

Maidstone Town - a view from the villages



Drawn by G Shepherd



MAIDSTONE TOWN – A VIEW FROM THE VILLAGES

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE) is a national organisation which exists to protect the English countryside from inappropriate overdevelopment. For many years, CPRE has also involved itself in urban issues because of the close inter-relationship between town and country.

The local Maidstone Committee of Protect Kent (CPRE Kent) focuses on issues throughout the whole Borough of Maidstone and is concerned with the situation of our county town, in particular our town centre. Although many of our members live in the town, the authors of this report live in the surrounding villages. We present a local perspective from outside the town and would wish to see the town centre as a place to visit for us, visitors or tourists to shop, eat or to bring friends.

Here we put forward some proposals which we hope will enhance the town centre, making it a more pleasant and enjoyable environment for everyone. We see this as a necessity if we are to promote economic and social regeneration in Maidstone in the future.

Maidstone Town

Maidstone, although the county town, appears to be generally less well regarded than other major towns in Kent. Somehow it lacks a defined image, and is not seen to compete well with popular Kent visitor hotspots such as Canterbury with its Cathedral, Tunbridge Wells with the Pantiles and Victoria Centre, Bluewater for shopping, Rochester with its Castle and Chatham with its Historic Dockyard.

Protect Kent Maidstone strongly believes that Maidstone has great potential for improvement. It seems to hide its assets to an almost perverse degree. Although many proposals have been made in the past to improve our town, little has been achieved and we feel this needs to be addressed.

Those who live in Maidstone's surrounding villages, who have a choice of where to go, often avoid the town centre. Unfortunately there is a widespread attitude that visiting the centre of Maidstone is on the basis of 'only if I have to' rather than for pleasure, to relax or to enjoy what the town has to offer.

Traffic and parking issues significantly affect the choice of whether to go in to the town centre or not as, in our view, it is currently not an easy place to visit.

The High Street

The current perception of the High Street is poor, and it is therefore encouraging to see action on the current project to redesign the High Street. Protect Kent Maidstone welcomes the design chosen, which includes the creation of some much needed public urban open space, so sadly lacking from our town.

The areas both east and west of the town hall would be ideal for this, particularly that to the east from the town hall to Gabriel's Hill. We note that the buses will continue to operate along the High Street, and hope consideration has been made to route the buses to ensure they take the minimum road width away from the south side, even if where they run becomes shared space. This area contains the greater concentration of listed and significant buildings. We trust that the final design will create a much greater awareness of them.

The High Street shopping, apart from the Week Street cross roads area, must be considered to be rather secondary, and it almost finishes towards the River Medway.

Protect Kent Maidstone hopes that the project will improve this situation even though it can not directly affect the buildings and shops themselves. Unfortunately the present road system destroys any possibility of the area benefiting from its closeness to the River Medway.

Although this project will enhance this part of Maidstone, we feel that it will not be sufficient as a standalone improvement to overcome the negative perception of the town centre.



East end of the High Street



High Street

Shopping in Maidstone

We consider here the town centre to be on the east side of the river. It is essentially an area of mostly small shops with only a few larger exceptions. The west side of the river is principally the larger warehouse-type operations, many with their own parking areas, which do not relate easily to the main town centre area.

Maidstone currently has a number of low quality shops and an apparent shortage of higher quality and designer shops, and restaurants, which could attract more affluent customers to the town. The opening of the Fremlin Walk Shopping Centre appears to have improved the overall range and to some extent the quality of the shops. However the overall footfall figures have increased since it was opened, but by a disappointingly small amount.

This situation may have resulted from the town's industrial employment history and in consequence being a town of small, lower value houses (it has a higher percentage of Council Tax A and B properties than very many of Kent's other towns).

The range of shops in Maidstone is varied and consists of commercial operations including banks and building societies. Protect Kent Maidstone feels it is essential to make the town centre a much more pleasant place to be and to relax. Better public amenities such as 'town squares' and easy access to green spaces such as Brenchley Gardens, the historic area and where possible the river – would all help to attract more high quality retailers to Maidstone. The only way for the town centre to grow and improve its economy is to attract more visitors.

Public Urban Open Space - 'Town Squares'

"Maidstone is a nice town but there is nowhere you can sit and eat your sandwiches"

This quote from a visitor to Maidstone, may not be strictly accurate but highlights a good point none the less. Protect Kent Maidstone would like to see further public urban open space created to enhance the town and reinforce and complement whatever is done in the High Street. The main shopping area now runs from the Chequers Centre on an axis across the High Street, along Week Street to the Fremlin Walk.

We suggest that Faith Street between the northern exit from the Fremlin Walk and the Museum should be pedestrianised and remodelled to create a town square.

This would take advantage of and open up the beautiful and historic Elizabethan frontage of our Museum, as well as giving focus to the sweeping set of steps coming down from Fremlin Walk.

Planting and greening would need to be considered in detail, to include in its design the formation of areas to sit, possibly with coffee and restaurant facilities.



Open Space by Maidstone Museum

It would also require altering the bus routes past County Hall to come via the roundabout from Sandling Road and make turning space on the south side of the East Station. We believe that this project together with the High Street changes would begin to bring significant improvement to the image of the town.

Brenchley Gardens

A recent visitor remarked “We enjoyed the Museum but had no idea it had a public garden behind it”.

Protect Kent Maidstone sees Brenchley Gardens as one of Maidstone’s hidden assets. The entrances, in particular at the station end past the public conveniences, are not inviting and somehow the gardens are disconnected from Week Street, with very few people walking along Station Road. Protect Kent Maidstone believes that the Borough Council has also expressed the same view. We would suggest that if part of Faith Street could be pedestrianised as suggested above, this should be continued round the corner to include most of Station Road.

We note that the hedge along the road in the Gardens has been removed and now replaced with railings. This does to a small extent open up the gardens by making them a little more visible, but our preference would have been to include just the low wall to help increase the awareness of the gardens from Station Road and Week Street.



Brenchley Gardens access from Maidstone Museum



Archbishops Palace



*Brenchley Gardens North Entrance
by Public Conveniences*

All three entrances are currently rather uninviting, and we believe that those at either end of Station Road should be made wider and more prominent (particularly the way past the public conveniences (as above)). The purpose is to make the gardens feel more like an inclusive part of the townscape from both Fremlin Walk and Week Street, to enhance the feeling of quality so necessary to the town centre.



Brenchley Gardens South Entrance from Station Road

The Historic Area

The historic area of Maidstone is another area that could be a major asset to our town. At present, in our view, this area falls well below its full potential.

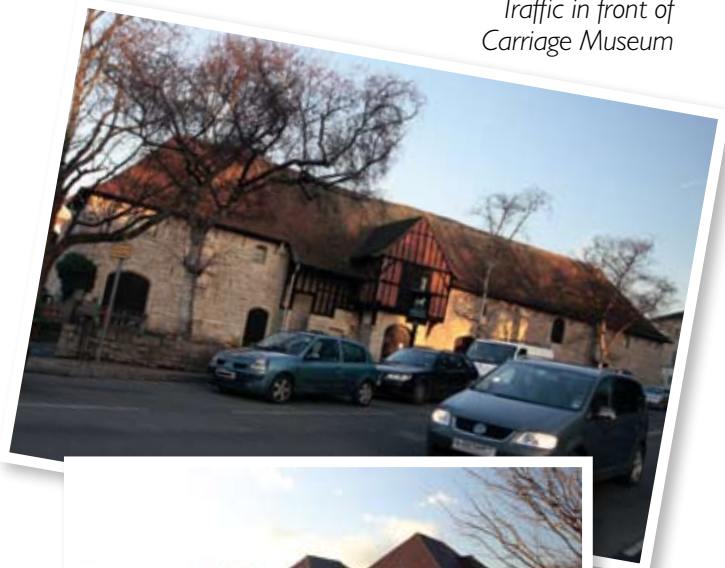
The area starts at the Archbishops Palace, with its splendid but almost hidden garden between the road and the river, and includes the carriage museum on the other side of the road with its little park to the back. It continues south, past All Saints Church and numerous interesting medieval buildings, all the way up to College Avenue and the derelict stone gateway.

There is a small well-maintained garden alongside this gateway. In College Avenue there is an unmarked path down to the amphitheatre and Rose Garden, leading back to the river and pedestrian bridge. There are however major problems at the present time which stifle any attempt to appreciate this area.

The historic area is practically cut off from the town centre by the volume of traffic down College Road and Bishops Way. The Carriage Museum is cut off from the Archbishops Palace area by the main road. The area is not opened up to have any distinct form or continuity and much is hidden from public view. In addition the car parks, particularly the one in front of the College, detract enormously.

Although the gardens are well maintained some of the larger trees have become overwhelming, as has the growth between the rose garden and the river,

Traffic in front of Carriage Museum



and should be cut back. Little of the area has any form of proper public access except the church and the carriage museum.

This is an area that could draw in people and generate tourism in a way the town almost entirely lacks at present, as well as providing a focal point within the town for both locals and visitors to relax in and enjoy.

Much of it is also alongside the river. It is essential in our view that the road proposals for the All Saints by-pass that have been mooted for many years should be re-examined to ensure that their objective is primarily to free this area from its current traffic blight, rather than just consider traffic flows. One objective Protect Kent Maidstone feels is important is to directly connect the Carriage Museum with the Archbishops Palace, without having to cross any roadway.

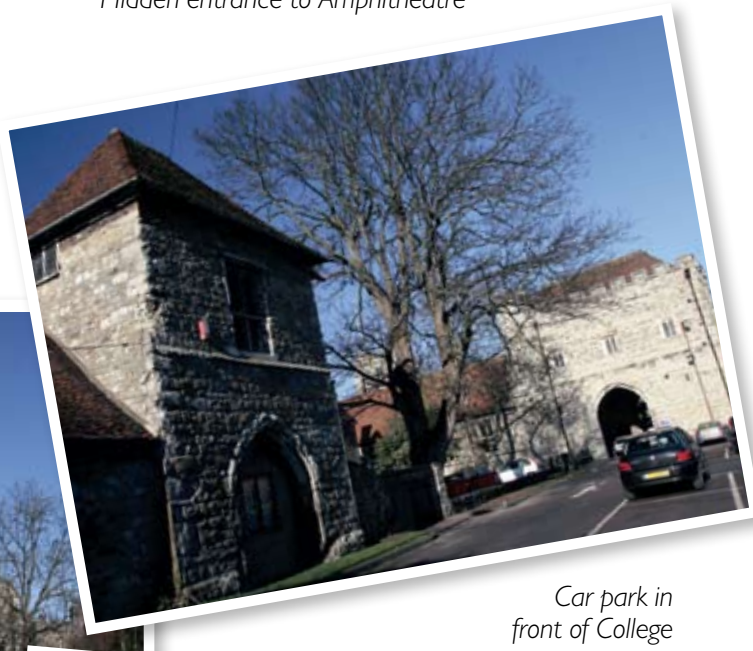
We feel the Museum could furnish the Archbishops Palace and open it to the public, letting it act as an annexe to the main museum. This would avoid the cost of the extension currently planned while creating an additional tourist attraction.

There do not appear to have ever been any attempts made for the town to benefit from this asset in any coherent manner.

Protect Kent Maidstone strongly suggests that a project structured similarly to that now in hand for the High Street should follow on as soon as possible to achieve the potential benefits of this historic area.



Hidden entrance to Amphitheatre



Car park in front of College



Amphitheatre



Ruined Gateway

Parking

Parking is very important to those of us who visit the town. Protect Kent Maidstone believes parking should be regarded as a means of stimulating the flow of visitors in to the town, as an asset to be maximised for the town's benefit.

At this time the emphasis appears to be on minimising the costs of operating the parks rather valuing the fact that every visitor is likely to spend money to the town's benefit.



College Road Pay and Display Car Park

The Park and Ride schemes are generally very good and meet the needs of those who wish to spend time in the town during the day. Unfortunately they close and are locked at 6.30pm, which discourages visitors using the Park and Ride to extend their visit in to the evenings.

Protect Kent Maidstone believes that our town centre car parks should be a facility just for people intending on a short visit. At present, the short stay car parks in the town centre are both fairly expensive and not sensibly time limited.

These car parks should be seen as an asset, to be used for the wider benefit of the town. We would suggest that the best mode of operation is to have a pay on exit scheme, with an escalating charge over time (second hour costs more than the first, third even more and so on). This reduces stress while prompting early return, but allows for unanticipated extension to time without resorting to penalties. This is much more comfortable for visitors and might also reduce some of the need for warden staff.

Public Conveniences

Well kept public conveniences are essential amenities of any thriving town. The Council is currently reviewing the operation of its public conveniences with a view to saving costs, and has closed a number. While it might seem inappropriate to describe toilets as an attraction, a lack of them will certainly become a disincentive to visiting the town centre.



Riverside Public Convenience

The alternative, of contracting with shop and restaurant operators does offer possibilities, but which need to become certainties. Demographic changes, with increased numbers of elderly people, will make these facilities more important

Protect Kent Maidstone is concerned at the loss of the public convenience in Palace Avenue, less than attractive though it was, because this was the nearest one to the car parks along College Road where many visitors arrive. It was therefore important to them, even though it was away from the main shopping areas and so overall may have been used less than others.

Traffic

The traffic in Maidstone is currently fairly well managed. There is great benefit to the town in keeping the High Street car free and Week Street traffic free.

The road alongside the river unfortunately removes any real possibility of incorporating the river in to the town scene, but its traffic flow does seem to be limited by the extraordinary number of traffic lights including those over the bridges. Some of these could be engineered out.

A revised All Saints by-pass should allow the historic area to be unified and traffic free, requiring a re-routing of vehicles coming down College Road / Mill Street southwards.

This could be possibly be achieved in part by routing these traffic lanes behind the Carriage Museum, replacing the little park within the opened up area, although this would incur some cost.



Too many traffic lights, Riverside

There needs to be a very easy pedestrian connection across these roads, possibly by a bridge, to minimise the separation of the historic area from the town centre. This new road layout must be designed principally to improve the town, rather than just to facilitate easier traffic flows.

Maidstone Town Fringe

Maidstone town centre has a great need and scope for improvements. However there are some marvellous amenities and attractions around the fringe of the town.

Protect Kent Maidstone is aware that many visitors are unaware of, or have difficulty finding these hidden attractions, even though they are in fairly easy reach.

The Millennium Park, and particularly Whatman's Field, is extremely poorly signposted, and hazardous to reach on foot. It has wonderful facilities, including a superb children's play area and skateboard/cycle arena.

The route to it via Monckton's Lane has highly off-putting signage saying "no parking for the millennium park". The footbridge over the river is very difficult to find and it is not accessible from the towpath.

In the opposite direction Mote Park is only a fairly short walk from the back of the Chequers Centre but totally unsigned. The Museum of Kent Life is also reasonably close, particularly if accessed from the river towpath and the Cobtree estate which almost connects to it.

There are many other assets of this type, which should be of great benefit in attracting visitors to Maidstone, but which do not seem to have wider public awareness.

Planning Policies

We look forward to the Council developing planning policies which would safeguard the best that the town has to offer, and are more sympathetic to its character, while promoting improvements where necessary. In particular we would wish to see a height restriction on all new buildings to no more than four storeys in the town centre, to avoid overwhelming the older buildings.

Maidstone has a considerable number of both listed and interesting buildings which are quite difficult to appreciate at this time. We welcome the current attention the Borough Council is giving at this time to analysing and appraising the various areas of the town.

Protect Kent Maidstone would also like to see that new buildings complement the area where they are proposed and fit in with the local character, even when they are outside designated Conservation Areas.

For example buildings such as those in Eclipse Park are overly dominant in the street scene and far too close to the road; they obscure the view and presence of the North Downs which is such an important part of Maidstone's attraction and seriously detract from the Hilton Hotel. It does not give the right impression of the town.

The River

It is unfortunate that Maidstone town centre does not make enough of one of its major asset, the beautiful River Medway. At present, the river makes no contribution to the townscape. Indeed it could almost just be seen as an obstruction to traffic flows, because of the limitations of the two adjacent bridges which form the connection between the town centre and the western side.

It is very difficult to see how any real improvements could be made to this situation with the current road layout. The High Street improvement project stops at the roadways adjacent to the river rather than continuing down to its banks.

The underpasses are particularly unpleasant. It is of course possible to walk along the river banks, and there are very interesting pedestrian bridges, particularly the Millennium Bridge to Lockmeadow, close to All Saints Church.

One possibility would be to promote more river activity in the areas extending to either side or between the road bridges. This could perhaps be achieved by creating additional mooring spaces, cutting in to the bank somewhat and putting in a few small jetties where appropriate.

The recent addition of a floating restaurant near the bridges has added interest and should become a new attraction to the town centre. Protect Kent Maidstone welcomes this development.

The success of the annual Maidstone River Festival, which attracts large numbers of boats but centres its activities on Whatman Park, serves to emphasise the lost opportunities for the town centre.



Pedestrian Footbridge over River Medway



Riverside Underpass



Archbishops Palace from River Medway



Summary

Protect Kent Maidstone welcomes the initiative of the Borough Council towards improving the High Street, but we believe that there is very much more to do improve the town to attract visitors and to raise the image of the town.

The more attractive the town becomes the more likely it is that improvements to its businesses, shopping and tourism and therefore the economy will happen. We suggest the Council put together a programme of improvements to follow on from the High Street project.

Suggested elements for inclusion:

- Adding a 'town square' between Fremilins Walk northern exit and the Museum
- Improvement of the visibility and entrances to Brenchley Gardens from Week Street and Fremilins Walk
- Unification of the historic area and traffic reduction (follow-on project from the High Street)
- Review of parking schemes both in and out of the town centre
- Change of attitude towards seeing the public conveniences as an asset not a cost
- Review of traffic flows to avoid separating the Carriage Museum from the Archbishops Palace
- Reducing the number of traffic lights
- Additional mooring facilities for small craft on the River Medway near the bridges

Maidstone has all the potential to be a very attractive town, but currently struggles to achieve its potential.

Our town does not appear to be recognised as a significant tourist destination and even those of us who live in the borough usually have second thoughts about going in to the town.

There are many improvements that can be made and we are well aware that the Borough Council has unsuccessfully promoted many of these in the past. These proposals are intended to be helpful in identifying some of the possible changes that would improve the future prospects of the town.

Protect Kent Maidstone

February 2010



Maidstone circa 1910