

'WHAT WE WANT IS VISION'

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Even though Ptolomy Dean is incensed over the state of some areas of Tunbridge Wells he had kind words for some officers at the Town Hall.

"We have conservation officers in this town who are highly qualified and highly experienced and working very hard. We know this expertise is here because they have protected the town from PVC windows and hideous extensions.

"The Pantiles looks fantastic and buildings along the High Street are intact. Victorian residential areas are well- preserved - Calverley Park and Hungershall Park have been protected by diligent enforcement by conservation staff at Tunbridge Wells Borough Council."

When asked why the preservation of the town's assets was not already ingrained practice he put it down initially to legislation. Planning legislation, he said, related to applications, and the planning process and street lighting, for example, was dealt with by different forms of legislation.

"It is not just here but generally. They are divided vigorously between planning, which is a rather defensive process and about stopping things, and highways which is about traffic improvements."

What was really needed was a person or an authority which had "the vision, the power and the budget" to bring those two forces together to a positive end "instead of merely seeking to stop ugly development and satisfy road needs".

In the village area, off the High Street, he paused to pick up from the ground an old and attractive black and white street sign stating Belgrove. He said: "I think this is a really bad reflection of the council's failure.

"If you walk around Cumberland Gardens, Cumberland Walk and Bedford Road, the council have retreated. They have abandoned street lighting pretty much altogether. Consequently these areas are targeted at night and vandalised. People dare not ask for lights because they might get something hideous."

He said traffic was taking precedence over pedestrians, but described the "amazing" reclamation of streets in London.

"They have taken them back from traffic engineering and removed clutter and traffic, widening pedestrian crossings and removing barriers, partly because it is getting emptier due to the congestion charge and partly because the balance has always been tipped towards priority of the car."

Shaking his head as he looked deep into his drink by the fire in the Compasses, he raised the

pedestrian crossing between the Pantiles and Chapel Place.

He said the crossing should link the entrances in a straight line, rather than the current funnelling of shoppers, creating bottlenecks with little room for pushchairs or wheelchairs.

"If they don't, as a 400th year project, make that connection better, then that is a missed opportunity," he said.

Tunbridge Wells, he said, should seek to compare itself to Bath and Harrogate which have a "much finer approach to streetscape".

"Tunbridge Wells does not rejoice and celebrate what it has. It has survived by default somehow, but it could be so fantastic."

What role, I wondered, did the civic society have to play in Tunbridge Wells?

"It has a very important role and it should be remembered they are people who volunteer their time. The starting point is already one of praise and encouragement."

But he told an interesting and perhaps sad story about the relationship between the society and borough council.

"When the civic society had their awards in Tunbridge Wells Town Hall they had to pay for the hire of the room and they had to pay from their subscription rates for what little refreshment was available.

"At Waverley Borough Council in Surrey I went to the civic society awards as I had won a design award. The council, which supported the civic awards, paid for the event which included refreshments. When I spoke to someone from the council they said it 'only cost a couple of hundred pounds and we were delighted to do it'.

"It involved schools, artwork, the public, conservation, new build and environmental things. It celebrated and rejoiced in what is good.

"But our poor old civic society had to pay - and they had even been told they couldn't move the chairs around."

He thought the town's civic society was "probably traumatised" by having to deal with a "municipal brick wall for years and years".

"The local authority is there to achieve the enhancement of the locality. Whose responsibility is it, if not the council, to press for and stand for proper and appropriate and fitting and sensitive civic improvements? We cannot blame KCC. We cannot blame John Prescott.

"It can start in the 399th year with the reinstatement of a properly designed lantern head for that lamp - and not left for a member of the public but carried out speedily and efficiently by the paid local authority traffic highways engineers whose job it is to do it."