



DEAL FESTIVAL OF MUSIC
AND THE ARTS LECTURE
'DEAL.... WILL ITS PAST
SHAPE ITS FUTURE?'

Lecture given by Robin Green

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It is May 1947. Britain is in crisis. After the Second World War the country faced massive debts and for the next 60 years was to be in debt to the USA as it became financially dependent. The special relationship was cemented in hard cash. There is also huge controversy about something called the NHS. But in the letters pages of the Times celebrity correspondents were concerned with far weightier matters, not least the future of the town of Deal on the east Kent coast:

‘There is hardly a house in the threatened area which is later than the Nelson period, and the layout of the town, with its picturesque seafront, was admirably planned to give the inhabitants as much protection as possible against the prevailing winds. The fact that Deal has, so far, preserved most of its original character makes it unique among the watering places within easy reach of London. We cannot help feeling that, in planning to destroy its own assets, the local authority is embarking on a scheme which will cause great distress to many residents and regular visitors, besides injuring the interests of those who cater for them.’
(Noel Coward and others)

The issues at stake were a major bomb damaged area and what were described by one further correspondent as ‘rotting damp pig holes’. He was referring to the houses of Beach and Middle Streets! And he continued: ‘We shall not tolerate misery and filth for the preservation of traditional charm.’

Another commented that the Borough Council was ‘trying to make dear little Deal a sort of inferior London by the sea’.

Very little emerged from this first attempt at major development for the town. Hardly anything was constructed but in 1949 44 buildings were granted Grade 2 listed status including Carter House in South St. And Queen Anne House in Middle St. A first attempt at creating the Deal Protection Society had achieved the beginnings of what we now call conservation areas.

It was nearly 20 years later that Deal Borough Council and Kent County Council became serious about large scale development in the town. In 1964 they appointed Sir John Allen, a town planner from Newcastle on Tyne, to prepare a master plan for Deal. New towns were being planned in the hinterland of London. Tower blocks were beginning to change and transform the landscape of London. Deal Borough Council was determined to have some of the action! Sir John Allen writes:

‘Deal has always undergone changes.....brought about by not only altered patterns of employment, but which have introduced fundamental changes into society and social habits.

Two additional features have now been added.....Deal shares with the rest of the civilised world the rapid development and universal use of the motor car.....

The third factor was constantly at the back of one's mind....It is the possibility of building a cross-channel link in the form of a bridge or tunnel.'

Here in the opening pages of the Allen report we discover the critical framework that that has shaped almost every report on the future of Deal. The four inter related and recurring themes are HOUSING: EMPLOYMENT: THE ENVIRONMENT AND FLOODING: TRANSPORT. As we noted in the preface to the Allen report the advent of the motor car was one of the key paradigms shaping the planning response. How strange that sounds to our 21st century environmental ears!

It was not long before Deal reappeared in the letters pages of the Times newspaper. The context has changed. The white heat of technological revolution is being born; the sexual revolution was affecting the media and artistic classes; Britain had been told that it had never had it so good; far more young people were making it into higher education; people were being rehoused out of London into new towns and old towns in several parts of south east England; and the two factors that Andrew Marr in 'The Making of Modern Britain' says shaped modern Britain were both in their infancy, pop music and the consumer society.

That is the context in which this letter appeared in the Times on April 25th 1964:

'On 29 May 1947 you saved the town of Deal from the planners The planners have gathered their forces again for a new onslaught of redevelopment.

.....fascinating period houses will go.....and in their place will arise a monstrous, incongruous collection of public buildings in the modern mode, including on the seafront a post office, a county clinic and the Borough Council offices in a skyscraper.....' (Peter Boulden and others)

Once again a local group of celebrities and civic leaders were challenging the notion that Deal had 'to get with it'! For that was the social context in which many other local leaders saw the Allen plans. The changing pattern of seaside resorts, the growing use of the motor car and increased affluence were seen to be indicators of why the town needed to change. It would be wrong of us in questioning Allen's plans for the town to under estimate the fundamental changes in social attitudes that have changed to character of seaside Britain in the last 50 years.

So before continuing with the historical analysis of what happened in 1964 I want to raise this fundamental question about the past, present and future of this town:

What does Deal need to be and what is to be the nature of that growth?

That is the question that every town plan, every development exercise and every master plan appears NOT to address. I would like to suggest that it is the fundamental question we are faced with today and that without some coherent response to it most plans flounder or fail to materialise.

So back to 1964. By May of that year the Deal Protection society had been reformed and a furious debate ensued in the pages of the East Kent Mercury about the Allen proposals. A Councillor Vernon described the plans as 'the town planning ideas of Old Moscow..a dead lump'. The skyscraper block for Deal Borough Council was Deal's Kremlin! Other councillors protested that nothing had been decided and the whole matter was up for public consultation (a local government cry that is regularly heard whenever far reaching plans are being formulated). A cry was heard from another town planner, Peter Budd:

'People are not sure what they want Deal to become, what the future holds'

And he went on (surprisingly for a town planner) to say that town planning holds no mystique, architects have no monopoly on the truth and a lot of what was being created in 1960's Britain was no better than egg crates!

The controversy raged on throughout 1964 until the Chair of the town council's planning committee declared: 'I don't like the Allen plan and I have never liked it. It would be far more honest to throw it out in its entirety.' And that is more or less what happened 2 months later. The plan was revised radically, Middle Street car park came into being as did a pedestrian precinct between South St. and Queen St. And £4000, John Allen's fee, went down the plughole!

One major outcome, however, appeared in the London Gazette 4 years later: the Middle Street area of Deal would be designated a Conservation area under the Civic Amenities Act of 1967. Kent had its first conservation area!

Report after report followed especially after Dover District Council came into being in 1974: the first was published in 1976; the latest is the Local Development Framework of 2010, a process which is as yet unfinished.

The key characteristic of all those reports is that the analysis remains the same: the road pattern of Deal makes heavy transport a liability and it is the end of the road: it is not the road to anywhere nor is it the road to nowhere! And some people want there to be a road to the great somewhere! There is always an employment problem....first it was the coalmines, then the Marines, now it is Pfizer: and plans for new housing development are drawn up without the fundamental relationship between housing and employment being addressed. The town sits in an environmentally sensitive area with the two mile long seafront being its greatest asset; but that raises issues about global warming and flooding and the town's drainage systems are not fit for purpose in terms of surface flooding.

To date not much has changed with the exercise that Dover District Council initiated in January 2011. A consultancy group GVA was appointed to prepare a master plan for North and Middle Deal:

‘The adopted Core Strategy recognises potential of Deal

- Indicates capacity for 1600 homes by 2026
- Identifies need to enable expansion to accommodate population growth
- Incremental past growth has not recognised key infrastructure issues
- A comprehensive view of community need is developed to ensure town works
- To investigate ability to overcome constraints to deliver on potential’

Once again the same fundamental questions arise. To date their analysis of the constraints that affect development in Deal appear to be much the same as in earlier reports. But they have raised the key question; ‘what does Deal need to be?’

But underlying this is a more fundamental question. The national body, Civic Voice, in a recent survey has uncovered that whilst people value, indeed celebrate, the places where they live they feel an increasing level of powerlessness in the face of local government decision making. This seems to me one of the key differences between 1964 and now. In 1964 they believed that writing a letter to the Times would make a difference. Indeed the writers of the 1964 letter acknowledge that that is what the 1947 letter achieved. The whole nature of media has changed with the advent of blogging and Twitter and all the rest. But there is not the slightest evidence that even that changes the sense of powerlessness vis a vis local government.

The first workshop of the 2011 master plan exercise involved 13 local residents and over 40 ‘experts’. Despite sustained protest there has been no attempt made by DDC to involve the people of Deal. Since March there have been no further workshops and last week the key DDC member of staff sent an e mail saying there were delays and she could tell me nothing for the purposes of this lecture.

So what can we surmise about the future from the past? Well certainly there were no national themes in 1964 like The Big Society and the power of localism. The political context is radically different and in theory should be more conducive to local people shaping the future of this town. There are some elements in the Localism Bill going through parliament that should encourage a far higher degree of neighbourhood planning, a greater respect for historic assets and conservation areas and a radical reshaping of the relationship between the general public and local government. But it will require a massive change of attitude in district council staff if that is ever to become reality.

Secondly we need to apply the lessons of 1964 to the future urban design of this town. The aspiration to build 1600 new homes between now and 2026 will be totally ill conceived unless a new approach is taken to house building. Deal at its heart is a fusion of small communities and local people still derive a lot of their sense of identity from which part of the town they live in. The larger scale housing developments over the last 20 years have been far less successful in integrating the town's neighbourhoods and communities. The developments proposed would only perpetuate that lack of success and exacerbate the multitude of social problems that have already been generated within those developments.

The way forward is to take a much more organic approach to house building encouraging smaller developments that integrate well with existing neighbourhoods. That, equally, needs to be related to a much clearer strategy for employment and the clue to that I suggest is to build on the historic character of the town as a town by the sea rather than a seaside town. Because DDC has no strategy for tourism and stimulating the visitor base it has no strategy for employment. The two are fundamentally linked. At least the 1964 Allen plan recognised that and included elements that would have served that aspiration.

Thirdly we can be Mary Portas's! Recently appointed to advise the national government on the shape of local high streets, she has produced a prototype of what makes a town centre.....a local high street...work. She could have been describing Deal High Street. Small independent shops backed up by a few high street chains with supermarkets located close to the town centre are her model for a vibrant high street. If that is the model is there really any necessity for large ring roads carrying HGV vehicles to service that kind of community. And why would it be necessary to create a large road to the north and the west of the town to stimulate more of that kind of traffic? I have no doubt that we shall soon be faced with yet more controversy about the shape of Deal's town centre with other major supermarkets showing a lively interest in the town.

So that takes me nicely to perhaps the major lesson that we can all learn from 1964. It is simply this. Cynicism gets you nowhere. There is no need to give in to feelings of powerlessness or apathy or depression. Human beings work best when they begin a sentence with the words 'we have a vision that...' They work worst when every sentence begins with the words 'we have a problem that..' That is what the people's master plan for Deal needs to address. What does this town need to be? What do its people want it to be? What is our vision for it in the 21st century? That is why we must retain and develop the right to challenge the bureaucracy of local government. It is our town, not theirs!

For further reading on the historical context: Gertrude Nunns: The Origins of the Deal Society, available from the Deal Society or view on the Society's website www.thedealsociety.org.uk