

CONCLUSION

THE FIVE WALKS

The routes taken on each of the five walks are shown on the aerial photograph below. The five walks were:

- Walk One: The Leas on 4 March 2017
- Walk Two: St Eanswythe's Water on 25 March 2017
- Walk Three: The Pent River on 8 April 2017
- Walk Four: East Leas on 22 April 2017

- Walk Five: The Harbour on 17 May 2017

The conclusions presented in this chapter resulted from a final walk around the historic town centre that took place on 13 June 2017



CONCLUSIONS

Aside from the simple pleasure of walking through an English town in good company and discovering new places and vistas, what can we distil from our ramblings that might, in some way, be of use?

Four of the walks began toward the edge of Folkestone and followed paths through the town centre to the Folkestone Harbour. The final walk, with pupils from St Peter's School, began at the school gate and progressed along the town waterfront to the harbour. So all the walks passed through the historic core of the town and ended at the same place. The pattern revealed is of three distinct zones:

- Relative newness and well maintained commercial and residential suburbs at the perimeter
- The run-down historic centre
- The industrial-scale drama of the harbour.

The perimeter

The first four walks explored the perimeter zone of Folkestone, each revealing a different character.

Walk One, which brought us into town from the west along the Leas, explored the genteel Edwardian grandeur of Folkestone from a time when the wealthy and the Royal came to enjoy the bracing air and fine views out to sea. The architecture remains magnificent and imposing but the style of life it was built to express is now gone, swept away by the calamity of the First

World War - the reverberations of which are still vividly present in the town. Later in the walk we encountered war memorials, the Avenue of Remembrance, and histories of marching troops heading across the Channel to join the slaughter in France. The knitted poppies attached to railings today are solemn salutes to all of the unforgotten fallen.

On Walk Two the perimeter landscape we encountered was of solid suburban houses set within immaculately groomed front gardens in the informal English style. This is a modest landscape created by the efforts of each self-contained household directed by a shared understanding of correct front gardening. Without codification or planning it all comes together by some invisible and unstated agreement. The working landscape of vegetable growing, in contrast, is hidden in back yards and ramshackle allotments.

Between houses we followed paths across parks and sports fields. We walked along watercourses and the backs of houses, picking out patterns of connection in the landscape that predate the suburban gardens that now subsume it.

Around the upper waters of the Pent River, explored during the Walk Three, the perimeter landscape is one of large-scale retail and industrial buildings, and car parks separated by patches of ornamental planting. This is a working landscape of big sheds and compounds. Industrial work has long



Foresters Way A traffic dominated environment with potential for a major regeneration initiative

been associated with the Pent River and the pattern remains but the nature and scale of activity have changed to the extent that such activity no longer fits into the old centre and has moved up the river to the more open edges of town.

Walk Four took us through East Leas where we returned to an exploration of the suburban landscapes of Folkestone. As on Walk Two the pattern here was of solid houses located within well-tended gardens. However, on this walk we also encountered many signs of small-scale adaptation and change of buildings, such as the addition of photovoltaic panels, extensions into gardens and roofs, window replacement, garage extensions, new conservatories and a great variety of adaptations to the garden landscapes. In some cases adaptations are so extensive and numerous as to completely obscure the original building buried within. We can imagine that in such a context the pattern of land ownerships will endure for a very long time. We might also imagine that within this fixed pattern, the process of gradual adaptation and replacement of the buildings will eventually completely transform the appearance of these neighbourhoods.

The Historic Centre

Each of the walks passed through part of Folkestone's historic centre, revealing the intriguing richness and complexity of the heart of the town. Folkestone is built upon the rolling topography of the deep valley carved by the Pent River as it cuts through the landscape to the sea. It is a town of steeply sloping streets and steps, and a great variety of buildings of all ages and uses are packed tightly together into every available space and along every contour. At its centre is the magnificent spectacle of Lewis Cubitt's viaduct carrying

the rail line across the valley. During the early walks the focus was on the apparent problems of the historic town. By Walk Five walkers were declaring: 'Folkestone is beautiful'. Indeed; the town has a powerful picturesque quality formed by its architecture being overlaid on dramatic topography.

But for all these qualities it would be foolish to deny the very real problems faced by the historic centre today, and the urgent need for strategies to regenerate the area.

Investment

The first need is for significant investment to restore, and in some cases replace, the run-down stock of buildings. Investment needs to be deployed in a highly granular way - with patient restoration and repurposing taking place building by building over many years. How might perceptions of values be changed so that both incoming and existing owners will believe that their investment of time and resources is worthwhile?

Access

This part of Folkestone was built long before the age of mass car ownership and is ill-suited to car traffic and parking. What are the potential options? The area could be remade to suit the car, but this would require wholesale rebuilding and would destroy underlying qualities of place.

We might also conceive of an urban design solution where cars are parked remotely from the centre with intermediate systems of public transport - bicycles, powered cycles, and small taxis - providing connections into the historic centre. We might alternatively imagine a radically changed future where car mobility is provided on demand (perhaps by driverless vehicles). We might add to this vision the idea of shared car



Historic centre streets and buildings in need of investment



Middelburg Square, Shellons Street and Foresters Way cut through the entrance to the historic town centre

ownership and car clubs rather than the current arrangement of individual, privately owned cars. Such alternative systems are already beginning to be used in many urban centres, and might well provide the basis for overcoming the car parking and access problem in historic Folkestone.

Making streets

A third issue is the traffic management in Folkestone's streets. It has already been noted that the historic centre was designed before the age of mass car ownership. The highways authority's response to traffic congestion in Folkestone has been to designate a very large number of streets for one-way traffic flow. This has resulted in labyrinthine patterns of traffic circulation moving at high speeds through the centre, making streets dangerous and generally unattractive to pedestrians (for whom the streets were originally made). New thinking is required to calm the impacts of traffic and restore the streets for use by pedestrians and cyclists. Such change would also assist in improving perceptions of the historic centre and would perhaps begin the process of attracting much-needed investment in the historic building stock.

Middleburg Square and Shellons Street

A further traffic-related issue is the design of Middleburg Square and Shellons Street. This unattractive threshold to the historic centre is a semi-derelict remnant of a half-completed plan to drive a great highway through Folkestone towards Dover. It was conceived in an era when the conventional wisdom was that towns required re-engineering for the car age.

Much damage was done to the UK's historic cities and towns during this period, not excluding Folkestone. City blocks were cleared, traffic speeds accelerated

and pedestrians were relegated to lowest priority. Folkestone's highway plans were conceived at a time when road access to the docks was a major economic driver for the prosperity of the town. But this is no longer the case.

Part of any regeneration plan for Folkestone must include the repair the damage done to this gateway to the historic centre of Folkestone by this out-dated and traffic dominated threshold.

Bus station

Buses provide the most important public transport linkages within Folkestone and with surrounding towns and communities. They provide essential connections for large sections of the community who, by choice or circumstance, have no access to alternatives. Buses also provide essential linkages with the rail network for longer distance and high-speed connections across the country.

Given the fundamental importance of buses to any strategic public transport plan for Folkestone, the planning of bus routes, bus information and bus facilities should be a high priority.

Bouverie Square Bus Station ought to be a welcoming civic gateway to the town but currently this hard working place is dominated by traffic needs. And important though these are the result is a deeply unwelcoming, hard surfaced and unsheltered arrival into the town. A reimagining of this important historic space is required as part of the wider strategy to revitalise the historic centre discussed in the section on shopping below. Consideration of how to plan the bus station could form part of a wider urban plan for Middleburg Square and Shellons Street.

Initiatives might include:

- Prioritising pedestrian access and connections



Could Bouverie Square bus station be improved?



Bouverie Square bus station An unwelcoming gateway to the heart of Folkestone





Backland space in the heart of town offering potential for new more intensive uses



- Improved information and ticketing facilities
- Much improved shelters for passengers
- Catering for waiting passengers
- Urban design and landscape improvements
- Communicating a message of welcome
- Information about what's on in town and how to get there

Provision of clear opportunities for interchange between buses and with other means of transport including cycle hire and taxis.

Railway Line

As we entered the historic centre during Walk Four we encountered the abandoned rail line that once provided a direct rail link from the main line to the harbour for onward connection to continental Europe by ship. The construction of the line was an audacious piece of railway engineering involving very steep track gradients and high-powered engines to haul carriages up the sides of the Pent River Valley from the harbour.

Creating this economically vital rail-to-ship connection was achieved at considerable cost to the town, almost completely severing east and west Folkestone. The economic drivers behind the creation of the line no longer exist but the severance remains. Nature is beginning to reclaim the alignment: buddleia, weeds and small trees sprout up between the tracks and adjacent streets are run down. There seems to be a great opportunity here for an imaginative rethinking of the use of the rail line and the space either side. Should the land be built on or made into a great new public space or park? Could the rail line provide

some form of new transport link into the historic centre? Could there be a park-and-ride facility at the head of the rail line with a tram link to the harbour for visitors to Folkestone? Could rethinking the use of the alignment form part of a wider integrated transport policy for Folkestone?

Great work is being done around the harbour to open up the viaduct for public access. Perhaps it is now time to extend that thinking and reimagine the use of the rest of the line and the regeneration of the surrounding streets.

Shopping

Historically, whatever the underlying economic activity one of the essential characteristics of a town was as a place of congregation. Where crowds gather there is exchange of ideas and news but above all buying and selling and so high streets and other well-connected gathering places were lined with shops.

This apparently basic truth about towns is today being fundamentally challenged by two factors. Firstly mass personalised mobility vastly expands the range over which people will travel to shop, giving priority to large, car accessible specialist retail centres often located away from less accessible historic centres. Secondly the internet brings vast shopping choice and convenience directly to people's homes - the 'shop' is now an online address rather than a building in a street. The effects of these two powerful forces of change can be seen in town centres everywhere and are very visible in Folkestone. Rows of empty shops, the under-performance of those that remain and a mood of decline are all evidence of the inexorable forces of change impacting on town centres.

It is clear that a strategic plan is needed in order to respond to these profound forces of change.



Shopping is changing in Folkestone



Enduring elegance from the past in Sandgate Road (above) and empty shops in Guildhall Street (below).





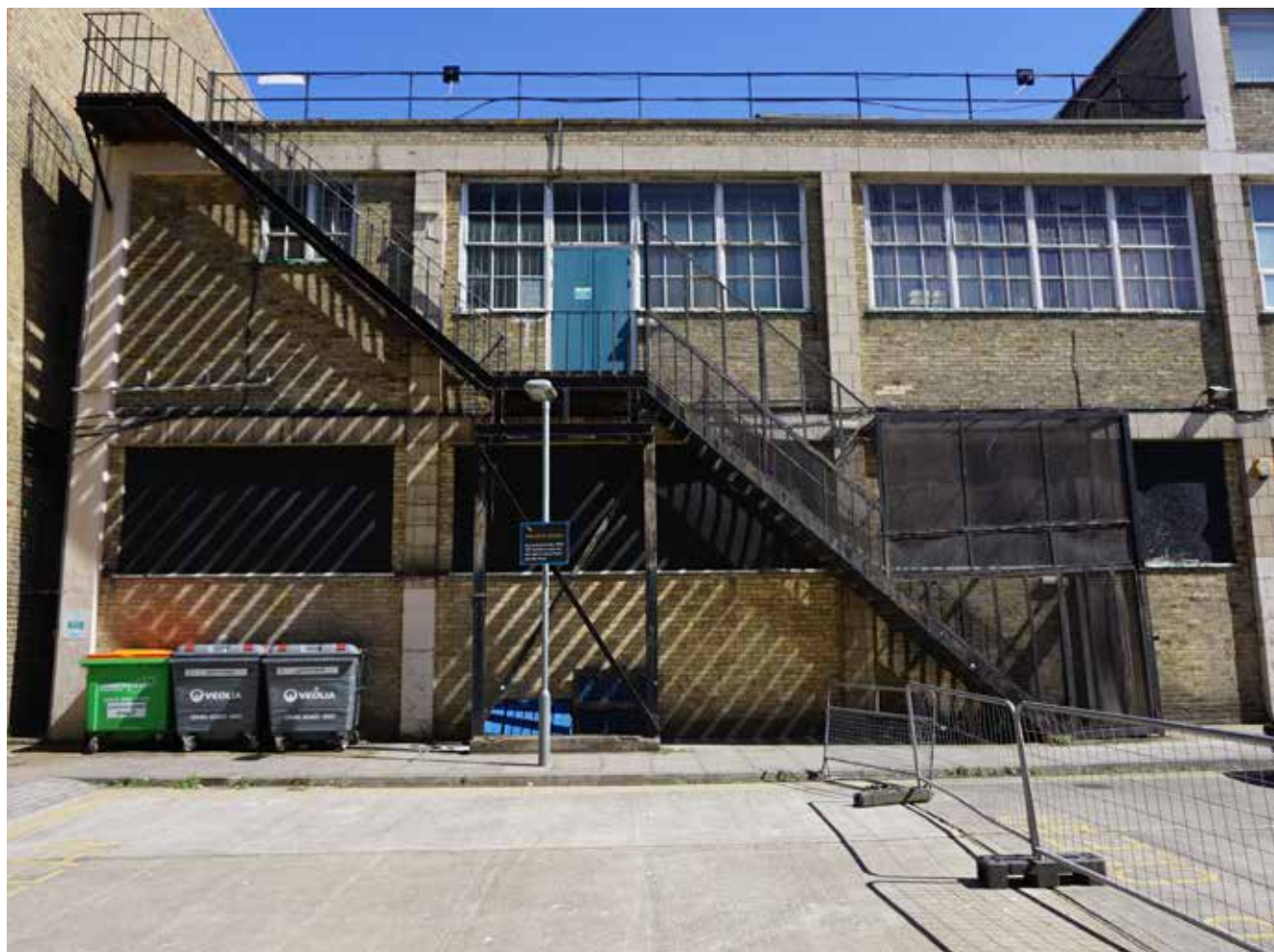
Car parks dominate the gateway to the town (above) and one-way streets dangerously accelerate traffic (below)

Central to such a strategy should be acknowledgment that, despite technologically driven change, humankind remains deeply sociable with a great appetite for gregarious assembly. With this perspective a shopping strategy for the town might include:

- Reduction in the amount of retail space (focused around the principal streets only)
- Repurposing shopping space for forms of public-facing work including the arts
- Promotion of events, markets and festivals perhaps with some shops opening on market days only
- Shifting the emphasis for street-facing space from provisioning and supply of good to the delivery of services
- Adoption of retail space and places for the delivery of public services including council, health and specialist education services
- Promotion of experimental and unique experiences and products not found in specialist retail centres
- Promotion of temporary shop installations working with low-cost start-ups and experimental ideas
- A co-ordinated engagement of the public sector with the general public and building owners to manage and promote beneficial change in the historic centre
- Very active management of public space across the entire historic centre

Public space

Walking through the historic centre we discovered many small and medium sized spaces and neglected corners that would benefit from a



What are the new types of work that will provide for the economic future of Folkestone?

public space design strategy for the historic centre tied into the management strategies discussed above.

Work

During the walks the discussion frequently referred to the types of work that took place in Folkestone in the past: craft trades along the Pent River, the trading port, a significant fishing industry and the big-scale tourism of Edwardian times were all mentioned. Much less visible or remarked on were the contemporary forms of work that now sustain the Folkestone economy including insurance services, Saga, the remaining leisure, tourism and shopping economies, and the large-scale retail and commercial activity around the upper Pent River. It is clear that the economic base of Folkestone is in a period of transition (perhaps this is always the case) and that new patterns of work activity are yet to fully emerge. Arts and cultural work seem to be a strong emerging theme. The new presence of start-up businesses in incubator space in Tontine Street is another indicator of change. It may well be that redevelopment of the harbour and beachfront will provide the catalyst for new enterprise in the town. An analysis of new work and the ways in which it should be supported and nurtured within the historic centre and as part of the various regeneration initiatives outlined above might reveal new patterns of change hidden from view during the walks.

The harbour

The harbour is an area of great drama and attraction, where the process of determined regeneration is daily transforming the area. The planned changes seemed to be enthusiastically supported by those who participated in the walks. It can only be hoped that change around the harbour and along the beachfront will act as a catalyst that with

accelerate the momentum for equally determined regeneration and change across the entire historic centre of Folkestone.

Change

The five walks revealed a three-part urban structure to Folkestone consisting of outer perimeter, historic centre and harbour areas.

In the newer outer perimeter zones where change is occurring it is in the form small-scale projects within an urban pattern of ownership and use that seems quite fixed. An exception to this perimeter zone pattern was evident in the upper Pent River area where new development is transforming quite large building plots.

The area with the greatest need for renewal and change is the historic centre where a combination of strategies is needed to:

- stimulate regeneration investment
- deal with the damaging effects of car traffic
- arrest the process of decline particularly of the retail core
- accommodate new patterns of work
- initiate quite large scale regeneration projects around the redundant rail line and the reinvention of Middleburg Square and Shellons Street.

The reward for such a combination of efforts will be the restoration and rediscovery of the great qualities of the historic centre that became increasingly evident during each of the five walks.



Many fine small spaces and green areas in Folkestone provide protential places for public assembly and pleasure



Transformations of the harbour and
redundant rail line

