

Axbridge Community Partnership

Axbridge Street Audit – 12th March 2013

Malcolm Gould – Axbridge Action Group (AAG)

George Ware – AAG

Peter Harding – AAG

Mike Taylor – Axbridge Town Council

John Frewin – AAG

Jack Skillen, Head of Projects, Living Streets

Introduction

Jack Skillen is from Living Streets “... the national charity that stands up for pedestrians...working to create safe, attractive and enjoyable streets where people want to walk”. (See Living Streets website) Jack was initially commissioned by Axbridge Community Partnership (ACP) to come to Axbridge to give feedback on how to develop the Streets of Axbridge into a more people friendly ‘shared space’. Jack was sent the Axbridge Parish Plan, the report from the Streets and Parking Improvement Plan for Axbridge 2008 and The Streets of Axbridge Town Square Trial Proposal 2012. His attendance was funded by Axbridge Action Group (on behalf of ACP) and Somerset Towns Forum (STF). Later in the day he took part in a wider presentation and discussion at a STF Event in Axbridge where people from towns across Somerset attended.

The audit was conducted by the party doing a walking tour around The Town with Jack Skillen. Jack engaged in conversation about the streets as we walked around. The comments below are feedback from Jack and from the other parties in the group.

High Street and West Street

Jack said High Street/West Street presents as a driving road. Designed for cars not people. The design of the street is particularly a problem for wheelchair and pushchair access. We need to consider how we can break up the ‘straight through’ roadway (‘race track’) feel of the roads here, where cars appear to enjoy travelling fast through the chicanes. Why don’t we have cars parked more in this street? This would not distract from the street being a ‘people space’ and could help create a street design to limit speed of cars and help with parking problems.

West Street and Houlgate Way junction – and beyond

Jack said that the ‘highway signs’ at Houlgate Way junction are not good as an entry treatment. They re-enforce the idea of this being a ‘highway’. Instead the ‘Gateway’ idea (as suggested within the Streets and Parking Improvement Plan for Axbridge 2008) is a better approach. Consider one Gateway here to west of Houlgate Way just before Compton House as an alternative to the proposal of having 2 ‘Gateways’ on start of West St and Houlgate way?

Note:: A gateway can involve raising the carriageway, narrowing the junctions through build-outs and putting in features such as planters. This could also be designed to create a space for people at the bus stop.

All agreed that we should look to change the priority with cars being sent down Houlgate Way rather than West Street as the way into the Town.

All agreed we need a proper path to Cross. This would help more than anything to connect up Cross and Axbridge as walking destinations to each other.

Houlgate Way and Church Road

Jack said junctions going onto Houlgate Way and Church road (and generally) – do not need to be so wide. Tighten junctions to close down the space and slow traffic down and make it easier for people to cross. There is good paving on junctions with textured surfaces at the edge of the pavement.

The landscaping on Houlgate way is a good feature. Jack said can we not have quality features like this in other parts of the town, or more targeted where people may benefit from them – eg in Square and space opposite Choate House?

Jack wondered why is there double yellow lines opposite surgery on Houlgate Way. Why can't cars park here? There is space here for many cars to park. Jack questioned the extent of double yellow lines throughout the town, particularly as parking appears to be at a premium.

Town Car Park and Meadow Street area

Walking bus – and shelter - is good feature for the Town.

Jack noted that the gateway is closed through the Nursing home. This needs to be opened to enable better public connection to different parts of the town and give better wheelchair user access for nursing home residents to the square/shops/pub/café/etc.. All said that this would also environmentally and socially connect the nursing home to the town

All agreed the the Town Car park as a facility is good and it is good that the town has acquired this.

Jack said - why don't we allow car parking on Meadow Street between the car park and Square. There is space here for many cars to park.

We all liked the feature of the extended square area coming out along Meadow Street. We all noted that the cars we observed noticeably slowed when they entered this 'zone'. This is particularly useful because there is a clear different colour from the road and the colour of the paving in the Square proper and the tarmac road on Meadow Street. It creates delineation for car drivers that they are now entering a different zone where they need to share the space with other users. Even though there is no formal pavement, the shared space principal seems to compare favourably in this context with the narrow pavement and carriageway on High Street/West Street as being good for pedestrians.

Jack suggested we extend this idea of an extended zone – in a different colour / material - for all of the roads as they enter the Square.

The Square

Jack talk about his impressions of the Square. He said that it is noisy with the vehicles. There is a constant rumble of traffic going through the Square. Cars do not slow down as they enter the Square from St Mary Street in the same way as they were observed to do as they entered the paving entering the Square from Meadow Street. Turnover of traffic was believed by all in the group to be constant and significant. More that you would think would be happening for such a small town. Why is there so much traffic?

- Felt that parents coming to pick children up from school is a big issue. People drive from different parts of the Town to pick up their children.
- All traffic going through the Town 'funnels' via the Square.
- People often choose to drive through the Square rather than going around the bye-pass because they want to see what is going on and if there is anyone they know in the Square that they can wave to.
- Sat navs often guide lorries into the Square

Agreed that it is not the extent of vehicles going through the Square that is such a problem but rather the speed of the vehicles and behaviour of drivers in relation to pedestrians. The 'shared space' idea is not working here as well as it should. Noted that there are a lot of people walking around and through the Square. People do amble across the road in the Square.

Jack said that his impression is that the design of the road through the Square is obsolete. Designed for a previous set up where the road through the Square was a part of the main road from Wells to Bristol.

Noted that the colour of the paving in the Square is not different than the surrounding roads and there is no significant creation of the feel of entering a different zone in terms of street usage. Jack suggested having a strip (couple of metres wide) of different paving (ie brick red like on Meadow Street) as the road from St Mary Street enters the Square (just up from the post office).

Jack said that in the town of Chillham, Kent they have put the car parking in the middle of their square. This pulls the cars out from the edge of the square and creates more of an impression of the square as a square and gives space for people to gather, and improves views of the historic buildings. Jack thinks we should consider changing the car parking in the Axbridge Square like this. Such a change would also remove the straight through roadway that is presently the street design.

We all felt that there needed to be more spaces for people to sit in the Square. Seating provided by cafes and pubs and public benches. We need to create more of a space where people want to gather. One person suggested that we should have somewhere that is a shelter in the Square. Also need more bike racks. We need cyclists to want to stop in Axbridge. Have a look around and use the shop, pubs café and museum.

At one point someone stopped us in the Square and asked what we were doing. When she heard she said that we should remove all of the parking from the Square. Another woman said that we should stop cars being able to go through the town.

Jack noted that the road is 'straight through' in the Square. We need to instead consider how we can change the course of the road through the Square. This would help to create more of a shared space. Can we trial moving the parking over? One idea was to move the parking to each side of the guttering going down the middle of the Square. Note that this would mean less parking available – but Jack feels that there is plenty of spaces throughout Axbridge where car parking could happen. Just not so much parking is needed in the Square.

St Mary Street and beyond

For St Mary Street all agreed good idea to have another gateway. 'Welcome to Axbridge Community Zone – 20mph' or 'Welcome to Axbridge Conservation Area – 20mph'.

Jack noted that the cars parked on St Mary Street/Cheddar Road provide an effective limiter on the speed of vehicles coming into the town.

Walking into and out of the square, it felt very natural to walk in the road to enjoy the town. However, this requires some nerve as drivers go quite fast, and so would be less appealing to vulnerable residents or visitors. It is important for all users to share the limited space in this conservation area, and enhance the 'place' value over the 'movement' value of traffic.

Moreland Street

Noted that Moreland Street is a busy shared space – people and cars – already. Many people walk through here with children – especially from the School. It was felt that many more were deterred from walking children to school so would drive short distances as the road is not appealing to walking with children. Jack suggested that we do more to re-enforce this area as a shared space by installing paving similar to Meadow Street.

The 20mph speed limit

All agreed that the 20mph speed limit throughout the town is generally not adhered to because the roads are not designed for 20mph. We need to develop a street design that re-enforces the need to go 20mph or less. Some suggested that the speed limit should be further reduced to 15mph. This is the speed limit often used for residential areas in USA.

One proposal from George was to extend to an overall 20mph speed limit for the whole town. The belief is that there would not be much more than 1 minutes max more time it would take to drive through the town and a 20 mph limit would emphasise the idea that the Town is a shared space with pedestrians etc. This would also be re-enforced by any changes to be made to the street design.

Conclusions

Concluding comments from Jack:

- The Axbridge Streets invite car drivers to drive fast. The roads can be viewed as like a race track.

- In general, the balance of parking seems wrong. It impedes places that people want to spend time to enjoy the town, while allowing traffic to move through at maximum speed. Need to consider parked cars in different parts of the roads/streets. Parking is a barrier to getting people on side with proposed schemes, so use it to get people on side.
- Need to consider how to break up the long site lines that prevail throughout the streets (E.g looking through the Square and down West Street). We need to use more deflectors such as planters or gateways, quality signage as well as parked vehicles. Use of materials in the right places can also signal that the roads are for all users to share, and break up the linearity of roads through the town.
- Shared space treatment, at least in parts, may be a more appropriate use of space than narrow and inconsistent pavements, particularly for vulnerable users and tourists.

What is holding us back?

We discussed with Jack the history of the ‘campaign around The Streets of Axbridge’. We discussed – what is happening that is holding progress back?

Some in the group said that many people are cynical about the whole idea. Some people say.... “There is no point in talking about the way streets could be unless we have the money”.

Jack said that instead we need to have agreement on a clear plan – things that we want to see happening. It is only through this that we can grasp funding opportunities that might emerge over time. For example this was the case with securing the funding for the improvement works on Meadow Street.

Jack said get clarity on what are the main things that most people do agree on. For example most people say we want:

- Thriving shops and other retail outlets
- Attractive spaces
- Revealment of more of the heritage of Axbridge
- More places for car parking
- We are not anti-cars
- We want a space where children, elderly and disabled people can access more easily
- More walking in the Square.
- More people gathering in the Square

Jack said that the plan for a trial is a good way to progress.

All agreed that the idea of widening the seating area outside the Oak House is good for the trial. In addition Pete proposed we create seating area outside the Alms House. Both sites cater for outside activity and have south facing aspects. Key for any trial is to make sure it is combined with an extensive process of consultation.