

## **Notes from Helen Johns and Tony Long in preparation for item on Midsomer Plaques at meeting of Thame Town Council on 18<sup>th</sup> June**

These notes are split into two sections - one relating to the recent decision by SODC to refuse permission for the plaques, the other relating to the Town Clerk's recommendations on whether to appeal or not.

### **SODC Planning Committee Decision**

We believe the argument on which the refusal was based is flawed and does not stand up to scrutiny. It states, '...the proposed plaques would result in harm to the historic and architectural interests of the individual listed buildings, by identifying the importance of the buildings as *belonging to a fictional person or place*'. We do not think the plaques identify the buildings as belonging to a fictional person or place, nor do they 'draw historic attention away' from them.

On the contrary, the fictional theme serves as a gateway to the history of each building, focusing attention on each building in its own right. People come to see the *real-life buildings* where filming took place – it's all about the buildings. Having been used as filming locations, they are the stars. The plaques are far from being a 'convenience/support to existing collateral' (in the Town Clerk's words).

Amongst comments received from tour participants, one wrote thanking us for pointing out a 16<sup>th</sup> century ceiling at the Swan Hotel which he had been unaware of. Another wrote from Perth, Australia, to say he was well aware Midsomer isn't real, but believed the plaques would be a huge boost for the town and *its historical significance*. Due to the TV series, he said, they had discovered lovely places they would otherwise have missed.

As such, we believe the plaques contribute towards 'optimum viable use' of the buildings, 'sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets', as stated in the National Planning Policy Framework guidelines.

The planning decision also states, '... less than substantial harm ... was not outweighed by public benefit'. We believe the public benefit is evident, as the plaques will add a dimension to the vibrancy and vitality of the town –

- Especially in the light of recent reports of High Street woes and retail closures, it is vital to attract and keep attracting visitors to Thame, both locally and from farther away. The plaques, as landmark features highlighting exceptional buildings, assist in this process.
- Enhancing the visitor experience in as many ways as possible will encourage visitors to linger and then tell friends about their experiences. The plaques enhance visitor engagement by adding focal points that assist the sightseeing voyage around the town centre.
- While they are in Thame, visitors spend in cafes, pubs, shops, hotels and restaurants, contributing to the local economy. The plaques assist, not only by attracting Midsomer devotees, but also by enhancing buildings of interest and helping increase dwell-time in the town.

To say (as one SODC councillor did) 'Thame is already doing well, so why do more?' is, in our view, complacent. There should be continual focus on adding to the visitor experience, otherwise Thame may fall behind other towns competing for the tourist pound and lose economic benefit.

We don't agree that Midsomer plaques 'devalue the blue plaques...' by showing 'transitory characters'. As part of the tour commentary, buildings bearing blue plaques are pointed out just as Midsomer locations are, and people don't feel the blue plaques

are undermined because Midsomer plaques commemorate fiction. Blue plaques themselves often commemorate 'transitory' events (Fothergill's ten years at the Spread Eagle is transitory in the context of its several centuries of history; W B Yeats spent just three months at the Thame house where he is commemorated) as well as people who are famous *because* they wrote fiction.

We also contest the view that the Midsomer plaques would set a precedent, opening the floodgates to a proliferation of TV-related plaques. Firstly, how many TV series are there with such longevity (22 years so far), such large viewing figures (6.5 million per show) or such global reach (over one billion have viewed)? Very, very few. How many relate to our area? Even fewer. Secondly, the council can set its own rules on eligibility, restricting 'all-comers'.

### **Town Clerk's Recommendations**

Thame Town Council has been in favour of the Midsomer Plaques project from the word go and given overwhelming support throughout. Having declared its aim, we believe the Town Council should see the project through to its conclusion by supporting an appeal.

Strengthening the case for an appeal, we agree no further financial resource is required, only time – and most of that will be spent by us rather than TTC. In addition, as GH says, there are separate commercial interests - economic benefits - if we win the appeal and the plaques are placed on selected buildings.

We don't agree that an independent planning inspector would necessarily back the views of district council planners – otherwise what's the point of going to appeal if it's just a 'birds of a feather flock together' scenario? The point is that there will be neutral, independent scrutiny. Although GH says, 'only one in three appeals succeed', ours could be that one, and we will accept the outcome.

We don't see why the plaques would set the battle-lines between SODC and TTC or have an effect on their relationship. This is a minute issue compared to much more important cases involving developers etc. During discussions with SODC, there was evidence of personal empathy and interest at a senior level within the planning department and our Design & Access Statement was admired. Other departments within SODC - the economic development team and the property department - stated that they were in favour of the plaques.

The alternative suggestion of stickers was explored and reported on as not preferred by the building owners in the Design & Access Statement: some venues have no windows or no visibility, and stickers were considered to look cheap compared to plaques. They would, therefore, do far more 'reputational damage' to the buildings and their historical significance than the more tasteful plaques. In addition, exploring stickers represents new work to be undertaken by us, whereas work on the plaques is complete.

### **Our Recommendations**

The Town Clerk lists several arguments against an appeal, many of which are of a minor or technical nature. His four arguments in favour of making an appeal – the council's declared aim; the minimal effort required; no further resource needed; the commercial benefit - in our view, far outweigh those minor points.

The public benefit, in terms of focusing interest on Thame, its historic heritage, and the economic advantages that increased profile and footfall will bring, totally outweigh any perceived 'harm' the plaques might be seen to cause.

We recommend the council supports an appeal.