Life
new

for small
Towns

A public lecture by David Rudlin to the RIAI Anual conference in Westport Ireland October 2010. This was also part of the Westport Arts Festival and was attended by both architects at the conference and the general public.

"The most beautiful view I ever saw in the World... It forms an event in one's life to have seen that place so beautiful that is it, and so unlike other beauties that I know of. Were such beauties lying on English shores it would be a World's wonder perhaps, if it were on the Mediterranean or Baltic, English travellers would flock to it by hundreds, why not come and see it in Ireland!"

William Makepeace Thackeray 1842

Thank you for inviting me to Westport, I must admit my first reaction when walking around the town yesterday involved teaching grandmothers to suck eggs. What can I tell you about how to create a great town? - As Thackeray pointed out, Westport is already a thing of beauty, far more lively than any town of 5,000 people has any right to be!

1: My credentials....

1: My credentials....

I know little about Westport
I don't know much about Irish towns
I'm a city boy!

....which in this case, I fear, are pretty thin!

New Life for Smaller Towns

A HANDBOOK FOR ACTION

However as Paul said in his introduction, at URBED we did a lot of work in the 1990s on what makes small towns tick and how they can survive and thrive in a modern world of supermarkets and suburbs.

I also offer by way of credentials work that URBED has done in small towns like this place - Selby in Yorkshire. I say small, Selby at 23,000 people is a metropolis compared to Westport but it faces many of the same issues.
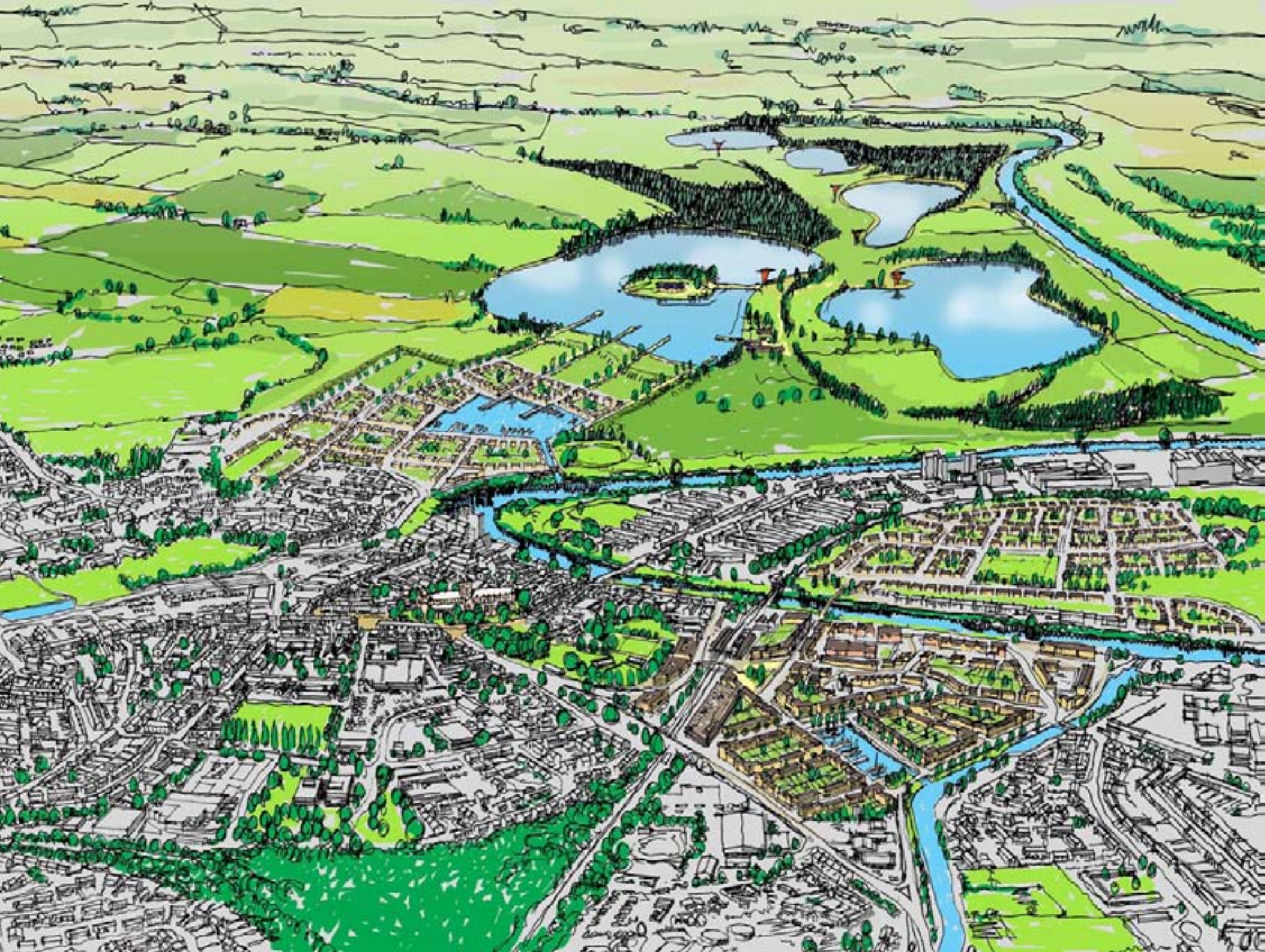
Here you can see some of the things that we proposed - turning a necessary flood defence system into a water park, turning over an obsolete industrial area to a marina and housing development, encouraging more people to visit and live in the town.

...and improving the high street, which as we heard from Simon on the walk-aroud, Westport has also recently completed.

Here is another example, the strange case of Tadcaster a town owned by a brewery barron from the pages of a Dicken's novel.
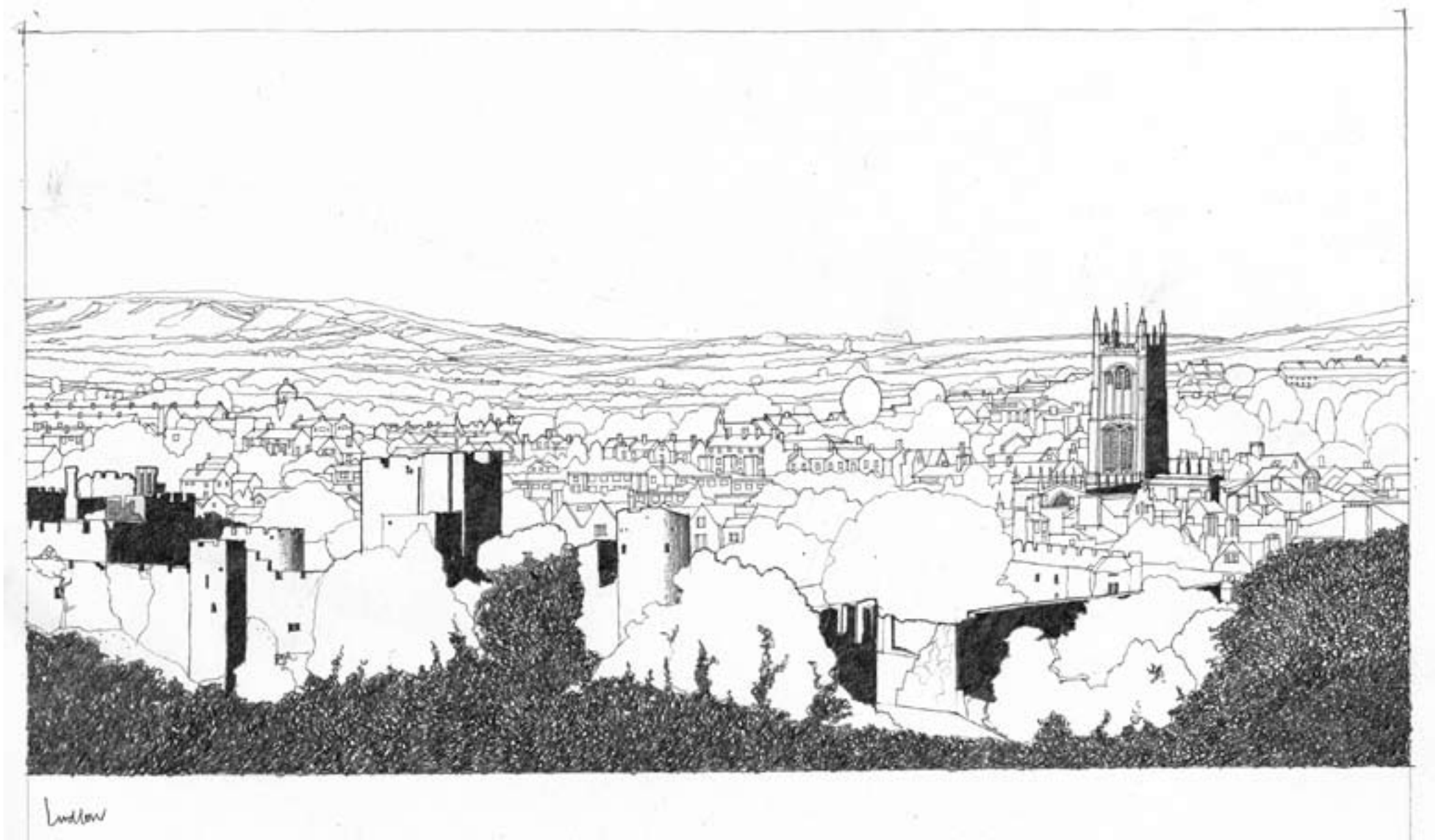
Here we proposed the same sorts of things, improving the quality of the environment, introducing attractions like markets, taming traffic.

THE ACADEMY
OF **URBANISM**

Ludlow

...and the final part of my credentials is as an assessor for the Academy of Urbanism on its great towns award. This is Ludlow, (pop 15,000) the winner in the year that I assessed the towns. Together with St. Ives (12,000) and Lincoln (80,000!) this formed the basis for the chapter that I wrote in the Academy of Urbanism's first book which I will be drawing on heavily today. Of course this year Westport is one of the three shortlisted towns in the AOU awards so we all, I'm sure, have our fingers crossed!
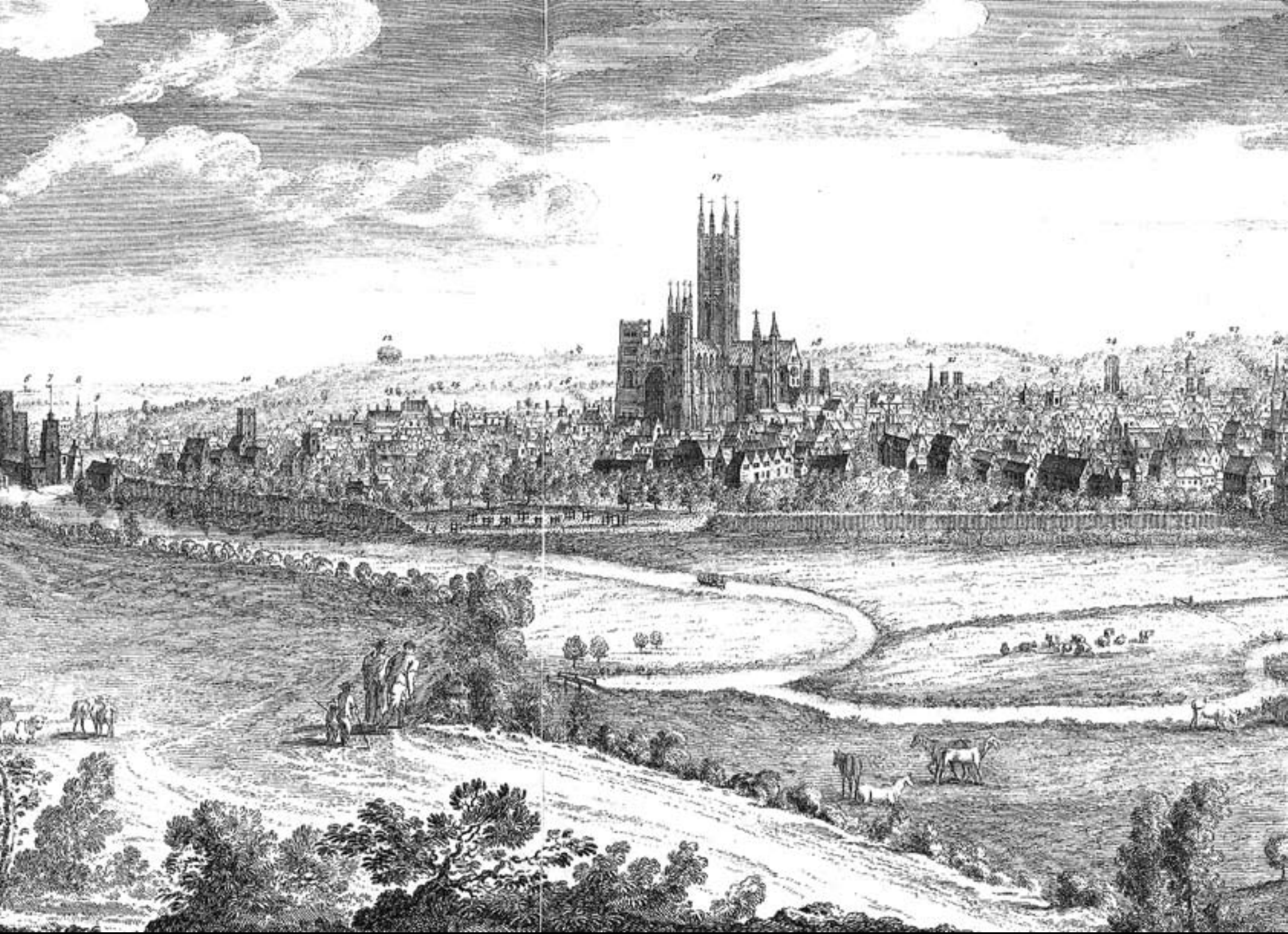
2: What is a town?

So lets go back to the beginning and think about what we mean by a town.

There was a time in England (and I'm guessing also Ireland) when towns were the highest form of urbanism. Until quite late in our history England had few cities and they were small, across most of the country the town was the seat of power.

TOWN HOUSE On the *town*

Paint the *town* red

down*town* / *town* centre

TOWN HALL

TOWN PLANNING

It is for this reason that the word 'town' in English often refers to something very urban.

I don't know whether the Archers travels to Ireland, but if you type 'Borchester' into Google images this is what you get, which also happens to be the town of Pershaw.

The point is that for the good residents of Ambridge, the fictional town of Borchester is the big smoke, its the place that they go to for sophisticated things like drinking in wine bars, shopping for clothes, having business meetings or engaging in liaisons.

small *town*

Those of us who are sophisticated city types look down on the town of course. We see it as somewhere small, uninteresting, and conservative, the place from which every red-blooded youth yearns to escape.

smallest scale for urbanism
largest scale for community

Its all a matter of perspective. However what really excited me about the towns I visited through the Academy was that they were at the same time the smallest scale place where you could find urbanism and the largest place where the community encapsulated the whole settlement. I loved the fact in Ludlow, for example that everyone had been to the same secondary school and therefore of a ceryain age knew each other regardless of social status.
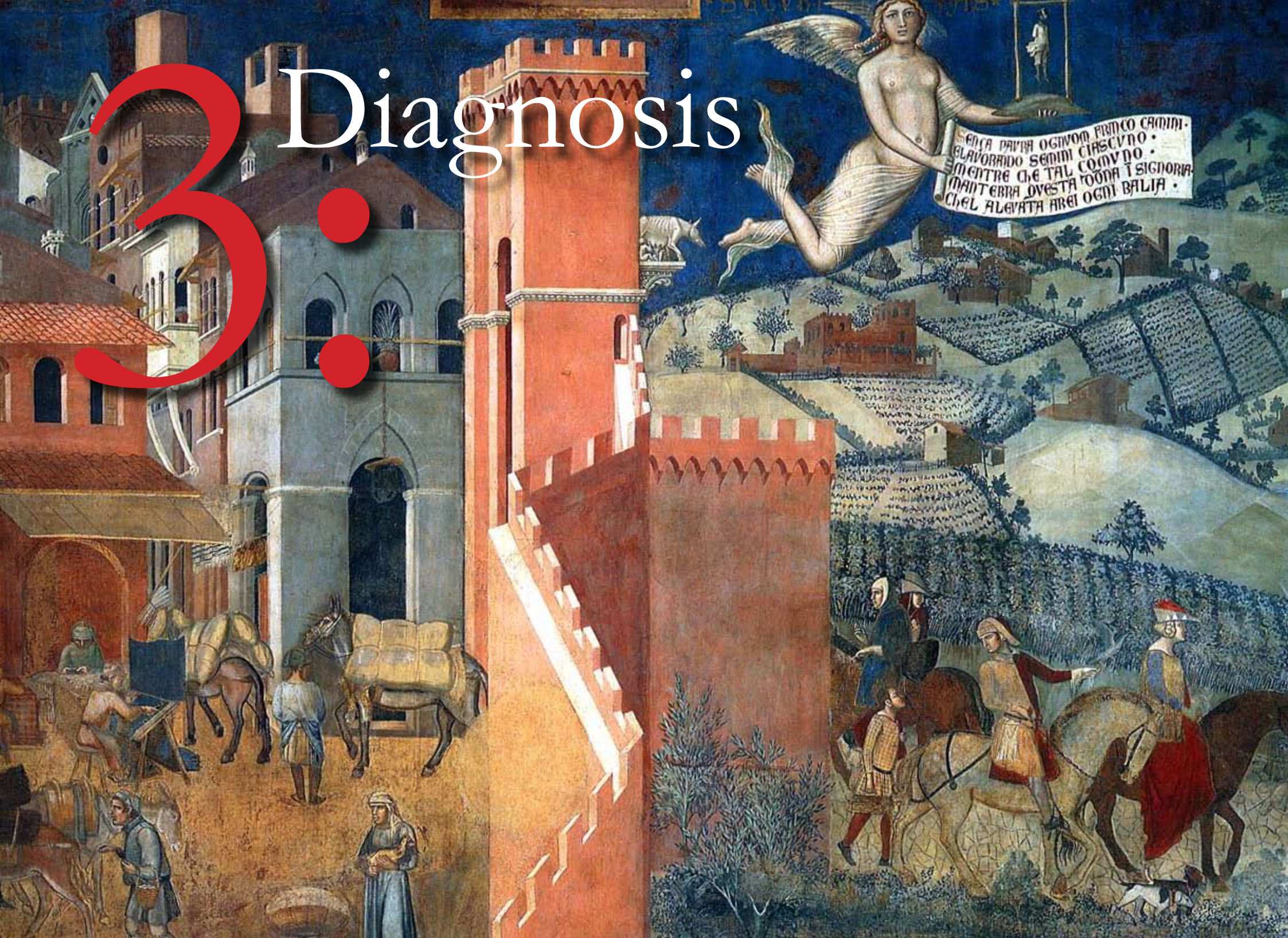
3: Diagnosis

OK now we are going to get medical - I want to start by trying to diagnose what problems towns face at the moment. I will then move onto the prognosis and then the potential treatment.
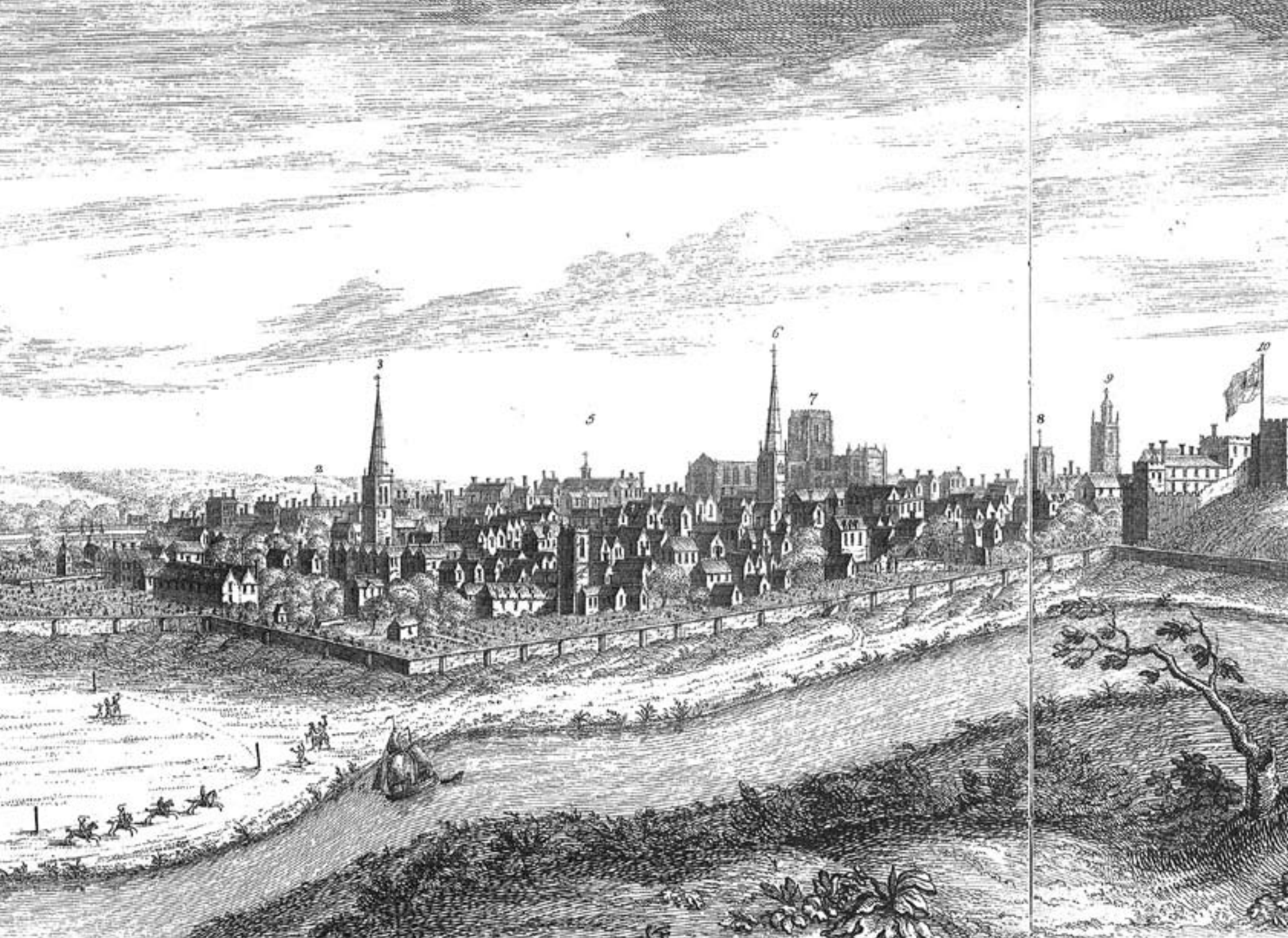
As I have said, England and Ireland were once rural nations where the highest form of urban life was the local market town (this, by the way, is Chester)

Then in England (but not Ireland) this was turned on its head by the Industrial Revolution. Towns like Cirencester (to the left) that were already well-establish before the industrial age fought hard, and largely successfully to resist its influence. The explosive growth happened in towns that were the small and unincorporated, like Manchester and Birmingham or on a smaller scale Dewsbury (to the right). Traditional towns maintained their character but at the expense of becoming backwaters, by-passed by the tide of progress.
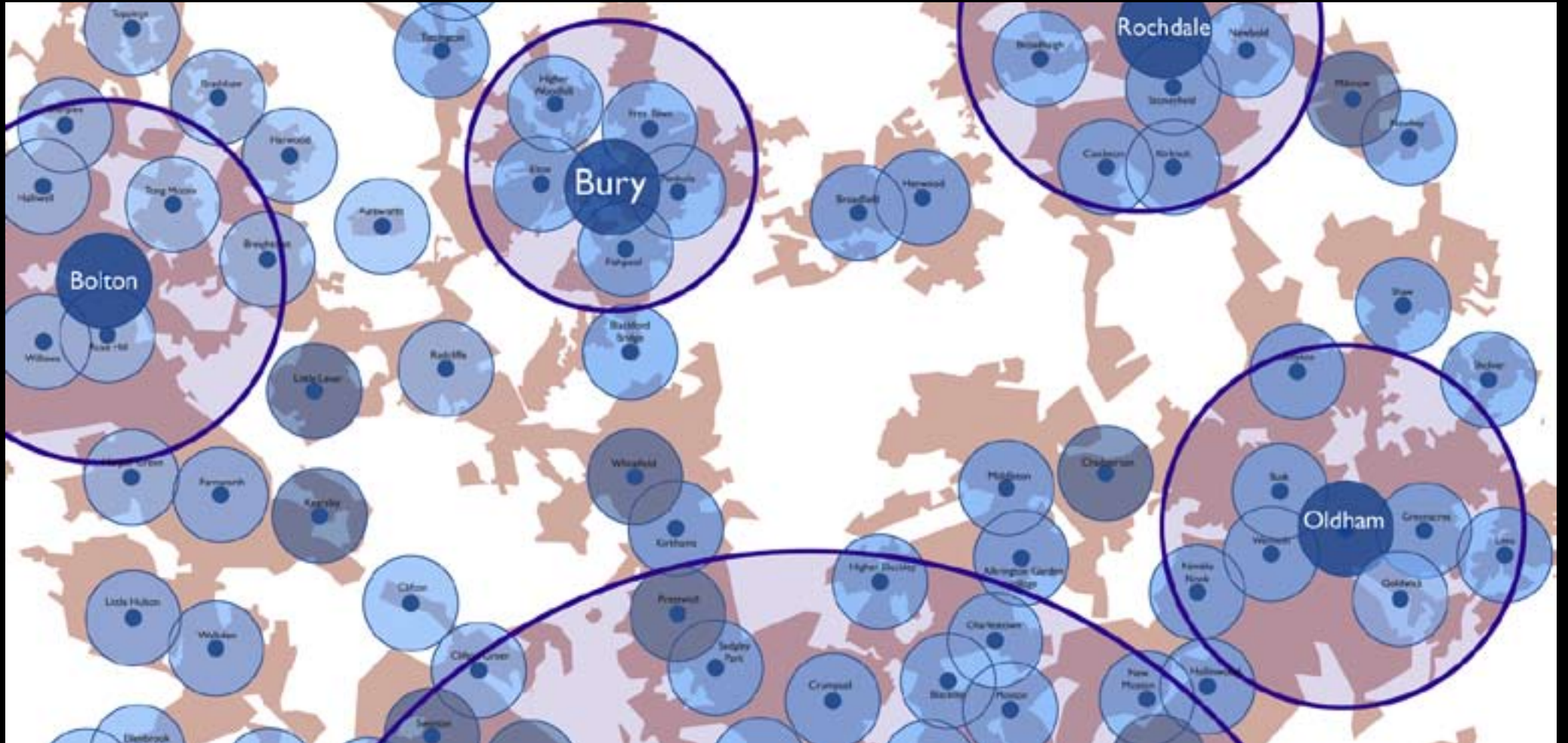
self-contained

So what pressures do these towns face at the beginning of the 21st century?

Towns in the past were self-contained. They provided services for their population and the surrounding rural area who were unable to travel elsewhere for these services creating a captive market.

self-contained

in competition

Today by contrast towns are now in intense competition with their neighbours. We heard earlier how Westport feared losing out to its big brother Castlebar just down the road. Today a town's catchment population is far more mobile. If they don't like what their town is able to offer it is just a short hop in the Range Rover to the neighbouring town or maybe twice that into the city. The towns of Ireland may not face quite the level of competition of the towns of Greater Manchester above, but there are none that are without potential competitors.

independence

In the past town every town was different. The shops and businesses were owned locally and were unique to the town. Every shop in this market square, with the possible exception of the Bank would have been an independent business. Towns also had their own town councils, local newspapers, sports clubs, institutes, and churches.

independence

Indeed the attraction of many successful towns today is the fact that they retain their independent shops and so are an antedote to the identikit high streets elsewhere.

independence

multi-national business

Unfortunately many towns have been strangled by the supermarket on the edge of the centre. In one town we looked at, the turnover of the delicatessen counter in the supermarket was greater than the the combined turnover of all of the shops on the high street!

autonomy

This is a poignant picture of the last meeting of Darlaston Town Council in the mid 1970s. Darlaston is a small town in the Black Country where we have recently worked....

autonomy
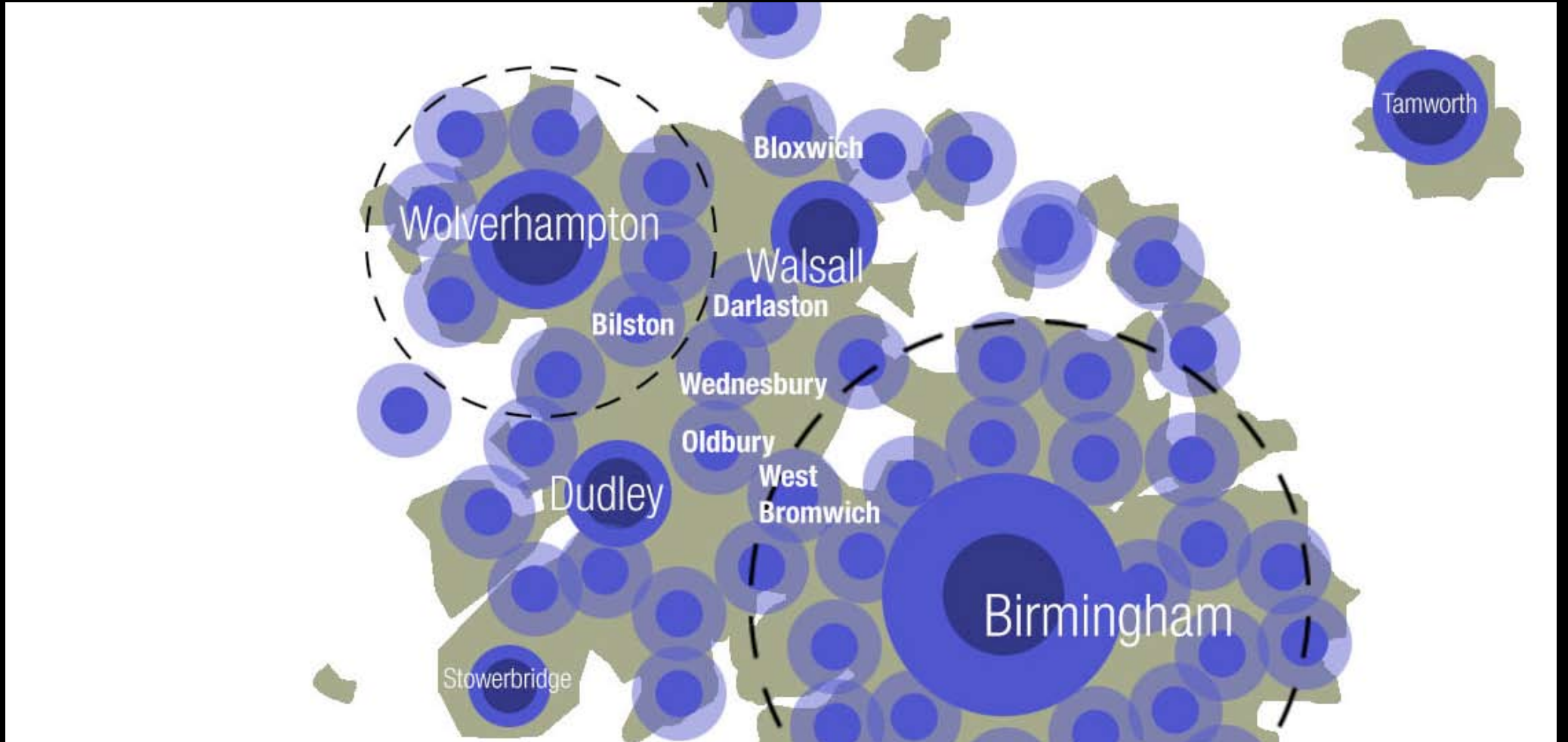
ruled from afar?

.... which as you can se is a very crowded part of the world. Darlaston like many towns lost its autonomy in the 1970s since when it has been ruled by its big neighbour Walsall. Local papers, where they survive, have also been absorbed into larger media groups not willing to invest in journalism to cover small town issues.

distinctive

This is Ludlow where there is a tradition of carving the head of the builder and his client onto new buildings, a tradition that this modern client has maintained. Every town used to have its quirks and idiosyncrasies....

distinctive

clone-town

.... whereas now every high street looks the same and is dominated by the same handful of multiple retailers with standard shopfronts and identikit products.

local employment

We also forget that towns used to employ a lot of people. There were thousands of people working in agriculture and local industries like the port above in the small Fenlands town of Wisbech.

local employment

efficiency/rationalisation

Much of this employment has gone. Farming has rationalised and employs a fraction of the work-force it once did. Industries have become part of larger conglomerates, often to see the inefficient small town plant closed-down. The harbour in Wisbech is now a marina...

mixed community

And towns were once mixed communities with rich and poor, squire and serf living within the same social space (or maybe I'm romanticising the past?).

mixed community

grey / middle class

Today many towns have become dominated by the middle-aged and the middle-class. They have lost many of their young people in an age when the UK government set a target that half of young people should go to university. Meanwhile locals can't afford local housing and are replaced by affluent newcomers from the city.

4: Prognosis

Which brings us to the prognosis. What will happen to towns if these trends are left unchecked? It seems to me that we will end falling into one of the following four categories:

Commuter town

Many towns within reach of a city have become commuter towns. This is Sherburn to the east of Leeds, once a strong independent town, now little more than a dormitory town. This is generally viewed by local people as a bad thing. However there is a clear difference in the north of England between those towns with a rail connection to Manchester or Leeds which are prospering, and those without, which are in decline.

Retirement town

Those towns that are a bit further away but which are beautiful – either in their own right or due to their setting – have become retirement centres. This is Ludlow that was in decline until it was discovered relatively recently by wealthy professionals from London who was it as a good place to retire. This is often also seen as a bad thing, but it has been the saving of Ludlow because the town has integrated these newcomers and made good use of their wealth and expertise.

Tourist town

Beautiful towns have of course also become tourist centres and some like St. Ives have done so with great style. The trick is to attract tourists without pandering to them and to absorb them without allowing them to spoil the thing that they have come to see.

Isolated town

Then there are those towns that are neither within reach of a city, or particularly beautiful, which have lost their traditional industries and seen the depopulation of their rural hinderlands. What is the future for somewhere like Wisbech above (which is actually a beautiful Georgian town). I'm not sure I know the answer and there is certainly a danger that these towns continue to decline.

The problems:

Of success:

lost identity/pressure of development/traffic

Of decline:

lost identity/vacancy/loss of trade

Both:

Authenticity/vitality/young people/life blood

So you take your pick - towns today are either dealing with the pressures of growth and incomers such as retirees or tourists, or they are suffering from decline and the loss of their traditional roles. Both types risk losing their sense of character and authenticity.

The hard truth is that towns need new blood – the trends I have described mean that they are losing their population, their local businesses and their independence. The only way to counteract this is to replace the lost people and their spending power. I'm afraid that a successful town is not the one that resists incomers, but the one that embraces they without losing its character.

To go back once more to our small town (and credit to Ben Hamilton Bailey for the illustration). We need to harness the pressures that most towns face... without spoiling their character.

5: Treatment

Which brings us to: What's to be done?

New Life for Smaller Towns

A HANDBOOK FOR ACTION

1. Improve shopping offer
2. Diversifying the attractions
3. Coping with the car
4. Creating pride of place
5. Resourcing initiatives

Back in the 1990s our handbook for small towns was organised around five themes. It includes a host of examples of towns that are still worth looking up. The report is also full of checklists and action points for how to revive towns.

However when you analyse all of this good advice it boils down to just 2 questions:

Only 2 questions

1. Where are the people going to come from? (Quality of life)

2. Where are they going to earn their money? (Wealth creation)

5a: Wealth creation

This is the most basic question we can ask – no town will survive for long if its residents have no way of making a living. The economy of towns has traditionally been based on farming, which once employed far more people that it does today. The town was a market for farm produce and provided services to its employees. Its industries were often related to agriculture, like farm equipment engineering, animal feeds or brewing. Unfortunately none of this can be relied upon today.
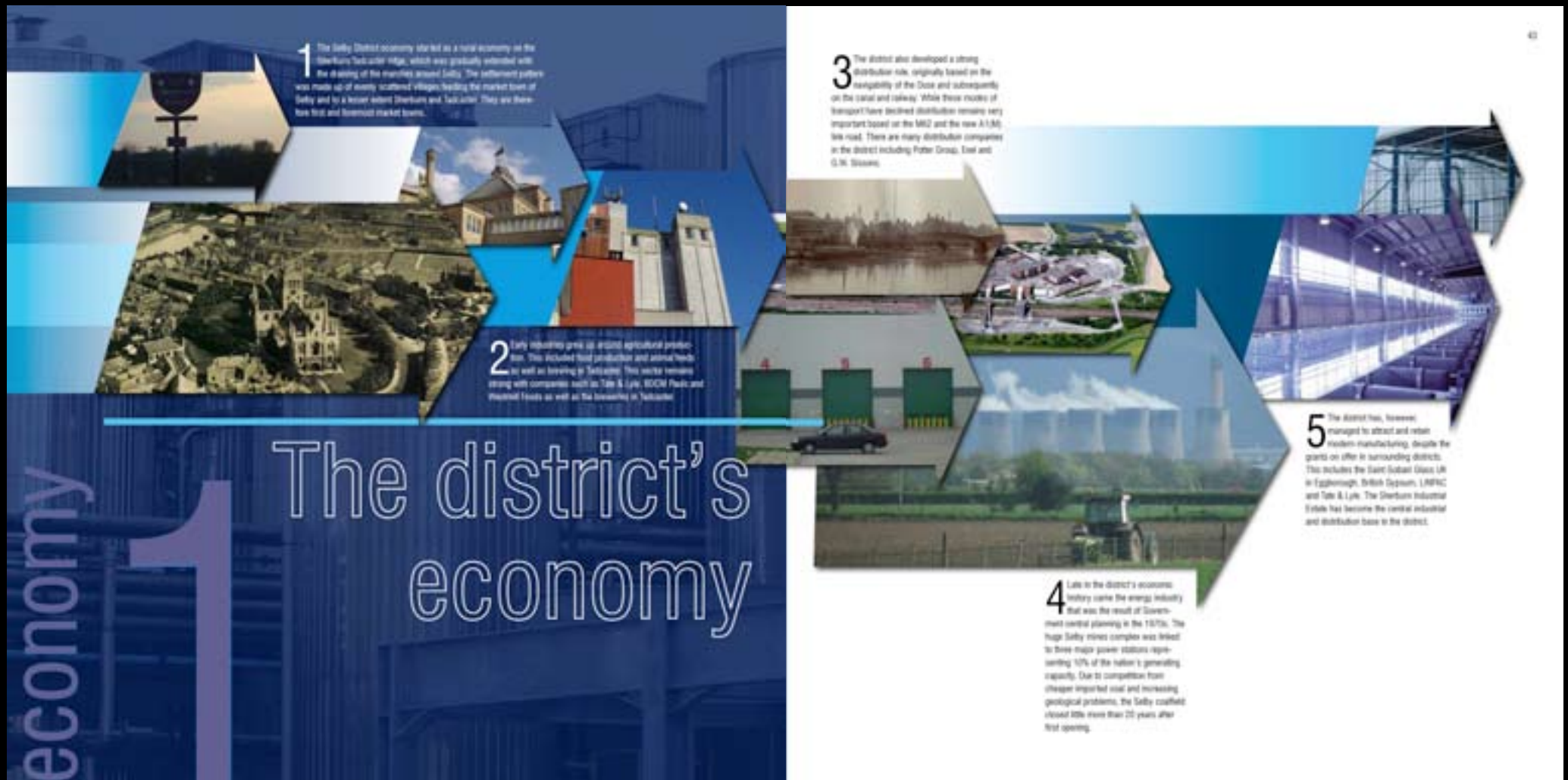
Local employment

This is not to say that we should give up on traditional employers - the brewers of Tadcaster still employ hundreds of people and other towns retain local employers. The starting point for any strategy must therefore me to protect what you have.

Inward investment

...and there may be scope to develop this. Selby's agricultural economy, for example made it an ideal place for bio-technology businesses, particularly given its proximity to York Science Park. I understand that Westport's economy is based in part on Botox, which is manufactured in the town. I'm reminded of the town of Deal in Kent that has benefited from the local Phizer plant where they supply the world with Viagra.

Inward investment

But inward investment doesn't have to mean a factory – the Tate in St. Ives has transformed the fortunes of the town and is now one of only three year-round tourist attractions in Cornwall (the others being the Eden Project and the National Maritime Museum. The Tate is not in fact that big, what it gives to the town is the power of its brand and the way that it highlights the importance of St. Ives artistic legacy.

Inward investment

Here's another example in the town of Ardrossan on Scotland's west coast. Ardrossan was dominated by an ICI oil depot that closed down. Turning over part of the ICI docks to a large marina has attracted people from Glasgow who come down to spend their weekends messing about on their boats and spending money in the town.

Inward investment

Even more improbably – this is 'Another Place' by Anthony Gormley, a traveling installation of 100 cast iron figures that was installed on a bleak section of beach in Crosby. The council have since raised the money to buy the piece permanently and it has transformed the beach from somewhere used by no one, other than local dog-walkers, to somewhere on the cover of the North-West of England tourist brochure.

Importing wealth

This brings us to the idea of importing wealth. Increasingly in a global world, money is made in the cities. London dominates the UK economy and places like Manchester (pictured) dominate their regions. Some of the most affluent towns like Alderly Edge (where many of the Manchester United Players have mansions) don't create any wealth themselves – they import it from the city. They do this by attracting commuters and visitors who make their money elsewhere and spend it in the local economy.

Importing wealth

The classic example of this is Lowell outside Boston. This was a textile town that lost all of its mills. It responded not by creating new employment but by making itself a good place to live and thus importing wealth from Boston. After a number of years companies started to ask why their employees were comuting to expensive premises in Boston and started moving to Lowell. Eventually all of the old mills were full of computer companies employing more people at far higher wages than the mills ever did.

5b: Quality of life

So the key to Lowell's revival was to making itself a good place to live. This brings it to the second question - what quality of life can a town offer? As cities have found for many years, places that generate wealth but are not good places to live end up losing their population. People take their money and go and fine somewhere nice to live. Indeed many people in cities aspire to live in attractive towns - addressing quality of life is therefore a good way of attracting people and important wealth.

Quality housing

The first question is the quality of the housing - are there homes available and of what quality. We saw today how Westport has been addressing this with some examples of excellent new housing.

Quality housing

I include this shot because the housing doesn't have to be modern. However ideally it should be urban. People living in car dependent, cul-de-sac based housing estates on the edge of town will feel less connection to the town and once they are in their car they can as easly go and shop in the neighbouring town. Much better, as we have seen in Westport, to create attractive walkable neighbourhoods linked to the centre.

Food/lifestyle

One very effective strategy is to focus on quality of life – an escape from the city rat-race to some-where more leisurely where you can take your time and enjoy life. This is encapsulated in the Slow Food movement and its town equivalent, Cittaslow. This started in the towns of Tuscany and has now spread across Europe. There are I think five or six Cittaslow in the UK including Ludlow and Perth. Strangely enough whenever we have suggested it as part of our work in small towns the reaction has been negative - 'you calling us slow!' – maybe we are doing something wrong.

Quality environment

We then get onto some of the natural advantages that many small towns have - the fact that they are beautiful and unspoilt. This is one of my favorites, Devizes in Wiltshire which has this incredible sequence of space - as good as any of the Italian towns that we study as urban designers.

It starts in the main square with its fountains and memorial....

Quality environment

As you walk across the square, the town hall starts to dominate the view fronting onto a smaller sqare off the main one.

Quality environment

As you get closer you notice a second civic building terminating the vista down the street...

Quality environment

Quality environment

As you enter that square, also of course full of parked cars, the a new vista opens up to the church tower...

Quality environment

... which is entered through yet another space, and then a gateway into the green church yard which is right on the edge of town.

Vitality

But beautiful spaces are nothing if they are deserted. The thing that brings town environmemnts is life and vitality - not everywhere but on the high street and in the square. Lots of places put huge effort into the design of paving and street furniture – the irony is that in successful street you can't see any of this because of the people!

A mix of stuff

Towns need more than houses and shops, they need a mix of businesses and other activities if they are to remain lively and feel like genuine places – it helps when like St. Ives you have a traditional activity like artists studios. Art like so many activities is much more effective if it is done for its own sake rather than for the benefit of visitors.

Local services

And remember the traditional role of towns as a provider of services, wher you can buy a pair of shoes, get your hair done, see a solicitor and get the car fixed. The attraction of towns should be that these are local businesses with high levels of customer service.

Traffic?

And then there is the knotty issue of traffic. I know this has been an issue in Westport and the three day trial when traffic was excluded from the centre had to be cut short when it created grid lock. Actually towns were always busy places - with horses and carts before the car. I tend to think that the above scene would be little improved by removing all of the cars and many shops have found to their cost that they lose trade when their town is bypassed or their street pedestrianised. The key is to get traffic speeds down to walking pace so that the cars can mix with pedestrians.

Traffic?

One very successful example of this is Hebden Bridge which is up against Westport in the Urbanism Awards this year. A major commuter centre for Manchester and strangely a focus for the north west Lesbian community, Hebden Bridge introduced a traffic management system (see map) that reduces the impact of cars but retains through traffic.

Cool

Which brings us to that most intangible of qualities! Towns have suffered for years from being terminally uncool! This is St. Ives again that has used surf culture to change its fusty sea side image. Away from the sea towns have used cycling, climbing and other extreme sports. Abersoch in North Wales has used boating, Hay-on-Wye has used books.

The least cool thing in the world however, as every teenager will tell you, is trying too hard to be cool!

Cool

This is Perigueux in the Dordogne, that I have been visiting for nearly 30 years to see my wife's family. Over that time it has transformed itself from a slightly dull sleepy place to somewhere lively and really rather cool.

It could of course just be that I have become middle aged over the same period!

Great towns are not those that resist change but those that embrace it.

And so to my conclusions...

Towns that resist change are destined to stagnate - painful as it can seem, towns must change and indeed must embrace change.

Successful towns attract people, absorb and integrate them and use their energy...
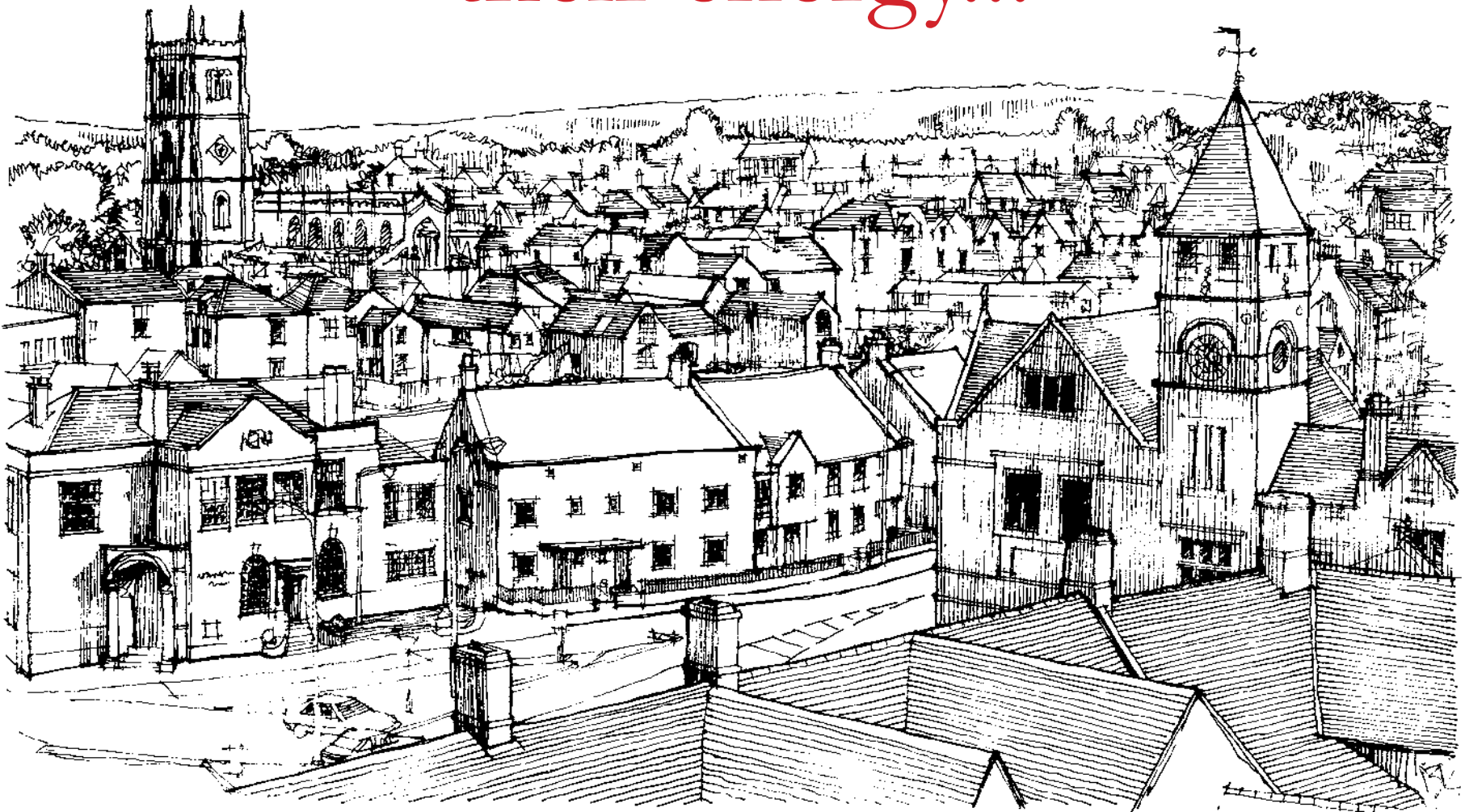
That change is likely to involve incomers be they commuters, retirees, day trippers or tourists. Towns need this new blood and the energy and money that it brings. Towns that are not attracting these people need to work out ways to do so, those that are need to find strategies to accommodate them without changing the character of the place too much.

The trick is not to try too hard

Or at least not to be seen to be trying too hard! People are attracted to genuine places. If they wanted somewhere artificially created to appeal to them they would go to Dinsneyland or Alton Towers. As someone in St. Ives said, the town is a good place to visit because it is a good place to live.

Authenticity is crucial: if you can fake that you're bound to succeed...

Because people are attracted to real places, however that reality is created!

Thank you!