

The Chester Civic Trust NEWSLETTER

June 2012

TIME FOR CELEBRATION

Cinemagoers could see films in “Glorious Technicolor” as long ago as 1922. Amateur photographers (like me) were able to take colour photographs in the 1950s. By the late 1970s, colour television had become the domestic norm and these days even our mobile phones have colour displays. Now you can enjoy the first full colour edition of Chester Civic Trust Newsletter. The familiar black on gold format has served us well for nearly 30 years, from the days when editing was literally a cut and paste job. We are also making more use of the web. Each issue of the newsletter is uploaded on to the Civic Trust website, where you may consult past issues, or download and print as you wish. Further, any websites mentioned in this newsletter are just two clicks away via the CCT website, where all relevant links are posted.

The past few weeks have seen colourful events that have emphasised the significant role that our city has in our national life. First, the Queen came as part of her Jubilee Tour to open the new entrance to Chester Zoo. Jean and I were delighted to be invited by the Zoo, as long-standing members, to attend the ceremony. Sadly, the reality came down to standing for almost two hours in the pouring rain in order to see Her Majesty pass by on the zoo's monorail. Since she was seated on the opposite side of the train to the spectators our sole view was of a broad-brimmed hat and a waving hand behind rain-streaked glass. Ah well! I gather that, despite the weather, the opening was a great success and it reinforces the importance of the Zoo in helping to put Chester on the national and international map.

The city's importance was also underlined by its role as an overnight stop on the Olympic Torch relay. This time the weather was kinder and thousands of Cestrians, as well as people from further afield, lined the streets for

the once in a lifetime opportunity to see the Olympic Flame in Chester. In the evening, 25,000 people thronged the Roodee to witness the spectacular The Moment When, staged as part of the North West Cultural Olympiad; this extended until dusk to finish with a spectacular firework display. This was closely



followed by the Jubilee weekend. Again, there were displays in the city centre but, perhaps more important, neighbours and local communities in all parts of Chester came together to organise street parties and other celebrations great and small. For me, certainly, it was a reminder of how important local communities are in sustaining the “Pride of Place” that civic societies like ours are keen to foster. It's not all about buildings!

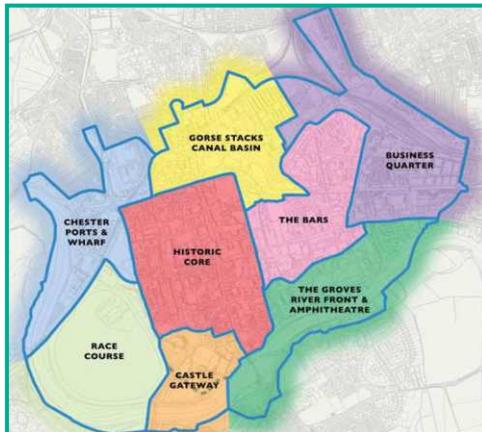
By the time you receive this newsletter we will have celebrated the second annual national Civic Day. CCT volunteers will be staffing a stall in the Town Hall Square to promote our work and to encourage passers-by to complete a national survey organised by Civic Voice. We have also enclosed a copy of the survey with this mailing and hope that you will take a few minutes to complete and return it. Meanwhile enjoy the rest of the summer – if we get one!

David Evans

THE ONE CITY PLAN

At an event in St. John's Church on 24 May 2012, Chester Renaissance  and Cheshire West & Chester Council launched the Chester 'One City Plan'. This is an ambitious document, setting down a vision of the city Chester could be in 15 years' time and proposing a development timeline en-route to 2027. The OCP is a substantial 96 page document, backed up by even larger appendices, including an analysis of 'The City of Now' and a Design Manifesto. The full documents are available via the Chester Renaissance website. Policies are outlined for eight areas of the City and a series of 30 Actions are promised, under the headings of 'People and Communities', 'Business and Investment', 'Living City' and 'Movement and Accessibility'. The development targets include action on the Northgate Development, the Business Quarter, the Cathedral Quarter, a Racecourse conference facility, and the Castle Gateway.

Several of the specific targets are to do with the transport system, including pedestrianisation of Northgate Street and remodelling most of the junctions on the Inner Ring Road. Traffic on Vicar's Lane and Little St John Street is seen as a barrier between the city and the



amphitheatre and would eventually be removed. Although the Plan extols the virtue of improving access to the city centre by public transport, many of the envisaged transport changes are likely to do exactly the opposite and some seem to me to be mutually incompatible. Bearing in mind that the transport system underpins the basic working of the city centre, and recognising that it no longer has sufficient staff to do the job itself, the Council is in the midst of letting a major contract to have consultants devise a new transport strategy for the city. The anticipated report-back in December 2012 looks hopelessly optimistic to me, given the complexities of the challenge, but we shall see!

As always, lurking at the back of our minds, are the metres of shelf space taken up by previous glossy documents that never progressed beyond the aspirational stage, all proposing wonderful things for the city centre. Chester Renaissance seems to be fully aware of the latent cynicism and is determined to prove the doubters wrong this time. Another instance where the proof of the pudding will be in the eating! In the meantime, the Council is pressing on with the development of its own ideas for the Northgate Development. When, in February 2012, the Council announced that it was ditching ING, its partner of 12 years, because of a lack of real progress, the developer responded that it would soon be ready to submit a planning application for the site: needless to say, nothing has been heard of this since, although ING has published some details of its own scheme on its website - but without any discernible facilities for buses! The Council has revealed the names of the

architects and other consultants whom it has engaged to take the work forward on its own scheme, leaving the possibility of linking up with another developer until later. The scheme would still be 'retail driven' but there appears to be a healthy recognition that non-retail elements, such as a multi-screen cinema and restaurants, are necessary to achieve a thriving quarter that doesn't shut down at 5.30pm.

The 'behind the scenes' work on the development of the Odeon site for a new Theatre continues, extending northwards to include Folliott House and westwards to include the site of the redundant Commerce House office block. The Council has announced the appointment of the same architects who masterminded the recent transformation of the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, so that is a hopeful sign. The latest

suggestion is to move the library into the new Odeon complex, to provide an all-day cultural venue for the city. The Civic Trust is likely to welcome this development in principle, provided the fundamental activities of the Theatre and the library are not thereby compromised. This idea, if proven feasible, would enable the realisation of the original Northgate Development proposal to move the Market to a new location on the current library site, behind the imposing facade of the old Westminster Coach and Motor Car Works. It is acknowledged that the one-time proposal to move the Market to the Kaleyards is now scrapped.

Some of the performing arts organisations in the city believe that a multi-purpose complex on the Odeon site would compromise the ability to house a wide range of drama productions and concerts, and hanker instead for a major new complex to be built behind the existing library, in addition to a re-vamped Odeon. There is no indication as to how this might be financed or whether it is at all compatible with the Northgate Development, but apparently they intend to write to the Arts Council telling it that the Odeon proposals do not have the backing of all the performing arts organisations in the city. Whether this will scupper the whole Odeon proposal, which will depend on Arts Council funding to complete the package, remains to be seen. Sometimes, as Voltaire said, "the best is the enemy of the good". The demolition of the



redundant building at Commerce House behind the Odeon, scheduled for the coming winter, will at least be the first and welcome tangible sign that the Council is determined to realise its ambition.

Peter Cocker

LEEDS AND WAKEFIELD VISIT

It was a cold and damp start on Friday 20th April for our group visit. Sprits were raised when we arrived at our first venue, the Yorkshire Sculpture Park (YSP). As we entered the 500 acre parkland it was immediately evident that this is undoubtedly one of the best sculpture parks in the world, set as it is in the grounds Bretton Hall, an 18th century estate until it became a college of education in the mid-20th century, and more recently the YSP. Our guide Michelle walked us



around the garden areas close to the house where we looked at, and debated, pieces by pioneers of 20th century sculpture such as Anthony Caro, Barbara Hepworth and Henry Moore. Our visit coincided with the first major

UK exhibition of sculpture by Joan Miró. His works, displayed throughout the garden, showed the playfulness, sensuality and warmth that undoubtedly influenced the CBBC children's television character Makka Pakka. The link will be instantly recognisable to anyone with a grandchild under the age of five.

We had lunch in the new visitor centre, designed by Fielden Clegg Bradley Studios, who are the architects of the Accordia housing scheme in Cambridge visited by the CCT last autumn. After a stroll around the indoor galleries to look at a further exhibition of superb Miró works, we drove on to Leeds and the Cosmopolitan Hotel, which is superbly sited right in the city centre at the south end of Briggate. We were joined in the evening by Linda Kitching and Kevin Grady, Chairman and Director respectively of Leeds Civic Society. Kevin gave a short presentation, which demonstrated that despite international weak economic growth, Leeds continues to be the powerhouse of the whole West Riding conurbation.

Our walking tour on Saturday was fascinating, showing the key role of woollen manufacture in the growth of the city over 400 years. We traced the line of recent canal and riverside developments from west to east, culminating in a view of the Royal Armouries building alongside the River Aire. Kevin and his colleague Joyce Hill provided a very clear exposition of the successes, and sometimes failures, of investments that have transformed what was previously a derelict area. For the highlights of what we saw in Leeds, one would mention straight away the exterior and interior of the Town Hall

by architect Cuthbert Brodrick (1853 to 1858), and Grade I listed. It is one of the largest in the UK and testament to Leeds as a powerhouse of 19th century industrial might. The same architect was responsible for the extraordinary Corn Exchange (1862) with its partly glazed dome and iron ribbed roof that looks like an upturned boat hull.

Even the retail averse could not be delighted by the Arcades, which continue to remind us that 'high end shopping' seems to defy the current economic gloom. This writer continues to be amused by shop windows that are completely devoid of any product display, the assumption being that you would not be one of their customers if you needed to be reminded as to what was being sold.

On the Sunday we travelled to Wakefield, a surprising city in many ways, overshadowed as it is by its neighbour Leeds. Our guide Kevin Trickett, President of Wakefield Civic Society, and a well-known figure in the civic society movement, walked us through his city, from elegant Georgian squares north of the centre, down through the administrative and shopping centre through to our final building: the Hepworth Gallery by architect David Chipperfield in 2011. For any fan of 20th century architecture this has to be a great building to visit with its subdued tones of grey and white that provide such a contrast to the stunning exhibits, many of them donated to Wakefield by Barbara Hepworth, who was born, raised and schooled in the city.

All in all a terrific visit and a reminder that the YSP and Hepworth are both easily visited on a day trip by car, with the bonus that both are free to visit. Finally, as one of the planners of this visit, can I thank on behalf of all those who went: Pat Barry and Martin Meredith, for all their work behind the scenes including the presentation of a cake to Alan Pullin to celebrate his birthday on the Sunday. Many thanks also to Karen McKay for her scouting visit and documentation, which gave us a wealth of information and helped interpret what we saw.

Peter Bingham



NEW WORKS NEWS

THE NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK

The Government has now rolled out its simplified NPPF, which aims to slash the amount of guidance and control of development imposed by central government. In general terms there is an assumption in favour of development proposals. It is already apparent that the supposedly simplified system actually leaves massive areas of policy and development control open to interpretation. We are finding that developers are using the NPPF in a formulaic way to justify any proposals they wish to make. This particularly means invoking the tenet of 'sustainability' and the need for local planning authorities to be 'positive' and 'pro-active' rather than 'negative' towards schemes. Equally, however, the Civic Trust has already found the NPPF useful in formulating objections to proposals on grounds of 'unsustainability' and the 'sequential test', which is designed to give priority to the maintenance of town centres. The prediction that the interpretation issues posed by the NPPF will turn it into a lawyers' playground is already being borne out.

THE STUDENT VILLAGE AT MOLLINGTON

The first application, to which we objected, was withdrawn following widespread public controversy. The battle is not over, however. The proposal will be re-submitted. Sir Steve Redgrave, the ex-Olympic rower, has been very publicly recruited to the scheme, and the developers are hoping to use a proposed Redgrave Institute sports facility on the site as a prop to strengthen the case for breaching the Green Belt. Civic Trust is clear that there is absolutely no merit to this argument, particularly since Chester University has stated there is no need for any new and massive free-standing accommodation for its students. The Council's own review of student accommodation says the same. New Works Committee has written directly to Sir Steve to alert him to our earlier objection and the unfortunate nature of his apparent support for the developers.

LEADWORKS (SHOT TOWER) DEVELOPMENT

New Works Committee considered this scheme carefully but in the end concluded that it would be an ugly and



unsympathetic development. The attempt to reflect the site's history by designing 'industrial' lead-coloured deck access tenement blocks is crude and simplistic. It will produce a brutal and gloomy development that looms over the canalside. The tenants will scarcely be able to see the waterway and deck access flats historically have a bad record in terms of anti-social behavior. We doubt whether this development will be any more successful in the long term. Civic Trust objected to the proposals and urged the developers to think again.

WAITROSE DEVELOPMENT, BOUGHTON



We welcome the proposal to redevelop this important site in Boughton. It needs a comprehensive and characterful development that relates sympathetically to both the canal and street frontages. The Civic Trust believes the developers' proposals go some way to achieving these objectives, although we can only say that the design for the supermarket is a reasonable expression of this type of building, no more. In particular, we cannot understand why the overall colour of the building – 'bronze' – has been adopted. It is particularly unsympathetic to the traditional character of the canalside where the predominant colour of both old and new developments is red-brown brick. If retained, the colour of the supermarket will be obtrusive and unsatisfactory when viewed against the backdrop of existing buildings. There are also problems with pedestrian/traffic conflict within the site. The proposed bridge across the canal, whilst a good idea, does not seem particularly well executed. These points have been made to the local planning authority.

DEMOLITION OF THE ENTERPRISE CENTRE CONFIRMED

Civic Trust objected to CWaC's proposal to demolish the remains of the old railway goods shed, previously the Enterprise Centre, which was gutted by fire in 2010. The basic structure is still sound and could have been adapted to new uses such as a desperately needed addition to the station car park. We appealed to the Secretary of State, whose permission was needed for demolition, but our arguments fell on deaf ears. The structure will now be demolished and the site sold, though what its ultimate use will be remains to be seen. There are no public proposals for its redevelopment.

QUEEN'S PARK HIGH SCHOOL ALL-WEATHER SPORTS FACILITIES

The proposal to develop all-weather sports facilities, including changing rooms and floodlighting, has been the subject of much controversy in the Queen's Park area. New Works considered the proposals carefully but concluded that, with safeguards, the benefits of the scheme outweigh the disadvantages. We also feel that some objectors are over-estimating its likely environmental impact. Civic Trust has been criticized for its stance but the issue shows how New Works Committee has to make reasoned decisions on the planning and civic merits, or otherwise, of schemes. The results may not be popular, but we hope such issues may stimulate more members to contribute to our work. A full statement of the Civic Trust's views on this development can be found on our website.

QUEEN'S PARK BANK SITE

Redrow's new proposals to redevelop the former bank site overlooking the river in Queen's Park are now emerging. They involve building three 'villas' – actually apartment blocks – on the river frontage and fifteen high

quality houses on the rest of the site – a total of thirty-three units. Redrow have employed a good architect to develop the concept scheme and the initial plans seem to be acceptable. This site's importance demands a top quality outcome, however, and it is essential that the originating architect continues to have a significant involvement in the actual execution of the scheme if it gets planning permission. We shall be watching closely and will comment publicly on the scheme when the planning application is received.

John Herson



CHBPT: AN AGENT OF LAST RESORT

Those of you who visited Ince Manor during Heritage Open Days or who remember its restoration ten years ago will have heard of the Chester Historic Buildings Preservation Trust (CHBPT). The Trust was set up in 1981 in association with the Chester Civic Trust, with the aim of acquiring and restoring buildings of historic importance. CHBPT has, by and large, relied on Civic Trust members for its successive chairmen and directors.

Unusually for a building preservation trust, CHBPT was set up without a specific project in mind. This proved to be an advantage, because it gave the committee time to consider a wide range of properties, and to assess for each the scale of work required and the financial implications, before embarking on a complex restoration project. In fact, the mere existence of CHBPT was enough to prompt some recalcitrant owners into action on their own behalf.

There are rarely quick fixes for a building preservation trust. Projects require substantial grant aid and subsidy because the cost of work is invariably more than can be recovered upon completion. The management of commercially unviable projects is a long process and has led to buildings preservation trusts being described as 'the agents of last resort'.

CHBT has successfully completed two major projects: Church House, Tarvin, and Ince Manor, near Elton. After a period of inactivity, steps are now being taken to

revive the Trust and potential projects have been identified on Wirral and in East Cheshire. If anyone knows of any other possible projects for restoration, or could offer some expertise in the field, CHBT would very much like to hear from them. Please contact CHBT via the Civic Trust office.

Stephen Langtree



HERITAGE WATCH

The Alliance to Reduce Crime against Heritage (ARCH) is a voluntary national network that has been formed by English Heritage, to tackle the growing problem of attacks on the nation's irreplaceable heritage. Theft and vandalism cause immediate damage, but the consequential loss can be disastrous. This month thieves ripped slates from the Grade I listed church at Plemstall. They found no lead, but the consequent rain ingress has done substantial and expensive damage to the organ and other furnishings.



Hilarie McNae, a CWaC Councillor and CWaC's Heritage Champion, addressed a recent ARCH conference in London, highlighting local issues and the innovative steps that CWaC's officers are taking. National and international media reported the conference; the problem of urination in the Rows was

reported under the headline "Heritage crime: medieval structure being ruined by late-night revellers".

Following the conference, Cheshire Police took the initiative in setting up Heritage Watch, the first of its kind in the country. This was in partnership with English Heritage, CWaC and Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service. Heritage Watch is a network of partners and groups within each community, who provide the collective eyes and ears to protect their local heritage sites. The pilot scheme for Heritage Watch covers Tarvin. They will keep an eye on not just the larger-scale and more obvious sites but also small items of heritage, such as milestones, finger-posts, distinctive railings and walls, that help to give an area its individuality. It is anticipated that Heritage Watch will unite communities in caring for their particular environment and will be an effective approach to preserving Cheshire's heritage for future generations.

Members of Chester Civic Trust will be pleased to know that the work done in CWaC is regarded by English Heritage as being at the forefront nationally of the fight against heritage crime. But we all need to be involved in protecting our heritage: if a crime is threatened or in progress, phone 999 to report it. Otherwise, if a heritage crime has already occurred, you can report it on the CWaC website, or by phoning 101 to lodge the information. For more information, or if you wish to set up your own local group, visit the Heritage Watch website.

DOUGLAS IN WIRRAL



50 Members set out on an unusually fine Thursday afternoon in May for a tour of John Douglas's work in Wirral; our guide was our own Graham Fisher, who had devised a packed programme for our education and entertainment. We began in Port Sunlight, where we found buildings by several great late-Victorian architects, including Lutyens, Ould and of course Douglas. The visit demonstrated the high quality and diversity of the buildings in this unique model village. Passing by the cottages in Neston Road, Thornton Hough, with their riot of styles and detailing, we moved on to Hill Bark, designed by Edward Ould and described as possibly one of the finest half timbered Victorian designs anywhere in the country. It was originally built in Birkenhead as a country house; in 1930 it was reconstructed on its present site and is

now a hotel. An excellent afternoon tea was served here

and, as we explored the house afterwards, we heard the sound of the Hill Bark organ played by Greg Yates – another CCT first? After stopping in Caldy to visit Resurrection and All Saints Church and its attendant Church Hall, with its ingenious dumb waiter, we moved on to West Kirby to be greeted at St Andrew's Church by Fr. Peter Walsh, a former CCT member and now the parish priest. My eye was caught by some splendid stained glass and in particular a 1990's addition made by Sep Waugh of York of the Transfiguration and Ascension; there was also a beautiful High Altar reredos by G Webb. Once again, the pleasant strains of organ music could be heard as Greg Yates played for our delight.

The visit was another triumph for the Trust, devised and outstandingly conducted by Graham Fisher.

Martin Meredith

WEST CHESHIRE HERITAGE FORUM

A train journey from Manchester to Chester in autumn 2009 gave Councillor Hilarie McNae and me the chance to hatch a plan! We had been to an English Heritage event that included discussions about the role of Heritage Champions and we were both struck by the idea of setting up a Heritage Forum for our then new borough of Cheshire West and Chester.

The Forum became a reality in 2010 with Hilarie, a Civic Trust member and CWaC's Heritage Champion, in the chair. To date, the Forum has met four times, each hosted by Chester Civic Trust at Bishop Lloyd's Palace. Networking with other civic societies and heritage groups has proved to be both interesting and instructive

– especially perhaps for those organisations that have less regular contact with the local authority than we do in Chester.

The latest meeting, on 21st May, covered Heritage Open Days, the new Historic Plaque Scheme and CWaC's Heritage Crime Initiative, together with topical news from all the organisations present. The next meeting is scheduled for November this year and hopefully might be held elsewhere in the borough, preceded by a tour of heritage assets.

Stephen Langtree

GILL FISHER



We are sad to announce the death of Gill Fisher in April this year. Her funeral took place at St Peter's Church, Plemstall, attended by many members of the Civic Trust. Gill was born in Hoole and attended local schools, becoming head girl of the City High School. She qualified as a French teacher; that and her knowledge of German and Italian were put to good use during various Civic Trust trips abroad. When a mother with young children, she joined the National Housewives Register. A meeting in her house was addressed by a young Stephen Langtree, and this resulted in Gill and Danny joining Chester Civic Trust. Gill eventually found herself on the Council and was chair of the Events Committee for 10 years. She accepted the responsibility of organising lectures and complex trips with quiet competence and good humour, earning the respect and gratitude of all members who came into contact with her. She is remembered with great affection.

NEWS IN BRIEF

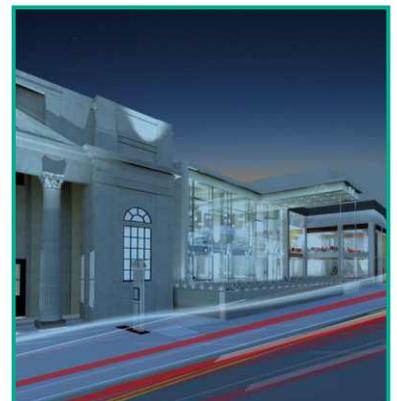
Cheshire West and Chester Council has spent over £3.2m converting the Grade II* Venetian Gothic Town Hall to a culture and entertainment centre. The original Assembly Room becomes a venue for the music festival and is equipped with a remodelled stage, improved dressing rooms and seating, and acoustic curtains to minimise echo off the oak-panelled walls. The former Quarter Sessions courtroom has been restored and is suitable for use as a reception or lecture room.



Chester's Roman Gardens have re-opened following an extensive programme of improvements. The works, which include a new path to access the base of the city walls, high quality

planting of Roman origin, topiary and a new York stone sitting and display area, follow on from the installation of the Four Seasons mosaic last year. The work was designed by CWaC's landscaping team and project managed by Chester Renaissance.

A planning application has been submitted to convert the former Habitat and adjacent Multiyork buildings in Pepper Street. The development will create four new restaurants on two levels, with the expectation that this area will become the "pre-eminent dining destination" in Chester.



DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

6th to 9th SEPTEMBER 2012

HERITAGE OPEN DAYS

Details to be announced

22nd SEPTEMBER 2012

CIVIC TRUST TRIP TO KENDAL

Details to be announced

11th OCTOBER 2012

ANNUAL: GENERAL MEETING

St Mary's Centre, 7.30 pm

19th to 22nd OCTOBER 2012

CIVIC TRUST TRIP TO BOSTON

Details and booking form enclosed



Published by

The Chester Civic Trust

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If you would like to join The Chester Civic Trust, please call in at our office at Bishop Lloyd's Palace between 1300 and 1500, Monday to Thursday, write to the Membership Secretary or email us at admin@chestercivictrust.org.uk

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