

Wincheap -
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a vision
a vision
for the new
for the new
millennium
millennium

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What's wrong with Wincheap?

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Everyone in Canterbury and the surrounding areas agrees that Wincheap is a traffic nightmare. For the people who live there, it is a constant loud presence and a threat to health and life; for the people passing through, it is a daily irritant and source of stress. Wincheap is considered by many to be a place where no one in their right mind would want to live, and new developments still in the pipeline can only exacerbate its already strained infrastructure and its dangerously high levels of pollution. Local businesses close on a regular basis and a number of Wincheap's shops have now been converted into housing.

Yet Wincheap is also an area of great charm – an ancient suburb dating back at least to the 13th century, with many buildings of historical and architectural interest, and a local economy that still manages to boast many unique, high-quality small businesses.

The Wincheap Society is not prepared to sit back and watch the erosion of our quality of life and, having tried unsuccessfully to roll back the tide of edge-of-town retail developments, is now working on a more proactive agenda to rescue Wincheap from its current malaise and restore it to being a real village community and a pleasant place to live.

The key to this plan is to realize the potential of two distinct sites: first Wincheap village itself, and second the largely moribund Wincheap Industrial Estate. Central to our vision is the idea that the main A28 should be re-routed through the Estate. This would not only solve Wincheap's traffic problems at a stroke, it would also revitalize the Industrial Estate as an area of significant economic activity and bring some sanity back to Wincheap. This document outlines a possible strategy for achieving these goals.

Wincheap today

Wincheap today

A brief historical tour

Wincheap has been described by local historian Paul Crampton as “an architecturally fascinating thoroughfare”. It has been an established suburb of Canterbury since the 13th century and at its wider part used to support a thriving market. Its name is derived from the Saxon “Wenchiappe”, which was possibly an ancient wine market or perhaps a waggon market. A timber market is also known to have existed, and an annual cherry fair was held on Wincheap Green (now the Wincheap roundabout) until the early 19th century. Much earlier, Wincheap was used by the Romans as a route to the iron workings of the Weald. There are a number of Roman cemeteries in the area around what was Wincheap Gate and the Gordon Road area.

Architecture

Wincheap still boasts many fine examples of architecture from the 15th century onwards. These include:

- Pubs: The Maiden’s Head was a Wealden Hall and also incorporates the remains of a 16th century market hall, while The King’s Head is an outstanding 15th century timber-framed building
- Restaurants and hotels: The Jalsha Restaurant at 74 Wincheap is a fine example of a 17th century double fronted house with a panelled door and carved corbells. Further out, the Thanington Hotel with its large garden opposite (now Wincheap swings) is a testament to Wincheap’s prosperity in the 18th century
- Residential buildings: Wincheap has a wonderful variety of architectural styles from many different eras, including 15th century timber-framed buildings, 17th, 18th, and 19th century terraces, and some fine town houses. In the 1960s houses were built to fill the gaps made by bomb damage and the closure of the railway
- Terraced housing: Paul Crampton points out that many old terraced houses in the main part of the city succumbed to bulldozers in the early postwar years, and he notes that Wincheap - by contrast - largely escaped this fate, and thus retains interesting examples of terraced housing from the late 17th century onwards which have been lost elsewhere

Wincheap as thoroughfare

In addition to its residential, business, and trading functions, Wincheap has since ancient times been a major thoroughfare – probably originating as an ancient trackway alongside the floodplain of the River Stour. It has always been thought of as a busy road: older residents remember complaints about the charabancs of trippers going to Margate in the summer, while others recall the bellowing of the cows from Chartham being driven to market (and not in motorized vehicles) – twice a week. But congestion is all relative: many not-so-old residents can still remember playing in the street as children, and even fairly recently one could see people washing their cars in the street at weekends - a practice that would now require nerves of steel and suicidal tendencies. Over the past ten years or so, Wincheap has become incapable of sustaining its function as a thoroughfare – residents now complain of their front rooms being plunged into darkness by massive container trucks in tailbacks outside their windows; it is impossible to cross the road at almost any time without using one of the signalled crossings; and unimaginable damage is being done to Wincheap's older buildings by a lethal combination of traffic-induced pollution and vibration.

Recent developments

The building of the Park and Ride and the Safeways shopping complex has done nothing to alleviate these problems. As an attempt at traffic management *thirty-two* new traffic lights were erected at the A2 intersection at the end of Wincheap, but this has merely exacerbated a traffic system already on the verge of collapse. There are now major traffic jams at all times of day, including now on Sundays. By July 1997 – notwithstanding the Park and Ride development - daytime traffic figures in Wincheap (7am-7pm) had reached an all-time high of 18,824 - an average of one vehicle every 2.27seconds. Figures continue to climb relentlessly.

Pollution levels are of course dangerously high, though the data here is unreliable: the Council's environmental department has admitted that the pollution monitoring equipment in Wincheap was recently recalibrated by the manufacturers, following a series of suspiciously low readings. Following this recalibration, readings have now *more than doubled*. Wincheap's pollution is now revealed to approach the levels in Broad Street – despite the fact that the Wincheap monitoring equipment is sited over 10 metres back from the road, behind a low wall and screened by trees in summer! Noise levels are too high for people to stop and talk to one another in the street, while the structural degradation caused by incessant vibration can only be guessed at.

And in the pipeline ...

Traffic has still not reached its peak: in the pipeline is yet another retail development at what used to be the Thanington Pumping Station – a 3750 square metre Homebase store, with car parks and inevitable add-on development. Traffic going to and from this site will be “managed” by a further set of traffic lights, and this same junction will also service a housing development of up to 180 dwellings, which is shortly to be built on the old hop gardens between Hollow Lane and the motorway. Sustainable development? We think not.

Is there a solution? Is there a solution?

To local residents, it has been blindingly obvious for years that the status quo – that is, simply allowing traffic volumes to rise inexorably, and hoping for the best – is not a viable option. What is needed now is an end to the hand-wringing excuses that "it will all cost too much", and a new determination to address this issue in a radical and imaginative way.

Just yards away from Wincheap, the so-called Industrial Estate – in reality a failing retail park – is blighted by low occupancy rates and continual closures. Recent businesses that have moved out include Seeboard and Comet – victims no doubt of the opening of rival outlets in other edge-of-town locations. But along with its boarded-up lots, the Industrial Estate boasts long, straight, and almost entirely traffic-free roads.

It simply makes no economic or environmental sense for this large plot – strategically located within minutes of the city centre, the East Station, the A2 and the main road to Ashford International Station – to continue in this semi-derelict state, while the adjacent Wincheap road is steadily destroyed by traffic. The solution to this problem involves a redefinition of these two areas.

Reroute the A28

Central to any change must be the re-routing of the A28. Visitors to France will be familiar with a traffic-management approach by which vehicles approaching a city are routinely diverted through "zones industrielles": these areas have the dual benefit of providing a busy, vibrant commercial and cultural centre on the edge of the city, while preserving historic residential areas from the ravages of trunk-road traffic. The Wincheap Industrial Estate is ideal for such a use, and – as our two maps show - much of the necessary infrastructure is already in place.

Possible routes

From the A28/A2 junction, the main road would follow a route around the back of Safeway and into Cotton Road. From here a clear, straight thoroughfare goes all almost the way to the railway embankment. The missing link - and the key to making this plan viable - is an extension of Cotton Road that would take the road under the railway to join the Rheims Way. Alternatively, the route could join up with Maynard Road – the central road of the Industrial Estate – to form a wide, tree-lined boulevard, dividing at the city end to take traffic to and from the ring road. The new A28 would thus form an unbroken link between the Safeways/Riverside area, the redeveloped Wincheap Estate, and the already-approved new retail warehouse next to Telephone House. These are, of course, just initial suggestions, and there are no doubt complex engineering issues to be resolved by people better qualified than we are.

One point perhaps needs stressing here. The idea of a one-way system – with city-bound traffic routed through the estate and outward traffic using Wincheap – is very definitely not an acceptable option . This might have some commercial attractions, but it would do little or nothing to resolve Wincheap's problems, and by doubling the capacity of the A28 it would inevitably attract yet more traffic onto the road. Any such initiative would certainly be opposed by The Wincheap Society.

But who will pay for it?

This is not a trivial undertaking, and the engineering costs of the vital road link would be substantial. One possible solution is that the Industrial Estate could be sold en bloc to a single large developer, with funding for the new road as a required part of the deal. We should not forget that this is a *very* large piece of real estate in an extremely desirable location. Recent major developments in this area (the Safeway and Riverside sites) were completed without one iota of planning gain accruing to the local community or to Canterbury as a whole. We *must not* allow such an opportunity to be squandered a second time. Other sources of finance - such as European regeneration funds - might also be available.

Wincheap Estate – from liability to asset

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The Industrial Estate represents a major asset to Canterbury, and its potential has hardly begun to be exploited. It has the unique advantages of being close to the city centre, close to the rail head, the park and ride and the main road to the Channel Tunnel. It is a spacious area with the added advantage of being a brownfield site which is mostly owned by the City Council, which means it can be sold to a single farsighted developer. With a little imagination, this retail wilderness could become a development for Canterbury to be proud of.

We have no prescriptive ideas for what the Estate should be used for - though it is surely obvious by now that further retail sheds are the last thing Canterbury needs. The Wincheap Estate could be maximized as a site to meet the needs of both local people and visitors and also to solve some of Canterbury's problems. We are not developers or planners but we would like to see a mixed development incorporating shops, housing, light industry, a cultural centre and a hotel. The following are some alternatives to the "let's-compete-with-Bluewater" school of planning:

skilled employment One of Canterbury's desperate needs is high-skill jobs – something to encourage the many graduates of our educational establishments to stay in the area. The renewed Wincheap Estate could incorporate some hi-tech industries.

housing Canterbury suffers from a lack of affordable housing. Residential accommodation – especially low-cost, high-density housing for single people or small families – could be built on part of the Estate along the lines of the housing planned for the top of the Whitefriars development, with the added attraction of fine views of the cathedral. An incidental benefit here is that a proportion of the city's new housing allocation could be met on what is effectively a brownfield site. A children's play area could also form part of any residential development.

culture a multifunctional building that could be used as a small theatre or cultural centre, art gallery, disco or a venue for bands and small orchestras – an outlet for creativity – would be an asset to the local community and to the city in general.

retail, business and restaurants Retail units can be interspersed with businesses and restaurants and the estate can have enough to attract visitors day and night.

market a covered market place (which could double as a performance space in the evenings) could easily be accommodated with multiple possibilities.

Wincheap Village restored

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Relieved of its traffic nightmare, Wincheap will get a new lease of life. The benefits for residents hardly need stating, but local businesses too will thrive on a road with ample on-street parking and a village atmosphere in which pedestrians feel happy to spend time. New businesses will spring up. Local traffic and traffic visiting local shops will of course still be allowed into the street and traffic management will be a subject for discussion with the highways department.

Trees can be planted in the street, and the existing passageways between the Estate and the Wincheap road will also be enhanced to encourage the free movement of pedestrians between the two areas. Wincheap's historic architecture, interesting shops, pubs and restaurants will attract tourists and locals alike.

Freed from the present volume of traffic, endless possibilities present themselves such as:

- the bottom end of Wincheap can again become the site of a thriving market – a weekly farmers' market would be a popular attraction
- a cycle route can be incorporated into the road (avoiding the present problem of bicycles taking up the pavements and terrorising pedestrians)
- pavement cafés will be a possibility
- local small enterprises could be encouraged through an extension to Wincheap of the policy of reducing the UBR for "sole traders"
- Wincheap will become a tourist attraction and its pleasant ambience will encourage park-and-ride users to stroll into the city centre, rather than use the bus

Where do we go from here?

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This document is merely a first draft. We now envisage a period of public consultation, so that local people and local businesses can feed in their ideas and suggestions. We intend to involve the local media, and we would also be delighted to hear the views of the Chamber of Commerce. A public meeting has provisionally been planned for late April, so that the local community can ask prospective councillors how they stand on these proposals. Later in the year, we intend to submit a finalized version of this report to those councillors and council officers who will be involved in the development of the next Local Plan.

This plan represents an unmissable and exciting opportunity to provide growth in the city – in housing provision, worthwhile employment, cultural facilities, conservation of our historical heritage, less pollution and most of all a greatly improved quality of life for the people of Wincheap. There is the real possibility here of a "win-win situation", bringing real economic and commercial benefits while simultaneously achieving much-needed environmental objectives. It is something that the local community, business interests, city planners, and politicians can all get behind.