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A Tale of Two Communities – Dorchester and Poundbury

One of the most interesting trips from our holiday flat near Sherborne, Dorset, was the day spent in Dorchester and Poundbury. Readers will doubtless be aware of the close interest taken by Prince Charles in the development of the “new town” of Poundbury, which makes concrete (HRH would hate that expression!) Prince Charles’ strongly held views on architecture, the importance of communities and the environment. I came away feeling that there were important issues raised by both this development and the current state of the ancient town of Dorchester, which we visited later in the day.

There is much to like about Poundbury. There is a range of building styles, mostly traditional but with much variation, from small cottages to grand Georgian style squares. There is ample car parking so that there is no need for yellow lines on the road. Even the notices limiting parking time are expressed as requests rather than commands. Everywhere feels very safe. BUT...there are not many pedestrians. Few young people were to be seen, even though with lockdown schools were still closed. The square celebrating the Queen Mother was to my eyes unnecessarily grand, rather pompous frankly. The open space designated as a play area seemed rather an afterthought. And when we drove on into Dorchester it became clear that Poundbury is barely a separate town but almost an outlying district of Dorchester.

Dorchester itself seemed to be plagued by heavy traffic. While its main claims to attract visitors are its history and museums, and its Hardy connections, the museums were closed for building work and Hardy’s house, Max Gate, was closed because of the pandemic. The shopping area was a typical British high street with many shops closed, some doubtless permanently. I did wonder if some of the substantial investment made in Poundbury could not have gone into a bypass for Dorchester and the creation of a flagship building such as an arts centre which would have been a focus for community events.

But above all I wondered if the creation of a highly planned new town was the best way of creating a community. Surely an element of evolution is required? An architect friend suggested that if Poundbury planners had built in some pockets of space available to entrepreneurs to do their own thing within pretty broad boundaries that would have produced a more vibrant atmosphere, hopefully fostering greater diversity of population. On the other hand Dorchester seemed to reflect what happens where planning becomes largely reactive, with no vision of what could be achieved. It is very much to be hoped that the Government’s promise to remove much of the detailed control of development in the current planning system heeds the lessons to be learned from Poundbury and Dorchester.