

Towards an Exciting Vision for Tunbridge Wells Civic Centre



The Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society is an independent non-political body aiming to represent the interests of all those living or working in the town.

Founded in 1959, it covers Royal Tunbridge Wells, with a population of about 35,000, the historic centre of the present Borough of Tunbridge Wells.

As the official amenity society for the town, it works with the Borough Council, the Town Forum and other local bodies, and campaigns on current issues.

Foreword

The Council is publishing its draft Allocations Plan for public consultation as part of the new Development Plan for Tunbridge Wells. Among the proposals is the area between Calverley Road, Monson Road, Upper Mt Pleasant and Church Road. On Map 7 this is shown together with the Cinema site as an area of change, with the notation ‘shopping’.

A key part of the area is the Civic Centre, the complex of Town Hall, Library, Museum, Assembly Hall, Police Station and Adult Education Centre. These listed buildings were the subject of controversy in 2010 when a previous administration planned to demolish them. There has also been debate about the future of the War Memorial and the forecourt of Calverley Terrace, the surviving Decimus Burton element of the Civic Centre.

Some years ago a study by well-known architects showed how the Town Hall could be adapted to modern needs. There are no major structural problems with this, which would sharply reduce the running costs of the building, and enable it to conform with forthcoming legislation on sustainability.

The Civic Society has suggested that the Town Hall interior could be modernised, with much better use of space, public access and new uses, as a centre for public bodies as well as the Council. Together with a refurbished Assembly Hall it could be a base for revenue-earning conferences and events. The Leader of the Council has suggested similarly extending and transforming the Library, Museum and Adult Education centre as a cultural and educational centre.

Philip Whitbourn OBE, who has studied these buildings for some years, has taken these ideas, and suggested how the Civic Centre as a whole could be reshaped to create a dynamic new heart for the town in active use by a wide range of the community, and yield an economic benefit. The necessary structural changes would enhance the listed status of the buildings, and give them new viability at the heart of Tunbridge Wells.

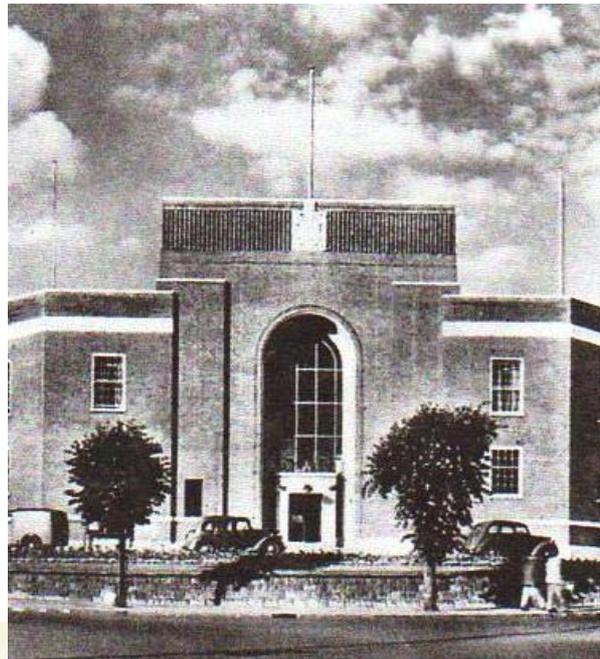
The Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society publishes Dr Whitbourn’s thoughts as a contribution to current debate.

Alastair Tod
Chairman RTWCS
March 2013

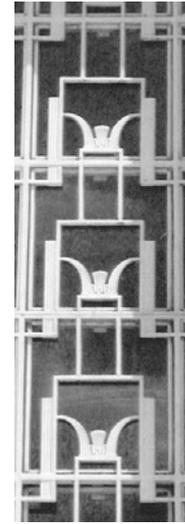


3.

Fashionable
Art Deco features.



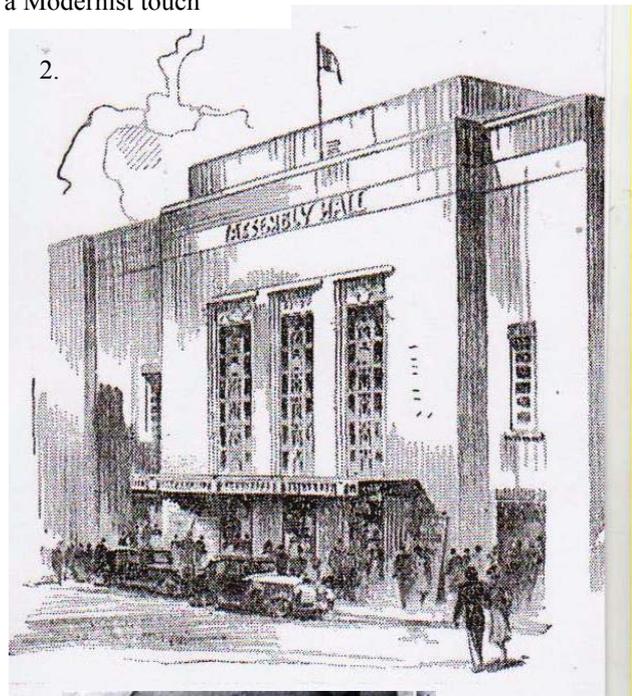
1. Civic pride with a Modernist touch



Fashionable
Art Deco features.



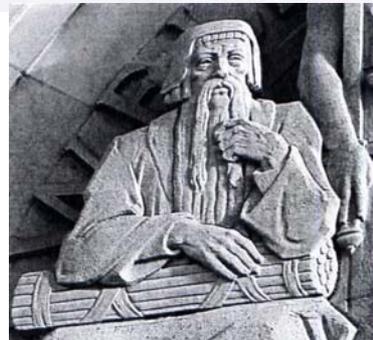
5.



2.



6.



Interesting
Sculpture
3.

The Civic Centre consists of six listed buildings. Four of them, the Town Hall (1), Assembly Hall (2), Court House (3), and Library/Museum (4) were designed by the eminent architect and Royal Gold Medallist Sir Percy Thomas, following an open national architectural competition in 1934. The Adult Education Centre (5) was designed in 1900 by HT Hare who, like Sir Percy, was a President of the Royal Institute of British Architects. Calverley Terrace (6) is a survival from the seminal Georgian Calverley New Town layout by the distinguished architect Decimus Burton.

A Cultural and Civic Heart for Tunbridge Wells

In the summer of 2010 the Council invited public comment on a Town Centre Area Action Plan (TCAAP) that it was preparing as part of its Local Development Framework (LDF). The TCAAP would, in effect be a Master Plan for the town centre. Also the Council appointed an Advisory Panel, drawn from various parts of the community, to feed in to the plan process. In the event, the Plan did not materialise in 2012 as had been intended, and was superseded in March 2013 by a Site Allocations Document.

However, the Panel reported in June 2012, in accordance with the programme at the time, and after making a careful study of Tunbridge Wells Town Centre.

A crucial part of the Panel's vision for Tunbridge Wells was that it should be the cultural centre of the Kent and Sussex Weald, the area centred on the Civic Complex, being identified as the cultural heart of the town.

Extract from Report (Sect 4.10)

“A key part of the Panel’s vision for Royal Tunbridge Wells is that the town should be the cultural centre of the Kentish and Sussex Weald. That would enrich the lives of residents; give shoppers an added incentive to go to Tunbridge Wells in preference to some other centres; and provide a necessary focus for Tunbridge Wells as a tourist destination. A place to love to live in!”

“Individual panel members also considered that this was an essential component of embracing the needs of younger members of the community.”

“To achieve that vision, however, two principal features of the town centre need to be addressed. One is the Civic Complex at the cultural and civic heart of the town, and the other is The Pantiles at its historic heart.”

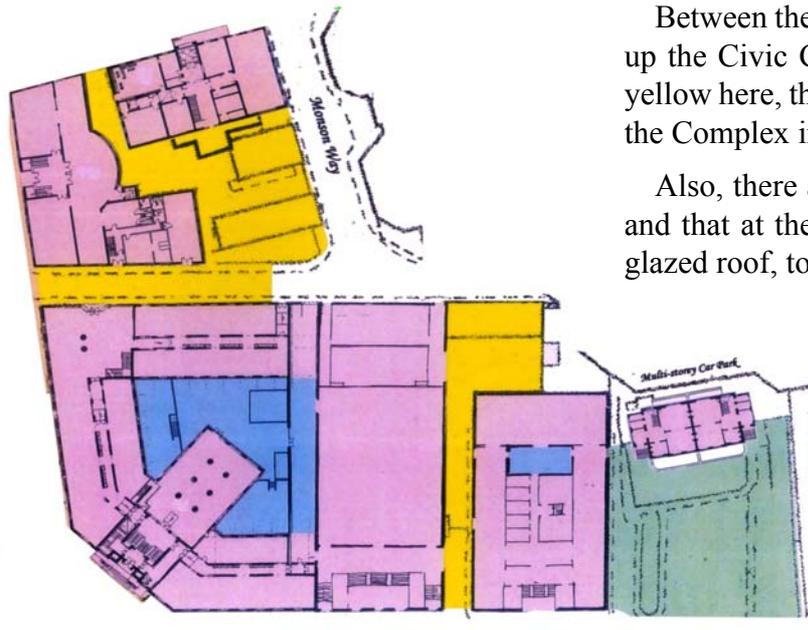
This paper addresses the first of those.

The Civic Complex provides the ideal opportunity for a Cultural and Civic Heart, not least because it:

- Is central
- Is well served by buses, trains, and car parks
- Has access to Theatre, Film, Hotel, Restaurant facilities
- Has the busiest Public Library in Kent and an Adult Education Centre
- Contains a treasure house of Art (see below) and Museum Artefacts
- Comprises six fine listed buildings (see opposite)
- Includes the important listed War Memorial

All six of these listed buildings are in use, although their treatment and settings leave much to be desired. By closing the Town Hall to the Public, the Council has created another dead corner, opposite the dead Cinema. The Town Hall should be a vibrant local hub where the public is welcomed and community activities can take place, as well as Council business. Also the settings of the listed buildings is marred by parked cars and huts that have passed their ‘sell-by’ date. The Library and Museum are over-due for an update, and the nationally-important collections of pictures and costumes are a wasted asset, hidden away in storage in the basement.

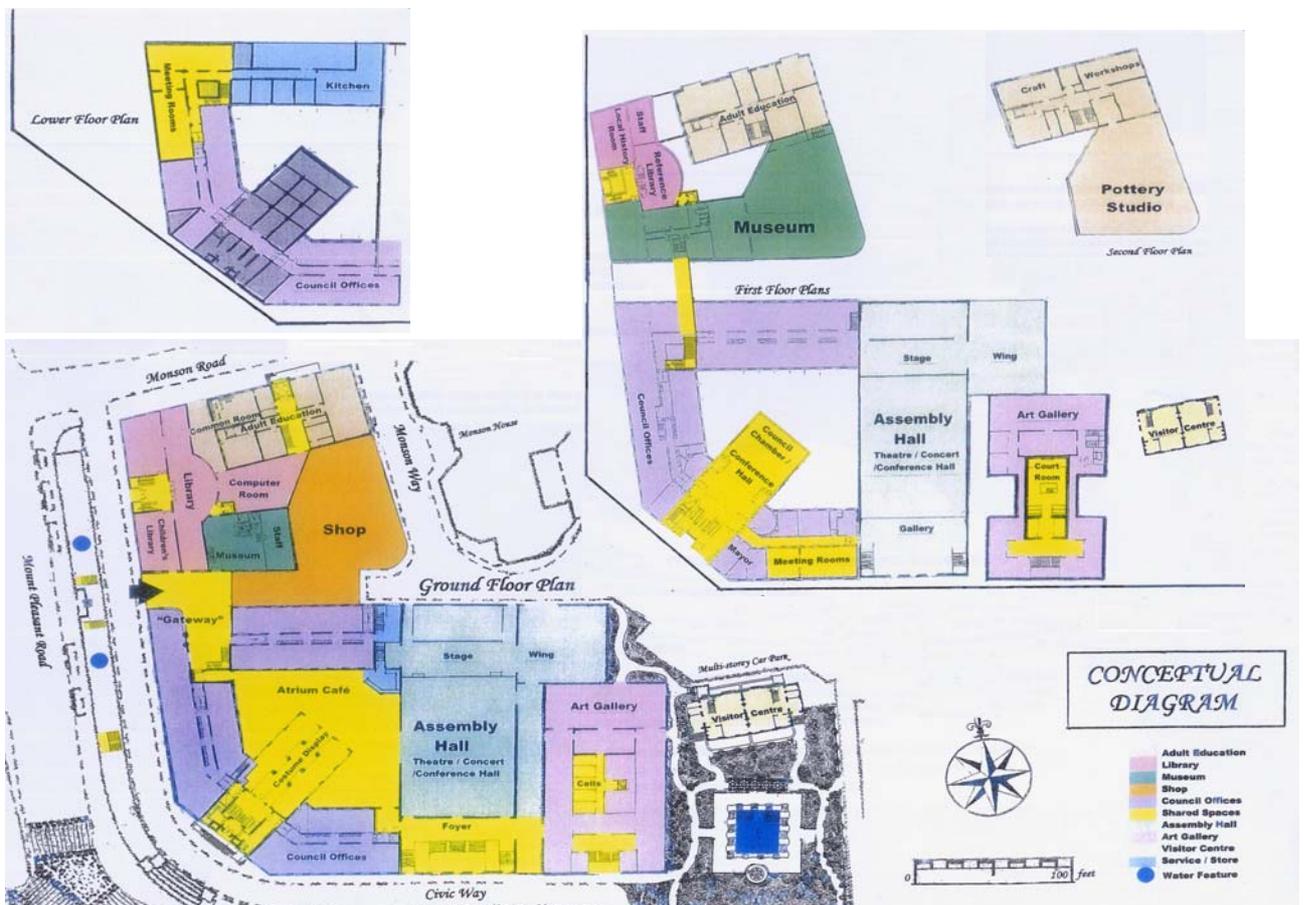


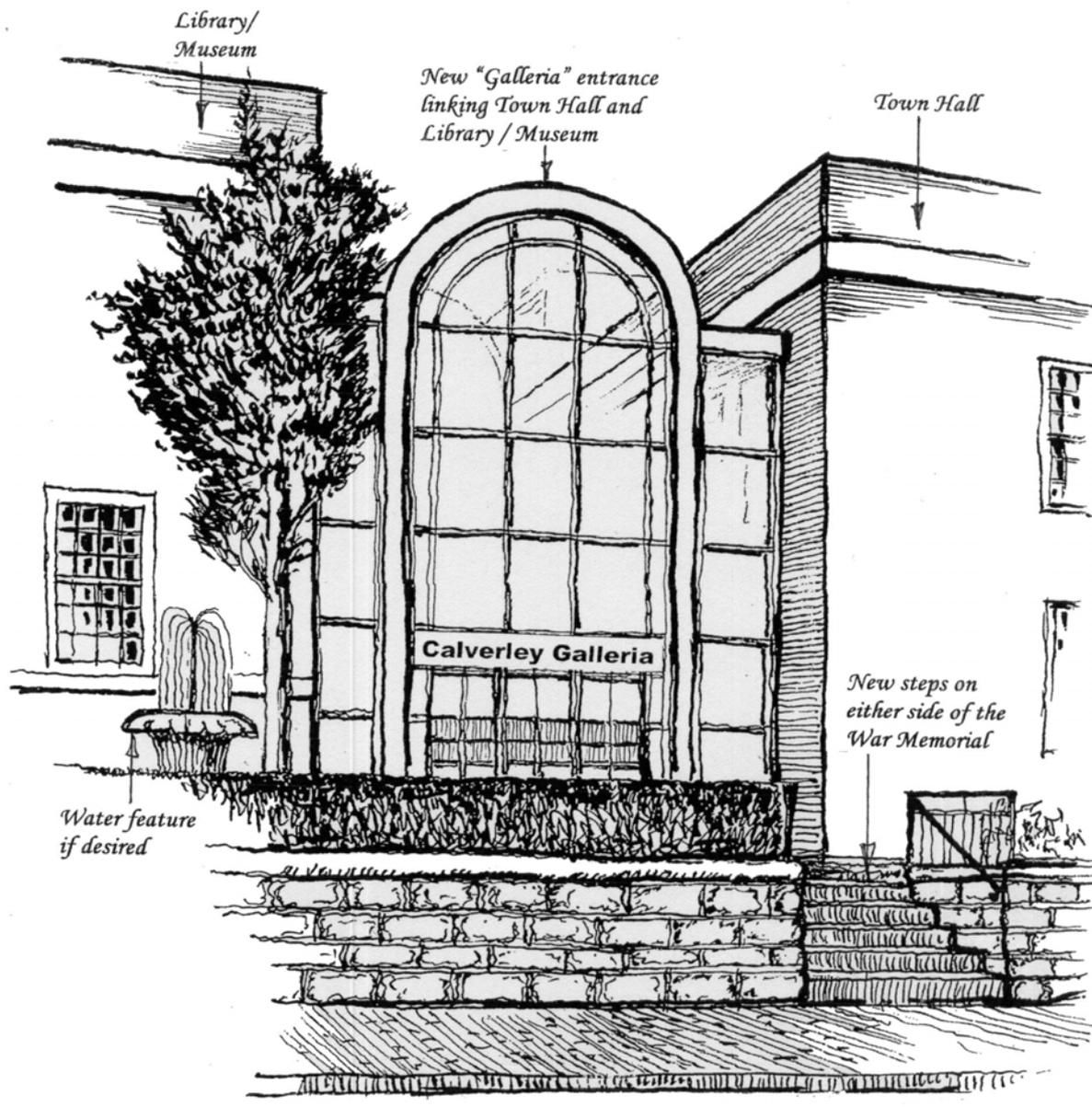


Between the six listed buildings that make up the Civic Complex are spaces, coloured yellow here, that could be developed to unite the Complex into one coherent whole.

Also, there are light wells, coloured blue, and that at the Town Hall could be given a glazed roof, to form an attractive atrium.

Needless to say, there are many ways of arranging accommodation, and the diagram below is but one thought on the subject. It envisages a much-needed extension to the museum, re-use of the Court House to display the picture collection, and a Visitor Centre in Calverley Terrace. It may well be that further study produces other and better ideas, but the important point at this stage is the concept for a Master Plan.





One starting point for a Master Plan for the Civic Somplex as a whole, would be the formation of a new entrance linking the Town Hall with the stand-alone Library and Museum building.

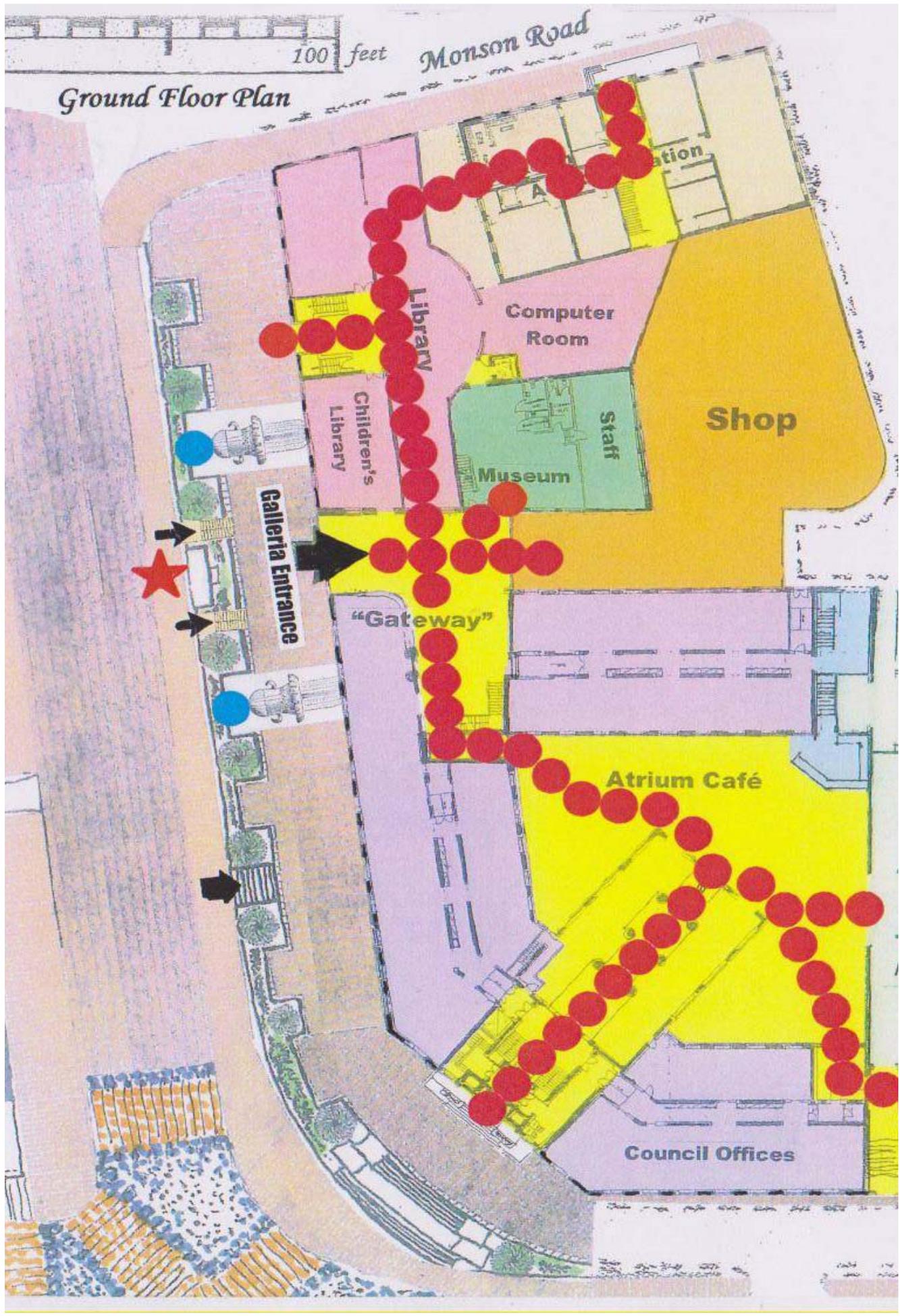
The rough sketch here shows a “Galleria”, or arched passageway, which would contain local information and lead to a series of public routes giving access to all parts of the Complex.

The arched form in the sketch seeks to reflect the arched treatment of Sir Percy Thomas’ main entrance on the chamfered corner. That corner entrance would be open and welcoming, but would become a secondary entrance, as would the other various entrances to different parts of the Complex.

There needs to be much better connection between the upper and lower levels around S. Nicholson Babb’s splendid listed War Memorial, and the introduction of steps on either side of the memorial could be one way of achieving this.

It is understood that consideration is being given to limiting the use of Upper Mount Pleasant Road to pedestrians and buses, which could result in an impressive paced and planted civic space in front of this new Galleria main entrance,

Water features in the form of fountains on either side of the memorial could be introduced, is desired.



Ground Floor Plan

100 feet

Monson Road

ation

Computer Room

Shop

Children's Library

Museum

Staff

Galleria Entrance

"Gateway"

Atrium Café

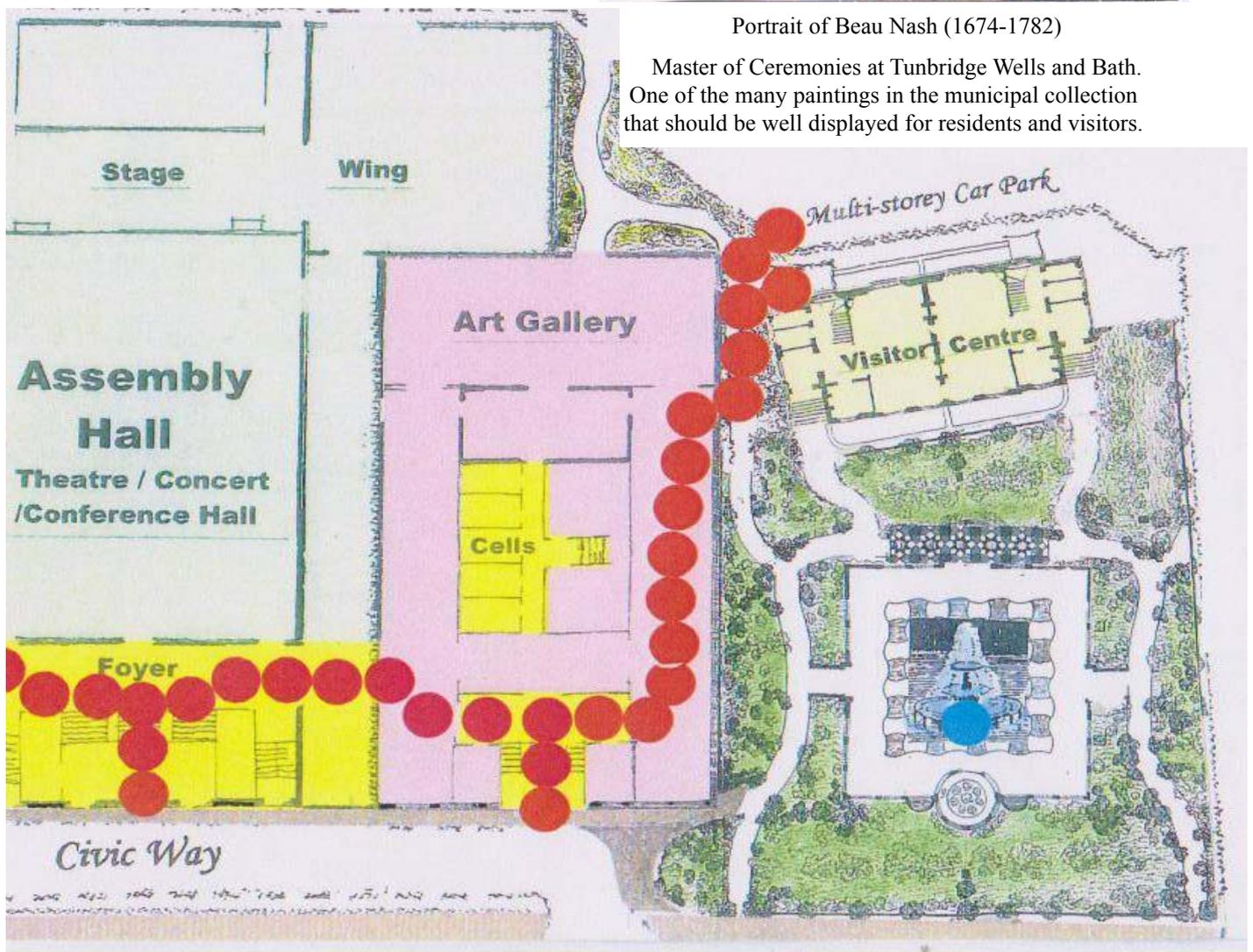
Council Offices

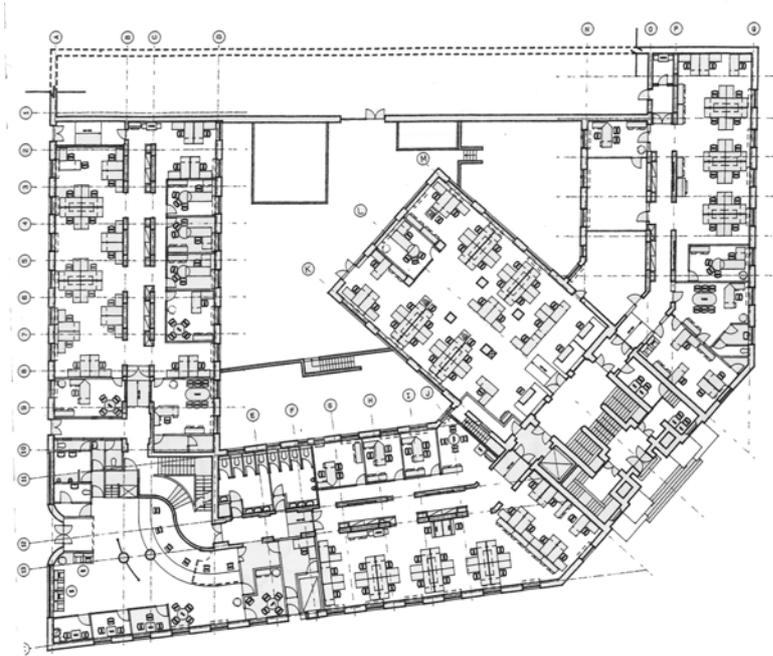
From the new Galleria entrance sequence of public routes could be developed, linking the six buildings. A new common room / cafe could serve both the Library and the AEC, and Gateway could be brought back into the Town Hall, where it belongs. A tourist-orientated shop could be introduced by the Museum, and the generous toilet provision at the Assembly Hall could become available to users of the Complex generally. Visitors arriving by coach in Crescent Road could approach the Visitor Centre through a landscaped garden, and thence to the Art Gallery alongside. A generous new Wing area at the Assembly Hall could complement its good-sized stage.



Portrait of Beau Nash (1674-1782)

Master of Ceremonies at Tunbridge Wells and Bath. One of the many paintings in the municipal collection that should be well displayed for residents and visitors.





Would it not be sensible to provide a caption for this?

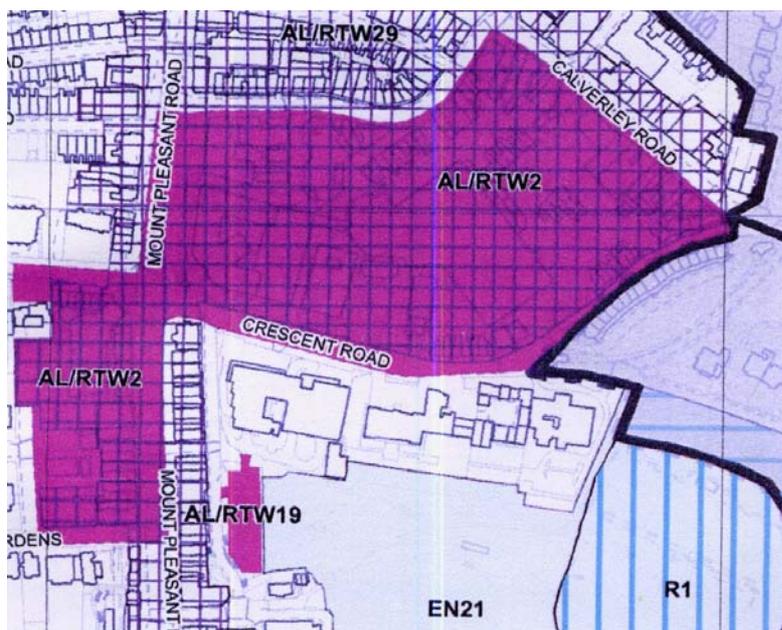
The realisation of any vision or concept of this sort, inevitably gives rise to the important questions of practicality and cost.

In October 1989 the highly-respected firm of architects, Building Design Partnership, prepared a Report for the Borough Council on updating the Town Hall.

The Report found refurbishment of the existing building to be a feasible proposition and, moreover, the cost of refurbishment was found to be between a quarter and a third of the cost of demolition and redevelopment.

The Society has given serious thought to the question of cost and has reluctantly come to the conclusion that, such are the various imponderables, such as phasing, specifications, etc., that it would be unwise to produce an estimate on the basis of present information. That said, initial impressions are that a project on these lines would be unlikely to cost less than around £10million. The Borough Council does hold substantial reserves and will, in any event, need to consider upgrading accommodation before long, as will the County Council in respect of the Library. Moreover, it may be that an enlightened scheme might attract grants or sponsorship. Policy AL/RTW2 of the Borough Council's recent Site Allocations DPD states that the Council will work

with the local community to produce a MaterPlan Supplementary planning document for the area, a move that the Society warmly welcomes.



Would it not be sensible to provide a caption for this?



At this stage, an exercise of this kind can only be “Blue Sky” thinking, that is to say, an academic exercise, not a fully worked-up scheme.

Such a scheme would require much more information on a range of topics, including details of different land ownerships; spatial requirements; possible sources of funding; phasing; listed building consents; structural considerations and the arrangement of services.

Nevertheless a major investigation of this sort has to start somewhere, and preferably with an overall vision of the type of outcome that is desired.

The Society looks forward to working with the Borough Council, and others to produce a Master Plan for the area, as envisaged in Policy AL/RTW2 of the Site Allocation DPD, currently the subject of public consultation and sincerely hopes for an outcome that can command general support.

A serious debate is surely needed about the future of this key piece in the Town Centre jigsaw. **It is hoped that these few thoughts on the subject may contribute to that debate.**

Published by the Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society
Registered Charity No. 276545
www.thecivicsociety.org