

HISTORIC TOWNS FORUM
**Urban Expansion and Growth in Historic Towns –
accommodating the inevitable? Models for positive change**
Chapter House, Chester Cathedral, 25th November 2014

Richard Bate, *Green Balance*

I shall briefly introduce our recent report for English Heritage on *The sustainable growth of cathedral cities and historic towns*. This is quite weighty, but not, I hope you'll find, a struggle to read. It goes to the heart of the theme for your conference today. In the time available I will pick up on the last part of that theme, 'Models for positive change', because our research aimed not only to find out what attention was being paid to heritage in planning for urban growth, but to show how it could be done well.

There were three main components which contributed something new to the debate. First, we set out to identify exactly what growth was proposed over the next 5-7 years in 50 historic towns. We wanted a sample that was sufficiently large to identify any trends without consuming the entire research budget. We only looked at historic towns in authorities with adopted Core Strategies, so we knew what was planned in the years ahead, and we took a reasonable spread around the country. We filled in a large spreadsheet which covered housing development, commercial development, retail development and infrastructure. We looked at proposals on greenfield sites and brownfield sites, and unimplemented permissions as well as the scale of planned future development. We related the information we obtained to the size of town involved (which was between 10,000 and 160,000 population).

The study found enormous variability in what is proposed from one place to another and trends are very difficult to identify. Broadly speaking, just because somewhere is 'historic' does not appear to have a great bearing on how much development is proposed there or what kind. Other driving forces seem to be explaining better the observed pattern of growth, which is rather a lottery for historic towns. About the only point of note we can offer is that the large majority of housing and commercial development planned for the next few years in historic towns is expected on greenfield sites, while the large majority of retail development is expected on brownfield sites.

The second part of the research looked at plan-making: how much weight was given by local planning authorities to safeguarding both the character of historic towns and their settings surrounding them? For this we looked at twenty towns in some detail, with telephone interviews and detailed assessment of documents. We found that heritage plays a highly significant role in shaping development in some towns but in others is set to one side. The driving force affecting the attention given to heritage was the cultural attitude of the councillors collectively towards heritage. We found that everywhere it is the economic wellbeing of towns which is councillors' key priority: contrary to the belief in parts of Government, authorities are not anti-growth NIMBYs. What does vary is how they interpret the role of heritage. Some view heritage as fostering a town's distinctiveness, attracting visitors and raising the quality of life (Winchester and Woodbridge, for example). But others

view it as a burden and drag on investment (Taunton and Wigan, for example). The process tended to reinforce itself, with the degree of priority given to heritage affecting the number of conservation staff employed, the evidence commissioned, the policies adopted, and the decisions on planning applications.

The system of Core Strategies introduced in 2004 had in most places not made much difference. There was continuity of policy from the previous system, reinforced by the slowness of many authorities in adopting new development management policies – so the old Saved Policies were still in place. The National Planning Policy Framework had not made a great deal of difference either: post-NPPF Core Strategies had such vague policies that it was only when detailed plans were adopted that what was intended became clear. The biggest benefit of the NPPF had been in obliging authorities to improve their evidence base if this was weak.

We investigated whether high quality outcomes resulted from high quality heritage policies. There is indeed some relationship: both are relatively good in place like Wymondham in Norfolk and Berkhamsted in Hertfordshire and both are relatively poor in, say, Hastings in East Sussex and Ilkeston in Derbyshire. However, sometimes heritage policies are aspirational and not implemented enthusiastically: in Stowmarket in Suffolk, for example. The really encouraging news is that people-power can change this. Councils with weaker policies can be spurred by voluntary organisations to take heritage more seriously, which had happened in Hastings and Folkestone, and equally to live up to their heritage policies, which had happened in Chelmsford. In each of these cases it was new organisations which had had this impact, principally through getting feet on the ground and making good use of social media.

The third and final part of our research investigated methodologies for reconciling growth with historic towns and cities. The methodologies we looked at were:

- (i) historic characterisation;
- (ii) efforts to protect skylines (looking specifically at controls over tall buildings, avoiding development within view cones, and protecting the wider setting of key buildings);
- (iii) urban intensification (including high quality design to facilitate this);
- (iv) urban extensions;
- (v) new settlements;
- (vi) urban containment (for which the mechanism used in England is Green Belt); and
- (vii) World Heritage Site status.

The report contains summaries of what these mechanisms can offer: I hope you find those helpful but we did not set out to provide original ideas on them. What is new is that we studied how these methodologies had been applied in eight cities, and the appendices describing these occupy half the report. More than one methodology was being applied in most of the cities we went to, so we tried to focus on just one method in each city – except Cambridge where we looked at both urban intensification and new settlements. The others were World Heritage Site in Bath, design solutions for urban intensification here in Chester, Green Belt in Durham, historic characterisation in Lichfield, view cones in Oxford, protection of the setting in Salisbury, and an urban extension in Winchester. These were intended ideally as good practice examples but certainly as illustrations of historic places which had

made an effort at reconciling growth with heritage. In reality, the results were all a bit messy: there were strengths and weaknesses everywhere.

We also made some comparisons across all or most of our case study cities, with some interesting results.

- (a) The first point is that most authorities were expecting these eight cities to take at least their proportionate share of the authority's growth compared with the current housing distribution. Only in the city and district of Winchester was development being actively spread elsewhere to constrain the need to develop in and immediately around the city itself (and that is despite the 2,000 houses planned for the Barton Farm urban extension).
- (b) The second point is that Conservation Area Appraisals have not everywhere taken the prominent role you might have expected: they do not exist in Chester, Bath or Oxford, and are in emerging draft form only in Salisbury and Durham. The reasons for that are unclear.
- (c) Third, the number of conservation officers everywhere has dropped, sometimes plummeted, and in a couple of cases the support structures within which conservation officers operated had been lost, making heritage a minor activity in an administrative backwater.
- (d) Fourth, there was a chorus of concern about students in those numerous cities where student numbers had increased in recent years.
- (e) Fifth, the relationship that authorities had with their neighbours made a big difference to how well development pressures in relation to heritage were being accommodated. There has been exemplary co-operation amongst the authorities around Cambridge, but woeful non-cooperation to address Oxford's problems, for instance.

I would like to highlight experiences in Bath both as a warning and as a beacon of opportunity. This is not to encourage the designation of lots more World Heritage Sites in other towns and cities in England but to learn some lessons from what has happened there. Bath is not only protected by World Heritage Site status. It is also surrounded entirely by Green Belt. It surrounded on three sides by the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The whole central area of Bath is a Conservation Area. It has nearly 5000 listed buildings and 9 Registered Parks and Gardens. And, very encouragingly, the local authority owns much of the Georgian part of the city. What could possibly go wrong?

Until quite recently, Bath and North East Somerset Council collectively did not support its own heritage with the vigour which you might have expected. It tended to view its large portfolio of heritage buildings used for retailing as something which could largely look after itself, and it gave priority to the rental income which the high quality retail offer could generate, e.g. to keep Council Tax low. It was also very keen on encouraging new development, so far as practicable within the city's boundaries. Planning for heritage was not taken particularly seriously, and a programme of new Listings was quashed. A few years ago I was studying experience in Bath and heard about the remarkable difficulties generated by a Property Department that could sometimes consider heritage a nuisance. For example, an occupant might carry out unauthorised work to a listed building for retailing purposes. Pressed by the Planning Department, the occupant would submit a retrospective application for consent. This would be refused, the occupant would appeal, lose the appeal and carry

on. The Property Department would then decide not to support the Planning Department in taking further legal action against the breach of planning control. Result: stalemate.

However, Bath has a population deeply attached to its heritage, so local people have been fighting the authority for years. Bath Preservation Trust has the expertise and resources to run a conservation team in a planning department, but is not the only active body. Some years ago the Property Department decided to demolish an unlisted neoclassical building near the railway station, despite 11,000 signatures on a petition, and replace it with a bus station. A modern circular building was constructed in the middle of this, known locally as the 'can of beans'. This spawned a new Bath Heritage Watchdog to hold the council to account.

But what really inflamed passions was a scheme by the Council to build a series of eight and nine-storey high blocks of flats at a site called Bath Riverside – outside the Georgian centre but not far away in the valley bottom. The Bath Preservation Trust was one of the bodies upset by this proposal, to the extent that it felt that this challenged the World Heritage Site status of Bath. Their Patron wrote a letter to UNESCO saying so. It's handy having the Prince of Wales as your Patron, and UNESCO duly sent a delegation to Bath in 2008 ostensibly to enquire into development pressures but with a clear underlying challenge as to whether World Heritage Site status might be withdrawn. They identified 'aggressive development' as a risk to address. Nor did they have anything good to say about the design of the Council's massive new shopping mall in the heart of the city: it used lots of Bath stone but was pastiche and overbearing.



The new shopping centre in Bath from Beechen Cliff, with the 'can of beans' in front on the left.

The UNESCO visit helped the Council see sense. The penny dropped that World Heritage Site status was an accolade well worth having because it brought in vast numbers of tourists with money to spend. The status also made Bath a favoured location for foreign undergraduate students, especially Chinese, at a time when the two Universities in Bath have been expanding. This was not something that should be put at risk. The second

change was that a new administration was elected in 2011 which had much more of its power base within the city rather than outside, and was more sympathetic to heritage.

The turn-around has been pronounced. The Council now uses the World Heritage Site as a central part of its branding, and promotes its status vigorously. Rather more attention is now paid to planning issues, and the Property Department has had to recognise the culture change. From a planning point of view, the World Heritage Site status applies to the entire built-up area of the city, not just to the Georgian and Roman core, so control over materials and design that elsewhere might only be vigorously pursued in a Conservation Area is now exercised everywhere. Builders have had to get used to the idea, with the less reliable ones effectively being forced out. But the great news is that developers have got the message too. They have worked out that the added value from high quality development more than pays for the extra initial cost of using Bath stone, and they don't want other developers allowed to get away with poor quality schemes which might detract from their own. So just about everyone is happy, and there is a virtuous circle which is leading to improvements in the built environment across the city. There are indeed flies in the ointment – Bath University's Chancellor's Building was recently a finalist in the 2014 Carbuncle Cup, for example – but the direction of travel is the right one.

You don't need World Heritage Site status to achieve this: you do need a culture of quality in development that everyone signs up to. That is an important lesson from our study.
