Conservation in Romsey

Romsey is one of the most important historic towns in the south of England. Its long and distinguished history is reflected in its ancient street pattern and old buildings. The town is small by today's standards but it has long been a prosperous trading centre, probably since the foundation of the Abbey in 902 AD. The origins of Romsey were formerly thought to date from this period or slightly earlier, but excavations in the Narrow Lane area of the town have revealed the existence of a Roman settlement, possibly a military encampment.

The Doomsday survey of 1085 records that Romsey had three mills on the Test and as the local wool-spinning industry developed, these rapidly increased in number. The present Market Place and Cornmarket once formed a single, much larger, open space; the Corn Exchange and Town Hall were introduced in the nineteenth century. The Market Place remains the social and commercial centre of the town, with the old streets of The Hundred, Church Street and Bell Street leading out of it in three corners.

Conservation Area

Of particular note is the Market Place, where several of the elegant eighteenth century brick façades behind earlier timber-framed structures. These are complemented by prominent street-end buildings, such as the Corn Exchange and the Dolphin Hotel. Elsewhere in the town are more intimate groups of smaller houses, such as those in Princes Street, Cherville Street and most notably, Middlebridge Street where vistas are enclosed in a series of gentle curves.

The Conservation Area

Since 1987 local planning authorities have designated as ‘conservation areas’ those areas of "...special architectural or historic amenity, the character and appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance...".

The heart of Romsey became a conservation area in 1970 and the boundary has latterly been extended to include most of the central area. Designation of the conservation area does not mean that no new development is permitted within its boundary or that its preservation can be considered in isolation from the future needs of people, commerce and industry. It does however ensure that claims for the retention of the historic character of the town are fully represented when changes are proposed. The Romsey Town Centre Local Plan takes account of the conservation area, and includes policies to assist the protection and enhancement of the town.

Legal Implications

In addition to the obligations for the local authority to formulate and publish proposals for the conservation area, there are also implications for the individual property owner:

(1) Demolition of buildings
Anyone intending to demolish a building or part of a building in the conservation area, whether listed or not, must first apply for consent from the Borough Council. The only exceptions are certain small or temporary buildings.

(2) Listed buildings
Anyone intending to carry out work on a listed building in such a way that might alter its character, internally or externally, must apply to the Borough Council for ‘listed building consent’. This would include such works as external redecoration, re-roofing and the alterations of doors and windows, as well as structural changes.

(3) Tree felling
Anyone intending to top, lop, uproot or fell a tree in the conservation area must give the Borough Council six weeks notice of their intention.

Further Information

Full details of these and other grants are available from the Planning Department, Test Valley Borough Council, Duttons Road, Romsey (Telephone: Romsey 51117).

J. B. Pybus, DipTP., MRTPI.,
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Financial Assistance

The upkeep of historic buildings is an important responsibility for owners, and because of this a wide range of grants is available for building repairs. The major sources are summarised below:

(1) Section 10 grants
Financial assistance is available from the Secretary of State for the Environment under Section 10 of the Town and Country Planning (Amendment) Act 1972 for works that will make a significant contribution towards preserving or enhancing a conservation area. These Section 10 grants are available for the restoration and repair of buildings and in special cases, projects such as landscaping or the removal of eyesores.

(2) Romsey Town Scheme grants
A special partnership exists in Romsey between the Department of the Environment, Hampshire County Council and Test Valley Borough Council whereby grants are available for up to half the cost of repairs to selected historical buildings in the conservation area. The eligible properties have been agreed by the three authorities and are scheduled in a leaflet available from the Borough Council; not all are listed buildings, but all make an important contribution to the character of the conservation area.

(3) Environmental Enhancement grants
The Borough Council and Hampshire County Council have funds for environmental enhancement purposes, which may be initiated by parish councils, voluntary groups or individuals. Such work is not limited to conservation areas, but projects within the centre of Romsey are certainly encouraged. Suitable works include tree and shrub planting, the removal of eyecorers, provision of paving and street furniture and clearance of waterways and footpaths.