

OUR DINGY TOWN

(and how we could make our streets look so much better in anniversary year)

TV expert and resident Ptolemy Dean gives his verdict and his solutions.

LEANING ON THE COUNCIL TO MEND AN OLD LAMPOST

Date : 25.11.05

It Started with a lamppost but has ended with an alarming exposure of the threat to the unique heritage of Tunbridge Wells by leading conservation architect Ptolemy Dean.



The presenter of BBC Two's Restoration series and adviser to English Heritage moved with his family to Tunbridge Wells a year ago.



In an exclusive interview with the Kent and Sussex Courier, the expert levelled harsh criticism at the local authorities which he believed had failed to preserve and enhance the town's historic assets.

As the town is poised to celebrate its 400th anniversary, he called for immediate action to restore civic pride.



On a chilly Monday evening we wandered through the streets of Chapel Place and the red-bricked and cobbled roads through the village area.

Mr Dean explained that it was an attractive but neglected ornate cast iron Victorian lamppost without a lantern in Chapel Place which prompted him to write to Tunbridge Wells Borough Council with a request to mend it.



To his horror, rather than fit an appropriate lantern, the Highways Unit of Kent County Council installed a new lamppost inches away.

Pointing upwards under the garish "orange sodium glow" he fumed: "Look at it! This hideousness has been erected, can you believe it, in one of the most historic, picturesque parts of any town in Kent.

"It is a standard light provided on any motorway underpass, a car park or a fast food

restaurant or outside a public convenience and yet here it is in the heart of a conservation area which we should all be working to preserve and enhance." He said the attitude of the borough council to "shrug its shoulders and say: 'It's KCC,' beggared belief.

"The borough council really gets my goat. They said it's not their fault, KCC is in charge of street lights. It's as though KCC is some higher being beyond their control. But they are accountable and the county council are too. They are democratically elected and accountable.

"The borough council should specify what they want and KCC should carry it out. The borough council cannot wash their hands of it, and if they fail to put on that important post a proper head it will be an indictment of a grotesque municipal failing."

Striding off up Bedford Terrace as I scurried behind, scribbling on my notepad, he pointed out a lamp, painted nicely with its lantern intact and working.

"It's the same one! The same type! I heard that KCC said the lamp in Chapel Place could not be repaired and yet here, just yards away, this one is working."

After clambering on to the wall, a closer inspection revealed the name and telephone number of the manufacturer of the fittings. He shouted down: "English Street Furniture Company, 01763 287588. They can ring this company.

"Isn't this absolutely incredible? This is a bad public service. The council should have the expertise to do this, they are qualified to do it on behalf of us as the rate payers."

In the Compasses pub it later transpired during exchanging pleasantries with a Bedford Terrace resident that householders had clubbed together and paid for the lamp repairs after failing to get anywhere with the authorities.

"Unbelievable. They did it themselves. If a member of the public can do it then ... oh, unbelievable!" he said slapping the table and laughing.

When asked how such an ugly lamp could have been chosen, he said sadly: "I think they apply the same lighting solution to anywhere in Kent and that solution is determined only by cost and concerns of health and safety.

"They see their job as fitting in with a set of prescribed standards, and hide behind health and safety as an excuse for perpetrating civic ugliness. It is not good enough in a civilised society.

"They don't need planning permission, and they just do what they like."

The architect sensed he had hit a nerve when he spoke about civic pride at the Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society awards in October.

He had wondered what he should speak about, and recalled an application to remove a glazing bar on a shop front in Chapel Place. Such bars run through most of the shop fronts in Chapel Place and split the window into quaint sections - a 19th century feature.

He had objected to the council planners and said he was informed permission was to be given because "it was for enhancement to the character of the conservation area". So the

seeds of his speech were sown.

"This and the lamppost made me think what does this say about civic pride, with the 400th anniversary next year? It says this is a town that does not look after itself.

"If you look around Tunbridge Wells you start to see how sad it is. So I put together a collection of pictures. There were rather a lot of Victorian things - some are unique to Tunbridge Wells and have the crest of the borough."

After an impromptu sketch showing an aerial view of Tunbridge Wells, he said it was a "great" and "very special town" and its hills and the common and its proximity to the county boundary had prevented sprawl east and westwards and seen it develop in linear form.

He said unlike Maidstone, Tonbridge, Ashford and Canterbury it did not sit on major junctions and have "disastrous roads or ring roads that would have smashed through this area", and it was surrounded by open spaces.

As we rambled through Frog Lane and paused to admire the homes, he said: "The town is an asset.

"However, the local authority have a history here since almost the 1920s, and the town hall is metaphoric. It is a polite, neo-Georgian design that replaced a fantastic Decimus new town, so really, Tunbridge Wells was replaced with municipal pomposity. And opposite ... that cinema!"

The opportunity to extract on-the-spot advice from the leading architect was too good to miss. What action would he prompt, I asked.

"For the borough council to commission a study of the historical street furniture of the town and of the street environment - the signage, the bollards, the lampposts - a historical streetscape study. Then look at this inventory and say: 'This has survived and this is important', or 'this is superfluous and unattractive', and then go out and get the money for civic improvements.

"What better way to celebrate the 400th birthday of Tunbridge Wells than to reinstate its streetscape?"

"It's a question of how might we make this place better? How can we enhance it?"

He said signage and street clutter were great culprits and he recalled a sign on the way into the town which, missing a T, shamefully welcomed visitors to "unbridge Wells".

"I know these things are a problem everywhere but to make it less of a problem here the borough council has to be proactive. It is not good enough to leave it to a county council because a county council does not care particularly which town it is dealing with. KCC is just a machine, isn't it?"

He said the borough council should protect its special areas and explained how the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea and the City of Westminster used white bulbs instead of yellow in street lighting.

Pointing down the High Street to Chapel Place, he said: "Imagine if they turned all the street

lights from the top of the town to the Pantiles to white. What a difference that would make. Imagine. Why do we want to live in an orange glow? Do you think these people on the council sit in an orange sodium high pressure glow at home? It is really awful.

"I took a picture of a traffic bollard to the civic society presentation and asked, would they have this in their garden? Why is something so inferior in design acceptable in your town? We all live in this place, this is what civic pride is all about - investing in and cherishing the place you live in."

He described ugly and inappropriate "relentless" street lighting as "stanchions of municipal safety" which dwarfed buildings and stretched into the skyline.

"It is amazing when you go to place where they have taken the lampposts and replaced them with low level light fittings or attached fittings to buildings. In Edinburgh, on the Royal Mile, they have put white lights on the buildings. Beautiful. Atmospheric. You can see the colours of the buildings and shadows."

ILLUSTRATING A POINT

Pulling my notepad across the table and snatching the pen from my hand, Mr Dean set about sketching a familiar view of Tunbridge Wells without the modern street clutter. Within seconds the Opera House took shape and beyond that Lloyds Bank before the road fell away down Mount Pleasant against an open skyline.

There is was without street lights, traffic sign, traffic lights, bollards, parking bays, lampposts, slow signs on the road surface, a dimpled pavement near a zebra crossing.

Then he added them: See, It was beautiful when I started it. Can you see how a beautiful street is turned into a dog's dinner?

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