

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

"Anything is better than nothing" has been the constant cry of many local residents of both sides of the River when asked to comment on the derelict Jolly Boatman site. Yet after the loss of the Jolly Boatman facility, some years ago, there have been many suggestions and attempts to improve the appearance of this environmentally important area just outside this delightful but dilapidated countryside station built in 1849 by the great Railway architect, Sir William Tite, to do justice architecturally to its significant position as the new public gateway to the Palace across the river at Hampton Court. The station should have been listed long ago.

So why did every attempt to develop this area, to do something to improve the appearance of the area since 1986, seem increasingly destined only to destroy the uniqueness of the station's commanding position alongside Lutyen's remarkable bridge, built in the early 1930s when the new Hampton Court Way was being created? Every application to develop the site, first just on the Jolly Boatman site and later trying to encompass the station and its surroundings in an plethora of large buildings quite out of keeping with the station's architecture, indicated the avaricious intention of the developer to maximise the potential of this desirable island site and crowd as many buildings as possible onto it. This would overwhelm the station with an array of structures that would destroy the traditional views across the river solely to the developer's benefit. Could this be the "Something that is better than nothing?" Or is it like 'trying to get the quart into the pint pot?'

I suppose what makes me angry is the fact that avaricious eyes have looked at the continuing unsightly Jolly Boatman site as prime development land while the station has been allowed to fall into a chronic state decay by its various owners, all ready to fall prey to a massive over-development proposal rather than have sympathetic landscaping of the new open space, as has been suggested, and restoring a miniature architectural marvel in an appropriate setting as would have been done in any historically self-respecting country. Could this be the answer local residents want? But it all costs money and one is constantly being warned to 'just think politics' because the state of the station won't win any arguments and Government policy is making correct planning decisions impossible! It seems there is an insatiable appetite to build on and fill any vacant plots of land with as many buildings as possible. It bothers me greatly that CABE - Commissioners for Architecture and the Built Environment - and English Heritage have both seen fit to indicate their approval of the latest planning proposals when English Heritage, in particular, should be fulfilling its role of protecting the natural environment. I hope these views will not influence unduly the Elmbridge planning committee at this stage into thinking it is all a foregone conclusion.

And these proposals are further complicated with the expectation of creating a new 'Star and Garter Home' for disabled ex-servicemen and women at the back of the station on the old car park but out of sight of the Palace unless the trees are removed. There are serious concerns about the suitability of the site the elderly and the people of Richmond should be taking a keen interest in this because they seem to have little idea of whether the new home will be adequate for its elderly residents or indeed how it is being shoe-horned into the already over-crowded site. Many just seem relieved that something is going to happen.

Finally, visitors to Hampton Court as well as the local residents should be aware of the remarkable changes being proposed for traffic management in the area. When the plans were first mooted, people to the north of the Thames were to be omitted from any consideration of their traffic requirements, so any visitor to the Palace by car from Hampton Wick, for instance, would have to leave the by the main Gates, travel over the bridge, as now, but continue as far as the Imber Court roundabout before being able to return to the Hampton Court roundabout to continue their journey home.

Our MP, Vincent Cable, has been strong in his opposition to these far from satisfactory proposals, as have been many residents on both sides of the river, supported by the Hampton Court Rescue Campaign with well over 3,000 signatures to its petition against the despoliation of the Jolly Boatman site and the over-development of the Station precinct. Hampton Court Palace shares the concern of many local residents on this side of the river about the negative impact any massive attack on the integrity of the station and its surrounding area would have on the historic environment which it has always striven to protect for the enjoyment of future generations. All this would be lost if the views across the river were destroyed by unsightly, unsympathetic over-development or, indeed, by any but very minimal development.

Yours sincerely,

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