid by the council.

**B2 Crafts Workshops.** A very suitable use for part of Rodboro Buildings would be small workshops rented to local craftspeople. There are some at the Farnham Maltings and it is believed there is a great demand for such facilities in the Guildford area. A craft shop could be profitably associated with them. There could be scope for visiting craftspeople from Europe, with a possibility of some EEC funding to facilitate this.

**B3 Hands-on Science and Technology Centre.** In view of Rodboro's technological origins this would be a very appropriate use for the building. The principle behind "hands-on" science museums, several of which are established in this country and elsewhere, is that they display scientific and technological phenomena in an innovative and entertaining way by inviting visitors – children and adults – to interact with the exhibits.

Because of the very strong involvement of Surrey University – and of the Research Park – in science and technology it is possible to envisage a centre at Rodboro being welcomed by the University. They may provide input into some of the exhibits and so obtain something of a shop-window for the University's activities.

A centre of this kind need not be entirely devoted to science and technology. The "Exploratorium" in San Francisco successfully combines hands-on science with a range of arts activities. Such a flexible approach would also be appropriate at Rodboro.