

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORY

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1979 Blueprint for Walden Buildings published: Saffron Walden Conservation Study John G. O'Leary

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A publication important to Saffron Walden has been published, in two parts: *Saffron Walden: a conservation study*, part one and *Interim Draft Policies*, part two. The literature on Saffron Walden is abundantly enriched by these two volumes with excellent illustrations both from photographs, drawings and graphic records... There is a great deal of conjecture in this work, but it is of a harmless character. The interim draft policies of the part No 2 are another matter....

The Conservation study is a document of importance but carries some lessons that don't quite fit the pattern. An excellent picture of the old Malting in Church Street. The caption says 'A derelict maltings complex, now demolished. The loss of vital links with the industrial past is to be regretted'. Just so, but look at the permitted development on the site. Town and country planning is primarily concerned with density of population. Take a long look at this block of flats. Architecturally they have little to commend them but other considerations are the concern of town planning.

Nobody is likely to be encouraged by the permitted development of the Carmelite Convent site in Ashdon Road.

It is possibly not known to everybody that Crown buildings are exempt from Town and Country Planning consent. This allowed the Post Office to build a Telephone Exchange in the garden of Hill House in a good residential area. It should have been at Shire Hill, being an industrial building, but the possession of the site saved all the bother of buying another. Hill House is for sale as the Post Office no longer require it. The Telephone exchange provides a hazard to any other use...

There is a lot of house building going on within the boundaries of Saffron Walden. These have received the approval of Town and Country planning but there is a hole in the bottom of the bucket. An argument, a long argument, took place over *facia* for Barclays Bank. It seems a very small detail and hardly within the planners business. It went on, the argument, briskly and the Chairman of Barclays Bank intervened in a letter to The Times. He said he was born in this bank and it is worth noting that he is the third member of the Tuke family to be Chairman of Barclays Bank. A small detail, this *facia*, compared with the principles of planning that are hardly commended by the development of the Convent site.

Part two of this work is devoted to the future. All of the recommendations will receive universal support. They are a restatement of principles already being followed. We find a new term in 'Townscape'. A proposal to build on the Dorset House site in Church Street. Dorset House was demolished to provide a view of the south side of the Parish Church which is very much 'Townscape' and so are the row of exceptional cottages in Church Path which were put into good order by one of the Societies devoted to old domestic architecture.

Apart from the Sun Inn there is nothing of outstanding architectural interest in Church Street except for the long brick facade of the house west of Church Path which places a mask on the face of a much older house.

We can with profit look at the new development on the site of the old maltings and ponder on what is now called 'Townscape'. Traffic problems are looked at but the oldest streets were made for walkers and horse riders and later wheeled vehicles. M11 when completed may syphon off east-west traffic but there is no clear picture of what can be done about High Street – King Street traffic. Lorry drivers like driving through old towns and enjoy the nuisance value they create. This trouble is common to all old towns and no worse example than Cambridge. Traffic freeways would give some relief to walkers and there is every support to keeping traffic out of the market areas on market days.

The future of the pig market site is prominent. There is nothing on this site worth preserving. Every practical consideration cries out for the site to be an enlargement of the Fairycroft car park but this is unlikely.

All of us are behind this document when conservation is the theme. The tone is a shade pontifical; *fiat secundum verbum tuum*, but it commands respect... The Castle takes up some space. A recent excavation in the footings revealed nothing. An excavation in the grounds of the old house opposite was also sterile. In my opinion it was a keep only and never had the buildings of a medieval castle. It looks today much the same as it

looked in an 18th century engraving and the exterior stone work was ripped off it probably in Tudor times.

What happened to Church Street is a matter of conjecture. On the north side there is nothing of interest until we meet the corner of Museum Street. Behind Vincents is a foundry with stock intact. This might be preserved as an industrial survival. It is it not visible from the street. On the south side there are a few good houses, a most unhappy building devoted to the motor trade and the cottage at the corner of Market Hill, which is pre-Tudor. Another example of bad work. The old windows were removed when the cottage became a ladies' hairdressers and a large plate glass window inserted. Going down the hill the first premises were only one house and are Tudor. Continuing down the street the corner of the cockpit is worth doing something for. On the opposite side, south of the Sun Inn, are a row of brick houses which were there in 1851 and in my opinion were built on the gardens or stabling of the inn. The end range of the Sun Inn is the oldest part and was built about the time the cottage opposite was built. This is an important bit for preservation and fortunately the Sun Inn belongs to a powerful body which will see that nothing happens to it...

King Street has little to show except for the buildings past the tailors and a really good corner made by the Cross Keys. A quite revealing picture of the High Street under the trees makes it look good, but there are a number of very good houses there and on the opposite side. What is the fate of Hil House? It is said to be falling to pieces but it is a prominent site at the top of the High Street. The Post Office have effectively ruined it with the Telephone Exchange and demolition is probably the only answer...

Mill said the price of liberty is eternal vigilance. Vigilance, that should be the watch word of the Saffron Walden Antiquarian Society.

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