

A BRIEF HISTORY OF PLANNING IN SHREWSBURY

Shrewsbury's early planning and building grew 'organically' according to whatever needs or influences existed at the time. It was not 'laid out' like Ludlow. For centuries it was created by local owners and local craftsmen using local materials to meet local practical requirements. For half a millennium, they were all following traditions introduced by the Normans, and gradually becoming anglicised.

However, the Renaissance had reached us by the 17th century, (in the form of the Jacobean Council House Gateway), and 'taste' became a new factor. Fortunately, 'taste' was generally in educated hands. In any case, it was restrained by a level of self-policing (and neighbour-opinion), which served us very well for a few more centuries. Then commercialism crept in, and 'marks began to be over-stepped' by some of the nouveau riche of the times. New materials and building methods brought greater freedom, ready to be mis-used.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries brought traffic, for which the fabric of the town was not prepared, and 'Local Authorities' had been established and staffed. They were run by the gentry at first, then later by committees of elected lay councillors, with varying results, depending on calibre.

Many excellent minor street improvements were carried out, and services installed. But the proposed demolition of English Bridge and replacement with a "flat, concrete one" highlighted the dangers of too much 'democracy' with too little expertise. Described as "*the most beautiful bridge in England*" (designed by John Gwynne, founder of the Royal Academy), it was only saved from the then 'practical men', whom the mayor had 'consulted', by Shrewsbury's early Borough Surveyor.

Fortunately surveyor Arthur Ward was also an Architect. We owe him a great debt of gratitude. He was our first, but quite unofficial planning and conservation system, exercised by personal contact as he walked around the town advising on the building work as he passed. Only under the post-war Planning Act of 1944 was his function given the support of legislation. Though rarely also a trained architect, Surveyors were given complete authority over all Planning and design. However, under the 1974 Local Government Reorganisation, their hitherto 'planning assistant' was made a "Chief Planning Officer". We were fortunate in ours, in SABC. It was Harold Berry.

The Shropshire Society of Architects (as the local branch of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA)), persuaded him to obtain permission to create the post of a "Conservation Officer" in his new department. He was thus able to appoint, and always fully supported, Andrew Arrol, a Chartered Architect who also held the AA Diploma of the Architectural Association, London. This was the beginning of our 'enlightened period' of active conservation - now sadly remote - seemingly leaving the Civic Society as the town's main protection against the constant threat of misguided 'progress'.

After Andrew left to start a private practice, the authority appointed a replacement "with an architectural degree" (mistakenly taken as being a qualified Architect!). He was soon succeeded by Michael (Micky) King, another highly qualified and experienced Architect. He continued Andrew's good work in Shrewsbury until reaching retirement age. Sadly, through modern economies, he has not been replaced.

Then, despite a contrary consultation vote, we 'went Unitary'. The new Shropshire County's first Conservation Officer and adviser on design, responsible for the whole county, was Colin Richards. He was much experienced and respected in the old 'South Shropshire authority' area, so naturally could not immediately be familiar with Shrewsbury's background and problems. Quite soon, with the new

authority's emphasis on 'growth', and perhaps thinking that the need for a Conservation Officer was lessened, he was "let go" - again, as part of the general 'cuts' - along with the status of the position.