

Community up in arms over bizarre Mercat Cross scheme

THE WRAPS have come off a £24,000 scheme of "environmental improvements" to Dornoch town centre – leaving local residents shocked and horrified by what they've seen.

The scheme, designed by Highland Council's planning and development service, was supposed to highlight and enhance the town's ancient Mercat Cross, a simple sandstone pillar that marks the spot where Dornoch's medieval markets were held centuries ago.

But instead, four huge granite bollards and circular granite plinth have dwarfed the scheduled ancient monument, outraged the townsfolk, and raised fears about road safety in the busy High Street.

Historic Scotland also want to speak to the council about alleged damage caused to the sandstone base of the cross.

by Duncan Ross

A common reaction locally is that the granite structures are out of proportion and out of keeping with the character of the historic town centre – small-scale, built of warm yellow sandstone, and a highly prized conservation area.

Peter Wild, curator of Dornoch's Historylinks museum, summed up the feelings of many when he said: "It's the sort of thing you'd put in front of an airport to stop terrorists trying to ram a car through the front door."

Civic leaders are also puzzled how such a grotesque design was ever approved in the first place. The council did consult the community a year or so ago, but no one remembers the plans looking anything like what is now in place.

As the Northern Times went to press, a meeting was being held in Dornoch to see what can be salvaged from the mess.

A council spokesman said yesterday (Thursday): "The scheme at Dornoch is sponsored by our planning and development service, who commissioned MM Miller contractors to install the bollards and seat at the Mercat Cross at a cost of £24,000.

"Even before the public expressed their misgivings, the planning and development service was aware that the design – shared with the community council etc in advance of installation – was not reflected in what appeared.

"So we are meeting today to see what can be done to provide Dornoch with improvements that enhance the environment. The community will again be consulted over the reviewed design."

Highland Councillor Jim McGillivray of Embo added: "The impact of the granite bollards is obviously causing concern, and some concern has been raised about road safety in what is a busy street. So we are having this further meeting to try and iron out these problems and see what can be done to acknowledge the concerns of the community about this project, which has come as a bit of a shock to everyone, me included.

"The upgrading of a local monument and the town centre is welcome but sometimes, with the best will in the world, what comes forward is not what people were expecting. We will just have to address it and go back to a previous stage and see how things can be adapted or improved."

Councillor McGillivray said the public were consulted about the scheme and it was in the public domain for some time. "But my recollection is that there were plans on display, but no elevations. The original design met with approval, but when you see the three-dimensional impact of it, you can see why prob-

lems have arisen. What is there is not quite what was expected, and I think that has to be addressed. I am as guilty as any. Perhaps I took my eye off the ball and didn't appreciate the full impact of what was proposed."

Peter Wild recalled: "I remember seeing some plans at a community council meeting well over a year ago. But I have to say that, like many others who saw them, I don't remember them looking anything like what has now actually happened. It has come as a bit of a surprise. It does seem to me an inappropriate use of materials. There is no history of granite in this area. It is very expensive foreign granite – I believe it was brought in from China – whereas everything else in the town is of sandstone.



What a load of bollards – Dornoch's medieval Mercat Cross (between the flower tubs) is dwarfed by the council's 'improvements'.

"Also, it completely dwarfs the Mercat Cross, the very thing it was meant to protect and enhance. The scale of the blocks of stone that have gone up does seem to be completely out of proportion."

He explained: "There are mercat crosses all over Scotland, but most of them have been moved from their original position. The important thing about this one is that it has never been moved and it still marks the original site of Dornoch's medieval markets. Although it is called the mercat cross, it was never in the shape of a cross. It is just a simple sandstone column. A lot of people assume bits of it must have fallen off over the centuries, but it was always this shape.

"It is a scheduled ancient monument and, as I understand it, that means there is a two-metre exclusion zone around it within which nothing can be changed without the permission of Historic Scotland.

Chris Ferne, chairman of the Dornoch Area Community Interest Company, said: "Speaking personally, I think this is entirely inappropriate. Granite has no place in Dornoch whatsoever – the whole town is built of yellow sandstone – and the carbon footprint involved in bringing all that granite from China doesn't bear thinking about.

"I think it's very regrettable and, quite frankly, the design is just bizarre. Nearly everyone I've spoken to is quite vociferous in their condemnation of it. One elderly lady was on the point of tears she was so upset. The town is just not going to have it."

Current chairman of Dornoch Community Council, Yvonne Ross, said she was happy with the new paving around the cross that was also part of the scheme.

"The main reason for doing it was that rainwater run-off was eroding the sand-

stone at the base of the cross," she said. "With the resurfacing the water will run the other way." But she was horrified by the granite bollards.

"Certainly there was consultation, and I did see plans, but I certainly didn't think it would look like that.

"I thought we were getting little sandstone bollards round the Mercat Cross. Now you can hardly see it behind these huge lumps of granite.

"Everyone's complaining about it and the roads department are worried from a safety point of view.

The bollards come too far out into the road, and a child could walk out from behind them.

"It might look alright in a big town centre, but in Dornoch it just doesn't fit in with the surroundings."

Nearest "neighbour" to the Mercat Cross is the even more historic Dornoch Cathedral, where the minister, the Rev Susan Brown, was just as shocked.

"It's completely out of proportion and out of kilter with everything around it," she said. "It's just a bit of an eyesore.

"I know that, if we want to put up a notice board, we have to consult with Historic

Scotland. We even need their approval for what colour we paint the gates."

A spokeswoman for Historic Scotland in Edinburgh said: "We were informed by the Highland Council in April 2008 that they were considering carrying out some public realm works around the Mercat Cross.

"At that time no scheme had been developed and no plans were available. We advised the council of the cross's scheduled status and asked to be kept updated as plans developed.

"We became aware that works had begun through our locally based monument warden in late March 2010.

"We have contacted the Highland Council concerning this matter as the works appear to have affected the scheduled area, and we are discussing with them how they intend to repair damage caused to the sandstone plinth.

"These works are likely to require scheduled monument consent.

"The public realm works remain a matter for the council.

"However, we are also raising with them the issue of their impact on the character of the Mercat Cross."