

**“Focus on ... local identity”  
Ludlow conference 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> May 2004**

The event opened at 6.30pm on Wednesday evening with a Civic Reception at The Church Inn hosted by **Mayor Graeme Kidd**, with support from Ludlow Chamber of Commerce, The Food & Drink Festival and Slow Food – our thanks to Graeme Perks. This was followed by a whistle-stop, illustrated, summary of the history of Ludlow by **Dr Martin Speight**, of the Ludlow Historical Research Group. Delegates then enjoyed a meal at ‘Ego’ a restaurant in Quality Square.

On Thursday, at the Assembly Rooms, Mill Street, **Sam Howes, Chair of EHTF** and Deputy Chief Executive of Chichester District Council, welcomed delegates and explained that the event was part of the continuing series to highlight the important issues surrounding the subject of the Public Realm – following EHTF’s commitment at the 2003 Annual Conference to make this the focus of its work in the coming year. He stressed the importance of the social and economic impacts made by the Public Realm of a town or city. It also played an important part in defining and reinforcing local identity.

He also recommended the publication launched at the time – “Focus on the Public Realm”, which delegates were able to purchase.

**James Caird, Head of Planning and Building Control at South Shropshire District Council** gave an introduction to Ludlow and the contemporary planning issues, focusing on ‘new versus old and the maintenance of a viable local economy’.

Some of his main points were that:

- Nothing worthwhile can be achieved overnight – what we were seeing was the result of 15 years of partnerships.
- Things that make places unique are more important than those which make them the same.

He explored why Ludlow is like it is - the strategic, economic and environmental factors -and the current influences – in particular that of the Conservation Area Advisory Committee and the owners of buildings – who provide the resources in many cases and gain satisfaction from their investment.

The economy of Ludlow has always, he said, traded on the initiatives brought to the town. Harnessing and managing these was the key to success. “Don’t try to play King Canute!” he warned “Go with the flow – but manage it”.



**Old buildings - new uses**

He cited several examples of successful conversions of old buildings for new uses and advocated a good mix of old and new as well as embracing current trends – the Merchants House (14<sup>th</sup> in the *world* table of restaurants) was a good example of a chance taken, and which has led the restaurant movement in the town.

There were of course tensions in the Conservation Area and the difficulty of assessing the impact of out-of-town retail outlets remains.

Addressing the mix of old and new architecture, he suggested that many of the buildings we now value were not 'in keeping' when they were built but now form part of the character of a place. The direction for Local Authorities to keep a 'hands off design' approach in the '80s was very damaging but this is changing and James cited several examples of well designed interventions (eg: the Assembly Rooms and the Castle) which demonstrate that it is 'good vs poor' not 'old vs new' that we should concentrate on.

The Tesco building (which features in the CABE / English Heritage publication "Building in Context") is the result of 10 years evolution with support from John Gummer and the foresight of the architect Richard MacCormac. The innovative technology involved in the lighting and ventilation systems helped to reduce the impact of the building, and its sweeping roof reflects the curve of the natural environment beyond Ludlow.

The new College building attracted no controversy, he said, whereas the new Library has; each must be approached on its own merits. If pastiche is the decision, then it should be done well, he emphasised.

He suggested that we need to develop a methodology for assessing quality; he suggested:

- Design quality
- Appropriateness
- Craftsmanship
- Sourcing and correct use of materials
- Developing a structured approach

Where next? he asked, and listed the positive and negative aspects to be considered and summarised in terms of the economy and the design/conservation factors:

Economy:

- Be very cautious of change which is major and rapid
- Be prepared to give the benefit of the doubt where detriment is not clear
- Don't miss opportunities - turn them to advantage

Design/conservation:

- Economy is the springboard for good conservation
- Fitness for purpose is more important than copying historic styles
- Foster your craftsmen - they may be your future

**Colin Richards, Conservation Officer**, performed technical miracles with his presentation on sustainable conservation in South Shropshire, sourcing traditional materials and providing access to skills training.

He emphasised the importance of the relevance of conservation to today; *interpretation*, he said, was one of the key roles of the local authority, and to engage with the public and the media. The correlation between buildings, landscape and materials as well as inherent links with other cultures and working *with* people was key to the viability of projects.

Lost skills, redundant farm buildings (as a result of foot and mouth and BSE) and limited public resources led to the many project partnerships which make up the whole movement - treatment and use of local fleece for insulation, locally sourced and manufactured bricks, locally grown wheat for thatching - together with a recognition that large spaces, as in redundant barns, can have many other uses.



**Re-use for redundant farm buildings?**

The enthusiasm of the Local Authority led manufacturers and developers to invest and training programmes, also supported by the Local Authority, led to the re-establishment of the skills required to realise the projects.

The result has been a confidence built in local suppliers – Colin’s mantra was “research - repetition - reinforce”.

The skills programmes have brought together the ageing workforce and the younger trainees to fill the current gap in education programmes. The Local Authority has been an ‘enabler’ in this process, working with the colleges and the Centre for Rural Crafts.

The project is not inward looking either; Colin has taken a team to Romania to support and advise on a restoration and rebuilding programme there.

Projects like the restoration of the historic weir, he added, may not have tangible economic value but they are important in raising the profile of a place and bringing together people in a volunteer force which helps to achieve local cohesion.

The industrial architecture also has an important part to play, as do the variety of festivals which have become part of the culture of Ludlow.

Colin concluded with a short piece of film which was being made to capture the essence of the projects he was involved in.

***Paul Russell, Town Clerk of the Ludlow Town Council***, was proud that Ludlow had been asked to lead the Cittaslow Project in England. He explained the background to the project – coming out of the Italian Slow Food and the European Slow Cities movements. Concentrated in small towns, the emphasis was on local traditions and diversity, with a view to improving quality of life.

The Cittaslow principles are:

- Encourage diversity not standardisation
- Support and encourage local culture and traditions
- Work for a more sustainable local environment
- Support and encourage local produce and products
- Encourage healthy living especially through children and young people
- Work with local communities to build up these values
- Accept that “Rome was not built in a day”!

There was no intention to stand still or to eschew modern technology, but to add vitality to a place and its people.

The criteria for joining the movement are in the following categories:

- Environmental
- Infrastructure
- Urban Fabric
- Local Produce and Products
- Hospitality
- Awareness

He asked "what makes Ludlow an ideal Cittaslow?" and listed the following:

- Its local heritage
- Good local producers and suppliers
- Its culinary reputation
- Its commitment to quality
- Its commitment to sustainability
- Its commitment to partnership workings
- Its commitment to making the process work



“Ludslow?”

Paul also listed the benefits of being associated with the movement and looked forward to a slow future! At a meeting in Bra in Italy recently, although there had been no mention of costs, there had been a great deal of enthusiasm!

After coffee, **Rob Surl, Head of Transportation, Shropshire County Council**, presented “The repaving of Ludlow town centre – plaudits and pitfalls”. His role, he said, was somewhere between a planner and a traffic engineer; the traditional approaches of the engineer and the conservation officer were very different, but both contribute to the historic fabric of a town.

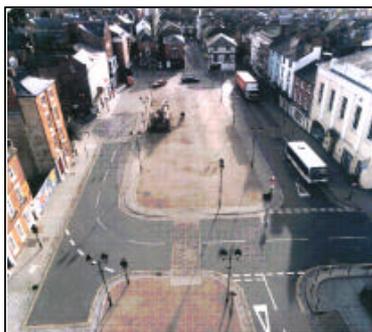
The aim of the repaving project was to reduce the impact of the traffic in the town centre whilst maintaining access, viability and vitality and respecting and enhancing the historic character. A tall order! Untidy signage and street markings and narrow pavements did nothing to enhance the town’s streetscape and hampered enjoyment of the architecture.

Another issue was the fact that arrival points are on the opposite side of the town from the historic streets and the castle, as was the new Tesco building. Access across the town was also therefore in need of improvement.

The tasks to be undertaken were to:

- Improve access by public transport, cycling and walking
- Make historic streets as attractive as possible
- Improve pedestrian access between east and west

There were three phases of town centre improvements:



Market Square

Phase 1 was in Castle Square, Mill Street, Broad Street and the High Street and included -

- the removal of parking which was controversial but went ahead with small compromises
- a limited pallet of materials used to achieve simple scheme
- a great deal of attention paid to the geometric designs – curves and simple lines.

It was a very long process to achieve the subtle but effective results which offer an improved setting for the surrounding buildings. This phase was jointly funded by the County, the District and the Town Councils together with European monies.



**Quality Square**

Phase 2 was made up of three smaller projects, the Castle entrance, Market Square and Quality Square. Rob was very pleased with the fact that the work was *unnoticeable*, it blends so well! There remain some unresolved parking problems but overall the projects, funded through the Local Transport Plan and English Heritage grants, have been successful.

Phase 3, in Old Street, Corve Street and the Bull ring, is currently in progress. Proposals for improvements to paving and crossings have been controversial, but will go ahead with the proviso that they will be reversed if necessary; but Rob believes the measures *will* work. Narrowing of gateways, 20mph speed limits and pedestrian dominance together with decriminalisation of parking are some of the measures being introduced.

The tours planned for the afternoon would, Rob promised, give delegates a better idea of the overall plans.

**Colin Davis of CJDA Ltd** explored the urban design details which contribute to enhancement of the streetscape. He drew attention to the ‘group of committed friends’ who had achieved the changes in Ludlow. There are, he said, no formal systems to deliver this sort of strategy. Like Ludlow, many ‘picture post card’ towns and cities are spoiled by the over use of signs and markings – “the chaos negates the quality”. A safe environment can be achieved within the law and without clutter, he assured.

The lack of co-ordination between the various agencies responsible for different elements of the public realm results in the chaos we see too often, with no one body having an overview of the whole picture – “like an orchestra without a conductor or composer – and with no rehearsal!”. The gulf between engineers and planners is also a problem; the professions, he said, must learn to understand each other better. He believed that unless the lead was taken at the level of Chief Executive or, more importantly, the Leader of the Council – who was likely to take an interest in the *detail* – as in a small number of places (eg: Kensington High Street and Devizes), the result was chaos.



The most important elements, he said, are maintenance, management and design. This is achieved in indoor shopping centres – so why not outdoors? Simplicity, good workmanship, high quality materials, local to the area, and attention to detail, are essential. Research by visiting places where it looks right – including exploration of the remnants of the way it used to be, in private forecourts and back yards - is very helpful. Whilst we continue to suffer from a lack of skills it is also essential to specify very clearly what is required.



Colin also showed examples of ‘gap sites’ – where end walls have been exposed and painted to enhance the built environment.

After lunch delegates chose two of the three walking tours of Ludlow led by James, Colin and Rob – each with a different emphasis – planning, conservation and traffic and paving.

Returning for tea and a plenary session discussion ranged over:

- the relationship between English Heritage and the Local Authority – which overall had been positive in Ludlow
- whether pedestrianisation had been an option – which James considered would have been a historical departure. It was management of the traffic that was important.
- A request for a ‘how to do it’ manual which Colin Davis said he was trying to achieve with the reissue of “Traffic Measures in Historic Towns”, he also referred delegates to his monthly column in Surveyor Magazine.
- Signage should not be sacrificed at a cost to legibility; there has to be a universal recognition of the sign and its meaning without the blandness of most of those in common use. It is possible to procure custom-made, distinctive signs which are fit for purpose.
- Local distinctiveness vs standardisation / globalisation? It is important to build on what you have already and not to lose sight of the fact that fundamentally it is the people who give a place its character.
- Design guides – are they helpful? Possibly but they can have a short shelf life and must leave room for flexibility and for future generations to make their mark too; some good examples have been produced by Suffolk and Edinburgh.
- Funding is always a problem, as is putting in place tracking mechanisms to measure the generation of investment as a result of projects. It is difficult to untangle the various elements which might effect this. One of the most important attainments in improvements to quality of life and this is difficult to quantify.



**Delegates take a walking tour of Ludlow**

**In summary**, Sam Howes said that:

- James's comment that **“the things that make a place unique are more important than the ones that make them the same”** should be remembered.
- It is important to get three things right: - **design, materials and skills**.
- We must continue to lobby the Department for Transport for support in using appropriate methods of traffic control in sensitive areas.
- The EHTF publications **“Focus on the Public Realm”**, the **“Historic Core Zones Project”** report and the **“Historic Core Zones Project Review”** were designed and written to help with the problems which had been discussed.



**Speakers' panel**

He concluded by thanking everyone who had helped to make the event possible and enjoyable and reminded delegates that the next event in the series would be held in Buxton on 29<sup>th</sup> June – **“Focus on ... regeneration through public buildings and spaces”**.

*Chris Winter  
EHTF  
May 2004*