

# Planning in Arundel

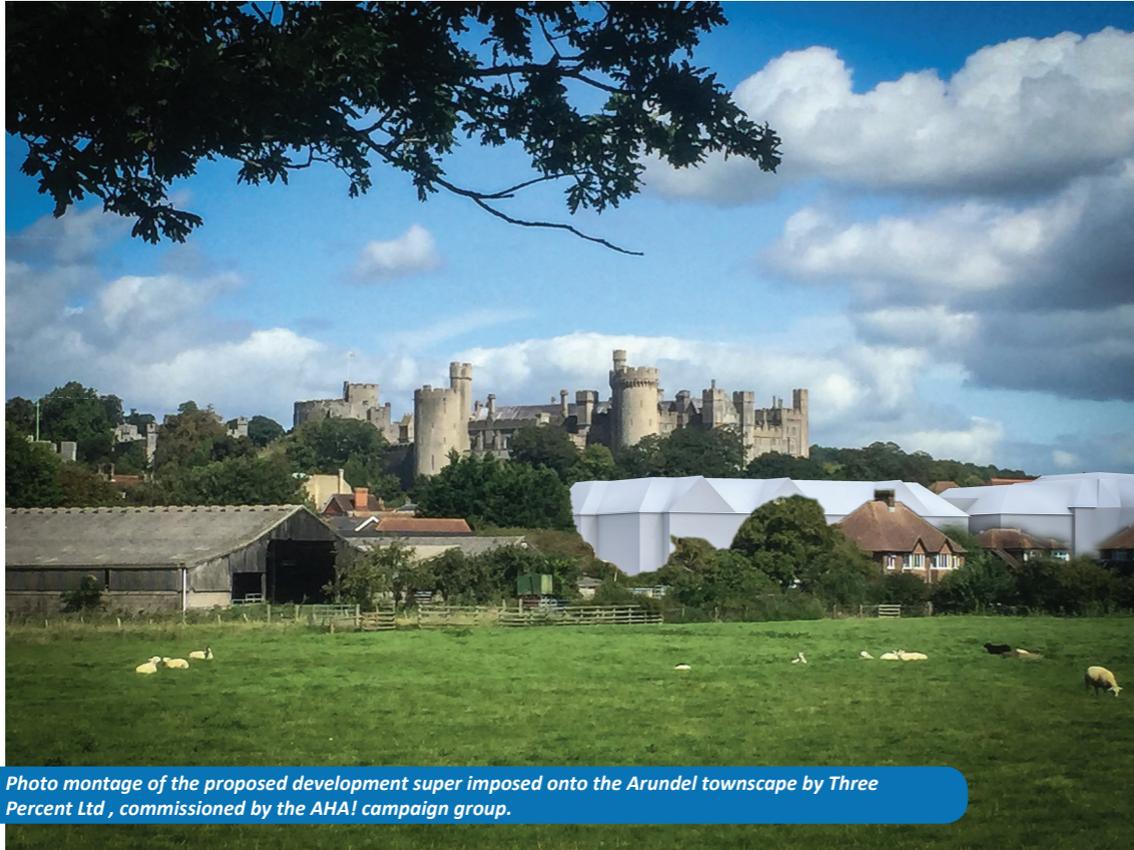


Photo montage of the proposed development super imposed onto the Arundel townscape by Three Percent Ltd, commissioned by the AHA! campaign group.

## *The Bell asked masterplanner Geoff Thorpe for an expert's view on planning issues in Arundel.*

I MUST be getting old. I have just realised that I have lived and worked in and around Arundel for significantly more than half of my life to date. Like most of us, we were originally drawn to the place by accident. In our case, a couple of weekend visits over thirty seven years ago to stay with my wife Jane's brother, David [always known as Mac], who, at that time, owned a butchers shop located in what is currently the Cancer Research Shop in the High Street.

I am an architect and a masterplanner. A masterplanner should not be confused with a planner. Whereas I believe that planning is primarily, albeit not totally, concerned with the interpretation of acknowledged policy and its subsequent policing, masterplanning tends to be a process of often challenging acknowledged policy from the 'ground upwards'. Most, but not all of

us, involved in masterplanning have an architectural background and tend to think in terms of the creation of specific places, inherently dependent upon proactive building and infrastructure design. Masterplanners tend to evolve from an initial involvement in individual buildings or building groups to a controlling involvement in the creation of larger, more complex places or communities. An apt analogy might be that of an orchestral musician becoming the orchestra's conductor. This has certainly been the case with regard to my personal involvement in the process. I started off as an individual architect designing specific buildings and somehow seem to have ended up creating and controlling concepts [masterplanning regimes] for complexes as large as city neighbourhoods, with many other architects producing individual buildings within design parameters of those regimes. Masterplanners as a breed therefore tend to take both a positive and proactive stance towards 'planning issues'. This short article is in response to a kind invitation to give a

commentary, given my background, on a few planning issues, either current or recent, in Arundel and its environs. A dangerous brief, but one which I am happy to accept!

Firstly, I need to explain how I personally understand that the current UK planning system works. There are to me three levels of planning initiatives: national initiatives, local initiatives and individual [singularly or collectively promoted] initiatives – the word 'initiative' covering all specific desires to either change or not to change our existing physical environment.

National initiatives include major infrastructure, roads, railways, new towns and villages. Local initiatives tend to concentrate upon town centres, neighbourhoods and public spaces. Individual initiatives have the greatest range from single buildings, clusters of buildings to substantive elements of proposals normally associated with both local and even national initiatives.

In terms of their public personas, national initiatives usually appear to have 'big brother' unemotional initiators [governmental in one form or another], usually vigorously opposed or even, on occasions, supported by highly motivated emotional groups of local residents or activists of one type or another. Local initiatives are usually initiated and controlled by more localised 'politics'. They are usually in the form of democratically generated policies or local plans. They are usually both well canvassed and well intentioned, but unless supported by a combination of very motivated politicians and a determined supporting administrative infrastructure, they tend to be either modest in terms of initial aspirations or lacklustre in their deliverability.

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We British are, by nature, suspicious of individual aspiration and yet curiously, we also applaud our national characteristics of individualism and innovative contribution to global human development. We can tend towards conformity, 'no heads above the parapet' approach, especially when it comes to planning applications. Individual planning initiatives tend therefore to be of two types: those in the majority who toe the line, blaming the 'planners' for the often

lacklustre physical results of their endeavours, and those in the minority who try to break the mode and as a result are usually somewhat negatively seen as, 'new money', 'the developers', 'the mad architects' etc. Individual initiatives are therefore, by definition, usually the most avidly 'population policed' initiatives.

I've eventually got to it. Having now explained my context as a masterplanner and my language, what about Arundel and its environs? I have a number of initiatives that, having been given the opportunity, I would like to comment upon.

Let's start with the A27 by-pass- an obvious example of a national initiative. Unless cars and trucks are to be nationally banned within the next 10 years, a by-pass must be considered as an absolute necessity. The A27 between west of Chichester and east of Brighton has been a 'running sore' for the past thirty or more years and it needs to be solved quickly. Arundel's bit at least can now be realised and we should not again 'screw up' the opportunity, as has recently happened in Chichester. Albeit that I feel very much for those who live in Binstead, for the greater good, I believe that they should be generously compensated and the most sensible, 5A, route adopted. Big brother and common sense really does know best on this one.

Another national initiative that I feel we did, as a 'resistant community', 'screw up', a few years ago, to our own medium and long term dis-benefit, was the then proposed new eco-village at Ford. The immediate local population were, quite reasonably, vehemently opposed this proposal in a similar manner to the residents of Binstead now. However, taking a more holistic approach, we threw away a 'gift horse'. My own experience in similar government sponsored projects being that they attract sufficient public monies and expertise to create well designed, viable and well serviced communities. The alternative, in response to the undeniable requirement for increasing housing numbers, being the current under managed, mediocrely designed and under infra-structured housing sprawl being added to most of our local communities south of the A27.

Most of 'downtown Arundel' is itself subject to a local initiative, as a conservation area, and actively managed and policed by all levels of publicly elected bodies, the town's residents and the County Conservation Officer in Chichester. In my opinion pretty well managed, albeit sometimes seemingly, a little perversely and in a slightly heavy handed manner by the latter's office. My only criticism, and it's a fairly fundamental one, is an almost total lack of new, well designed architecture. One notable and often forgotten exception is Carlton Terrace in Tarrant Street, constructed a few years ago. These three very well designed, unashamedly modern homes are a true addition to the town's heritage. OK,

so they are mainly hidden by design behind a high street facing, reconstructed stone wall and therefore do not significantly affect the Tarrant Street streetscape, but they are now, and will be in future, an important part of the town's building stock. They provide a good example of an individual initiative, which in my opinion makes a positive contribution. I like to believe that the existence of these houses is the result of a positive management of the conservation area, rather than an initiative that slipped through the net. The new Arundel Museum however, is in my mind, the opposite. A pastiche of a building of little design merit, sat in one of the most important locations in the town. Whilst I applaud those who fought to make the project happen at all, its resultant design is a massive and unforgivable missed opportunity to create a modern, important public building of merit in the centre of the town. I live in hope that we are not missing another chance in the renovation of The Victoria Institute in Tarrant Street.

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We currently have another opportunity consistent with the current adopted Arundel Neighbourhood Plan, to create another major local initiative, located in the Queen Street and eastern Fitzalan Road area. The 'Queen Street Quarter', incorporating what is now the busiest day to day part of the town, centred on the Co-op and its surrounding shops, extending to one of the town's last remaining underused assets, the southern River Arun frontage. Proposals have recently been made for both the old Swallow Brewery building opposite the CO-OP [currently occupied by Gaskyns as a retail unit] and another ex-brewery building in Fitzalan Road [currently occupied by Blastreat as an industrial unit]. Both of these proposals have created significant and, in my opinion, totally justified local opposition. Both seem to suggest inappropriate uses and missed civic opportunities. The indicative physical designs of both are also, to say the least, mediocre. In the face of these clearly inappropriate and geographically related individual initiatives, it is obviously time for the Arundel community to instigate a new dynamic and deliverable local initiative for the area. Dare I say it, a masterplan with the aims for the neighbourhood of managing the

obviously fundable, redevelopment aspirations, whilst using them to ensure the provision of accommodation that the town really needs, including affordable housing for our younger people, all within a newly defined, high quality public infrastructure.

I have one last individual initiative that I feel honour bound to comment upon- the Home Grown Hotels Group plans for a Pig Hotel just to the north of the town, in my home hamlet of Madehurst. There can be little doubt that such a hotel will be a great asset to Arundel and its environs, whilst positively responding to the hamlet's locational value in terms of the accessibility aspirations of the National Park. However this initiative, for a country hotel located centrally in the hamlet, has recently been the subject of considerable angst and animosity amongst Madehurst residents. I personally have been in the minority who favour the proposal on the basis that the changes that it would inevitably bring would enhance, not destroy, the existing community. I personally believe that the existence of this particular hotel would ensure the future sustainability of the community, significantly adding to its activity core. However, in the light of last month's acceptance of an application for a judicial review of the recently approved planning application for the hotel, the whole Madehurst community remains in turmoil. I can only hope that eventually the community both positively and generously accepts its new neighbour. A community that gets its mind around a positive plan for its future as a village, rather than trying to retain what is currently an inaccurate image of itself as a remote and closed, rural idyll. But I would say that, as a positive masterplanner, wouldn't I ?!

### **Geoff Thorpe Profile**

After studying architecture at The Architectural Association School in London, Geoff was heavily involved in the creation by of the new city of Milton Keynes. He moved to Arundel with his wife Jane in the late 1970s and, after a short role as Assistant County Architect for East Sussex, they started their own practice, Thorpe Architecture, based in the town. The practice, with local architect and good friend John Wheatley as the third long serving partner, has been responsible for a large number of major projects in the UK, whilst Geoff personally has been invited for many years to act as masterplanner for a variety of complex projects both nationally and internationally. He continues in this role with the specific aim of not becoming more of a grumpy old man than he currently is!