

# MONTROSE HIGH STREET

## THE HIGH STREET PROBLEM

Montrose has a very fine High Street which, like high streets across the land, is in poor condition. The many fine buildings, dating from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries, are decaying because their owners do not have either motive or wherewithal to repair and maintain them. The people who inhabit the buildings, whether as tenants or owners are mostly in lower socio-economic categories: that is to say, they are poor. Poor people can't and won't spend money on old buildings. If the people who own and live in the High Street were better-off, they would repair and maintain the buildings and ensure that the street was a pleasanter place for everyone.

There are always empty shops in the High Street, despite low rateable values. Few of the people who inhabit or frequent the High Street have substantial disposable incomes; consequently the only shops which survive there are those which sell cheap goods on slender margins. Many of the shops are charity shops, which don't pay rates and whose goods and staff cost nothing. Few tourists visit the High Street – it has little to attract them, given the dilapidated state of its buildings – and there are few public facilities to attract middle-class local people, so those shops which inhabit the street must seek their subsistence from residents who are mostly poor.

Over the last few decades there have been several initiatives which have suggested ways to improve things. All these initiatives have been predicated on the expenditure of public money and therefore have failed, for little public money has been available. There is no prospect that the future will be much different: capital investment by Government will be hard to justify, especially if its consequence will be an ongoing commitment to revenue expenditure to maintain the result.

There is no prospect of significant private investment in the High Street, for the very good reason that there is no likelihood of such investment producing an acceptable return. The only works in recent times have been small-scale property developments which divide larger buildings into relatively low-value flats.

At governmental level, there appears to be a complete absence of strategic thinking about how to change things for the better. So what do we do?

How do we change the underlying economic situation so that the High Street becomes more prosperous? There are three possibilities:

- (1) make people who already live there better-off
- (2) get better-off people to live there
- (3) get people who have money to spend to go there to spend it

If by governmental (or any other) action we could effect any one of the above, things would improve. Ideally all of them, for each will interact positively with the others. For example, if (2) were to happen, more money would be spent in High Street shops; better shops would be attracted to the street, thus causing (1) and, with the upgrading of the environment which better-off people would demand and get, (3) would be realised. The causation also works in the other directions but this is the most obvious and (possibly) realisable effect.

## THE IDEA

What follows may seem slightly far-fetched but similar things have been done elsewhere and there is reason to believe that it would work for Montrose. At root, the idea is to use access to transport to effect social and economic change.

-----

Like everyone else, the people of Montrose are going to have to accept restrictions on the use of fossil-fuelled personal transport as governments address global warming. As far as can be seen at present, that means that cars are going to have to be battery-powered. (Fuel cells and hydrogen power are possible but the present consensus is that personal transport by individual car is likely to be battery-powered.) Battery-powered cars require charging points and most people will want to have a point adjacent to their home. This is not a problem for folk who live in the suburbs but it will be difficult for Montrose to provide High Street residents with convenient points and impossible to provide enough for early-evening charging. If that happens, Montrose High Street will become even less-appealing to middle-class residents and the condition of the street will deteriorate even further. Government will be faced with the equally unattractive alternatives of allowing it to do so or spending public money with no realistic hope of a return.

There is a second, transport-related consideration as regards the social condition of the high Street. That is, the lack of parking spaces at present for people resident in and around the High Street. Difficulty of parking (real or perceived) is a disincentive to middle-class buyers of property. If more and better parking could be provided, even without any further incentive, property in the High Street would become more desirable. Restrictions on fossil-fuelled cars would act as a multiplier of this factor.

The **Idea** is to create close and convenient car parking for at least one car for each apartment in the High Street; to provide each bay with a metered charging point; to make occupancy of each bay available only to the owner-occupier of a High Street property; to make that occupancy legally inalienable from ownership of the property. If this were done, owner-occupancy of High street properties would become more attractive to middle-class people. With a change – even a partial change- in the socio-economic position of owner-occupiers, historic buildings would be maintained and improved; street facilities improved; shops raised from the present low level; a better environment provided for everyone. Poorer people as well as better-off would benefit; and who knows, we might even attract tourists to come and spend money in the town. With a well-maintained and handsome High

Street, the values of adjacent properties would rise and they too would be upgraded, to everyone's benefit.

-----

How is this to be achieved? Land suitable for parking exists: it is the piece of long-disused former railway sidings to the south of the present railway station. Cars parked on that land would be within a few hundred metres of all High Street residences. Obviously, a multi-storey car park would be needed, but it need not be more than two or three storeys high. It could include public, metered bays as well as those allocated to High Street residents.

The allocation of parking bays to High Street residences could be made in one of several ways. From the point of view of the socio-economic engineering implicit in the scheme, the ideal would be to simply give each bay as a title inalienable from the property. The effect on High Street property values would be immediate – indeed it would happen as soon as the scheme was mooted, let alone implemented. Sale and lease are possible options but, though these would be attractive in many ways, they should be resisted in the interest of the more ambitious scheme.

The provision of the car park envisaged here could well be combined with a bus station and an upgraded railway station, to provide a transport hub for Montrose fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If that were done, it would be simple to create a covered walkway up Hume Street to the town centre: a much-needed gateway to a fine town.

This paper does not seek to address the many issues of finance and ownership. Given the will, all of these are realisable. The point here is the Idea: as far as I know, there are no others which would address most of the High Street's problems. The cost would be substantial but at least in part offset by higher rateable values and taxes from more prosperous shops and facilities. And future generations would thank us for it, as we thank George Scott for the mid-links.

Phillip Hills

14 April 2020.