

“We are talking about the Civic Centre Opportunity site. Considering its central position, it was relatively undeveloped when it was purchased by the city in the post WWII period. Then, a Masterplan was created for a municipal campus with Magistrates Court, City Hall and municipal offices. It was developed in accordance with this 1957 plan and financed by the sale of the myriad of old houses which served as council offices. The significant buildings of the Grange mansion and of course the old Town Hall were retained.

The Master Plan took thirty years to come to fruition and was the work of several renowned figures – Sir Frederick Gibberd of New Town fame, and our own Borough Engineer Albert S Moody.

Completion of the plan, and the building of the Crown Court in Bricket Road and the, very ugly, Job Centre next to it, extended the town centre from the medieval centre in an easterly direction, and closer to the Midland Railway Station and the industrial Victorian heart of the town towards Fleetville. Or did it?

The 1866 Midland Railway station, now our City Station, and the Fleetville industrial area had created a separation of the economy of the town from its administrative centre. The two were linked by Hatfield Road to the north and Victoria Street to the south. The lie of the land and the route of the ancient Shropshire Lane, which was simply renamed as Victoria Street, means that the southern link presents a challenge in modern terms, being both steep and narrow, so not conducive to obvious and easy, especially vehicular, communication between the station and the town centre. The side presentation of the iconic Town Hall at the top of the street is more menacing than welcoming and the turn into St Peter’s Street is awkward. Bricket Road is a one way street south and so any deviation from Victoria Street hill for cars must be achieved already via Marlborough Road going north, which is a less than obvious route to the city centre. Nothing from this direction welcomes the resident or visitor to the ‘municipal campus’ which was intended to be a hub.

The opportunity now arises to review the 1960s and 70s plan and perhaps see provided something which will draw people in a more satisfactory way to this central area of the public realm of the city centre. We can perhaps with this exercise add to the work already undertaken and presumably still available in this section of the City Vision exercise, which took place with considerable community input only a short number of years ago.

It may be useful to reflect on how the site was so open and came to be available for such plans in the first place.

It is the estate of The Grange, the 18th century mansion of which survives as part of the site with a frontage on St Peter’s Street. Yes, it was, for all the reasons we know, a site approached primarily only from St Peter’s Street, for the last three hundred years, the principal street of the town, although old farm cottages belonging to the estate can still be seen on Victoria Street. Just beyond, almost out of town, was the small 18th century Quaker burial ground, still marked by a small planted garden. The site had survived in a coherent way as an edge of town estate associated with an original monastic grange, which enjoyed high status occupation until shortly before the Second World War. It was more clearly defined in the 19th century by the cutting of Bricket Road, between the estate and the

remaining field on the Tonman Ditch borough boundary. At that time footpath routes across the site were established, which would now helpfully be preserved and enhanced.

By the end of the 19th century the mansion was occupied by a piano manufacturer, who kept a weather station, reporting monthly in gentlemanly journals and magazines, and then by our own borough treasurer Mr Blow, father of Percival the architect who so influenced much of the town centre in the early 20th century.

By then a small development of medium sized family houses had already appeared within the estate, known as Grange Gardens and Bricket Road, but the site still had an open and rural feel. This was enhanced by the relocation of the Barn from Water End to the site in the 1930s and as the need arose, car parking was allowed on the open ground.

That the 1970s developments of this prominent location are now ripe for challenge, begs serious consideration of the most desirable ambience which can be created for future generations. The development of the Maltings Shopping Centre in the 1980s brought a commercial focus to the East side of the town centre. There was much debate about the nature of that development and a sensitive design was achieved which complements the Market Place and Cathedral Quarter shopping areas, though the connections across the busy Chequer Street are a challenge. A revitalised Grange estate must address all the obvious challenges. The town centre is increasingly residential, yet without a great deal of public realm other than in St Peter's Street itself and without the many and varied facilities that residential areas are usually expected to offer. The civic functions at present on the site must still be provided and should be very easily accessible for those increasing number of residents and visitors and this is a golden opportunity to provide imaginative and well thought through public realm which addresses the communication challenges.

So, historically and culturally, we are talking about a site which is and can be open, slightly green and valuable public realm, but which lies out with or at least on the edge of the traditional town centre functions, in the direction, albeit rather awkwardly, of the dense contemporary desire lines from commuter station to residential and commercial sectors. There is a real opportunity to link the two somehow, perhaps by vista, as attempted by the sadly unsuccessful Maltings balcony idea – Who has ever been on the Library balcony? or by pathway, or by some imaginative welcoming function.

Though unintended, the present carpark element and Arena backside approach to the site from the east has a seriously inhibiting effect on the pedestrian visitor, perhaps having left their car in the civic centre car park of an evening or on a Saturday, leaving Victoria Street itself as the only desirable route into the town. As said, for various reasons, this is not a welcoming route either. A successful development on the site now would offer a welcome to its own function from the east and south (via the Maltings) as well as a welcome from the station and points east into the town centre itself, through the site on to the upper end of the market on St Peter's Street as well as the new Museum directly at the end of Victoria Street."