
USK MONMOUTHSHIRE

Tackling traffic and safety concerns through place-making and lower speeds



For Usk Town Council and Monmouthshire County Council

November 2016

Hamilton-Baillie Associates Ltd

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Introduction

The quality of public space is critical to the economic and social vitality of towns and villages. The streets and spaces between buildings provide the essential connections between the houses, shops, schools, pubs and meeting places, connections that define a community and underpin its identity. For a town to prosper, a coherent public realm is essential to provide the framework for the day-to-day human activity and exchanges that form the basis for urban life.

For most towns and villages, especially those close to major traffic arteries, it is the impact of vehicles and traffic that determines the quality of its public space. Every community relies on the connections and movement provided by the network of streets, lanes and roads. Buses, cars and lorries and the transport they provide will continue to be an essential component of towns and villages for many years. But traffic can also isolate and erode urban life, and the vitality and economic resilience of a community depends to a great extent on balancing the pressure from traffic and maintaining a coherent and attractive public realm.

For towns close to busy traffic routes, such a balance is especially challenging. Usk is a striking example. Its location close to the A449 junction generates particular pressures. Potential future growth and its implications for traffic volumes add to the challenge. Retaining and enhancing the quality of the town centre in the face of growing traffic has become critical to the relative prosperity and quality of life in Usk.

For this reason, Monmouthshire Council and Usk Town Council have taken the initiative to explore the potential for measures capable of restoring a balance between traffic and town quality. The initiative builds on many years of discussion and debate, and reflects the strong emphasis placed on the need to retain a thriving and safe town centre.

Usk is not alone in seeking ways to improve the balance between traffic and the qualities of place. Similar initiatives are underway elsewhere across the UK to find ways to moderate traffic speeds and improve safety and comfort in villages centres. *Manual for Streets (2)* of 2011 set out the policy context for balancing the qualities of place with movement in urban centres. Guidance such as *Traffic in Villages: a toolkit for communities* published by Dorset AONB has identified a range of measures to support such objectives. The economic and social benefits generated through revitalized town centres are well established. Usk presents a particularly acute example of where such interventions and improvements are necessary.

These brief notes are not intended to resolve all the issues associated with traffic in Usk. Traffic pressures on Bridge Street and the Usk Bridge, together with wider pressures beyond the centre, are not susceptible to simple measures. Nevertheless the initiative to examine the issues provides a starting point for a community determined to retain and enhance the quality of the market town. The ideas and principles explored are intended to serve as a catalyst for future public and private sector measures that will support the long-term revitalization of Usk as a thriving and attractive market town.



Background

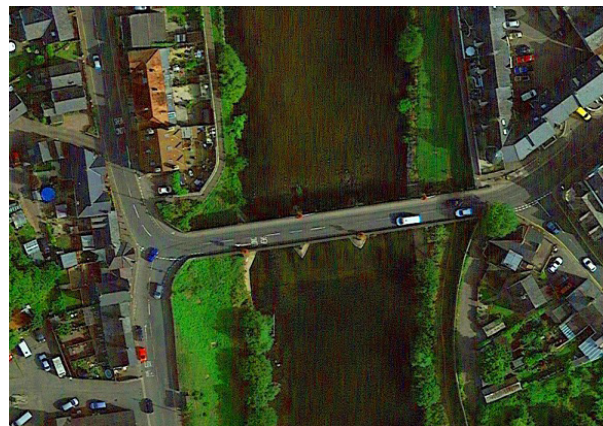
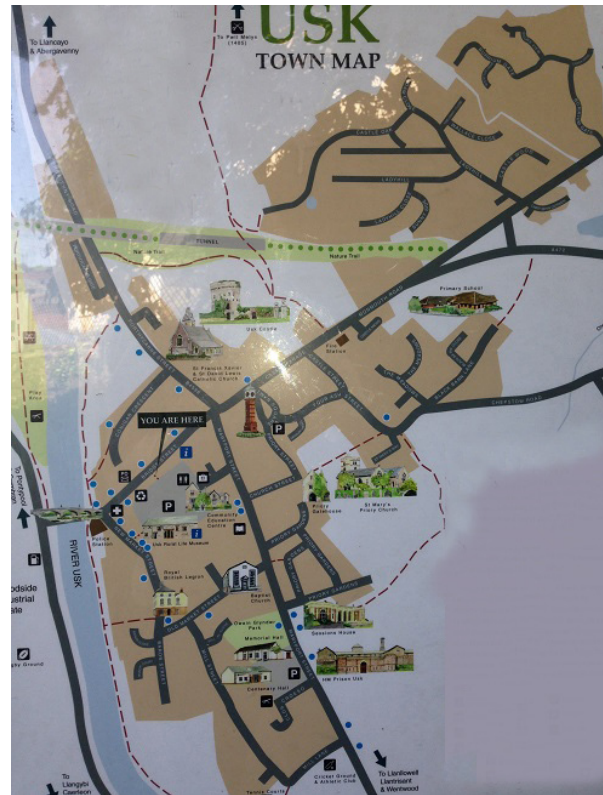
These notes stem from an initial one-day visit to Usk on 15th November 2016. The visit followed from an invitation by the Traffic Sub-Group of Usk Parish Council and Monmouthshire County Council in response to growing levels of concern amongst residents and traders about the impact of speeds and volumes of traffic on the town.

The visit included a well-attended meeting in Sessions House, Usk, with residents and members of the Town Council, officers from Monmouthshire CC., and representatives of other organisations. This allowed an introduction to some of the core principles underpinning emerging best practice for traffic in towns and villages, as well as some initial observations and recommendations concerning Usk. This report summarises many of these points. The visit also allowed the author to observe a number of key locations in and around Usk, and to re-aquaint himself with the town and its circumstances.

Usk Town Council has sought to address issues of traffic, speeds and parking pressures for over a decade. The intention of the initial discussions was to develop a broad consensus concerning the direction of policies for Usk's public realm in reducing the impact of traffic, and to ensure that resources and effort is steered towards measures that are most likely to be effective, and to avoid distraction from issues that are less likely to be feasible or practical.

Usk is not alone in seeking fresh ways to address traffic issues. Across the South Wales, South-West England and the rest of the UK concerns about traffic speeds, safety, pedestrian confidence and the quality of public space in towns and villages increasingly dominates local concerns. The publication of *Manual for Streets* (2), alongside guidance such as *Traffic in Villages*, has provided renewed impetus to reconciling the realities of traffic with the qualities of streets and spaces that provide the economic and social basis for communities.

Usk -



The town - Initial observations

Despite the significant changes in retail and employment patterns of recent decades, Usk retains its considerable charm and attraction as an historic market town, with a distinctive identity. Its specialist shops and its location on the River Usk combine with notable landmarks such as the castle, bridge and Sessions House to create a memorable sense of place. The population of around 3,000 seems likely to increase, and although lacking rail connections, the town enjoys good road links to Newport and Monmouth.

In common with many towns focused on a river crossing, there is a notable divide between the main part of the town and settlements including Llanbadoc running north-south on the west side of the bridge. The bridge itself is narrow, with a footway on one side only. Both of the landing points for the bridge are awkward, especially on the west side where the A472 makes a sharp turn in front of a former toll house.

The proximity of the town to the junction of the A449 appears to generate higher than normal speeds into the east side of Usk as the A472 gradually narrows from a wide, fast highway into the older heart of the town. The approaches from the north and south also lack any clear or consistent transitions as they enter the built-up area.

It is notable that much of the charm and key places in Usk are not immediately identifiable from the streets. The attractive *Three Salmons Hotel* at the central crossing of Bridge Street with Maryport Street has little street presence, and the main square and car park (Twyn Square) is not especially evident on approaching the town. Sessions House other landmarks do not share a presence with their adjoining streetscapes, and the much of the town seems modestly concealed from the passing motorist.

Although not at crisis point, there are signs that the retail opportunities in the town may be suffering from the limitations of the heavily-trafficked streets, with a number of unlet or underused premises.



Design principles

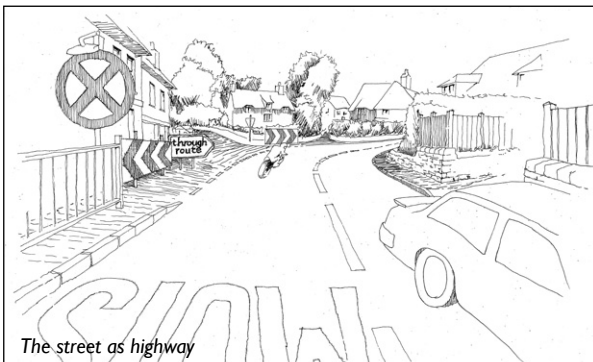
Retaining and enhancing the quality of Usk requires a set of combined measures to modify the response of drivers to their surroundings. In particular this means reductions in speeds, whilst maintaining steady vehicle flows to cope with traffic movement. Conventional traffic calming measures such as speed humps and chicanes have not helped achieve these objectives in the past, and are unlikely to do so in the future. Amendments to the current 30 mph speed limit are also unlikely to be effective on their own. The appropriate change in speeds and driver expectations can be achieved by introducing more subtle modifications to the streetscape known to slow traffic and improve safety.

The first such change relies on creating a clear point of transition between the faster approaching highways and the context of the town centre. A distinctive change in scale and street characteristics on the boundaries helps alert drivers to the change in circumstances. For an extended towns such as Usk, a number of such transitions may be appropriate. This is especially important where a town is close to a major trunk road.

Secondly, lower speeds can be fostered by reducing the apparent widths of carriageways. This can be achieved through modifying verge and kerb details. The use of central median strips to divide carriageways, where widths permit, can also help.

Thirdly, reducing the linearity of streets, and emphasising their relationship to adjacent buildings, can reduce speeds. Removing or minimising road markings such as centre lines can also be helpful. Lower speeds result where streets are punctuated by a series of perceived spaces or “events”, which reduce the linear characteristics. Animation and activity alongside the carriageway in drivers’ peripheral vision, sometimes referred to as “edge friction”, is an additional factor in modifying the speed environment.

Above all, the extent to which a town is perceived as a place in its own right, rather than a mere stretch of highway, influences drivers’ speed and expectations. Such place-making is key to achieving more balanced, low-speed streetscapes. Lower speeds in turn enhance the potential for establishing places, creating more forgiving road environments better suited to the complex unpredictable context of a town centre.



Usk entry points

The construction of the A449 and the gradual extension of Usk around Ladyhill to the north-east have combined to diminish a clear transition between the nearby highway and the medieval town form. Centre lines continue unbroken into the town centre. The wide, sweeping entrance to Ladyhill retains the high-speed highway feel. It is not until the entrance to Twyn Square that the older town streetscape is evident. The town entry signboard is positioned well away from the visual boundary, and the continuity of the centre-line markings re-inforces the continuity between highway and Usk.

Likewise the approach along the A472 from the north suffers from the fragmentation of the settlement and the gaps in the built environment. The former industrial site near the crossing of the former railway line provides an opportunity for a clearer gateway, but the evidence of the railway and bridge is lost from the road. To the south, the stretch between Llanbadoc and Usk Bridge is straight and linear, with little to announce the approach to the town centre.

The bridge, of course, serves as a very distinctive entry point into the east part of the town centre, although the transition is eroded by the emphasis that has been given to the main route.

The approach from the south along Maryport Street is clearer, with a definite transition between countryside and town. To the north, the B4598 makes a slow, gradual transition along Abergavenny Road into Porthycarne Street, with the centre lines and consistent carriageway widths blurring the point of transition.

Some relatively minor changes to the way in which the entry points to Usk are detailed, and the transition to a low-speed environment are conveyed to drivers, could provide one small but significant change to the speeds and driver expectations as traffic enters the town.



The high-speed highway context of the A449 and A472



The wide, sweeping junction with Ladyhill on the eastern approach



The straight, linear southern approach to Usk Bridge from Llanbadoc



The approach to Usk Bridge from the north along the A472

Parking management

No community ever has sufficient parking. The latent demand for parking is huge, and the availability of space, especially in older towns and villages will always be limited. Every community has to strike a difficult balance between the accessibility and convenience of on-street parking, and the detrimental effect that such use of precious town centre space can have on the quality and attractiveness of the public realm, particularly in terms of congestion and pedestrian comfort.

Usk is fortunate to have a reasonable amount of off-street parking. On street parking is clearly a problem in some locations. Yellow lines have only partial effect, and enforcement services are distant and occasional. The existing yellow lines cause problems for Usk by reducing the visual quality of the public realm, and by increasing the linearity of the streetscapes. They also add to the clutter of highways signs and markings that strongly influences the response and expectations of drivers.

Usk is an example of a village that could benefit from the introduction of a *Restricted Parking Zone* (RPZ), shifting management away from parking restrictions towards identifying appropriate place to park. Such schemes have been used in places such as Chepstow, and more widely in towns such as Bury St Edmunds, Chester, Halifax, Petersfield, Poynton and Wells. Clarifying the spaces available for parking can help dissuade drivers from parking inappropriately, and can help to reduce the apparent width of carriageway and thus reduce speeds. There are a variety of ways to define parking bays, from surface treatments to simple framing inserted setts.



Clearly defined on-street parking



Parking defined by edge strip - Petersfield, Hampshire



On-street parking bays - France



*Town entry sign for
Restricted Parking Zones*



On street bays and visual narrowing. - Poynton, Cheshire

Highway clutter

Towns increasingly rely on their intrinsic attractions and distinctive environment to maintain the footfall essential to economic viability. Especially for towns under pressure from traffic, and particularly from larger vehicles such as HGV's, it is very easy for highway paraphernalia to gradually accumulate and begin to overwhelm the intrinsic qualities of the town.

This steady erosion of quality in the public realm is not merely an aesthetic issue. It has a direct influence on the perceptions and behaviour of drivers, and their response to the built environment. The more that the streetscape feels like highways, the less tolerant drivers become of the constraints and compromises that are an inevitable part of a lively townscape. Signs and markings act as a screen between drivers and their surroundings, drawing attention away from the quirky and unexpected incidents of an historic town towards highway clutter.

Usk has resisted this erosion better than many other towns, but it is not hard to see the process increasingly undermining the unique qualities upon which the long-term future depends.



Yellow lines and road markings accentuate movement and speed over place



Traffic pressure, and measures to contain it, can degrade the public realm



Untended accumulation of signs on the historic Usk Bridge

Place-making

A final and critical component of the toolkit for improving traffic in towns builds on the concept of place-making. Empirical research indicates that driver speeds and behaviour can be modified and improved through awareness of a distinctive set of places or memorable spaces through which routes pass. Such routes punctuate the linear continuity of the driver's perspective, and contribute strongly to emphasizing the unpredictable and multi-purpose context of a market town.

Such places need not be formal spaces or village squares, greens or market spaces. Very simple measures to help frame spaces and provide a clear connection between buildings and adjoining space are often sufficient. A line of setts, or a slight change in paving can be enough.

Usk presents a number of such opportunities. At present there is little to interrupt the linear progression of the driver's experience through the town, and few cues to draw his or her attention to distinct places. The more such places extend their presence and activities to front the street, the more drivers moderate speed and engage with the realities of the busy centre.

Above all, successful towns need a centre. In river crossing towns, the bridge is often the central focus. In Usk the centre feels closer to the junction of Maryport Street with Bridge Street, or around Twyn Square. Neither of these spaces is adequately recognized by the street arrangement as it stands. The Three Salmonds Hotel could benefit from a stronger presence on the town crossroads, and the entrance to Twyn Square, marked by a magnificent cedar tree, would be greatly enhanced (and made more accessible) by incorporating Monmouth Street into its overall spatial design.

Throughout Usk there are many other important and potentially attractive spaces that would serve to reinforce the spatial qualities of the public realm, and to downplay the highway characteristics. Examples include the attractive terminus of Old Market Street, and the space outside Sessions House. The junctions that form the landing places at either end of the bridge could also benefit from clearer place qualities.



Twyn Square entrance - potential place-making on Monmouth Road



Key town centre space at crossroads outside Three Salmonds Hotel



Potentially attractive landmark place on Old Market Street



The junction with New Market St. at the eastern landing of Usk Bridge

Usk - The next steps

This initial visit and brief notes represent merely the first stage in a long journey. A community response to the traffic issues in Usk calls for a thorough programme for local public engagement and participation. The presentation and discussion are intended to assist with a long-term vision for Usk as a thriving and attractive town. Much refinement and modifications will be required, especially in partnership with Monmouthshire as highway authority. The interests of local businesses are key to such a scheme to maximise the economic and social benefits that a cohesive town centre can bring.

Although the circumstances for Usk are unique, there are benefits to be gained from learning from precedents. These can range from relatively simple rural schemes that combine speed reduction with place-making. One example is West Meon in Hampshire, where speeds on the A32 were reduced and a village centre re-established. At a more ambitious level, schemes such as the regeneration of Poynton in Cheshire demonstrates the potential for urban regeneration and place-making despite very heavy through traffic. Visits and further analysis to such examples can build up understanding and knowledge, and afford valuable lessons for Usk.

Changes to the public realm are not easy. Streetscape alterations are disruptive, expensive and almost always controversial. A community has to undergo many months of debate and persuasion in order to establish sufficient consensus to take a project forward, to raise the necessary funds and support, and to withstand the discomfort and inconvenience of any construction works. Such consensus building requires patient engagement at both a local and county level to establish agreements on the key principles behind the approach. It is hoped that this brief visit may form a basis for exploring the vision further, and modifying the details in light of local responses, opportunities, and ever-changing circumstances. We would recommend a programme of events over the coming months to initiate this critical engagement process, and a follow-up more detailed feasibility study if the necessary funds can be raised.



Extensive local engagement will be required to develop the scheme



Low cost speed reduction and place-making - West Meon



Low speed village centre with heavy traffic - Poynton

Conclusions and recommendations

An initiative by the Town Council to address the long-term future of traffic and the public realm in Usk is well timed. The gradual erosion of the essential qualities and attractiveness of the town as a result of traffic and speeds is very evident. At the same time, new principles and techniques are emerging that can address some of these issues while allowing streets to retain their transport functions. Relying on the Highway Authority alone, with a limited palette of traffic calming measures or lower speed limits, is unlikely to resolve or ameliorate the issues.

Funding in a time of public sector austerity is clearly a challenge. It is likely that the Town Council and its community will need to be much more directly engaged in fund assembly and packaging together the various potential contributions, particularly those that are increasingly available from development, such as the Community Infrastructure Levy. Over coming years, much maintenance and street replacement will take place, and it is essential that such works are informed and guided by a long-term vision.

With limited resources and voluntary leadership, it makes sense for the Town Council not to waste time and energy on measures that are unlikely to be realistic or beneficial. For example, we do not think it is likely that major changes to the road network or weight restrictions will be feasible. Neither would the introduction of one-way systems or road closures help. One-way systems bring a range of additional highway paraphernalia, and tend to increase overall speeds. A focus on a set of small scale, modest enhancements to adapt the streetscape will be the most effective means to address the major concerns.

Traffic will remain a reality for most rural communities for many years, especially for those close to areas of growth and development. Congestion will always be a characteristic of thriving towns and villages. However an approach based on the principles outlined and discussed are likely to be most effective in ameliorating traffic concerns, and helping to retain and enhance the long-term qualities of Usk.

