

Have Your Say

Work to regenerate Bicester's Market Square could start next year after three proposals for a £1m facelift were unveiled. Residents will get a chance to have their say on the options at a public consultation due to be held on 27 & 28 November. The project is a joint initiative between Cherwell district and Oxfordshire county councils, which are pumping £250,000 and £750,000 respectively into the scheme. It comes four years after three schemes – two similar to the latest proposals – were dropped. But what is it that makes Market Square special? Peter Chivers looks at how it has changed down the years.

“The Chamber wants a Market Square ... that allows businesses to flourish and meets the needs of all those that use it. As the historic heart of the town it should be a focal point.”

Chamber of Commerce President Ben Jackson

Another Car Park or Something Different?

Stand in the middle of the Market Square and one of the first things you'll see is that it isn't a square at all! Like most open market trading places in Oxfordshire it takes the form of a triangle. This is how many market locations seemed to have developed in the county. The Market Square forms the core of the town and one of its most attractive features with a wealth of historic buildings. A weekly street market, a focal point for the sale of produce and livestock, was held on the Market Square for nearly eight hundred years. Its early survival was due to Bicester Priory being close by and the monks, visitors and pilgrims ensured there was reason for the market to flourish. It was very much part of the local agricultural economy. It would be wrong to associate the Market Square solely with trading enterprises. The open space provided an ideal meeting place for other gatherings. Fairs made annual visits and camped in the Square. Hiring Fairs where local labourers found employment were held there. Coronation



celebrations, parades and other civic functions were also a feature of life in the Market Square. Naturally, a large number of inns were established to provide refreshment for traders and visitors. There was a darker side to the activities that took place in the Market Square. The town stocks and whipping post, which can still be seen at The Garth, were located in the Square. George Strap, a servant, murdered his master, Edward Bowden in one of the shops that fronted the Square in 1775. Rioters demolished 'The Shambles' Town Council House in 1826. Servicemen and local youths frequently brawled in the Square only a few decades

ago. Hopefully, this part of the history of the square is one that will be disregarded by the Councils' plans! News of the local Councils' decisions to allocate funding to improve the area has proved most welcome. Time has not served the Market Square well in recent years. It is time that the area is enhanced to reflect its long history and heritage? While it is essential that the Market Square be developed to meet modern needs there is an opportunity to create more than an additional future car parking facility. With imagination and a little joined up thinking the Market Square could be developed to once again take its place as a core feature of the town.

