

Horsham Society

with John Steele



Chance for something new and exciting

Horsham has very little modern architecture of which it can be proud, so when an opportunity arises to replace a prominent building we should take particular care to ensure it enhances the town.

Prewetts Mill, the empty office block awaiting redevelopment in Worthing Road next to the River Arun, currently presents a sad sight. But it offers a huge opportunity to create something new and exciting which will be a credit to the town.

Nearly two years ago McCarthy and Stone applied for permission to demolish everything on the site and erect a block of extra care assisted living accommodation. This was refused by the council and the subsequent appeal was also refused on the grounds that McCarthy & Stone's proposal for a six storey building was too tall and dominant and would detract from the character and appearance of the surrounding area.

We were pleased with this outcome because the design was unsuitable for the site, but the words "detract from the character and appearance of the



A past view of Prewetts Mill in Horsham.

surrounding area" could be a hostage to fortune. This site is crying out for a significant landmark building to mark the end of the residential part of Worthing Road and the start of the town centre.

Prewetts Mill already has consent for change of use to 45 flats. Recently a new company which proposes to raise the roof by 1.5 metres and increase the number of

flats to 55, commissioned five architectural practices to come up with a new wrap-around design. Boards went up on the hoarding around the site announcing a consultation with pictures of each of the five designs.

We have long advocated the use of competitions as a way of encouraging innovative new design and there are plenty of examples nationally of how successful they can be. The five designs submitted were very different, ranging from the very quirky to the more conventional.

The brief required the retention of the existing Prewetts Mill façade which will please many residents; and given they largely work within the existing building shell, the overall size is constrained.

So far, so good. But then it all went wrong.

The consultation was not advertised other than on the hoardings around the site at a size that would only be seen by passing pedestrians, of which there aren't that many.

It was open for a very short time and votes could only be registered on a special website. It will be surprising if more than a couple of hundred votes were cast whereas had it been properly advertised one might

have expected a thousand or more.

Even if the company were to suggest they were deliberately targeting local residents their strategy was poor. For example, online voting is scarcely likely to be the most effective way of engaging the elderly residents of Homestream House behind Prewetts Mill, who will be the local residents most affected.

Reluctantly, we must conclude that this was never intended to be a proper community consultation, more a gimmick designed to impress the planning authority. This is so sad; it was a golden opportunity to kickstart a genuine conversation about modern design and its place in our town. It could have set the standard for future landmark sites and helped to encourage a climate of innovation and excellence. What a missed opportunity.

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 261905.