



**Berkhamsted
Citizens
Association**

NEWSLETTER

September 1984

Quality Circles

As Aldous Huxley pointed out, "most human beings have an almost infinite capacity for taking things for granted". There is much evidence to support this thesis, whether in family life, local politics, or public services. Is it that we take things for granted or we just don't have much time to stop and think about how things get done? Mums and dads, local Councillors, club secretaries, water authorities - all know how much effort has to be executed to make things happen efficiently - and don't we take for granted that it does - until a crisis occurs. OK, we cannot go around thanking people all the time and we have a right to expect competence in public affairs. It is remarkable, however, what little we know about the mechanics of how things get done, how decisions are made, and who is responsible. In spite of this, we quickly reach for a pen and paper or the telephone to sound off at somebody if things go wrong. Well, so we should. It is argued that the British are far too compliant. The standards of service and compared with the French, Germans or Americans, we don't insist enough on high standards. People in Berkhamsted are fairly vocal when things are unsatisfactory and over the past few years we have felt that our legitimate concerns were being ignored. Well, perhaps things are changing for the better - although as we point out later, there are four major problems which need sorting. As costs mount higher rates are levied, there will need to be greater and greater emphasis on professionalism and value for money in local affairs. Quality is everybody's business, and we lose interest at our peril.

Opportunity and Choice

What most people want out of life, more than anything else is the opportunity to make choices. The worst possible life is a life without choices, a life barren of the hope of new things, a life of blind alleys. In contrast the most pleasant life is one with the most opportunities. If that sounds a bit heavy, it is not meant to be; because it is directly why so many people like living in Berkhamsted. There is here choice between going up to Town, or enjoying the country. There is the Canal and the Common to balance being a computer! The Chiltern Ramblers pamphlet mentions Whipsnade, Tring Nature Reserves / Reservoir, Ashridge House and Common, Ridgeway Path and several other facilities to remind us of the many interests on our doorstep. There are several matters, however, on which no choice exists. We have to live with the traffic noise and pollution along the A41 / High Street. We have to put up with delays and danger of crossing the road. The big diesels are making life in the town centre, and shopping, a far from pleasant

experience. We need the bypass desperately or people will be making other choices - not to shop or work in Berkhamsted. A decision on the route of the bypass has been promised for September / October (this year!) with building to commence in 1986. The M25 is starting to grow at Kings Langley and will bring extra traffic along the A41; particularly when the M25 is completed north-west of London Airport. On this we have no choice. We have no choice on the amount of vacant office accommodation currently available, but our Councillors can look around and make a choice on the extra amount to allow. They can also make a choice on the amount of building, the densities and quality of design. They make the choice for us and pray they make a good choice! What is particularly worrying is the trend for them to make choices on scant information. Planning permissions are being submitted (and accepted) on the flimsiest basis. Where insufficient information, drawings and specification is given they should be bounced back until adequate details are provided. There is some evidence that Councillors are beginning to be aware of this. We have no choice on the fact that our environment is under pressure. We do have a choice on how to respond: we need to insist that change improves the quality of life in Berkhamsted and not lessens it.

3. Philosophy and Action

Beorcham's article in the June issue of the Berkhamsted Review referred to 'our changing Town' and specifically the new massive building which resembles the bridge of the QE2. This is a change with a vengeance, in size and proportions along that stretch of the High Street. The line and profile have, however, resembled in a small way the adjacent roof profiles and the rising site up Park View Road. It does rather dwarf the 'George' and other adjacent property. We would like to think that Councillors involved in that planning decision looked at this and other sites (after) completion and compared the finished product with the plans. Discussion on buildings 'post facto' is important in making better future assessments of planning applications. What all this philosophy on quality amounts to is a way of achieving a better approach to our town's future. Without some general philosophy or policy and an appropriate set of targets, councils and Councillors will never see the wood for the trees. They will be left dealing with each Agenda as it arrives with no perspective on what 100 Agendas add up to. In other words will any change occur because they wanted it or because the wind of Agendas blew them somewhere?

It must be very difficult for Councillors involved in a busy programme of meetings to keep a perspective; and to avoid being overwhelmed by details. We have said before that the way to achieve this is to adopt the philosophy of KISS - Keep It Simple Syd. There must be a simple and clear set of objectives; and a plan for Berkhamsted co-ordinating Housing, Commercial, Transport and Leisure. There are four objectives which the Town and District Councillors must achieve in the next two years to improve Berkhamsted and these are:

1. Achievement of a bypass.
2. Development of the St. John's Well Lane / Lower Kings Road site involving extra car parking and removal of Amenity Tip.
3. Improved Leisure facilities at Ashlyns on basis of dual-use principle - in co-operation with Herts County Council.
4. Provision of Youth Club premises to replace that lost on Park View Road.

We believe that the Town Council and Dacorum District Council are aware of these needs. What is under test is whether there is the will and skill to achieve them in spite of all the difficulties.

4. Bridge that Gap

The graceful curve of the bridge over the Bulbourne and the canal, between the amenity tip and the swimming pool, is very pleasing. It is a much needed facility to allow easy access to the pool, Tennis /Squash Clubs and Canal Fields, and has been designed so that prams and invalid chairs can be wheeled across with minimum difficulty. The landscaping needs completion and no doubt this will be actioned in the late autumn or early spring. It makes the canal towpath easier to reach from the centre of Town; anyone who hasn't had a stroll along there is missing a treat. What a pity that the pleasure given by this Bulbourne site is utterly destroyed by the presence of the amenity tip. Get rid of this and the whole site to Lower Kings Road could be developed in a combination of commercial and public use to improve the whole town.

5. Going Critical

The size of Berkhamsteds' population is not exactly known. The last census figures given in the DDC Diary show 16,500 for Berkhamsted, 1,150 for Northchurch and 3,000 for surrounding villages. Since then there has been significant building and infilling of many small sites within the Town. It appears that the size of the Town in relation to it's commerce and general amenities is entering a critical phase because of inflation; ie. the fixed costs are becoming too high for shops and offices to bear. The Town is a large enough community to deserve more commercial, shopping and leisure facilities on the doorstep but not large enough to make them economically safe. Why else do we have so much change in the shops and offices? Woolworths, Kinghams, Table Topics, Goughs, Antique and D.I.Y. shops closing down and others on an unsatisfactory margin, so the grapevine says. Why else can dual use leisure facilities provide the only viable way of improvement and wider choice? It is for this reason that the Councillors should stand back and look at all the trends and pressures on our Town and develop a strategy. A plan for Berkhamsted is needed which has an overview and stop dealing with each problem on an ad-hoc basis. The Lower Kings Road car park must be expanded to give better facilities for shoppers, and the bypass must happen soon to avoid choking Berkhamsted almost literally to death.

6. Waitrose – Front , Back and Sides

The public reaction against the first proposal for the front of Waitrose seems to have caused a rethink. We are now all interested in the practical outcome. The frontage commands an important part of the High Street and deserves to be completed in a Quality way. However, if we want all this area to be pleasing rather than the reverse, why is there no greater outcry about the dreadful concrete bus stop in front of the supermarket and the derelict shops opposite - next, to the Civic Centre? We should try to obtain a newer cleaner shelter in the heart of the High Street. Other towns seem to have clean, well designed shelters in vandal proof material.

