

Building for the future in... *Colchester*

BUILDING new housing and redeveloping town and city centres provides the constant challenge of how to mix the old effectively with the new; to reflect and celebrate history, but also move forward to regenerate and prosper. Colchester, England's oldest recorded town, exemplifies this challenge perfectly.

A Celtic settlement before the Roman conquest, with signs of early Saxon occupation, an important site for the Vikings, with a Norman castle, a Tudor Dutch quarter and links to the Civil War, Colchester is set to grow over the next few years with plans for 17,000 new homes in the borough by 2021.

Like all ancient settlements, Colchester is no stranger to burying its treasures over the years in its drive to modernise. Colchester Castle was built over an old Roman Temple and the Roman Circus was recently discovered during building work on the Army's old Garrison Site. As the first Roman Chariot Racing track to be positively identified in Britain, it has been given Scheduled Ancient Monument Status, while development of the Abbey Fields area in which it stands, and which has many listed and historically interesting buildings, continues around it. Here, more than 130 hectares of land are being transformed into an 'urban village' which aims to enhance the character of the area, partly by using existing buildings wherever possible.

In the centre of Colchester, the

In the first of a series of features looking at the redevelopment of some of the county's major towns and cities, Essex Life looks at the changing face of Colchester and how it will be shaped during the next decade

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Colchester's war memorial and castle



Williams & Griffin department store is undergoing a £30 million development, and Red Lion Yard has just celebrated the completion of its £600,000 refurbishment. Housing is being built on the site of Severalls Hospital and The Hythe also continues its regeneration. And as the town changes, even more of its treasures are being revealed.

While Williams & Griffin is undergoing its development, which will expand its floor space by 50% and aims to provide a West End shopping experience for the town, experts from Colchester Archaeological Trust have been investigating the site. They have found two pieces of burnt and blackened human bone which are believed to be remnants from the Boudiccan revolt of AD62, when British tribes launched a failed attempt to defeat the Roman army.

Phillip Crummy, director of the trust explains: 'Boudiccan artefacts have been

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COLCHESTER



An artist's impression of the new Williams & Griffin shop facade

for some of the recent store upgrades at Harrods and Selfridges. There will be a visual narrative running through the interiors that seeks to capture the spirit and energy of Colchester past and present. One reference is taken from the Essex company, Crittall Windows. The designers have sought to reflect the modern proportions of the windows in the handbag displays.

The intention is also to fully restore the Merchants House to reveal the crown post in the roof and original timber frames and the new High Street glazed facades will incorporate the Victorian Radcliff and Tudor buildings.

Further down the High Street, Red Lion Yard completed its refurbishment in July. The site falls within the Conservation Area surrounding the Red Lion Hotel, which was originally built as a private home for the Dukes of Norfolk in the 15th century and was later converted to an



A jaw bone found during excavation

unearthed in Colchester, but the discovery of human remains is extremely rare. They are likely to be people who died in buildings set on fire by the British as they overran the town.

Reflecting the past is key, according to Williams & Griffin store managing director Carl Milton. 'The new interiors are being developed by HMKM, the leading London retail agency responsible

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Sketch of the new interior at Williams & Griffin designed by HMKM

COLCHESTER



Ruins of Colchester Priory

inn after the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII.

The culmination of a five-year project starting in 2009, the developers worked in partnership with the borough council to ensure the improvements were in keeping with the history and tradition of the town. It included restoration of brickwork and beams dating back hundreds of years in the arch that forms the entrance to Red Lion Yard and is part of the Grade I listed hotel.

‘It was essential that the buildings reflect their origins – the beams have been stripped back and the rendering lime washed and pulled back to the original finish. It was a lengthy process involving discussions with English Heritage and Colchester Borough Council,’ explains Red Lion Yard manager, John Fleming. John is no stranger to respecting historical



Looking back towards Red Lion Yard





buildings and during his time in the Armed Forces he looked after a number of historic sites including the Map Rooms in Portsmouth where the D Day landings were planned.

The boutique shopping quarter the centre provides, with its mixture of independent retailers, is important. John continues: 'It has been completely transformed over the last few months. It really does look fantastic. It's all about the shopping experience. We need to encourage the Colchester shopping catchment area into the town.'

With Colchester popular with commuters, the increase in housing stock is a vital part of its economic success to encourage new people to move there. 'On the whole it is still a massive growth area for new builds for Beresfords,' says Aaron Breakwell, land and new homes associate director for Beresfords Estate Agents Group. 'But it is also a growth area for our investment department as the yields are generally very good. Beresfords is involved in Millstones Green in Copford, and with regards to forthcoming developments there is the next huge phase to come at the Severalls site. There is also a major development

Left: The unveiling of the newly developed Red Lion Yard

Below: The striking £30 million Williams & Griffin development will bring a new lease of life to the Colchester High Street

DEVELOPING ESSEX

COLCHESTER

coming through at Park Road in Lexden, featuring large detached houses and a sympathetic conversion of an old local authority building.

'I also have no doubt there will be further developments of The Hythe in Colchester,' continues Aaron, 'and with regards to the centre of the town, we will have a small development of new homes on a site adjacent to Williams Walk, coming onto the market in 2014 to 2015.'

So, as the town continues to evolve and expand with its mixture of old and new, the template has been set for how it will look and feel over the next 20 years, encompassing the fabric of its past and integrating it into its vision of the future. ■

