

The Ipswich Society

## *Fore Street improvement scheme*, The Ipswich Society film 1961

### **Background**

In 1946 Peter Boulton and Gilbert Hawker set up Boulton-Hawker Films. Their main objective was to make educational films. A series of films on local crafts was made between 1946 and 1947. Boulton-Hawker also made films on agriculture, market gardening and geography.\*

In 1956, Gilbert Hawker left amicably to concentrate on sponsored commercial films, leaving Boulton to continue with his passion for educational film, specialising in science, zoology, and botany. In 1959 Gilbert Hawker produced the film *Evening Star: the working day of the Evening Star, an Ipswich-based newspaper*. (duration: 16minutes, 23 seconds) and in 1961, sponsored by The Ipswich Society he produced *The Fore Street improvement scheme (duration 15 minutes and 50 seconds)*.

[\*Today, Boulton-Hawker Films continues to be a successful and thriving company, now run by Peter Boulton's son David.]

### **Film commentary**

“This is Fore Street in the spring of 1961, approached from the north at the junction of Orwell Place and Eagle Street. Here one can see the generally poor condition of the buildings, a number of which down the curve of the street are dirty and in a neglected state of repair.

Many of them are of considerable architectural merit, but sadly in need of renovation. Even flowers grow on the rooftops and rubbish collects on the tiles. Traffic density and close proximity to the docks all contribute to the very sombre appearance the buildings. One can see the low tone and generally dull and uninteresting effect in the streets as it was at this time.

For years dust and dirt from dockside granaries and coal and timber wharves has been blown and carried onto the buildings, the pavements, the sign-boards and even the trolley-bus poles. The ever-increasing numbers of heavy vehicles continually passing through in both directions have added their quota of grime and soot.

Cars, buses, lorries, tankers: vehicles of every description are using Fore Street more and more as each year passes. Its importance as a trading centre and as a through road to the housing estates and the new outlying industrial areas as well as a main route to the coast is becoming daily more obvious.

*[The Wheatsheaf Inn]*

Even this beautiful old building, a merchant's house of the early 17th century, with its raised plaster panel work and very fine windows – similar in character to the Ancient House in the Butter Market – has suffered the depredations of time.

*[‘CND Aldermaston March, Easter 1961’ and ‘Rock 'n' Roll At Its Best at The Baths Hall, Ipswich every Tuesday’ posters]*

Torn and tattered posters add to the general air of neglect. Improvement was obviously necessary if the many worthwhile buildings were to be preserved and the general visual effect of Fore Street brought up to a reasonable standard befitting its growing importance.

## The Ipswich Society

A concerted effort by every owner or occupier was undoubtedly required. The dull and dingy appearance was so universal and of such long-standing that it had become accepted and unnoticed. Apathy and lack of action on the part of those who should have been most interested was as obvious as the ever-increasing use of the street by vehicular and pedestrian traffic.

Obvious also was the very pressing need for an extensive clean-up. Many of the buildings are well known and are landmarks in the town. Sign-brackets, long forgotten, mar the character of many of the buildings. Dirty walls, damaged gutters, broken plaster, uncared for brickwork and rotting wood are everywhere to be seen.

*[Advertising hoarding, Fore Street/Angel Lane junction]*

The poster problem in the street is a major one. This large hoarding covers up the end of a building in very poor condition and is itself out of scale with the street. The small area of ground in front represents a missed opportunity and is of no real value to the public.

The derelict areas adjacent to and visible from Fore Street are used as parking and dumping grounds in a haphazard fashion. Curbstones, long ago worn away, have never been replaced, pavements have never been laid and bricks and rubble have been left strewn over the ground. With the urgent need for off-street parking, a comparatively small sum spent on resurfacing would pay handsome dividends.

This shows that the Corporation played its part in the improvement scheme, but there is still much to do. For instance, the condition of the trolley-bus standards is but one example. Until these posts and wires are removed, the visual scene is impaired and the completion of the improvements remains a problem.

By the time the store-risers [solid section at the base of a shop window] of some of the shops had been repaired and repainted, the area was so much smarter and brighter that it was almost unrecognisable as the previously dull and uninteresting section. As in so many matters, a little time, a little thought and then prompt, effective action will quickly produce excellent results. This stretch of pavement, having been relaid, made an immediate and marked improvement to the whole of that portion of the roadway.

*[Isaac Lord building, The Neptune Inn]*

Here is the junction with Salthouse Street... and this was originally a merchant's house with a way down to the courtyard and the warehouses backing on the docks still showing. The Neptune Inn, now a private dwelling, is perhaps one of the finest examples in the street of the merchant's house with its 17th century bay windows and other parts dating back to the 13th century and earlier.

*[Fore Snax (The Neptune Café), Esso petrol station]*

Further examples of dilapidation are seen here. One large gap in Fore Street has been filled by a modern petrol service station, backed on the skyline of the new Civic College on one side and St Clement's Church, not seen here, on the other. The service station is tidy, but improvement in depth still remains a problem.

*[original Salvation Army hostel]*

## The Ipswich Society

Work on roads leading off the street had also to be considered. This hostel, which had been an outstanding landmark for years with its interesting and unusual exterior, was cleaned and repainted. Its appearance today is now in keeping with its architectural importance.

*[Georgian frontage, east of Sorrel Horse]*

Sadly, this Georgian building of considerable character did not warrant bringing up to standard and has since been demolished to be later replaced by a temporary, but tidier, frontage.

*[Eastern Counties Farmers Ltd 60s block]*

This newer section required no further attention other than painting.

*[Social Settlement]*

The demolition of The Social Settlement, already under consideration, was brought forwards by the efforts of the Improvement Scheme Committee and this building also is now no more.

*[Offord's Newsagent's and neighbours]*

The street terminates with these half-timbered houses which were originally occupied by rope-workers. Their occupation, in its day, was flourishing trade; its modern counterpart still exists.

*[Painting the Rapid Radio Service shop, 13 Fore Street]*

Here is some of the work in progress, but a small part of the effort and activity which suddenly broke out everywhere up and down the street. Work went on a feverish rate for many weeks: washing, cleaning, scraping, painting. The workmen and contractors were busy everywhere.

And, starting again from the northern end of the street, we shall see the completed scheme. Let us go then up and down Fore Street following the improvements. In February 1961 the scheme was inspired by The Ipswich Society at a meeting with the occupiers. The idea was taken up with considerable enthusiasm and a committee was elected to carry it into effect.

A co-ordinating architect was appointed [Birkin Haward] and asked to empanel the necessary number of young architects to draw up proposals. This he did with great enthusiasm, believing that here was much of architectural value springing from 16th and 17th century origins and connected with the maritime trade of that period and since.

Originally the street consisted largely of merchants' houses with warehouses at the rear stretching along the dockside and this still dominates its character today. It belongs, of course, to a pedestrian age and is not easily adaptable to that of the motor vehicle. However, it possesses a number of consistent features which the architect considered worthy of preservation. His proposals, which were accepted in full, were as follows:-

- To take advantage of the curved shape of the street and to make a particular feature of the buildings forming the stops at the end of either vista.
- To restore all the buildings of architectural interest to their original colours and to re-emphasise their features using a co-ordinated colour scheme throughout, actually employing a limited number of colours and repeating these where necessary to create the impression of unity. At the same time the individual occupiers were asked to accept the colour schemes for their own buildings in the interests of the street as a whole.

## The Ipswich Society

- Recommended, too, were essential repairs to such items as rotting dormer windows, sagging gutters and leaking downpipes and the re-establishment of the scale of Fore Street by suitable treatment of the shop fronts while retaining its original character above this level.
- To eliminate or modify later developments which conflict with these qualities by the removal of unessential building features such as hanging signs and ugly street furniture.
- To prevail upon the local authorities to clean up sites for which they are responsible and national advertising on hoardings to be removed or reduced to scale, thus restoring the visual dominance of local business interest.

In his report, the architect reminded his clients that under the town's redevelopment scheme the whole of the north side of the street would be demolished within the next twenty years. Greatly to the credit of those who are under this suspended sentence they agreed that, in the meantime, life goes on. The improvements would be well worthwhile and that, in the spirit of enterprise such as this, they were much more likely to survive the operation when it happened.

It was agreed that the target date for completion should be the visit of Her Majesty the Queen on July the 21st. This did not allow time for some of the protracted negotiations necessary with local authorities for removal of some of the eyesores. However, they assisted greatly by cleaning and decorating properties which they owned, by repaving substantial sections of the street and by demolishing the Social Settlement.

More than ninety per cent of the occupiers of the street joined the scheme and carried out the recommendations at their own expense, which in some cases was considerable. The impact of this enterprise on the area around Ipswich was tremendous, as evidenced by the procession of sightseers thronging the street on foot and in cars during the evenings leading up to Her Majesty's visit.

Fore Street became a number one talking point in the town and it is of the greatest importance that this interest should be continued, so that the achievements and prominence gained will never again be lost to the commercial life of the street. The committee would have liked to see much more done but time did not permit. However, all the essential work was completed on schedule and the effort culminated in a completely co-ordinated decoration of the street with flower baskets and garlands. The effect produced, as will be seen, one of light-hearted gaiety.

The visit of Her Majesty the Queen provided yet another opportunity for Fore Street to shine and during that period it looked a picture. Draped garlands from one end to the other, hanging flower baskets, window boxes, flower tubs: all added to that gay scene on that memorable occasion. Fore Street was proud of itself and, judging by the complimentary remarks, Ipswich was proud of Fore Street.

As late as the day before the royal visit the final arrangements were still going on. Finishing touches were being put to paintwork, sign-writers were busy completing new fascia lettering in more contemporary styles, garlands were being adjusted and flower baskets were given a final watering before being rehung.

The activities of the previous weeks had reached a peak and no effort was spared to get the job done on time. It was certain from the results already apparent that a most worthwhile job was really being done well. And what a contrast here: the old [*junction of Fore and Lower Brook Streets – Sneezums corner*] ... and the new.

## The Ipswich Society

On the day of the visit all was ready. The streets were crowded and flags were waving. Early in the morning crash-barriers were erected and very soon vantage points were being carefully selected and claimed. Some people even brought their own chairs, ready for a long wait, while late-comers borrowed steps from nearby shops. Those with premises in the street had a grandstand view from their windows as did many of their guests, invited to make use of them for the occasion. Waving flags and smiling faces were everywhere.

The highlight, of course, was the Royal procession...

*[Motorcade passing up Fore Street]*

appearing now, with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in the leading car. A gay and colourful climax for a gay and colourful street. What a transformation in so short a time.

During the visit by Queen Elizabeth the First four hundred years ago it is said that she complained bitterly at the state of the pavements in Ipswich. It can truly be said that Fore Street led the way in creating a more favourable impression on Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second.

*[End of film: 'Produced by Gilbert Hawker Films Limited, Ipswich']*

*[Available to view on the World Wide Web on the East Anglian Film Archive website:  
<http://www.eafa.org.uk/catalogue/830>]*



The Ipswich Society