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# CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

# NEWSLETTER

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## BACK AFTER A BREAK

**A**pologies to members for the long gap since the last Newsletter. The committee only resumed holding meetings this month (having chosen not to follow the fashion for Zoom meetings during the lockdown), and there has not been a great deal of news to report. It is still not possible to restart speaker meetings but the committee is keen to let members know that we remain active on various fronts.

## RICHARD ROBINSON: A SAD LOSS

**M**ost members will probably have seen the announcement in the *Derbyshire Times* of 27 August of the death of Richard Robinson ten days previously. Richard and his wife were longstanding members of the Civic Society and faithful supporters of its meetings. Among the wide range of other organisations with which he was connected were the North East Derbyshire Industrial Archaeology Society and Probus. He maintained to the full his family's strong tradition of public service to the town, in which their company was for many years one of the largest employers and a nationally recognised leader in promoting the welfare of their predominantly female workforce.

## LOCKED DOWN STREETS

**O**ne of the more regrettable consequences of the pandemic, in Chesterfield as in other towns, has been the sudden closure by the county council, acting under emergency powers, not the ordinary powers of a highway authority, of two streets in the town centre (South Place and Corporation Street) and a third elsewhere (Crow Lane). At the same time other streets have been obstructed with temporary barriers and large lumps of concrete.

Similar steps have been taken by all highway authorities at the request of the Government, which has given Derbyshire county council £443,000 to spend on the work. The emergency powers allow the council to close the roads for up to eighteen months without giving any notice or consulting any other local authority or the public.

The Civic Society committee discussed this decision at its last meeting and it was agreed that I should send a letter to the *Derbyshire Times*. To its credit, the paper published the letter more or less unchanged. In brief, our view is that these closures have done nothing to protect people from Covid but have made Chesterfield look unsightly at a time when local authorities should be doing everything possible to encourage shoppers to come into the town and spend money, and generally to get life back to normal.

The closure of Crow Lane, done with the improbable aim of encouraging more people to walk or cycle to the Royal Hospital, is a different

matter. There is a case for closing this very narrow holloway to motor vehicles, while leaving access to Tapton golf course and the two residential properties which front the lane, but it should be done through the traditional method of advertisement, consultation and discussion, not the overnight blocking of the road with what look like giant Lego bricks, and the posting of notices saying what the county council has done, not what it proposes to do.

## LOCKED DOWN TRAINS

**A**nother serious consequence of Covid, which the Civic Society has also complained about, was the decision by Cross Country Trains to stop all its services calling at Chesterfield (and elsewhere, including Bath as well as many smaller towns). This provoked justifiable outrage from the Borough Council and one of the two Members of Parliament whose constituents were most affected (nothing seems to have been heard from the other one). As a result, Cross Country agreed to restore a few stopping services, although nothing like the number in the normal timetable.

Our view was that this was another example of a knee-jerk reaction that jeopardises efforts to regenerate the local economy. One of Chesterfield's strongest selling points is that it has exceptionally good connections by rail for a town of its size. Not merely is there an hourly (or better) service to London, but there is (or used to be) a

similar service to North East England and Scotland, Liverpool and Manchester, the East of England, and Birmingham and the South West.

The train operating companies have recently said that they propose to restore a virtually normal (pre-Covid) timetable from 1 September. Cross Country seems to have ignored this decision. Their website continues to state that few or no services will call at a long list of stations, including Chesterfield.

For a company that appears to remain solvent only thanks to a large monthly subvention from the taxpayer to behave like this is unacceptable. We hope that Members of Parliament and the local authorities will continue to press Cross Country and (on the off-chance that it might achieve something) the Department for Transport to restore a proper service to Chesterfield.

## A RAILWAY REOPENING?

On a more positive note, we are pleased that Lee Rowley, the Conservative MP for North East Derbyshire (how odd that phrase would have sounded even twenty years ago) is campaigning for the restoration of passenger services and the reopening of several stations on the former North Midland Railway line between Chesterfield and Sheffield via Staveley and Eckington. The intermediate stations closed in 1950 but the line has remained open, maintained to passenger train standards, as a diversionary route in case the direct line through Dronfield (which dates from 1870) is closed. A few passenger trains each week use the Old Road to maintain drivers' route knowledge.

The proposal to reinstate stopping services at new stations has got through the first short-listing stage for railway reopening schemes the Government will back. It should be one of the most straightforward to achieve, since the track and other infrastructure is all intact, and thus one of the cheapest per mile. All the places through which the line runs have seen

new building in recent years, increasing the potential market for train services, but the area remains relatively deprived, with a low level of access to private cars. The proposal can only benefit the area and appears to be a case of public money well spent. It is a scheme the Civic Society committee supports.

## HURST HOUSE

There has been an important development in this long-running saga, although it cannot be described as positive news for either Hurst House or the charity which owns the property.

Derbyshire county council has decided to transfer its trusteeship of all the 47 educational charities for which it has hitherto been responsible to the Derbyshire Community Foundation, an umbrella organisation for several charities and itself a registered charity, which operates under the name Community Derbyshire. This body is entirely Derby-oriented and has no connection with the north-east of the county. The decision will involve transferring about £1.25m. in cash and stock, most of which belongs to two large charities, the Chesterfield Schools Foundation and a charity which benefits two primary schools at Heage and Ambergate. In addition, the Chesterfield Schools Foundation's freehold interest in Hurst House will be transferred.

The Charity Commission has agreed to this change and appears not to have considered any alternative idea. No consideration was given, for example, to the appointment of independent local trustees for at least two largest charities, as Ripley town council wished to see happen in the case of the Heage Educational Charity.

In the hands of its new trustees, Hurst House will remain a 'Building at Risk' as long as it is left empty. The Civic Society will continue to press the Charity Commission to take action to secure the sale of the property, on the ground that it cannot be in the best interests of the charity to leave it empty, and will encourage the borough council to do the same.

There will inevitably be outgoings on the property, which appears to be worth about £400,000, and more seriously the Chesterfield Schools Foundation is receiving no income on part of its capital. In the meantime, Hurst House remains an eyesore, and will become more of one if the grounds are allowed to become overgrown.

## BLUE PLAQUES

Mainly because of the disruption caused by Covid, we have not been able to make any progress with the installation of plaques at the Central Methodist Church or 87 New Square. We hope now to move forward with both.

The sale of Walton Ridge, the house on Matlock Road which was the last Derbyshire home of Harry Brearley, the inventor of stainless steel, has prompted suggestions that a plaque should be erected to his memory. We are all in favour of this but have had difficulty finding a suitable location. Few people would see a plaque installed at the entrance to Walton Ridge, and the owner of Brearley's home in Whittington has refused to have one erected there. We considered the boundary wall of Brearley Park at Whittington, but it is rock-faced without a flat surface on which to mount a plaque. Any other suggestions would be welcome.

Another, rather better known, local figure who should undoubtedly be commemorated is Violet Markham (1872–1959), but here again we have had difficulty finding a suitable location. Her family's home, Tapton House, is more commonly associated with George Stephenson and is in any case not currently accessible to the public. In later life Miss Markham lived in London and later Kent. One suggestion made at our last committee meeting, which we will look into, is to install a plaque on the Packers Row frontage of Burlington House. This stands in part on the site of the Chesterfield Settlement, one of Miss Markham's earliest initiatives in the field of social welfare, which became a prototype for similar ventures in other towns.

Burlington House has recently

changed hands and the new owners propose to convert the upper floors into flats. We hope it may be possible to persuade the developers to include a plaque as part of the scheme.

Until 1991, of course, Violet Markham was, most appropriately, commemorated in the name of a well-regarded girls' school, a reflection of her belief in widening educational opportunities for working-class girls. In an unhappy hour that school and all it stood for was swept away. It is presumably too much to hope that the owners of the present school on the site might restore the name in place of the locally meaningless corporate branding 'Outwood'.

## TAPTON HOUSE

Mention of Tapton House prompts the further comment that the Civic Society committee continues to hope that the Borough Council, as owners, will be able to find a viable use for this architecturally and historically important property, one a handful of grade II\* list buildings in its area. There is no easy solution to this problem but it would be tragic if this fine house, which many local people remember as the home of a very successful secondary school, was allowed to deteriorate. The council have secured the property but, like Hurst House, it remains a 'Building at Risk' until a new use can be found for it.

## CANAL MOVES FORWARD

The Civic Society committee was delighted to strongly support the Chesterfield Canal Trust's application for planning consent to restore the last mile or so of the canal within the borough, from the new Staveley Basin to near Mast-in Moor. No objections have been received and there have been several other letters of support.

The one fly in the ointment is the suggestion that the Trust should be obliged to undertake an archaeological investigation of what the county

council archaeology service claims are thirteen sites of potential interest on this part of the canal. One of these is the canal itself, which is here carried on a low earthen embankment to keep it at a constant level. We have suggested that none of these is in reality of the slightest 'archaeological importance' and that it is unreasonable to put the Trust to the further trouble and expense of paying for the site of long demolished bridges and wharves to be excavated archaeologically. This would add nothing to what is already known about the history of the canal.

## DUNSTON GRANGE

Part of the problem over the 'archaeology' of the Chesterfield Canal stems from a very poor 'Heritage Report' submitted as part of the application, which says virtually nothing of any value in 59 page pages of turgid prose. In complete contrast, the current application to renovate Dunston Grange, a smaller house behind the better known Dunston Hall, is worth looking at simply because it includes an exceptionally good heritage report which is a model of its kind (application reference CHE/20/00419/LBC).

Dunston Grange is a double-pile house, made up of a much-altered 17th-century range and an early or mid-19th century block. The property is listed grade II, although it is not of outstanding importance because of the extensive alterations to the older part. The Civic Society has written in support of the application, which will bring the house back into beneficial use as a private residence.

## HOTELS AND EX-HOTELS

The Civic Society committee supported the plan to build a hotel on land at Basil Close, near the former nursing home which is now a private hospital. We would have preferred to see a better computer-generated image showing more clearly the impact of the building on

the view of the parish church from lower down the hill-slope, but otherwise the plan seemed the best use of land which has stood vacant for too long.

We know nothing more than what has appeared in the *Derbyshire Times* about plans for the former Chesterfield Hotel, where the Borough Council state that they are working with the owners to create a design that will be a credit to the new approach from the station to the town centre. As far as we know, the building remains the property of Prestige Hotels (Midlands) Ltd, a company which appears not to own or operate any hotels, prestigious or otherwise, in the Midlands or elsewhere, and whose registered office is a modest private house in Bushey (Herts.). Its most recently filed 'micro-accounts' do not suggest that it has ready access to the capital needed to redevelop the site.

## UNTIDINESS ON (AND OFF) CHATSWORTH ROAD

One of the matters raised at our last committee meeting was the excessive weed growth in gutters on Chatsworth Road, including examples of buddleia up to 18 inches high. We have written to the county council asking if this problem can be tackled, not least because Chatsworth Road is the main entrance to Chesterfield from the west and it is important that it gives a good initial impression of the town to visitors. It is also a road on which a good deal has been spent in recent years on improving parking and the public realm generally, which makes it regrettable that weeds have been allowed to become established.

We also discussed the unsightly derelict remains of the former Stoppard & Davenport foundry on Hipper Street West, off Chatsworth Road near the old electricity board workshops. The rest of the street is residential. There is no easy answer to this problem. Even if the site was cleared it is probably not suitable for more housing because the road is so narrow. If anything, the land might be

better used to provide off-street parking and a turning circle for existing residents. The first step is to find out who owns the site and what their plans are for it. Any information gratefully received.

We are also hoping to re-engage Mecca Bingo in the discussions we had a couple of years ago about the cut-out steel art installation at the start of the Holme Valley walk on Chatsworth Road. The company agreed that it was their responsibility to repair but a promised site meeting to discuss cleaning and repainting never took place.

## A NEGLECTED MEMORIAL

A small but irritating problem at Newbold was also mentioned. When the new Co-op store was built at the junction of Newbold Road and Littlemoor the stone memorial plaque to the village school that used to stand on the site was mounted under Perspex on a plinth in front of the shop, surrounded by a flowerbed. No arrangement seems to have been made to keep the bed weeded and it is only tidy at present because a Civic Society member is paying someone privately to weed it. It is unfair that this should continue and we are hoping to persuade the appropriate Co-op Retail concern to take responsibility for it.

## WINGERWORTH HALL

The Civic Society's full name includes the phrase 'and District'. In recent years we have not in practice ventured much outside the town, but the society's chairman was recently consulted about a proposed development at Wingerworth Hall, which is under consideration by the local planning authority, North East Derbyshire District Council (NEDDC).

Anyone interested in the history of Wingerworth knows that the modern Hall was built in the 1720s and demolished in the 1920s. In fact, two older blocks which stood at the rear of the front range of the 1720s survive. These appear to date from the late 17th century; both have been divided in recent years into two residential properties.

The owner of part of the southern block obtained outline planning permission in 2018 for a 'modest' bungalow on part of the grounds belonging to the property house. More recently an application has been made for full planning permission to build on the land, but the proposed dwelling can certainly not be described as 'modest'. Instead of sitting in the middle of a reasonably large plot (which is what the drawing of 2018 shows) the current application is for a large H-plan semi-bungalow, of timber-framed construction and tawdry design, which extends almost to the boundary of the plot on two sides, approaching to within 25 metres of

one of the two late 17th-century blocks, listed grade II.

The owner of part of the northern block is understandably very unhappy with the proposal, as is his retained planning consultant, who (as a stranger to the area) was unstinting in her criticism of NEDDC as a local planning authority. At a site meeting, your chairman explained that the council has enjoyed an appalling reputation in this respect ever since it was created in 1974. Its main predecessor, Chesterfield rural district council, is still remembered as an efficient housing authority and emptier of dustbins, whereas NEDDC has long suffered from delusions of adequacy. It has still to complete a Local Plan acceptable to the Secretary of State, despite years of trying.

Among its shortcomings, the council refuses to employ a conservation officer and so is obliged to rely on outside consultants when asked to determine a planning application involving (or affecting the setting of) a listed building, as this one does. The council has repeatedly set back the deadline for making a decision on the application, to the understandable annoyance of the adjoining property owner.

The Civic Society committee has made a lengthy representation to the council about this application, to which it is strongly opposed. Members can read what we have said, and see what is proposed to be built, on NEDDC's planning website under the reference 20/00170/FL. The outline application is at 18/00703/OL.