



**Berkhamsted
Citizens
Association**

NEWSLETTER

May 1986

Mcllroys was here!

Those people who have lived in Berkhamsted for many years (and possibly become over familiar with it) need occasionally to have feedback on visitors' perceptions of our town. Sometimes impressions obtained at a short visit can reveal things that we don't see, or take for granted, or are over-protective about. One BCA member recently had a phone call from friends who are prospective purchasers of a house in the town. (They are moving from the High Wycombe area because it was more convenient to get into London by train) and their comments indicated their increasing pleasure with the town and its environs each time they visited. Nice to have confirmed what we think ourselves! But the notion that Berkhamsted is a quiet little country town carries the risk of some dangerous delusions. Firstly, it isn't quiet, or little any longer, and secondly, such notion deludes us into believing that it can stand still, unbesieged by the social and economic problems of the South East in particular and the country in general. We should not be deluded into the belief that we must hang on to anything old, and savagely resist anything that is new. Old is not always good, nor new always bad and vice versa.

The rather emotional reaction that has resulted from the application to change Mcllroys site (nee Sharlands) needs looking at with some quiet objectivity. We who are concerned with protecting our 'little country town' need to look with some wisdom at the situation beyond each separate crisis of bricks and mortar and have an overview of the town, so that we can discuss which buildings, what functions really need to be preserved, which need developing and nurturing? For example, the preservation of the Town Hall, with its unique front, contributes to ours being a special High Street, with a different character than your mass produced Shire town centres. But that architectural inheritance is light years away from the front of Mcllroys and the architecture of the Lower Kings Road buildings. Just take a good hard look at it from the front of Barclays Bank or across from the Police Station. Apart from that part next to the Britannia Building Society in the old Girls School (another character building) the rest is, of arguable visual value. The barn inside Mcllroys is another character feature but how many people shop there, or just go in, to admire this feature?

In considering changes we should also consider the overall appeal of the town to its people as shoppers and employees. The town has an "economics" dimension to it as well as social, cultural and religious. In considering the impact of change we should acknowledge all the aspects required for a balanced community. People recognise this - hence the outcry about the number and location of building societies and restaurants. But in accepting changes we should absolutely insist on quality finish to any new buildings, and that designs are totally in sympathy with adjacent buildings. We could also consider what opportunities this new building provides. In this example, at the centre cross roads of the town, we have a unique

chance of traffic improvement. The building line of any new building should be put back so as to allow two lanes of traffic approaching from the station. How often have queues developed because a car wants to turn right? If an inside lane allowed traffic to flow left or ahead up Kings Road, whilst another car was waiting to turn right - what an improvement! The proposed new building recognises the problem of pedestrians and cars turning left into Lower Kings Road off the High Street by widening this corner. It also appears to retain the clock tower feature and give a frontage of an appropriate character. But the opportunity should not be lost to open up the traffic lights end of Lower Kings Road - in the same-way as Kings Road opposite was opened up when the existing Police Station replaced the old one.

So there are many opportunities to have improvements and good contemporary architecture, in sympathy with its old neighbours. What we must not have is a repeat of the unthinking architecture that was characteristic of the buildings on the other side of the Town Hall. Opposition to redevelopment probably is based on a fear, quite understandably, of a repeat of the Boots/Smiths/Waitrose development. The other basis for opposition is the impact on the small shops, being swept away for two medium sized sites plus a very large "supermarket" site. But in seeking a balanced evolution we must not forget that this town has an economic dimension as well as a cultural and social one. It is clear that for various reasons people do not conceive Berkhamsted as an advantageous place to shop, compared with the competition around at nearby towns. If people don't shop in Berkhamsted in sufficient numbers, the small shops will not survive particularly those based on rentals/leases which are escalating hugely. The Bookstack, de Lisle's, etc. are examples of a range of shops which are threatened by economic forces. This is not a peculiar feature of Berkhamsted but is happening along many High Streets. Chesham is a good example - so is Wimbledon. The pattern of shops and the choice they give, give a town "customer appeal". So does ease of access, and this means ease of car parking. If this doesn't improve people will use Berkhamsted only for their home, buying or selling it, and their Building Society account (and possibly getting their hair done or eating out). For shopping people will naturally go to somewhere easier and offering significant choice, ie. Hemel Hempstead, Watford, Milton Keynes, St. Albans. Berkhamsted will never compete totally with these, but can offer its citizens a better choice. So instead of rejecting the idea in principle we should recognise the opportunities. A facility for small shops should be built into this new development, the road should be widened, and the quality/design of the frontage must be compatible with its neighbours. But don't let us just object because its a change to a familiar corner. We can't object to building societies and restaurants killing the town, and also object to an opportunity for improved choice for the town. But choice should involve satisfactory solutions to the small shops problem. This could also be solved by a small shop precinct on the area behind the High Street, joining up with St. Johns Well Lane. Let's look at the town centre's development as a whole, not just one corner by the traffic lights.

The Peter Principle

Both our new Mayors, Peter Ginger at Berkhamsted and Peter Benton at Dacorum have called for unity. Not a principle unknown in the speeches of new leaders! One wonders why it is thought necessary? Presumably because there is a perceived absence of unity. But does this occur on the substance of principle, objectives, resources, or merely on detail? It is very difficult to establish which, as local regular information comes only from the headlines of the Gazette, the Mail or the Herald,

and communications between Councils at Berkhamsted and Dacorum via newspaper headlines is not the best way to understanding. Things have improved over recent years, but it can get even better. There is still a need for people to know more about the activities of Town and Borough Councils. Unity comes from understanding and understanding comes from information. We have long advocated that it would be helpful to have a regular column in the Review or in the local papers by the Mayor. The nearest we have come is an (unidentified) councillor's comments in the Parish Review.

So a little thought on how to achieve unity, and not just an exploitation for it to happen - would pay dividends. One practical way is regular informal dialogue - which is why we asked for and held a meeting with Dacorum Borough Councillors in March. The Town Councillors also attended (coincidentally they had made a similar request.) We have now held for two years running an informal summer gathering with Town Councillors at a member's home/garden. Such events allow a better exchange of views than by just the writing of letters, and is a practical step towards unity of understanding. These meetings should become a regular part of the fabric of the town and of Dacorum.

Information Principle

Regular information to the town is not a facility that comes without effort, and the means by which people can get information easily. The minutes of meetings are available in the Library, and Sheila Robinson the Town Clerk is always helpful, as are the officials at Dacorum. The background to minutes and decisions is not easy to come by. What's new you say? Why did the Planning Committee vote 6-2 against the McIlroy development? What were the main arguments for and against? What are the aims of the Mayor and Council for the next two years?

Much of the apparent disunity in Dacorum in previous years was based on a perceived imbalance on facilities and money spent. That situation is not so bad now and will be better for Berkhamsted when the Ashlyns Sports Complex is completed in 1987. The sort of figures which reflect a sharing of resources are reflected in the following extract from a letter dated May 1984 replying to our request for information. The main ratios and amounts are still valid, but need updating to March 1987.

1. Basic Information.

(a) Population at 1981 Census:

Berkhamsted	15,805
Hemel Hempstead	80,318
Tring	10,728
Other Districts of Dacorum	<u>23,150</u>
	130,001

(b) Rateable Value at February 1984

Berkhamsted	2,807,554
Hemel Hempstead	14,628,700
Tring	1,554,664
Other Districts of Dacorum	<u>4,293,340</u>
	23,284,258

(c) Capital Expenditure through Leisure Committee since 1974, including currently planned spend, i.e. Canal Fields:

Berkhamsted	387,650
Hemel Hempstead	1,991,971
Tring	263,734
Other Districts of Dacorum	<u>580,112</u>
	3,223,467

This table does not include payments pre 1.4.74 on schemes carried forward to Dacorum. Payments made after 1.4.74 on these schemes is included. Two years on from May 1984 the Canal Field and Bowling Club project is completed. We shall be asking for an update for 1986-7 assuming the Ashlyns project/costs to be included.

Future activities

Friday 20th June Summer Wine. Victoria School. 7.00 p.m. to 9.00 p.m. You are cordially invited to come and enjoy what we hope will be a lovely summer evening - we just could be lucky this time!

Thursday 3rd July A Walk in the Woods with Chris Meade, an ornithologist with an infectious and informative enthusiasm. Meet at Ashridge Monument at 7.30 p.m.

Anyone with transport problems for this event can phone:

Valerie Clark	Berkhamsted	2613
Hazel Ward	Berkhamsted	5604
Miranda Cummins	Berkhamsted	6075

Walks

For some time the Association has had plans to produce a book of walks. This project is now live again and as a sort of taster the description of a walk to Berkhamsted Common is included with this Newsletter. This is a nice shortish circuit - ideal for walking off the Sunday lunch!

We would welcome customer feedback on this walk description. Do you like the format? Did you have any trouble following the description? Have you any suggestions for improvements?

It is intended to include similar walk descriptions with the next few newsletters. But we eventually hope to publish (and sell) a collection of perhaps 30 walk descriptions - if the demand is there. It would be useful to have members' comments on that point. It would also be useful to have comments on what form any eventual publication should take. Options which have been considered are a conventional book (probably soft-backed and pocket sized) or some sort of loose-leaf format involving sheets printed on plastic/laminated paper and published either individually or in groups of half a dozen or so, or all together in a folder. Which of these would you be included to buy? Or would you prefer something entirely different? We want to choose the best format for attracting the paying customer. So ideas please!

Finally, we have already got a good body of volunteers to help with this project. But we would be delighted to hear from anyone else who wants to be involved. Someone with a talent for drawing maps would be particularly welcome.

Any comments or offers of help please to:

Eric Drake - 18 Holliday Street. Tel: Berkhamsted 73122