

John Steele: future prosperity depends on protecting heritage



If there is one thing on which almost everyone is agreed it is that we want Horsham to retain its character as a historic market town with a diverse range of shops and other attractions.

The investment in East Street and the core time pedestrianisation have reinvigorated this ancient shopping area and instead of pedestrians being hemmed in on narrow pavements it is now a pleasure to visit. And, if the council follows through on its promise in the Town Plan to continue to strengthen the independent niche and boutique retail outlets and



West Street is looking tired

high quality restaurants, it should get better still.

The council plans to turn its attention next to West Street which is looking tired with rather an old fashioned approach to pedestrianisation. This will be a bigger test

because it is long and straight with the main features of architectural interest above the shopfronts. If the challenge in East Street was to bring order to chaos, in West Street it is to bring more life to an often rather empty, and at

night somewhat intimidating, experience.

Both streets have one thing in common: East Street and part of West Street are within a conservation area which includes Causeway and Carfax.

Our wealth of historic buildings and ancient twittens provides a unique backdrop which too often we take for granted. This is what makes Horsham the interesting town it is. It is what helps to attract the visitors we need to sustain our wide range of shops and restaurants, and to encourage new businesses to set up in the town.

An example of the pull of our heritage buildings is Bill's decision to open a new restaurant.

They specialise in bringing new life to old historic buildings and the opportunity offered by our long empty Town Hall was a key factor.

Even when the economy is

not doing as well our heritage is a positive factor. Even our empty shopfronts, and unfortunately we have some, seem a little less depressing than their counterparts in the average high street because there is so much of visual interest in our street scene to draw the eye away.

What does it mean to have a conservation area? Well any changes to the façades of buildings require prior consent from the council and in the case of our many listed buildings the rules are more strict. Trees and other landscaping are also protected. This does not mean nothing can be changed, just that changes must be appropriate to the historic context and serve to preserve or enhance the special characteristics of the conservation area.

But if conservation areas are to be effective it requires councils to take a proactive

approach and to rigorously enforce the law. This is not always easy because sometimes occupiers of commercial premises are either unaware of the law or willfully disregard it.

So, as well as enforcement, more needs to be done to raise awareness concerning the positive advantages of conservation areas and to encourage businesses to take pride in their role as custodians of our heritage.

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.