

300

BUCKING THE TREND

KENT BARKER looks at the state of local newspapers in the UK and wonders how HIP has managed to survive for twelve years

Hastings Independent seems to be, at the same time, both bucking and setting trends in local journalism. As more local commercial newspapers fold, the community model initiated by HIP (Hastings Independent Press) is being increasingly adopted around the country.

Currently, five-and-a-half million people in the UK live in an area with no local press at all, a state of affairs decried by the Media Reform Coalition: “Unaccountable concentrations of media power are amongst the greatest threats to a free and open democratic society. We need a proactive, future-proof framework for media plurality that supports a greater diversity of media owners, and public interest reforms to promote and uphold the highest standards in journalism.”

Of course, just having an existing local newspaper doesn't guarantee diversity or quality. It was because of considerable dissatisfaction with the content of the Hastings Observer – then owned by Johnston Press, now by National World – that HIP was created in February 2014. Now, 300 editions later, it is something of a miracle that it is still going – and is still determined to present an independent voice for the community of Hastings.

Over the years, many individuals have devoted large amounts of time on a voluntary basis to ensure that the town continues to have an alternative voice. Making use of a non-hierarchical structure, we are able to ensure that there are no entrenched editorial views or support for one group or political party over another.

And this is where HIP seems to have set a trend. In the past few years, a number of other ‘hyperlocal papers’ have fol-

lowed its lead. In the Manchester area, five ‘Post’ community print publications cover Stockport, Manchester, Trafford, Chester and Salford, while the Bolton, Bury and Tameside Posts are due to be launched this year. Elsewhere in East Sussex, the free Hailsham News follows the Post model and is distributed door to door, while the Eastbourne News and Bexhill News (all three published by Regional Media Group) are found mainly in supermarkets. In London, the Social Spider Community Interest company publishes titles in Harringay, Waltham Forest, Enfield and Barnet. Few have paid staff, but all seem to survive on local advertising and donations.

Relying on volunteers allows HIP to draw on contributors with diverse skills while keeping operating costs to a minimum. However, a steadier income, whether through government funding or increased community support, would give the paper an enormous boost. It would enable us to work more efficiently (by improving software and employing administrative staff), broaden our outreach and strengthen our capacity to train and support aspiring journalists.

We all know money is tight, but if the community wants to see another 300 editions of HIP, we need more people to become Friends and more local organisations to advertise with us, so we can continue to reach residents across the town. HIP's mission statement seems to resonate with our estimated 16,000 plus readers: “The newspaper recognises that there will be a wide range of views within the community and it seeks to cover a broad spectrum of those views.”



HASTINGS SINCE THE BIRTH OF HIP

JOEL CHESHIRE

'UP-AND-COME' ST LEONARDS HIP 29 MARCH, 2026

St Leonards was named among the top ten places to live in the southeast of England in a Sunday Times feature Best Places to Live 2026 published last weekend.
hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/up-and-come



CHANGING HASTINGS: TOWN MEETING ADDRESSES HOUSING ISSUES

HIP 29 November 2019

Participants were split into five discussion areas: price rises, second homes/Airbnb, private rented, who owns Hastings? and a 'wildcard', with three potential approaches to each of these issues: what the council and/or government could do, what campaigns locals could lead, and what practical solutions could be implemented.
hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/changing_hastings



Over the past 12 years, Hastings has undergone a period of striking and often complex change, seen most clearly in the story of Hastings Pier and the evolving fortunes of its high streets.

The pier's story has come to define the town's recent history. In October 2010, a fire destroyed much of the Victorian structure, leaving it closed and derelict for years. What followed was an unusually strong local response: more than 2,000 people invested in a community share scheme to help fund its restoration, alongside significant public funding. When the pier reopened in 2016 after an £14 million rebuild, it was widely described as a community success story, a rare example of local people directly shaping the future of a major landmark.

The project gained national recognition, with the rebuilt pier winning the Stirling Prize in 2017 for its minimalist design. Yet the optimism proved difficult to sustain. The charity set up to run the pier entered administration in 2017, and by 2018 it had been sold to a private owner. Since then, the pier has faced repeated closures, changes in management and ongoing debate about its long-term role, whether as an events venue, a public space, or something in between.

While the pier has provided a highly visible focal point, change across Hastings has also been unfolding more gradually in its commercial streets. Areas such as the Old Town and parts of St Leonards have seen a steady growth in independent cafés, galleries and small businesses over the past decade. This shift has been linked to an influx of creatives and remote workers, particularly from London, drawn by comparatively lower property prices and the town's coastal setting.

At the same time, these changes have

not been uniform. Hastings town centre has continued to experience vacant retail units and the impact of national trends affecting high streets, including the decline of chain retailers and the rise of online shopping. The contrast between more vibrant, independent-led areas and quieter commercial zones has become increasingly pronounced.

Physical regeneration has also played a role. The Observer Building, once a hub for regional journalism employing hundreds of people, has been redeveloped into a mixed-use creative and business space. Projects like this reflect a broader shift away from large-scale local industry toward smaller, more flexible forms of economic activity.

Together, these developments point to a town in transition. Hastings has seen clear signs of renewal over the past twelve years, through independent enterprise and cultural investment, but also ongoing uncertainty around long-term sustainability.

Alongside these economic shifts, both Hastings and St Leonards have increasingly established themselves as centres for arts and culture. Since we started HIP, we've noticed the area has attracted a growing number of artists, musicians and writers. This has been reflected by the busy calendar of festivals and exhibitions that have helped reshape the town's reputation, and has caused Arts as a sub-section for us to always be filled each fortnight.

This cultural resurgence has brought renewed energy, helping to redefine the visibility of Hastings and St Leonards. More than a decade on from HIP's foundation, Hastings remains a place shaped by both resilience and reinvention, still evolving, and still negotiating the balance between its past and its future.

WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE A NEWCOMER IN HASTINGS?

15 December, 2020

I moved here with my partner in August, well aware that the coronavirus had turned the trickle of DFLs into a deluge.
hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/newcomer



CHANGE TO AIRBNB IN HASTINGS: SCOURGE OR BLESSING?

HIP 29 November 2019

Of course, seaside towns like Hastings have always had transient visitors. But the current trend, accelerated by Airbnb, has made property unaffordable. When young people can't afford to buy or even to rent in their own town, the balance is wrong. I have nothing against Airbnb, but it is adding incrementally to the housing crisis in our town. We don't want our neighbourhoods turning into 'ghost towns' as they have in Cornwall and elsewhere.
hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/Airbnb





A TOWN RESHAPED

PIER FUTURE

20 April 2018

Friends of Hastings Pier (FoHP) has submitted an ambitious £3 million bid to take on Hastings Pier in an attempt to save it from being sold off into private ownership.

[hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/articles/news/tide-us-over](https://www.hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/articles/news/tide-us-over)



JUDGE A MAN BY THE COMPANY HE KEEPS

29 June 2018

So how did the Sheikh with a string of failed and failing companies get his pier bid approved? "The aim throughout the process was that the heritage asset be sold to the party which demonstrated the highest probability of sustaining it financially into the future and maintained the benefits for Hastings and the wider community". So stated the administrators

<https://www.hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/judge-man>



HASTINGS PIER

The period of striking and complex change that Hastings has undergone over the past twelve years is seen very clearly in the story of Hastings Pier.

HIP has regularly documented the changing fortunes of the pier over the past 12 years. In fact, the pier's story has come to define the town's recent history. In October 2010, a fire destroyed much of the Victorian structure, leaving it closed and derelict for years. What followed was an unusually strong local response: more than 2,000 people invested in a community share scheme to help fund its restoration, and bolster the amount provided by The Heritage Lottery Fund. When the pier reopened in 2016 after a £14 million rebuild, it was widely acclaimed as a community success story, a rare example of local people directly shaping the future of a major landmark.

The project gained national recognition, with the rebuilt pier winning the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2017 for its minimalist design. Yet, for complex reasons, the charity set up to run the pier was unable to maintain its financial sustainability, and it entered administration in 2017. In 2018, amid great controversy, the administrators sold it to the flamboyant owner of Eastbourne Pier, despite a strong bid from The Friends of Hastings Pier. Since then, the pier has faced repeated closures, changes in management and ongoing debate about its long-term role, whether as an events venue, a public space or something in between. It has now been put up for sale and is no longer fully operational.

HASTINGS RETAIL

While the pier has provided a highly visible focal point, change across Hastings has also been unfolding more gradually in its commercial streets. Areas such as the Old Town and parts of St Leonards

have seen a steady growth in independent cafés, galleries and small businesses, particularly in the wellbeing sector, over the past decade. This shift is linked to a new influx of creatives and remote workers, mainly from London, drawn by comparatively lower property prices and the town's coastal setting.

These changes have not been uniform. Hastings town centre continues to be plagued by vacant retail units to some extent caused by national trends including the decline of chain retailers and the rise of online shopping. The contrast between more vibrant, independent-led areas and quieter commercial zones has become increasingly pronounced.

Physical regeneration has also played a role. The Observer Building, once a hub for regional journalism employing hundreds of people, has been redeveloped after many years of neglect. Its transformation into a mixed-use creative and business space – along with several other major buildings in the area – reflect a broader shift away from large-scale local industry toward smaller, more flexible forms of economic activity.

Various pots of government funding have also played a part, but not always in a positive way such as with the abortive attempt to reopen Debenhams building as an events venue. An ongoing project is The Hastings Town Centre Public Realm and Green Connections Project, a £10m-£20m+ initiative to transform the town center with nature-based solutions, enhancing biodiversity, and improving walking/cycling links between the station and seafront.

Together, these developments point to a town in transition. Hastings has seen clear signs of renewal over the past twelve years, through independent enterprise and cultural investment, but also ongoing uncertainty around long-term sustainability.

WHAT FUTURE FOR HASTINGS' SHOPS?

22 February 2019

Debenhams lies on the fringe of the main shopping area. Flaky exterior paint (take a look from the seaward side) and all the interior charm and excitement of a 1970s East German department store. It is a national chain in deep difficulty

[hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/what-future](https://www.hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/what-future)



OB – 'It's Going To Happen'

22 September 2020

The Observer Building has suffered 35 years of dereliction, speculation and extraction. This is the first time it has had a deliverable planning permission, and the resources in place to deliver it.

[hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/ob-happening](https://www.hastingsindependentpress.co.uk/ob-happening)



FACT FILE

2014: The first edition of HIP was published in February – the same month as The Bristol Cable, another independent print newspaper that's still operational – but is quarterly rather than fortnightly.

VOLUNTEERS: Our writers, editors and photographers are all volunteers. These have included a politician/activist, the multi-talented Des Wilson; musicians, numerous successful writers and journalists; and several young writers, including an eight-year-old who loves knitting.

INDEPENDENT: HIP is independent because it's not owned by a media corporation and has a flat structure with no overall editor. Decisions are made by editorial committee members at our regular meetings. Note: HIP should not be confused with the other HIP (Hastings International Piano) or HIG (referred to as Hastings independents).

DISTRIBUTION: Around 7,500 copies are distributed per edition across 100+ locations in Hastings & St Leonards including cafes, shops, supermarkets, libraries, NHS waiting rooms and even the local police station. Can't find it? Look on our website for a list of locations under the dropdown About us.

OUR READERS: Most of our stories are only relevant to the local community, although we do have readers from as far afield as New Zealand.

SECTIONS: Several section editors have come and gone over the last twelve years, including the much missed satirist, bass player Colin Gibson (Bird Guano) who once survived life in the supergroup Ginger Baker's Airforce. The longest serving section editor is the poet, Pete Donohue, a founding member of HIP and editor of the Literature Section.

300 EDITIONS: HIP has been published every fortnight since it began (although it was online-only during the pandemic), a major achievement for a volunteer-run publication – marking over a decade of continuous local journalism.

MENTIONED: Helena Dolimore MP mentioned the paper twice in parliament: once to thank "the journalists who helped expose the scandal [of Owens]" and once to ask the Leader of the House to join her in wishing HIP a happy 10th birthday and "thanking them [and Rye News] for all their hard work".

NATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL: Several items in HIP have been picked up by the national press, including The Observer and Private Eye. One article was even republished in the International Flute Journal.



Planning the 10th anniversary edition

PUTTING HIP TOGETHER

Each issue of HIP begins long before it reaches the café counters and shop windows and supermarkets, where readers pick it up for free

Central to the process is a committed network of editors, one for each section. These are listed on page two in every issue of the paper. All the editors are volunteers, bringing forward ideas shaped by their own experiences of Hastings. They are a mix of seasoned journalists, or others who have previously worked in writing and publishing, plus some new to this creative process. What unites us is not background but

perspective. HIP has always drawn strength from this mix, allowing stories to emerge from within the community rather than being imposed upon it.

To encourage the community-driven process, we encourage contributors to contact us with their stories, whether they write it themselves or have one of the editors interview them to tell the story on their behalf.

1. Section editors begin to collect stories: they may come up with their own ideas, but also individuals, charities, etc, email them with ideas of what to include.

2. The editorial meeting is where the next issue really begins to take shape. This meeting acts as a planning session and open forum. Section editors pitch ideas, debate angles. With no rigid hierarchy, decisions are collaborative.

3. The editing process begins as agreed content is produced. Sub editors then fact check, correct and shape articles, uploading them with suggested photos, ready for design.

4. Layout and design are managed by HIP's Art Director. Text and imagery are laid out in the distinctive style that regular readers will recognise over the production weekend.

5. The final stage in production involves the laid-out proofs being read and checked by section editors, proof-readers and the content coordinator on Monday before the paper goes to print.

6. Printing marks the point where the paper shifts from idea to object. 7,500 copies are produced every other week.

Distribution is a collective effort. Bundles of papers arrive on Thursday and delivered to cafés, bars, galleries, community centres and public spaces, where they are made freely available.

The decision to keep our paper free is to ensure that access is not limited by income so the

widest possible audience can be engaged with.

Readers encounter the paper in every-day settings, often picking it up casually, sometimes returning regularly. The stories they find there, about housing, culture, politics or local life, often feed into the next cycle of ideas