



SOROPTIMIST INTERNATIONAL OF TUNBRIDGE WELLS & DISTRICT

AROUND THE CLOCK



SURVEY OF USERS' VIEWS ABOUT IMPROVING FIVE WAYS

May 2007

About Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District:

Our Club was established in 1946. It is part of a worldwide organisation working for human rights and the advancement of women, and for international friendship and understanding. SI is the world's largest women's service organisation and has General Consultative Status at the United Nations.

We seek to use women's perspectives and skills to good effect in the community, and carry out fact-finding, practical projects and fundraising to that end, locally, nationally and internationally.

This report on the area around Five Ways is part of our work looking at local environmental and personal security issues.

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AROUND THE CLOCK

Survey of Users' Views about Improving Five Ways

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Five Ways is a key town landmark at the heart of the shopping area. But four-fifths of users find it drab and unwelcoming. It needs immediate action to remove eyesores and set standards for the street scene. Much could be done with better use of existing budgets to benefit local trade.

Insufficient seating, and feeling intimidated by other users, are major deterrents. 40% referred to “tramps”, “undesirables”, *drunken weirdos*, or “strange people”. A quarter disliked crowds of congregating school children annexing seats and blocking pavements, while skateboarders were criticised by 10%

Brightening up and “softening” the appearance of the area with hanging baskets and greenery was seen by users as the top priority. More benches and café tables came next, and action to make the area feel safer.

The report’s main recommendations for action are to

- clean up Currys sidewall as part of new “heritage” quality standards to be set for fascias and frontages in the area generally;
- instal hanging wall baskets, and greenery covering the clock plinth;
- provide more seating and café tables subject to a strict code of practice on litter prevention;
- challenge poor pavement repairs and low maintenance standards;
- reduce street clutter and remove intrusive advertising;
- create interesting things to look at such as art displays, a buskers pitch and market stalls;
- improve the public’s sense of security by displacing skateboarders and motor-bikes, speedy installation of taxi rank, street warden patrols and attention to lighting and CCTV.

Local schools should be asked to remind pupils not to create a nuisance to others and, for the longer term, the Council should introduce more “landmark” green spaces with seating to reduce the pressure on Five Ways. A new small park in the public space in front of the Town Hall could mark the Royal Tunbridge Wells Centenary and further “Green Oases” with landmarks be created as part of the Town Plan. A Task Force should be set up jointly by TWBC and KCC to plan and deliver prompt action on all these matters.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Purpose

1.1 Five Ways lies at the heart of Tunbridge Wells shopping centre and is a key part of the townscape for locals and visitors alike. This report sets out the findings of a street survey of users' views about its appearance and how this could be improved. It was carried out as part of the work of Soroptimist International of Tunbridge Wells and District looking at local environmental and safety issues through women's eyes.

1.2 The Borough Council took a welcome interest in the project and we are grateful to them for their practical help with display equipment for the survey.

The area we looked at

1.3 This was quite small, consisting of the brick paved strip created from former roadways when three of the five streets that gave Five Ways its name were blocked off to traffic. It is a favourite place for people to congregate, whether sitting on the benches, standing in groups or in the case of skateboarders performing manoeuvres on and off the plinth of the spidery clock.

1.4. The space contains — besides the clock and benches — some cycle stands (mainly used by motor cycles) a flourishing young tree and a sickly one. One side is flanked by three café tables with chairs outside Costa Coffee shop. On the other is the grubby side wall of Currys.digital ("Currys"). At the back, the Brasserie Blanc with its attractive forecourt is cut off from the paved area by the loop of the traffic circuit formed out of two of the old roads, while in front, traffic on Mount Pleasant Road separates it from the main pedestrian precinct running along Calverley Road. Though restricted to buses between the hours of 10 to 4, this road carries many vehicles taking an illegal short cut.

What we did

1.5 The survey took place on International Women's Day Thursday 8th March with a view to capturing women's and girls' views about the area, though some men's views were also collected for comparison. 108 people were interviewed, 92 women and 16 men. 13 per cent were under 20 and 32 per cent over 60, with the remaining 45 per cent spread between. No significant gender or age differences of view emerged about the nature of the problems and what needed to be done, save that young males had more to say about problems after dark.

1.6 The people using the area were a mixture of weekday shoppers, visitors to Tunbridge Wells, workers on their coffee or lunch breaks, unemployed people filling in time, and the hordes of secondary schoolchildren who daily descend on the town centre from 3.30 onwards.

1.7 The main reasons given for being in this part of town were to shop, to meet friends, and to work. A fifth of those interviewed were visitors to the town, three of them from overseas. The rest lived in Tunbridge Wells itself or its immediate environs.

Structure of the report

1.8 Open-ended questions were used to capture personal impressions of the area, good or bad, and provide an understanding about how people wished to use it. Ideas were then sought about what might be done to make that a pleasanter experience. A copy of the form used is in the annex.

1.9 Chapter 2 describes what people said they liked and disliked about the area. Chapter 3 describes the ideas they offered about how matters might be improved. Most of these would involve only modest outlays.

1.10 Chapter 4 gives our overview and recommendations.



CHAPTER 2: VIEWS ABOUT THE FIVE WAYS AREA

2.1 This chapter summarises replies to the following questions about the use made of the area and how it looked and felt:

- A. do you ever sit here? Why?
- B. how would you describe its appearance at present?
- C. is there anything you specifically like or dislike about it?

A. Use made of the area

2.2 Five main reasons were given for sitting here:

i. *Pleasant sunny spot to watch the world go by.*

“It’s a nice place in the sun”; “After shopping it’s a nice place to sit in the sun”; “It’s at the heart of things. You can see everything”; “I often sit here to watch. There’s lots going on”; “I like people-watching”; and “I often rest here”.

Virtually everyone sitting used the two public benches on the sunny side of the area or the coffee-shop chairs in the sun. The bench on the shady side under Currys wall was used far less and the low uncomfortable steps of the clock dais only by lounging teenagers in the afternoon.

ii. *The clock is a landmark to suggest for meeting up.*

“It’s a good meeting place”; and “It’s the only landmark you can name — there aren’t any others this end of town”.

We return later to this interesting point about landmarks, and its relationship with some of the crowd-problems people disliked.

iii. *Meeting friends*

“You come to meet your friends”; and “You know your friends will be somewhere around this area”.

The first comment came mainly from adults out shopping or in their lunch break. Once they had met up they usually either moved off or had a coffee together before doing so; The second came mainly from unemployed people and teenagers. They occupied the public benches for long periods and brought their own refreshments if any.

iv. *Convenient vehicle pick-up point*

“I’m waiting for my husband to pick me up”; and “Someone is picking me up”.

Our 2006 report on taxis and hirecars¹ noted the shortage of town centre pick-up and waiting points for people being taken home by private car or taxi. “The loop” is used by many for this purpose and the two public benches near Costa Coffee had a succession of elderly occupiers awaiting a lift home. Others stood waiting when no space was

¹ Women’s View of Taxis in Tunbridge Wells, March 2006

available. Some of the latter were very elderly and frail. Some people left vehicles for long periods unattended on the double yellow lines of the loop.

v. *Enjoying refreshments at the outdoor café tables*

“Drinking coffee”; “Drinking a coffee in the sun”; and “Having elevenses with a friend”.

The tables of the two cafés abutting the area, Café Nero and Costa Coffee, were well patronised all day with a fairly quick turnover. Presumably on wet days the same patrons would have been inside the premises.

2.3 Two main reasons were given for not lingering (apart from having no time to stop). These were shortage of seating, and nervousness about certain other groups of people there.

i. *Shortage of seating*

“Too many people, not enough seats”; “You need to have nicer seating areas”; and “The seats are always packed with schoolchildren”.

Only 3 benches were available, one of them damaged. Supply fell well short of demand and what was available as the day wore on was increasingly monopolised by groups of young people. People did not want to sit squashed up against strangers so the maximum number able to sit on the benches at any one time was 9 people. This rose to around a dozen later when groups of young people arrived,



cramming onto the seats, some perched on the backs and others on one another’s laps. A few teenagers perched on the clock plinth but even had that been graffiti free and in better condition the low height and design made sitting there an awkward business. The 12 chairs outside Costa and the similar number outside Café Nero were well patronised all day.

ii. *Presence of what were variously described as “undesirables”, “drunken weirdos”, “strange people”, “the regular gents”*

“I used to sit here but not now much because of the ne’er-dowells”; “The seats are all full and taken up with men and women drinking”; and “Where the tables are outside it’s a nice feeling, but the tramps put you off”.

40% of people interviewed, from all age groups, said that the fact the area was frequented by this type of person was why either they did not use it at all, or felt uncomfortable when doing so. During our day’s observations we noted at least three people with apparent mental problems of some sort. While obvious alcohol indulgence seems to have been curbed by the street drinking ban, some of those on the benches had plainly been drinking or taking drugs.

iii. *Crowds of noisy school children*

“It’s always packed with schoolkids”; “The mobs congregate”; “Sometimes there’s a few too many large groups of school kids”; and “It attracts loiterers and loud gatherings of young people”.

This deterrent was mentioned by over a quarter of those interviewed. There were many criticisms not only of the obstruction they caused and their virtual takeover of seating, but also their unmannerly behaviour:

“They treat you as if you’re invisible”; “They completely block the way for the baby buggy and refuse to move even when you ask”; and “Over the top sexual encounters”.

iv. *Skateboarders and yobs*

“The skateboarders obstruct you”; “Children milling and with skateboards”; “There’s too many youngsters jumping on and off the clock”; “It’s full of the homeless and kids with skateboards”; and “A typical cut through route for drunks and skateboarders”,

though three added

“but they have to go somewhere”.

Skateboarders were mentioned by 10% of people, often coupled with “and yobs” which appeared to mean loud-mouthed youths, the motorcyclists congregating there, attracted by the availability of cycle stands for their machines, and young men who created a nuisance there in the evenings. The clock plinth had been badly chipped by skateboarders, and graffiti had sunk into the soft stone.



B. Appearance

2.4 The table overleaf shows how people responded to our invitation to describe the area. Around 20 % thought the area looked:

“OK”; “quite good”; “quite nice”; “reasonable”; and “pretty”.

But the overwhelming majority of comments were less flattering. Even discounting excessive terms such as “diabolical” or “atrocious”, there was a strong vein of criticism in over half of the descriptions offered. The terms most commonly used were variants of:

“drab”; “dull”; “utilitarian”; “unwelcoming” and “grubby”.

Some of the criticisms were used by people who were visitors to the town, though these tended to be more polite than residents.

Terms used to describe the area

Favourable or neutral (19 responses)

<i>Nice/quite nice (3)</i>	<i>Very pleasant in the sunshine</i>	<i>Reasonable</i>
<i>Pleasant (2)</i>	<i>I like it, its so open</i>	<i>Not too bad</i>
<i>Pretty (2)</i>	<i>Better than it was</i>	<i>Looks quite good</i>
<i>Busy (2)</i>	<i>Much better</i>	<i>Nothing special</i>
<i>OK/Fairly OK (2)</i>		

Unfavourable (71 responses)

<i>Drab (6)</i>	<i>Unattractive</i>	<i>Grim</i>
<i>Dull (5)</i>	<i>Unfriendly</i>	<i>Horrible</i>
<i>Tatty (5)</i>	<i>Industrial</i>	<i>Scummy</i>
<i>Bland (3)</i>	<i>Utilitarian</i>	<i>Awful</i>
<i>Boring (3)</i>	<i>Poor. Puts people off</i>	<i>Terrible</i>
<i>Scruffy (3)</i>	<i>Usually off-putting</i>	<i>Its rubbish</i>
<i>Dirty (3)</i>	<i>Run down</i>	<i>Diabolical</i>
<i>Shabby (2)</i>	<i>A bit of a mess</i>	<i>The people spoil it</i>
<i>Could be nicer</i>	<i>Bare</i>	<i>An eyesore</i>
<i>Not very good</i>	<i>Grubby</i>	<i>Atrocious</i>
<i>Lifeless</i>	<i>Sad</i>	<i>Doesn't have a purpose</i>
<i>Grey</i>	<i>Busy and dirty</i>	<i>Closed in</i>
<i>Dingy</i>	<i>Unclean</i>	<i>Typical of the area</i>
<i>Uninteresting</i>	<i>Old</i>	<i>Room for improvement</i>
<i>Devoid of anything interesting</i>	<i>Dated</i>	<i>Like a very scant bit of pavement with an ugly clock and 3 benches</i>
<i>Not very inviting</i>	<i>A bit desolate</i>	
<i>Unwelcoming</i>	<i>A bit exposed</i>	

2.5 We were surprised by so many negative descriptions of what was a relatively neat paved area. The reasons for this became a little clearer in answers to the next question about what they specifically liked or disliked about it.

C. Likes and dislikes

2.6 Only a quarter of those interviewed could name something they particularly liked about the area. The most commonly mentioned feature was that it was a “pleasant open space” where you could sit in the middle of the town with good views of what was going on around. Seven liked the clock, and others mentioned favourably the small shops, the appearance of the café tables, “the cafés outdoor tables are lovely”, and the tree by Costa, “I love the tree, it’s really lovely”. The most common responses by the remaining three-quarters — where they did not seize on the question to offer a criticism — were “nothing in particular” and “can’t think of anything”.

2.7 They had no such reticence about what they disliked. Over three-quarters promptly named a feature nearly all in one of the three following categories:

i. *Currys wall*

The dirty blank appearance, grey colour and decrepit windows of the side wall of Currys was criticised by 28 % of respondents:

“Currys wall is horrible” and “Replace that horrible sign on Currys”.

This probably lay behind many of the criticisms of the general appearance of the area as dirty, dingy, an eyesore and so forth. The grey concrete together with the open metal-work of the legs of the clock may have inspired their use of the terms “industrial” and “utilitarian” for the area.

ii. *The millennium clock*

Passionately disliked by nearly a quarter of respondents:

“My husband will dismantle it right now for you and cart it away if you like”
and *“Pull it down”.*

Some (particularly older people) mentioned the difficulty of reading the time and its intermittent inaccuracy, and others (including some of the teenagers) saw it as out of keeping with the image of a town like Tunbridge Wells or just plain ugly.

The remaining 65 % of those interviewed who did not mention either liking or disliking the clock presumably took it for granted. However many of those proposing ways to improve the general appearance of the area even though not criticising the clock as such, suggested filling in around its feet with greenery.

Its odd appearance certainly did not seem to have deterred anyone from using the area — though its attendant skateboarders certainly did — and helped to make it the main landmark of the top of the town.

iii. *Other users*

The third big dislike was a quite different matter and had a clear deterrent impact. Three groups of users made others feel intimidated. As already noted above unwelcome “other people” were perceived by many people — of all ages — as a reason for not sitting there or feeling very uneasy when doing so. 40% referred to:

“undesirables”; “tramps”; “drunks on the seats”; “strange people” and “drunken weirdos”.

Almost as many found the crowds of school-children and skateboarders not just annoying but intimidating:

“It’s quite threatening if you are on your own seeing all the kids”; “You don’t feel in a safe area when it’s so busy”; “When all the kids congregate you feel vulnerable”; “The young people swarm the area and are a bit frightening and unruly”; “The children can be aggressive”; “I felt uncomfortable waiting for a friend to go to Petit Blanc. I felt intimidated by the crowds of young people hanging around”.

Skateboarders were seen as aggressive and noisy, and risking physical harm to themselves and others:

It's diabolical when the kids get out of school and at the weekends it's a free-zone for skateboarders"; "A lot of kids hang out here. It's slightly intimidating"; "Skateboarding is very dangerous" and "Usually there's a lot of kids on skateboards. It's intimidating though I'm quite young myself".

Staff at Costa Coffee commented that the close proximity of the public benches was a problem. One of the people surveyed complained of:

"people begging when you're sitting at Costa tables".

2.8 One of our questions sought people's views about the area after dark when different circumstances applied.

iv. Personal security and night-time.

The vast majority said they never went there in the evening, either from choice, or because they had no occasion to do so:

"I only come with company, but not in this area, not on my own"; "I will only drive through at night"; "I'd never come here alone"; and "I wouldn't come here on a Friday or Saturday".

However some of the younger age groups, particularly boys had first hand experience to offer. Typical comments were:

"It's rowdy at times"; "Drunk and noisy people there intimidate you"; "All the pubs round the corner cause havoc, all this shit going on. It's not a good environment for people to grow up in"; "It's daunting and scary"; "I live near there. There's hundreds of cars around at night. They and the yobs make a lot of noise"; "It can be a bit intimidating if you're here alone at night due to Wetherspoons and Que Pasa etc nearby"; and "You're uncomfortable there in the evening with yobs stumbling around drunk. The decent places are shut, but Wetherspoons is open".

2.9 The overall message was:

"It's the people who spoil it".



CHAPTER 3: IMPROVING THE AREA

- 3.1 This chapter looks at the ideas people suggested in reply to the following questions
- A. What new things would brighten it up/make it more interesting/feel safer?
 - B. Which of these would you most like to see here?
 - C. What other ideas have you to make this part of the town nicer to visit or see?

A. Brightening up Five Ways

3.2 Everybody had ideas to offer — some people enthusiastically proposing several. Many of these could be swiftly adopted without great expense, while others are food for thought for the longer term. The improvements most frequently suggested came under 6 main headings

- i. enhancing the area with colour and greenery;
- ii. tackling Currys wall;
- iii. providing more seating and bins;
- iv. introducing interesting things to look at;
- v. reducing the traffic; and
- vi. feeling safer.

i. *Colour and greenery.*

3.3 Trees, “*more trees please*”, shrubs, greenery and flowers were suggested by nearly half of all respondents in order to:

“create a more park-like appearance”; “brighten it up”; “soften the appearance”; “flowers to soften”; “create a green place”; and “make it more colourful”.

Several commented favourably on the neat appearance of the frontage of the Brasserie Blanc and the trim hedge beside it. Some favoured shrubs while others said they wanted something very colourful.

3.4 When asked where the greenery might be put, the suggestion of most people was that it should be massed around and under the clock:

“a big green centrepiece”; “some colour around the clock to highlight it and bring it alive”; and “make it into a green focus”.

Reasons given were to provide a focal point, to soften the hard appearance of the clock and to reduce the risk of wilful damage. Shrubs and perhaps a quirky display of topiary or figures might be used such as seen in some other towns. This might convey symbolically what Royal Tunbridge Wells stands for — a message several people thought should be given about the town and was presently absent.

3.5 To reduce the risk of vandalism, several people suggested that colour should be provided by hanging baskets all round the area:

“I know they’d say flowers would be vandalised but Tonbridge High Street is a picture with hanging baskets”: and “Nothing at ground level— keep it out of harms way”.

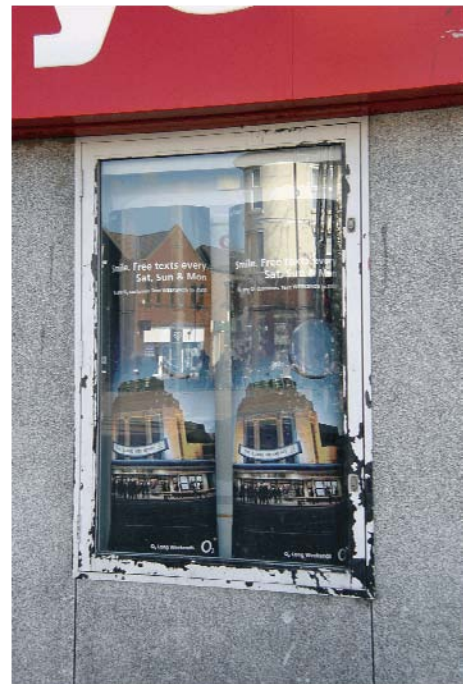
They envisaged this particularly along Currys wall and on the lamp standards. The latter in any event need some attention, their high industrial columns on top of traditional bases being out of keeping with their surroundings, while still failing to provide enough illumination at people- height for night security.

3.6 Lighting up the clock was suggested as an associated means of making it more attractive, while others seemed more concerned to make it less of a contrast in style to surrounding buildings. Several people suggested a circle of benches could surround the planting, to help protect it, designed so as not to invite the attentions of any skateboarders. The flourishing alder tree near Costas was admired by some while commenting that the other tree seemed sickly.

3.7 A water feature was proposed by 10% of people, perhaps with a paddling area for children, though some added *“but it would probably be vandalised”* — a gloomy comment also made by some of those suggesting the introduction of more flowers and greenery.

ii. *Currys wall.*

3.8 There was general agreement that brightening up this wall would be a big benefit. Besides the suggestions about hanging baskets, many thought a simple coat of paint say in cream or yellow or some colour suitable in relation to the surroundings, would do a lot immediately to brighten up the whole Five Ways. The decayed state and dirtiness of the windows was deplored and the intrusive public utilities hardware at the foot of the wall. The Currys sign was criticised as an added eyesore whose style and colour were quite out of keeping with the area and several people thought that the Council needed to pay more attention to controlling shop fascias and signs in the shopping area generally, which they saw as being neglected compared with the detailed attention lavished on the appearance of premises in the Pantiles. We return to this in chapter 4.



3.9 Others had more ambitious ideas about using the wall to dramatic effect, perhaps for street art that could be a feature of the area. Four people recalled with approval the giant “picture” temporarily erected there some months ago:

“I really liked the art display on the wall” “ they need to have a mural on Currys wall to make it more attractive” “I liked that mural on the wall”.

Another suggestion was to have local artists paint a temporary mural directly on the wall to be replaced with another in say three or six months time as a “rolling exhibition” of local talent. Further ideas ranged from a large mosaic wall map of historic Tunbridge Wells walks, to turning the wall into an “official graffiti” site or a big digital message board relaying town information and promoting its charms:

“In London parks there are little pavilions and you can buy tickets or find out what’s on. Something like that would help promote Tunbridge Wells”

3.10 The common thread in all the comments was that it was very important to get this prominent wall cleaned up as soon as possible and to make it interesting to look at.

iii. Seating and bins

3.11 Not surprisingly, given the limited amount of available seating, over a third of respondents wanted more benches, placed where people could enjoy the sunshine and their surroundings. One of the observable features during the day was the differing usage of the shady and sunny sides of the area, perhaps also influenced by the close proximity of motorcyclists and their machines on the Currys side. It is for consideration how the differing aspects should be best exploited in any reallocation of the overall space available. The precise location of the taxi rank will be a factor.

3.12 There were also suggestions about improving the layout of the seating:

“You need seating in a square, not a row with its back to the café. It’s not a friendly seating area”; “You need more seating for people not drinking Costa Coffee”; and “The bench is too close to Costa Coffee”.

3.13 Besides wanting more public seats, 10 % of people favoured having more café tables and chairs for paying customers:

“Making it look more Continental”; “Making it feel like Spain or Portugal”; “More of a European atmosphere”; and “You could fence off a bit”.

One person however said *“Not more cafés please”*. There were pleas for awnings or *“little canopies”* to provide shelter from the weather when sitting or waiting there.

3.14 Chewing gum and litter were mentioned by some people, perhaps prompted that day by the very visible presence of the Gumbusters team busy cleaning the pavement. While most liked the clean-up, one saw it as a waste of money. A practical suggestion was *“They should get rid of the machine selling gum in the RVP”*. Schoolchildren were blamed by one person for the litter *“There’s a lot less rubbish when the kids aren’t here”*, but it seemed to us that the litter had a variety of sources, including adults eating and drinking on the benches and at the café tables. The amount of drink holders and wrappings blowing about here and across the road by the Café Nero noticeably increased as the day went by.



3.15 Some people wanted more litter bins, *“You need more litter bins in bright colours with big notices”* preferably right next the seats. When it was pointed out there were several around the

area, a typical response was that they hadn't noticed them — a point we have made in the past² about “tastefully unobtrusive” litter bins.

iv. Introducing interesting things to look at

3.16 Besides more colourful surroundings and displays on Currys wall, several people suggested some form of street entertainment, including buskers, that people could watch or listen to as they sat there. “*Something to look at*”, whether a picture, flower display or street activity, was generally viewed favourably. “*Make it more adult-friendly*”. Another suggestion to add liveliness to the street scene was a row of market stalls below Currys wall. A street market, particularly one selling low cost goods, or a Farmers Market was suggested by several people, and two specific suggestions were a fortnightly “bouquinistes” day for second hand booksellers, and allowing local charities to set up stalls there free of charge on certain days. One person thought that the Council might need to provide basic stands of an approved design to maintain a harmonious appearance. Another suggestion was that the area might be turned into an open-air skating rink in the winter or a play area for small children.

3.17 Some of the suggestions were far too ambitious for such a small area, but offer food for thought about application to other parts of this general top of the town area — something we return to in our concluding chapter 4.

v. Reducing through movement and traffic

3.18 Several people had mentioned they liked the feeling of openness. But others thought: “*its just a route through for pedestrians*”; “*It doesn't have a purpose*”; and “*Its just a traffic island*”.

More fencing-in was also suggested.

3.19 People also wanted more enforcement of the present restrictions on traffic:

“You need more control on the traffic. A large number should not be there legally”; “They should enforce the parking along the road”; and “There should be fewer cars, not this constant stream”



More pedestrianisation was another suggestion:

“It's a shame about the road. It cuts right through the square. It would be ideal without traffic”; and “It should be completely pedestrianised across the shopping precinct”.

²Green and Clean: A Litter Prevention Strategy, July 2003

However other people wanted the bus stops to be nearer and to see taxis plying from a stand there: *"I've always missed the taxi rank I want it back. I don't drive ..."*. Two people asked if we knew what was happening about the promised new taxi-stand.

3.20 Staff at Café Nero commented that the traffic on the road throughout the day created a barrier that people were reluctant to cross.

vi. Feeling safer

3.21 Though many people said they felt intimidated by other day-time users their only suggestions for action were more visible policing of the area, to move on “undesirables” and provide better control of teenage misbehaviour.

3.22 However those also familiar with the area at night had some additional proposals. Staff at Currys mentioned petty vandalism at the back of their premises and that people urinated there. They wanted better CCTV coverage. This was also suggested by other people, saying that the present camera was not wholly effective and that its existence should be publicised as a deterrent by the erection of a big notice, as on railway stations, saying the area was under surveillance.

3.23 Two people wanted better lighting there, preferably white not orange. As noted earlier there is an issue about the design as well as the location of lighting in this area to make it more in keeping with the surroundings.

B. Top Priority Choices

3.23 In order to sharpen up what people felt was the top priority we asked people to say what they would choose if just one thing could be done. As the table shows, there was a runaway winner — adding greenery and flowers. Taking public benches and café areas together, more seating was the next priority while the third was various measures to make the area feel safer, by tougher enforcement, more policing and better lighting.

Top priority by % of respondents	
Flowers	39
More seating	
Benches	15
Café tables/chairs	6
Total	21
Making the area feel safer	11
Remove the clock	8
Clean Currys wall/add art display	7
Provide more bins/clear up litter and gum	4
Remove/enforce traffic and pedestrianise more	3
Instal fountain	3
Better bus and taxi access	2
Street entertainment	2
Improve shop fronts	1

C. Other suggestions

3.24 Our final question was a roundup one to complete the interview by capturing any other ideas people wanted to offer about improving the general appearance of this part of the town.

The points made in response covered a wide range of matters, but there were certain discernible themes:

i. *Brightening up:*

“Brighten the whole place up”; “More eating out places along the precinct”; “It’s a dull old town. Everything shuts at 5.00”; “The town needs a general facelift”; “Generally smarten up”; “I’d like them to paint all the buildings in different colours, pink and green and blue and cream”; and “They don’t cater for poor people. We need more street markets”.

ii. *Flowers and greenery:*

“Tunbridge Wells is very bad for flowers”; “More seats and colour everywhere”; “more hanging baskets”; “Flowers” (several people); and “Some secluded green space to sit in”.

iii. *Making a clearer statement about the character of the town generally:*

“You need some landmarks to remind them this is TW”; “It should be a bit more like Harrogate”; “Bring a style out more”; “You need to make people see its attractions more clearly They have forgotten it is Royal Tunbridge Wells” (17 year old); “It’s a lovely town. But it’s a bit more upmarket down at Hoopers”; “The buildings need more discreet signage here. They are old buildings”; and “They need to have things more in keeping”.

iv. *Keeping it clean*

“Less litter”; “Down in Calverley Grounds its all drugs and needles” (18 year old); “Keep it free from litter”; “Stop vandalism”; “Chewing gum is horrible but it’s a total waste of time clearing it up”; “Remove the chewing gum machine from RVP”; and “More wall-mounted holders for cigarette butts”.

v. *Traffic and pedestrians*

“Free parking”; “I’d like park and ride”; “Make all traffic go round from 8-4 not through the middle”; “Make it a 24-hour ban so people aren’t confused”; “Have cobbles or hatchings on the road”; “Have a real gateway so you know you’re in the pedestrian area”; and “The bus gate needs much clearer signs. They are small and in the wrong place. You don’t see them till you’re on them”

vi. *Things for young people and the elderly to do*

“Something for children but tasteful and quiet”; “Something for children under cover”; “Somewhere they could paddle”; “Something for young people”; “Somewhere for skateboarders to go”; “They should have kept a cinema in the town”; and “That awful Wetherspoons has left nowhere at all in the town for the poor old folk to go — it used to be their only night out. No alternative exists.”

3.25 We conclude this chapter with the comment of an 18 year old unemployed youth:

“I used to do stupid things and get into trouble when I was younger, and I want Tunbridge Wells to be a better place than when I grew up.”

CHAPTER 4: OVERVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Five Ways in the townscape

4.1 Royal Tunbridge Wells is a great deal more than just the Pantiles and Decimus Burton. Its main shopping area has an attractive Victorian and Edwardian heritage. This deserves to be carefully conserved and enhanced as a basic part of the agreeable surroundings people look for in a spa town. Footfall by shoppers and visitors is crucial to the prosperity of local businesses as well as for the town as a whole.

4.2 Five Ways is the hub of the main shopping area, its clock the main landmark. Its appearance and atmosphere need careful management. Yet there appears to be no coherent guiding vision about the ensemble as a whole, vital though that is at a time when developers are on the prowl. Meanwhile, poor highways maintenance standards and a random assortment of “add-on” initiatives, worthy as the individual intention of each may be, are making matters worse. The Town Forum³ and the Civic Society have both deplored this.



4.3 The vista along the Precinct has degenerated into a corridor of poles, signs, bins, information drums, telephone kiosks, cycle stands, large advertising displays and other items. The arrangement of public seating in long lines is soul-less, with people moving behind as well as in front, and much of it in shade. At Five Ways itself the arrangement of clock, benches, cycle stands and lampposts is incoherent and unwelcoming, too few seats are provided, ugly tarmac patch repairs are appearing and the condition of the clock plinth is a disgrace. No fewer than 62 bollards hem this small area, sending out a strong signal that road vehicles are the boss. It was scarcely surprising that so many people in our survey were highly critical of the overall appearance and “feel” of the area.



4.4 Joint action by the Borough and County Councils is badly needed to clean up some eyesores, to soften the general appearance and to stop further damage to the clock plinth. Local

³

Getting Around Tunbridge Wells, April 2007

businesses, the police and local schools also need to be involved. A Task Force should be set up for this purpose working closely with the Town Forum and Civic Society. A long term joined-up strategy about general standards for the whole area around it should be worked out, with careful thought given to the needs of the people waiting for transport, meeting up with friends or just sitting in the sunshine. Part of that has to be to make the area feel safer at all times. We were unable to determine who, if anyone, within the Borough Council is charged with devising and



carrying through the various elements of an effective action plan to deal with the combination of social, environmental and economic issues involved. This needs to be deployed in a more cost-effective way than the scatter of individual budgets at local and County level.

4.5 *We recommend:*

- *recognition by TWBC and KCC that the street ensemble at the “top of the town” is as important as that in the Pantiles area, and affects the town’s prosperity;*
- *talks by TWBC with all neighbouring shops and businesses about a collective approach to their frontages so as to foster a distinctive RTW image;*
- *establishment of a task force to plan and deliver effective action;*
- *development by TWBC as soon as possible of a set of standards for the appearance of all signs and fascias in this part of the town to enhance this quality image;*
- *application by KCC of “ heritage” code of standards to pavements and street furniture throughout this area.*

B. Matters for immediate action

i. *Cleaning up the look of the area*

4.6 Curry's grubby side wall and neglected windows are a blot on the landscape, made worse by the garish sign they have installed above. They need urgent attention. So too do the broken seat, crudely patched paving and broken grating and the chipped clock plinth. The cycle stands are another eyesore in a cramped area and an open invitation to motorcyclists. The cafés offer valuable street seating, but need to apply a stricter litter prevention



code as recommended in our 2003 report⁴. Intrusive A boards should be removed along with any other extraneous advertising signage, and well-designed pictograms used for taxis and public conveniences. The work of the TWBC Signage Working Party on this some years ago should be revisited and carried forward.

4.7 *We recommend:*

- *immediate repainting of Curry's wall and removal of its sign prior to better use of this wall;*
- *replacing tarmac patches to match original paving and better Kent Highways supervision to ensure contractors deliver quality work;*
- *relocation of cycle stands to elsewhere;*
- *strict application of litter code to street cafes;*
- *a clean up of street signage, with appropriate new replacement items.*

ii. *Greening up*

4.8 More greenery and flowers to soften the sterile appearance of the area is the top priority for most people. The preferred location is around and under the clock and would cost less than replacing with higher quality materials the unsightly damaged plinth. It would reduce the area's attractiveness to skateboarders. Hanging baskets would make an immediate colourful impact. Even if water shortages recur, this is a small area and the baskets might be sponsored and looked after by neighbouring shops.

4.9 Another possibility is a lightweight wooden open colonnade of trellis work with climbing plants along the west side of the area. Introduction of a water feature as suggested by some would be far more problematical, from the point of view of maintenance, hygiene, children's security and sheer lack of space.

4.10 *We recommend:*

- *early installation of a collection of hanging flower baskets in this area, possibly sponsored and maintained by neighbouring traders;*
- *redesign of the plinth to become an interesting floral or shrub feature and provide a green focus;*
- *consideration of a trellised colonnade on the Lime Hill Road side.*

iii. *Providing pleasant waiting places*

4.11 A high priority item for users. More public benches in a pleasant sunny location with good sight-lines are needed, both for those simply sitting there and for those awaiting taxis or lifts. Around the clock base is one obvious location and by the wall beyond Costas another. Some sort of canopy there or by Curry's wall to shelter from rain would be helpful.

⁴ *Green and Clean: A Litter Prevention Strategy, July 2003*

4.12 Unfortunately extra public benches could draw in further numbers of uncongenial fellow-users. We look at ways of tackling this below. More café seating with staff around keeping an eye on things would be self-enforcing. The downside is reduction of public space available for those who cannot or do not want to pay, and the need to move the existing sunny pair of benches. As noted above extension of the street café space would need strict litter prevention conditions. Indeed we should like this applied more strictly to the present arrangements as recommended in our report⁵ on street litter in 2003

4.13 Relocation of the metal cycle stands as suggested above would allow more options for the new layout including taxi access or a buskers corner, as well as remove an eyesore and reduce intrusion onto the area of motorcyclists and their gear.



4.14 *We recommend:*

- *providing extra seating around the clock for general use and by the walls for those awaiting transport;*
- *providing a small canopy for the latter;*
- *allowing Costa Coffee to extend the area of seating they offer, subject to not blocking access for people walking through, and minimising hazards to disabled people;*
- *strict conditions to minimise any litter and requiring clear up.*

iv. Enjoying the street scene

4.15 People want something interesting or restful to look at while sitting in the area. This could be floral or other displays under the clock. Some would like a repeat of the giant picture that briefly disguised Currys wall, or smaller art displays there. A digital information screen in place of the collection of banners, finger posts and street drums along the precinct was another suggestion while others wanted market stalls and an area for street entertainment. There is only limited space, but some of these ideas might be considered for this shady wall. Any vending stall would need, like street cafés, to have strict litter control.

⁵ *Op. Cit.*

4.16 *We recommend:*

- *outdoor art displays by Currys wall;*
- *one or two market stalls subject to strict litter control;*
- *licensed street entertainment on a marked pitch;*
- *changing floral or other displays under the clock;*
- *discreetly placed digital wall information display.*

v. *Making it feel safer*

4.17 The long-standing problem of thoughtless groups of schoolchildren annexing pavements seems to have intensified recently. The concept of acceptable street behaviour also seems to be continuously evolving. What is not acceptable is that so many other people are being annoyed and indeed intimidated by this. Local schools might be asked to remind their pupils regularly about responsible behaviour. Occasional high visibility patrols by teachers, Street Enforcement or Neighbourhood



Officers, as recommended in our March 2004 report⁶ on anti-social behaviour, could also help. Neighbouring café staff might be given a hot-line to use.

4.18 *We recommend:*

- *an approach to local schools about reducing annoyance to the public;*
- *high-visibility deployment of Street Enforcement or other community staff from time to time to deter misbehaviour.*

4.19 These actions should reduce one set of public security concerns, and the proposed removal of incentives for skateboarders and bikers to congregate around the clock will help with another. But the area also needs to be made to feel safer in the evenings. Once the taxi-stand is established there, this will help provide natural guardianship and reassurance. Increased police patrols on Friday and Saturday evenings would be another. Meanwhile, the suggestions people made on CCTV coverage and notices are practical and desirable. More appropriate ground-level street lighting is an enhancement project to which local businesses, including Wetherspoons and Que Pasa might be asked to contribute, given that their patrons are directly involved.

⁶ *Different Places —Same Problems: Young people's anti-social behaviour in 5 countries, March 2004.*

4.20 *We recommend:*

- *speedy installation of the taxi-rank to increase on the spot guardianship;*
- *increased police patrols on Friday and Saturday evenings to clamp down on rowdy behaviour;*
- *review of CCTV coverage and lighting.*

C. Longer term initiatives

4.21 Three longer term areas for action emerged from the views and suggestions made, namely:

- i. improvement and reclamation strategy to brighten up top of the town;
- ii. changed priorities between people and vehicles;
- iii. landmarks and green places.

All these need top management attention, and inclusion in the Town Plan which is being prepared.

i. Brightening up the top of the town

4.22. Many of the suggestions for brightening up Five Ways could usefully be applied to the whole of the “top of the town”, including the traffic-dominated shabby area around Tesco. In some cases this is mainly a matter of agreeing standards and codes of practice that will apply and encouraging traders to get together in a longer term programme of smartening up their frontages within an overall theme, and perhaps to sponsor some modest improvements to street furniture on their own doorsteps. In others decisions need to be taken as part of the planning process, and to meet economic and environmental priorities. There is also an important role for the private sector which could sponsor some improvements. .

4.23 Among the wide range of activities people suggested, and which could not possibly all be crammed into the Five Ways area, ideas included market, second hand book and charity stalls along Calverley Road, occasional open air art exhibitions there and more venues for street performances perhaps theatre style. Things to engage and amuse children was a frequent theme. As regards street trading, we have for some years made representations that this precinct would make a more fitting setting for the Farmers Market than its unattractive present location, now that the original objection to this by the police — the line of planters down the centre that formerly obstructed emergency access— has been designed out. This lends weight to the desirability of removing the accretion of street furniture and advertising material that is bit by bit taking over long strips of the precinct and fostering a down-market appearance.

4.24 There has been a drift towards using only the Pantiles for big public street events. While that is understandable from those keen to attract footfall there, some are needed for the top of the town too. Ideally the respective traders associations at the top and bottom of the town would cooperate with complementary “attractions” and events. This could create a powerful axis to encourage movement between the different parts of Royal Tunbridge Wells and encourage “family days out” that benefit both venues and the overall trade of the town.

4.25 *We recommend :*

- *agreeing with local traders a set of “quality image” standards within an overall theme for brightening up the top of the town while emphasising its traditional and historic character;*
- *removal of clutter of poles, barriers and street furniture and relocation of phone booths and cycle stands;*
- *transfer of the Farmers Market to Calverley Road;*
- *development of other forms of street trading there and street entertainment associated with realigned seating;*
- *location of simultaneous and complementary events at the top and bottom of the town.*

ii. Changed priority between people and vehicles

4.26 Whether the pedestrian area will be extended depends on the longer-term strategy for movement around the town and the respective priorities to be given to people and vehicles. Issues of access to public transport, parking and goods delivery would have to be resolved. What this survey has pointed up is first that the traffic on Mount Pleasant Road creates a resented barrier between Five Ways and the main shopping precinct, and second that maintaining ready access to taxis, hire-cars and pickup cars via the loop is important.

4.27 The continued failure to enforce the present vehicle restrictions at Five Ways remains a source of great aggravation to many people and an encouragement to flouting other road regulations.

4.28 *We recommend:*

- *clearer visual messages provided by KCC that the “gateway” is a pedestrian priority area which is off limits to private cars and vans; using high visibility signage, a chicane, and road textures or colours;*
- *taking of powers by KCC to instal a camera to enforce the prohibition with automatic fines recycled to upgrade street furniture in the pedestrian area;*
- *consideration within the Town Plan of how severance all along the “gateway” and round Tescos can be reduced, while maintaining necessary access.*

iii. Landmarks and green places

4.29 A message that came out loud and clear from some of the survey responses was that they feel intimidated by the concentration of some groups of users in the Five Ways area. The “no street-drinking” ban was welcomed but still left many problems. Two features that particularly attract people to congregate there are that it contains the only central landmark in that part of the town, and that they can sit in a sunny spot out of the main hurly burly. It seems remarkable that this is the only area of its kind in and around the shopping centre. The seats along the precinct itself or dotted in places such as Monson Road lack the same attractions.

4.30 Given that those at a loose end or meeting up with large numbers of friends cannot and should not simply be driven away, the best course seems to be reduce their concentration in any one area by offering them a range of alternative places to go. If additional landmark spots enhanced with greenery and a few benches could be created at the top of the town these would immediately relieve some of the present pressures on Five Ways. Any such new venue should have a strict “no drinking” ban. The most obvious place that could combine the necessary features is the area in front of the Town Hall and Library, already in public ownership. Here a considerable stretch of open public space is divided for purely historical reasons that have never been revisited into a series of 6 parallel strips, namely a broad pavement subsuming what were former front gardens, a through roadway, another narrower pavement crammed with bus shelters and people, an ornamental green open strip walled off from public use, a second road with privileged parking and a third pavement. It cries out for redesign into something to benefit the whole community.

4.31 Turning the land frontage of the civic buildings into a sunny small “2009 Royal Centenary Park” with trees and benches would not only be a permanent environmental asset for the town, contributing to its sustainability goals, but could be associated with a new easy access route to a glass Conservatory style atrium between the two blocks of the Civic Centre. We have for some years pressed the Council to consider this as a much-needed addition of space to house a readily accessible inquiry and information centre for the town. This would make a strong statement about what Tunbridge Wells stands for, encourage town centre footfall, benefit those who lack skills and means to use web information sources, promote local events and volunteering opportunities and encourage people to move around different parts of the town to visit displays, exhibitions, events and specialist shops.



4.32 The redesigned park area with trees and footpaths could offer a user friendly place for those waiting for buses and taxis or to meet friends, or just wishing to sit and rest quietly in pleasant surroundings. Surrounded by seating, the war memorial itself would become a landmark in a more worthy setting and a meeting place rather than cramped backdrop to a bus shelter. In the small open space at the corner of Church Road a sunny seating area with a second landmark in place of the little used information drum could be created to represent an aspect of Royal Tunbridge Wells history. The developer of the Ritz site might be encouraged to contribute a significant piece of street sculpture there as part of the setting for the new buildings opposite.

4.33 All this might enhance and punctuate a new “visitors route” providing a walking trail that encouraged people to move between the different parts of the town while offering them resting places with interesting features at planned intervals as they do so.

4.34 By setting out a planning brief for this now in advance of imminent redevelopment, a new frame of reference would be created for the basic layout of the buildings that will replace some of those down the hill and past the station and provide the needful niches of open space.

4.35 *We recommend:*

- *creation of more landmarks symbolising Royal Tunbridge Wells associated with pleasant places to sit;*
- *redesigning the no-go space outside the Town Hall into a small public park to mark the town's Royal Centenary;*
- *negotiating with the Ritz developer to provide a sitting area and landmark outside Hawksmoor in place of the information drum;*
- *building into the Town Plan and any redevelopment briefs a chain of green oases with landmarks down the spine of the town.*

Form used in the survey

Five Ways survey

Cleaning the Place up a bit

We'd like your views on how this area could be made more attractive and interesting.

1. Do you ever sit here? Yes G No G

Why?

2. How would you describe its appearance at present?

3. Is there anything you specifically like or dislike about it?

- by day
- at night

4. What new things would brighten it up/make it more interesting/feel safer.

5. Which of these would you most like to see here if only one could be done?

6. Any other comments or ideas about what is needed in this part of town to make it a nicer place to visit and use?

.....

Reason here (visitingG shoppingGworkGtouristGother.....)

Do you live in Tunbridge Wells.YesGNoG If not where are you from?

Age under 20G 20-40G 40-60G Over 60G Woman G Man G

