

Towards a Vision for Tunbridge Wells Civic Centre

A discussion paper by the Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society

Foreword

The Council has recently published a draft ‘Allocations’ Plan for public consultation. This will form part of its new Development Plan for Tunbridge Wells. Among the proposals is the area bounded by Calverley Road, Monson Road, Upper Mt Pleasant and Crescent Road. In the document this is shown, combined with the Cinema site, as an area of change, with the notation ‘shopping’.

A key feature of this area is the Civic Centre, the important 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 recent debate about the future of the War Memorial, and of the forecourt of Calverley Terrace, the surviving Decimus Burton building on the site. Meanwhile, the police only use part of the Court House building, and are expected to leave altogether in the near future.

Some years ago a study by nationally-known architects showed how the Town Hall could be adapted to modern needs without effect on the exterior. There would be no major structural problems in doing this, and modernisation would sharply reduce the running costs of the building, and enable it to conform to forthcoming legislation on sustainability. In these environmentally-conscious days, we should also be aware of the ‘embodied energy’ in the building - how much more efficient it is to use existing structures rather than demolish and rebuild.

The Civic Society has suggested that the Town Hall interior could be adapted now, with public access and new uses, as a centre for public bodies and public events, as well as the Council’s own needs. Linked to a refurbished Assembly Hall it could be a base for revenue-earning conferences and exhibitions. The Leader of the Council has similarly suggested extending and transforming the Library, Museum and Adult Education centre as an arts and educational centre.

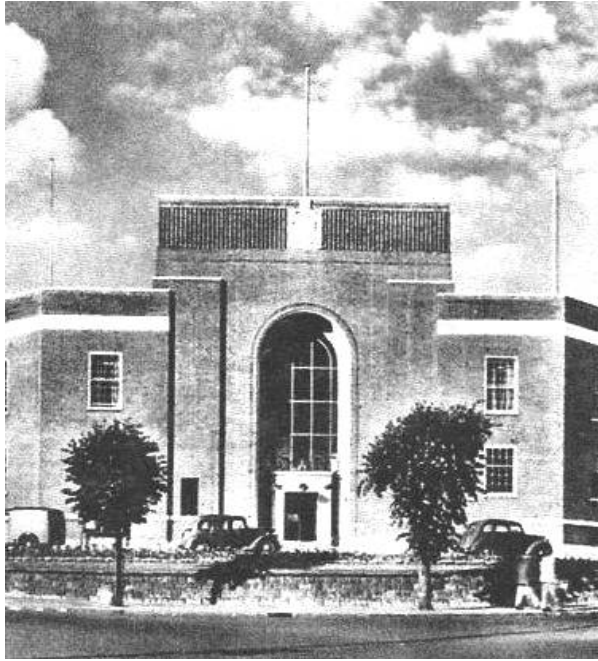
Philip Whitbourn OBE, a recognised authority on architecture and town planning, who has studied these buildings for some years, has looked at all these ideas. In this document he suggests how the Civic Centre as a whole could be reshaped to create a dynamic new heart for the town, in active use by the whole community, and at the same time yield an economic benefit. The necessary structural changes would enhance the character of these protected buildings, and give them a new role at the centre of Tunbridge Wells.

The Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society has a long history in promoting imaginative change in the town, and resisting damaging developments. The Society publishes Dr Whitbourn’s ideas as a contribution to public debate on the new development plan.

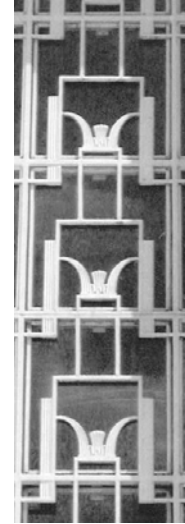
Alastair Tod
Chairman RTWCS
March 2013



4. Art Deco features.



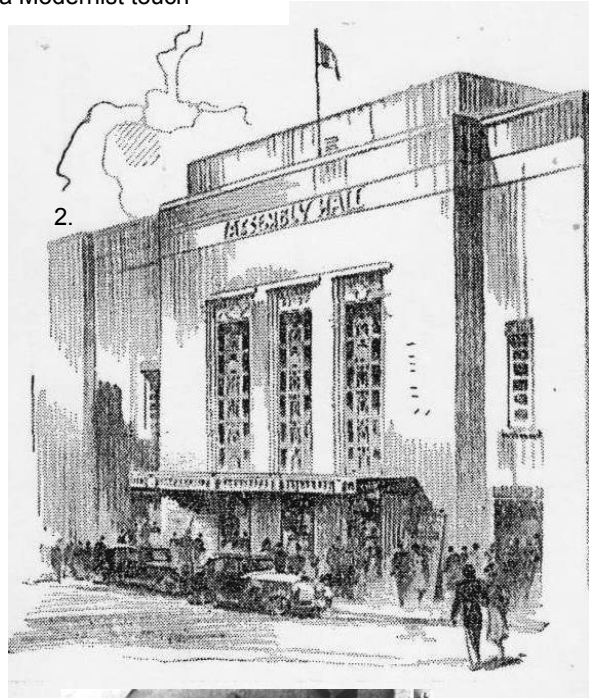
1. Civic pride with a Modernist touch



Art Deco features.



5.



2.



6.



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 the public to become involved in creating a Town Centre Action Plan that it was hoping to produce as part of its Local Development Framework. It also set up a more formal Advisory Panel, with representatives from various parts of the community, to provide more structured input. In the event, the Plan did not materialise, but the Advisory Panel continued their work and produced a set of detailed recommendations in June 2012.

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; and they identified the area around the Civic Centre as the cultural and social heart of the town.

The following is an extract from their 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 Centre 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 and 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 setting of the listed buildings is marred by parked cars and dilapidated huts, the latter making inefficient use of a valuable site. The library and museum are short of space and over-due for an update, and the nationally-important collections of pictures and costumes are hidden away in storage in the basement.

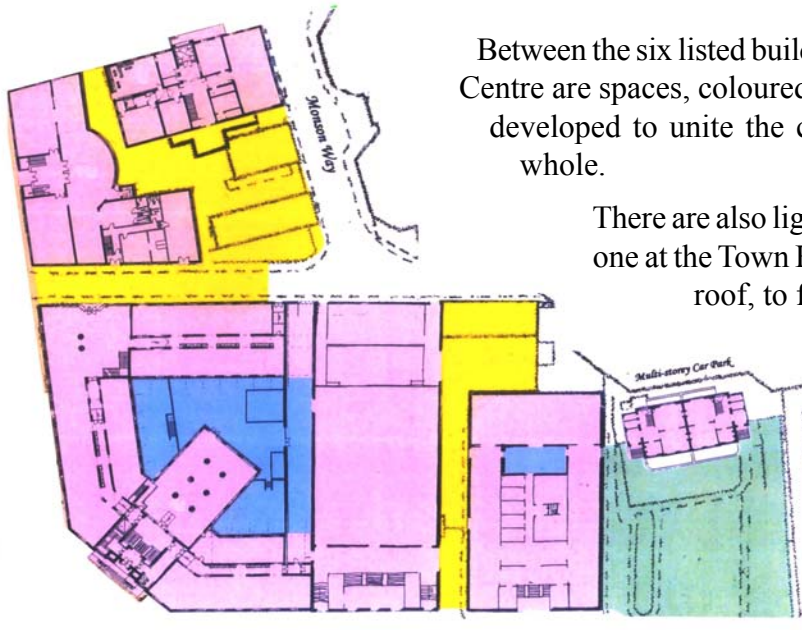


Items from the Museum's collection, not usually on public display

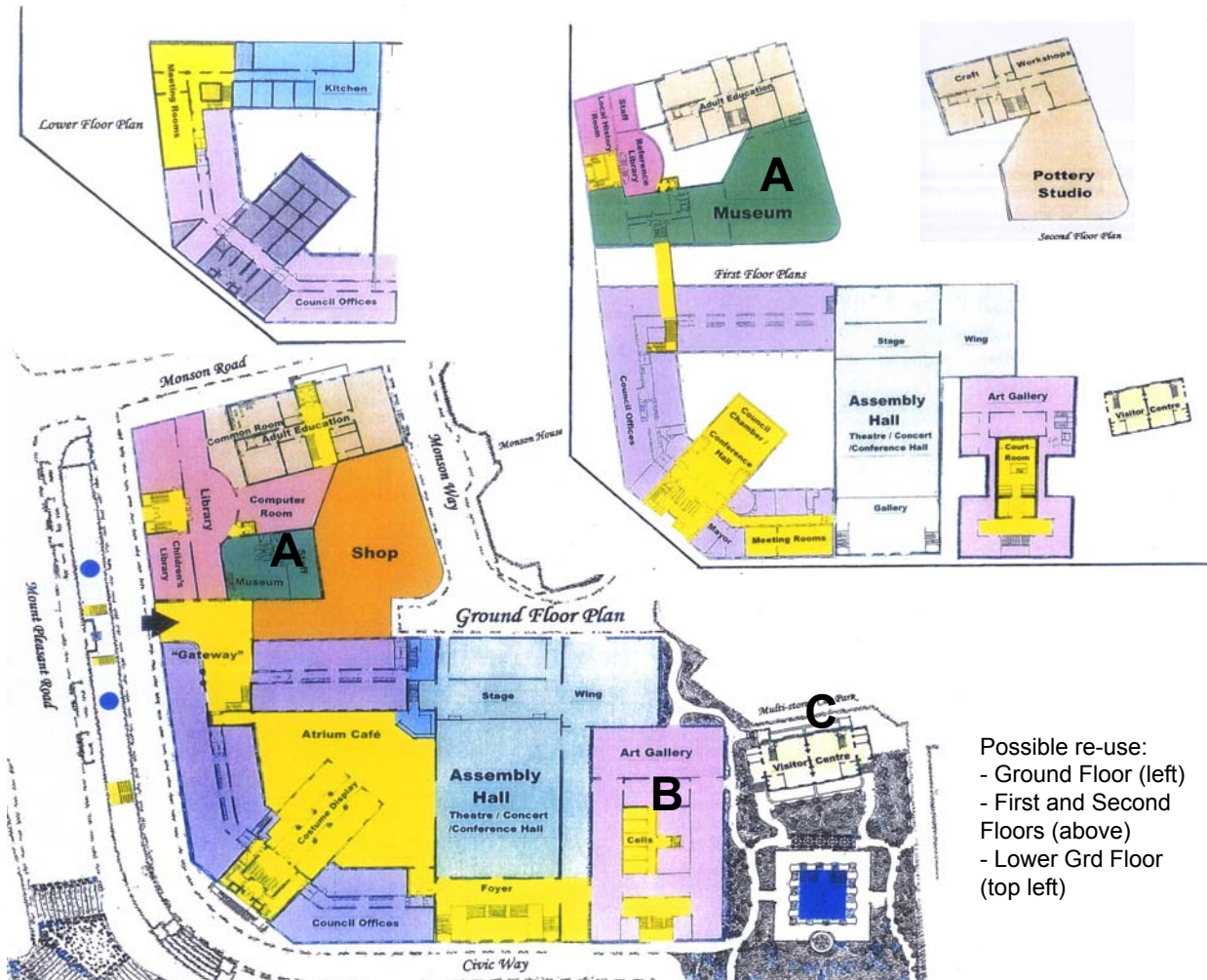
What might be done

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

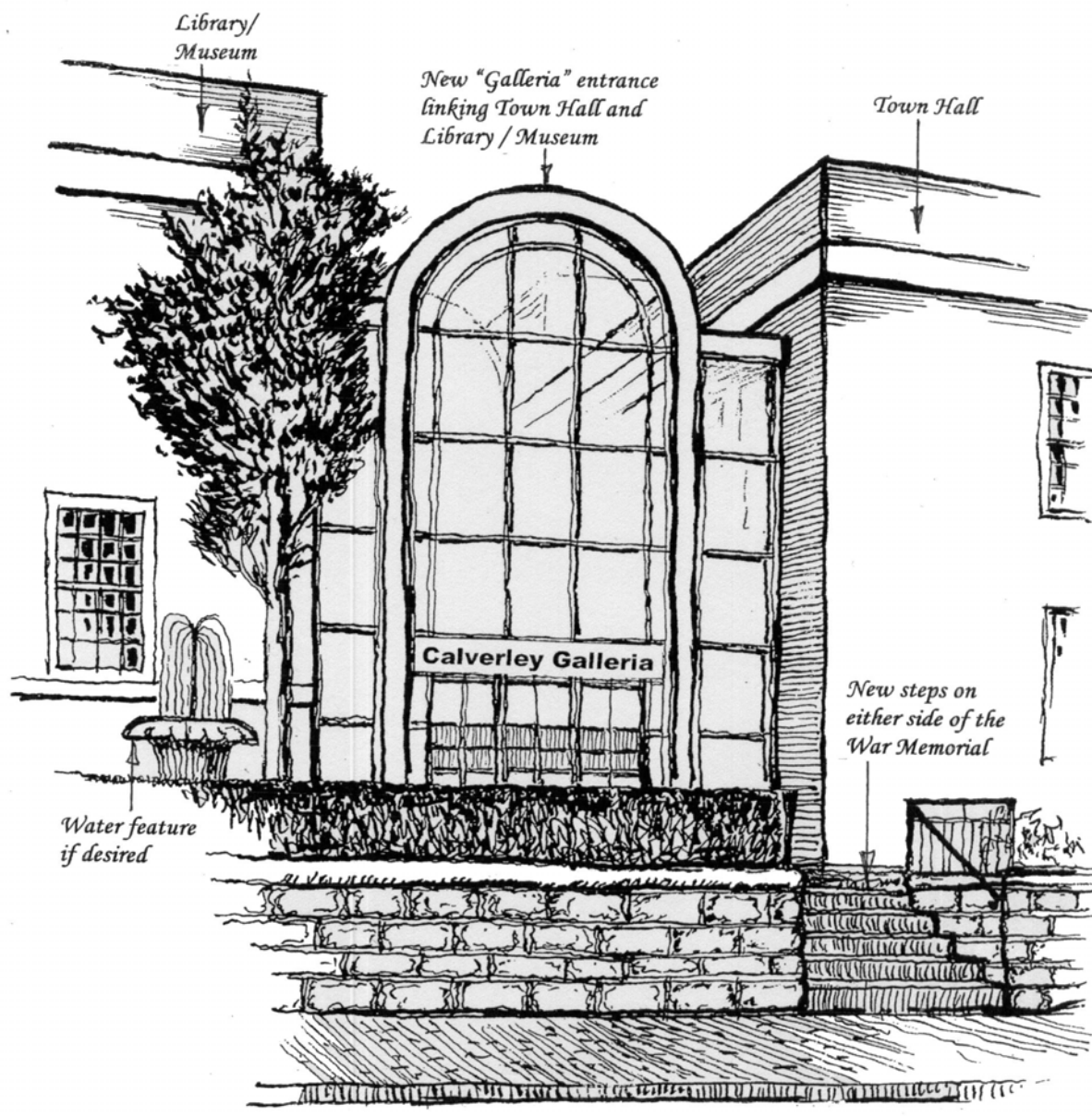
There are also light wells, coloured blue. The one at the Town Hall could be given a glazed roof, to form an attractive atrium.



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 (A), re-use of the Court House (B) to display the picture collection, and a Visitor Centre (C) in Calverley Terrace. It may well be that further study produces other and better ideas, but the important point at this stage is to have a master plan.



- Possible re-use:
- Ground Floor (left)
 - First and Second Floors (above)
 - Lower Grd Floor (top left)



One starting point for a master plan for the civic complex as a whole, would be the formation of a new entrance linking the Town Hall with the stand-alone Library and Museum building.

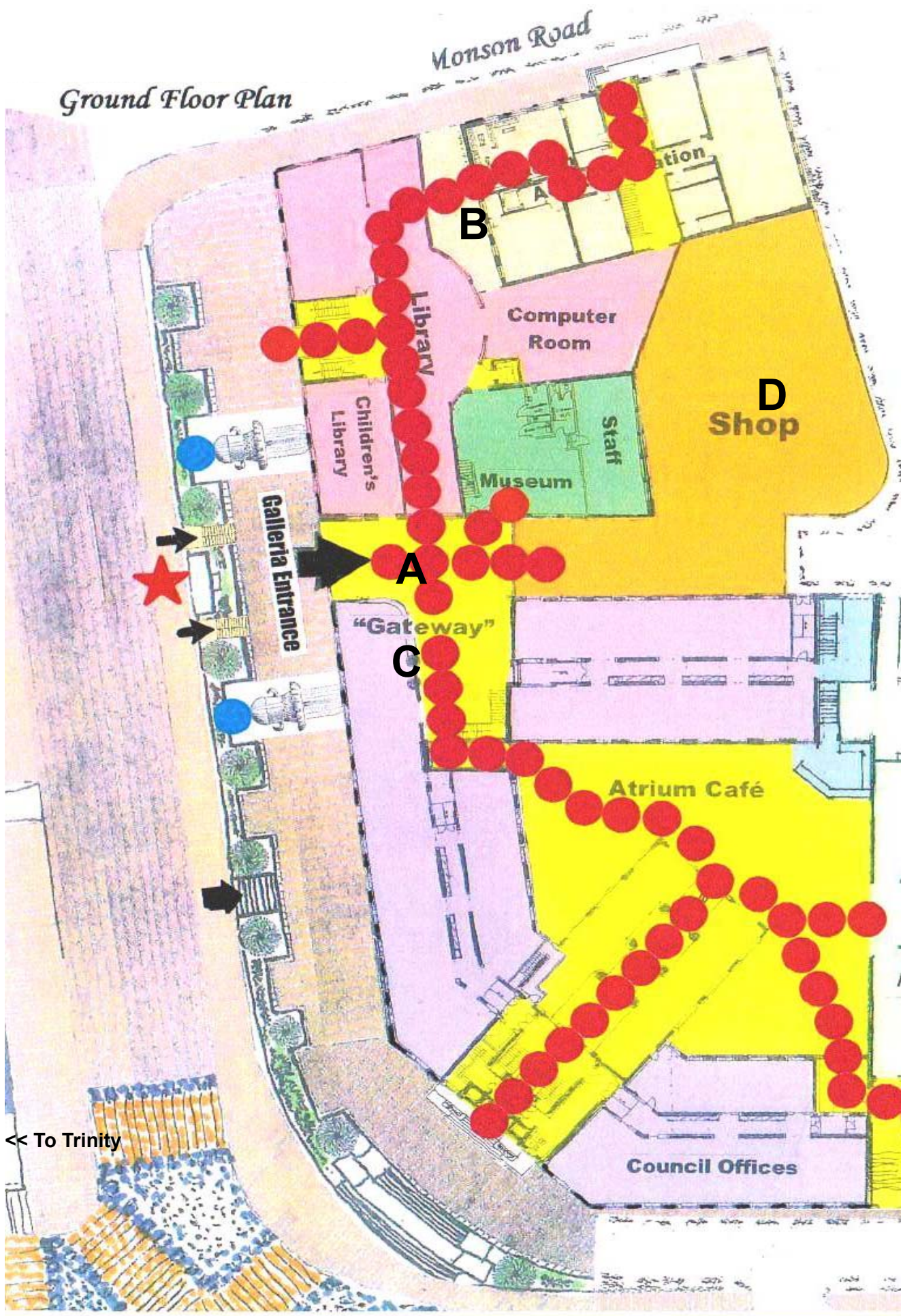
The rough sketch here shows a “Galleria”, or arched passageway, which would contain local information and lead to a series of public routes giving access to all parts of the complex.

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 pavements 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 paved 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, if desired.



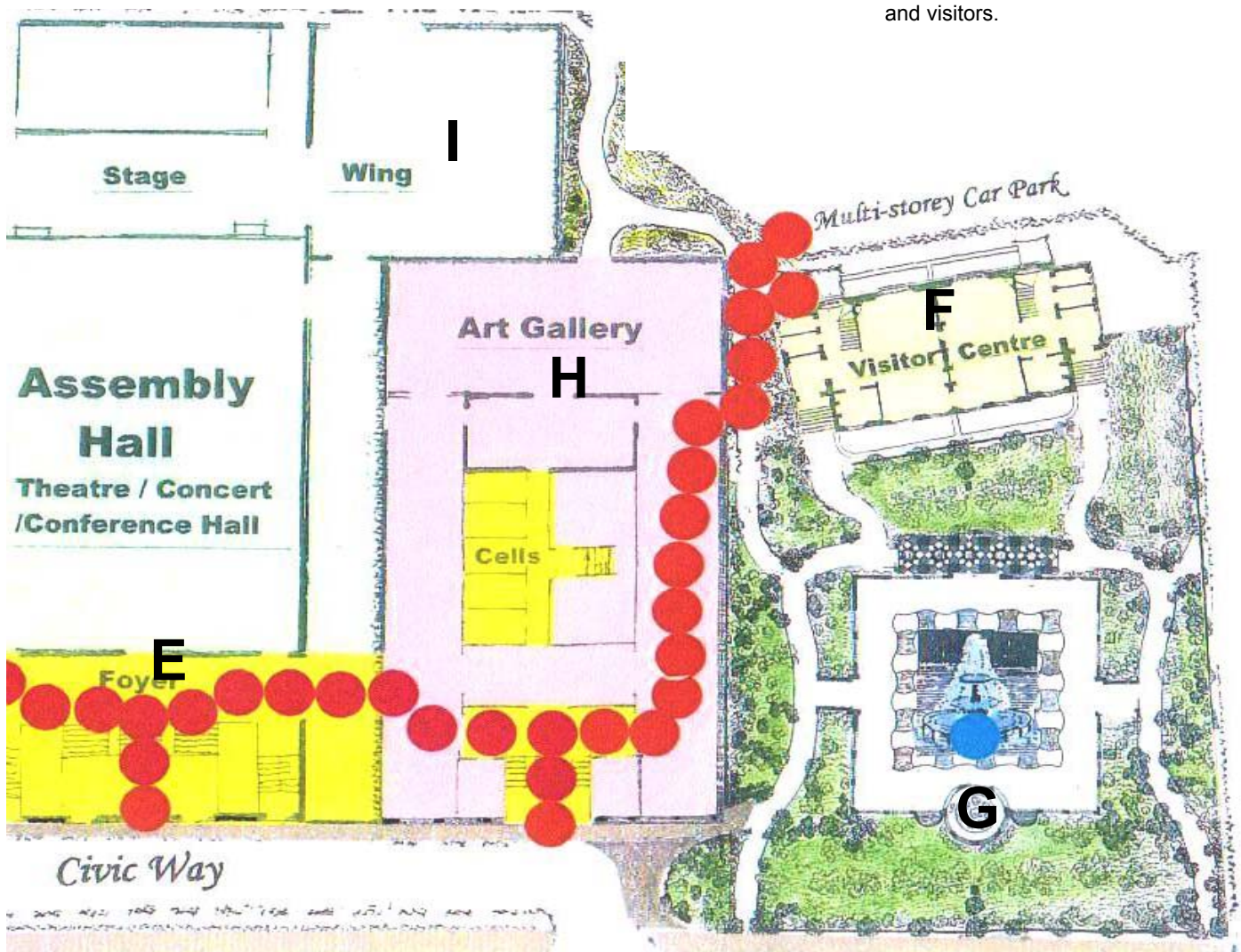
A Public Route through the Complex

From the new Galleria entrance (A) a sequence of public routes could be developed, linking the six buildings. A new common room/cafe (B) could serve both the library and the AEC, and the Gateway (C) could be brought back into the Town Hall, where it belongs. A tourist-orientated shop (D), possibly including a Post Office, could be introduced by the museum, and the toilet provision at the Assembly Hall (E) could become available to users of the complex generally. Visitors arriving by coach in Crescent Road could approach the visitor centre (F) through a landscaped garden (G), and thence to the art gallery (H) alongside. A generous new back-stage area (I) at the Assembly Hall occupying the disused police yard could complement its good-sized stage.

Outside the complex, there would be easy access to Trinity; to the railway station and bus stops; and to a potential new hotel on the 'cinema' site.



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 displayed for residents and visitors.



Practicality and Cost

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

In 1989 the highly-respected firm of architects, Building Design Partnership, prepared a report for the Borough Council on updating the Town Hall, the key element of the complex.

The report found refurbishment of the existing building to current standards 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, or the relocation of Council business elsewhere.

The Society has given serious thought to the question of cost and has had some indicative figures produced. These are, of course, subject to various imponderables, such as the legal rights of other bodies, phasing and specifications, etc., and exclude ownership issues, fitting-out costs, and relocation/removals. It is understood that any such comprehensive renewal would not be cheap, would necessarily be phased over a number of years, and would involve temporary accommodation for various users of the complex.

That said, an expert assessment, made on behalf of the Society, indicates that the cost of the works described would be around £10 million, or rather less than was proposed formerly to accommodate the Council offices (only) at the former Land Registry. The Borough Council does hold substantial reserves and will, in any event, be required to upgrade its accommodation before long, as will the County Council in respect of the Library. Modernising the buildings would make significant savings in operating costs while extending their use and making it possible to earn revenue from lettings and sales of merchandise. Moreover, it may be that an enlightened scheme might attract grants or sponsorship. It would also be possible to sell the present Gateway premises in their prime commercial position.

Approximate Costs (£000s) (Excluding Fees)

Works to Library, AEC, Museum and Shop	£3,000
New Galleria Entrance, Gateway and associated works	£ 500
Visitor centre and Art Gallery	£1,500
Works to Town Hall, Atrium and Assembly Hall	£4,000
Contingency sum	£1,000
TOTAL	£10,000

The Borough Council's Site Allocations Plan states that the Council will work with the local community to produce a Master Plan for the area embracing the civic complex. The Society welcomes this inclusive approach and looks forward to playing its part



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