

Rossendale Civic Trust Response to Conservation Places and People APPG Inquiry: 21st Century Places: values and benefits

Only having become aware of this request for information in the last few days, I apologise for the informality of this response.

It originates from current experience with a bid for Future High Street Funding of Bacup Town Centre Conservation Area by Rossendale Borough Council.

We heard on December 26th that this bid had failed.

Although there were many details of the proposal that were not fully worked up, stakeholders were informed at a group Zoom meeting on Tuesday last week that a major stumbling block in the application was the discrepancy in the cost of refurbishing eleven buildings within the High Street Conservation Area and their value afterwards. Every single one showed a deficit. (We have these figures but are not supposed to share them.)

We were also told that none of these buildings had had any interest from any potential taker, especially after having seen them and their context.

Bacup Town Centre was given Conservation Area status in 1980, when it was designated as 'outstanding' and has since been described as the 'best preserved mill town in England' but this has not stopped its building stock from being neglected, nor has it brought private investment.

In the past thirty years Bacup has had input from English Heritage and Conservation Area schemes, both of which provided for refurbishment of buildings which did not find users, although recently hard-won Townscape Heritage Initiative funding, which proved equally difficult to deliver (building owners were, specially, allowed a 10% contribution rather than the normal 25%), has brought a small corner of the town back into use - for now. Generous though this concession was, some owners did not see fit to participate in the scheme. If discrepancy in value had been a major criteria in these cases, it is doubtful that any of this would have been possible.

The Conservation Area is still considered to be 'At Risk' by Historic England.

Only one of the eleven buildings in the bid is Listed. The rest form much of the traditional fabric of the Conservation Area. These valuations, and the run-down appearance of the town led to the project leaders seeking a 'transformation' as part of their bid, proposing a major new intervention into the centre of the town, which would have been, to say the least, controversial in generally understood heritage and Conservation Area terms. It would have been a departure from, rather than a build on, the heritage values that have previously guided bidding approaches, planning and building alterations (there is an Article 4 Direction in place).

Whether the transformative introduction of a large modern commercial unit would have kick-started an interest in the surrounding existing heritage buildings, or absorbed uses that they could have been put to themselves, will probably now never be known, but two major factors remain for consideration.

1. Should buildings, which in themselves are not special or valuable financially, but

collectively as a heritage unit (Conservation Area) are irreplaceable, be judged on their commercial value only?

2. Should 'transformation', which could cause harm to the character of a Conservation Area (including potential loss of traditional buildings) be favoured over investment in heritage, because the cost of restoring that heritage is deemed to be excessive?

The fact remains that it is the run-down and, now proven, unviable heritage element in the town that is being blamed for its current state, and, its inclusion in the bid, for the failure to be able to 'transform' the High Street.

There has, of course, been the inevitable comment that 'if this town had been in the south this would never have happened' thus adding fuel to the North/South divide, but underpinning this are Conservation and Heritage principles which should know no boundaries.

I offer no solution to this, only to draw to your attention to the fact that whilst heritage is being promoted as a basis for regeneration on the one hand, in practice it is being priced out of the reckoning and blamed for failure, with all the further consequences of unpopularity and neglect that will come from it.

I trust that your debate will take this information on board. Please do not hesitate to get back to me if you need further information.

Yours faithfully,

Kathy Fishwick (Dip. Con. Studies York, Chair, Rossendale Civic Trust)