



LANCASTER CIVIC SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

No. 119 November 2014

Forthcoming events

Wednesday 10 December, Town Hall:

The Winders of Wyresdale - illustrated talk by Andy Hornby, followed by a quiz and mince pies, mulled wine and soft drinks.

The Winders were regular members of a village band in Wyresdale throughout the 19th century.

Sunday 4 January: Ugly walk - The area of interest for the 2015 Ugly Walk is Fairfield.

We will be meeting in the Railway Station buffet on platform 3 at 10 am on Sunday 4th January 2015. Please wrap up warmly and have sensible footwear. A camera to record the good and bad things we see is helpful. We will return to the Station buffet for hot chocolate at about 12 noon.

Wednesday 14 January, The Storey Lecture Theatre:

Edmund Sharpe - Lancaster's Renaissance Man, of eminent local architects Sharpe, Paley and Austen. Lecture presentation by the well-known local geographer and historian Jim Price.

Wednesday 11 February, The Storey Lecture Theatre:

The B4RN (Broadband for the Rural North) Project

Talk by Barry Forde, Chief Executive of B4RN, which provides high-speed broadband for rural districts in this area.

*Wednesday 11 March, Town Hall:
The Grand Theatre*

Mike Hardy, Chairman of the Footlights, will speak about the Grand, one of the oldest working theatres in the country.

*Wednesday 8 April, Town Hall:
The Heysham-M6 Link Road*

Lecture and update by Tony Crowley, Community Liaison Officer, Costain.

More on approaching the City from the east

The last issue of this newsletter carried a front-page article about a walk by some Civic Society members along the routes likely to be taken by visitors or others who arrive in Lancaster by road from the east. In the main, these routes do not lift the spirits, and in his report on this walk Peter Wiltshire offered some proposals for low-cost improvements.

In the article below, Mike Quinton offers an alternative view, and this is followed by a short account of a proposal by a local group to celebrate the history of the Caton Road building that now houses Standfast and Barracks.

From Mike Quinton:

Nobody will disagree with Peter Wiltshire's description of the miserable eastern route into the city in the article on the front page of the September newsletter. I am afraid that I can offer no immediate suggestions for improvements; all I feel impelled to respond is to ask the standard question: Why? Why do things like this happen and can any useful lessons be learnt for the future? Meanwhile I apologise in advance that my comments could appear rather negative or even curmudgeonly.

Firstly, as one of the many who have regularly to reach Lancaster, Morecambe or Heysham via Junction 34 and Caton Road, I am not keen on finding a new hazard in the form of volunteers or ex-offenders pulling up weeds or climbing up decaying buildings to get rid of buddleias. The sooner these unwanted buildings disappear the better. Meanwhile, at least anything growing will be adding some oxygen to the atmosphere, bless 'em.

But first some GOOD NEWS! As Peter points out, a major element in the problem lies in the slow-moving nature of the traffic flow, but all that construction work going on around Junction 34 of the M6 relates to the long-overdue completion of the M6/Heysham link road. This should make a massive change in the use of the A683 from Junction 34 westward, which currently forces all the coast-bound traffic to share a two-lane road as far as the traffic lights before Greyhound Bridge. Far fewer will still need to continue on the A683 and along Back Caton Road (BCRd.), once so many will be able to take the new road coastwards from Junction 34.

OK, that awful little stretch of BCRd. may not be otherwise improved. On the east side there will remain that huge muddy shelf dug out by developers who had somehow gained permission to insert in it a large office block with entrance and exit feeding off and into the BCRd. traffic. If permission for such a development was not ridiculous enough, consider the effect of leaving so many houses in Bulk Road perched on top of a precipice. I do not know what the exact status of that permission is but fear it has already created a precedent which could let in some other crazy development (there's already a rumour around about houses on the site!). At least there should be a requirement on any developer who digs such an unsightly big hole to fill it back in if they are not going to use it.

Looking to the west side of the road, we have a mix of unrelated buildings, some old and decayed, some built more recently, which could not easily be removed. Amongst them, of course, is the rear of Bridge House, the one building in that whole block between Parliament Street and BCRd that is *really worthy, architecturally and historically*, of restoration and retention. Alas, even here we have disappointments: the integrity of Bridge House was permanently compromised by a sizeable extension made to accommodate the now long-defunct Orient Express Restaurant. Then, on the other side, the front facade of Bridge House is seriously spoilt because, again long ago, the last arch of Skerton Bridge was raised to let trains through, leaving that frontage half-buried behind a sunken footpath.

Now we come to our "elephant", not in the room, nor grey, pink or white, but yellow. There it squats uncomfortably on what has to be explained as an old, unused, unloved and unlovely bus garage. Here also we find our old enemy, the law of unintended consequences. When English Heritage, supposedly the national guardian of the most excellent parts of our built and rural environment, slapped a Listing on these old ruins, it effectively blighted the whole of that Kingsway block between Parliament Street and BCRd. which otherwise could have been the site of a large, integrated and well-designed development; perhaps eventually with roads to match the importance to us all of that eastern, primary, route into Lancaster. Ah Well.

Mike Quinton

Possible celebration of the Caton Road Wagon Works?

The long wall along the north-west side of Caton Road, with its clock tower halfway along it, forms one side of a building which was originally built as a factory for railway carriages and wagons. Designed by Paley and Austen, and now listed grade 2, it opened in 1865.

During World War I it was used variously as a barracks and as an internment camp. Some time after the end of that war, the building became the Standfast fabric dyeing and printing works. This continues to operate, producing high-class printed fabrics for Liberty, Morris and Co, Sanderson and other makers. As well as traditional flatbed and rotary printing techniques, the company also has the latest ink-jet digital technology, which enables it to print short and special runs.

A new local arts and heritage group, called Mirador, aims to celebrate the history of the Caton Road site, which will reach its 150th anniversary next year, 2015. With support from Standfast and Barracks, the group is currently seeking funding for its programme. If this bid is successful, let us hope the rather grim exterior of the building will receive a makeover - for example, to display some of the products that are made inside.

Double standards or double bind?,

by Stephen Langtree

Imagine you live in a conservation area, such as Cannon Hill in Lancaster, or Curzon Park in Chester. Your house is over 100 years old and is listed Grade 2 - but you would like it to be a little larger. The proposed extension might comprise a study, an extra bedroom or a larger garage. What will you need to do?

Well, almost everything! You will need planning approval, including Listed Building consent; you will probably need to employ a qualified architect, and you can expect the Local Authority to scrutinise every last detail of your scheme. The planning officer, conservation officer and building control officer will offer advice and test you to the limit. The Conservation Area Advisory Panel, the residents' association and/or the parish council will all offer their views, as will the neighbours - not to mention Lancaster Civic Society or Chester Civic Trust! In other words, you can expect a long and expensive ordeal.

Compare and contrast this with the design standards adopted by many of the volume house builders. Their schemes are usually in less sensitive locations, but they are subject to the same generic design policies in the Council's Local Plan - aren't they?

In Lancaster two long-awaited housing schemes are emerging on large brownfield sites next to the river. Luneside West (403 units) is fairly remote from the centre of the historic city and was thus recommended as a development which might employ some imaginative, if not adventurous, urban design. In the event the house-builders failed to employ an architect and are using their 'safe' pattern-book style - recently described by a senior Council officer as 'no more than adequate.' Luneside East (149 units) is nearer the city centre and the Castle, and was originally thought suitable for an 'urban village.' The Council suggested this, among a series of more-specific recommendations in their pre-application discussions with the developer. Alas, most of this advice has been ignored, and the Officers are recommending approval 'with a heavy heart.' Curiously, the Officers feel they cannot (or dare not)

recommend refusal of such schemes on design grounds alone. Ironically, of course, that is exactly what they would do if they didn't like your house extension in a conservation area.

Meanwhile, in Chester over the past six months, two high-profile planning applications have been turned down by Council Members, after having been recommended for permission by the Officers. Both were for housing, both are in conservation areas; and both were rejected on design grounds.

Interestingly, in one case the Officers were said to be looking for other reasons to justify the refusal because they didn't think that poor design was an adequate reason! Both refusals leave Cheshire West and Chester Council open to shouldering the costs of losing on Appeal. Apparently, the Council have already amassed a financial liability of nearly £500,000 to cover the cost of lost appeals.

One interpretation of this is that the Planning Officers give insufficient weight to the importance of design standards, and are out of step with public opinion and the views of their own members. Another is that the Council Members themselves are being irresponsible in not appreciating the constraints placed upon their Officers and, by overturning recommendations for approval, they are exposing the Council to punitive costs at Appeal.

Whichever is true, and it will vary from case to case, the de-skilling of planning departments, many of which no longer have any trained architects or conservation officers at all, certainly doesn't help.

Moreover, all of this is set against the background of a national shortage of housing and a government which gives the impression that house-building will boost our economy better than anything else. To this end, local councils are being put under a lot of pressure to allocate land for large-scale house-building even if, as in Chester and Lancaster, that may mean eroding the Green Belt. In Lancaster, the debate about how many new homes are needed and where they should go is in full flow. No final decisions have been taken yet, but the Civic Society and Lancaster Vision are already 'on the case'. We are, of course, concerned that

any growth should not prejudice the character and setting of the city, but we are equally determined to secure high-quality design, both in overall planning and in the building styles.

So, if design standards are allowed to decline, who is to blame? Well, everybody, but for different reasons:

The house-builders (some, but not all), for putting short-term profits above their social and professional responsibilities

The local planning authorities, for not preparing site-specific development briefs and for not applying their existing design policies even-handedly

The government, for promoting a massive increase in house-building while relaxing the

planning controls that help to ensure good design

The Planning Inspectorate, for all too often supporting the developer's aspirations above those of the local community

The general public, for being more interested in the next-door neighbour's plans than in the design of their towns and villages.

And what's to be done? The opposite of the above!

Perhaps if the design quality of new housing was considerably better than it usually is, the public would be less hostile to the prospect of necessary growth!

Stephen Langtree
Chester Civic Trust (Vice-President)
Lancaster Civic Society (Committee Member)

Saving your Heritage Conference, Lancaster Town Hall, 29 October 2014

by Anne Stelfox

Roger and I attended this conference at Lancaster Town Hall, organised by English Heritage.

There were 100 delegates attending from a wide range of organisations throughout the North West, including local councils, churches, the Victorian Society, project personnel from Areas of Outstanding National Beauty, the Lake District National Park, and Morecambe Bay Partnership, as well as members of Civic Societies.

The underlying theme of the event was for delegates to "network" and assist in helping to preserve the properties, gardens, churches and area of land which are on the "At Risk" Register.

The Register has 500 sites listed, of which 90 are in the North West. As sites get restored, they are removed from the register, e.g. Mrs Gaskell's House in Manchester, which recently completed a substantial restoration.

There were a series of ten speakers during the day, most from the region. However the Programme Director from The Prince's Regeneration Trust came from London and

spoke about the "Brick Scheme". This stands for Building Resource, Investment and Community Knowledge. This is a mentoring and training programme supporting local community groups throughout the country to find new ways to save their local heritage.

Throughout the day, emphasis was put on how much valuable work was done by committed volunteers, eg workers in the Lake District who (after training) were able to clear bracken off many archaeological sites. The volunteers are supported by grants from such organisations as LDNP, The National Trust and English Heritage.

Saving Your Heritage was a most interesting and inspiring day. Photographs of projects both before and after restoration were very encouraging, especially when successful new ways had been found to bring the buildings back into sustainable use. One such was "Middleport Pottery" in Stoke-on-Trent, which had made my grandmother's dinner service in 1900!

There was a real buzz in the air during the breaks and I feel sure that English Heritage will be encouraged to organise a similar conference on another occasion.

Anne Stelfox

Planning responses

Following an invitation from the City Council's Conservation Team, our responses are now also copied to the Conservation Team.

14/00961/CU 5 - 11A Brock Street: Change of use of upper floors of the Oddfellows Hall to student accommodation with alterations to the roof including new dormer windows to the front and rear, alterations to fenestration and installation of new retail frontages on the ground floor.

We wrote to welcome the proposal to restore the exterior of the Oddfellows Hall to something close to its original appearance, and to bring the whole building back into active use. We welcomed the restoration of the original frontage to Brock Street, whilst trusting that care would be taken to minimise the impact on the appearance of additional floors cutting across existing windows.

On the Mary Street frontage we believed that the original doorway had a pediment above, and urged that that feature be restored, in preference to the proposed archway which appears out of character with the rest of the building..

We had reservations about the continuous line of additional dormer windows which appear to be out of scale with the remaining fenestration and question if these could not be broken up, possibly by the use of heavier vertical glazing bars.

Prior approval for partial demolition: 34 - 38 Parliament Street, Lancaster

We wrote that we deplore the fact that these properties have been allowed to deteriorate to such an extent that it is difficult to envisage them being brought back into use. The frontage to the whole length of Parliament Street has been all but destroyed, with only the Old Marble Works (Kashish Restaurant) rightly being preserved, (although in a very poor state to the rear). We support the City Council Conservation Officer's contention that demolition of these houses would constitute a major loss to the historic fabric of the city.

We strongly urged that, if demolition is to take place, every effort should be made to protect the integrity of the historic Rope Walk situated to the rear of these properties.

Reports on evening meetings

October 2014

The opening talk of the 2014-15 session was a highly topical and well-illustrated presentation by John Byron from United Utilities on the company's current works in Lancaster. We are all familiar with the disruption to people, traffic and businesses caused by these major works to upgrade Lancaster's sewer system. John Byron began his talk by outlining the historic background behind the extensive powers of the water utilities, which originated in the public-health reforms of the 19th century. He then outlined the necessity for the current works, the complexities of the operation, the magnitude of the civil engineering involved, some of the unexpected difficulties encountered and the negotiations with various agencies to minimise the inevitable disruption. The first stage of the works involved improvements north of the river in Skerton, including the creation of a new pumping station. The second stage has been the phased work in the city centre, including the installation of two huge interceptor tanks to collect stormwater, plus major improvements to nine unsatisfactory overflows to prevent pollution of the Lune. The third stage is an upgrade of the Waste Water Treatment Works at Stodday.

November 2014

The Commonwealth War Graves Commission looks after the graves and memorials of 1.7 million service people who died in the two World Wars. On 12 November Admiral Sir John Kerr spoke to the Civic Society about the Commission's work since 1917 for the casualties from the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India. He told us about the large memorials - the Menin Gate at Ypres and Thiépval - where are inscribed the names of the many killed and missing in action. He showed us the graves of those killed, some headstones recording the names and details of the fallen whereas others are only 'known unto God' (Rudyard Kipling's phrase). Gertrude Jekyll influenced the landscaping and planting schemes in the cemeteries. Sir Edwin Lutyens designed the headstones and many of the memorials. At the end of the First World War it was decided,

