



**The Camberley Society**

## **Chairman's Report 2008 - 'the credit crunch and beyond'**

The society could not exist without the efforts and energy of its executive committee members. So it is only right that this report starts - as in previous years - by thanking all those concerned for their input and commitment. Because she is standing down from the committee, specific mention should be made of Val Harvey, who has proved invaluable as Membership Secretary. We wish her well in the future.

It is also right to point out the obvious, that the composition of a committee should undergo regular change. No-one can go on for ever, and committees benefit from new ideas and new ways of doing things. But, as with many voluntary organisations, the society finds it difficult to fill all the vacancies on its committee, and to ensure that replacements are waiting in the wings. We all know the saying that if you don't vote in a general election you can't complain about the government; the same thing happens more locally. If you don't participate actively in The Camberley Society, you can't complain about developments (or lack of them) in the town!

Probably the two most significant events in 2008 affecting the town were the 'bricks and mortar' completion of the Atrium, and the Town Centre Area Action Plan document setting out preferred options for developments up to the year 2026:

Firstly, the Atrium. It was probably inevitable that residents close to the development suffered substantial noise and disruption during the construction activities. These same residents were, of course, best-placed to raise the problems that they experienced directly with the developer, and the council, to seek solutions. The society was less-directly involved, as it provided the vice-chair of the Atrium Forum, which provided formal opportunities for dialogue between residents, the developer and contractor, the council and others involved.

The good news is that, although those living in the immediate vicinity are unfortunately adversely affected by the Atrium, the completed development appears to have been successful commercially so far. Contrary to numerous predictions, the many new restaurants are busy, and, at the time of writing, the new Vue cinema has sold nearly a quarter of million tickets. The retailers occupying the site have not had such a good time in the current financial climate- with Zavvi being closed after only a few months' operation - so it is perhaps fortunate that the development does not, and was never intended to, incorporate more shops.

The second main event - the Area Action Plan document, in effect looks at what should happen to the rest of the town following the completion of the Atrium. The document, totalling some 140 pages, outlines proposals for shops, housing, employment, leisure and transport in the town. It also describes wholesale development of the 'London Road Block' (roughly, the buildings between the A30 and the Mall shopping centre), the railway station/Pembroke Broadway area and also land east of Knoll Road.

The society's 17-page response to the document very much supported most of its progressive and ambitious proposals. Our main disagreement was with a relative minor policy, namely that parking spaces within the town should be insufficient to meet demand in order to promote the use of public transport. Such an approach would simply encourage residents to drive to neighbouring towns - the residents, local retailers and the environment would all suffer as a result.

On a cold February Saturday afternoon, the society, assisted by the Surrey Chambers of Commerce and the Town Centre Manager, surveyed members of the public in the High Street. People were asked whether they would be for, or against, closing the road to traffic. We discovered that there was overwhelming support for pedestrianisation; we duly formally reported this to the borough council. Frustratingly, the council responded that there was no likelihood of banning traffic for a number of years. This was in spite of the fact that the Area Action Plan document, which was published after our survey, also proposed pedestrianisation.

In our support for banning traffic, we did not overlook the needs of less-mobile people. Indeed, our written response to the council's draft parking strategy early in 2008 specifically stressed the importance of providing facilities for 'parent and child', infirm and older people.

The parking strategy stressed the 'politically-correct' importance of using public transport rather than private cars. We did not disagree with this - but we did emphasise that such a change should be achieved by making public transport more convenient and attractive, and not by compelling people to abandon their cars.

The borough council produced a second policy document of similar size to the town centre Area Action Plan. This was the lengthily-titled 'Core Strategy and Development Management Policies Development Plan Document - Options'. The wide-ranging document covered issues such as sustainable development, the location and scale of new housing within the borough, development within the Green Belt and traffic management.

In our response to the core strategy document, we stressed that Camberley was too small to compete on a 'me too' basis with neighbouring towns. Camberley should therefore be a 'quality', rather than a 'quantity', place to visit and in which to live. We highlighted the fact that the large number of drinking establishments within the town centre was adversely affecting night-life there, and we indicated that the proposed policy to protect buildings of local importance was somewhat hollow. The council has failed to find any way of protecting empty houses on the corner of the Upper Gordon Road Conservation Area, so promises to protect important areas of the borough carry little weight.

We monitored most of the planning applications affecting the town centre, but rarely found it necessary to make any formal comment on them. One exception was in the case of an application to demolish the ramshackle 'Hoover Spares' building between the High Street and Knoll Road. Ironically, although we welcomed a proposal to remove a long-standing eyesore, we objected to the offices that would replace it. Our hope was that the footpath alongside the buildings could be widened to improve east-west links within the town centre. However, we were concerned that the new offices would be too large to permit this. In spite of our objection, the new development was approved, though, perhaps because of the economic climate, the derelict building remains.

Just before the end of the year, we also objected to a licensing application by the as-yet unopened 'Spin' nightclub on the corner of Pembroke Broadway. We did this reluctantly, as a nightclub would bring money and employment into the town. However, as it would also unavoidably cause significant late-night disruption and inconvenience to local residents, we felt obliged to oppose it.

The final planning issue to be mentioned here is the Special Protection Area restriction on new dwellings in Camberley - and much of the borough - that applied throughout the year. This had the happy effect of saving Camberley from a surplus of flats and additional pressure on our infrastructure; it had the less-happy effect of restricting the number of newcomers who would contribute to the coffers of the local council and retailers.

The society provided its members with three newsletters during the year. These were less-formal in content and appearance than used to be the case, although we did, for example, include an item provided by the local police. Many thanks to my wife Louette for arranging the newsletters' layout. We had to cancel one of our two traditional lunches. The other included a sketch about the life of Dame Ethel Smythe, given by an actress. This met with a mixed response.

We took part in a number of organisations and events. These included the executive committee of the local chamber of commerce, a transport conference and a town centre forum held by the borough council, and the advisory board of the Camberley Town Centre Community Interest Company. We maintained a presence on Facebook, and in our internet web-site, as well providing conventional leaflets about the society at the information desk in the Mall.

David Chesneau, Chairman  
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