



September 1992

EDITOR'S MUSINGS

I do not know where the months go to. They disappear into the years and years themselves soon vanish into the past. Here we are at September, the nights are already closing in and soon the mists will appear. I do not know what happened to summer. I think it was a couple of Fridays ago.

No sooner is the summer wine party at Amersfort over than we begin to look forward to our Christmas Celebration.

The Amersfort Summer wine party was a great success. Altogether about a hundred attended and the delightful setting enhanced a lovely evening which, from all accounts, was greatly appreciated and enjoyed.

Which brings me to the Christmas Celebration. As many of you will know, the Great Hall of Berkhamsted Town Hall has been substantially completed (although a more permanent floor will be laid in two years time). To mark this auspicious occasion. The Association is planning a big Christmas Celebration to be held in the hall on Friday 18th December. Appropriately enough this will take the form of a Victorian evening with, it is hoped, suitable entertainment of a period nature for the occasion. There is plenty of time to grow your mutton chops and spruce up your bustles. It looks like being a great evening so make a note of it. I am respectfully requested by His Majesty the Chairman to inform you that "we will not be amused" if you are not in attendance. However, we think you will be amused so please roll up.

In our last newsletter we urged maximum participation in the events which are shaping our town and invited comments. My goodness, we got them. Our heaviest postbag so far indicates the strength of interest in what is happening and it is good to see. In addition to the postbag, the By-pass Demonstration Project Exhibition held in July was extremely well attended. The exhibition was held to obtain views and not, at this stage, to propose solutions. Key issues were outlined and opinion forms distributed. I am informed that those returned numbered hundreds, so your views are now known and will be taken into account when drawing up proposals. There will be another more detailed exhibition later this year.

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These consultation stages are very important. I can only urge maximum participation and comment whenever the opportunity arises. The Association is, of course, represented on the appropriate working party but your individual views are of paramount importance. No doubt some are contradictory, no doubt some are impracticable. It does not matter. Unless they are all known, those working on the project cannot form a balanced view. I cannot stress too strongly, now is the time.

I mentioned last time a proposal for some of the Association's committee to beat the bounds, as it were, on the A41 Berkhamsted section of the by-pass. This was done in July too. Ten stalwarts were squashed into an extended Landrover and while one or two probably had a better view of the contours of an adjacent left ear than of the greater scene outside, enough could be seen to form quite a favourable view of what was in progress.

The route followed was from the present Tring by-pass to the Bourne End interchange. The safari atmosphere was enhanced by the discovery that the pleasant young civil engineer who escorted the party was a South African. He is on the staff of the Consulting Engineers who are supervising the project for the Ministry of Transport.

Most of the by-pass is in cuttings with additional landscaping and noise mounding provided where possible to screen the route from sight and sound.

The route has uncovered evidence of bronze Age and Neolithic cultures. Work in these areas has been rescheduled to allow the Herts Archaeological Trust to carry out a full recorded excavation at these sites.

In addition, badger setts and deer runs have been located and expert expert advice has been sought on how to deal with their relocation. The Committee was interested to note the lengths to which the contractors are going to relocate one particular badger sett. A small copse where the sett was located had been left temporarily while fencing was erected and the badgers were being tempted to a different location by scraps of food placed increasingly far away. The by-pass is roughly five miles long for the old and staid but 11.4 kilometres for the young and with it. It will be a dual 2-way carriage road and to make the mind boggle 1.3 million cubic metres will be dug out. I suspect that 0.65 million cubic metres has descended as dust on top of my car and the remaining 0.65 million is stuck as mud underneath it.

It is quite a mammoth feat, but the one statistic which really interests us is that the road is due to open on 27th January 1994 at the end of a two year contract. The great news is that it is ahead of schedule.

In all fairness, it must be admitted that a great deal of effort is being expended to minimise the mess and, as far as possible, protect the environment. It is difficult to visualise any beauty in the squelchy scar at the moment but the landscaping and contouring could result in an elegant piece of civil engineering. I suspect myself that any resulting impact may not be due to the road itself, but subsequent developments around it. More on that subject in a moment when I attempt to deal with the letters.

It is no easy matter to give a clear and comprehensive reply to the many letters we received. The subjects raised were many and diverse. All the topics deserve attention and I can assure correspondents that their views will be considered by the Association's committee in formulating their responses even if I do not refer to them here. Indeed the Association has anticipated quite a few of the comments in the representations it has made already. A recurrent concern in the letters was the declassification of the green belt land adjacent to the by-pass and its subsequent development by property speculators who, I am informed, have already purchased it. The correspondents were, as one might expect, not all concerned with the same parcels of land but they can be assured that the Association has made the most rigorous representations already in all cases both on moral and practical grounds. Dacorum Borough Council itself is opposed to a change and has referred to the Association's views in its own submission.

Another recurrent item was the Kingsgate development, the effect this might have on the town centre more widely and indeed shopping generally in Berkhamsted. Correspondents refer almost without exception to a "shopping mall" for the Kingsgate development. The shopping mall which was originally proposed is long dead. There was little enthusiasm for the proposal from practically any quarter. What is now proposed for the site is a two phase development. The first phase is the completion of a new food store and outline planning permission for this has already been agreed. Whether this store will qualify for the term bandied about of 'superstore' I do not know. The second phase is the construction of pedestrian streets to link with existing cross roads which will include some further shopping development.

Some of our correspondents were of the view that the East's site was the right place for a further foodstore. Some referred to the need for individual shops as opposed to branches of the multiples.

All were concerned that development should not kill the High Street.

What can we identify as a consensus? There is, by and large, acceptance that some increase in food Shopping is required, perhaps grudgingly on occasion with some preferring an alternative outlet to the town centre. No-one suggested it should be totally out of town although one correspondent in mentioning other matters did mention it. I believe the experts also believe it to be necessary both for its own sake and because, without it, the town centre would languish. If, therefore, we do need another or a larger food outlet where should it be? The East's site would meet the requirement for increased supply but what would it do for the town centre? In my view, not a lot.

Perhaps the experts are wrong then. Is it really essential to put the extra grocery capacity in the centre to keep the rest of the town's trade healthy?

I don't know - I am not an expert. Maybe we are an odd family (no correspondence on that one, please), but we do tend to come in for our groceries and then buy whatever else we need as nearby as possible. It is very rarely the other way round. I think the experts could be right.

The next question is whether the proposed store on the Kingsgate site with its linking pedestrian precincts will meet the requirement of regenerating the centre without damaging the High Street. I think it depends on what exactly these linking routes will be like and where they will be. I have no information on this. I am sure you will have views on this critical subject.

Other issues raised in correspondence concerned roads and traffic calming, etc. It was felt that the opening of the by-pass could allow for some changes of route and access to the A41 hitherto denied which could take the pressure off certain "rat-runs".

Clearly the flow of traffic will be a major influence on the town centre and will have as marked an impact as the linking pedestrian precincts mentioned earlier. It seems to me that strong flows of traffic tend to box in certain areas. I would guess that notwithstanding the by-pass, the current A41 would constrain the town centre development to the north of the High Street. (I suppose it is north at that point, anyway towards the canal.) At present the major part of the High Street activities is to the east of Kings Road in the Waitrose/Tesco area. The proposed development is to the west of Kings Road. What effect will Kings Road have on the integration of a coherent town centre? Again, I have no idea, but I look forward to seeing yours.

One thing did astonish me in the correspondence we received. There was little mention of parking, a key issue I would have thought in a town centre study and one which will influence integration and coherence as much as anything else.

I should like to stick my neck out now. Several of our correspondents referred to the need to keep Berkhamsted as a "country town" shopping centre. It is a key premise of the Association as well and I referred to it in the last Newsletter. One or two correspondents mentioned developments in other towns which they considered sympathetic (several others were quoted as disastrous). No-one actually defined what a country town shopping centre was. It may mean different things to different people.

What I want is a place pleasant to look at, not twee but natural. I want to be able to buy three quarters of my needs within five or six hundred yards, that is all my food, most of my clothing, all my stationery, books, hardware, cleaners, footwear, drinks, records, electrical sundries, etc. I accept that nearby larger towns will draw us away for some larger items. I do not particularly like it but it is a fact of life. I want somewhere I can go for a cup of coffee. I want it to be sufficiently compact for me to bump into friends. I do not want to have to get into my car and drive to a supermarket, then into my car again to get a packet of screws. Once I am parked I want everything to be within reach on foot. I do not want a lot of circulating traffic. I do want it to be full enough of pedestrians to be lively and not dead. There should be meeting halls for local events and entertainment. There should be restaurants for the occasional meal out and somewhere to have a civilised drink.

I think we largely have it at the moment. The problem is how to accommodate the necessary expansion without destroying the present atmosphere.

PLANNING AND AMENITIES

Old Gas Showroom

A new application has been received which is lower and less out of keeping with the area. This appears more acceptable.

Lancaster Carpet Shop (formerly Weatherheads)

Plans have been submitted for a coffee shop.

Castle Hill Barn

An architectural report has been commissioned and Dacorum B.C. is likely to recommend it for Grade Two Star Listing. Later a survey will be carried out so that the cost implication can be worked out.

Town Hall Trust – Great Hall

Heating, wiring and replastering are nearly completed and a temporary floor will render the Great Hall usable. A more permanent floor will be installed in a couple of years.

The University of the Third Age

We have received information on the above activity which is currently gaining ground locally. The Third Age is loosely the 20% of the population who are no longer in full time employment, the First Age being childhood, the Second Age being full time employment.

The University of the Third Age can best be described as a learning co-operative of older people which enables members to share educational, creative and leisure activities. No qualifications are required and none are given. Members organise their own activities in informal groups drawing on each others' skills, knowledge and experience.

Any member of the Association who is interested could attend one of the general monthly meetings held on the first Monday in every month at the Friends' Meeting House, St. Mary's Road, Hemel Hempstead at 10 30 a.m., or contact Bob Edmonds, Secretary U3A (0442 252491) or Wanda Farey, Membership Secretary (0442 824244).

DIARY EVENTS

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| Wednesday 7th October | Talk by the Herts Archaeological Trust about their findings along the by-pass route.
Sessions Hall 8.00 pm. |
| Sunday 25th October | Autumn Ramble. |
| Friday 18th December | Victorian Christmas Celebration.
Wellcome Great Hall, Berkhamsted
Town Hall. 8.00 pm. |
| Friday 1st January 1993 | New Year's Day Ramble. |