



Redevelopment in Post-war Weston

A report produced for Weston's Borough Council in 1947 suggested major changes to our town. The existing buildings along Beach Road should be replaced with multi-storey hotels and blocks of flats. A wide link road cut through Waterloo Street, Worthy Lane and West Street from Boulevard would improve access to the sea front. A new railway station should be built on the rugby ground, and a conference hall put up in Ellenborough Park.

These plans were never actioned, but they did lead to schemes in the 1960s which affected Weston's historic centre. Union Street was widened and became a southern extension to High Street. The gardens of Alexandra Parade became a giant traffic island. After 118 years, St John's School on Lower Church Road was closed in 1964 and then demolished. It was replaced by a concrete multi-storey Technical College (now the main campus of Weston College). The design and scale of the college shocked many Westonians at the time. The building still towers over the town, despite changes to its outline in recent years.



Maine Square, 1957 © courtesy of Weston Library



Sidmouth Cottages, 1957 © courtesy of Weston Library



Carlton Street Looking East, 1957 © courtesy of Weston Library

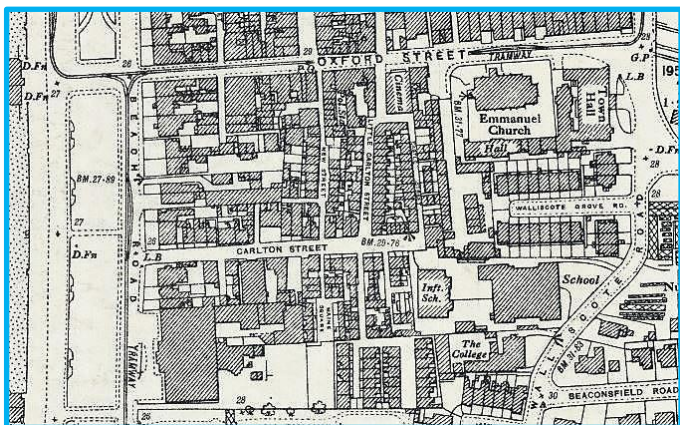
Weston's most notorious redevelopment of the 1960s was of the area between Oxford Street and Carlton Street. This neighbourhood dated back to the mid-1800s, when rows of terraced workers' houses were built. Emmanuel Church was surrounded by a maze of narrow streets, with names such as Willow Cottages, New Street, Castle Street, Maine Square and Sidmouth Cottages. Many of the houses had been occupied by the same families for generations.

The district had escaped major bomb damage during the Blitz, and was largely intact. The Borough Council, however, was determined to redevelop the area and bring it up to date. In 1961 a report was commissioned from architects Chamberlain, Powell & Bon. This proposed adding new council offices and a library to form a civic centre with the existing town hall. Blocks of flats and a circular hotel tower would also be built.

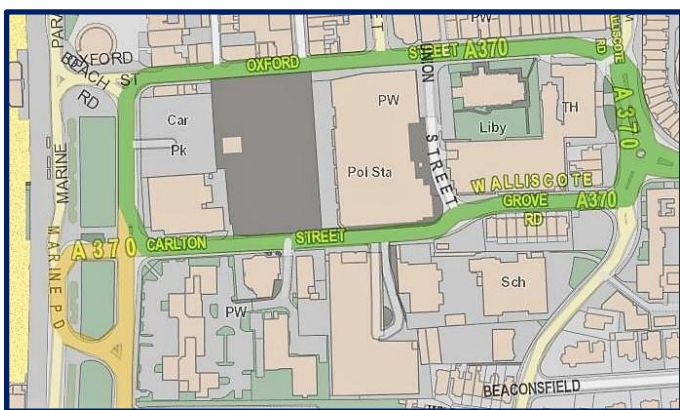
At the centre of the development would be a square multi-purpose building providing underground car parking. Shops, cafes and a bowling alley would be at ground level. A first floor garden terrace would house a cinema, restaurant, and a conference hall with tiered seats. When not in use, a retractable floor would convert the hall into a swimming pool.

The architects produced a structural model of their scheme, which is on display here in the Seaside Gallery.

The cost of the scheme was estimated at £1.5 million, later revised to over £3 million. This was too much money, and the plan was scrapped. Instead, councillors gave the go-ahead in April 1964 for a development of shops and flats costing £750,000. Demolition of the surrounding streets had already begun, on the basis that many houses were unfit to live in. The community were horrified that their homes were considered slums. Albert Watts, a local resident, said: "It is monstrous to pull down these houses. They are not slums. Many are little palaces to the people living in them."



The Carlton Street area before redevelopment © North Somerset Council



The Carlton Street area in 2017 © North Somerset Council

The Vicar of Emmanuel, the Rev Ernest Bowes, supported local people in their battle against redevelopment. He said of the houses: "It is not right to say that they are unfit for human habitation, as if they were dog kennels...they are decent little houses occupied by people who have taken a pride in their homes."

It was no good. More than 100 houses, shops, cafes and pubs were pulled down, and replaced with the Dolphin Square Shopping Centre and Carlton Street Car Park. The community was split up, and many residents were rehoused on suburban council estates. Weston's old fire station and the Central Cinema, both on Oxford Street, were also demolished and replaced with council offices. The Salvation Army Citadel and the Prince of Wales pub were the only buildings left standing on Carlton Street.



The Dolphin Square Precinct © courtesy of Weston Library

The new Dolphin Square consisted of a pedestrian precinct surrounded by shops, with flats built above. There was also office space and car parking; a bowling alley and a covered market were added later. The first shops opened in 1965. A footbridge over Beach Road, connecting the shopping centre to the Beach Lawns, was built in 1967.

A dolphin statue, twelve feet high, was added to the precinct in about 1970. Following vandalism, it was removed for restoration in 1979. A children's competition resulted in the statue being christened Dolly on its return. Sadly, Dolly suffered further damage and was removed permanently in December 1980. The statue has not been seen since.

Dolphin Square was sold to a private developer and demolished in 2013. It was replaced with a leisure complex of the same name.

Today, the area between Boulevard and Alexandra Parade gives us an idea of how the Carlton Street area looked before demolition. Palmer Street, Palmer Row, Hopkins Street and Alma Street were built in the 1860s, and remain largely unchanged. They are an important part of Weston's social history.

