NEWS

Harrogate Heritage

Looking back: What would you choose for town – homes or shops?

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For almost twenty years from 1995, the eminent local historian Malcolm Neesam contributed a series of remarkable articles to the Advertiser, initially under the headline 'Bygone Harrogate' and later using the title 'Our Heritage'. In association with Harrogate Civic Society, we are proud to republish a selection from the series. The views expressed were those of the late Mr Neesam at the time of writing and do not necessarily reflect the current view of the Advertiser or Harrogate Civic Society.

Some readers may have heard the recent comments from a government advisor about the changing use of streets in so many British towns, and I suppose there can be few townspeople who feel that their familiar urban landscape has remained unchanged since their earliest memories.

The forces that have caused these changes may have been the result of alterations in residential, commercial or industrial activity.

Some areas become fashionable residential localities, which are promoted by builders and estate agents, whereas others suffer from falling land values or a withdrawal of support from homeowners or shoppers.

As we can all see, Harrogate has not been immune to such changes. The present Harrogate urban area owes the majority of its land use to planned development, rather than uncontrolled, random growth.

Old Bilton developed around the needs of tenant farmers within the Royal Forest; High Harrogate, instead of developing as ribbon development, found it advantageous to grow around the four principal wells, two of which were mineral wells (the Tewit Well and the St. John's Well), two of which were fresh water wells (the Black Spring and the Moor Well).

The hinterland of High Harrogate in its earliest form consisted of the farming estates of the great hotels, and after c.1840, a number of small housing developments (Shutt Hill, Myrtle Square, etc) Low Harrogate, by contrast, grew around the Old Sulphur Well, the Bogs Field wells, and the principal access roads to these settlements: Robin Hood Lane (now Cold Bath Road) and the turnpike route now formed by the Leeds to Ripon Road.

Other important factors in the history of Harrogate's urbanisation were the retention of large tracts of land by the Duchy of Lancaster, after the enclosure of the Royal Forest in 1770, the small number of land owners other than the Duchy who controlled Harrogate lands after the Award of 1778, and the arrival of the railways in 1848.

This last matter had a powerful effect, in that the food-stuffs that could then be imported in bulk rendered obsolete the farms which had hither-to supplied the great hotels, the farm land then becoming more profitable as land for houses and shops. In the light of such expansion, the population increased, growing from 3,434 in 1851 to 6,775 in 1871.

Few townspeople will feel that their familiar urban landscape has remained unchanged

By the latter year, the Victoria Park Company had been in existence for ten years, and had achieved its goal of linking the two medieval villages of High and Low Harrogate into a single town with a new centre based on Station Parade, Victoria Avenue, and surrounding streets.

The eventual success of the Victoria Park Company's urbanization plan led to imitators. Joshua Bowers scheme to build "high class villas" on the lands of the old Dragon Hotel was dealt a body blow by the arrival of a central railway station opening in 1862, the lines for which devalued the surrounding land, but which could not prevent its eventual urbanisation by the Chippindale brothers, who crammed low-cost terrace properties on to the site which proved attractive to Harrogate's growing population of working families.

The Bown estate between the cemetery, King's Road, and the lands of the Victoria Park Company, was another planned scheme of urbanisation, which included Grove Road and the Franklins.



A private house once stood on the site of Barclay's Bank in James Street.

Isaac Pickard developed the Tewit Well estate between the Stray, Leeds Road and Tewit Well Road, and the Raworth brothers had a hand in the growth of the White House estate.

And all these developments were distinct from the Duchy of Lancaster developments at Red Bank [now known as Beech Grove] or the Duchy estate, built largely by the great David Simpson.

One of the most interesting of Harrogate's developers was George Dawson, who was a magnificent builder as well as a clever man of business.

When he began to build Cambridge Crescent, the first units appear to have been built as lodging houses, for the accommodation of visitors to the Spa who did not wish to pay the high prices at the hotels.

The design of these early Cambridge Crescent units reflected their intended use, as the ground floor had moderate sized windows suitable for reception room of a lodging house. But as Dawson progressed with his scheme, it became clear that the future heart of the new Harrogate would be retail, rather than residential, so Dawson introduced huge plate glass windows at ground floor level, which were ideal for the display of retail goods.

Over the years, several Harrogate streets have fluctuated between being purely residential or purely commercial, such as James Street, which began life as a residential locality.

The purpose of this article is to suggest that if the public continues to patronise the big supermarkets which have been built on land originally intended for residential use, and if the planners continue to allow this, we may see a declining use of town centre properties for retail purposes.

Rather than perpetuate empty retail units I suggest that every encouragement should be given to adapt them for residential purposes.

Although I hope it will never happen, I can imagine James Street, Prince's Square, and Cheltenham Parade as purely residential.

What do readers think is the solution to empty town-centre retail properties?

This article was first published on September 13, 2012

A note from Harrogate Civic Society: It is now almost four years since Malcolm's death. He left behind an astonishing body of work that we at the Harrogate Civic Society are determined should be preserved and enhanced for the benefit of future historians and, indeed, for the benefit of anyone who cares about Harrogate.

Not long before his passing, we discussed with Malcolm and the *Advertiser* republishing at least some of his articles.

Many of Malcolm's arti-



The iconic Hoopers on James Street.

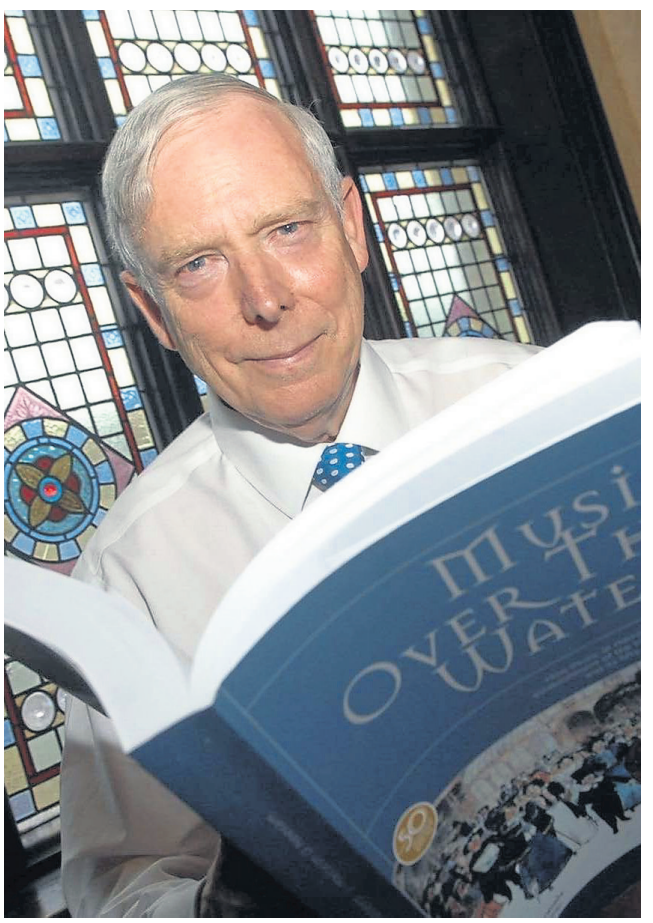
cles dealt with the history of the town, exploring the people, places and events that helped to form the Harrogate we know today. At other times Malcolm concentrated more on contemporary issues.

While acknowledging that Harrogate could not stand still, he was convinced that change should always be tested.

We are grateful to Malcolm's family for their approval, to Simon Kent (closely involved with securing Malcolm's legacy) for his work researching and preparing the articles for reprint, for the advice of historian Paul Jennings and to Graham Chalmers and his team at the *Advertiser* for their support and encouragement.

We hope you will enjoy reading (or in some cases re-reading) these irreplaceable snapshots of history.

If you are able to add to our knowledge, or wish to know more about our work, contact us at: history@harrogatecivicsociety.org



The late Malcolm Neesam.



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A choice between homes and shops

The iconic Hoopers on James Street.

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