

CHESTERFIELD AND DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

OBSERVATIONS ON LISTED BUILDING APPLICATION CHE/21/00802/LBC

REFURBISHMENT OF STEPHENSON MEMORIAL HALL

1 Introduction

The Civic Society committee welcomes the invitation to comment on this application (and the parallel application for planning permission). This response has been prepared jointly by several members of the society, who together have considerable professional architectural and historical expertise. In general we support the idea of remodelling the building but wish to draw attention to certain aspects of the work proposed. At the same time, we are very unhappy indeed about the intended changes to the museum displays.

2 Historical background

The Heritage Statement opens with an attempt to fit the rebuilding into principles set out in an English Heritage document, which we consider both strained and irrelevant. The Memorial Hall is of local significance both architecturally and historically, which is why it is listed Grade II (and not Grade II*). It does not stand in an 'area of cultural and heritage significance', a meaningless phrase which we can only assume refers to the proximity of the parish church (listed Grade I) and 2 St Mary's Gate, a seventeenth-century house (Grade II*). The Memorial Hall has no connection with either. It occupies a prominent position at the junction of the main north–south road through Chesterfield with a new road laid out in 1870 to improve access to the rebuilt Midland Railway station. Because it has been open to the public for a variety of purposes ever since it was built, the Hall is familiar to virtually all residents of Chesterfield and has fond memories for many.

- 3 The account of the history of the building is not entirely accurate. The Memorial Hall, opened in 1879, was built by the Chesterfield & Derbyshire Institute of Mining, Civil and Mechanical Engineers, founded eight years

earlier, as their headquarters, although it was intended also to be used as a centre for technical education. Chesterfield Corporation made a contribution to the cost on condition that they could open a public library and reading room in the building. The Hall also became a centre for Cambridge University Extension Classes, which marks the beginning of non-vocational adult education in Chesterfield. Rudimentary dressing rooms were provided for performers using the platform in the main lecture hall, but theatrical or musical entertainments were a very minor part of the plan. It is worth noting that there was no bar or refreshment room in the original scheme.

- 4 The building was named in memory of George Stephenson (1781–1848), whose connection with Chesterfield, then as now, tends to be exaggerated. For the last ten years of his life Stephenson leased Tapton House, just outside the town, and chose to be buried at Holy Trinity church on Newbold Road, rather than in his native North East. His son Robert did not maintain the connection with Chesterfield, nor with the coal and iron company his father founded at Clay Cross. Several of the leading members of the Chesterfield & Derbyshire Institute were also members of the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, founded by Stephenson in 1847, and obviously saw him as their hero, which is presumably why the Hall was dedicated to his memory.
- 5 The Hall was far too ambitious a venture for a small provincial engineering institute, especially in the slump which affected their industry in the 1880s, and in 1889 the institute sold the building to Chesterfield Corporation for a sum equal to the debt left over from its construction. In the 1890s the corporation acquired the garden of Kilblean House, which adjoins the Hall to the east, and used the land to build a stage, with a fly-tower and dressing rooms, to replace the platform in the main lecture hall. It was probably at this date that raked seating was introduced on the ground floor and an attempt made to remodel the gallery as a 'circle'. These changes were not entirely successful and to this day the Pomegranate retains the character of a converted lecture hall, not a purpose-built theatre. The caretaker's house on Station Back Lane also dates from this period.

- 6 A further change took place after 1901, when a new dual-purpose building was erected at the Grammar School on Sheffield Road, to be used during the day by the school and in the evening by technical classes previously accommodated in the Memorial Hall. This enabled the corporation to take over more rooms at the Hall, alongside the library. The main auditorium became the Corporation Theatre in 1904, although until just after the Second World War it functioned mainly as a cinema and was let to a commercial operator. The council staff moved to the new Town Hall in 1938, allowing the library to expand into the whole of the western end of the building.
- 7 After the war the corporation resumed control of the theatre and reopened it in 1949 as England's first local authority Civic Theatre, with a resident repertory company. The cost later became unsustainable and, after a period in which it was threatened with closure, the Borough Council refurbished the interior, renamed the theatre the Pomegranate, and from 1982 operated it as a receiving house and later a venue for live screenings. It is occasionally used for other events, notably the very successful annual Derbyshire Archaeology Day. This was originally a Sheffield University extramural day-school and so in that respect the Hall has come full circle to be used once again for adult education. Finally, in 1984 the county council, which replaced the borough council as the library authority in Chesterfield in 1974, opened a new branch library on New Beetwell Street and the rooms at the Memorial Hall formerly occupied by the library became a museum, opened in 1994, which Chesterfield had previously lacked. Few would claim that the rooms were particularly well suited for either purpose.

Proposed alterations to the building

- 8 A proper grasp of the original function and changing use of the Memorial Hall is essential to understand both its original layout and later changes. Although externally the Hall has not been greatly altered since the eastern end was extended in the 1890s, internally it has been remodelled on several occasions. Most if not all the rooms have been used for more than one purpose since 1879 and few of the original fixtures and fittings survive. In that

respect, the interior is a palimpsest of the changing function of the building, but that does not mean that the present layout merits retention. If anything, it removes objections some might have to further change. Aspects of the interior which the present generation remember with affection are not 'historic', they are just features which they have known for a long time.

- 9 The present proposals are in essence a reworking of a scheme that was prepared by Borough Council officers in the late 1980s and abandoned because it could not be funded. We feel that the alterations to the theatre gallery proposed on that occasion were superior to those in the present scheme, which we believe are too plain. In 1989–90 council officers prepared revised and cheaper plans, which were executed. The building was stabilised, the theatre reinstated, and the derelict library converted into a museum.
- 10 Under the new proposals, most of the present museum ground floor is to become a foyer and bar for the theatre and the present museum storage area is to be moved off-site to an unspecified location. A new gallery over the top of the existing theatre entrance will be the route most patrons use to get in and out. These internal changes are so extensive that this will be a very expensive 'gut and stuff' exercise that will close the entire building for a year or more.
- 11 We consider the fundamental defect of the proposals to be the problem of access. The Design and Access Statement acknowledges that this is a difficult, sloping site, but claims that to have a single access under the tower will solve the problem. We agree that the insertion of a large lift serving all levels is a great improvement (one which was unachievable within the budget for the scheme of 1989–90), but we consider it disingenuous to claim that this lift will make access for all easier. It is in fact obvious from the plans that all visitors to the building, except for the few who use the lift, will be obliged to climb a flight of steps, both coming and going, instead of the much safer present option of virtually level access in both cases. There will also be more steps to negotiate internally, for example to reach the lavatories. We believe that the present design will make access more difficult for the vast majority of

users. There are likely to be long queues for the lift before and after theatre performances, tempting some less mobile people to tackle the stairs rather than wait for the lift, with a resultant risk of crush injuries and falls.

- 12 It is possible that there is some merit in merging the two primary uses of the building (as a theatre and museum) but we would like to see a plausible, better developed business case for this. There is be little or no overlap between the two functions from day to day, and for this reason less justification than the Design and Access Report claims for such a costly and disruptive intervention to the structure of the building as is proposed.
- 13 On a more positive note, we are glad to see that the designers are aware of the structural implications of the proposed changes. We hope that consultant structural engineers will be engaged to ensure that strengthening is incorporated into the detailed design to keep the tower and the auditorium roof safe, and also the new openings in the party wall between the two halves of the building. The intervention plans submitted with the application only highlight places in the existing building where demolition will be needed. Only from the corresponding proposed plan at that level does it become clear what the openings will look like.
- 14 In summary, we would like the plans to be reconsidered, especially the means of access into and between different parts of the building, so as to ensure that they are an improvement on those that exist at present.
- 15 We are happy to support the design of the new work proposed at the front and back. The rebuilding at the back will be a great improvement on what is there at present. The elevation to Station Back Lane will never be an object of beauty but will look much better. The new work at the front, providing for the first time disabled access to the upper level of the theatre, will be a striking addition but we agree that it should be striking and not ape the work of 1879 (as that of the 1890s did). The approach is reminiscent (on a much smaller scale) of the way in which the Lyceum in Sheffield has been successfully extended and modernised.

Proposed changes to the museum displays

- 16 We condemn unreservedly the recommendations contained in the report entitled 'Re-imagining Stephenson Memorial Hall'. Every page of this document contains statements that are either historically inaccurate, inappropriate, meaningless or all three. The proposed scheme demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of both the history of Chesterfield and how a local museum should interpret that history. We consider it pretentious in the extreme, riddled (sometimes to the point of being incomprehensible) with what is presumably currently fashionable museum jargon. If carried through, it would give both local people and visitors a completely unbalanced view of the town's history. We hope that it will be dismissed out of hand by the Borough Council and replaced by a scheme for a much more straightforward new permanent exhibition, which should continue to explain the history of Chesterfield through objects and illustrations. What is proposed here will not remotely achieve that. The rest of this paper sets out in detail our objections.
- 17 As we have explained, George Stephenson's connection with Chesterfield is very slight and is certainly not something on which to base an entire museum display (p. 4). Nor was the Memorial Hall built 'on the back of an initiative to improve the general education of the working classes'. It would be reasonable to include a display on Stephenson's links with Chesterfield and the history of the Memorial Hall, but he should not be seen a central figure in the story of either. Under no circumstances should the museum be renamed 'Stephenson Hall' (unless this is merely a typing error).
- 18 We are dubious about the general approach described as 'Character Driven' but in any case the examples given on pp.8–9 are unrepresentative and the details of individuals inaccurate. Valerie Hunter-Gordon had no connection with Chesterfield except that, as a pioneer of disposable nappies, she approached Robinson & Son to commercialise the innovation. We do not understand what the captions 'Community response' 'Global reach' and 'Community memory' mean, but we suspect little or nothing. It would obviously be appropriate to include a display on the history of Robinsons, who

were not only the largest employer of working-class female labour in Chesterfield for most of the twentieth century, but were also recognised nationally for their enlightened approach to employee welfare. If any individuals associated with the company are to be picked out, it should be members of the family, notably Florence Robinson.

- 19 Charles Paxton Markham is an important figure in both the industrial history of Chesterfield and its public life but the suggestions made on p. 8 are inaccurate and irrelevant. His father, Charles Markham, did more to build up the Staveley Coal & Iron Company than he did. C.P. Markham took over a failed foundry and built a successful engineering company, Markham & Co., in its place, but he sold the business in 1922, four years before he died. Markham did make generous gifts to Chesterfield Corporation, notably of the Tapton House estate, but he had nothing to do with either the school opened there in 1931 or the Innovation Centre. There is no mention of the golf course and public park created from parts of the estate. A much more serious defect is that this concentration on the Markhams is at the expense of any of the other major coal, iron and engineering businesses which formed the bedrock of the local economy between the mid nineteenth century and mid twentieth. Why is there nothing about Chesterfield Tube Works, Bryan Donkin or Sheepbridge?
- 20 T.P. Wood was not a 'pioneer of bottled spring water'. He inherited a small wine and spirit merchant's business from his father and became a minor producer of mineral water, serving a local market. His greatest talent seems to have been self-promotion, one aspect of which was the publication of an annual almanac. Like other successful local businessmen, he built himself a large house on the outskirts of the town, later the home of a vastly more important figure in the business history of Chesterfield, and a far greater benefactor to the town, George Albert Eastwood. Neither had any connection with the school which opened at Brambling House in 1939. Nothing is said about the importance of Brambling House as one of the first special schools opened by a second-tier local education authority. Equally there are dozens of men of Wood's generation who were far more significant in the commercial

and public life of Chesterfield, including (in the same line of business) the owners of the three local breweries. The choice is frankly ridiculous.

- 21 Violet Markham can reasonably be described as the most important woman native of Chesterfield but her connection with the town has tended to be exaggerated (not least by her). She did establish a pioneer settlement and was briefly a member of Chesterfield school board (the slogan 'Education for all' is meaningless). But for much of her time as vice-chairman of the corporation's education committee she was a co-opted member, and only became an elected councillor for a short period from 1925, during which she was Chesterfield's first (and until recent years only) woman mayor. From 1901 Miss Markham lived mainly in London and after her brother gave Tapton House to the corporation she merely kept a flat at the settlement. She had no day-to-day involvement in public life locally from the start of the First World War, preferring to work on the national stage. She had little or no 'influence on town structure' (whatever that is) and the statement 'Memories of Violet's memorial in London' is both bad English and devoid of meaning. It would be reasonable to have a display on women in public life in Chesterfield, but several others of or around her generation, notably Mary Swanwick and Blanche Eastwood, as well as Florence Robinson, did far more for social welfare and education over a longer period than the Blessed Violet CH.
- 22 We fail to see why Paul Cummins (p. 10) and his ceramic poppies should be singled out in a museum that is supposed to illustrate Chesterfield's history. By all means have a display on Chesterfield during the two World Wars (and also the Napoleonic War, given the presence of French prisoners in the town) but this is another example of a very skewed approach to a particular theme.
- 23 We have no idea what 'Story Maps' (p. 14) are but it appears that the visitor to the museum will first be confronted with the 'builder's wheel' from the parish church, without any displays relating to the building of the church to put it into context. The room is apparently to be filled with displays about the random collection of people whom the report describes as 'Chesterfield Character(s)'. We have already explained why Stephenson, Wood and the

two members of the Markham family have no particular claim to be picked out. Of the others mentioned on pp. 15–16 Joseph Syddall is a moderately well known artist born in Old Whittington, some of whose works are in the museum, but we fail to understand why Florrie Green has been chosen; Phyllis Hanson was a local amateur artist who couldn't paint; and the inclusion of the other two on p. 16 is beyond parody as (it seems) Chesterfield's response to what has come to be called 'the EDI agenda'. Edward Carpenter, for example, was not 'hugely influential' in the founding of the Labour Party; for most of his life he did not live in Chesterfield and he played no discernible part in public affairs locally, apart from giving lectures.

- 24 We are also concerned at the inclusion of Reuban Redhead as an example of families of Caribbean descent who settled in Chesterfield. Although undoubtedly respected for his public service, Mr Redhead is happily still with us and it is usually considered undesirable to portray living figures in museum displays. More generally, Chesterfield saw very little immigration from the Caribbean Commonwealth. Equally few came from the Indian subcontinent. Immigration is not an important theme in the post-1945 history of Chesterfield. If it was to be featured in a display, the emphasis should be on the Poles who came at the end of the Second World War and the Hungarians who arrived after the 1956 Rising. They were able to work in the mining industry, which never employed men of Caribbean, African or Asian heritage. Some Italians moved to Chesterfield in the late nineteenth century and others came as prisoners of war in the Second World War.
- 25 It is not clear, from the impenetrable jargon on pp. 18–20, what the permanent exhibition on the first floor is to consist of, but it does not appear to include any displays illustrating the history of the town from the time of the first permanent settlement on the site by the Romans to shortly before the present day. Indeed, a very depressing feature of the entire report is its obsession with Chesterfield since some indeterminate date towards the end of the nineteenth century, to the exclusion of everything else. This is a completely unbalanced approach, which again is beyond parody as it presumably tries to be 'fashionable' or 'relevant'. This is exactly the approach

which has done so much damage to the teaching of History at GCSE and A Level, obliging reputable university History departments to spend much of the first year of undergraduate degree courses trying to explain to students what happened before 1917, a task which those at the Mickey Mouse end of the market don't even attempt. It is not a fashion the museum should follow.

26 We consider that it would be quite wrong for visitors to the museum to be left without any understanding of the town's history before about 1870. Topics that might be covered include:

- the earliest (i.e. Mesolithic) evidence for occupation on the site;
- the beginning of permanent settlement from the building of the Roman fort and the adjoining *vicus*;
- the trade in lead through Chesterfield, which is a continuing theme from Roman times to the late eighteenth century;
- Chesterfield as the centre of a large Anglo-Saxon and Norman estate, with an early minster church, possibly the earliest in north-east Derbyshire;
- the transition from village to town in the twelfth century;
- the building of the new market place in the 1190s, which more than doubled the size of the built-up area;
- Chesterfield as the only successful medieval market town in north-east Derbyshire, standing on major routes in all directions and at the centre of a large parish;
- the building of a very fine parish church, and the chapels founded in some of the other townships of the very large parish;
- the rise and fall of gentry families in the adjoining rural townships, including the Freschevilles of Staveley, the Foljambes of Walton and the Leakes of Sutton;
- the growth of corporate identity among the burgesses and the struggle for self-government in the late sixteenth century against the power of the Talbot earls of Shrewsbury;
- the early establishment of a diverse range of nonconformist congregations alongside the parish church;
- Chesterfield as the main commercial centre of the Peak lead industry;

- the early growth of coal mining and ironworking in the surrounding countryside;
- Chesterfield as one of the first towns outside London to have a silk mill and later as a minor centre of the cotton spinning industry;
- the impact of the Chesterfield Canal, including the rapid growth of the pottery industry as well as coal and iron;
- the repeated rebuilding of the town centre, notably in the period 1780–1820, which has left the most visible mark on the modern town.

27 Even if we consider only the recent history of Chesterfield, the omissions from the proposals in this report are frankly staggering. Later nineteenth-century topics which the authors apparently do not consider worth mentioning include:

- the impact of the railways from 1840;
- the emergence of deep mining and heavy engineering in and to the east of Chesterfield, with the town becoming the commercial centre for both industries;
- the creation of the Derbyshire Miners Association and its very fine headquarters on Saltergate;
- the growth of Robinson & Son Ltd as a major employer of female labour;
- the wide range of second-rank industries, including pottery, glass-making, railway wagon building, and malting and brewing;
- the growth of the built-up area, including both slum housing in the yards behind the main streets, notably Low Pavement and Beetwell Street, and new middle-class suburbs, such as Lower Newbold;
- the rise of modern retailing, including an important Co-operative Society, in a town with a relatively large travel-to-shop area;
- the impact of Irish immigration and the growth of a Catholic community, with its own church and schools;
- the growth of commercial entertainment, including the theatre and the races, and later the cinema and dance halls;
- the establishment of board schools, the modernisation of secondary education, and the growth of technical education;
- the impact of the First World War on Chesterfield.

28 For the twentieth century topics should that might be covered (rather than mineral water and disposable nappies) include:

- the post-1918 campaign to improve housing through the building of large council estates and the development of the western suburbs for lower middle-class owner-occupiers;
- the determination of the council to make up for lost ground in rebuilding the town centre, whose legacy includes the unique 'black and white' buildings and a very fine Town Hall;
- the reform of education between 1928 and 1932, creating a system that was recognised nationally as outstanding;
- Chesterfield during the Depression of the 1930s;
- Chesterfield during the Second World War;
- the renewed determination to rebuild after 1945, including the remodelling of education on lines that once again attracted national recognition;
- the controversy over the redevelopment of the town centre and the eventual outcome, now regarded nationally as a turning-point in the campaign for conservation-led urban renewal;
- the arrival of the Accountant General's Department of the Post Office in 1963, part of the Government's policy of moving Civil Service jobs out of London and the local authority's wish to diversify employment in the town; the coming of the AGD also prompted the building of the Loundsley Green estate, one of the council's last big housing schemes.
- the decline of the industrial staples on which the local economy had depended for a century, and the response of local and central government to the challenge.
- Chesterfield today, a large non-unitary authority which remains an important manufacturing centre but has successfully diversified its economy and (for a town of its size) is currently attracting enormous sums in inward investment.

29 These in our view are some of the aspects of the history of Chesterfield which

both local people and visitors want to be told about, in an attractive and accessible way, drawing on the museum's collections, combined with audio and visual displays, drawings and photographs, maps and plans, models and digital reconstructions. What is proposed in this report will fail utterly to achieve this. If executed on the lines suggested, the displays will become little more than a monument to what was fashionable in some parts of the museum world c.2022. It will not tell the story of Chesterfield and once the novelty has worn off visitor numbers will once again drop off.