

## **50<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Erith Town Forum**

Yes, the January 2006 meeting will be the 50<sup>th</sup> time residents, councillors, business representatives and council officers have come together to discuss what is happening or should happen in Erith. When the Management Committee realised this fact we decided such a milestone should be celebrated, and we should do a quick walk down memory lane to reflect on what we have achieved during that time.

In fact the Forum grew out of the Erith Consultative Group first set up in 1995 and was funded under a Government initiative in 1998 called Capital Challenge which sought to promote wider community involvement in decision making. In the early days we had some young people from the Ocean Park Estate joining the meeting to let us know what they felt was lacking in Erith and the seeds were sown for the Youth and Family Centre. We are now trying once again to bring into the Forum some younger members of our community.

A supermarket in the town was high on the Forum's agenda and when Morrisons decided to build their southern flagship store here, a great cheer was heard, although very few of us knew what Morrisons' stores were like since they were mostly sited in the north of England. We have all been suitably impressed by both the service provided and the environmental improvements to the area particularly the renovation of the Pier. Unfortunately it took a long time and many heated meetings before the rest of the Town was brought back to life.

Much time and effort was put in by Cllr. Margaret O'Neill and Maisie Jamieson, the then Chair of the Forum, to ensure that the new Health Centre was built but with the decline of the market the Town lost a valuable retail attraction and all the remaining shops suffered. The Forum continued to press for regeneration and in the meantime pressed hard for better security and things to brighten up the town. We succeeded in getting CCTV, some tree planting, hanging baskets throughout the year and lights and community events at Christmas time. We even had our own skating rink.

The Forum joined in celebrating when the first blow was struck on the concrete car park and Carey's began their transformation project to produce Riverside Shopping Centre and of course we buried our Time Capsule in xxxxx. We worked with the Shopping Centre Public Relations Company in planning the "Jumping for Joy" opening celebrations, with members of the Erith Playhouse representing characters from Erith's proud history.

A model of the proposed developments on the Business Centre site was brought to the Forum in 2004 enabling all to see how the new Library, Shops, Foyer and Homes would look, once again allowing the community to comment on the proposals.

When fears that Erith Museum might be closed the Forum were there to support the volunteers in their effort to make sure this didn't happen and now we are watching very carefully as plans are being drawn up for the future use of the Carnegie Library building and again the future of the Museum. Erith has much history and the Town Forum decided that particular buildings should have identifying plaques. We had the plaques put up and with the help of local historians we compiled a Town Trail leaflet and placed an information board on the Riverside Gardens with a map identifying

those special buildings. The information Board was partly funded by Erith Rotary to mark their centenary year. (The leaflet is available in the library, pick one up and do the walk)

The need to engage with young people and promote positive activities was discussed many times and out of this came the TriForum which was a combination of Erith, Slade Green and Belvedere Forums all wanting to offer free sport and entertainment during school holidays. We have gone from strength to strength and this year have organised regular activities on Saturdays, Sundays and during the half term holidays. We also ran a whole week of Fun Days during the summer. All the activities are free of charge and are partly funded out of the grants the three Forums receive from Bexley Council.

Addressing ourselves to the older members of our community, for the past three years close to Christmas, Erith Forum have organised a free afternoon of entertainment, high tea and bingo for 140 senior citizens. We also embarked on our first seaside trip in September 2004 and using the vehicles and services of Bexley Accessible Transport we took 40 senior citizens on a day out to Broadstairs, once again free of charge, and much enjoyed by all who came.

An important role for the Forum is to keep residents informed about new initiatives that will impact on their lives. To achieve this we have organised presentations at our meetings on the Strategic Partnership for Bexley, Bexley Community Safety Partnership, CSAZ, Areas of Opportunity, Thames Road Improvement Schemes, Erith Western Gateway, Thames Gateway Bridge, Cross Rail, Pro Logis, Public Realm Improvements, Erith Riverside Conservation Area, to name just a few. Thinking particularly of the Conservation Area I am so pleased Erith Forum supported financially the creation of the mural on the wall of the White Hart.

Finally I mention Town and Around, born in June 2002 with four issues each year. Initially volunteers distributed it but now, with the grant from Bexley Council, we can afford to pay for some of this to be done. We know it is read because we get letters in about the articles appearing, particularly out historical pieces.

We are proud of the way the Forum has developed and are glad to acknowledge the enormous amount of friendly help and co-operation we have always received from the officers of Bexley Council. Erith Town Forum was the first forum in Bexley and we have led the way in community consultation. We are no longer just concerned about the Town Centre, we have branched out into a wider area to help achieve real social cohesion.