

St Ives Town Team
presents a

Vision of St Ives

Version 3
October 2022

The Old Riverport

St Ives
CAMBRIDGESHIRE

A Vision of St Ives



Introduction

Three years ago St Ives Town Team produced *A Vision of St Ives*, which suggested changes that would improve the town for residents and visitors. It followed a survey that the Team had undertaken with local people and groups, including businesses, and tried to take on board those comments in its conclusions.

That version was amended in 2020 following the *Prospectus for Growth* (PFG) document issued by Huntingdonshire District Council (HDC) to address some of the proposals that the PFG was proposing.

This third version takes into account two other factors: the changing nature of town centres following the pandemic; the current economic situation that prevails with the war in Ukraine; and a change of leadership of the UK Government. It is also timely to look at the proposals in this *Vision* following HDC's publication of a *Draft Plan for St Ives* (DP), which has caused much concern among residents.

We hope that this *Vision* will act as a stimulus for what might be achieved and help the Town Council to complete its Neighbourhood Plan, which is an important step for the town to ensure development protects the wonderful assets that St Ives already has.

One of the criticisms levelled at the PFG and DP is that it is based on old data (following the town meeting about the plan we are hoping to see the data that was used to guide the proposals). This updated *Vision* therefore takes into account the latest situation, such as the trees that are now on The Quay, which was a suggestion made in the first version of *Vision of St Ives*.

The basis for a plan

Like many town centres, St Ives is facing competition from many sources: out of town developments; an economic downturn; and people's changing habits such as online shopping. There is also competition from neighbouring towns, new and old.

Unlike Huntingdon, the town centre of St Ives has largely remained unchanged, without a substantial number of national chain stores, or a modern shopping centre, that tends to make many towns look and feel the same. This should be considered a blessing.

The perceived lack of national chain stores is often cited as a reason not to shop in St Ives. Conversely, many people visit St Ives precisely because of the attractive streets and the independent shops. What is clear now is that the town is unlikely to attract more national stores, as many have set up in nearby towns and they will be unlikely to have another outlet so close. Also, the premises that might be available are too small often in historic buildings.

It is acknowledged that there is no room for complacency, and without a plan for the future, St Ives will see falling footfall and less activity, putting shops and the town's economy at risk.

It is important that the current discussions around the DP concentrate on issues that will improve St Ives's economic prospects, building on its strengths, rather than imposing a standard economic vision that may not work here, or may change forever the very nature of the town.



St Ives is more than just a riverside town

St Ives is defined by its river and this is one of the reasons that the Town Council designated the town centre as The Old Riverport, recognising the importance of the Great Ouse in the town's development over centuries, and the river remains its main attraction today. This definition is unique. There are no other Old Riverports in the world. It also differentiates the market town of St Ives from all the other market towns in the area, which has proved beneficial when promoting the town and its businesses. There are now several, newly established, businesses that use the word riverport in their name.

St Ives has a vibrant night-time economy and offers a pleasant environment for residents and tourists with leisure activities, particularly along the Ouse Valley, which is an area of outstanding beauty. The town's development pattern resembles that of Huntingdon, in that the centre is clearly defined as being north of the river.

But unlike Huntingdon it has an historic and beautiful meadow on one side of the river, which is a bonus and a peaceful and award winning nature reserve, Holt Island, on the other.

As a result of the town centre being north of the river and the A14 being south of the river, traffic congestion is a problem, particularly with so many people commuting out of the town. This problem will require considerable investment and detailed planning to improve. That is the responsibility of the County Council and currently a feasibility study is underway with the support of the Combined Authority Mayor to see what might be done to improve our local roads. That issue is beyond the scope of this document.

Developing Ideas for St Ives

All too often the future is defined by developers providing more housing, more jobs and more shops, a model that is questionable considering the present economic situation. The geography of St Ives does not easily support that model, with one side of the town in a flood plain. Of course, more land can be allocated for housing north of the town but that will put extra strain on the crumbling infrastructure and health and education services as well as adding to the traffic problems.

The number of houses in the town *has* increased in recent years, as a result of infilling and the conversion of redundant industrial land to residential developments, and there are several sites currently being developed including redundant premises in the town centre. A large-scale development could be detrimental to the nature of the town, changing it dramatically, and without better infrastructure it would add to the problems rather than improving the life of its inhabitants.

We understand that no town can stand still and rest on its laurels, and every community needs to assess and reassess itself to ensure it is taking advantage of all the opportunities that exist. The following suggestions take into account the issues already identified that require attention, and some that can be addressed in a relatively short time scale - 'Quick Wins' as they have been described. The full vision includes longer-term projects, which could bring greater prosperity and take advantage of St Ives's unique strengths, as well as the opportunities afforded by its close connections to Cambridge and the new town developments along the Busway.

The Town Team has completed a survey of businesses, residents and visitors, which highlighted some issues that could and should be addressed soon.

Public Transport

The Busway allows people to get to and from Cambridge and Huntingdon Railway Stations. Plans for a Metro have been scrapped and bus services are currently under threat with the lack of funding, so St Ives is fortunate that the Busway is here. There is pressure for everywhere to be more environmentally friendly and St Ives is in a good position to help reduce our long-term desire for more roads and more cars. Being a town that encourages a more eco-friendly lifestyle could be a winning formula.

One of the original concepts for the route of the Busway was along The Broadway through Crown Street and Market Hill. The bollards in Crown Street were erected to allow buses through, but not other vehicles. The idea behind this vision was to make the bus route towards Cambridge easier than the current route along the narrow winding North Road/East Street, and bring more life to The Broadway.

The current bus stop in Station Road is not ideal and its relocation to the Sheep Market could be a better position. The greater use of the area around Cromwell's statue for markets (see later) could allow this to happen. The need to encourage more use of public transport could see more passengers from the surrounding villages able to alight in either The Broadway or Market Hill, directly adjacent to the shops.

Parking

This is the number one concern of everyone in surveys. It is the issue that is raised most with the police and there are a number of reasons for this. The structure of the parking charges discriminates against town centre businesses and discourages the public from 'popping into town'.

HDC introduced a 'parking upgrade', but this did not offer what the public and traders requested in their response to the Town Team survey. The preference was for a scale of charges (or a free period) that encourages shoppers to call in more frequently.

The lack of parking control on the streets means that pedestrians and other drivers are hindered and parking slots overstayed. Parts of the centre around Bridge Street are confusing, particularly for visitors, as the areas for loading and unloading of commercial vehicles are not tightly defined and appear to be pedestrianised.

Pedestrianisation

This has been discussed at length over the years without a firm conclusion. Depending on the outcome of this debate there are several options. The area including Crown Street, Bridge Street and Merryland could easily be pedestrianised, with access for residents and delivery vehicles only. In theory signage indicates that this is the case at the moment but there is little enforcement and some businesses, such as taxi companies, take advantage of this and block pavements.

We believe that good street design (see picture right) and proper signage could solve this problem without the need for daily enforcement. HDC's proposals to take over parking control with Traffic Wardens are in the pipeline we are told, although a date for this to happen is not yet set.

The Markets

St Ives has a long history of being a market town and St Ives is suited to this role. It is only a few years since it was considered to have the best Farmers' Market in the country. It must be acknowledged that Covid did disrupt the town, and the market in particular, and that more needs to be done to return the markets to their former glory, particularly the famous Bank Holiday markets. This can be done with the correct approach from HDC, that is responsible for running the markets.



Market Hill

Market Hill could also be partly pedestrianised. The area around Oliver Cromwell's statue, in front of the Town Hall, Free Church and Corn Exchange is the natural town centre; its benches often used by shoppers to rest and meet.

By removing the parking, many options become available for making the most of this area, particularly if a cover for part of the area was incorporated.

In medieval times many towns had market halls; open-sided buildings offering shelter for traders. This created a centre for the community and today places that retain such structures are revered throughout Europe. A modern equivalent (we have illustrated a permanent tent-like structure on page 4) has been suggested, although a well-designed wooden version may be more appropriate, offering a space that could be used for a variety of purposes.



A typical French street with narrow metal bollards protecting pedestrians and preventing cars mounting the pavement.

Bus Station

Another area which could be considered for some regeneration is the area around the bus station, some of which is owned by HDC. This includes The Octagon building, Hyperion Auction Rooms and Antique Centre and the Coral shop.

Redevelopment of this site with a new building could offer a range of outlets, an improved antique centre, residential flats and a highly unusual historic auction room – the Octagon shown on page 6.

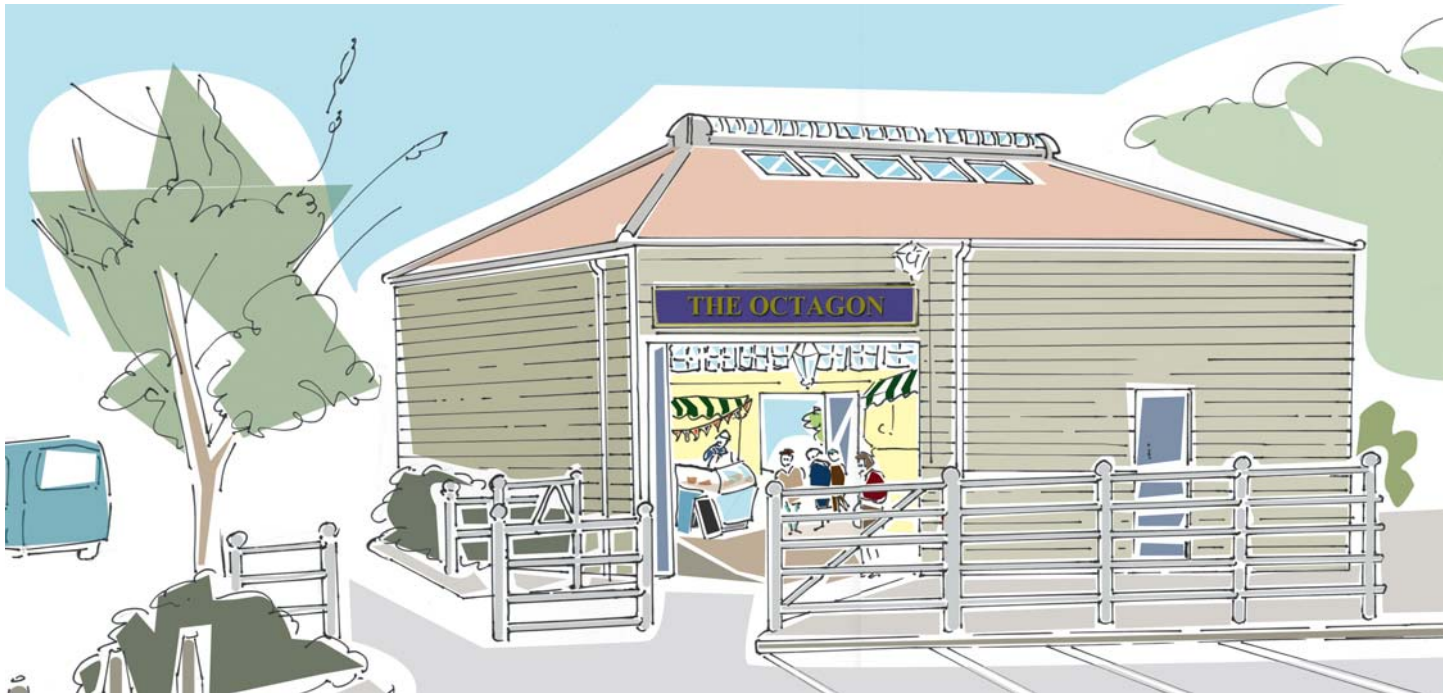
Being directly opposite the historic Station Road premises (Nuts cafe, Cambridge Building Society) and the Cromwell Mews shops, this could encourage new niche businesses to set up helping the existing traders to develop further. The gain would be the opportunity to build a significant attraction within metres of the bus station and main car park.

A development of this kind may take some time to complete and would require incentives for new businesses such as a period of reduced rent and rates, but in comparison to other plans it could be cost effective. It could also attract higher value shops offering an alternative to Cambridge for some shoppers.

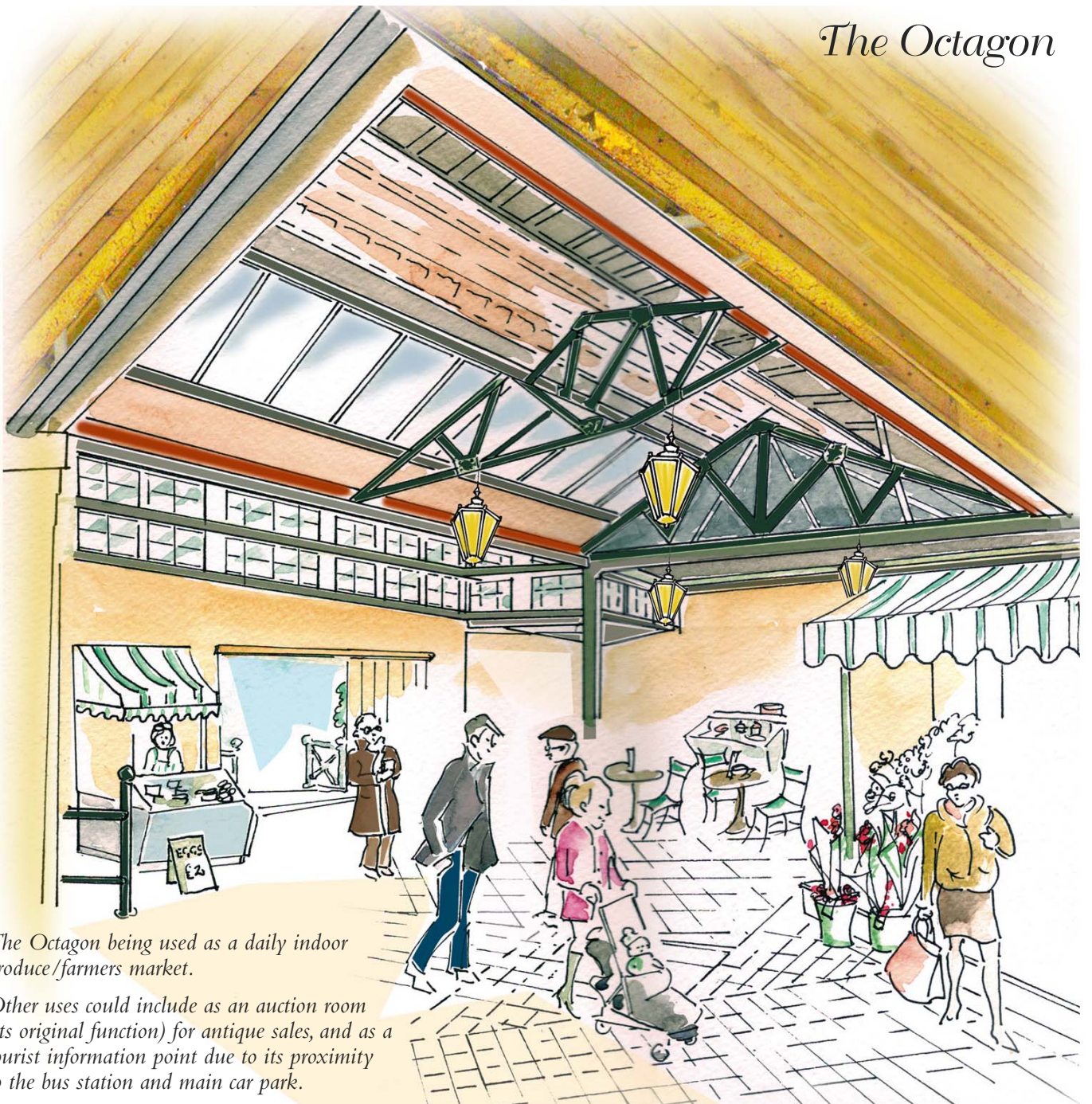
And it would build on the current attractions of St Ives, keeping the historic cattle market car park and offering an alternative to the out-of-town supermarkets. It could take advantage of the increased population of nearby Northstowe and the increasing costs of visiting Cambridge.

Overleaf

An artist impression of The Octagon.



The Octagon



The Octagon being used as a daily indoor produce/farmers market.

Other uses could include as an auction room (its original function) for antique sales, and as a tourist information point due to its proximity to the bus station and main car park.



The riverside and ancient bridge are among our greatest assets.

The River and Quayside

The river remains a main attraction and with the increase in the number of people boating for pleasure there is an opportunity to encourage more boaters to stop in St Ives.

The Quay has already been enhanced with some large container-planted trees, that will offer colour and shade on hot summer days.

The installation of additional mooring pontoons at The Quay could increase the number of mooring places in the heart of the town.

Please note these are different to those suggested in the *DP* and would not obstruct boats going under the bridge.

The actual design would not necessarily be as the image above and would need to be refined after consultation with companies and groups that regularly use the river.

Rationale for pontoon mooring

- Establishes St Ives as a major visitor centre for river visitors
- Increase in quantity of visitor berths
- Could improve access to town amenities and the shops by river users, particularly elderly or disabled passengers
- Provides further opportunities for river-based events and builds on the major successes of current events (river parades, regattas etc.)

- Access for a range of different sized river craft including small day boats, paddle boards/canoes/row boats, cruisers, narrowboats and day hire craft. (Many sizes of craft cannot currently access The Quay)
- Considerably improved amenities for overnight visitor moorings.

Safety improvements

- Water's edge safety allows anyone accidentally in the river to be in a position for easier/faster rescue
- Could make riverside events easier to marshal
- Children falling into the water from The Quay not at risk being trapped between quay and moored boats.

The Waits and The Broadway

The Waits is the second town centre mooring site. The current proposals for a bandstand here, by the Norris Museum, will enable more use of this attractive area and help raise footfall in The Broadway.

Re-routing buses along The Broadway, and adding a bus stop (see **Public Transport** section page 4) should also help footfall for businesses here.

Adding a bus stop will require altering the current parking arrangements in The Broadway.



Marketing opportunities

We may not have the advantage of a Cathedral to help market the town but we do have one of only four bridges nationwide with a chapel on it, plus a number of other interesting historic buildings.

Located in the East of England we are also fortunate in having one of the best climates in the country, and it is not unusual for visitors to be so enamoured with their visit that they frequently return, and some even relocate here.

One of the town's undoubted strengths is its people. There are many active organisations offering the community a wealth of opportunities for sport, social and leisure activities, and the chance to gain knowledge and skills. It is well established as a caring community; designated a Dementia Friendly Community and a Calm Town.

Most of these community groups work together well on a variety of projects, and add more to the life of the town than the sum of their parts.

St Ives has a reputation for being a place where interesting things are always happening. The newly refurbished Corn Exchange is fast becoming a busy arts centre as well as a community hub. This is helping to attract people to the town especially in the evenings.

Tourism Strategy

Any plans for the town need to address the marketing of St Ives and its tourism strategy. Recent discussions have highlighted the need for a comprehensive website and social media campaign that would benefit all businesses. This should be managed by the Town Council and should be appropriately funded. A good example of this is nearby Oundle where information is easily accessible online.

Cleanliness

Although there are good and dedicated street cleaners there are obvious signs that maintenance of street furniture and pavements has been neglected. The Town Team and St Ives in Bloom have dealt with some of these issues in the past by painting railings and varnishing benches. Some residents on The Quay have pressure-washed the pavements at their own expense.

Some of the narrow passageways have been badly neglected over the years. Piecemeal efforts by community groups and volunteers should not be, and cannot be, relied on and a regular regime should be instigated to address this issue.

An increasingly important matter is the collection of rubbish and the proliferation of unattractive wheelie bins in the most beautiful parts of the town centre particularly on The Quay.

This has arisen largely because of the inadequate service provided by the District Council for commercial customers, and the reliance on commercial waste companies who have no interest in keeping their bins out of sight. A better system is urgently required with designated areas for waste collection.

Communications

St Ives still has poor mobile signals although broadband has been improved lately. Fortunately the town has a number of publications regularly distributing the news and events, some representing community groups – another indication of the strength of these organisations.

Other matters

The vision we offer in this document concentrates on the town centre and the current strengths of the town, focussing on issues that have been already highlighted and some that could be instigated fairly quickly.

The *DP* includes mention of an Innovation Hub to encourage entrepreneurs to work in St Ives. This idea is worth considering and our original *Vision* document suggested that some of the vacant premises could be used in this way for pop-up businesses and conference facilities.

The suggestion of allowing Waitrose to expand into what is currently the library also has merit, although it may be too late for this to happen as Waitrose now faces enormous competition from the new out-of-town stores. The Library is also a tremendous asset that should be protected but relocating it within the town centre may be more difficult now County Council budgets are under so much pressure.

Finally we have not proposed any specific measures to improve the East and West Street areas. If buses from Huntingdon were re-routed via The Broadway this would halve the number of buses along North and East Street reducing congestion and potentially allowing improvements to the street scene.