



# SOCIETY URGES RETHINK ON SWAFFHAM IMPROVEMENT SCHEME

*Many Society members will be aware of proposals that have been drawn up to enhance the centre of Swaffham, one of this area's most important and attractive market towns. The proposals seek to address a range of perceived problems, ranging from illegal and dangerous parking to the lack of uniformity in paving surfaces. There was a public consultation exercise, with copies of the proposals available for examination in Swaffham Museum and in the town's Assembly Rooms. The deadline for comments was 21 May. The proposals have provoked widespread debate, and some concern on the part of Swaffham shopkeepers and market traders, as well as among those who use the town's shops and services.*

Funding for a town 'enhancement' project (to the tune of £725,000) was secured in October 2003, following which a working group involving Mott MacDonald (the company commissioned to produce the scheme), Swaffham Town Council and the Icen Partnership developed proposals for public consultation.

The key elements of the scheme are as follows:

## **Market Place North**

- The direction of the angled parking outside Boots will be altered so that vehicles can drive in and reverse out of the spaces

## **Market Place East**

- The off-road parking between the traffic lights and Woolworths will be removed and a new loading bay created
- Parking provision between Woolworth's and the Town Pit (next to the Greyhound pub) will be reduced and pedestrian areas extended

## **Market Place West**

- A mini-roundabout will be created at the junction of London Road and the Market Place
- Parking provision along the western side of the Market Place will be reduced and the pedestrian areas improved
- A loading bay will be created outside the Town Hall

## **Market Place Central**

- South Street (in front of the Assembly Rooms) and East Street (leading up to the War Memorial) will be pedestrianised
- Parking provision in the main parking area will be reduced to facilitate the creation of a walkway through the area between the Assembly Rooms and the Butter Cross
- Two new zebra crossings will be provided at the end of South Street, with informal crossing points near the Butter Cross

- A loading bay will be created on the west side the Assembly Rooms

## **General issues**

- A 20mph speed limit will be implemented within the town centre
- New trees will be planted around the sides of the market place, e.g in front of the Greyhound, White Hart, Goldmine, Forbuoys etc
- New street furniture – planters, seating, signposts – will be installed
- Extensive areas of new paving will be created, with different colours denoting usage (pedestrian areas, parking etc).
- The town's Traffic Regulation Orders will be re-written to ensure they are enforceable

Mott MacDonald claim that proposals 'have been developed so that they are fully compatible with the Saturday market', although no detail is given. Subject to agreement to the proposals, the first of the three phases of work is due to commence in January 2005 and will be carried out by Norfolk County Council. To minimise disruption, no works are intended during the busy summer months or in the run-up to Christmas.

However, the Breckland Society is concerned about the impact on Swaffham of both the general philosophy behind the scheme – one of penalising those using the town by private vehicle by restricting access and the amount of convenient parking – and the detail of much of what is proposed, which is bland and inappropriate to a working market town in Norfolk. The Chairman, James Parry, has written to Mott MacDonald outlining the Society's concerns. A copy of his letter appears overleaf. The consultation process continues, and will hopefully prompt revision and adaptation of the proposals to produce a scheme that is more imaginative, individual and realistic.

Dear Sirs,

### **Swaffham Town Centre Enhancement Scheme**

Thank you for sending details of the above scheme and for giving the Breckland Society the opportunity to comment on the proposals.

There are several aspects of the scheme which we certainly support. In particular, the altering of the direction of the angled parking outside Boots and the creation of a mini-roundabout at the junction of London Road and Market Place are positive developments. The reduction in the town centre speed limit to 20mph is also welcome.

However, we are concerned about other aspects of the proposals, both in terms of general philosophy and practical detail. First, we are not convinced that there is a problem that needs fixing in quite the way this scheme sets out to do. Much of what is proposed is aimed at 'tidying-up' the town centre, removing what are perceived as somehow undesirable elements, such as mismatched paving materials. Swaffham's great strength is its appearance and function as a traditional Norfolk market town, with all the variety and idiosyncrasy that centuries of evolution and change have combined to bring. It is precisely this individual character that local people value about their town, and which also brings visitors here from elsewhere. Dressing up the town centre with uniform paving and 'heritage' street furniture – bollards, fingerposts, planters etc – will bring unwelcome and needless conformity and a diminution of the individual character of the town centre and of its component parts.

Second, we are uneasy about the basic premise that car access to the town centre should be reduced and restricted as proposed. Swaffham draws largely on surrounding villages for its trade and prosperity and, local transport services being what they are, the overwhelming majority of local people arrive by car and will continue to do so until satisfactory alternative provision is made. Therefore, any changes to vehicular access to the town centre, and particularly to parking, must be considered very carefully to ensure that they do not make the town less attractive to those arriving by car. In our view, improving the situation for pedestrians – a key element of the proposed scheme – must not be at the expense of the local shoptraders and those who use Swaffham as a convenient shopping location. If the town becomes less accessible to car-borne shoppers, they will go elsewhere and the town will suffer financially.

We would like to make specific points as follows:

#### **Parking**

The proposals make much of 'rationalising' parking in the town centre. Effectively, this means cutting the number of parking spaces from 199 to 139, a reduction of one third. Have the implications of this reduction been properly evaluated? The great advantage of Swaffham is that it offers free town centre parking; reducing the number of available spaces by such a margin can only have a negative effect in terms of the town's appeal to car-borne visitors. It will also make the town less convenient for shop-traders. We do not accept the

contention that the new arrangement will result in a more rapid turnover of vehicles and therefore more parking 'opportunities' through the day; this would be meaningful only if demand were spread evenly, which it is not. Have any studies been made of hour-by-hour demand? Furthermore, there is already a parking restriction in force in the town centre, and so the benefits the scheme claims will ensue in terms of turnover should in fact already be apparent. It is difficult to see how removing a third of the spaces will improve the situation. We would also query some of the terms used in the proposals: what is an 'acceptable level of parking' between Woolworths and the Town Pit? Acceptable to whom? This needs definition and clarification, but we would in any case question the contention that the number of spaces here should be reduced as proposed, simply to provide greater pedestrian access, which is already adequate in this location.

#### **Trees and planting**

One of the great attractions of Swaffham is its architecture and streetscape. Further obscuring this with trees – as proposed in front of The Greyhound, for example – is undesirable in our view. Furthermore, the choice of plane trees is wholly inappropriate. This species is not only atypical of the area, but is also a considerable maintenance nightmare in terms both of leaf-fall clearance (as any London borough authority will confirm) and ultimate size – far too large for the proposed site, in fact. If additional trees are considered necessary, then consideration should be given to planting native species more appropriate in scale. Equally, rhododendrons are a particularly uninspiring choice for planters, as proposed. Again, more appropriate and imaginative options should be considered: plants and grasses typical of the area, for example. Such planting can serve to help link the town with its surrounding landscape and draw awareness to the unique flora of the Brecks.

#### **Paving and street furniture**

There is nothing in these proposals that seeks to draw out Swaffham's distinctive character and much that will result in its loss. A proliferation of standardised Saxon paving and identikit black bollards, benches and signs is not the answer for Swaffham. At a time when local distinctiveness is rightly accorded increasing priority, this is an opportunity to come up with new and innovative ideas for the town's enhancement rather than simply copying what has been blindly implemented elsewhere. For example, could consideration be given to running a competition to encourage local artists and craftsmen to submit designs for 'unique-to-Swaffham' street furniture?

In summary, whilst we welcome some of the proposals, we are concerned that without further thought and some creative imagination the scheme risks adversely altering the town rather than 'improving the environment for everyone who uses Swaffham'. We look forward to seeing further detail in due course, but would caution that this is a chance to celebrate Swaffham's individuality, not drown it in a sea of enforced conformity.

Yours faithfully,

### **WANT TO GET INVOLVED?**

The Society is working with the local group of the Campaign to Protect Rural England (Norfolk) to monitor planning and development within Breckland District Council, and we hope very soon to set up similar links on the Suffolk side of the Brecks. With such an area to cover, it is difficult to keep tabs on the large number of planning applications that are made every month. Not all of these will be of interest to us, of course, but developments such as proposals for new housing or commercial/industrial development on greenfield sites, as well as 'enhancement' schemes such as that proposed for Swaffham, most definitely are. We are therefore asking for volunteers who will act as our 'eyes and ears' at a local level to let us know what's going on. Please contact James Parry on 01366 328676 if you are interested.

## VIEWPOINT

*Viewpoint is an opportunity for members of the Society to air their views on subjects of interest to other members and/or of relevance to the work of the Society. We welcome members' submissions and comments, but make the point that any opinions expressed are those of the individual(s) concerned and not necessarily of the Society (although of course we always listen to what you have to say!). In this edition, Nicholas Sibbett, Conservation Manager, English Nature Suffolk Team, responds to recent correspondence concerning the impact of mink on the Breckland environment and its wildlife.*

As new members of the Breckland Society, English Nature looks forward to sharing its nature conservation policies and actions, and to receiving views from Society members. I welcome the discussion about English Nature and mink in Viewpoint, in December's newsletter. In particular, English Nature was criticised for having no policy about mink.

English Nature has recognised for a long time that mink deplete biodiversity, with particular attention to water voles. For example, this was recognised in our Breckland Natural Area Profile, published in 1998. In 2001, we published in our Enact magazine an article advocating mink trapping, together with practical guidance for land managers advising on ways of doing it. I have sent these two documents to the Breckland Society office for members to look at. Our Water Vole Conservation Handbook also advocates trapping mink for water vole conservation, in certain circumstances.

We are also looking at the wider picture of non-native species. As well as established non-native species that have become a nuisance, there is also the issue of preventing other species from becoming established and causing a problem. English Nature was a significant contributor to a Defra review, which can be found at [www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/resprog/findings/non-native/execsummary.pdf](http://www.defra.gov.uk/wildlife-countryside/resprog/findings/non-native/execsummary.pdf).

We are unable to give site-by-site advice to most people, but we have Conservation Officers available to advise on Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). We want SSSIs to be in favourable condition, so if any SSSI manager would like to discuss mink or any other issue, please give us a call.

For general information, please contact English Nature's Enquiry Service. For specific issues, for example about your SSSI, please contact your local English Nature team:

### English Nature Enquiry Service

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## HEATHLAND CELEBRATION

*The Norfolk and Suffolk Brecks were once covered by one of the largest expanses of lowland heath in Britain. From Swaffham in the north to Bury St Edmunds in the south, a wide steppe-like landscape stretched as far as the eye could see. Seemingly bleak and home to little more than rabbits and stone curlews, this unique area was characterised by thin, sandy soils littered with flints and studded with clumps of heather, gorse and broom. Yet this apparently 'wild' landscape was essentially manmade, the result of human activity going back thousands of years.*

The process started around the fifth millennium BC, when Neolithic farmers cleared the area of its indigenous forest in order to create pasture for their grazing animals and open areas for cultivation. Once the weak soils were exposed, they were soon 'leached' out by rainfall, or their nutrients exhausted by a few years' cultivation. Unsuitable for permanent arable agriculture, the heaths were used mainly for grazing sheep and for raising rabbits in extensive warrens. Although the latter had once been a lucrative form of land use, the heaths later became regarded as worthless tracts of land fit for nothing more than 'improvement'.

Innovations in agriculture during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries made possible the bringing of such marginal land into productivity, and this fuelled an increase in land values and the advent of enclosure. Heathland – much of which was common land over which local people held grazing and other rights – was steadily taken into private ownership by landowners eager to enlarge their estates and maximise profit by ploughing up heathland and planting it with crops.

Whilst such developments were widely held to be in the public interest, for the people who lived on, and from, the heath the impact was little short of disastrous. Denied access to essential commodities such as fuel (firewood, gorse stems and turf), they were pushed right

to the very brink of survival. Scorned by 'improvers', these people were regarded as little more than vagabonds, their supposedly uncivilised state taken as evidence of the need to replace the wild heaths with a neater, more controlled, environment. Yet the heath-dwellers maintained a simple and effective harmony with their landscape, with virtually everything they needed for daily life found around them on the heath.

During the late nineteenth century, the attention of certain, more sympathetic, commentators was drawn to the plight of those living on the heath. In particular, there was a growing interest in their culture, increasingly regarded as offering something pure and genuine. Although 'rough and ready', heathland folk were recognised as possessing insights since lost to city-dwellers. A spate of song- and dance-collectors travelled among the gypsies and other inhabitants of the England's dwindling heaths, recording their dying way of life. This was the inspiration for *Heathland Wisdom*, a short play coming to the region in September and sponsored jointly by the Society and the Brecks Countryside Project. Commissioned by English Nature's Tomorrow's Heathland Heritage, the 40-minute play gives a lively and insightful account into a meeting between a Victorian song-collector and a gypsy couple living on a heath.

**See back page for details of dates and venue.**

## A TASTE OF THE BRECKS

*A major aim of the Brecks Sustainable Tourism project, funded by ERDF, EEDA/Keystone, Suffolk and Norfolk County Councils, Breckland Council and the Brecks Countryside Project, is to raise the distinctiveness of the area by encouraging tourism businesses to use and feature local produce on menus.*

With this objective in mind, a Brecks Local Produce Taster Event was held at Lynford Hall Country Hotel on 19<sup>th</sup> May. Attended by 170 guests, the event was designed to introduce local producers of food and tourism services to hotels, bed and breakfasts, visitor attractions and restaurants. Sixteen producers and guests were encouraged to sample local delights including asparagus, cheeses, venison, sausages, pork, fish, apple juice, wine, beer and ales and bread.

At the same event, ten tourism businesses also received a Green Tourism Business Award, a scheme delivered in partnership with the East of England Tourist Board. These businesses were considered to have demonstrated their commitment to environmental issues such as energy and water conservation, purchasing local produce, public transport and wildlife.

Feedback from guests and producers was very positive and a leaflet is now being designed to promote local produce to visitors and residents.

BBC's *Look East* covered the event in their regional news on 19<sup>th</sup> May.

## SOCIETY EVENTS ROUND-UP

*Wet and windy weather on 7 April did not deter 20 members from turning out for a guided tour of Brandon by local historian Leigh Yeager. Leigh has been carrying out research into the history of the town for several years now, and was able to shed much light on the hidden delights of what is often a much derided town.*

Brandon has not been without its problems, not least a disastrous fire in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which swept down the high street and destroyed many of the thatched buildings. Brandon was notable at this time for the number of impressive coaching inns, some of which still survive at the north end of the town, near the bridge. Celebrated inhabitants included the Rought family, who owned one of the rabbit factories in the town and lived in one of the grandest houses, now the Brandon House Hotel. The tour concluded with a visit to Brandon Museum which, despite restricted opening hours, is worth making an effort to see, as it contains fascinating photographs and information about flint-knapping and rabbit warrening, once the mainstays of the town.

Over thirty members attended the Society's nightingale evening on 12 May at Foulton. Two male birds were heard singing only fitfully, a result perhaps of the very cool conditions. 2004 has not been a good year for nightingales locally, with numbers well down on previous years. Although the nightingale has achieved almost iconic status in literature, music etc, it has probably never been a particularly common bird in Britain. We are at the very edge of its range – it is essentially a bird of southern, warmer climes – and it is virtually restricted to England south-east of a line from the Humber to the Severn. Foulton Common is a traditional stronghold, with 25 singing males recorded here in 1980. Sadly, the total is now far fewer, perhaps only 5 or 6 annually. This reduction mirrors the situation nationally, with the population having declined severely since the 1950s. Much of this has been due to habitat loss and the 'tidying-up' of the countryside; the overgrown hedgerows and neglected corners so favoured by nightingales have been largely swept away. Nightingales require dense undergrowth in which to nest: blackthorn and hazel coppice are particularly favoured, and the depredations of muntjac (which remove much of the lower undergrowth storey) have rendered many sites less suitable; the high local muntjac population may help explain why Foulton Common supports fewer nightingales today than in the past. However, a range of other birds was seen on the evening, including close views of barn owl and several roding woodcock.

Thanks go to Catherine and Stephen Parker for their warm hospitality.

## WHAT'S ON

### Forthcoming Society events

There will be no Society events during July and August but please see enclosed flyer from the Wayland Partnership regarding their Wayland Church Tour on 10 July.

#### Friday 17 September

Two performances of the play *Heathland Wisdom*, a joint event with The Brecks Countryside Project. This is an excellent short play and well worth seeing. See *Heathland Celebration* (page 3). 5.30pm and 6.30pm, Brandon Park Heath, parking at Brandon Country Park. Admission free, but please book with James Parry on 01366 328676.

#### Wednesday 6 October

*Peddars Way – A Songline for East Anglia*, a cycle of stories and songs based on the history of the Peddars Way and presented by Hugh Lupton and company, to be performed at the Houghton Centre, South Pickenham (see enclosed flyer).

The Centre is located almost on the Peddars Way, one of the most ancient trackways through East Anglia, used by prehistoric man and adapted by the Romans. This promises to be a fascinating insight into one of the Brecks' most intriguing historical features.

7.30pm. £8 member, £10 non-members, to include glass of wine. Tickets available from Sue Whittle on 01366 328190.

#### mid-November

We are hoping to arrange a talk on Brecks archaeology; see September newsletter for details.

#### Saturday 18 December

A Christmas celebration with Patience Tomlinson and others, a joint event with the Houghton Centre. Details will be given in the next newsletter.

#### The Breckland Society

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