

Stand to retain town's character

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BY MIKE BUCKELL

THE TOURIST explosion is no fantasy phrase. Nationally and internationally the holiday trade continues to grow and towns and cities strive to find more and bigger attractions to cash in on the holiday boom,

Christchurch has its share of the holiday hordes. Although standing in the shadow of Bournemouth, the Priory town has many attractions — mostly based on its history, something which Bournemouth sadly lacks.

But the skyline of Christchurch is changing. Planners are looking to the future, examining road demands and shopping trends, parklands and amenities.

But in planning for the years to come, are they neglecting the years gone by? Bad planning can ruin a town's character, and it's a fair bet that the character of Christchurch and the feel of the town is its star feature.

The organisation which is pledged to retain the character of the town is Christchurch Preservation Trust.

Secretary Mr. Paul MacCarty told me: "The town has not yet destroyed itself — but we are at a crossroads. We can either continue to erode and eventually destroy, or we can make a valiant stand and retain what is best in Christchurch and preserve the character of the town."

Mr. MacCarty said that with the Town Centre development proposals, Christchurch was presented with an opportunity which only occurred at very remote intervals to retain its character — and the Government had seen fit to allow it to remain as a separate complete unit.

"It seems that everything has conspired to give us the opportunity of preserving Christchurch as an entity since at least Saxon times and possibly well before that," he told me, "but it's up to us now."

Together with a photographer I went out around Christchurch to have a look at some of the sites which are threatened.

First we went to the United Reformed Church, just behind the High Street — a building with a spire which is almost as much of the Christchurch skyline as the Priory.

Said Mr. MacCarty: "It is a pity it has to go, although I can fully appreciate the difficulty of the people who own it. The spire is Victorian."

Coun. Michael Hodges, also deeply concerned with preservation of the town, pointed out it was a very old site — he thought it was first used about 1650 as a place of worship.

The demolition of this church is closely tied up with the Town Centre plan and redevelopment of the Staggs site, fronting onto the High Street.

Here is one of the first "purpose built" shops in Christchurch High Street — now it stands empty awaiting the bulldozer. The council are awaiting schemes for comprehensive redevelopment.

"It will be a great shame to lose this," remarked Mr. MacCarty, "and I hope there have been lots of photographs taken of it."

"It's certainly an interesting site," said Coun. Hodges. "I only hope there is an opportunity for an archaeological dig there. New development must be in keeping with the character of the town and not obscure the Priory and other buildings of a high elevation."

At the entrance to the town stands the Fountain Hotel. This mock Tudor building is, too, under the axe.

IMPOSING

"It's a very imposing structure," said Mr. MacCarty. "The main worry is that they will remove something interesting which is serving a useful purpose and replace it with a nondescript characterless building in this very imposing position."

"The Preservation Trust will take a very strong interest in what is to be done here."

Coun. Hodges was worried that the replacement for the impressive Fountain would be just another "concrete slab" at the town's gates.

Perhaps the most horrifying of all the suggestions is one to roof The Constable's House and use it as the bowling pavilion.

Coun. Hodges was not impressed. "This is a building of vital architectural interest," he said.

"It is a transitional building, used for the defence of the town and for habitation. I agree it could be roofed — however, if it was to be used as a bowling pavilion, it would remove it from easy public access, its internal structure would be concealed and it would be severely damaged since services such as toilets, drains, water, gas and electricity would have to be laid on and this would require holes to be made in the fabric."

He added: "The Preservation Trust would be against this, and I personally would be shocked if the Department of the Environment allowed a public monument in its charge to be so used."

Mr. MacCarty was equally firm. "It is perhaps one of the most significant buildings in the country and to do anything except preserve it would meet with very strong opposition."

Soon to go also is the Dolphin Hotel — not an outstanding building as such, but certainly interesting.

"It is a bit of old Christchurch and if it goes it will be another bit of history destroyed," thought Mr. MacCarty. Although it is in the conservation area, he was of the opinion it would be a lost cause to fight for it.

Not so, said Coun. Hodges. "It is one of the oldest original inns in the town; parts of it are very old and go back to the days of smuggling in the town. There are old trapdoors and boltholes in the building.

"Fortunately the planners have refused to allow a three-storey building here, but it is clear the developers want to put as many shops as they can."

These are just a few of the sites threatened — there are bound to be more. Demolition has already gone ahead in Millhams Street — one of the oldest in the borough — on houses that were said to be unsafe.

But an informed source told me recently they were, in fact, as safe as anything in Christchurch.

"At the present rate of demolition and redevelopment Christchurch as we know it will soon be no more," remarked Coun. Hodges.

"Our planners cannot seem to grasp that these old buildings are a part of the town's stock in trade. People go to Bournemouth for concrete, plastic and neon — we are in danger of killing the goose that lays the golden egg. Christchurch needs to realise that its olde worlde charm is of economic value."

We draw no conclusions from our look around the town — but what do you think? Write and tell us.