

LIVING OVER THE SHOP

LIN CLACKETT

The under-use of town-centre buildings seems to have emerged as an issue after a report by the Ministry of Housing in 1986. It took twelve years, until 1978, for a specific report to be commissioned and after yet another twelve years the 'Living Over the Shop' project was set up by Ann Petherick, based at York University and funded by a private Memorial Trust. Hopefully, this initiative will halt the decay of many of our urban buildings and breathe new life into our town centres.

The problem of empty floors above shops seems to affect every town centre. Our own town has the added problem of tall late-Victorian buildings, most with four or five stories above the shops.

Gone are the days when shopkeepers or workers lived above the premises, and more efficient stock control by "multiple" stores means that less storage space is needed.

The reluctance of property owners to rent accommodation was exacerbated by the old legislation, but the 1988 Housing Act now enables a landlord to offer a fixed term tenancy. However, the costs of renovating and converting the upper floors of a building to meet modern standards can easily outweigh the returns available from the rent.

The 'Living Over The Shop' project enables property owners to obtain grants of up to 75% of the conversion costs. Housing Associations are also being encouraged to use the scheme to provide cheap accommodation, leasing the upper floors from the owner.

I contacted our own council who are participating in the scheme and we must hope that they publicise this fact to local property owners. However, after speaking to several property owners in the town centre I found that none had heard of the scheme. The local grants officer also explained that this scheme is not available for owners wishing to live above their own premises, which is a shame, for it is increasingly difficult for a small business man (or woman !) to afford a shop and a separate home. Perhaps if the grants were to include occupying owners more of the small shops in areas such as our own London Road could be improved.

If owners are made aware of this project and the possible grants available, perhaps we can halt the decline of our fine old buildings, provide much-needed accommodation and make our town centres brighter and safer places at night.