**Hassocks Amenity Association**

**Village Market Square**

1. **Introduction**

This paper presents the case for creating a Village Market Square as a key part of the Hassocks Neighbourhood Plan and offers the first steps towards a vision of where it might be situated and what it might contain.

1. **Whither Hassocks?**

Hassocks has been referred to as a ‘linear village’, spreading east/west along the B2116 between Ditchling and Hurstpierpoint. A rather more accurate description is a ‘quartered village’, the north/south railway line - the embankment to the north creating ‘the Great Wall of Hassocks’ – effectively giving four quadrants with a main line railway station at the centre. Car parking has become a major problem for many residents, leading to the paving over of front gardens which increases the risk of local flooding. Indeed, the negotiation of parked cars – on the road, the pavement and even grass verges – is already a major hazard for pedestrians and cyclists alike. Recent house building has led to the loss of playing fields as the schools build on them to create more classrooms. Sadly, much of the more recent building has not been appropriate, for example the ugly Infants School extension.

‘Third Place Working’ (where people are using libraries, coffee shops and pubs to engage in work-related activities) is already evident but the footfall in the shops in the high street is still falling due to the developments on the periphery of the village encouraging shopping elsewhere. Social interaction is thus decreasing, being replaced by the ‘soulless internet’. Further house building potential if the Mayfield Market Towns proposal is approved and Gatwick airport is expanded will accelerate the trend towards the ever increasing *urbanisation* of the village.

Cynicism has been embedded in the mind of many residents after local objections and constructive suggestions were apparently ignored during the Mackie Avenue, Stafford House, and Sainsbury Building developments. If we are to recapture the ‘Village Spirit’ many recall from the 1990’s, a *vision* will be needed to carry forward the development of a Neighbourhood Plan.

However, there are positive indications of the will to succeed. The success of the Village Market in recent years, conducted on the hard forecourt in front of the Tyre Centre, has been widely welcomed. Tree planting on verges around the village has proved popular and is undoubtedly raising the general appearance in the areas so far included. Hassocks has a reputation for ‘getting things done’ via local volunteers and the restoration of Oldland Windmill, the construction of a new railway station building, and the current refurbishment of Spitalfield Bridge and its immediate surroundings are testament to the determination of local residents to both preserve and enhance their environment by their own efforts. The Downlands School locally-owned renewable energy project based on solar power - whose share offer was fully subscribed recently in little more than a week compared to a planned period of 7 weeks! - also demonstrates the level of local interest in a sustainable, low carbon future.

1. **Why contemplate a Village Market Square**

Recent discussions about the development of a Neighbourhood Plan for Hassocks have regularly thrown up the lack of a village ‘centre’. Although Adastra Park and Adastra Hall do provide valuable and well-used recreational facilities, there remains the need for a hard all-weather surface where events such as the Village Market can take place rather than relying on the generosity of the owners of the Tyre Centre. There is undoubtedly a ground swell of opinion that believes that creating the vision of such a facility will be a significant step towards encouraging and giving a focus to the development of the Neighbourhood Plan.

1. **Location**

It is self-evident that the square should be as near the intersection of the two dividing influences as practical - i.e. the railway bridge over the B2116. But given that the shops run to the east of this point, a location within the existing shopping area would seem preferable. The vicinity of the National Tyre Centre, the Dale Avenue car park and the Pauline Thaw Centre (Age Concern) would appear to be the only realistic location.

The existing Tyre Centre is known to be the subject of developer interest and the tenants of the prefabricated sheds to the south have been moved out. The Pauline Thaw Centre is a temporary timber-framed structure which is likely to need replacing in no more than 10 years time. To the south of the centre is some BT/Post Office land, the latter now privately owned, and alongside are some garage blocks and a surface car park. If all this land was drawn together, a surprisingly large area could be embraced.

In summary, the whole area appears to be ripe for comprehensive redevelopment; it has in fact already been referred to as “one of the largest brownfield sites in Sussex”!

It is thus not unrealistic to anticipate that this whole central area will be acquired by developers who could deck over the surface car park and provide a new Pauline Thaw Centre as part of a Section 106 Agreement. In return the developer could build dwellings, shops and offices on the site, arguing that the offices would require minimal parking as Hassocks has a main line railway station! It could be that the first Hassocks residents know about such a proposal is when a planning statement/application is published.

1. **Potential Centre Facilities**

The above provides a list of activities which could well be located around a Village Market Square. These include:

* A **Pedestrian-Only** hard area suitable to mount the regular **Village Market**.
* An updated and extended **Pauline Thaw Centre**.
* A number of **Flats** incorporated within the overall scheme.
* A number of **Shops** and **Offices** within the overall scheme.
* An extended **Car Park** to provide improved parking for Parklands Road residents and also to serve the local shops.
* A **Green Area** to create a quiet garden space.
* **Tree Planting** to link the site to adjacent areas and the Keymer Road.
* A second locally-owned **Renewable Energy Project** based on sustainable buildings.

 Such a development would attract residents from the west side of the village who

 tend to gravitate to Burgess Hill. It would therefore have the potential to unify

 Hassocks and evolve in time to become the ‘Village Core’, preserving village

 elements which would distinguish it from the increasing urbanisation of the

 surrounding area.

1. **Developer negotiations**

It is essential that Hassocks negotiates with any developer to ensure that the Section 106 Agreement contributes to reducing the village car parking problem. For example, any on-site access roads should hug the rear site boundary of the houses on the east side of Parklands Road with dedicated parking spaces for these houses via rear garden access. The provision of retirement units could free up family housing locally, and require less car park provision in the centre of the village.

Hassocks was once a village using the local Keymer Brick and Tile Company products. It is now drifting into suburbia and losing any concept of its ‘Genius Loci’! Local red brick facing with pitched roofs are the essential elements, not large coloured panels, excessive areas of timber facing , and flat or curved roofs. Modern interventions such as ‘Iconic2 buildings’ are not required, just a careful connection to what exists and the fostering of sympathetic relationships.

The building lines that the planners would require on the Keymer Road and Dale Avenue junction together with the sight lines for vehicular traffic negotiating the corner could substantially reduce or increase the permitted footprint and thus building mass. Vehicular entry to the site might also necessitate revised access points.

1. **The way forward**

Some readers will dismiss this whole concept as a ‘pipe dream’ and not worth pursuing. However, the current development of the Hassocks Neighbourhood Plan creates a golden opportunity for *residents* to create a vision of what *they* would like to see at the heart of their village rather than sitting back and waiting for an external developer to impose his or her wishes based upon maximising the profit and subsequent income. Such an opportunity may never occur again.

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