

The history of car parking provision in Wotton-under-Edge



Prepared at the request of Wotton-under-Edge & District Chamber of Trade and Commerce by Gareth Kitchen, February 2017.

Summary

- Poor parking provision repeatedly verified by robust survey work.
- The Town Council acknowledges a shortfall in provision of 80 spaces.
- Opportunities to purchase land for additional car parking have been lost.
- No suitable car park locations within the settlement boundary.
- The Town Council strongly opposed to the imposition of parking charges.
- The Town Council consistently puts the need for long-stay above short-stay.
- The Town Council holds SDC responsible for providing parking to meet local needs.

Background

The history of the poor parking provision in Wotton-under-Edge is long and convoluted. This document limits itself to outlining notable events since the beginning of the century.

As early as 1999 the SDC Draft Local Plan laments “However, much of the town centre is made up of narrow one-way streets, with inadequate servicing facilities, and there is a perceived shortage of short-stay parking.”

The Chamber of Trade in Wotton at that time had disbanded. There was an informal group of businesses called the Traders Forum with approximately twenty-five members. As the members were mainly shopkeepers their primary interest was the availability of parking so that residents could access the services provided in the town.

At that time the independent traders were unhappy that an opportunity for the Town Council to purchase the old Blue Coat School site for use as an extension to the Chipping Car Park had been squandered a number of years earlier. At a Halcrow consultation one trader recalls that a local councillor lost his temper at the idea of using it as a car park as it was prime building land. The Blue Coat trustees were obliged to seek full market value for the site to fund the construction of the new school.

A major theme of national government in the early 2000s was 'Regeneration'. Settlements within Stroud District were encouraged to engage in Community Healthchecks which were developed by the Countryside Agency. SDC formed a Regeneration Team and commissioned a company called Beacon Research to perform Market Town surveys focussing on car parking and footfall. The methodology was simple and the surveys were repeated in 2003, 2004 & 2005.

The Wotton Town Council Regeneration Partnership drew on this robust data which confirmed that there were indeed real parking problems in Wotton, not just perceived.

Independently, SDC maintain an audit of vacant commercial properties, useful, no doubt, to monitor the loss of business rate revenue and this will become increasingly important with the future funding of social care, for example.

The number of [vacant premises in Wotton town centre](#) at this time (Nov 2005) was 4%.

When the [Community Plan was published in 2005](#) one of the main conclusions was that “Lack of adequate parking provision is a constraint to Wotton-under-Edge achieving most of the vision themes.” and it went on: “to maximise the use of the existing car parks effectively they may need to be controlled and policed. Charging is one way to achieve this but the charges would have to be low to avoid deterring shoppers and visitors.”

At about this time, SDC commissioned a company called Scott Wilson to produce another one off, more comprehensive analysis of the settlements in the district. Their report provided detailed parking and footfall analysis ([hardcopy archive is retained at SDC](#)). For the traders in Wotton, two key facts stood out clearly:

- Short Term parking occupancy in Wotton exceeds total capacity 9:15am–3:45pm
- Average pedestrian flow in Wotton had declined by 40% 2003-2006

Soon after the Community Plan was published the Beacon surveys were discontinued by SDC and their final survey was published in 2006.

2006 also saw the Wotton Chamber of Trade reform after a gap of more than five years. Membership was around twenty-five and included most of the informal Traders Forum group.

Changes in consumer habits, housing and planning law continued apace. Numerous car free developments were permitted within Wotton's settlement boundary and ever increasing car ownership only served to exacerbate the poor parking provision. The shopkeepers in the town were painfully aware that nothing tangible was being done by the Town Council to manage the parking situation.

So, in August 2008 a [meeting](#) was held at the Civic centre with representatives from the Town Council, Town Council Regeneration Partnership, Chamber of Trade and Stroud District Council to discuss car parking problems. A number of [potential locations](#) were identified to investigate if they could accommodate additional parking, such as Chipping Manor, Royal Oak and Wotton Auction Rooms. Based on the evidence from the Market Town Surveys, SDC would consider changing restrictions in the Chipping Car Park. Further [meetings](#) were held at the Civic Centre to discuss progress and work continued until the following Spring when additional surveys were arranged. Whilst the investigation into additional sites was unsuccessful, SDC were recommending pay and display in the various car parks at appx. 40p for 2 hours along with 2½ days per week of enforcement.

Capital costs were to be re-couped over 4 years but on-going maintenance costs were not insignificant. However, the parking charges would offset these and made the proposal cost neutral to council tax payer. The proposal was inline with FSB 'Keep Trade Local' guidance. Resident parking permits could possibly be administered by SDC and operated through Cotswold District.

Note: SDC say that time limited parking “is a time-consuming and labour intensive way to monitor and to enforce. Where parking is free, an enforcement officer has to note the vehicle registration number of all the cars at a particular time and then return after the maximum time allowed and see whether any of those vehicles are still there.”

April 2009 saw a proposal from SDC [detailing the scheme](#) noting that “Any proposal to introduce charges for parking will be controversial and in a small market town, such as Wotton-Under-Edge it is important to set the charges at the right level, to achieve a reasonable balance between short and long-stay spaces and to agree a limit on parking permits. This is critical to ensuring that charges support the town's economy by providing an adequate turnover of spaces, particularly in an economic downturn.”

By this time, all aspects of the proposal were advanced to the point where a public consultation should have taken place and [a draft outline of the proposal](#) was presented at Chamber of Trade and Town Council Regeneration meetings in May.

Town Council Meeting May 2009 noted a possible scheme to improve parking in Wotton-under-Edge. A more detailed report would be forthcoming from the working party and it was agreed that this should be put on the agenda for a future meeting of Town Council for further discussion when more details were known. [T.3449](#)

After a number of delays in May, June and July, Cllr June Cordwell reported back in September 2009 that Stroud District Council had now carried out one survey and another was planned. A paper for Stroud District Council Cabinet would then be prepared and a further report made to Town Council. [T.3495](#)

The number of [vacant premises in Wotton town centre](#) at this time (Nov 2009) had increased to 6%.

The public consultation about the possible changes to waiting times in the Chipping was finally carried out during December 2009. Questionnaires were distributed and a report would be made to the Town Council. [T.3557](#) (For reasons unknown the idea of low cost charges appear to have been abandoned by the working party at this point.)

At the regular Town Council meeting in January 2010 [T.3563](#) It was noted that the former CPC Plastics and former Stokes Bakery sites were for sale on the open market and could, potentially, be used for car parking. Consideration was given to taking out a [Public Works Loan Board](#) loan of £2.25m. Some housing could be provided on the site to offset the cost. It was proposed not to pursue this project, as it would be too expensive. Passed all in favour.

A week later an extraordinary meeting of Town Council was called. [T.3565](#) The proposal was to limit all parking in the Chipping to three hours. The results of the public consultation carried out the previous month were reported although not minuted. Reservations about the relevance of some questions on the questionnaire. Members of the public present at the meeting commented that a lack of long term parking was a problem. An estate agent noted that changing long-stay to short-stay would cause house prices to drop. Others commented that the town centre was saturated with vehicles. The Chamber of Trade was now neutral on the proposal as business members (with staff parking requirements) exceeded independent traders approx. 2:1. One prophetic councillor noted that rejecting this proposal would not solve the problems and warned that the Council might need to consider more radical proposals, such as looking for a new car park.

Without considering the *raison d'être* of the working group, or the robust survey work of the Market Town Studies, or the need to support the High Street economy in an economic downturn, the Council resolved to make no changes to waiting times in the Chipping. Additionally, the Town Council looked to SDC as the parking authority to provide additional parking, to meet local needs, even though no sites could be identified as potential locations.

February 2010 saw the idea of the former Stokes Bakery site as car park floated again. Touted as “possibly the last site within the town centre where much needed additional parking could be provided.” [T.3574](#) The Town Council resolved to Commission Quattro Design Ltd to undertake a feasibility study for the site. It was also noted that the Chamber of Trade now had 108 members and that the Supper Club was proving particularly successful.

A petition from independent traders in Wotton-under-Edge was sent to SDC in July 2010. The lease on the Chipping car park was up for renewal. As the short-term parking issues could not be any worse, the independent retailers asked SDC to justify its subsidy of the long terms spaces in The Chipping, as these spaces were primarily used by business users during the day. The petition was not welcomed by local officials. But the response from SDC was much more positive and they indicated that they were initiating a district wide car parking review, challenging the costs and benefits of them providing these facilities across the district.

Renishaw started work on the former Stokes Bakery site in order to retain their planning permission for the housing development which had been obtained some years previously, so the site was no longer suitable for use as a car park. [T.3701](#)

Another opportunity to address the parking situation in the town had been lost, but not for the lack of effort by the Chamber of Trade. Independent traders were disappointed by the on-going parking situation. A [flyer](#) was distributed to all the businesses on the high street.

July 2011 saw the publication of the [SDC Car Park Review 2011](#): Yet again the survey work confirmed the previous findings of the Market Towns Study. “However, the same survey in Wotton (where there are no charges) showed that 60% of those travelling by car, viewed off-street parking provision as poor.”

SDC clearly grasped the problems facing the town. Indeed, comments relating to the [Car Park Review at SDC Cabinet](#) in December 2011 says “The parking problems in Wotton have been in existence for many years with pressure on both on and off-street parking. There are concerns that long-stay parking is limiting short-stay spaces in the Chipping impacting further on footfall in the town. There was no formal response to the consultation document from the Chamber of Trade as there is no consensus of opinion from its members. However, as the petition submitted last year also shows, retailers in particular feel that the Chipping needs to be managed in a way that improves turnover of spaces. There is a view that on-street spaces should be marked to encourage better parking and maximise the number of cars that can be parked. Better signage and more enforcement were also requested. At both meetings, the potential of a supermarket development on the Renishaw site was raised which, if it goes ahead, may provide some public parking. There was concern that

charges could impact on the viability of the town centre, particularly with free parking available in South Gloucestershire, but equally some traders feeling that action must be taken to improve turnover”

It should be noted that the Supermarket development at the Renishaw site was abandoned.

However, within weeks of the publication the Car Park Review Wotton Town Council had “flip-flopped” their position (as per the 2005 Community Plan) thus undermining all previous effort working towards a solution to the problem. At the August 2011 Town Council Meeting [T.3944](#) “The introduction of parking charges was not the answer to the local shortage of parking provision and enforcement of existing time restrictions would have the same effect if properly enforced.

The Town Council was strongly opposed to the imposition of parking charges in the town which would be damaging to the viability of the traders in the town and likely to deter shoppers....”

It is unclear where the data came from to support the notion that the imposition of charges would be detrimental to the traders and likely to deter shoppers. The independent traders were of the opinion that the short-term parking could not get any worse as it was at capacity. Any positive management would serve to alleviate the problem by increasing turnover and therefore make the town centre more accessible. There was no vote.

The number of [vacant premises in Wotton town centre](#) at this time (Oct 2011) had increased to 7%.

The Car Park Review went to [SDC Cabinet](#) in December 2011.

It was claimed that the [Car Park Review 2011 was overturned](#) by Cllr June Cordwell on becoming a cabinet member at SDC, citing residents in up-roar and that the Co-Op had stopped all long-stay parking. No evidence can be found to support these claims apart from improved signage at the Co-Op. SDC say that the scheme was simply not pursued as none of the settlements pushed for it, along with changes in responsibility at SDC for parking management.

However, it is clear that SDC listened to the Town Council about the proposed introduction of charges and were still responsive to the needs of the trading community on the high street. SDC published an order to make changes to the parking restrictions in the Chipping. The changes would change one row of long-stay to short-stay. Notices were displayed in the Chipping Car Park over the summer. The changes would increase the turnover of spaces and go some way to address the short-term parking which is well documented and has plagued the economy of the town since the beginning of the century.

The number of [vacant premises in Wotton town centre](#) at this time (Nov 2012) had increased to 8%.

An extraordinary meeting of the Town Council was called in February 2013. [T.4249](#)

Note: There had been a meeting a few days earlier possibly with the three members of public at this meeting along with Cllr John Cordwell and Alison Fisk of SDC, but no representation from the Chamber of Trade. It was minuted that, at that meeting “They suggested that there was plenty of short term parking available and that more, not less, long term parking was required for residents and business people in the town centre.” That claim appears to be *false* and not backed up by the evidence.

Further discussion suggested that increased use of traffic wardens would address the traders' needs. Clearly, this would make no difference at all to the availability of short-stay parking in The Chipping or Civic Centre etc. which had already been shown to be beyond capacity.

After further discussion, it was proposed to object to the proposed changes but that they would mark out additional bays in front of 11,10,9 & 8 the Chipping as long-term parking spaces for local resident permit

holders only.

The number of [vacant premises in Wotton town centre](#) at this time (July 2013) had increased to 9%.

May 2014 saw the first signs that the [Community Plan](#) was to be updated and a working group formed. By September, a community questionnaire had been drafted and in December 2014 some 3000 were distributed yielding 270 responses. [The brief report from the Mayor](#) noted “The need for more parking in the town – although there is clearly no appetite to pay for such a facility either through increasing the precept or introducing parking charges”

The number of [vacant premises in Wotton town centre](#) at this time (July 2014) had increased to 10%.

At the [Parish Assembly](#) in March 2015 it was announced that the Council “continued to explore opportunities for providing additional parking in the town, including the possibility of establishing a car park on open land behind the Fire Station. This initiative, facilitated by the Chamber of Trade, is still at an early stage and no planning application has yet been made. Public views are welcomed on this. We have been informed by Renishaw that the company intends to continue its operations in Old Town and develop the Stokes Bakery site, thus these locations are not available for supermarkets, parking or anything else.”

April 2015 saw the long awaited update to the [Community Plan](#).

Shortly before Christmas 2015, the Town Council welcomed Mr M Evans of Coburn Homes to their Town Council Meeting. [T.4884](#). The scheme was for a 96-space car park, 2 coach spaces, and 10 houses. The scheme was welcomed and the need for the housing having to pay for it was understood. It was generally noted by the responses in the community plan questionnaire that in order for the town and businesses to trade and prosper in the future, there needs to be more parking provision in Wotton. The Town Council agreed, in principle, the following month to support the scheme 8 for and 3 against with 1 abstention. [T.4927](#)

Mid 2016, the Town Council car park working group circulated a [summary of all the areas](#) in the town that may have been used for car parking. It was clear that all potential sites had been fully investigated. This included traders using the Wotton Auction Room car park. The owner of that site had e-mailed the Town Council to say he did not wish the car park to be considered for wider daily use as previously proposed, citing resident objections amongst other things. A [Parking Review](#) was also circulated which did not appear to accurately reflect the evidence.

In the autumn of 2016, the Town Council undertook an in-depth survey and consultation called the Car Parking Survey 2016 which supported the conclusions from the 2011 SDC survey work which concluded that car park users in Wotton experienced an above average difficulty finding a space.

The main fact to emerge was that “Utilization levels in the Civic Centre and Chipping exceeded the recognised industry standard of 85% occupancy for long periods.”

We were very lucky that the Town Council published these results. It was only through the Chairman using his casting vote in favour the motion was passed to publish them. [Wotton Town Council Car Parking Survey 2016](#)

Conclusion

The Town Council had, after 17 years, finally grasped the scale of the problem with the report saying that: “...it is concluded that around 80 spaces would be needed to meet current shortfalls and future demand.” and the number of 70 spaces being agreed upon at the Town Council meeting of October 2016. [T.5140](#)

Disclaimer

The references in this document to various meetings, proposals and reports held by or presented to Wotton Town Council, Stroud District Council or other bodies is, to the best of the author's knowledge, an accurate and true reflection of these events. The PDF version of this document available at https://media.stroud.social/car_parking_history/full-report.pdf supports click through to the documents and reports referenced in this report. Quotations, where given, have been taken from the minutes of the aforesaid meetings and reports. Other than the official documents referred to herein, the content of this report is based on the information available to the author and are his interpretation of these matters.

Disclosure

The author has been a non-committee member of Wotton-under-Edge Chamber of Trade since June 2015 and was the founding member of the Traders Forum. Includes Scott Wilson summary located after publication.

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