

# Festive lights should beam true meaning of Christmas

The question of how much money Richmond upon Thames Council is prepared to contribute to Christmas lights in the borough's five towns is a perennial controversy.

Should council tax payers or traders fund the seasonal decorations?

Are they erected to remind residents about Christ's birth - or persuade shoppers that the time of big spending is upon them?

Richmond town itself is one of the most affluent and popular trading areas - and at Christmas attracts thousands of extra visitors to its restaurants and night life - yet has always found it tough to persuade the multinational companies that own most of the key sites in George Street to contribute.

The lanes funded by the small shopkeepers get a cheery illumination but the main thoroughfares are generally second rate.

Dickins and Jones have from time to time provided a spectacular centrepiece with magnificent window displays and helped fund decorations outside. But times and owners change and things get tougher.

When the former MP for Billingsay, Harvey Proctor, was president of the chamber of commerce he threw his energies into fundraising for projects like this - and no-one could do it better.

He struggled valiantly to twist the arms of the chain stores and retailers to fund lights and the also Victorian Evening.

Like his predecessors he found it almost impossible to squeeze cash from the likes of Clark's, Dixons, Argos and Mothercare, who then dominated the High Street.

The exception was Marks and Spencer, Iris Green, a former advertising manager with the Richmond and



## The Malcolm Richards Column

Twickenham Times series, who also held the position of chamber president, similarly struggled with the trading streets.

"It was one of the most frustrating projects I had to tackle. I always thought it was a disgrace that Richmond town centre lights were second rate and wanted to get something more spectacular and welcoming," she recalled.

"We even considered buying some of Blackpool's old illuminations and got as far as negotiating a deal.

"But new health and safety regulations were coming in at that time and we hit all kinds of snags in trying to string festoons across George Street.

"At one time the council was able to supply the labour and the Southern Electricity Board did not charge us for

connection.

"But costs shot up when the higher safety standards were introduced and there was a big problem because double decker buses had to pass through. In the end we dropped the idea."

The irony was that quite often the smaller centres like Hampton, Teddington and Whiston were able to provide respectable displays while Richmond, the rich relation, lagged behind.

This year, the Tories have drawn attention to the fact that the new Lib Dem council is cutting back its contributions in St Margarets, Whiston, Teddington, East Sheen and Kew - although there is confusion over the figures.

The council claims that money spent last year was for one off expenditures on fitting sockets to lamp posts in some high streets and will not arise in 2005.

There is increasing cynicism about the vulgar commercialisation of Christmas and the question is bound to arise whether spending public money on sprucing up town centres to encourage even more people to join the materialistic scrum is really the best use of scarce public resources.

The message the lights should beam out is quite the opposite from that which renders us trying to project.

The timeless clichés of Peace and Goodwill need to be emblazoned in our town centres - but just for the traditional twelve days of Christmas.

The problem is that those who have vested interests in persuading us to empty our pockets want the festivities to start before the whiff of Guy Fawkes gunpowder has left the air.

By the time the actual holiday starts the display is tawdry and fading - as are the sentiments.