RIPON CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER - JANUARY 2021

Dare I wish you Happy New Year? Of course. Let's trust that before long we shall be able to meet up once again. Patience is a virtue.



In the meantime, let's start with the good news that the Cabmen's Shelter has returned to the Market Place. It looks very well after its comprehensive restoration for Ripon City Council.

Some more welcome news was the Committee's conclusion that the refreshed newsletter has proved to be valuable and needs to go forward, and with more pictures please. I'm always happy to receive comments and indeed your contributions for future issue.

We refreshed the website in 2020 too, and you can read about who is looking at it and where from; there are some surprises.

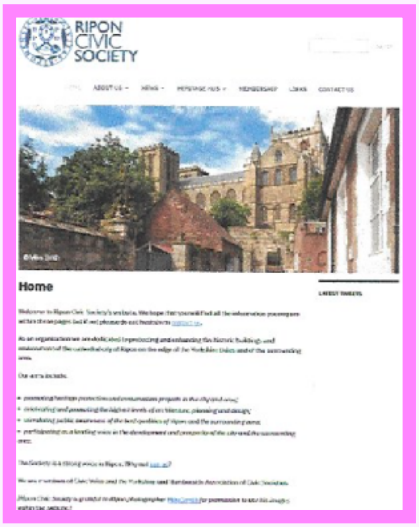
Our programme starts on 7 January. Last September we heard about 'what lies beneath', namely gypsum. This time we'll hear more about gypsum from Mick Stanley in Art and Alabaster.

There are also some reflections on the city centre.

Christopher Hughes
Chairman

Website Analytics

Our new website has now been up and running since late July and we hope that our members are finding its content useful and easy to access.



As part of our Hosting package we can access analytics which provide us with all sorts of information and data about usage of the website. Much of it is fairly obtuse and probably not of much interest to anyone other than the most technically-minded.

However, we recently gleaned the following which might be of more than just passing interest:

Popular pages: Consistently the most viewed pages appear to be "Commemorative Plaques", mapping the green and other plaques around Ripon, and our "Contact Us" enquiry form, each with about 100/150 hits each month.

International audience: The largest number of unique user viewings to our website hail from the United Kingdom (unsurprisingly) and from the USA. But since there are further Ripons in Wisconsin and California this may go some way to explaining our popularity Stateside! Somewhat bizarrely the third highest number of viewings in October was from India. (Could that have been anything to do that month with Richard Taylor's presentation on the Marquess of Ripon and his Indian connections?) And in November the third-highest viewing figures were from …… Israel! No, I'm afraid that we can't find a link for that one.

https://riponcivicsociety.org.uk/

Unique visitors: These figures inform us of the number of individuals who have accessed our website; so repeat viewings don't count here. From August through November these have consistently clocked in at around 500 per month, except October when this leapt to around 1100. One can only surmise, but it is entirely possible, that this hike was in recognition of our comprehensive response to the proposed Ripon Barracks (Clotherholme) Development compiled by members of your committee. If you haven't yet read this, it is still there on the website. Click on the "About Us" tab and then on "Planning Correspondence".

Traffic – A fairly consistent 90% of our visitors arrive at our website via email and newsletter links and / or social media. Nowadays it is difficult to overestimate the value of social media in bringing attention to your cause. This is therefore an area that we plan to focus on in the coming months and years. If you have an idle moment why don't you have a look at Wakefield Civic Society's website https://wakefieldcivicsociety.org.uk/ which is something of an exemplar in this and other respects?

Downloads – On each occasion that one of our Newsletters is published there are approximately twenty "downloads" implying that members (or others) are printing copies, perhaps for later consumption? It is gratifying for those involved in its production that there is recognised interest in the finished article! Please keep reading.

And finally …

We would very much welcome comment, critical as well as complimentary: are there any areas that you particularly like …. or dislike? Are there omissions that you would like to see included or content that you feel might be superfluous? Please let us know. Why not use the "Contact Us" form on the website to do so?

https://riponcivicsociety.org.uk/

Reflections on our city centre

A decade ago in Ripon city centre, Benson's provided hardware, the Arcadia group offered Burtons and Dorothy Perkins, Stead and Simpson sold shoes, Curry's sold electrical goods. There was a small department store and most banks had branches.
Marks and Spencer anchored the recently opened Arcade and Booth's was about to open.
A reasonable offer for a market town?





Over the recent decade there has been increasing concern for the future of the high street, brought about significantly (but by no means exclusively) by shoppers choosing to buy online.

Planning regulations define various "use classes" for businesses and types of development. Properties are able to change occupier within the use class, but planning permission is needed to change from one use class to another. Some changes are permitted by government regulation. Some uses are unique, (known as 'sui generis') for which planning permission is always needed.

Town centre uses were collected in class A and divided into five sections for retail, professional and financial services, cafés and restaurants, public houses and takeaways. Other use classes would be found in town centres such as for assembly including halls, theatres and cinemas.

In September 2020 the Government finally decided that this process was getting in the way of high street properties changing from one use to another and a new wider set of use classes were approved to reduce red tape. Town centre activities now fall within a new use class E for Commercial, Business and Service uses.

Nothing stays the same and Ripon city centre, along with other high streets, has changed. Has this been for the worse, or the better? Let's look at some of the evidence.

A decade or so ago some Ripon voices were irritated by the reluctance of Harrogate Borough Council to grant permission for shops to be used for other types of business, such as building societies and cafes. Did this mean that Ripon had more vacant shops than other towns in the area? Would the city centre be more attractive if a more flexible approach was taken?





In 2012 a survey was carried out to find how properties in the city centre were being used. This used categories set up by the then Action for Market Towns (AMT) organisation so that individual towns could compare themselves with other places.

How many commercial units were there and how many were vacant? AMT also suggested looking at markets, where shoppers came from, car park usage, "footfall" and property values. There could be business confidence and user surveys.

The principal focus was on shop businesses. How many shops were used for day to day "convenience" purchases (that's food, tobacco, drink, newspapers and other consumables); and how many were "comparison" shops (such as clothing, books, hardware, chemists, furnishings and services including hairdressing).





Shops were also to be sorted into four business types.
Key Attractors named a specific list of department stores, mixed goods retailers (such as Boots, Argos, WH Smith), supermarkets, clothing and other retailers (such as Clintons and Superdrug). There were all national names.
The next type was *Multiple Retailers*. These have countrywide presence but did not feature as key attractors. (Many charity shops were included.)
A third type was the *Regional Trader* found in a particular part of the country and with stores in several towns.
Finally the survey looked for *Independent Traders* local to one centre.

The first step was to decide the city centre's boundaries. Surely it's obvious? Well, perhaps not. Ought the dozen or so businesses on North Street beyond Coltsgate Hill be included? How much of High Skellgate and Blossomgate should be counted? Ultimately data was collected for all commercial units, about 240 in total.





Other factors were decided. The Planning use class of each unit would be recorded. The survey would concentrate only on ground floor uses. Street level residential use would not be counted. (One day a survey should be carried out to find out the number of flats and apartments on upper floors and cottages in rear courtyards.) The three doctors' surgeries would be excluded but other incidental health related uses (such as dentists and osteopaths) would be recorded. The Spar convenience shop at the filling station on North Street was excluded.

Rather than just write about the 2012 results, the survey was repeated in December 2020. This allows comparison and the opportunity to observe what change is actually happening in the city centre. So,

- there are 3 more units overall (243)
- coincidentally there are 20 vacant units in both surveys, although they are mostly different properties (only 3 appear in both surveys). The number includes the former NatWest Bank which is being renovated and plans have been prepared for refurbishment of the former Lloyd's Bank. Others are to let or just dormant. Half of the vacant units are former shops (10)
- around 140 businesses operating in 2020 were active in 2012
- fewer than half of today's units are shops (110). (This excludes hairdressing and beauty businesses.)
- 93 shops are "comparison", 17 are "convenience"
- 10 "comparison" shops are charity shops
- 6 "key attractors" - *Superdrug*, *Specsavers*, *Boots the Chemist*, *WH Smith*, *Sainsbury's*, *Argos*
- 26 "multiple traders" - *M&Co*, *Fat Face*, *Mountain Warehouse*, *Timpson's*, *Gregg's*, *Holland & Barrett*, *Majestic Wines*, *Pets Corner*, *Home Bargains*, *Poundstretcher*, *The Works*, *Motor World*, *Card Factory*, *Day Lewis Pharmacy (2)*, *Edinburgh Woollen Mill*, *Tui*, *Cancer Research*, *Oxfam*, *Martin House*, *Scope*, *Age UK*, *Blue Cross*, *British Heart Foundation*, *Sue Ryder*, *Salvation Army*.
- 12 "regional traders"
- more than half of city centre shops are "independent traders"(62) (and some regional traders are independently owned)
- there are 20 hairdressers and 5 beauty salons, similar to 2012.

- units occupied by solicitors and estate agents have remained similar in number
- there are 26 places serving food to eat in (and also three PH / hotels serving meals as well as Booths in-store café)
- and 7 take aways
- a handful of specialists such as chiropodists, dental services, tailor, laundrette.

The imminent closures of Edinburgh Woollen Mill and Ponden Interiors have been announced and Tui appears not to be open. Argos is moving into Sainsbury's. None of these actions had happened at the date of the survey so they have been included as if trading.

Between the surveys Aldi and Marks and Spencer opened convenience food stores. A planning permission for a new larger Morrison's food store lapsed and permission was granted for alterations to the existing store. Are these complementary to the city centre?

Are you surprised by any of these results? What conclusions should we draw?
Do you think these show the city centre is a balanced "meeting place of choice"?









What trends might we be seeing?

Fewer familiar shops? Units for online click and collect. Showrooms for online traders? Offices for meeting clients in person? How might this affect the shop front? Will new high street uses expect more privacy? What might ground floor residents demand. Will we see new design approaches and how would we, as a civic society, respond to this?
What happens on upper floors? Could this affect how buildings look? And how will building owners respond, especially if current demand falls for high street property?

A lot of questions and little in the way of answers. Perhaps an answer will lie in how we want to use our city centre.

The Ripon Neighbourhood Plan shared the city centre between four quarters. Being the "meeting place of choice" depends on visitors to the city centre and its cultural and recreational attractions. The *Cathedral Precinct*, *Northern Quarter* and *Spa Quarter* each present different yet complementary facets of Ripon and the city centre along with the shopping focus of the *Market Place Quarter*.

Ripon Civic Society has for a long time argued that the city centre must be more than just retail. Our Market Place, Cathedral, museums, library, Spa Gardens and park are integral to what makes the city centre. Which is also why we'll be advocating positive proposals following relocation of the Spa Baths. Even the Town Hall has much to offer.

We think that there is ample evidence that the city centre can be sustained. This will mean taking a positive long term view and challenging convention - and that's what civic societies can do.



Beware of what we wish for

Good news arrived last month. Harrogate Borough Council refused planning permission for the demolition of the former North Yorkshire Timber building on Trinity Lane for housing. We objected to the loss of this building of interest to Ripon's industrial history, Kearsley's warehouse, and were supported by the Council's Conservation Officer.
In case the Council would be inclined to grant planning permission we added several reasons why the redevelopment was not good enough. These included materials, boundary treatment and lack of footpaths to link with other streets.
We shall have to see how the applicant deals with the refusal.





Experience warns of the difficult case of the former Girls' High School where, despite planning permission being given for conversion to apartments, there has been no progress and the building continues to deteriorate.

A third case is also relevant, that of the Tower Road field where despite the area being allocated as Local Green Space in the Ripon Neighbourhood Plan curiously there is no action on the part of Harrogate Borough Council to refuse an application to develop it for housing. We shall continue to press for the right decision to be made without further delay.

