



LANCASTER CIVIC SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

No. 104 February 2011

Lancaster Castle

News that the Castle Prison is to close at the end of March followed hard on the heels of the publication of the Council's draft Cultural Heritage Strategy. The consultants who compiled this report frequently mentioned the potential of this Grade 1 listed building to lift Lancaster's visitor attractions into a higher league. The closure will affect the lives and livelihoods of many and finding a suitable and sustainable role for this iconic building will require imagination and huge investment.

Meanwhile we all owe a considerable debt of gratitude to the Home Office and the Prison Service for keeping the building in very good condition over the years. As a Grade I listed building it must continue to be well maintained. On page 4 you can read John Champness' thoughts on the subject. John is an authority on the Castle and has written an excellent guide to the building.

In 2006 the Society, along with the Lancaster Archaeological and Historical Society, organised a symposium on the Castle. Publication of the proceedings has been delayed but is now back on track. A number of members previously expressed interest in purchasing a copy and there may now be additional interest in the publication. If you are interested in more details when these become available please contact Winnie Clark: (clark4be@btinternet.com or telephone: 01524 33411)

Christmas Social

About 40 members braved a bitterly cold night to enjoy a very convivial evening. Once again we were entertained by the talented Arkholme Youth Band and Gillian Sheath provided an excellent quiz which was much enjoyed. Our thanks go to all those who worked so hard to make the evening such a success.

The Market & the Museum

At the 9th February meeting we learned of the proposal to relocate the indoor market into the City Museum. The Council's Cabinet will discuss the future of the market at its meeting on 15th February and will be asked to agree to further investigation into the feasibility of this suggestion. Whilst the proposed location would provide better connectivity between the indoor and outdoor markets, the proposal begs a huge number of questions, not least the future of the City Museum and its collections, and that of the Grade II* listed building itself. The proposal speaks of offering "improved museum facilities" but it is hard to see how this could be achieved if the whole of the ground floor is lost to the Museum. Whether the ground floor could be converted suitably and sensitively to meet the needs of the traders is also debatable. There are also health, hygiene and safety issues plus the problem of access for deliveries especially of meat, fish and vegetables, plus rubbish collections. The proposal, with its many implications, requires very thorough investigation. We will put material on our website as it becomes available. Please add your comments and ideas.

Cultural Heritage Strategy

The City Council recently invited comments on the draft Cultural Heritage Strategy document compiled by consultants Blue Sail and SQW. Martin Widden undertook to produce a response on behalf of the Society which is included as an insert with this newsletter. We are extremely grateful to him for undertaking this task.

Exhibition

Paley and Austin: images old and new
runs until 26 March at the City Museum.

Ugly Walk

On Sunday, January 2nd five of us accompanied Roger on the annual 'Ugly Walk'. It was a grey day, but calm and not unpleasant. We began at Greaves Park walking out behind the former old people's home to lower Bowerham Road, Meadowside and the Nuffield (now BMI hospital) car park, proceeding down South Road to the canal bridge taking in Springfield Street and Tower Court, the cluster of streets on Ashton Road west of The Pointer, and Ashton Road itself as far as Bridge Road.

In general it was a pleasing walk with few black spots. There was some fly posting and graffiti. The worst litter was found at the junction of Meadowside and Bowerham where it was felt a litter bin could be sited. Opposite the Nuffield, between the end of Meadowside and the car park, there was fly tipping behind high railings making it difficult to clear. Similarly, at Tower Court which was otherwise very tidy, there was a railed-in area, impossible to access, in which rubbish is accumulating. There were unsightly Rediffusion wires and the pavement at the east end of Railway Street had damaging weed growth and some houses were very poorly maintained.

Interestingly, there were two good plots of land apparently suitable for infill. One was the plot opposite the Nuffield and the other on a triangle between Railway Street and the RLI.

There were many delights on the walk, some architectural and some decorative. These included the splendid entrance to The Grove, the still extant orchard which gives one of Meadowside's houses its name, the original limestone gateposts of Meadowside and the stained glass there and elsewhere. There are two wonderful towers, one at Tower Court and one further north which we have yet to investigate, beautiful features on Springfield House, carvings under the eaves of two houses on South Road and the great variety of terrace housing. We also benefitted from the local knowledge of two of the group in particular who knew both the history and the local

politics of the area. Roger noted how much neater neighbourhoods were with wheelie bins .

Our thanks go to Roger for organising the walk, for his astute comments throughout, and for the report he has submitted to the council.

Sheila Jones

Report on January meeting

Chris Wild of Oxford Archaeology North provided an excellent start to the new year with his talk on the clay buildings (or clay dubbins as they are known in Cumbria) of the Solway Plain. These earth-built structures are mainly found on the coastal fringe where there is little stone and few trees. The greatest concentration is to be found at Burgh-by-Sands. A survey by R.W. Brunskill and Nina Jennings undertaken in 2003 revealed 252 surviving clay buildings with a further 55 sites previously documented but now destroyed. Agricultural buildings (mainly barns) and domestic dwellings (many of which have now been rendered making them difficult to recognise as of clay construction) are the most commonly found, with just a few pubs and industrial buildings. The walls of clay buildings were typically very thick (two feet at the base was common) with small windows which were cut out after construction. Roof structures were generally A frame or cruck frame, roofed with Welsh slate (thatched roofs were rare). Clay walls, if well maintained, can last for centuries (Chris showed us buildings with date stones from the 17th century) and heat loss is negligible. However, if damp does get in it is very difficult to eradicate.

The method of construction typical of the Solway area was the "Quick Build" method with thin layers of clay separated by straw. A clay dubbin cottage might be built over a weekend by villagers for a newly-married couple. The lecture was well illustrated with many examples of surviving clay buildings and the talk provided members with a fascinating insight into this age-old construction.

Planning Matters

One of the Society's remits is to comment on planning applications of interest or concern. A Planning Group meets to consider relevant applications and formulate a response on behalf of the Society. Given the size of the Society's membership there will be many differing views and we are conscious that the Society's response may be at variance with the opinions of some members. Given the time constraints (for most applications comments need to be made within 3 weeks) extensive consultation is not feasible. We therefore encourage members to submit personal responses to applications of interest and copy them to us (email Anne Stelfox at rjw.stelfox@virgin.net). These will be considered if the Group also debates the application.

If you are interested in planning issues please consider joining the Planning Group - new members are always welcome (contact Anne Stelfox as above or via tel. 01524 823299).

The following representations have recently been submitted to the City Council.

Application No. 10/01016/FUL STUDENT ACCOMMODATION Victoria Court, Penny Street, Lancaster

The proposed scheme differs only in detail from the previously submitted scheme. In scale and bulk the proposed development is the same and the Civic Society maintains its objection to a scheme that would have a significantly greater scale than the adjoining buildings and for this reason alone the building would be prominent and intrusive in the street scene.

The proposed Penny Street frontage of the building would have regular window openings at all floor levels above ground floor level. Above ground level the building would have a dull and bland appearance. The proposed scheme does not display an appreciation of its context or any skilful architectural design. The proposed building, on its Penny Street frontage, would

be a large unattractive decorated box.

The five storey box would extend, albeit in a narrower form, to the rear of Penny Street and would have a frontage onto Thurnham Street adjacent to a two-storey mews development. The contrast in scale would be incongruous. Furthermore, the extensive unbroken wall of development would be visually intrusive in an area where there is a wide variety of building heights, styles and roof forms.

The proposed redevelopment scheme at Victoria Court is unacceptable for a variety of reasons. It would be, in simple terms, one storey too high and, consequently, its scale would be thoroughly out of keeping with adjoining development. The scheme, given its dull design, would be unattractive and would have a significant adverse effect on the character and appearance of the Conservation Area within which it would be located. The Civic Society recommends that planning permission be refused for what would be a visually intrusive development on a prominent site on an important road in Lancaster city.

n.b. This application was granted planning permission at the January meeting of the Planning Committee. However one Councillor quoted our comments in proposing refusal, though this motion was lost.

Application No. 10/01319/FUL AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT Wheatfield Street, Lancaster

The Civic Society has no objection to the proposed affordable housing development, which will contribute significantly to providing for those in housing need. The scheme has been sensitively designed and would be a successful development on an awkward site.

The Society's support for the proposed development is given despite concerns for traffic congestion on nearby Meeting House Lane. The additional traffic generated by the proposed scheme will exacerbate congestion on this busy road particularly during morning and evening rush hour periods.

**Application No. 10/01093/FUL
HOUSING DEVELOPMENT on land to the
rear of Lancaster Railway Sports and Social
Club, Morecambe Road, Lancaster**

The Civic Society supports this proposed affordable housing scheme.

The building would be on a prominent site and has, in general, been sensitively designed. The Society suggests that if planning permission is granted, a condition is imposed to control the materials used on the external elevations of the building. In this regard the sculptured elevations would be enhanced by subtle differences in the walling materials. The Society also recommends, for this to be a successful development, that one of the flats is occupied by a live-in manager.

Only by making this provision would the development be successfully maintained in the future.

The Civic Society recommends that planning permission be granted for the proposed development subject to the imposition of the aforementioned conditions.

n.b. This application was granted planning permission at the February meeting of the City Council's Planning Committee.

Canal Corridor North site

Following a period of quiet about the future of the Canal Corridor North site, Centros recently released a statement expressing their continued interest in the site and indicating that, following consultations with English Heritage and the City Council, revised plans will be issued for consultation in the autumn. The previous proposals proved divisive within the City and the Society. We hope to encourage debate with members via means such as the website and newsletter. We all wish to see the redevelopment of this neglected site although there are differing views of the best way achieving this.

The Society has recently issued a statement about the site which is included with this newsletter.

John Champness on Lancaster Castle

The decision to close the Prison in Lancaster Castle will not be reversed. We have to accept a *fait accompli* and then try to make the best of the many opportunities which the closure will create.

We have also to accept that the Castle belongs not to the City Council, but to the Queen, as Duke of Lancaster. It is therefore with the Duchy Council and other Duchy staff that discussions will have to be held about the best way to exploit the Castle's many assets.

The Castle contains fine medieval and Georgian buildings and includes many features of historical significance. It is a complex of castle, prison and courts which is second to none in England. It has, therefore, considerable tourism potential beyond what is already being achieved by County Council staff around the Shire Hall. It is good to learn that Trevor Osborne, whose firm managed the conversion of Oxford Prison, is interested in doing something similar at Lancaster.

There is, however, no hurry to take important decisions. The Duchy will probably ensure that the Ministry of Justice does not leave before its lease expires in about three years time; and all of that period will be needed to allow the careful removal of the Prison's equipment - except, of course, those many items which are of historic interest.

We, the people of Lancaster owe it to ourselves to use the next few months to propose and discuss imaginative but realistic ideas about the future of the Castle, in the hope of discussing them with the Duchy authorities. Lancaster Civic Society is already in contact with a number of bodies in the City and County and would welcome any suggestions from individuals or groups. Please send them to the Society at 90 Aldcliffe Road, Lancaster LA1 5BE.

Lancaster Civic Society

Response to the City Council's draft Cultural Heritage Strategy

Introduction

The consultants Blue Sail have prepared a comprehensive and well-researched report setting out a draft Cultural Heritage Strategy for Lancaster. This covers the whole District, but focuses chiefly on Lancaster itself, which has many historic buildings and the longest and most significant history of any part of the District.

Lancaster Civic Society welcomes this draft strategy. It believes that it could provide a blueprint for the development and better presentation of the historic and cultural assets of Lancaster over the next ten years or so. However, this will not be achieved without a very considerable effort by local organisations, as well as the City and County Councils and the Duchy, to agree a series of achievable objectives, to raise funding to take them forward, and to participate in their implementation.

Lancaster Castle and its importance to the strategy

Dated December 2010, the report was published just before the announcement that Lancaster Castle Prison is to close. Again and again in the report the consultants say that Lancaster Castle, when it becomes accessible to the public, has the potential to transform Lancaster's position in the hierarchy of heritage destinations in north-west England. This has now become a real possibility: the Castle could become the centrepiece of a range of buildings and features that would bring many more visitors to the City, as well as acting as a focus for the interest of local people.

Need to offer a rounded experience

Blue Sail emphasise that, if Lancaster is to become a successful heritage destination, it will not be sufficient to concentrate effort on just a few landmark buildings. To take full advantage of the opportunities available to it, the City will need to have a rich range of attractions, including an attractive townscape with historic buildings, a well-maintained public realm, a good retail centre, and a range of interesting eating places and hotel accommodation. Having made a detailed assessment of the various heritage attractions in Lancaster, the consultants conclude that the City has many historic buildings and attractive townscapes, but there has been insufficient investment in the public realm over recent years. The city has a number of good independent shops, but there is a lack of large stores, and there are no high-class hotels in the city. This situation needs to be addressed.

Lancaster's competition

Comparing Lancaster with Carlisle and Chester, Lancaster's competitors as heritage cities in north-west England, the report finds that Lancaster has similar numbers of attractions to the other two cities and brings in similar numbers of visitors. This is very encouraging. It gives support to the idea that Lancaster could achieve substantial economic benefits from investment in its cultural heritage.

The blight of the A6 road

The Blue Sail report laments the unfortunate division of the city by the two carriageways of the A6 road. The northbound part is a barrier between the whole Castle precinct, including the Priory, Vicarage Field and the Judges' Lodging, and the shopping centre, with Market Square and the City Museum. The southbound part despoils Dalton Square, dividing the Town Hall and the two theatres from the shops; it also makes it difficult to develop the Canal Corridor North site in a way that connects with the present shopping centre. An opportunity to solve this problem was created years ago, but it was not grasped.

Finance

Implementation of the proposed Cultural Heritage Strategy will require substantial investment. In the present financial climate, it is difficult to see where this money might come from. However, we believe that, with a positive approach to this difficulty, it should be possible to raise finance to restore the Castle and open it to the public, and to begin to make the other investments that are called for, with a view to completing the process set out within a ten-year period at most.

Conclusion and summary

Lancaster Civic Society welcomes the draft Cultural Heritage Strategy for Lancaster, which we believe sets out a positive and workable plan. The forthcoming closure of the Castle Prison will greatly increase the opportunities for the city to develop and enhance its cultural heritage attractions. Following the decision to

close Lancaster Castle prison in the near future, much of the content of the Blue Sail report can stand, but the Action Plan needs to be revisited.

The Blue Sail report notes that similar reports have been published in the past few years, e.g. for NWDA and the Vision Board. These have not led to much visible action, and it is vital the present report does not meet a similar fate.

Lancaster Civic Society looks forward to playing an active part in the further development of the Strategy, and also to contributing to its implementation. As stated above, achieving this will require a major effort by local organisations, including Lancaster Civic Society, as well as the City and County Councils and the Duchy, to agree a series of achievable objectives, to raise funding to take them forward, and to participate in their implementation.

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3 February 2011

n.b. The draft Cultural Heritage Strategy document and Action Plan are available on the Society's website (www.lancastercivicsociety.org).

THE LANCASTER CANAL CORRIDOR NORTH SITE:

A policy statement by Lancaster Civic Society

Introduction

The chief aims of Lancaster Civic Society are to support high standards of architecture and town planning in the City, and to encourage the preservation and improvement of features of general public amenity or historic interest. These aims cannot be achieved without a thriving and vibrant economy in Lancaster, to provide a range of employment opportunities and to enable finance to be raised for good new buildings and the conservation of fine old ones. These ideas have determined the Society's views - which are positive - on the development of the Canal Corridor North (CCN) site.

Background

The CCN site, bounded by Moor Lane, St Leonardgate and the Lancaster Canal, is roughly the same land area as the present central shopping area within the Lancaster one-way road system. At the western extremity of the site there is a short (20-metre) frontage on to Stonewell. There have been buildings along the western parts of St Leonardgate and Moor Lane and at Stonewell for many years. The remainder of the site was undeveloped agricultural land until at least 1850. In the second half of the 19th century terraced housing was built over much of this land; the lines of the streets in this area follow the old field boundaries.

Most of the CCN site was cleared in the 1960s to provide a route for an inner relief road, intended to carry road vehicles through Lancaster more smoothly and to relieve historic areas such as Dalton Square of heavy traffic, but this has not been built. There have been other, less intrusive, road proposals since, but these have not been built either.

Site assets, development possibilities and recommendations

Much of the site is still empty of buildings. The few buildings that are standing in the site are mostly not of sufficient quality or utility to justify keeping them. Exceptions include the Grand Theatre and the Dukes

Theatre, both of them important for their historic and cultural significance to the City, and the malthouse of the Brewery, which was recently listed. There are a few other buildings which should be retained and nurtured.

The very short Stonewell frontage, at the western extremity of the site, is close to the existing retail centre. The CCN site is unfortunately divided from the main retail centre by the southbound carriageway of the A6 road. The almost total division of the site from the existing retail centre is a severe disadvantage, and imaginative and/or radical solutions will be needed to overcome it.

The site slopes downhill from the Canal on the eastern side of the site to Stonewell on the west: the level difference is some 10 m. This is an opportunity for developers and architects to generate both interesting massing as seen from a distance, and attractive vistas nearer to and within the development.

Any scheme for the site must of course 'stack up' financially, so it will need to incorporate enterprises that give a decent return on investment. At present, this means a substantial retail component: a succession of studies have indicated that Lancaster can support retail expansion, aiming to recover the business that has gradually leaked away to other centres. However, only the western part of the site, closest to the present shopping area, can be used for new shopping units. The rest of the site is too far from the present shopping area; retail may not always remain a high-value activity, so it would be risky to devote too much space to it; and, as with any town, there is a limit to the retail floor area that Lancaster can support. Residential buildings and possibly small workshops should take a larger proportion than in most recent commercial developments.

Lancaster Civic Society therefore recommends that

- The Canal Corridor North site should be developed in a way that protects its assets for a rich mix of uses, including retail, office, high-density housing such as terraced housing and flats, places for leisure (cafés, restaurants, pubs, etc), and possibly small workshops. These can co-exist very fruitfully with the cultural buildings (the Duke's Theatre and the Grand Theatre). This mix will help to ensure the continuing viability of the area, and will make it an interesting place to visit. The aim should be an area that is open and alive at all times of the day and night, but it should not be noisy or rowdy, because of the large residential component.
- Because the site is very near to the historic centre of Lancaster, the City must call for high standards of architecture and design; good-quality, durable materials; and excellent workmanship by the builders. This is essential to support Lancaster's need to sustain and improve its attractiveness as a place to live and work, and as a centre for tourism.
- There are views from the CCN site of the Ashton Memorial, the spire of St Peter's Cathedral, the Town Hall clock, the tower of St John's Church, and the tower of St Thomas's, as well as important buildings like St Leonard's House. Great care will be needed with any proposals for new tall buildings, to ensure that important views are not obstructed. In general, because of the scale of surrounding buildings, new buildings should be no taller than three storeys, and vistas where long views can be seen should be preserved.
- The present street pattern of the site - Edward Street, Seymour Street, Alfred Street etc - follows old field boundaries, but it should not be preserved for reasons of nostalgia. However, the lines of drains and sewers could be a reason to keep some of the present street lines.

Lancaster Civic Society, January 2011

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