

Chairman's Review Jan 2019

Looking at the political situation in Westminster, you would be forgiven for feeling very apprehensive about the future of our country. Fortunately the Stowmarket Society is not expected to come up with answers to the problems taxing our national politicians, even though we may sometimes be tempted to feel that we could probably do a better job.

One of the striking things about the situation we find ourselves in is that certain developments seem to carry on in the town regardless of the national scene, which is encouraging. The last year has seen:

- New housing being built, with the Chilton Park extension well under way, the last phases of Cedars Park nearing completion, and affordable housing in Wilkes Way and Violet Hill Road.
- Retail development, with Aldi being proposed on Gipping Way
- Food and drink proposals with a McDonalds under construction near Tesco's – and a Costa and Marstons pub rumoured to be part of the same development
- Major proposals for the Cedars Hotel are under discussion
- Industrial/employment units are under construction on the Cedars estate
- Mid Suffolk has bought the NatWest bank, tidied up the exterior and is preparing proposals for beneficial long-term community use.
- A significant maintenance scheme on the paving of the main street is improving its appearance, albeit not to the standards we would have ideally hoped for.
- On the Education front a rebuild of the High School is proposed.

In broad terms these are all positive things which the Society has in principle supported. Indeed, some of the proposals we have positively commended – we don't just say "No" to things! We advocated the acquisition of the important NatWest Listed Building by the public sector and were particularly pleased to play our part in hosting an Open Day at the bank, giving people the opportunity to see the premises and record their ideas for its future.

It is only when you stop to record the things that have happened or are happening that you realise what the rate of change is, and that is change mostly for the better.

Through all of these developments the Society has kept plans under review and commented where necessary if the designs are hopelessly inadequate and should be refused planning permission, or in need of significant improvement. It is widely accepted that local authorities are under significant strain with inadequate resources, and so the temptation is often to push things through, and not go for the incremental improvements that turn poor schemes into good ones. Our job is to highlight situations that are capable of improvement, and hopefully our interest is used by the planning authority to secure improvements, or help justify refusals. We don't win them all, but that is disappointing rather than surprising.

As you will have read in the latest Newsletter, we are concerned at the clouds gathering over the general retail scene in the country. The Internet is fundamentally affecting the economics of the High Street. If we are lucky Stowmarket may not be as badly affected as the larger shopping centres. Nevertheless, we will be lucky to escape some shop and bank closures . Just today the future closure of the Santander Bank was announced. Closures have a knock on effect on property values and therefore property maintenance levels. New builds in our main streets will be few and far between. It is not so long ago that a significant retail development in Ipswich Street was on the cards, but this has lost its moment of opportunity.

In the current climate nobody feels inclined towards complacency – anything could happen. However, Stowmarket is not a regional centre, its facilities exist largely to support its own population and that of adjacent villages. The continuing housing growth replaces at least some of the demand lost through changing habits. So we feel the town is well-positioned to withstand the changes that are in the air.

Turning to other matters, the Committee has worked on the updating of the Town Trail, which is jointly published with the Town Council. We have been out adjusting the route where thought beneficial, and bringing the commentary up-to-date. Jonathan has produced a very clear and artistic new map for the centrepiece. It is now published and copies are available for you to see after the meeting.

Once again this summer saw us on our annual historic churches tour. This is an eagerly awaited event, and this year we visited Eye, Yaxley and Gislingham. Thanks as ever, to Jon for preparing the tour and giving us an expert guide to each church. The weather once again was kind and the evening was rounded off in the customary convivial manner in the local pub.

We hope you remain happy with your Committee's work on your behalf. I would especially like to thank Jon Pattle our Secretary and John Gardiner our Treasurer, plus other Committee members Barry Salmon, Marilyn Finbow, and Tony and Sally Taylor, for their hard work and commitment.

Finally, to conclude as I have before, the organisation's strength is to some degree a reflection of its membership, so if any of you know of likely new members, please give them a copy of a recent newsletter and get them to send in the form on the back page to the address given. Fees are still very modest – indeed a bargain!

Mike Smith, Chairman. Jan 2019.