

Fifty years ago the Archery Ground and its terrace of listed Regency villas – both integral to James Burton's original design for his New Town of St Leonards – were swallowed up by Hastings College. This was despite the fact that the land had been used as a public open space for 100 years and had been bequeathed to the residents of St Leonards in perpetuity for their recreation and enjoyment.

Those with long memories still smart at what many thought was a shabby deal. For a long time it threatened to wipe the heart of Burtons' St Leonards off the map altogether. Historic buildings were torn down or gutted in mysterious fires.

It was probably too much to expect St Leonards would get its stolen gardens back when the college finally relocated to Station Plaza in Hastings in 2010. But it was surely reasonable to hope for a redevelopment that was, at last, sympathetic to an area recognised nationally for its architectural and historic uniqueness.

This looks a forlorn hope, judging from a planning application that was slipped without fanfare into last week's Hastings Observer. The newly cleared land is to be crammed full of multiple blocks of flats and townhouses of stunningly indifferent design. There will be a total of 163 housing 'units' squeezed onto this small, confined, sensitive site, with the Grade II listed terrace chopped up into 27 apartments.

It will be the largest housing project in the conservation area since Burton created his New Town in 1830 and, like the original theft half a century ago, residents of the area are being railroaded.

There have been 'dozens' of meetings between the council and the applicant (according to the planning brief), with private presentations to elected councillors. But many residents remain totally unaware of a plan that will bring upwards of 300 people (and cars) into the area. There have been no open, public, meetings and no serious opportunity for the broader community to question the aims of the council and the developers. With the plans formal submission, the only option left for residents is to register an objection.

This is a dereliction of the council's duty to public participation. The planning application should be withdrawn so that proper public consultation can take place. St Leonards was robbed half a century ago. Are we going to let it happen again?

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