

Chesterfield and District Civic Society

OBSERVATIONS ON THE FUTURE OF THE OPEN MARKET IN CHESTERFIELD

Introductory

1 This paper has been prepared by the Civic Society committee as a contribution to the public consultation exercise by the Borough Council concerning the future of the open market in Chesterfield. The committee does not, as a matter of policy, take part in online questionnaires, and in any case the one devised in this case is clearly aimed to obtain the views of individuals, rather than the collective view of an organisation. All members of the committee have had the opportunity to contribute to this document, but we have drawn particularly on the first-hand experience of one of our members who is a long-standing market trader in Chesterfield and elsewhere.

2 Historical background

It is reasonable that the consultation document includes some historical background, since the market is one of the oldest institutions in Chesterfield with a continuous history, but disappointing that professional assistance was not sought to ensure that the details were correct. More careful editing and proof-reading would also have been welcome. Perhaps most seriously, the document fails to draw an important lesson for the future from the market's long history: that retailing (including markets) evolves continuously and both retailers and their landlords (in this case the Borough Council) must change in response to changing consumer demand.

3 The first reference to a market in Chesterfield is in 1165 (not 1156) and the present market place (known throughout the Middle Ages as the New Market)

had been built by 1199, before (not after) the burgesses were granted the right in 1204 to hold a Saturday market (not two markets a week) and an eight-day annual fair. The old market place, on the north side of the parish church, became known as the Weekday Market, presumably because a small number of traders stood there on days other than Saturdays. The chartered Saturday market was held in the present Market Place. The old market place had been built over the by the 15th century and may have gone out of use before then.

- 4 The historical notes (and the rest of the consultation) also fail to make the important point that the New Market of the 1190s had three components: the open market place, the lines of shops and house along its northern and southern sides, and the block of shambles at its eastern end. There are still shops on Low Pavement and High Street and these need no further comment. The Shambles were rehabilitated during the modernisation of the market area which culminated in the opening of the Pavements shopping precinct in 1981 and have worn reasonably well since then. Their future should, however, be considered alongside that of the open market, of which they are an integral part.
- 5 The same applies to the Market Hall, which dates from 1857 but replaced earlier buildings on the same site. These also provided covered accommodation for some traders and rooms for public meetings. The Market Hall was refurbished in the late 1970s, as it has been since, but is another aspect of market trading which needs to be taken into consideration (even if the only conclusion is that no further changes need to be made).
- 6 Although other fairs were established in Chesterfield after 1204, alongside the main September fair, no additional markets were chartered. The practice of

holding markets on Friday and Monday, as well as Saturday, appears to date only from the early 20th century and is not an 'old' aspect of the open market which must be preserved for that reason. On the contrary, market trading has contracted over the last hundred years and so it is possible that the two additional market days are no longer sustainable. This should be seen as part of a natural process of evolution, not something to shed tears over or fight against.

- 7 The practice of erecting stalls other than in the Market Place is much more recent. The current proposals include the removal of these back into the Market Place, for which there appear to be arguments for and against.

Proposals for the future

- 8 In general we welcome the proposed changes, but only on the basis that they should be seen as experiments which can be reversed if they prove unsuccessful or replaced with other innovations if new ideas come along in the future. Essentially, this means that change should not involve new building in the Market Place, but should leave it as a single, large open space which can be used differently in the future if necessary. We consider it essential that the open market be seen as a dynamic institution which is bound to change at least once every generation as consumers' habits change. (We are using the word 'dynamic' here in its precise sense, not as a synonym for 'vibrant', a word which we consider has been overused in the consultation document.)

We also wish to express reservations about some of the specific changes proposed.

- 9 Although the demand for stalls from what might be called 'traditional' market

traders has been in secular decline probably for some decades, the great success story in recent years has been the Thursday flea market, which we understand has up to 150 stalls in both the main Market Place and New Square. For this reason we have doubts about the wisdom of removing stalls entirely from New Square and reducing the number in the main Market Place from the present figure of 135 to 96. Demand for stalls at the Saturday market, we understand, has also stabilised and may warrant keeping some in New Square.

- 10 The proposal to upgrade the actual market stalls, so as to offer traders better facilities, appears at first sight to be welcome, but we understand that a similar change in Sheffield has led to the homeless using the permanent stalls for shelter. This is something to avoid at all costs, including the cost of dismantling and re-erecting temporary stalls, so that the Market Place cannot be used for rough sleeping. This will not solve the problem of rough sleeping in Chesterfield, but may help to avoid it becoming worse. Sadly, the provision of more seating (to promote what the consultation document pretentiously calls 'Dwell Time') may also aggravate the problem.
- 11 The decision to remove stalls from the streets adjoining the Market Place might seem an obvious one to take if overall demand for stalls is falling, but traders who at present bring large vehicles to the market would have difficulty getting them in and out of the Market Place, where they would in any case take up space, and for them a stall in Packers Row or Vicar Lane is probably more convenient. It is surely undesirable to discourage such traders from attending the market and better to continue to offer them the specific facilities they need.
- 12 We find some of the suggestions rather optimistic, which is why we wish any

changes to be reversible. We wonder if they have been devised by outside consultants with no real understanding of what sort of town Chesterfield is. Phrases like 'a vibrant open-air shopping experience', 'a legible network of spaces', 'historic wayfinding landmarks', 'non-prescriptive playful elements', 'community cohesion and enjoyment' belong in the *Private Eye* column which satirises pompous town planning jargon. We doubt whether many visitors to the market are deterred by the prospect of a terrorist attack or even the slow moving vehicles which market traders use to service their stalls. We also strongly dislike the use of the name 'Market Square' for the Market Place, which has no historical justification. The Market Place is in any case sub-triangular, not square.

- 13 There is undoubtedly scope to modernise some aspects of the open market, but we would prefer to see modest incremental changes that suit Chesterfield, rather than grandiose schemes devised by those with no local knowledge that may fall flat. If a traditional Saturday market can be maintained, then all well and good; if not it will disappear, in the same way that the traditional September fair faded away in the 19th century. If more specialised events, notably the weekly flea market, but also farmers' markets, continental markets and the like, continue to be successful, they will survive. Some tidying up of any open market is probably always both possible and desirable, but trying to turn Chesterfield Market Place into something that reminds people of continental holidays, or even visits to much wealthier towns in the south of England, is almost certainly bound to fail. It is unlikely to attract many more tourists and may put some local people off. It will almost certainly not be (public) money well spent.

20 August 2021

