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# THE WYE CONFERENCE

Nineteenth Annual Conference of Amenity Societies & Local Authorities

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## KENT IN THE 21st CENTURY

KEN WRAIGHT

THE nineteenth annual conference of Local Government and Amenity Societies, once again under the chairmanship of our own Jack Woolford, was held at Withersdane Hall, Wye College on the 14th and 15th September 1991. The turnout from Amenity Societies was regrettably low, but, those who did attend were treated to excellent presentations on the theme of "*Towards 2000 — Kent in the 21st Century.*"

Proceedings opened with a session on "Controlled Growth and Protection" from Richard Alderton, Assistant Planning Officer, Ashford Borough Council. He drew attention to the problems of managing change in a growth town such as Ashford, in particular the need for openness within the planning process so that all interests, from landowners to local pressure groups, could receive a balanced hearing. Stressing the necessity for compromise between local authorities and interested parties such as developers and retailers (who had at least as much influence on the final decisions as the council itself), he pointed to the re-vitalisation of Ashford town centre, through new Conservation Areas and park-and-ride schemes; and the proposed introduction of a pioneering policy for affordable housing on new sites, as examples of what could be achieved. Mr Addleton's presentation also formed the basis of the regular Saturday afternoon tour, which visited development sites around Ashford.

A note of caution was sounded by the next speaker, Col. John Talbot from the East Ashford Rural Trust. In response to Mr Addleton's rosy view of Ashford's future, the EART was sceptical whether the envisaged influx of jobs would occur, thus negating the need for the large-scale housing programme (a viewpoint later supported by the latest Kent Impact Study). The Trust also expressed concern at the detrimental effect on the town centre of new out-of-town shopping centres, forcing shops and pubs to move from the centre for lack of business. If this process continued, Col. Talbot feared the centre would become a "graffiti land" at night, a fear shared by many Dovorians.

The final session of the morning was devoted to the Channel Tunnel Rail Link with Chris Waite, Chief Development Planner, KCC, outlining the damaging delays caused by indecision over the route and lack of funding for the Ashford International Passenger Station (both issues clarified by subsequent developments). The KCC was pressing for six major priorities, the best possible national and international services; the maximum possible rail freight; the best station strategy; the minimum environmental impact, the best possible network links to the rest of the country. The KCC was also pushing for rapid introduction of new commuter trains to share the link with international services after 1993.

The Conference returned from its tour of Ashford to a presentation by Jonathan Carey, DIP.L. ARCH, RIBA, on the conservation of Kent buildings. Using an extensive collection

of slides, he illustrated the danger of 'conserving' through period reconstruction of buildings such as a typical Kentish country house. He urged amenity societies to oppose attempts to "restore" buildings to possibly imaginary layouts, and, at the same time to protect Kent's heritage through statutory controls, loving ownership and education. Societies had a duty to advise on the repair of old buildings in order to save them from possibly well-intentioned but misguided alterations. Even blackmail was a useful tool in such circumstances!

Saturday ended with a spot of "crystal gazing" from Arthur Percival, MBE, D.LITT, FSA, from the Civic Trust Community Enterprise Unit who, like John Butler, (whose address on the Future of Local Government is reported elsewhere in the journal), feared lest the disappearance of County Councils permitted District Councils to accept limitless development without reference to local opinion or consultation with amenity societies. He thought the existing three-tier system worked well as compared with obscure boards and unelected joint committees. District Councils were already too big and remote and party politics should be irrelevant. Local government was a service, not a business. Parish or urban community councils were most desirable.

In impending local government changes the main criteria should be:-

1. 'Everyday' services sensitive and responsive to local needs.
2. Offices and staff easily and cheaply accessible to those without cars
3. Adequate freedom and resources to attract competent representatives and staff.

Developers should not be able to blackmail Planning Officers into unwanted developments. Permission should be required for cessation of use as well as for its authorisation. Prosperous, productive, quality-conscious and innovative companies were the nation's life-blood, but they owed a duty to the community of which they formed a part. Local amenity societies had had a major and most beneficial impact. Without them Kent would have degenerated since the War into a dreary suburban morass of ugliness.

The goal was to see the community as we saw our homes, as something which was ours for two or three generations and for which we could be as ready to shell out as for holidays or expensive meals. We should concentrate on working together pragmatically for the good of all.

Sunday morning began with a cautionary tale from Julie Stillwell of the Collier Street Residents' Association, set up to try to combat the ever-increasing number of families who are living in mobile homes on small tracts of farmland, thus avoiding planning restrictions. She warned that Kent was attracting increasing numbers of such people so that what seemed at present to be merely a local problem would rapidly spread throughout the county without firm community and local authority action.

The rest of Sunday morning was devoted to a discussion on the reconciliation of conservation and that symbol of modern rural England, the golf course. Speaking in favour of the golfers, Michael Bayer, a landscape designer, used examples of courses designed by his company to illustrate that not only were the concepts not inevitably incompatible, but that those courses which took most account of the existing environment were the most likely to gain planning permission from increasingly reluctant local authorities and become financially successful.

Countering these assertions, R.G. W. Smith, Chairman of the London Green Belt Council, noted that although golf courses claim to be another type of landscape, they serve a leisure industry which is not tied to the land, but to profit. Courses which proved to be surplus would not be restored to the land but would be further developed into leisure centres, if not housing, thus losing for ever the natural characteristics which course builders claim to be protecting. Golf enthusiasts are demanding a doubling in the number of courses by the end of the decade — Mr Smith reminded the conference that this demand would have to be met from natural resources, with little chance of any secure return for the environment.

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*Report of John Butler's Address to the 19th Annual Conference*

## *The Future of Local Government*

JACK WOOLFORD

Like Dr Percival, John Butler said that he was suggesting only a possible scenario for the future of local government. The 1980s had been very eventful with major local government legislation every year. It was currently said that only two or three people in the country now understood the grant system and rumoured that none of them were currently employed by the government.

Although we should always need some form of local administration since Whitehall was unlikely (yet!) to organise dustbin collection, in the light of what had happened in the last ten to fifteen years, it could be asked if multi-functional elected authorities of local individuals, responsible and responsive to local demands, needs and wishes and financed by local taxation, as we had known (and loved?) them, had any future at all. In retrospect the turning point had been signalled by the alleged, infamous remark by the late Tony Crosland, addressing a local government conference in 1974/5, that "the party is over".

In the period of economic contraction since the mid-70s there had been increasing centralisation, increasing governmental control of the public sector because it was, allegedly, grabbing more than its fair share of national resources through wasteful overspending, which had caused excessive rises of rates, destroyed local businesses and thus generated unemployment. Granted that local autonomy could never be complete because some local services, like the police, were really national and therefore required central control, and granted, too, that reasonably common standards of service were expected and that only central government could prevent falling standards, local government had become unrecognisable from what it had been fifty years ago.

In fact it was not true that local rates had been a significant problem for local businesses: much less so, in fact, than the recent revaluation for the Unified Business Rate. Nor were