

BATH & WEST SHOWGROUND

Developing an institution

Just how do you begin to redevelop the home of one of the jewels in the agricultural show calendar, asks **Andrew Merrell**.

Enthusiasm for the Royal Bath & West Show is infectious. So much so that the developer charged with piloting the £120m regeneration of its Somerset showground has just doubled his expectation of how much a new-look operation could generate for the economy.

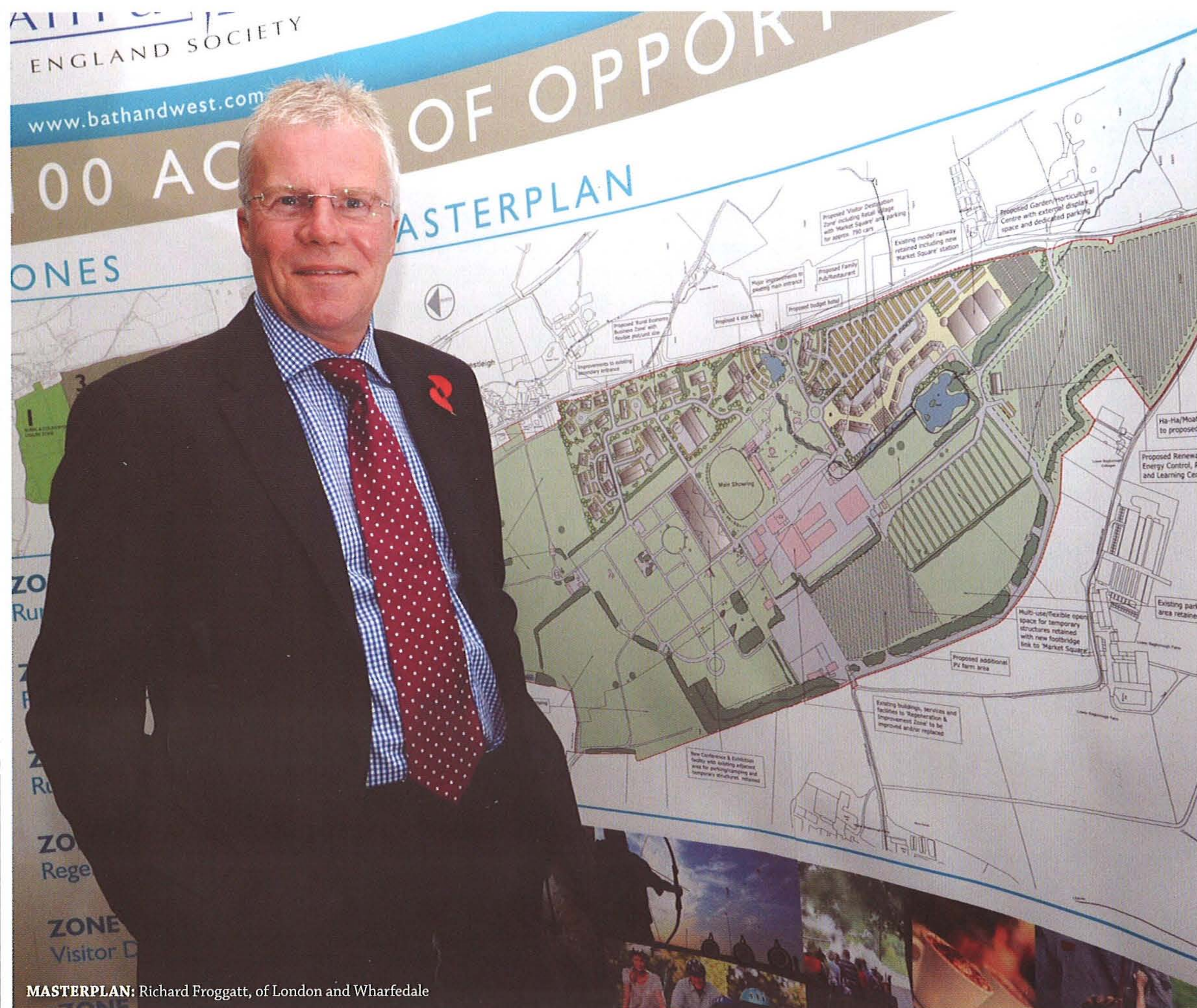
Currently the annual show is worth an estimated £175m annually to the economy, but should the ambitious plans for the 260-acre Shepton Mallett show ground go ahead Richard Froggatt predicts that figure will quickly double.

And he is not a man prone to making exaggerated claims.

Mr Froggatt is chairman and managing director of London and Wharfedale, the company charged with making the development plans reality.

For 11 years prior to this he was executive director of St Modwen Properties PLC and was described as key to its expansion and profit growth during that period.

The sales pitch currently being marketed on behalf of his clients, the venerable institution that is The Royal Bath & West of England Society, is that the plans for show ground will make it a key economic driver for the region and a destination of national significance.



MASTERPLAN: Richard Froggatt, of London and Wharfedale

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Plans (which can be seen at www.bathandwest.com including economic impact and ecology reports) include a rural business park, hotels, a retail village and the world's first photovoltaic park for solar energy production, all firmly linked in to the agricultural sector the charity champions.

When fully operational the society claims its new-look facilities will attract 2.5 million visitors a year to the Prestleigh site near Shepton Mallet and create around 1,500 jobs.

Changing economic times put such major developments in a new perspective. Once finance would have been assumed, jobs widespread with attention falling instead on environmental impact and detail.

Now, offering to create hundreds of jobs, not to mention preserve the economic future of a show deeply rooted in the psyche of the region's agricultural community, wins hands down.

Fears of over development in what is a beautiful rural setting are nowhere to be heard, but probably also speaks volumes for the way the scheme is being handled and the widespread support.

According to London and Wharfedale finance is not the sticking point now, it is permission to begin work.

That of course entirely simplifies the process, which has seen more than three and a half years of careful planning to date to arrive at a plan of development which will minimise disruption, preserve business interests of those already on the site and win the backing of society supports, who number the great and the good – not to mention a few Royals.

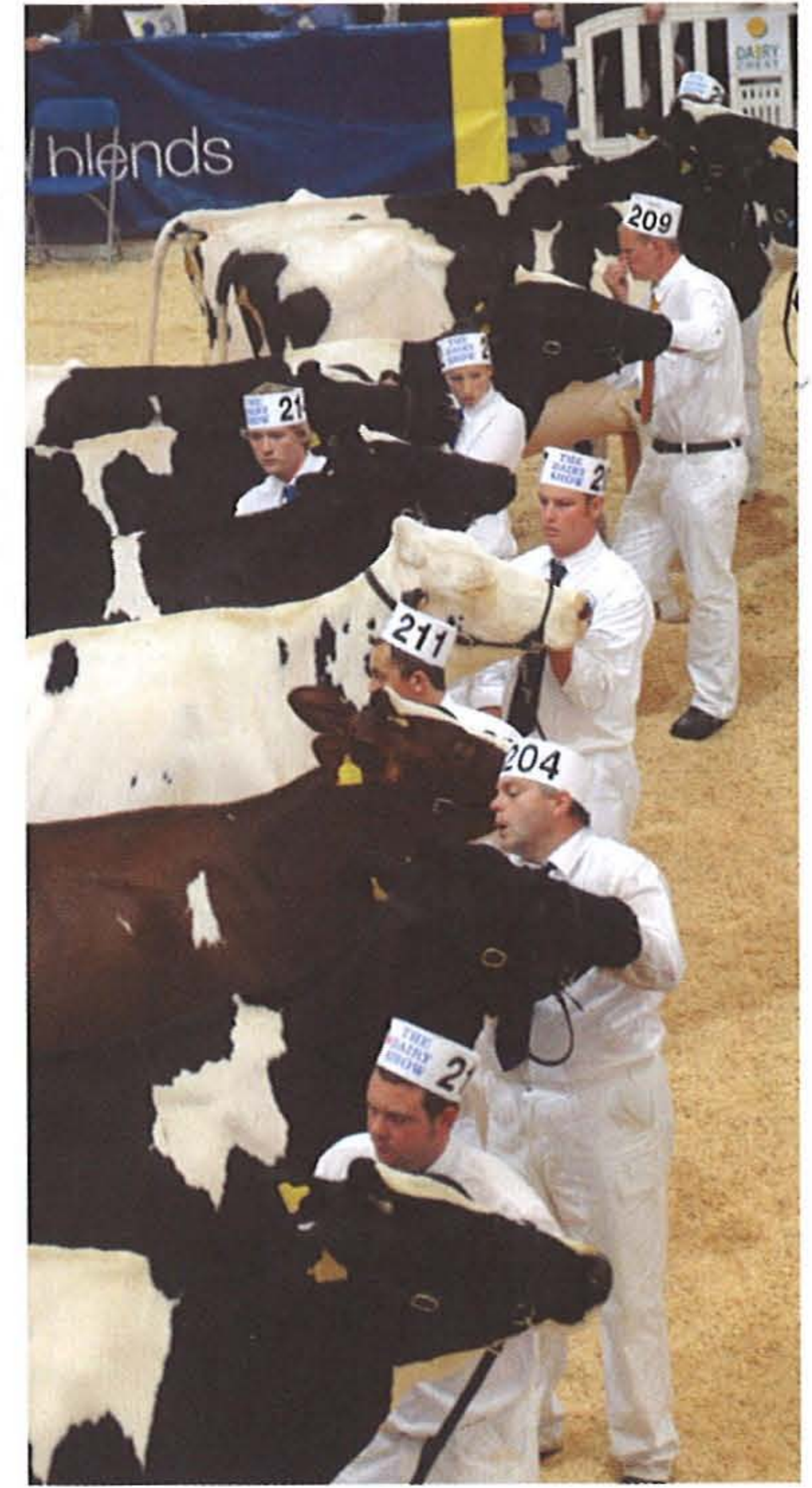
Ian Jarman, chairman of the Shepton Mallet District Chamber of Commerce, said: "The chamber's position is we welcome any inward investment in the area. We see any development at the Bath and West Show Ground as a positive development. The show is an integral part of the town's economy and we would support them in their plans."

Mr Froggatt's involvement goes back more than three years, even before his business won the bid to take the scheme forward, and he is as enthusiastic about the society's plans as he is about doing business in the region.

His expertise was latched onto initially



EXCUSE ME: Truckfest 2010 at Bath & West Show ground. Big Foot looks for a parking space



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ON COURSE: Richard Froggatt and Dr Jane Guise

through what society chief executive Dr Jane Guise jokes are the far-reaching "tentacles" of her organisation. Its already capable board is able to draw upon a network of supporters whose individual expertise, power, influence and insight would be an asset to most companies.

Indeed, bringing like-minded motivated individuals together is the society's earliest tradition. It was back in 1777 that one upwardly mobile Edmund Rack advertised in his local newspaper, The Bath Chronicle, calling on 'Nobility and Gentry in the counties of Somerset, Gloucester, Wiltshire and Dorset in general, and the Cities of Bath and Bristol in particular' to form a 'Society in this City, for the encouragement of Agriculture, Planting, Manufactures, Commerce, and the Fine Arts...'

That plea was answered and today we have the Royal Bath & West of England Society

"The society had been looking at how its commercial business could be improved, both from its assets and revenue to existing business. From a chance meeting, which often happens in business, it was decided I come down and go through the ideas with Jane, which I did," said Mr Froggatt, explaining how he became unwittingly caught up in the society's plans.

He became so convinced in the project when the chance to tender came up his company pitched and won, and although he approached the scheme from a business perspective it is clear he now shares the passion for the organisation, its vision and the all-important agricultural show.

"The first thing I did was to look at the viability and deliverability. Jane had already set up a working group with district and county councils. Then, because the society is a charity it had to go through a selective process and fortunately we were chosen," said Mr Froggatt, who lives in Somerset not far from Taunton.

"The society had a first class chief executive, a first class board and were trying to make things happen. My first test is always 'is does this organisation really want this and is it prepared to stick to it and are the local authority supportive?'"

"Without these ingredients you are not going to get anywhere. Then I look at the technical constraints, for example, is there something about this project which will prevent it happening – such as a problem with highways."

A lot of eyes are now on the project, not just within the show ground community – which is world-wide. »

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Not least because here is a business seeking to a private sector solution to a mammoth commercial project.

It has all the hallmarks of the brave new world as dictated by the economic times and prescribed by the coalition Government.

It is also a project shot through with optimism and enthusiasm for one of our most important and until recently unfashionable industries – agriculture.

“We think we have a commercial solution and we would rather have that any day. With public money the strings can be strangling. We worked closely with the regional development agency early on to produce a lot of pre-development reports which were very expensive.

“I have colleagues in The Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth (RASC) and there are lots of different ways to redevelop a show ground. Some get Government grants. Melbourne and Adelaide have massive grants for redevelopment.

“But they said they would rather go down our route because of the strings that can be attached to public money,” said Dr Guise, who is both a scientist and a businesswoman, not to mention smallholder.

“The show community is huge. There are a couple of UK showgrounds that are looking in a lot of detail at what is happening here. There is no longer a Royal Show, and that has made us even more significant.”

“What we are trying to do is put the society where for the next fifty years it will be stronger than it has been. If you look at our history it is one of bringing people together to make things happen.”

The foundations are more than just historic.

“One of the attraction of this project is that it has significant business here already for 120 days of the year which gives it a solid platform to build from,” said Mr Froggatt.

The showground is also host to antique and game fairs, auto-jumbles, off-road driving exhibitions, gardening, craft, classic car events as well as a major Christian conference and dairy show.

“One of the exciting things is that when you look at, for example, the exhibition centre (part of the development scheme).



SOCIETY PRESIDENT: The Countess of Wessex

There are no other facilities like that in the South West.

“It will be great news for the society and save a fortune for it and its customers. One business associated with the showground has already said it would be interested in investing because it could save £200,000 a year in tentage alone. The society would be looking at a six-figure sum as well.

“You can see how you quickly move from ‘wouldn’t it be nice’ to do that to ‘let’s do this’ because it makes economic sense.”

Details of the finances for the project remain, as you would expect, confidential, but there the determination is backed by confident assertions that the money is all in place in what appears to be a series of partnerships and deals which suggest a shrewder, safer and more practical approach than putting all of the eggs in one basket.

“The first thing to bear in mind is that, thankfully, this is not a single project requiring £100m single finance package.

“It is in reality a number of varied opportunities which happen to be in a single master planned location. The financing will therefore vary as appropriate,” said Mr Froggatt.

“By way of example we are finalising finance for the development and have strong interest from renewable energy funds. Should we go this route we may well use our existing banking arrangements for development finance.

“On current employment interest we will see a mixture of development where we retain the resultant investment and in other cases where there will be sales to external investors.

“The Society’s preference is to build up its income base and wishes to receive rental income from its improved value land asset.

The basic principle is that in financial terms this is a major development which will be delivered in bite size chunks.”

“We need to begin this year,” said Mr Froggatt. “We have some serious requirements that we have to get moving. But until we get the heads-up from planning, some small ticks, we can’t go around submitting planning applications.”

But if all goes to plan the society would love to see the first bulldozer through the gates off the A371 as early as February.

Only then, you feel, will some townfolk truly believe. They know their otherwise attractive town needs inwards investment, but there is a feeling that they have been promised much in the past from developers of unrelated projects only to be let down.

In a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ vote the society’s project would probably win overwhelmingly backing, but no one is getting too carried away just yet.

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Changing times

With hopes high it can soon begin its major redevelopment plans we talk to the chief executive of the Royal Bath & West Society.

You can understand something of why Dr Jane Guise makes such a good figurehead for the society charged with safeguarding the future of the Bath and West Show in her reply to one question.

Asked whether it is significant that she is the first female to head up the organisation since its inception in 1777 she thinks for a moment before replying that it simply demonstrates the forward-thinking nature of the current board of directors of the Royal Bath & West Society.

Indeed, the organisation has a lot of stake. It is the guardian of hundreds of years of heritage and custom, and would dearly like to continue in that same vein.

So it probably also says a lot for the board also that at a time when it was looking to take on its most ambitious move for years – the £120m redevelopment of its 260-acre showground near Shepton Mallett – it looked for talent above all else.

The society's world-famous show injects an estimated £175m into the economy annually, not to mention the support it gives the beleaguered but obdurately resolute agricultural sector. No pressure then.

"In about 2000 farming became a difficult place to be. I think it is now coming into a renaissance. The supermarkets are cosying up to farmers to make sure they have enough supplies and farming is promoting its importance to the national

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FACT BOX

Name: Dr Jane Guise
Title: Chief executive of the Royal Bath & West Society
Education: Malvern College, Reading University.
Career: A director of several companies for more than 10 years in a career which has also included a sales role and running her own business. Honorary lecturer at the Royal Veterinary College. Published over 100 popular articles and scientific papers bridging the gap between science and commercial practise.
Family: Jane has four children and lives on a smallholding in Wiltshire
Favourite book: Admits a fondness for her childhood favourites, including Stig of the Dump.



CHANGING TIMES: Dr Jane Guise, ceo of the Royal Bath & West Show Society

economy," said Dr Guise, who has led the society towards a commercial solution to their redevelopment plans and managed to cement good working relationships with the public sector as well.

"Local authorities want to be part of the success story as well. All we are really doing is elevating the activities that we have got already."

It has not been without some re-organisation within the society as it prepared itself.

A childhood in Worcestershire and academic studies completed at Reading University led Dr Guise through a variety of roles, including running her own business and an unlikely period in the world of sales which she recalls as a teacher of many valuable lessons she has taken with her through her business life.

Her official show society biography describes her as a distinguished agri-scientist with a twenty year track record of delivering applied science and knowledge transfer projects on both the public and private sectors, and a wealth of experience in project management and direction.

And it is easy to see how her CV neatly

fits the society's current push to better-mix the commercial potential of its assets with the agricultural and charitable aims it holds dear.

According to the society her current role means she has made efforts to ensure that the society has taken a strong interest in supporting regional initiatives to enhance agricultural policy in changing times, particularly through new mechanisms to deliver advice to the rural business community.

Dr Guise can count among her various professional interests: membership of the Farm Animal Welfare Council, Honorary Associate of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, membership of the South West Strategy for Sustainable Food and Farming Steering Group, Trusteeship of the Kingshay Farming Trust and Trusteeship of the Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth.

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