

ALTON TOWN CENTRE



Introduction

We have looked at, and completed, the surveys currently being circulated by Heartflood. We feel strongly that they no more than scratched the surface, so we set out below more detailed ideas and observations about reshaping our Town Centre.

The Town

Alton is an expanding town: a wave of development is taking place which is adding over a thousand new households to our community and during the remainder of this decade more developments will follow. The character of the town is changing: it is moving from a market town with a brewery background and industry towards a dormitory town with an increasing emphasis on retirement homes. Often neglected is the fact that we have an academic population of over 3,000 teenagers (Alton College, Amery and Eggars).

The town has many advantages:

- an unspoilt town centre, compact and accessible
- plentiful central car parking
- an attractive country valley setting (to be preserved)
- direct rail service to London
- good road network
- good bus service south to Winchester
- five central venues for events
 - Community Centre
 - Assembly Rooms
 - The Maltings
 - Alton College
 - Library
- Three supermarkets on the fringe of town (one of them just off the town centre), with the expected addition of a fourth at the proposed new retail part in Mill Lane.



Attractions

The town already benefits from:

- The Watercress Line
- Jane Austen aura (Chawton and Chawton House)
- Alton Gallery and Curtis Museum (both central)
- The River Wey and three public open spaces within easy walking distance of the Town Centre

- Regency Week
- Beer Festival (bi-annual)
- Transport rallies (cars, buses)
- Weekly market
- Alton Town Council park programme
- New Sports Centre
- 'Marmot Christmas'
- May's Walking Festival
- The Palace Cinema
- The Bottle Fair (bi-annual)
- Civil War re-enactments
- An emerging café society on both the High Street and in Market Square
- The arrival of new businesses, mainly independents
- A Monthly Farmers' Market, although this appears to have been declining – potentially due to the popularity of direct selling to consumers as a result of the pandemic?



Target

What do we want to change/encourage?

- a) more visitors: day or stay? both?
- b) more for the teenage population to do
- c) drawing the new estates' residents into the town to spend, participate and contribute

Improving the Town Centre

We have listed below some suggestions:

- a) Appearance and presentation:
 - smartness (shops and frontages)
 - cleanliness - litter war
 - signage - simplified and updated
 - flowers and trees (more of both)
- b) Car parking - first hour to be free (to encourage longer stays)
- c) Late evening shopping: once a week in the summer season and during run-up to Christmas
- d) Encourage new businesses on High Street and Market Street:
 - use of 'pop up' tenancies
 - i. (exhibitions, sales, collectables, crafts, advertising - local, societies, schools)
 - new ventures to be encouraged:
 - i. butcher*
 - ii. artisan baker/cake shop*
 - iii. hair salon
 - iv. toy shop
 - v. greengrocer*
 - vi. delicatessen*
 - vii. another bistro (High Street) - ? already in prospect
 - viii. more cafés
 - ix. craft supplies, such as yarn, fabrics, haberdashery, papercrafts, jewellery

founded 1984

Representing the residents of Amery Hill, Amery Street, The Cloisters, Cromwell Gardens, Kingdon's Mews, Oliver Rise, Steeple Drive, Tanhouse Lane & Vicarage Hill, Alton

- x. 'Digital Hub' – providing a space for home-workers to hotdesk/book meeting rooms
 - xi. *if not individual premises, perhaps a 'Farm Shop' shared space for local producers, akin to the new Creative Emporium
 - Alongside a policy of no more stores on outskirts which could devitalise the Town Centre
- e) Publicise!
- Selling the town on social media and in print
 - Establish a proper Tourist Information Centre:
 - i. Our proposal is that space in the Assembly Rooms (ground floor front) could be used to offer an active service for visitors as opposed to a passive 'cupboard' of leaflets in a back street without any staff. Having a manned presence is either an employment opportunity in the town or the opportunity for volunteering. An alternative location could be to use one of the empty shops in the Town Centre.
 - ii. More features and explorations of the Town to be highlighted e.g. Tree Trail, Architectural Highlights
- f) Museum and Gallery - an active focus:
- more should be made of these assets. Publicity for the outstanding collection of china and pottery upstairs in the Allen Gallery - more talks and themed displays. Establish a new exhibition of Alton History of Brewing upstairs in the Assembly Rooms – potential to partner with Alton College media students to create an interactive, multi-media display?
 - i. Seek investment to make the Curtis Museum more interactive and visitor responsive.
 - ii. If relocating the Tourist Information to the ground floor of the Assembly Rooms, and introducing an Alton History of Brewing to the upstairs floor of the Assembly Rooms, there is the opportunity to identify the Museum/Assembly Rooms complex as Alton's 'Cultural Centre'.
 - More events on the Green.
- g) More themed events, e.g:
- Film Festival (Palace Cinema and Alton College)
 - an Austen Weekend: talks and tours (Chawton and Chawton House)
 - an Opie Weekend: (folk) dance, songs and talks
- h) Cyclist access and pedestrianisation. The former has been much improved with cycle racks and repair stations. Changes in High Street access can be considered but must be thought through carefully, particularly with regards to numbers and benefit. Pedestrianisation is a controversial topic and does not have the same priority as other proposed measures.



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Conclusion

The Town already has much to offer but undersells itself: that needs to be changed. This needs active support and contributions from County and District. There is scope, with backing and encouragement, to extend the range of what is on offer and to draw new residents and visitors in and to integrate new residents. Alton's residents are proud of their town but have become disillusioned by the gentle demise of a vibrant High Street. Against the backdrop of the changing nature of retail and purpose of High Street businesses, it will be easy to dismiss these ideas as impractical or to say 'We've already tried that'. If we do not make an effort, nothing will change and we will quietly slip further down, overtaken by Bordon and Petersfield, with a sclerotic centre, slowly seizing up, to be labelled 'Gateway to the National Park', a transit zone.

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