



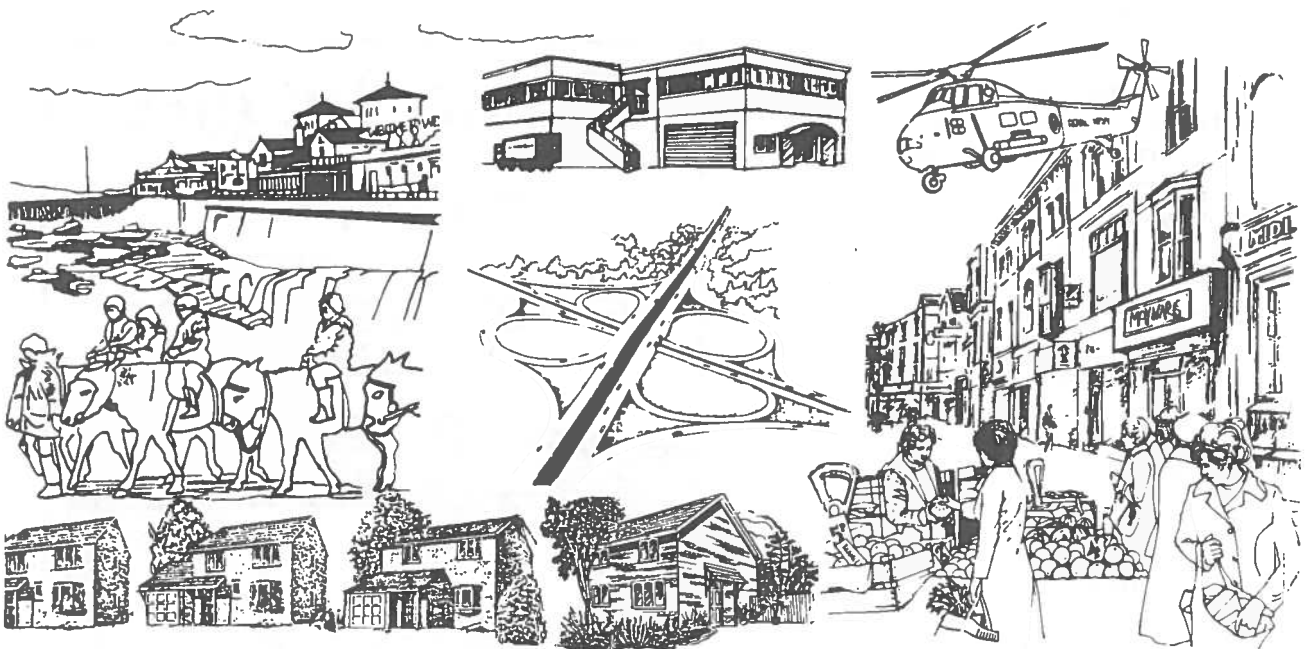
WESTON VIEW

May - June 1987

Number 29

Price 10p - Free to Weston Civic Society Members

EVER FORWARD!



PREDICTED JOB LOSSES AT WESTLANDS WILL ADD THEIR WEIGHT TO THE DECLINE OF WESTON'S CURRENT BRAND OF TOURISM AND THE UNCERTAINTY OF TOWN CENTRE RETAILING, FUELLING WIDESPREAD CONCERN ABOUT THE STABILITY OF THE TOWN'S ECONOMY.

What steps should Weston be taking to get itself out of the present difficulty? We look at how other resort towns have learned to adopt a conservation strategy which makes solid economic sense, and examine the lessons for Weston in this.

It is well known that from the earliest days of its development as a town, Weston's employment prospects depended largely on leisure and tourism. The post-war decision to diversify - to introduce an industrial dimension into the town's economy - brought in new employers: Clarks, Bristol Aerojets, Westlands themselves, as well as the companies occupying factories in the Oldmixon Industrial Estate. This move was seen as a prudent measure designed to minimise the economic consequences of a possible reduction in the town's popularity with holidaymakers. On the other hand, the policy itself was recognised by some as potentially destructive of the very qualities which constitute the reason for the resort's existence. Industrial development had earlier been regarded as incompatible with the scenic attractions and leisured atmosphere essential in a place which is in business to attract customers from large manufacturing centres seeking respite from the rigours of their working lives. Instead of getting clean away from Birmingham, holidaymakers could now rediscover a bit of their own familiar territory which had spilled over to the seaside.

- MOTORWAY -

The extension of the M5 motorway, linking Weston with the country's major cities and ports was seen as a factor which would underpin the vigour of the new industrial base. It would attract firms to the town and ensure prosperity. But plenty of other places are, after all, served by the same communications network, and some of these have been able to compete successfully for the available industrial prizes. Swindon and North Bristol are two examples of motorway-led growth.

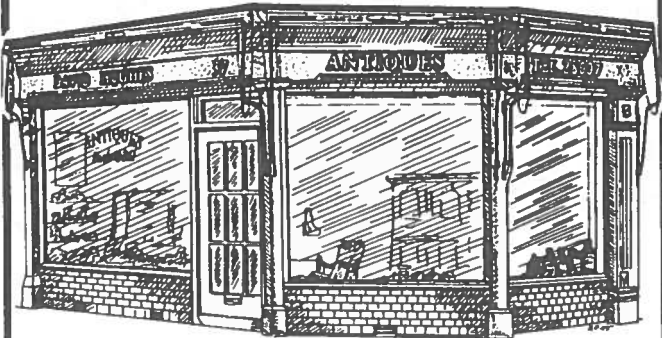
What the motorway unquestionably has brought is an enormous and expanding housing sprawl. However unsatisfactory access from the motorway to the town may have turned out to be, many newcomers find the M5 convenient for daily commuting to Bristol and beyond. Studies demonstrate that those who commute and those who have come to retire take out more from the local economy than they put in. The planning policies of the post-war years, sometimes forced on the council, sometimes adopted enthusiastically, have helped to produce a weak local economy.

- COMMUNITY IDENTITY -

A loss of community identity in Weston has stemmed in part from the rapid growth in the size of the town, which, coupled with its peculiar shape, has made any sense of cohesiveness increasingly difficult to sustain. Local government reorganisation has both symbolised and compounded this tendency, enormously increasing the area for which elected members and officers are deemed responsible, and effectively reducing the impact of detailed local knowledge. Issues which are finely balanced even within the town now have

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to be weighed against the claims of other towns and villages within a large District. The resulting horse-trading is a complex and unsatisfactory process. Councillors are pulled this way and that by competing essentials. Loyalties and responsibilities are obscured, and local people feel remote from the decision-making process.

- RETAILING DECLINE -

At the same time, Weston has declined as a retail centre. By common consent, choice and quality in our shops have suffered restriction over the last thirty years. The problem is not of course peculiar to our own town: corner shops have everywhere been forced out of business by multiples rich enough to afford prime sites and big enough to pass on the benefits of bulk-buying to the consumer. A race of greater giants has now appeared in the land, and the stranglehold of superstores, especially if they are in the suburbs, offers a bleak prospect for those seeking variety and enterprise in traditional urban shopping centres. Weston's planned new central shopping centre is heralded as the bringer of new life, but is necessarily the case that existing

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businesses will be able to co-exist happily beside it, taking advantage of an overall increase in trade which it is expected to generate? The economy is, after all, not in a phase of spectacular upsurge, and it has generally been the case in recent years that successful commercial development has been at the expense of competitors.

- HOLIDAY PROBLEMS -

All this has been taking place against a background of decline of the English seaside resort in general. Factors routinely blamed for the failing fortunes of the traditional resort include the readier availability of reasonably-priced holidays abroad; the closure or reduction of railway services; road traffic problems; withdrawal of steamer services; fears of pollution; the trend away from use of serviced accommodation; unwise dependence on only one sector of the tourist market. If seaside resorts are to survive, these

influences need to be reversed or their effects nullified.

These problems, and their application to Weston, are not new. They have been with us, to a greater or lesser extent, for years. Unfortunately it is one of the shortcomings of a liberal democracy that it puts off dealing with problems until a crisis ensues. Short-term solutions are preferred, and strategic thinking is not rigorously developed. Ten years ago efforts at diagnosis were usually denounced. Now the scale of the problem is admitted on all sides.

- AFFLUENCE AND APATHY -

During the present century the steady growth of personal affluence and the emergence of a materialistic society have kept pace with a corresponding decline in public-spiritedness. Those with ability and an educated perspective do not, as they did 100 years ago, play a significant part in local debate. The professional classes, who might have most to offer in this respect, tend now to live in the countryside, or to seek diversion in playing golf, sailing boats and the like. Concentration on D-I-Y home improvements and care with the garden reinforce a self-contained sense of fulfilment. The wider world with its problems is kept at bay as the trappings of a personal lifestyle are cultivated. What happens outside the front door or the garden gate is someone else's concern.

This withdrawal of potential talent has contributed to a situation in which it is difficult for the town to focus on its needs. We are supposed to live in a democracy, and constitutionally we do, yet it is necessary to fight and shout to get the issues properly debated.

LESSONS TO BE LEARNED

It is salutary to step back from problems as they are perceived locally and to review what is being experienced, and what action is being proposed, in comparable situations elsewhere. Our membership of a national network helps us here.

- ILFRACOMBE -

In the Ilfracombe Project, launched in May 1986, the Civic Trust has entered into a partnership with the North Devon District Council in a move to bring new life to a town showing disturbing symptoms of decay. Though much smaller, Ilfracombe has a number of features in common with Weston, being in essence a Victorian seaside resort in a fine natural setting. To quote Paul Davies of the Civic Trust: '[the] decline is manifested in the appearance of the town, the unemployment statistics, the failure rate of hoteliers, the level of disrepair and the standard of goods in the High Street shopwindows.' A meeting called to launch the Ilfracombe Project attracted nearly 1000 people and revealed overwhelming evidence that local

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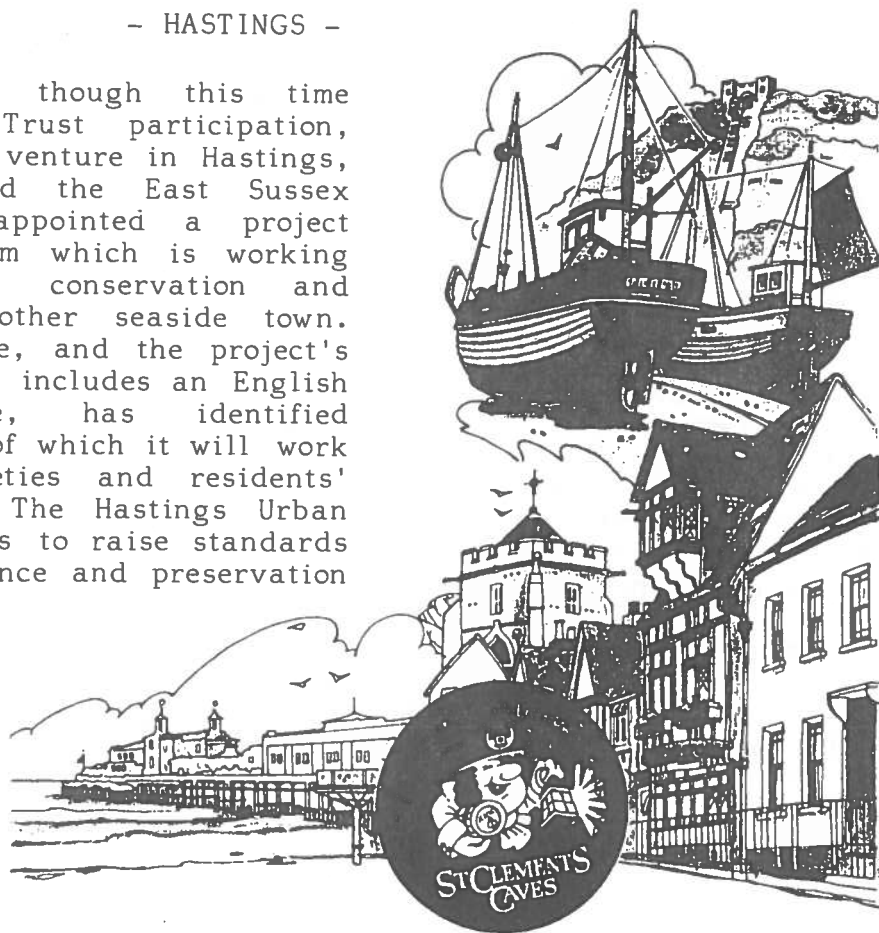
residents were aware both of the town's predicament and of the need for remedial action. The aim of the current venture is to define specific projects and to locate the resources to turn them into reality.

Initiatives already identified include a Town Scheme for the repair of specific buildings in the conservation area, with support from district and county councils and English Heritage; enhancement of public spaces; a landscape survey to define areas for new tree planting; a rolling programme for improvement of the promenade, specific development and conversion projects for job creation; shopfront improvements with on-the-spot design advice; incentives and resources for the improvement of housing and hotel accommodation in the town centre. An Advisory Group has been set up to represent community interest and undertake its own projects. Stress is laid on the injection of tourism business expertise and the need to create a truer image of the town through marketing.

Fresh from the conspicuous success of the Wirksworth Project, a textbook example of co-operation between the Civic Trust, local amenity groups and local council which has brought grant aid and expertise flooding in to transform and revitalise the Derbyshire town, the Civic Trust is eager to help restore some of Ilfracombe's former glory, establishing a sound and balanced economic base adapted to shifts of economic reality.

- HASTINGS -

'Doing a Wirksworth', though this time without direct Civic Trust participation, aptly describes a joint venture in Hastings, where the Borough and the East Sussex County Council have appointed a project director to head a team which is working for the revitalisation, conservation and enhancement of yet another seaside town. Hastings is a big place, and the project's steering committee, which includes an English Heritage representative, has identified priority areas, in each of which it will work alongside amenity societies and residents' and traders' groups. The Hastings Urban Conservation Project aims to raise standards of maintenance, appearance and preservation of buildings and their surroundings, to convince local people of the quality of their town, and to bring together all those concerned about urban conservation with those with the wit, ability and skill to achieve results.




Hand in hand with deployment of central funds - an English Heritage Town Scheme will enhance a newly pedestrianised area - comes a self-help initiative in which shopkeepers and householders are encouraged to take a more active interest in their environment, providing flower displays and mounting a programme of events and attractions to make local people and visitors more aware of the quality of the old town. Some exciting conversions of older properties have already been completed: adaptation and re-use of good existing buildings is to be facilitated by the establishment of a revolving fund.

A large measure of unrealised potential is waiting to be exploited: the fabric of the present town contains the seeds of its revival, and local people are responding to the challenge to pull their town back from the threat of decay.

It is of course no mere coincidence that the two examples quoted here involve seaside towns undergoing a programme of renewal. In a period in which tourism has been something of a boom industry, the seaside is the only sector of British tourism that has shown a decline. It is surely important that the seaside should not continue to lose ground at a time when tourism is increasingly regarded as a legitimate part of the 'real' economy, worthy of serious consideration as a major employer. Turnover in U.K. tourism in 1985 was around £13 billion, greater than the aerospace industry. An estimated 1 to 1.5 million jobs are supported directly or indirectly by tourist spending, and the figure is growing.

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- FACILITIES -

Foreign beaches may afford a more reliable climate, but the tourist's need as the twenty-first century approaches is becoming more varied and more sophisticated. In the words of David Trippier M.P., Minister responsible for tourism, tourists are looking for 'food, accommodation, enlightenment and entertainment'. To an extent these can be offered successfully in any centre which is prepared to provide a decent environment, imaginative design and a positive marketing strategy. The fact that they are increasingly becoming the formula for success at inland tourist centres, which are now directly competing with what traditional seaside resorts have to offer, suggests that seaside towns which intend to take themselves seriously as providers of leisure facilities ought to forget about how badly they compare with their Mediterranean cousins and get on with the business of competing for the home trade by providing all-weather facilities and catering for a wider range of interests and activities than has traditionally been thought adequate.

- BLACKPOOL -

It is plain that some resorts are doing exactly this. Blackpool's Sandcastle Centre can accommodate 10,000 people indoors. Water parks are becoming popular and are planned for many areas including Bridlington, Southsea, and Torbay, often as part of large, integrated developments including restaurants, amusements and other leisure facilities. Even Minehead has converted its traditional swimming pool into an all-weather leisure pool which is so popular in the high season that a shift system has to be operated. Everywhere activity holidays, from birdwatching to ballooning, yachting to yoga, are being linked to the accommodation and facilities that can be made available.

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

It seems evident that a determined effort to identify, conserve and enhance a town's character, conveying a strong sense of place, to offer activities based on an area's natural endowment, and to provide new and attractive facilities, can be the key to the survival and success of a seaside resort. The growing availability of choice elsewhere suggests that one of these elements on its own is less likely to succeed than an imaginative combination, professionally marketed. The opportunity for having a good time in delightful surroundings has always lain at the heart of the distinctive contribution of the English seaside resort.

There is a challenge to be faced, and calls for a sober reappraisal should not be condemned as destructive. The Civic Society, which is naturally more concerned with the conservation and enhancement element of the equation, has repeatedly put forward specific suggestions. Unfortunately decisions are still routinely taken of a kind that belies any coherent overall grasp of the town's need to maintain a decent environment. Woodspring's Resort 2000 entry was unsuccessful, while Torbay spent much time and money to good effect on its winning submission, which included official recognition of the need to develop potential heritage attractions, including interpretation, and to improve the physical fabric of the resort, while at the same time providing new facilities.

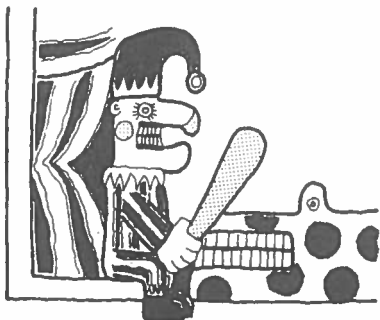
Our Heritage Project demonstrates in a small way that this kind of appraisal of what a resort can and should offer will lead to job creation and add to the stock of permanent tourist attractions. Weston is also particularly well placed to cater for a variety of interest- and activity-based holidays exploiting the rural hinterland as well as more obvious coastal resources.

- MEANNESS -

Paul Theroux, in his recent book which describes a trek around the English coastline, has much to say about the tattiness that he encountered and concludes that 'Britain is too mean to save herself'. There is a meanness of spirit at work which accompanies the lack of willingness to spend money. Parts of Britain are in fact saving themselves quite effectively, as Mr. Theroux would no doubt concede, but our corner will only join in that process if Weston confronts the realities of the situation and explores the varied potential for finding workable solutions.

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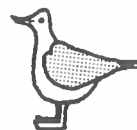
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ENVIRONMENT WEEK ROUND-UP

GIVE ME YOUR ANSWER, DO!

One of the Civic Society's activities for Environment Week was a kind of public consultation new to Weston - a questionnaire survey to find out what local people's environmental priorities really are, and what changes they would like, or not like, to see happen in their town.

Most of the forms returned came from the *Weston Mercury* which gave generous coverage to both questions and answers. Most of the replies were also from non-Civic Society members, presumably an impartial cross-section of the community.

The results have been printed at length in the *Weston Mercury*. They contained few surprises for the Civic Society members who collated them. Most people thought that big modern buildings are ugly; that Victorian buildings should be carefully preserved and restored; that Weston's open spaces and historic areas are the town's main attractions; that the District Council should exercise stricter controls on planning matters; that the sea front is run down; that the untidiness and pollution of the town and the beach are a disgrace; that Weston badly needs many more trees, more covered leisure amenities, more free public seats and more peace and quiet, and fewer juggernaut lorries, chip shops and ugly new shop fronts.



We are grateful to all those who took the trouble to make their views known, and to the authors of the many interesting proposals which space has not permitted us to detail. Many of the matters listed above have already aroused the concern of the local authorities, and we look forward now to the powers-that-be acting on the wishes of local people.

ANOTHER GOOD MEETING



The fourteenth AGM of Weston Civic Society took place during Environment Week, in the now officially opened Countryside Room at the Heritage Centre. The normal business was transacted swiftly, and the outgoing officers and committee were re-elected.

As usual, the portion of the evening reserved for the expression of members' views produced a lively discussion. Concern was expressed from several quarters at the direction in which Weston was moving, and whether the town would be able to maintain its desirability as an historic resort, with an appropriate mix of tourism and industry. Was enough being done to provide facilities for residents? Was the Civic Society getting its message across to councillors?

One Heritage Centre volunteer suggested that a potted history of the Civic Society, and a brief résumé of what it has been up to, would be very useful to new members and those who help to spread the light while working

in the Society shop. It may take the Committee a little while to work out just what they have been doing for the last fourteen years, but we hope to publish just such a synopsis soon.

The highlight of the evening was a preview of the audio-visual display which will soon be a permanent feature of the Countryside Room. The eight-minute presentation, on a television-style screen, uses the very effective two slide projector dissolve system, with accompanying voice over and music. Its aim is to whet the appetite of visitors by showing them the interesting and attractive buildings, sites and scenery which can be discovered in and around Weston, with a little about the history of the area. The presentation is mainly the work of the Civic Society's Chief Designer, Ray Dwerryhouse, and other slide runs are to be produced for specialised purposes.

The newly elected Executive Committee consists of Martin Taylor (Chairman), Philip Beisly (Secretary), John Trenchard (Treasurer), Sheila Burton, John Crockford-Hawley, Andrew Eddy, Mary Harding, Bob Smart, Howard Smith and Rosemary Smith. They will be joined by two members elected by the Committee of the Thursday Club.

OUR LAST OPENING

Our main commemorative event for Environment Week was the official opening of the displays in the Countryside Room at the heritage Centre, the last of the opening ceremonies which have pleasantly punctuated life at Wadham Street over the last few years. The Vice Chairman of Woodspring District Council, Cllr. Horace Ashman, who, appropriately enough, farms in one of the most attractive parts of the District, kindly and ably made the official declaration, and there were also speeches from Dr. Gary Mantle, Southern Region Development Officer for UK 2000, and Civic Society Secretary Philip Beisly.



A showing of the new audio-visual display in the Countryside Room was greeted with applause, and an excellent buffet lunch, provided by Cornish's Coffee House, was savoured by those present. Two very welcome guests later in the day were the Chairman of Woodspring District Council, Cllr. Mrs. Mary McEwen-Smith, and Mr. McEwen-Smith, who were given an extended guided tour of the premises.

A VERY FAIR FAIR

The one sure sign of spring in Weston is when Civic Society helpers find their arms buried up to the shoulder in clothes, books and bric-à-brac. Our Spring Fair this year took place the day after May Day, and several committee members were thus enabled to get their new spring wardrobe together in time for the Bank Holiday.

Once again the tried and tested system worked well at the Boulevard United Reformed Church Hall. It is always a mystery to us how six car loads can expand themselves to cram a large church hall with merchandisable items, but the magic never fails, and the suspension of the Chairman's Citroën self-righted itself self-righteously and uncomplainingly. The public seemed to prefer patronising us to being beaten up or blown away on the sea front, and rather more than the traditional £222 was raised. We thank all those who donated goods for sale, and all those who gave their time and energy to sorting the goods or manning the stalls.

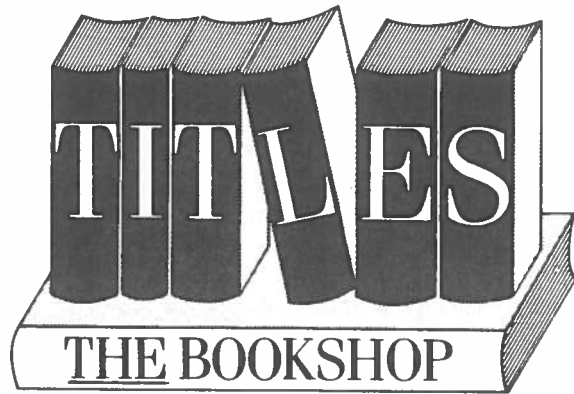
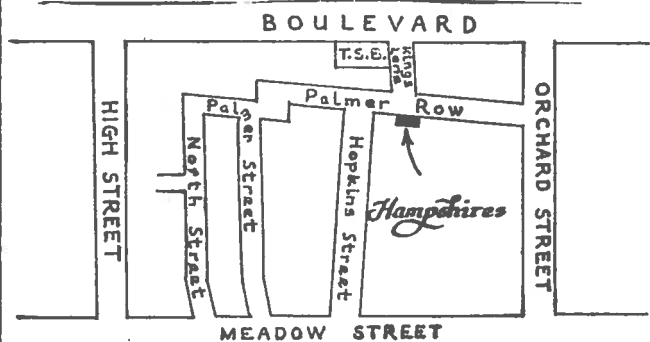
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BLAKEHAY APPEAL 87



The Blakehay Appeal, detailed in the *Weston Mercury* every week, is trying to raise £30,000 to give Weston its new Arts and Community Centre. A welcome aspect of the campaign has been the interest shown by the various volunteers and Community Programme participants engaged on the work in raising money by ingenious forms of sponsorship.

The ball was set rolling by one lady who is being sponsored to give up smoking, a project which will benefit both the Blakehay and herself. Many members of our Building Team are keen to submit themselves to the army assault course at Taunton for the good of the cause.

The field is obviously wide open for suggestions for new kinds of sponsorship, which, while raising money for the Blakehay, could help to make Weston a better place to live. Dog owners could be sponsored not to let their pets foul the pavements, and young people not to play transistor radios in the High Street. Residents could be sponsored not to paint their houses green.

The Appeal organisers welcome your suggestions, especially serious ones, though the lesson of the 1980s is that there can be no stunt so outrageous that some people will not be prepared to spend money on it, and this can be made to work to our advantage. Please send your ideas, and offers, to the Blakehay Office at 23 Wadham Street, and watch this space for more news of progress.

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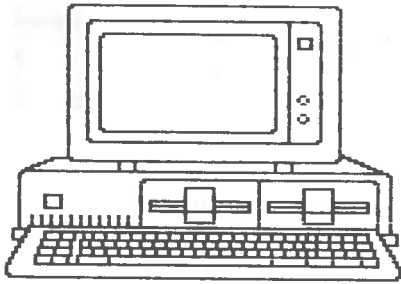
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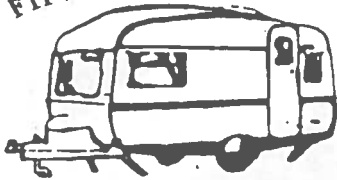
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