

ROMSEY PEDESTRIANISATION

Introduction

I have always had an interest in town centre planning and my work, though in a totally different sphere has enabled me to witness, first hand, schemes introduced by local authorities, in a number of towns and cities around the country.

Being employed by some of these authorities I was not in a position to speak for or against the schemes. Now, being in a different position, I am able to make my previous observations known to others.

Pedestrianisation schemes, whether full or partial, always attract considerable attention and the independent trader, in the area planned for redevelopment, will usually be against the scheme from day one till the end of trading on the first day after its opening. He/she will then consider it the best thing to have ever happened.

Irrespective of what the scheme involves disruption will occur in the area being redeveloped but in this instance, in Romsey, should full/partial pedestrianisation go ahead this should only involve the centre of the road and not be directly outside a shop's doorway as on previous occasions.

The Need in Romsey

The roads in the town centre of Romsey were designed to accommodate the stage coaches travelling to and from London – Southampton etc. They were never designed to cope with motor vehicles, let alone articulated lorries. Romsey, as we all know, is a very pleasant town which attracts increasing numbers of visitors. The pavements, in the finishing stages of being widened a second time in recent years, will still not be sufficient to cope with this increased footfall. During the periods of this work, when the road has been closed to traffic, pedestrians have taken full advantage of walking freely down the centre of the road, and enjoyed it.

As will be shown below in the section “Car Parking” and “Traffic Restrictions”, to implement full or partial pedestrianisation would not seriously disrupt traffic flow in or around the town. Though there would be some inconvenience to those who cannot park their car immediately outside the shop they wish to go into, as they would have to walk, they will be in the minority compared to the benefits it would bring to everybody else.

It should be explained at this point the difference between full and partial pedestrianisation:

- Full: Except for emergency vehicles no vehicular access would be allowed at any time except with written authority from the Council/Town Centre Manager.
- Partial: Except for emergency vehicles no vehicular access would be allowed between the hours of 10 am – 4 pm except for market traders vehicles at close of market on market days, and later when shopping evenings occur prior to Christmas. Outside of these hours normal traffic would be permitted and parking allowed outside shops for delivery/collection in specially marked parking bays.

Heavy lorries should be banned and a low speed limit maintained. During the hours of closure removable bollards should be positioned at the appropriate place to prevent vehicular access.

Because of access problems to a few premises for deliveries and likely traffic congestion at peak times, early morning/late afternoon, it is suggested that partial pedestrianisation be seriously considered and as an example of the success of such an existing scheme see “Other Examples: Norwich”, below.

The rest of this report is based on the introduction of a partial pedestrianisation scheme.

At the present moment in time the majority of shops on the “Boots” side of ‘The Hundred’ have rear delivery access. On the opposite side of the road shops between “The White Horse” and “Woolworths” have no rear access as this is taken up by the car park for “The White Horse”. Negotiations/compulsory purchase of the access road from Latimer Street leading to “The White Horse” and demolition of the wall at the rear of the affected properties would provide delivery access. Delivery otherwise would have to be by the front of the shops before 10 am and after 4 pm or from a loading/unloading bay at the end of the pedestrianised area and taken by trolley to the requisite shop. Because of traffic restrictions in many towns and cities around the country delivery drivers are used to complying with such restrictions.

Pedestrianisation of any town centre, whether full or partial, brings many benefits to the area.

- A pleasant, shopping area.
- A safe, traffic free, shopping area.
- Increased shoppers.
- Increased sales/revenue to traders.

Car Parking

Unfortunately, as mentioned above, some people insist on parking outside the shop they wish to go into. These people, though a minority raise their voices vociferously and in some instances local authorities pay more attention of them than the overall benefits to the majority of the populace. These people usually claim they cannot walk distances yet can be seen queuing in a post office for 20 minutes without any problem. With partial pedestrianisation they will still be able to park outside the shop of their choice, before 10 am and after 4 pm so their argument could therefore be discounted.

Romsey has a proliferation of car parks within easy distance of the town centre compared to many towns and cities. It has however become apparent from previous town centre changes in Romsey that the loss of just one parking space in the town causes extreme consternation. Partial pedestrianisation would result in the loss of approximately 10 short stay parking spaces between 10 am – 4 pm and with the additional visitors/shoppers attracted to the town further parking spaces will be required as well. It has been suggested

that the site of the Council Offices at Duttons Road could be turned into a multi-storey car park. Though a good idea some people even consider the new Waitrose car park too far a walk from the town centre, Dutton's road would be considered unassailable. Four alternative sites for a multi-storey car park would prove more suitable.

- Part of the "Old Brewery" site adjacent to Station Road.
- Existing car park junction Latimer Street/to rear of the Post Office.
- Existing car park off Alma Road adjacent to Waitrose car park.
- Existing short stay car park Broadwater Road/ bus station

It is also suggested that the area from outside the Abbey building Society to the Town Hall be made available for disabled parking only and from the Town Hall to HSBC be short stay parking, 30 minutes maximum, possibly ticket controlled with a "Pay and Display" machine.

Another consideration, taking into account the large number of elderly people in the area, that a shopmobility scheme be set up using, for example, the Alma Road/Waitrose car park where electric powered buggies could be hired for a small fee. Many towns and cities already operate such schemes successfully. Perhaps this is something Waitrose might consider sponsoring/running if based in their car park as it is from there that some people deem the town centre too far to walk.

Traders/Public reaction.

To implement partial pedestrianisation more upheaval in the town centre must be expected. With new paving having just been laid along both sides of 'The Hundred' no work will be required within one – two metres of a shop frontage. At the present moment in time some parts of the pavement has been angled, so as to allow water drainage and also meet the raised camber of the road surface. This is especially noticeable in the area from 'Woolworths/Clintons' and 'The Card shop'/Julian Graves opposite.

It is suggested that the road surface be lowered to just below that of the present lowest part of the pavement for water to drain to the centre, away from the shops. Though this work, and the laying of new surfaces would prove disruptive, on a temporary basis, it would prove much safer than the existing surfaces where shoppers are tripping on a regular basis and the authorities could easily find themselves subject to litigation for injuries incurred.

Traders will, naturally, complain and protest about the further disruption and this is understandable as this would be the third session of major disruption in recent years. The first session, which was badly managed, necessitated the second but this, the third, would be the final and result in the town centre proving a very popular shopping centre attracting visitors in much larger numbers. Upon completion of the scheme traders will benefit considerably from increased trading but will say little about these increased benefits they have been brought.

Members of the public, and traders, both complain about the changes to parking facilities but by building a multi-storey car park, and increasing available car parking spaces, again everybody will benefit in the long term.

With appropriate street furniture, see below, and raised flower beds the new precinct will become, and prove, very popular with shoppers and make the town centre a very pleasing environment free from the dangers of through traffic, between 10 am – 4 pm.

Street Furniture.

With vehicular access being limited during the day time, and a suggested restricted speed limit at other times, it would be possible to install bench seats at intervals along ‘The Hundred’ instead of the new “perches” that have been installed. Raised flower beds could be constructed to direct traffic flow and indicate parking bays for delivery/collection use. Because of the limited width of ‘The Hundred’, hence the necessity for pedestrianisation, other street furniture/decorations would have to be discounted.

An ideal example of the use of flower beds to direct traffic flow can be seen in Regent Road, Great Yarmouth, see below.

Traffic Restrictions/Rerouting.

As stated above no traffic, whatsoever, except for emergency vehicles, would be allowed access to ‘The Hundred’ from 10 am – 4 pm daily unless authority has been obtained from the Council or Town Centre Manager. It is suggested that this restriction be enforced from outside W.H. Smiths, and include the Cornmarket, through to the junction of ‘The Hundred’ with Latimer Street.

During these hours all vehicles entering the town centre from Bell Street and Abbey Meads would exit via Church Street and Cherville Street and/or Portersbridge Street. Access to Abbey Meads and area would still be accessible via Church Street and Bell Street as at present.

Traffic flow through this area would be reduced with proper signing and residents/locals would soon get used to this. Drivers wishing to reach ‘The Hundred’, past Latimer Street to Palmerston Street would go via Portersbridge Street and/or Duttons Road to Latimer Street and then turn left into ‘The Hundred’. Large/heavy vehicles should not be permitted to use Portersbridge Street and a size/weight limit imposed. These vehicles would have to use Duttons Road.

Before 10 am and after 4 pm access would be permitted through Market Place, Cornmarket and ‘The Hundred’ subject to a weight limit and a speed restriction of 10-15 mph. To help ensure the speed restriction, flower beds should be sited so that no straight run is possible and vehicles have to negotiate rolling curves. The flower beds should also be sited in such a way as to permit vehicles to park between them, for loading/unloading, maximum stay 30 minutes.

The route of the roadway should be indicated with a special colour, load-bearing surface, parking bays a second colour surface and the existing paving slabs remain to indicate footpath. Road surface, parking bays and footpath should all be on the same level with no kerbs.

Other Examples.

The author of this report has witnessed a number of pedestrianisation schemes be set up and uses some of these as examples to support the proposed scheme for Romsey.

Norwich:

Norwich City Council set up the first pedestrianised scheme in the country in the 1960's. The street, 'London Street' is only slightly wider than 'The Hundred' in Romsey and was used by doubledecker buses etc. When plans were announced traders immediately rose up in protest and from then till completion there was hardly a day when the local newspaper did not air their opinions. The City Council stood firm and on completion of the scheme traders acknowledged that trade increased to levels never witnessed/experienced before.

Since then most of the City Centre has been pedestrianised as shown on the attached map, appendix 2.

Norwich boasts the largest, permanent, outdoor market in the country. Roads around the market 'Gentleman's Walk' and 'Guildhall Hill' are, during the hours 10 am – 4 pm pedestrian only. 'Gentleman's Walk' once the second main vehicular thoroughfare through the City, and a major bus route is packed with shoppers on a daily basis. Looking at it now one would wonder how vehicles ever got through anyway with so many shoppers. The 'Walk' could easily accommodate three lanes of traffic with 4 metre wide footpaths. Before 10 am and after 4 pm vehicular access is still permitted for loading/unloading and through traffic but this, since limits have been imposed, is much reduced.

Great Yarmouth:

Regent Road in Great Yarmouth is the main route from the town centre to the seafront. Great Yarmouth sea front is on a par with that of Blackpool and accommodates the majority of the town's amusement facilities etc. During summer months, prior to pedestrianisation, the footpaths either side of Regent Road were so packed with shoppers/holidaymakers that they constantly spilled onto the road. A fatal accident was waiting to happen.

In the late 1970's a letter, written by myself, appeared in the local newspaper bringing this matter to the attention of the Town Council and asking whether it would take an accident to occur before they considered pedestrianisation. No action was taken.

Two years later a female holidaymaker, walking down Regent Road was hit by a bus and killed, the resulting media coverage forced the Town Council to rethink and within a

short period of time traffic was banned during the summer months. After evaluation of this ban the road was turned into a pedestrian thoroughfare with vehicular access limited to delivery/collection at certain times with vehicle routes being determined by flower beds. It is now a very pleasant shopping area attracting a considerable number of extra visitors/shoppers. This, to such an extent, where the shops which were once only open from Spring Bank Holiday to mid September, many are now open all year round. In the week leading up to Easter 2004 the numbers shopping/walking along the road was equivalent to mid August and all shops were open.

Further roads in the town centre have since been pedestrianised or had severe vehicle restrictions placed upon them. (appendix 3).

Folkestone:

In the mid 1970's Shepway District Council, Folkestone decided to pedestrianise Sandgate Road. As to be expected traders protested at traffic being banned. Upon completion of the scheme footfall in Sandgate Road rose considerably and the precinct became a popular location for outdoor concerts and buskers.

The next area to be pedestrianised was Guildhall Street but this area, not a popular shopping street anyway owing to the range of shops, did not benefit from increased footfall. Other areas have also been pedestrianised in recent years. (appendix 4). Folkestone is now a depressed area with many empty shops and hotels being used to accommodate asylum seekers.

Hythe:

A small town, not too dissimilar to Romsey, within the control of Shepway District Council has a very narrow High Street. Pedestrianisation was proposed for this street against considerable local protest. After only a few months of a six-month evaluation period, when vehicles were banned, Shepway Council gave in to the continued protests. It must be noted that Hythe had a number of residents whose voices could be heard in Westminster and their power influenced that of District Councillors. Alan Clarke MP lived locally and the local MP was, and still is, Michael Howard.

Conclusions/Recommendations.

With the current works coming to a conclusion in Romsey town centre, and motor vehicles being allowed through access once again, pedestrians will have to vie with drivers for space. Inconsiderate parking and the opening of car doors, without looking as to whether vehicles or pedestrians are within close proximity, together with lost lorry drivers driving through the town centre, will make shopping a dangerous pastime yet again. This is not counting the additional dangers of tripping over numerous kerbs and lips between pavement, parking bays and road surfaces.

It is therefore time that Test Valley Council and Hampshire County Council realise that Romsey needs to have its shopping facilities brought into the 21st century and not give in to the vociferous minority. Instead of looking at other schemes and their success/failure

throughout Hampshire a working party should look at schemes in other towns and cities throughout the country. Should such a trip take place then a visit to Norwich and Great Yarmouth would be recommended both can be visited in one day, albeit a long one, from Romsey.

Some traders, it has been noted, complain that any activity in 'The Hundred' causes severe damage to their trade but take no steps to rectify the problem except complain loudly to the local press. One shop owner in particular is renowned for this yet it is possible to pass their shop and not realise it is open because of both its dowdy interior and exterior. The type of business they undertake should result in a colourful and attractive window display but often all that can be seen is a dog sitting in the window, this alone is sufficient to put many people off entering. Such traders should be advised by the Chamber of Trade on how to dress their shops and make them look inviting to passing trade and employ a decorator/painter to undertake redecoration.

In conclusion it is recommended that a pedestrianisation scheme be introduced in Romsey, at the earliest possible opportunity, in which no vehicular access is allowed from W.H. Smith/Barclays bank down to the junction with Latimer Street between the hours of 10 am – 4 pm daily.

Appendix 1. Map of Romsey town centre.

Appendix 2. Map of Norwich city centre (2 sheets).

Appendix 3. Map of Great Yarmouth town centre.

Appendix 4. Map of Folkestone town centre.

Areas marked with an orange highlighter on Maps (appendix 2-4) signify pedestrianised areas.