

NOOKS and CORNERS

THERE may be a recession, but there seems to be no end to the supply of overweening and unnecessary commercial developments.

Royal Leamington Spa (which has appeared in this column several times over the years) is threatened by yet another shopping centre, thanks to the encouragement of Warwick district council. The development, called Clarendon Arcade, is to be squeezed into the elegant planned Regency "new town" in Leamington and will involve the disappearance of three existing streets of the grid-plan as well as overshadowing the houses in Clarendon Parade.

With some 40 shops, a "major anchor store", and a car park for 500 vehicles, it will lie between Warwick Street and Clarendon Avenue and The Parade and Chandos Street. It will occupy the existing council-owned car park off Chandos Street, but will be more than three times as big and will require the compulsory purchase and demolition of businesses and buildings.

The Leamington Society objects that the development is "vastly too high, will build over three streets, overwhelm nearby residences, bring yet more traffic, including juggernaut lorries, and pollution." The town council is also opposed, but the district council is all powerful. It chose its favourite developer, Wilson Bowden, which was responsible for earlier commercial developments in Leamington; and to design it the developer has chosen Chapman Taylor, now an international firm, which was responsible for the Royal Priors shopping centre in the town and more recently has given the nation the feebly pedantic yet overblown Classical architecture of the Southgate shopping centre in Bath (*Eyes passim*).

Quite apart from the damage the scheme will do to the fabric of Leamington, it is not at all clear that it is commercially viable. Leamington already has around 50 empty shops and the identity of the "major anchor store" (if one exists) has yet to be revealed.

The Green Party, another objector, points out that not only is the development undesirable in terms of the traffic it will generate but that adding yet another shopping complex to the town assumes that the chimera of constant economic "growth" will one day resume. What if it doesn't? Warwick district council is not interested in debating the matter; it is ignoring objections and the fear is that it will push the scheme through this month when many will be on holiday – a well-tryed trick by local authorities and others.

MEANWHILE good news about another development which ought not to happen – the project by Gladedale, disgracefully supported by Elmbridge borough council, to build across the Thames from Hampton Court Palace (*Eyes*

passim ad nauseam).

The presence of accommodation on this site for retired and injured servicemen originally added a degree of respectability to the project, but now the Royal Star & Garter Homes has announced that it is withdrawing. It blames the uncertainty and delay resulting from the legal challenge against Elmbridge's decision to grant planning permission mounted by the architect Keith Garner, but that is absurd as the Royal Star & Garter Homes must long have known that the whole development is highly controversial.

It is also a most inappropriate place to put elderly or disabled soldiers, not least as the area is liable to flooding. Perhaps the organisation might now reconsider its sad and foolish decision to abandon and sell its magnificent purpose built home – which is also a war memorial – on the crest of Richmond Hill (*Eye 1230*).

Meanwhile the heroic Mr Garner battles on singlehandedly with his legal challenge against what David Starkey has rightly described as not only "a national scandal, but an international scandal". As reported in *Eye 1260*, Mr Garner's application for a protective costs order was refused on the grounds that he had not demonstrated that the case was in

the public interest (mainly because English Heritage let us all down by not objecting in principle to the wretched scheme by Quinlan Terry architects, père et fils) even though *Historic Royal Palaces* was and is opposed to it.

And, unlike the developer, Network Rail, which owns part of the site, said it would press for costs if Mr Garner lost. However, he was granted leave to appeal against this refusal and has now been granted a protective costs order (with Elmbridge having to pay him costs). Furthermore, Network Rail has graciously announced that it will not now be seeking costs. The legal challenge will probably be heard in October.

Meanwhile, vindictive Elmbridge council, in opposing Mr Garner's application, has demanded that he disclose his financial position, including the value of his home. This is, not least, rank hypocrisy given that this same council continues to refuse to let any member of the public see a confidential "viability report" on the proposed development submitted by Gladedale two years ago. This report is believed to offer a justification for the developer offering only 10 percent of affordable homes when Elmbridge's own local plan requires 40 percent in such a case. A complaint to the Information Commissioner resulted in an order to Elmbridge to release the report – against which the wretched local authority is appealing.

And to think the government wants to devolve more power locally!

'Piloti'

Clarendon Arcade,
an artist's impression

