

## Report on Town Centre in 2023

As last year, the Society's interest in the town centre has focused on the work of the Strategic Partnership and on the town's historic buildings. The Strategic Partnership is an association of the main interests in the town, business, local government and charities. Its purpose is to identify priorities and secure support for them from each of the sponsoring organisations. It is intended to give a common sense of purpose for the town which has been conspicuously lacking for many years.

This year, the Partnership has been working on a vision and a set of strategic priorities for the town centre. Amongst them are likely to be projects already familiar, as for example, the Gateway project and the World Shakespeare Centre on which there was consultation recently; also, the Bridge Street /High Street project, which, as reported last year, has not received the hoped-for Government funding. Beyond this, there are proposals for building the town centre economy by encouraging more residential use, and boosting evening activity as well as proposals for building, a broader cultural focus and facilities for youth.

The draft plan will be finalised shortly and then referred to the local authorities for them to support its contents. It will then go for public consultation during which I expect to be able to bring it to the Society for full examination and response. The District Council have indicated they will aim to introduce the High Street part of the Bridge St / High Street scheme during the year though its precise timing will need to be co-ordinated with progress on the Debenhams Hotel re-building also expected to begin this year. I understand the County Council will shortly begin a temporary closure to research and test the traffic implications of a full-time closure.

During the year the General Committee authorised the re-establishment of a small group to consider and make recommendations on how to project further the heritage of the town as expressed through its historic buildings. It's membership so far is drawn from the Committee with two external members. It has immediately concentrated on the historic spine of the town and continuation of the pavement plaques scheme. Its recommendation is that the aim should be for a further 8 plaques along the spine, which would in effect conclude the first phase of the scheme. Thereafter, the focus could turn to buildings in other parts of the town or indeed to other ways of recognising and enhancing our historic buildings heritage.

Funding for the 8 plaques is proposed to be achieved through contributions from the owners of the buildings with a contribution from the Society's reserve funds but only where other funding would be unachievable. This was the approach taken in the later stages of the completed parts of the scheme. We are looking at other ways of securing funding from Government or publicly available sources to secure a sound basis for future initiatives.

**John Scampion**  
General Committee  
February 2024