

John Steele: Horsham's West Street is looking shoddy and sad



Recently Louise Goldsmith, Leader of West Sussex County Council, wrote to parish and neighbourhood councils to encourage them to consider entering their local high street in the Government's Great British High Street competition.

The £50,000 prize will be shared among the winners of seven categories of high street, together with advice from Google on improving their digital presence as well as their physical appearance.

This obviously worthwhile competition raises a number of questions as far as Horsham is concerned, not least if £50,000 can benefit seven high streets why on earth did Horsham District

Council's makeover of West Street, costing over £600,000, achieve so little?

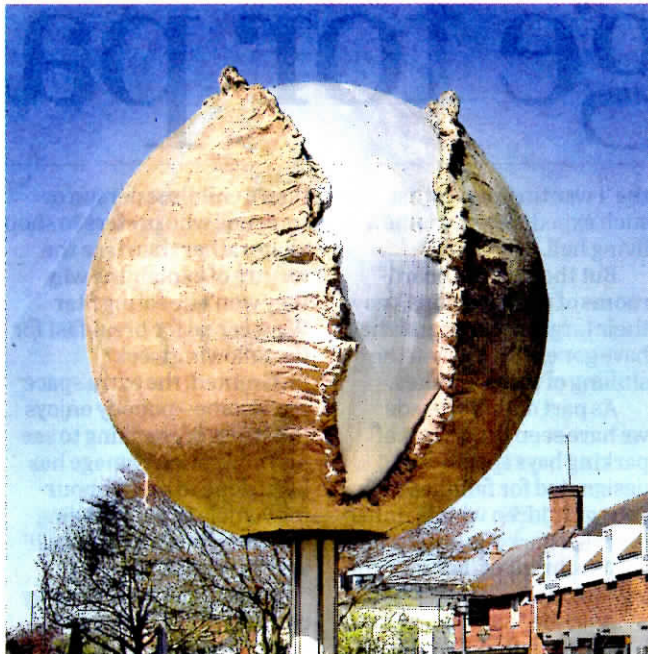
With that much to spend the result should have been a vibrant, colourful high street which we would be pleased to put forward for consideration.

Instead of a positive transformation what we have is a bleak, ugly makeover which has stripped West Street of its character.

Gone are the trees which softened the urban feel and were proportionate to the overall street scene.

Gone, too, are the hanging baskets which provided such a colourful display throughout the summer. Did someone read a report by some retail consultant that claimed that flower displays inhibited consumer spending?

What have we got instead? First, we had the small, and not particularly attractive, planters with bamboo that flapped wildly in the wind and slapped shoppers



Motionless and decaying - the Shelley Fountain

in the face, only to find them replaced by stubby insignificant hedge plants that do little but get in the way.

No doubt there were some

good intentions when the decision was taken to spend such a large amount of money and it would be wrong to deny that the drainage has been improved. The quality

of the work appears to be poor in places, including for example the setting of the plaques in the paving, but it is impossible to say whether this is a fault of specification or execution.

Then there is the street furniture. The style of the bench seats and litter bins does not blend with or enhance the street and they have deteriorated very quickly with the varnish peeling off.

There is some sign that the council is at last addressing this. We hope the cost of the repairs will not also fall on the public purse.

Unfortunately, there is only one competition that the West Street transformation project would win and that is for the most conspicuous waste of public money.

But that is not all. Sitting at the end of West Street is the Shelley Fountain, motionless and decaying. A sorry sight and another feature adding to the shoddy feel of our high street.

It is extraordinary that this situation has been allowed to come about. It is bad for residents, visitors, shoppers and the shops which invest so heavily in their own premises and offerings.

It falls far short of the standards we should expect for a town regularly rated as one of the best places to live.

This must change so that in future we would be proud to enter West Street in the Great British High Street competition with every expectation of winning.

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 the website www.horshamsociety.org or phone 01403 272814.