



**Berkhamsted
Citizens
Association**

NEWSLETTER

December 1994

Editor's Musings

Oh dear! Oh dear! The season of goodwill is upon us and I have to deal with a sheaf of papers on Kingsgate in this issue and if there is one subject guaranteed to dispel the Christmas spirit it is that.

As with many other issues where there are no clear rights and wrongs, there is a tendency for those who are interested parties one way or another to go to extremes in defence of their point of view. The argument that develops a great deal of heat but remarkably little light.

Anyone who tries to take a balanced view tends to get shot at by both sides and accused of favouring the other side. What is a balanced view anyway? We are all human and tend to see things from our own point of view. Sometimes we are not in possession of all the facts and may form the wrong point of view. Most of use are also human in the sense that in a confrontation situation we tend to react, particularly when the views are extreme and, as is usually the case, so black and white that flaws can easily be seen. In these circumstances there is a tendency to react against the bigoted point of view even though we might agree that some points deserve consideration in our less heated moments.

Somehow or other the Association needs to avoid taking up an extremist point of view while at the same time pursuing a positive course of action. Not an easy thing to do.

Throughout the Kingsgate saga the Association has been under pressure from strong opponents of the project to engage in outright opposition. The fact that the Association does have considerable misgiving leads such people to believe that this is the only course of action.

More recently there has been considerable reaction to the constant activities of the Kingsgate Opinion Group who have been particularly vociferous and have campaigned strongly against it by meetings and in the press. They are quite entitled to do so. Other interested parties, the councillors and the developer have responded likewise of course. The Association has not taken such a public profile although meetings have been held and the Newsletter has recording ongoing activities. It has, however, been very active - more on this later.

We are now getting a reaction from members who are clearly irritated by the activities of the KOG and believe that the Association should have taken more active public steps to oppose them. I quote:

"It seems, however, that the only people other than the developers who get, or perhaps seek, any publicity in the press are the 'antis', led now by KOG who I am afraid are persuading a lot of people who are really neutral that they are opposed to any development. This is achieved by KOG publishing emotive, frightening, subjective and unsubstantiated statements about the detrimental effects of any development. I understood from earlier Newsletters that the Association was in favour in principle providing certain assurances were met. I personally agree with the Association's attitude, as I am sure most others do, so why is the Citizens Association not now standing up and declaring loudly what it believes the citizens do actually want?"

The correspondent goes on to connect this issue with my recent plea for views on what the Association's role should be. This is exactly the sort of response I was hoping for in general but I would like to decouple the wider issue of role reorganisation from that of Kingsgate for the moment. I know it can not be totally divorced from it but somehow I have to try and clarify a number of rather complex matters.

First, may I restate what the Association's policy is on Kingsgate and why it has arrived at it. I will itemise the issues:

1. **Is there any need for enhanced grocery facilities?**

There is evidence that a substantial amount of grocery trade has left the town. (Fact - it has happened.)

An independently commissioned study reported that reversal of this tendency was necessary to regenerate the town centre since grocery shopping draws in more trade with it. (Not a fact, but independent and expert. Our own experience tells us it is probable but none of us is in a position to quantify it.)

The present stores are outdated with narrow aisles and tendency to be congested. (Fact - the aisles are narrow and do get congested. What is not a fact is whether that bothers you nor whether it will get worse.)

Conclusion: The Association accepts that there is a need for enhanced grocery facilities.

2. **Can the present stores be improved where they are?**

Where would they go - upwards, sideways, lengthways? It is difficult to see what could be done except backwards into an already congested car park or southward by extinguishing a right of way. To the layman upwards does not seem impossible but lifts would be needed. How high would you go though? A towering building in the centre of town would not meet with much approval. (Fact - it is difficult to see where extension could take place. Opinion - have the alternatives been properly explored?)

Conclusion: With reluctance, for the present sites are undoubtedly the best (parking apart), the association concludes that relocation may be necessary.

3. Where should it go?

There are two possibilities: town centre or out of town. There are several out of town stores already; presumably it is to these that the disappearing grocery trade has gone. On the assumption that the maintenance of a healthy town centre is a cardinal point there seems little option but to seek a site as near the town centre as possible. The sixty four thousand dollar question is how near is near? This cannot be resolved factually. It is a matter of opinion. Kingsgate is only two or three hundred yards from the High Street.

Conclusion: The Association has reservations in this respect but takes the line that given a good, well designed and attractive pedestrian access it could be satisfactory.

4. What range of goods should it carry?

This is a difficult one. Since the basic intention is to upgrade a grocery store, one can expect the new store to carry a similar range, possibly somewhat larger. The arguments for and against supermarkets remain unchanged. Some people prefer to buy everything from the supermarket and some prefer their own favourite butcher or baker. Kingsgate does not really change this issue. The main difference in the present application is for 20% non-food items. The Association is not happy with the size of this. A few per cent is acceptable but in principle the mix should not be greatly different from the present.

Conclusion: The Association opposed any extension in the sale of non-food items.

5. Car parking.

The Kingsgate site is already partly given to parking. The remainder is derelict. Proposals indicate a desire for parking dedicated to the store. This has to be related to more general parking which must be available for non-store users. What about the adequacy of parking overall? At present the Water Lane car park is nearly always full. King's Road and St. John's Well Lane rarely present a problem. The reason for this is proximity to the stores and the ease of wheeling a trolley to the car. A change of location of the store will presumably result in more parking in Kingsgate and perhaps less in Water Lane. The related question is what extra traffic will be generated by the store? There will presumably be some, otherwise improvement in grocery facilities will have failed in the attempt to draw some of the lost trade back to revitalise the town centre. Some of the more absurd doom mongers have suggested that it will attract enormous number of out of town shoppers. The store is hardly of the size to achieve this. Where would it come from - Hemel Hempstead, Chesham, Amersham, Watford? All have larger stores of their own. It seems to the Association that all it would do is restore some of the lost trade. This would, however, involve some extra traffic and consequently some extra parking. The present plan includes some provision for a modicum of extra parking. Whether this is sufficient is anybody's guess.

Conclusion: The Association has reservations about the adequacy of parking and will press for the maximum non-store parking.

There are other considerations. There has been mud-slinging about whether the Council has pressed for Kingsgate because it owns most of the site. The Association has no wish to involve itself in this. Whether it is justified or not will not alter the outcome.

Taking all the factors into account, the Association came to the conclusion, albeit with some reservations, not to oppose Kingsgate in principle but to concentrate its efforts on achieving a harmonious link-up with the centre of the town.

Now, briefly, I would like to return to the letter I quoted earlier regarding the Association's line. As I said earlier, I do not wish to deal with the wider issue of the Association's role in general. Owing to pressure of space that will now have to await a later issue. I need, however, to say why the Association has not campaigned against KOG on the Kingsgate issue. The Association is not the developer of the site, nor is it the Council. They are the bodies who have a vested interest in the Kingsgate development. It is for them to defend it, if they wish, as absolutely as KOG rejects it. If Kingsgate was abandoned because it was belatedly realised that the town centre would be regenerated without it, the Association would not feel it should press the case for it. It is simply that the Association has, perhaps reluctantly, conducted a disparate review of the situation and concluded that something needs to be done and acted accordingly. It has tried to analyse what is needed to make the development acceptable and has pressed for it in the appropriate quarters. KOG has no authority and confronting them would have achieved nothing. It is difficult to gauge what the silent majority really want. So far as we can judge, our correspondent is right - most people are warily accepting that something needs to be done and, providing certain features are taken care of, will accept Kingsgate. We have regularly commented on our actions in the Newsletter and, apart from KOG (some of whose members may also be Association members of course) we have had practically no adverse comments. It would be a brave man who would claim that he knows what a silent majority is thinking, but it may well be tacit acceptance of the Association's line.

There is also a tactical reason. The Association realised early on that confrontation would be counter-productive. Accordingly the Association set about trying to achieve certain important limited objectives. It is now quite clear that confrontation has failed. An agreement in principle as been signed. The Association has, however, spent, and is still spending, many hours in consultation with the various interested parties and is still pressing for certain conditions to be met.

Now to the present position. The Association has been conducting a dialogue with the other interested parties: Waitrose, the Planning Authority (Dacorum Borough Council) and the M.P. Richard Page. In particular, the Chairman has recently visited new Waitrose developments at Abingdon and Thame in the company of other interested parties including KOG. These were claimed to be comparable developments in roughly similar locations. Of course, Waitrose used the occasion as a PR exercise to demonstrate two attractive developments. The chairman reported that they were indeed quite satisfactory in this respect and he was as impressed as anyone else. However he, and he alone, was not satisfied with the trip as a PR exercise alone and tabled a list of points for discussion:

Visit to Waitrose stores at Abingdon and Thame, 8th November 1994

The BCA seeks information on the following points:

1. What was the reaction of the local Chamber of Commerce and of local civic societies to the proposed stores?
2. How many shops have changed hands or closed down in the local town centres since the stores were opened?
3. What were the employment implications of opening the stores?
4. What arrangements were made for the changes in traffic flows, with regard to (i) customers' cars and (ii) delivery vehicles?
5. What range of goods are on sale in the two stores?

In addition to the response to question 5 above, the BCA would also like to know what Waitrose's plans are for the range of goods which would be sold in the proposed Berkhamsted store and what assurances Waitrose is prepared to give about changes to that range in future.

Needless to say, some of the issues, although discussed, were not resolved. A representative from Thame did however report increase of trade in the town with some new shops opening.

The chairman was particularly impressed with the architecture at Abingdon but on being told this was 20,000 square feet which, to him, seemed adequately large enough for Berkhamsted, he has been querying the need for 25,000 here. This and the application for 20% non-food items has been the subject since of correspondence with Waitrose. The gist of Waitrose's response was that they wished to preserve their flexibility for the future and that their experience told them this was necessary to meet their customers' needs. They did, however, give an assurance that they have no intention of selling apparel or similar items. The chairman has since been in touch with Mr. Richard Page seeking his support in modifying Waitrose's demands. He has further been in touch with Julian Taunton, chairman of DBC, pointing out the attractive pedestrian access they both saw at Abingdon and seeking his support for similar access at Kingsgate.

Apart from all the above and whether or not the other interested parties are actively pursuing the issue, the Association is making direct contact with MEPC, which is the property company owning the site of the most suitable approach.

A great deal is going on. It is all breathless activity at the moment. I am even puffing a bit writing it all up.

And a Happy Christmas to you all!

On that jolly note, don't forget the Christmas party. It is in the Great Hall of the Town Hall on Saturday this year, 17th December, starting at 8.00 pm. It is in the form of a traditional Christmas celebration with music, popular carols, both for your own voices and the choir, mince pies and punch. The chairman will also smile benignly upon you. What could be better than that?

The music and choir this year are from St. Paul's Church, Langleybury. When we discovered that Graham Spittle, one of the committee, was a man of many talents, not only spending his days soliciting in Berkhamsted but organising and choir-mastering at St. Paul's in his evenings, there was no stopping us volunteering him for the job which I am sure he will do with the greatest relish.

Please come along and thoroughly enjoy yourself. We deserve a little relaxation.

Other news will have to be very brief this time but there is one item I would like to highlight. It is now time to send in nominations for the annual Environment Award. Please send them in with details to any member of the committee and we will pass them to David Brunt who masterminds the process.

Town Amenities

Traffic lights: no resolution of the timing problems is in sight but checks have been made.

Street signs: letters objecting to the new design have been sent.

Bollards: the reflective bands have been extended for better visibility at night.

Castle pub: plans have been published for four town houses to be built in addition to adapting the listed building.

Future Events

17th December A Christmas Celebration in the Town Hall.

1st January 1995 New Year Ramble to Aldbury.
Meet at railway station at 10.30 a.m.

16th February Looking around old Northchurch.
Talk by Bert Hosier. Town Hall. 8.00 pm.

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