



## **Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society**

Reg Charity No 276545

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### **Our Approach**

#### ***Introduction***

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.

#### ***Aims***

supporting the development and improvement of Royal Tunbridge Wells, as well as its protection and preservation;

caring for the environment, built and natural, and the economic and cultural life and history of the town;

promoting the involvement of the whole community in its governance.

#### ***What We Do***

we campaign on issues affecting the character and life of the town and the rights of citizens to be involved in decisions about its future;

we publish scholarly studies of aspects of local history, walks and guides to the town, and a challenging newsletter;

we scrutinise planning applications, discuss them with developers, give advice to residents, and make representations to the Council where necessary;

we give awards for development and conservation work in any style that enhances its environment, including sensitive re-use and sympathetic extension;

we respond to policy proposals from the Council and the Government on planning, housing, heritage and sustainability;

### ***How We Do It***

The Society elects an Executive Committee, with a Management Group which meets monthly; we form working groups on particular issues including other members of the Society;

Each month the Scrutiny Panel reviews planning applications. Other groups include Local History, the Public Realm, Communications, and Events;

Members meet monthly to receive reports on current activities and hear a visiting speaker;

Our 400 members contribute a wealth of experience and love of the town to seeing it developed while its character is secured.

### ***What Our Members Get from the Society***

- ◆ A respected voice in discussions with the Council
- ◆ A role in stimulating debate on current issues
- ◆ A diverse programme of annual Heritage Open Days
- ◆ A lively quarterly newsletter
- ◆ An active programme of events
- ◆ A discount on Society publications

## ***What We Have Done***

The present character of the town owes much to past achievements of the Society, in preserving Trinity as an arts centre, in shaping the Royal Victoria Place in place of an Arndale shopping centre, in securing the restoration of the Calverley Park villas, and in defeating a ring road that would have destroyed much of Lansdowne Road.

More recent achievements include:

### ***Bandstand***

When the Council announced it was going to demolish the bandstand in Calverley Grounds, a well-loved local landmark, the Society opposed this in advance of agreement on a replacement, and promoted a petition. After negotiation the Council agreed to plan for the future of the park to include a base for live performances. The Society is now helping to produce this plan.

### ***Panorama***

The Society enlisted the support of the Council for a Panorama to mark the 50th anniversary of the Society and the 100<sup>th</sup> of Royal Tunbridge Wells. The Panorama consisting of three blocks of hewn sandstone with a stainless steel plaque designed by a member of the Society identifying landmarks in the town, was unveiled in 2009.

### ***Local List***

English Heritage invited us to list features worthy of preservation which were not on the official list of protected buildings, in which Tunbridge Wells is particularly rich. Members compiled a Local List which is used in deciding applications to demolish or alter buildings in the conservation area. We now intend to revise and expand the original list.

### ***Civic Centre***

When the Council closed the Town Hall to the public without debate, it emerged they planned to remove their staff and redevelop the whole civic complex to make way for a shopping centre. Using Freedom of Information we showed agreements were being made in secret. After we backed petitions and publicised the issue, in 2010 the Council leader was forced to resign. The Council is now considering proposals for revitalising the Civic Centre.

### ***Courier Archive***

In 2011 the Society learned that the local Courier newspaper was moving to smaller accommodation and its bound archive of back numbers, almost complete since the mid-nineteenth century, and an irreplaceable source for

local history, was at risk of being lost. The Society found alternative secure accommodation for the material, and members moved it there.

### *Environmental Improvement*

We persuaded the Council to take planning control of some developments otherwise exempt. They agreed to consider the conversion of front gardens for parking, a particular problem in Royal Tunbridge Wells. Members of the Society carried out a survey, and in 2012 the Council took control of front garden parking in one area. The Society is now pressing for control in other areas, and of problems such as satellite dishes and plastic windows.

### *Publications*

Since 2000 the Society has published a dozen scholarly monographs on aspects of the history of Tunbridge Wells; more are planned.

### ***What We're Doing Now***

Some of what we're doing is indicated above and we're also working on:

#### *Grot Spots*

Pressing for solutions to long-standing eyesores such as the Cinema site. This has stood empty and derelict for twelve years; two developers have come and gone, and the site is now owned by a US private equity business. We're urging the Council to use its powers to have the site cleared at the owners' expense, and if there is still no progress to acquire it compulsorily for development which meets the needs of the town.

#### *The Civic Centre*

The six listed buildings are a unique asset which has been sadly neglected. The Society is publishing proposals for it to be restored and converted internally as a community and administrative centre for the borough, an arts and educational hub, a new museum for the town's fine collections, and an improved theatre. There are no major structural obstacles to modernisation, which would cost less than the alternative of replacement.

#### *Economic Development*

The Society believes that the character of Royal Tunbridge Wells indicates a future resting more on tourism and events than the heavy emphasis on retail in the Council's current plans. These aim for a 40% increase in comparison goods shopping, focussed on the land around the Civic Centre. We doubt whether such a large increase is necessary or viable, and advocate a plan making more use of conserving existing assets and promoting tourism.

### *Improving the Urban Environment*

We are discussing with the Council proposals for major improvements to the public realm in the town centre, with more space and better surfaces for people on foot, fewer unnecessary barriers and other clutter, and the possibility of `shared space`. Our objective is a simpler, safer environment, cheaper to maintain, which encourages pedestrians, reduces the impact of traffic, and provides scope for planting, art installations and water features.

### *Transport and Infrastructure*

The Society is concerned at the failure of the recently published Transport Strategy to recognise the serious weaknesses, and resultant congestion, in the transport infrastructure. While present constraints on major spending persist we believe we need a sustained programme of minor physical steps and management measures to reduce congestion, support alternatives to car travel, and improve conditions for walking and cycling.