

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS ON

Derek Barnard looks back on a report, the outcome of which is still visible today, and reminds us of some things that did not happen.

On 13 September 1973, almost exactly twenty-five years ago, a report was published entitled: Rochester City Centre: Informal District Plan. Although titled 'Informal' the report was to be used for public consultation which after local discussion would form the basis for action by the City Council and would be taken into account by the Secretary of State for the Environment when assessing planning applications.

The historic heart of the City, including the cathedral, castle and a section of the High Street, had been designated a Conservation Area on 28 January 1972. This superbly written report and its accompanying package looked at the area and the approaches to it and suggested where improvements might be made. Half-way down page 7 is a paragraph which shows-off the writer's style and is so relevant still:

'Although the retention of the present townscape and architectural qualities is considered to be the primary planning objective, limited amounts of physical change might be acceptable. Human history is made up of change and it is the gradual evolution of the townscape within the Roman framework which has brought about the present historical interest in Rochester. But what is really important in the context of planning for the future of this area is man's curiosity about his past which now leads him to wish to preserve, or at least not to destroy unnecessarily, certain tangible evidence of his history, for his own interest and that of future generations.'

The first thing to be done was to relieve the traffic pressure on the High Street and to do this the Northern Link Road, cutting across St Margaret's Banks to meet the New Road on the Chatham boundary, was still under consideration. This was however, a very expensive option and work had already begun on dualling part of Corporation Street and improving the Star Hill junction. Being involved in scouting rather than conservation at that time I remember my astonishment when the Red Lion at Star Hill and the Gundulph at the Bridge end were demolished. Other suggested improvements began to be carried out: the removal of the clutter that festooned buildings; for example, redundant signs, brackets, bolts, insulators and electric wiring and switches; the mass of overhead wires were removed, poles more carefully positioned, TV was piped so that aerials could be removed and roadsigns were moved. Illuminated shop fronts were to be discouraged and large plate glass windows frowned upon.

The colonnaded building on the old Leonard's site was about to be started and it was hoped that part of the store still leaning against the Eagle Tavern would soon be demolished. Opposite, between Blue Boar Lane and the city walls, agreement had been reached with the planning authority for a development which included a multi-storey car park. Another was expected in Almon Place.

Retailing was to be encouraged for although it was recognised that Chatham was the Towns' main shopping centre and that Strood was rapidly developing, it was

still thought there was a place for Rochester. This was, of course, before the advent of the large supermarkets and out-of-town centres.

Many of the report's recommendations we now take for granted - like the wider pavements and the paved carriageway, the careful addition of street furniture, the replacing of the concrete lampposts and the floodlighting of certain buildings etc. One suggestion, the upgrading of road and pavement surfaces between and around the castle and the cathedral, was a little late in starting but is now progressing well! Some ideas were ignored, luckily - like the eight foot high ragstone wall proposed to run from Chertsey's Gate to the corner of the graveyard to shut off the Precinct. The recommendation to remove the railings from the eastern end of the Vines, with low planting introduced to show off the houses in Crow Lane was ignored as was that '...the inappropriate wooden railings on 1 to 7 Minor Canon Row should be replaced with iron ones

I re-read this report earlier this year but I was tempted to write this piece after the many favourable comments from new visitors to our city that I took on tours during the Dickens Festival. Most will be coming back on quieter days to visit our museum, climb the castle and explore more fully the cathedral, the shops and our city's history to which they were introduced. Things may not be perfect for those who dwell and trade in the centre but I write in gratitude to those who had the foresight to give us what we have today, a great deal of which could so easily have been lost: the consultants, planners, Council members and, not least, the early members of this Society who fought so hard for what they felt was best. How right they were!



The railings that survived (*see overleaf*).

Derek Barnard

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