

FARNHAM COMMUNITY PLAY RESEARCH

Some thoughts –

The play should reflect the nature of present-day Farnham and how it has arisen from its history and how its future will be. Once the home of the very first motor cars, traffic is now threatening to suffocate the very life and trade of the town, coming and going along its East, South and West Streets and to the north along Castle St. towards the motorway.

Farnham is currently a dormitory area for commuters and for retirement. The population is heavily weighted towards the middle aged and elderly and there is a lot of wealth in the surrounding settlements to the south, which were built up after the coming of the railway.

The town has a fine heritage of architecture with the Castle, St. Andrews Church, Medieval and Georgian buildings in the centre. The local amenity society successfully managed to preserve the centre throughout the last century, but failed to prevent the ugly Woolmead buildings in the 1960s in East Street and has failed to protect East Street from further unwanted development in the Brightwells area of East Street.

Arts and crafts have thrived in Farnham, potteries and art schools have flourished and today the town hosts the University of the Creative Arts. Farnham Maltings, saved in the 1960s by the community is now a regional centre for the Arts. We have a history of theatre, first with the tiny Castle Theatre then the nationally renowned Redgrave. As with Farnham Maltings, the people of Farnham raised the money for these buildings, but sadly now the theatre is scheduled to be sacrificed in the East Street re-development.

Farnham's most famous son was William Cobbett was born and buried here, but his pre-socialist thinking and fight for the poor and the working man has been largely ignored by well-to-do Farnham. He came to fame in an age when the town's wealth was developed from the hop trade. Farnham's hops were of superior quality and were favoured for the production of India Pale Ale, which was exported across the world. However, despite the rich hop merchants and their beautiful houses in the town centre, the hop trade eventually was the cause of disorder in the town. Pubs proliferated, especially to the east where they served the soldiery from Aldershot and the itinerant hop pickers. Drunkenness was rife.

Farnham is 'posh!' The middle classes with pretensions now dominate. The population is wealthier and better educated than most towns in England, but there are pockets of deprivation in the surrounding council estates – and particularly the Sandy Hill estate on the eastern border with Hampshire. Aldershot military town is only 2 miles to the east from Farnham town centre and most of Farnham does not want to know that it is there. To live on the wrong side of the park is to live on the east side – South Farnham is the preferred destination for house-hunters.

When I arrived in Farnham in the 1960s from the midlands I was immediately struck by the class divide. Social life here was so very formal – no one 'dropped in' to see friends and appointments had to be made first and every visit returned. Shop assistants would not look you in the eye and never engaged in conversation with customers as in the north. It was quite a culture shock! Life in the 21st century may be a little more relaxed, but not much. What you have and what you own seem to be more important than actually who you are.

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