

John Steele: challenge of creating new beginning for Park House



Each week's Looking Back feature provides a fascinating insight into how every generation has to address very similar issues. Whether it's dissatisfaction with the standard and frequency of grass cutting, the cost of car parking or local taxes, many topics seem perennial. But sometimes I come across items that chime particularly clearly with the present day.

Thirty years ago, we read, Horsham District Council was hotly debating its plans for a new arts centre in what had been the ABC cinema.

The ABC was the last of the



Prominent and important setting - Horsham Park

town's cinemas and theatres to close. The council acquired the building and pledged to ensure that Horsham retained a theatre.

Thus, eventually, was born the Capitol theatre, cinema and arts centre we enjoy

today. This splendid building, which so easily could have become another victim of the bulldozers, was restored and improved with its impressive modern glazed atrium.

The councillors of the day had the foresight and courage

to commit to what was at the time an expensive project sure in the knowledge that the town and future generations would benefit and thank them for it.

And we do. Imagine how impoverished Horsham would seem today without the Capitol's broad range of shows and films, and much more?

Entertainment, education and escape, all under one roof.

At the same time controversy was raging about the rising cost of converting Park House for council offices.

Move on 30 years and those same offices will soon no longer be needed.

Built in the early 18th century, and now a Grade II* listed building, Park House was the home of the Hurst family who for much of the 19th century played a major role in the political history of the town.

Its prominent setting in

Horsham Park makes the decision on its future one of the most important and challenging that our current councillors will face.

One suggestion we have heard is that the museum might be relocated there, freeing up its current site in Causeway for sale. That would be a dreadful shame.

Its location in the heart of the old medieval town is ideal and with its outbuildings and walled garden it is a much loved feature for residents and visitors alike. What is needed is something that will complement our existing attractions and what would be better than to use Park House for an art gallery?

A gallery attracting high quality touring exhibitions could draw visitors to the town who would also use our restaurants and shops. It would fill the missing link needed to create the

council's vision of a town that is a centre for creative and performing arts. It would be a long term project, building slowly as so many other successful galleries around the country have done. It would be something for the town and district to take pride in and bequeath for future generations.

Have our current council leaders the wisdom and foresight of their predecessors? Let's hope so.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone, who shares these concerns. For more information, visit our website www.horshamsociety.org or telephone 01403 261640.