



SMALL TOWNS INITIATIVE: ARBROATH REPORT



A report by BEFS Chairman, Professor Emeritus Cliff Hague, based on a visit to Arbroath in November 2012 as part of BEFS Small Towns Initiative. The visit was featured in the [Arbroath Herald](#).



'... it is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom – for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself.'

Arbroath's significance to Scotland's heritage is vouchsafed by the Declaration of 1320. The remains of the Abbey provide a physical link to what is arguably the most significant document ever produced in Scotland. Long before the

Abbey was founded in 1178, there was human settlement here. Archaeological remains from the Neolithic and the Bronze Age have been found.

The historic core of the town, once defended by a town wall, had a tight-knit pattern of narrow streets and wynds aligned on the slope from the harbour to the Abbey. Industrial closures and the use of large sites for supermarkets and parking have breached some of this intimacy, but a strong legacy from the 18 and 19th century is still there. The once-abandoned Inner Harbour itself has been given an imaginative and successful re-use as a marina. The area immediately adjacent to the waterfront retains a strong sense of place, helped by good modern interpretive signage and the visible presence of several smoke houses where the renowned Arbroath Smokies are produced.

Once a Royal Burgh, Arbroath is now vulnerable to forces outside its own control. Economic restructuring resulted in loss of traditional sources of employment in mills and engineering and in the fishing industry. While it is the largest town in Angus, it no longer has its own Town Council. For both local government and Visit Scotland it is just one part of a wider administrative unit. There has also been change in the agricultural hinterland. P.J.Stirling is one of Scotland's leading fruit and vegetable producers and Abbey Fruit is its processing side, based in the town. Over the past 20years the introduction of polytunnels has extended the growing season and seen a significant shift towards soft fruit production. Migration from central and eastern Europe has sustained this shift, with knock-on impacts into housing and social life in the town.

Success stories

Compared to the rest of Angus, Arbroath remains a place where there are good jobs. Manufacturing has now moved out to the industrial estates on the edge of town. For example, MacIntyre Chocolate Systems produce a wide range of machinery for the confectionery, biscuit and ice cream industries throughout the world. Presentation Products does the specialist packaging for many of Scotland's leading whisky brands.

Sea Fest, an annual festival of the sea, is held by the harbour over a weekend each August. It attracts about 30,000 people and feeds the narrative of Arbroath as a maritime settlement with a distinctive food product – the Smokie, which enjoys European Geographical Protective status. There is also an Arbroath Smoky tartan. Its colours symbolise key parts of the town's

identity. Red represents the sandstone of the Abbey (and thus also references the Declaration of Independence); blue and white represent the sea; the red glow of the smokie barrel and the golden yellow of the delicacy itself.

Mackay Boat Builders is now the only operating yard of its kind between Eyemouth and Peterhead. The town has also managed to sustain the Webster Memorial Theatre. Located on the High Street, it offers a regular programme of shows and performances. It also offers conference facilities.

The town centre

As in many small towns, the town centre is struggling. There is no significant public square, and so the High Street is the main public space in the centre. It is part pedestrianized, and has plenty of free parking within easy reach. Also a small shopping mall, the Abbeygate, has been developed back from one end of the High Street. Vacancies in the Abbeygate seem proportionally more than on the High Street, probably reflecting over-ambitious estimations of the rents they can command under current conditions.

The buildings on the High Street are mainly from the nineteenth century, with small retail units on the ground floor. While there is residential use of upper levels, most seem to be used for storage or are vacant. There are some independent retailers, though few use the name “Arbroath” in promoting their services. The main impression of the retailing is that there is a high proportion of “bargain” or “pound shops”. The main supermarkets are behind the High Street or on the edge of the town. Meanwhile there is some evidence that repair and maintenance of frontages and roofs is falling behind.

We heard that there is little cohesion amongst High Street traders: A “Hope for the High Street” event planned by the Arbroath and Area Partnership in October 2012 was cancelled due to lack of interest. Faced with competition from the supermarkets and the growing use of internet shopping, the High Street is going to have to find a new role. A certain amount can be done in terms of physical improvements – but it is likely that new types of uses will be necessary, specialising in personal services. In addition, new business models may also have a part to play. For example, the Darling’s Coffee Shop on the High Street is a social enterprise run by Enable Scotland, the country’s major organisation working with people with learning disabilities. As well as providing a good service, it trains young people and builds their confidence and progress to paid work.

The budget hotel chains are not present in Arbroath. Their business model does not fit the scale of the market here. Nor is there any presence of the kind of boutique hotel that can run on a smaller number of bedrooms. Indeed, former hotels in the town have been converted into other uses, including apartments, and there has been a growth in “£20 a night bed only” in the bed and breakfast sector. Executives visiting companies in the town stay in Carnoustie about 6 miles down the coast towards Dundee.

Retention of young people and attraction of graduates

There are several organisations and clubs in the town, including a semi-professional football club that helps to get the name known and to provide a focus for local identity. However, the overall picture appears to be that there is not much to do in town in the evening.

There are two secondary schools and a valued Further Education college. However, links between education and business could be strengthened. Lack of higher education opportunities in the town means that there is a haemorrhaging of young people who leave Arbroath to go to university. Getting them back is difficult, and there appear to be formal policies addressing this challenge. Building a sense of identity with and attachment to the town would help, together with measures to emphasise and augment the attraction of Arbroath for family living and skilled employment.

Branding

There is no attractive website that is exclusively committed to promoting Arbroath. This is a serious weakness. Place marketing is fragmented. You can find out about Arbroath in a number of places, but usually only as part of Angus. The Visitor Centre at the harbour can give you a map of Arbroath with advertisements for attractions in Dundee, but no “Arbroath leaflet”. The road signs marking the entry to the town contain a coat of arms but nothing more to communicate the essence of the town.

There appears to be no systematic marketing of the town to the Scottish diaspora, other than through the general benefits that accrue through the annual Tartan Day, which is held in annually in the USA to coincide with the anniversary of the 1320 Declaration. The 700th anniversary in 2020 will provide a window of opportunity that needs to be planned for.

Governance

The Arbroath Town Centre Regeneration Group is a key institution. It comprises representation from the Arbroath and Area Partnership, the Arbroath and Area Local Community Planning Team, the Royal Burgh of Arbroath Community Council, local businesses and local elected members. It is the nearest thing there is to an organisation that exists exclusively to mobilise citizens and businesses behind the cause of Arbroath as a place to be, a place in which to live, work and play. The town needs to decide how it is to position itself strategically in the face of the challenges it is facing, and in the context of the emerging landscape of external competition and diminishing public investment.

2010 Town Centre Health Check conducted by Angus Council

The report ([download](#)) described Arbroath as having an “elongated town centre that connects the harbour to the abbey”.

The survey found that Arbroath’s town centre had relatively good accessibility for shoppers and ease of movement for pedestrians, but there was a significant level of discount and charity shops. There was a good balance between shops and services, but a high vacancy rate, and few local retailers selling high value goods. Shoplifting was a more frequent offence than in the other Angus town centres.

The report noted that the viability of the centre is likely to be influenced by a range of factors including the condition of the commercial properties and the wider built environment. In Arbroath, “noticeable areas of modern, unsympathetic development” were recorded. Quality of shop fascia and signage was generally low. While the pedestrian area provided “places to linger” it was not seen as “inviting as a place to dwell”.

The study benchmarked Arbroath’s town centre against the other 6 towns in Angus. One local councillor responded to the above report with a call for a 'golden mile' from the harbour to the abbey.