**Haslemere**

**A potted history**

Haslemere can trace its recorded history back to 1220. It has been granted two charters, by Richard lll and Elizabeth l, which gave rights to hold a market and two fairs. The prosperity of the place was due to iron-stone working in the middle ages. Locally abundant water and charcoal supplies from the wooded hillsides made iron smelting a viable proposition, although the sandy loam geology is generally poor for agriculture.

The 'T-shaped' old town centre layout is broadly as it was in the middle ages and it remained a sleepy small market town until the railway came in 1859 after which its population grew from about 400 to the 17,000 we see today.

The town is in two distinct parts, the medieval core and the Victorian Wey Hill. The latter was built to provide housing for railway workers, tanners and the staff and other workers who were employed in the various large houses, the owners of which had migrated from London seeking fresh air and a healthier lifestyle (described in the ‘Hilltop Writers’). At that time many famous writers, philosophers and other notables came to live here. One, Sir Robert Hunter, arrived in 1882. He recognised that at Hindhead, development threatened the open space there and formed a local preservation group, now the Haslemere Society, in 1884. Hunter lived in Three Gates Lane, off the lower High Street, and is now famous as one of the three founders of the National Trust, formed in 1895.

The geographical constraints on the town derive in part from its hilly topography and narrow entry points and from the substantial National trust ownership around all sides of the town. NT owns a total of around 4,500 acres in various parcels: Black Down; Hindhead; Swan Barn (in the town centre, just yards from the High Street) and Bramshott Chase.

At around the same time Haslemere became famous as the centre of a thriving Arts and Crafts industry. Apart from textiles and ceramics a new style of architecture was evolving and Haslemere has many fine examples of work by notable Arts and Crafts architects: Brownrigg, Troup, Triggs, Voysey, Norman-Shaw and others.

**Haslemere's distinctive culture**

Haslemere has a very distinctive culture, its population is drawn from both those who have always lived in the area and those who have moved to enjoy the unique combination of high speed train services to London and the South, a belt of beautiful, protected countryside, great schools, a mix of historic buildings, and a strong sense of community. Most incomers have made an active choice to leave behind the cities and larger towns, and are very protective of Haslemere's market town environment and culture. The recent public uproar over SCC plans for pay and display meters, seen as an attempt to urbanise the town, is a case in point.

Haslemere has a rich community and cultural life, with very popular annual music, art and food festivals, a well-used Hall (for cinema, theatre and events), and an award winning Museum. The High Street is closed for the Christmas Fair and bi-annual Charter Fair. There are over 300 local organisations and charities, and there is a long history of philanthropy in the town.

A recurring issue for concern is the perception that SCC and its representatives based in Kingston, often take a very urban perspective when dealing with Haslemere's issues, and fail to recognise and understand the desire of residents to nurture and enhance Haslemere's unique character. The location of Haslemere, distant from Kingston in the far south-west corner of the county further exacerbates this impression.

**Key Challenges**

***A town of contrasts***

Although the town appears prosperous with a high number of city commuters, several private schools and many fine houses, there are pockets of significant economic and social deprivation. The property market is in a micro bubble which leads to high property prices on the one hand, but very little affordable housing on the other. A food bank has recently been set up in the Methodist Church. It is supported by an additional food bank for Haslemere across the West Sussex border in Fernhurst. Mental health is a significant issue and yet there is no mental health team in Haslemere, the nearest provision being in Godalming. Personal debt also ranks as a high concern from residents who seek help at the local Citizens Advice Bureau.

***Development constraints***

In recent years all local manual work employment sites have been sold (by WBC) for housing thus there is hardly any local employment other than shops and other similar trades in the town. In the last 20 years we have seen huge numbers of houses built on back-land with garden-grab style developments. Waverley‘s failure to develop a Core Strategy has made the town vulnerable to development but in reality there are virtually no sites left – apart from the Sturt Farm land adjacent to Sun Brow estate. There are plans to develop about a third of the 35 acres of AONB and AGLV designated land there, to build 150 houses. As with all parts of Haslemere, vehicular access is difficult. Narrow roads/lanes, poor visibility, flood risks and serious congestion at peak times create intractable problems.

***Transport and parking***

Public transport provision is minimal in Haslemere; social isolation and exclusion experienced by those without car access is one of the main problems identified by agencies working with all age groups.

Most residents cite traffic issues as a problem and there is a repeated call for a 20mph limit in areas of the town centre. Several road junctions are dangerous for pedestrians, perception of car speeds are exacerbated by the narrow roads, the town lacks crossings, and there are few cyclists because of road safety concerns. The roads around the train station are highly congested with both commuters and parents ferrying their children by car, even though distances are walkable/cyclable.

The town suffers from cross-border parking pressures created in the main by commuters who use the fast train service to London (50 minutes). There are several large development sites in West Sussex and Hampshire, the borders of both counties being within the town boundary.

The futures of two of the main car parks in Haslemere are currently under discussion. WBC have submitted plans to redevelop and be able to start charging on the Wey Hill Fairground common land, currently providing over a 100 free car parking spaces. A public inquiry will be held on April 17th, 2014. The construction of a multi-storey car park at the train station has been discussed for many years, supported by Haslemere Town Council. The current proposals for an MSCP have recently been assessed as non-viable by the Secretary of State for Transport despite an offer of additional funding from the Town Council.

***Education***

Many families move out of London to Haslemere, and there has been a growing shortage of primary school places. St Bartholomew’s Primary and Grayswood Infant School are both currently being expanded.

***Retail***

Haslemere High Street is very attractive with many independent shops, however the general economic down turn, high business rates and increasing car parking charges, have created very difficult trading conditions and shop units remain empty. The Wey Hill shopping area of Haslemere is relatively run down compared with the High Street, although several of the independents are successful international businesses.

***Youth services***

The well equipped Wey Centre run by an excellent team of mainly part times and volunteers, however it appears underutilised due to lack of consistent staffing. There has been a high level of management instability over recent years. The centre is running on minimal staffing levels with “no additional hours” contracts for staff, so that sessions are cut.

***Fracking***

Fernhurst is an exploration site for Cuadrilla and there is an open application for planning. This would have huge implications for large vehicular traffic through Haslemere which is close to the site. This has been raised as a concern by the Leader of WCB, however, it is to be seen if this stance will change given the government’s announcement regarding business rates this week.

**Key Opportunities**

***Haslemere Neighbourhood Plan***

In 2013 Haslemere was designated as a Neighbourhood Area under the Localism Act. The Haslemere Town Council has delegated to Haslemere Vision, the tasks of consulting with the community to create a shared vision for the future of the town, and then preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan, to be taken to local referendum in 2015. Key issues include the development of a holistic, sustainable transport strategy and the identification of possible sites for housing development.

***Tourism***

Haslemere has been identified as the Gateway to the South Downs National Park as part of the Two Parks Project, and has been awarded £150,000 to improve sustainable transport links between the South Downs and Haslemere train station. Haslemere is seen as a gateway to Hindhead Common (with the re-wilding of the old A3 and close proximity to South Downs National Park.)

Haslemere Museum won a prestigious award last year and annually hosts the Natural History Museum’s Wildlife Photography exhibition.

'Walkers are Welcome' designation was granted to Haslemere last year (and it is the first town in Surrey to gain this.)

A Market Scheme is under discussion as way to redevelop the old police station. It would offer a combination of residential housing and an indoor and outdoor market. This may revive the arts & crafts heritage of Haslemere as well as sell locally sourced food and drink.

***Affordable housing***

In order to address the lack of affordable housing, the proposed Sturt Farm development could be assigned affordable housing quotas. In addition, there is possible opportunity to change shop use to residential use within the commercial streets as footfall on high streets changes due to increases in online shopping.

**Stopping points on SCC Chief Executive's visit Friday 17th January 2014**

1. Train station
2. St. Bartholomew's School and SCC's Sure Start Children's Centre
3. Wey Hill
4. Food Bank (at Methodist Church, Wey Hill)
5. Haslewey Community Centre
6. Wey Centre Youth Centre
7. Fairground Car Park
8. Station Car Park (proposed site of MSCP)
9. Town Hall
10. Haslemere Educational Museum
11. High Street
12. West Street (Fire Station, Old Police Station, Haslemere Hall)

Councillor Nikki Barton

January 2014