

# Maidstone's Culture & Heritage

## Positioning Report

October 2015

### 1. Context

Commissioned by Maidstone Borough Council and undertaken by Nick Ewbank Associates, this Culture and Heritage Positioning Report aims to provide an overview of the strengths and weaknesses of Maidstone's current cultural offer, including an outline assessment of the town's tangible and intangible cultural and heritage assets, and to set out potential future actions.

This Report supports and builds on: Maidstone Borough Council's Economic Development Strategy; Town Centre Development Programme; Festivals and Events Strategy; Community Development Strategy; Green and Blue Infrastructure Strategy; Maidstone Culture and Leisure Business Plan; and Destination Management Plan.

In drawing up this Report, Nick Ewbank Associates undertook desk research and a series of interviews and consultative meetings between April and September 2015 with key members and officers of Maidstone Borough Council and its stakeholders including Arts Council England, the South East LEP, Kent County Council and with representatives of the Maidstone cultural, heritage and creative industries sectors. As part of the process, representatives of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) joined with Maidstone Borough Council officers and members in a walking study tour of Maidstone town centre.

### 2. Introduction

Maidstone is Kent's county town and largest single settlement. It is the seat of local government, has a strong and growing economy and is an important retail centre. There are impressive heritage assets and significant visitor attractions within the borough boundaries, including Leeds Castle, Mote Park and the Museum of Kent Life. And yet Maidstone's cultural and heritage profile is considerably below that of several other notable Kent towns and comparable county towns. In particular, despite the presence of significant cultural and heritage assets such as the Hazlitt Theatre and the Maidstone Museum, the town centre tends to hide its cultural and heritage strengths and overly-dominant vehicular traffic flows prevent linkages with the attractive river frontage. A senior Kent County Councillor commented that Maidstone's cultural and heritage offer is "disappointing" – this view seems to be widely echoed by respondents consulted during this process, as these quotes attest:

"Maidstone doesn't feel like the county town"	"Maidstone lacks identity – it's a bit bland"
"Most people would say it's a cultural desert"	"Creative people are very isolated"
"The town has turned its back on the river"	"There's no sense of a cultural vision"
"It doesn't feel like a cultural place – but there's lots of potential"	

During the course of this commission a clear consensus has emerged among stakeholders and consultees as to the points of focus and priorities for action required to begin the process of realising Maidstone’s cultural and heritage potential. These fall into four areas set out in Section 4 below.

The envisaged outcomes arising from the realisations of these actions are as follows:

- Re-positioning Maidstone as a regional cultural hub
- Strengthening the county town brand
- Building the tourism economy
- Attracting significant inward investment
- Creating jobs and growing the local economy
- Positively influencing future residential and commercial development projects
- Building connections across the communities of Maidstone
- Contributing to improved health and wellbeing for local people
- Building community engagement and inspiring local people to participate in creative place-shaping for the future of their town.

This Report focuses largely on the town centre of Maidstone rather than the Borough’s more rural hinterland – it is contended that addressing and strengthening the cultural and heritage offer of Maidstone town itself will bring economic and social rewards to the whole Borough – and indeed to other parts of Kent.

Some of the potential actions contained within this report are ambitious and may require considerable time and cross-agency partnership working to bring to fruition. Nevertheless it is recognised that initiatives of ambition and scale are required if the significant linked outcomes identified above are to be realised.

#### 4. Summary of Themes and Potential Actions

	<b>Theme</b>	<b>Potential Actions</b>
1	Cultural Heritage	Creation of town Centre and riverfront heritage zone, with new squares, strengthened pedestrian links to river Medway, public art, lighting and signage enhancement
2	Cultural Place Making	(a) Partnership with RSA / HLF for piloting of social innovation and creative place-making (and archive development) (b) Cultural Commons project with Voluntary Arts and Arts Development UK (c) Culture, health and wellbeing research
3	Cultural Assets	(a) Relocating / expanding carriage / transport museum (b) Kent’s Music Capital – scope out venue need and potential
4	The Creative Economy	Support, advice and networking for the creative sector

## **5. Themes**

### **5.1 Cultural Heritage**

Historically, Maidstone grew up as a transport hub, where the Roman road linking Rochester with the port of Lympne crossed the confluence of the River Len and the River Medway, and where these important waterways could be forded or bridged. The rivers became both sources of power for milling and other industrial processes and transport conduits to London and further afield. The Saxon village that grew up on the banks of the Medway became a prosperous medieval trading station and its historic wealth is reflected in the fine collection of heritage buildings that characterise Gabriel's Hill, Jubilee Square, Bank Street, Week Street, Earl Street and other parts of the town centre. The cluster of Grade One listed religious buildings by the riverside is particularly notable, with the Archbishop's Palace, the Tithe Barn, All Saints Church ("the grandest Perpendicular Church in England") and the College of All Saints forming a nationally significant complex of medieval architecture. Chillington Manor, now the Maidstone Museum and Bently Art Gallery, sits at the heart of the town and is one of the finest museums in the south east, with important collections of Anglo-Saxon and Japanese material among more than half a million artefacts. The Kent History and Library Centre opened in 2012 and contains around 14km of historic material including the archive from the former Centre for Kentish Studies.

However all these riches are somewhat hidden from view – a visitor to the town can spend all day shopping in Maidstone, or can enjoy the town's celebrated nightlife, without necessarily becoming aware of the rich cultural heritage all around them. Similarly, one of the most attractive features of the town should be the frontage and walkway along the banks of the River Medway, but this zone is currently cut-off from the town centre by four lanes of fast-flowing traffic – and once reached through underpasses, the quality of the public realm is poor and there is little to detain the visitor.

#### **Potential Action 1**

That the Council and its partners establish a town centre Heritage Zone (possibly identified as "The Square Mile") through a streets and squares, public art and lighting project designed to enhance and celebrate the culture and heritage of Maidstone and to establish new linkages and connections, including with the river Medway. As an integral part of this project the Council should develop and adopt a public art policy (to include plaques, signage, street furniture, interpretation / installations) and appoint a public artist in residence.

### **5.2 Cultural Place Making**

The Royal Society of Arts (full name The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, abbreviated to RSA) was founded in 1754 by William Shipley, a Maidstone born artist and social reformer. Shipley lived for many years in Knightrider Street in Maidstone and is buried in the grounds of All Saints Church. The RSA is based in London and is active in 80 countries. It has developed an international reputation for innovative thinking – its self-proclaimed mission is "21<sup>st</sup> century enlightenment: enriching society through ideas and action". In partnership with the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) the RSA has recently launched a Heritage, Identity and Place project intended to spark local initiatives to build stronger, more cohesive communities through deepening our understanding of common heritage. Initial discussions have been held about developing a local

project for Maidstone, building on the link with William Shipley, and the RSA has also expressed interest in discussions with regard to its own archive.

Simultaneously, Voluntary Arts UK and Arts Development UK have jointly launched the Our Cultural Commons initiative. This builds on principles of self-governance, community action and local action to build new models of cultural provision that respond to a changing world. As they put it: *“The rapid pace of change surrounding all our local cultural spaces, including changes to local government, and the rapidly increasing digitization of the wider cultural world, means that previous models of local cultural planning are no longer effectively providing support. However there are new and emerging models, building on local cultural assets and making links with education, healthcare, the voluntary and community sector, and local government.”*

Organisations such as Maidstone Area Arts Partnership already bring together a wealth of voluntary arts groups, particularly in music, that are active in the borough, and there is an opportunity to build on this good practice to contribute further to community cohesion and a wide range of other public sector corporate goals.

There is also growing interest in the potential of culture to impact on people’s health and wellbeing. An emerging body of international evidence (some produced by the Kent-based Sidney De Haan Research Centre for Arts and Health, which is already active in the borough) points to a wide range of health benefits arising from engaging in singing and other participatory arts activities. This evidence suggests that, alongside regular physical exercise and good diet, positive cultural activities may be an important component of maintaining population health.

Maidstone has an opportunity to embrace these new ways of working and thus to carve out a distinctive niche for itself as a forward thinking cultural place where all citizens are encouraged to develop their own creative lives as a means to promoting wellbeing and better health for all.

This approach to cultural place-making is based on partnership building and establishing the conditions where creativity can flourish – other aspects of the Council’s work such as its support for a vibrant programme of Festivals and Events, locally produced food initiatives, environmental initiatives and a safe night-time economy are equally important components.

### **Potential Action 2**

That the Council works with the RSA and the HLF to develop a local Heritage, Identity and Place project for Maidstone and that, building on the legacy of William Shipley, stronger links are fostered in the future between Maidstone and the RSA.

### **Potential Action 3**

That the Council works with Voluntary Arts and Arts Development UK to develop a Maidstone Our Cultural Commons project, mapping existing cultural assets across Maidstone (including those currently used for commercial, subsidised and amateur cultural activity as well as other facilities with the potential to be used for cultural activity - such as adult education colleges, care homes and community centres) and exploring innovative ways to make better use of these local assets to reduce isolation, increase skills, strengthen communities and stimulate new connections between local people.

#### **Potential Action 4**

That the Council works with cultural organisations across the borough, Kent County Council, Culture Kent, the West Kent Health and Wellbeing Board and research partners in undertaking action research to better understand and promulgate the role of cultural engagement in improving social connectedness and delivering better health and wellbeing.

#### **5.3 Cultural Assets - maintenance, usage and development**

Maidstone town centre has important heritage and cultural assets such as Maidstone Museum and Bently Art Gallery, which is the subject of separate development plans outside the scope of this report. The Hazlitt Theatre and Arts Centre has recently benefited from capital investment and is now operated independently of the Council by Parkwood Leisure. Any successful Council-led cultural and heritage strategy will be flexible and responsive to independent projects and initiatives that arise from the local community and beyond. However it is recommended that the Council focus its energies on a two key projects that build on existing strengths to make a substantial and lasting difference to Maidstone's cultural and heritage offer. These are:

##### **5.3.1 Transport Museum**

Throughout history Maidstone's fortunes rose and fell in line with innovations in transport. The Romans brought the road; in medieval times the town became a gathering place for trade and distribution via the river; when the railway came Maidstone at first failed to grasp the opportunity and suffered as a consequence – but the coming of the car was embraced and brought prosperity through Rootes, which had its base in Maidstone and became the largest car and truck distributor in the UK in the 1920s, and through the Tilling-Stevens factory, which manufactured engines for buses. Rootes built the 1930s art deco style listed building currently occupied by Peugeot opposite the Archbishop's Palace while Tilling-Stevens operated from the large building on the west bank of the Medway now known as the Powerhub, also listed and designed in the 1920s in the style of a Henry Ford Daylight Factory. Latterly though, the dominance ceded to the car and the lorry has left a shadow on the character of the town, including severing the link with the river and contributing to poor air quality in the Medway valley.

Twelve times Mayor of Maidstone, Sir Garrard Tyrwhitt-Drake was a successful businessman and benefactor of the town. In 1946 he established the Carriage Museum in the beautiful historic thatched Tithe Barn, persuading both the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) and the Royal Collection to lend important carriages which are still in situ today. The Tithe Barn however is not an ideal location for a Carriage Museum - the collection is cramped and difficult to access - and the building could potentially be put to a more suitable cultural use (see below).

#### **Potential Action 5**

That the Council forms a partnership with the V&A, HLF, Kent County Council and other partners to explore the feasibility of re-locating the Carriage Museum to a more appropriate location within the borough of Maidstone.

Additional considerations:

- This feasibility process should examine the potential for expanding the collection to take in a historic survey of all the forms of transport that have so impacted on Maidstone and other communities over the centuries – as well as potentially scanning the horizon in terms of future modes of human conveyance.
- Both the Peugeot building and the Powerhub building should be considered as possible locations for this initiative.
- The need to ensure a commercially sustainable business model should be regarded as an essential requirement from the outset.
- Future uses for the Tithe Barn and the cluster of historic buildings around the Archbishop's Palace should also be given consideration as part of the feasibility process – including the possibility of establishing a Cultural Quarter in this zone.

### **5.3.2 The Music Capital of Kent**

Maidstone has a thriving music scene. The area is home to: Kent Music (one of Europe's largest music schools); Proms in the Park; Maidstone Mela; six choral societies and at least seven community choirs; The Social Festival; The Rambling Man Festival; Maidstone Fringe Festival; a strong folk and rock scene in local pubs; an outstanding jazz programme at Pizza Express; clubs and DJs of international standing. This level of activity alone, across so many forms of music, exceeds that of other Kent towns and is a solid base on which to build a reputation as the music capital of Kent. Uniquely, though, Maidstone is also host to Jools Holland's Later – the flagship BBC2 music programme broadcast from Maidstone Studios since 1992 which brings some of the world's top musical talents and rising stars to Maidstone to play short live sets.

However Maidstone's main public music venues are not well suited to meet the needs of modern audiences. All Saints Church has good acoustics for unamplified orchestral and choral music but has uncomfortable pews, poor sight lines and a lack of WCs. Mote Hall at Maidstone Leisure Centre has the wrong ambience to become a successful amplified music venue.

#### **Potential Action 6**

That the Council form a partnership with Maidstone Studios and the BBC (perhaps drawing on the presence of big name music stars in the town for the Later programme), Arts Council England, Kent County Council, music organisations, universities and other partners to explore the potential for developing one or more dedicated venues of scale in Maidstone for the presentation of live music.

### **5.4 Supporting and Developing Maidstone's Creative Economy**

Perhaps more than another factor, it is the sustaining and developing of a well networked cluster of professional artists, cultural organisations and creatives that determines whether or not a particular location comes to be seen as a successful cultural place. The creative industries is the fastest growing sector of the UK economy and one which any location with ambitious economic growth targets cannot afford to ignore. Models of good practice elsewhere indicate that if the conditions can be established whereby artists and creatives feel supported and nurtured the reputation of Maidstone as a cultural hub will spread - and unpredictable but positive outcomes will follow.

Innovative, progressive local authorities understand that their role in this respect is an enabling one, establishing the right conditions where high level individual artistic practice and creative enterprise can flourish.

Maidstone Studios already hosts an important cluster of creative industries as well as providing a regional TV studio, and Maidstone Borough Council has recently launched the Business Terrace in the town centre. The University of the Creative Arts is offering new undergraduate courses in Television Production at Maidstone Studios with the aim of building to 300 students. But despite these welcome initiatives local artists and small creative businesses reported feeling isolated and unsupported, and there are anecdotal reports of local creatives travelling or relocating to Medway and elsewhere in order to access more propitious working environments.

### **Potential Action 7**

That the Council and its partners foster the growth of existing and new clusters of artists and creative businesses through:

- Providing (and developing policies to support the provision of) affordable workspace: both clean, networked shared space for creative businesses and messy space for artists and makers
- Adopting a responsive, enabling approach to new initiatives in culture and heritage that arise from the local community
- Attracting and supporting the retention of creative graduates within the locality
- Encouraging and supporting mechanisms for re-location support, business and funding advice, networking, recruitment, training and events, and the development of a shared voice for the professional creative sector.