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(Precursor of the "URBAN DESIGN GROUP") Jan. 1968

THE DEVELOPMENT OF HARPENDEN

"Only when the citizens of a community have participated in selecting the goals which will shape their environment can they be expected to support the actions necessary to accomplish those goals." President John Kennedy, 1961

"People must be able to participate fully in the planning process.....one of the Government's aims in the present review of planning legislation is to ensure that there are greater opportunities for the discussion of important changes while they are still at the formative stage and can be influenced by the people whose lives they will affect." White Paper, 1967

The members of the Harpenden Society present at the 1967 Annual Meeting expressed concern at the apparent lack of coordination in the development and expansion of the township. The committee was called on to look into the situation, review the vital factors and make practical recommendations for a more effective policy for the future. A Development sub-committee was formed to undertake this. In addition to its meetings it has delved into the subject of development control in specific government and other publications¹, corresponded with planning officers and civic authorities and consulted some of the architects and planning experts who live in Harpenden. The following is a resume of its assessment of the situation and of its principal suggestions for improved planning and control.

¹The list is too long to reproduce. "The Citizen's Guide to Town and Country Planning" by D. W. Riley (Town and Country Planning Association, 1967) is the most readable non-technical pamphlet which sums up the subject with brilliance and force.

Inferior piecemeal development has long been part of the English scene. The degree of control exercised varies enormously in ancient and modern towns alike. It seems most effective in the few places where the local authority is supported by both expert advice and public opinion in determining that the preservation of heritage character and established environment need not be incompatible with planned expansion and a satisfactory financial return. Since the war legislation and official directives have given every encouragement to local authorities and to the public to protect what is finest in their existing environment and to take a positive attitude to the control of new developments of all sizes, but in very few localities have they taken full advantage of their powers or of their capacity for good influence.

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Ironically it is since the war that indiscriminate development has broken into the established character of Harpenden. Until 1945 it was a small Victorian residential town, grown from a scattered community of hamlets and manors, with the Parish Church at its centre. It preserved - and is now enhanced by - its common, its broad high street, its greens and trees and the generous spacing of many of its buildings. Since the war residential and commercial expansion has been fast and free, a tribute no doubt to Harpenden's attractiveness as a place to live and work in. But the Planning Authority's tolerance in passing many plans with little criticism or long-term consideration has resulted in a lot of mediocre building which robs Harpenden of its established dignity and rural foundation. A town of considerable natural character is becoming conventional and suburban.

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The 1951 Development Plan zones certain areas of the town for open space, residential, commercial and industrial uses but "planning is not just a matter of prescribing permissible land uses.....what

matters far more....is whether the physical environment as a whole is being properly shaped" (White Paper)

No comprehensive plan exists, so far as we are aware, for the expansion of Harpenden: there is little coordination of different schemes, no firm directives as to appropriate layouts, nor guidance on character and scale or the materials which help new buildings to blend satisfactorily with old, and enhance existing settings. One or two of the new estates have been tolerably well laid out but the vast majority of new buildings over the past ten years have been ruthlessly forced upon the scene under pressure from commercial interests. Expensive and characterless estates blight the rural fringes of the town: the east side of the Common is being urbanised: the new Milton Road accumulates haphazardly, and the same destruction awaits other mature areas of the town, such is the effect of uncoordinated development on the environment.

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As the Council has so far appeared reluctant to appoint consultants, or an officer specialising in planning, the Harpenden Society urges it to make far more use of the County Council's Planning department in an advisory capacity and to seek the co-operation of its Panel of Architects OR - better still - to recruit from among the number of qualified architects and planners who live in Harpenden a local panel of voluntary unpaid consultants. Much of the ill-attuned building development in Harpenden is due to lack of sufficient professional guidance and advice. Planned redevelopment and expansion on an urban scale is a task which calls for the skill and experience of a team of qualified experts no less than in industry or engineering. Such expert backing could enormously augment the Council's power to deal firmly with persistent commercial interests and property developers. Also it would enable it to formulate with professional authority a positive guide to developers on scale, design, materials, siting etc., which incidentally would carry greater weight at appeal inquiries

where it has, so far, been unable to establish precedent by consistent standards or design policy.

Unhappily the situation we have described is not in the least peculiar to Harpenden. All over England local authorities, actuated by the best democratic principles, have been passive parties to the mutilation of fine townscapes in the cause of "progress" and profit. Residents who would expect the heritage character of their town to be preserved are confronted times without number by faits accomplis that have been decided by conscientious but inexperienced laymen without benefit of sufficient professional advice. This must not be interpreted as a reflection on the full-time paid officials employed by the Council. Their duty is to advise the Councillors, but they also have to carry out Council policy. Because the value of professionally qualified advice appears at times to be underestimated at Council level, with subsequent uncertainty about technical matters, many urgent policy decisions are deferred, such as the provision of a relief road, conservation of the central area, preparation of action plans for re-development areas, formulation of a tree policy etc. And every decision deferred, every uncoordinated planning approval granted, makes an ultimate overall master plan for a tolerable environment increasingly difficult to achieve.

But the government and the national amenity organisations are now urging us all to develop a positive, creative approach towards the guardianship of our own special areas. The methods of advice, consultation, direction and control practiced, for example in Coventry,

York, East Suffolk or Norwich¹ foreshadow a new and increasingly successful approach that can be applied elsewhere. Dictatorship is not involved: "preservation and enhancement of heritage areas will best be secured by the planning authority putting its proposals forward at the earliest stage for general discussion by the public, societies, individual users and occupiers". In other words corporate responsibility should be encouraged and practiced.

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As a civic amenity society representing informed opinion in Harpenden, buttressed by its professionally qualified members, the Harpenden Society urges the U.D.C. to share its load by inviting citizen participation in the whole planning process from the initial stages, and thus re-vitalise public interest in congenial urban environment. Harpenden residents can be drawn in as active participants with the Council in this work. The Civic Trust, with which the Harpenden Society has long been registered, records many instances of local civic societies actively cooperating with their local authority: among them is this Society's modest 1967 "Make Harpenden Tidy" campaign which could be the forerunner of more ambitious projects in Harpenden. Thus the Harpenden Society's findings are as much a challenge to its own members (and those who have yet to join it) as to the Planning Authority.

¹ "Quinquennial Review of the City Development Plan: WARD MEETINGS": report of the City of Coventry's Department of Architecture and Town Planning.

"A Guide for Developers": prepared for the Development and Planning Committee of York City Council in association with the York Civic Trust and the York & East Yorkshire Architectural Society.

"Advice to Applicants Seeking Planning Permission" (Building Design, Car Parking, Housing Layout, etc.) prepared by the County Planning Department of East Suffolk County Council.

"Foot Streets in Four Cities", "Re-vitalisation Appraisal", and other publications of the Norwich City Planning Department.

As a result of its researches, both national and local, the Harpenden Society considers that our local authority possesses the powers and should take heart and plan, guide, and control more effectively than hitherto and should invite the professions and public to contribute to and share in its thinking and policy-making. The methods and procedures outlined above are practiced elsewhere to the lasting benefit of comely townships and the people who live in them.

January, 1968

The Harpenden Society: Hon. Secretary: 6, East Common, Harpenden