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The Leamington Society Newsletter

August 2014

Chairman's Notes

A View from the Public Gallery

The Leamington Society is a little short of sixty years old and it's no secret that many of its members are rather more than that age. We have experienced a revolution in communications and come to rely on the internet and emails, even if some of us leave tweeting to those who grew up with mobiles.

Yet the view of the council chamber, from the public gallery, would be recognisable to our grandparents. Public debate, within a format of political groups, is still seen as a central feature.

To what extent is this a ritual, a rubber stamping of decisions pre-determined by committee room caucus?

These thoughts were prompted by watching a recent Council meeting, to hear discussion on plans for a new District headquarters. It soon became clear that the assumptions of an Executive report had misjudged the mood of councillors as well as the public. The ready-made proposals were halted in their tracks and the Council's leadership were visibly discomfited by the experience.

Meanwhile in Warwick, the administration has encountered public indignation at the handling of St. Mary's Land and its varying leaseholders. Recently the Information Commissioner ruled WDC had in effect been economic with the full story of the discussions about the Warwick Racecourse.

Watching from the public gallery is not most people's idea of an evening out. Our Council could easily assume that the public, by and large, cannot be bothered. Councillors are burdened with numerous agendas and lengthy reports. Officers are harried in public, all too often by anonymous letter writers.

Talks

The King under the Car Park Mathew Morris

Thursday, September 18th, 7.30
Conference Centre, Dormer Place

Close Encounters with the Past Professor Richard Beacham

Thursday, October 9th, 7.30
Conference Centre, Dormer Place

Growing the railway in the West Midlands - an exciting future Ian Baxter

Thursday, October 23th, 6.30
Conference Centre, Dormer Place

Joint meeting with Literary Society **Dylan Thomas Andrew Davies**

Tuesday, November 11th, 7.30
Conference Centre, Dormer Place

Coventry Cathedral Sarah Hosking

Tuesday, December 2nd, 7.30
Conference Centre, Dormer Place

The full calendar of events for
2014-15 is included with this
Newsletter

congestion in both Warwick and Leamington, mar the towns with a clutter of traffic lights to maximise the flow of vehicles, and damage the health of residents by worsening already-illegal air pollution. The worst of the Plan will have been implemented before its unsoundness is starkly exposed. Remember ‘Localism’?

We lament that the only way to change the Council’s attitude appears to be to pursue legal action. The groups which have together opposed the Plan and its consequences are considering carefully whether this is now necessary and possible.

James Mackay

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New HQ for WDC?

Thanks to public pressure the proposed new building on Spa Centre Green was **not** approved on the nod. We are grateful to those councillors who insisted on a proper debate by the full council and made clear that the number of letters of opposition received was exceptional. The leader, Andrew Mobbs, then proposed going back to basics without any constraint: the site did not have to be in Leamington Spa, nor did it have to be owned by WDC. He was sure that other towns would welcome the presence of the offices even if Leamington did not!

Leamington Spa has been the administrative site of the town and district ever since there was a need for it. The Leamington Society supports this arrangement, but not on Spa Centre Green, at the cost of a pleasant gateway to our most famous park – and nobody has yet acknowledged authorship of this “bright” and unexpected idea. Consultants will be commissioned to consider alternatives. The trouble is that they come to it cold, without knowing the full history of this debate and may well recommend what they sense is wanted by the commissioners, as consultants do.

Here is a list – not of every possible site in the area, built or un-built, but of distinct possibilities, starting with existing buildings and moving on to new building.

Location	Advantages	Problems
Leamington Town Hall	Familiar, central, accessible by public transport. It is a white elephant with expensive maintenance costs even when used to the full. Students and the Town Council could be moved to other sites (unused office blocks and the Pump Rooms respectively). It could house the “public face” at least.	Very few rooms and not suitable as a modern office. Would need rewiring for computers and money spent to subdivide and extend into the attic and at the back – but with fewer staff and many people working from home and sharing desks this matters less than it used to.
Riverside House	Familiar by now and with good parking, fully employed. Janie Barrett (former CEO) was very proud of moving WDC there early in this century. <i>It turns out to have been an astute purchase.</i>	Too big for WDC in current form and too expensive, though about half the annual cost of £600,000 turns out to be business rates! To save 50% of total costs would mean a building less than half the size, as it would still use gas and electricity and need cleaning,

	<p>Saves disruption to staff</p> <p>There is a rumour that Warwickshire County Council wanted to share it and WDC did not respond to their overtures. Why?</p>	<p>security and insurance. How much would it cost to insulate properly?</p> <p>It is very valuable for potential housing development and money may be talking.</p>
Shire Hall (Warwick) and Barrack Street	The most economical solution with the smallest overhead costs if there is room (see above for declining staff numbers etc.) Central and accessible.	WDC officers and councillors see this as the first step towards a unitary authority, which may threaten their jobs and power. It would be a loss to Leamington Spa too.
Old Post Office now Grade II listed	<p>Handsome building, centrally situated and no longer used as such. Accessible by public transport.</p> <p>Benefits Old Town (but only just)</p>	Parking space in short supply. Only the ground floor is currently to let. Post Office still uses 1970s section and upstairs in older building for sorting and delivery. They hold lease from Royal Mail to 2019. The whole may not be big enough (but see above for shrinking needs of WDC)
Packington Place car park and derelict buildings on this site	Belongs to WDC and central. Brown-field site just big enough for a new building which would revitalise a sad area of Old Town. Not yet considered by WDC. Why not?	Access from Radford Road may be difficult. Derelict building needs demolition.
Covent Garden multi-storey car park	Central and accessible. An unpopular structure reaching the end of its useful life with car-parking space around it. Belongs to WDC and they could build a good new design	Requires demolition and rebuilding which costs money. Does nothing for Old Town, which used to be a priority consideration for WDC. Will be needed for parking if / when Chandos Street is redeveloped
Court Street car park & surrounding buildings	Belongs to WDC and a brownfield site, ripe for redevelopment and bordering the canal. Big enough for the WDC offices and housing and (possibly) more student accommodation. Costs may be covered by sale of building land here and at Riverside House. With good architecture and landscaping this could revitalise Old Town around the clock. Definitely favoured by WDC until very recently.	<p>Car access may be difficult and officers have mentioned the noise of trains passing on the bridges, but double glazing on the north side and internal ventilation can eliminate this problem. The site is deemed acceptable for social housing in spite of this!</p> <p>Full redevelopment of site to canal means buying buildings on canal border.</p>
Spa Centre Green	Central and attractive site with car parking behind. Possible synergy in reception area with Spa Centre.	Building and inevitable increase in parking would spoil entrance to Jephson Gardens (where visitors are

