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# CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

# NEWSLETTER

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No 14

[www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk](http://www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk)

December 2020

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## Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

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### THANKS

There was a gratifying response to the last *Newsletter*, with several members taking the time and trouble to write saying how interesting they found it. One suggested that we should send a copy to all members of the borough council. This we could do, but we would prefer them to join the Civic Society and so improve our finances. At present we have five borough councillors among the membership, all from the Liberal Democrat opposition.

Not all *Newsletters* can be as exciting as others, and this one may not be a vintage issue, but enough has happened over the last few weeks to justify continuing publication as close to monthly as possible. This issue has been slightly delayed because of the arrival at the last minute of replies from the county council on two matters which we raised with them several weeks ago. We have included the gist of both letters.

### GRANT FOR BLUE PLAQUES

We were very pleased to learn that the Civic Society has been awarded £1,000 from the Borough Council's Community Infrastructure Funding Programme for our work in erecting blue plaques. The grant is dependent on the society finding £500 in matching funding.

The money has to be spent over the next twelve months and so we will proceed as fast as possible to firm up some ideas we have discussed in the past, approaching owners, and trying to get plaques commissioned and installed.

If possible, we hope that owners of the properties concerned will meet us with a contribution to the cost. In round figures, the plaques cost about £500 to make and install, which means £1,000 will pay for two, but if the cost is shared 50:50 we could get four out of the grant, or perhaps five or six if we use some of our own funds.



We have a number of names and places in mind but if any members have other suggestions we would be glad to have them. Over the last few years the problem has not so much been finding suitable buildings or people to commemorate as securing permission from owners to put up the plaques.

### CECIL RHODES: NO CASE TO ANSWER IN CHESTERFIELD

We were contacted recently by the borough council, which had itself been approached by those concerned that the name Rhodesia Road (off Heaton Street, to the north of Chatsworth Road) commemorated either Cecil Rhodes or the colony he founded. Ward members believed that the street was in fact named after William Rhodes, a prominent local builder and councillor.

A search of the *Derbyshire Times* revealed that the ward members were right. On 10 January 1941 the paper printed a lengthy obituary of Alderman Rhodes of 161A Old Road, who died on 4 January aged 81. He was an honorary freeman of the borough as well as a former elected member. The article states that Rhodesia Road and Rhodes Avenue, Newbold, had been named after him.

Rhodes began his building career with a contract to build the chancel of St Thomas's church on Chatsworth Road, and he may well have built Rhodesia Road. On 10 November 1923 the *Derbyshire Times* reported that a bankrupt had bought a house on Rhodesia Road in 1918 for £370. This is the closest we can get at present to the date the road was developed.

Among later references found in the paper was a magistrates' court hearing in which a man was accused of insulting a maid at one of the hous-

es on Rhodesia Road, which has perhaps declined somewhat in social esteem since then!

William Rhodes was the driving force behind Chesterfield Corporation's very successful house-building programme in the 1920s and 1930s, which did much to improve working-class living conditions in the town. In particular he was largely responsible for the creation of the Boythorpe estate, the corporation's first major scheme, which celebrates its centenary next year. It was for this reason that the junior and senior schools serving the estate were named after him. The primary school still bears his name; the secondary school was given the meaningless name 'Parkside' in the reign of terror of 1991 which destroyed what had once been a very fine system of secondary education in the town.



There is clearly no reason to rename either Rhodesia Road or Rhodes Avenue; but there is a very good case for restoring the historic name of William Rhodes secondary school, whose greatly respected post-war headmaster, Norman Crookes DFC (pictured above), many Civic Society members will remember.

## ROAD CLOSURES AND BARRIERS

I mentioned in the last *Newsletter* that I had written to the county council relaying the collective views of several members that Crow

Lane could reasonably be closed permanently but that we would like to see Corporation Street and South Place reopened and the unsightly concrete blocks and other obstacles removed from the town centre, since these appear to have achieved nothing.



The road closure issue was taken up by a Liberal Democrat borough councillor, Keith Falconer, and featured in the *Derbyshire Times*, whose picture we reproduce here, with Coun. Falconer standing in front of the barrier closing Corporation Street.

We have received a reply from the county council which explains why the authority took the action it did, although it does not specifically defend the closure of South Place and Corporation Street.

One of the main points made is that in Glumangate, where customers of the NatWest and HSBC banks currently have to queue outside their side doors on either side of a narrow road, there was a perceived risk that vehicles might run into pedestrians.

It was for this reason that concrete blocks as well as crash barriers were installed and there are at present no plans to remove them. The obvious solution in this case is for both banks to reopen their main entrances on Market Place, where there is more room to manage queues.

## SHOULD CROW LANE BE CLOSED?

The same letter also states that the county council favours the permanent closure of Crow Lane to all traffic apart from pedestrians, cyclists and horse-riders. There have been objections to this and so there will be a formal consultation on the proposal, probably next spring.

## ROUGH SLEEPING

There was also a reference in the last *Newsletter* to a problem of rough sleeping in a particularly dangerous and distressing location, which I brought to the attention of both the county council (as a social care authority) and the borough council (as a housing authority).

After a delay of seven weeks, which seems excessive given the nature of the case, the county council replied stating that it was for the borough council to take the lead in preventing homelessness. In the meantime the rough sleeper in question has moved on, and neither local authority has been able to make contact with them. I have not received any response from the borough council.

## OLD FOUNDRY ON HIPPER STREET WEST: OWNER TRACED

In *Newsletter* 11 we drew attention to the derelict and unsightly former Stoppard & Davenport foundry at the south end of Hipper Street West, off Chatsworth Road. After some detective work by our member Darrell Clark we have identified the owner as Westcliffe Properties Ltd, who were also the builders of the adjoining flats.

Westcliffe Properties is controlled by the Frederick family, better known as vendors of high quality ice-cream in and around the town. The next step is to try to persuade the company to remove this eyesore and bring the site back into beneficial use, ideally to provide more new housing in the area.





## PARKING AT THE ROYAL HOSPITAL



Members who have recently visited the Royal Hospital will know that parking remains difficult for much of the day.

We have pursued this matter and received a full and helpful reply from the Trust. Summarised, this explains that in an attempt to ease congestion at the hospital the Trust acquired an additional car-park (developed privately) on Top Road in Calow (where there used to be a retail showroom).

When the Covid pandemic first struck, with many hospital staff working from home, fewer out-patients' appointments and less visiting, the new car-park was not in practice needed and there was less pressure on parking at the hospital. More recently, the hospital car-parks have filled up again, partly because charges remain suspended. The Trust has reminded staff that the Top Road car-park is available for them (at a substantially reduced charge compared with using the hospital car-parks) in the hope that there will be space at the hospital for visitors.

This may improve the situation but we suspect that the long-term solution is to reintroduce charges to deter people parking at the hospital all day and travelling to work in town by bus. This requires a change of policy by the Government.

## MORE FLATS FOR TOWN CENTRE

Following the scheme to convert the upper floors of what used to be Woodheads' grocery shop on Burlington Street into flats, a similar project has been announced for the

first and second floors of 9-21 (odd) Stephenson Place, a large block of shops and (originally) offices which probably dates from the creation of this road in its modern form just after 1900. It was previously part of Knife-smithgate and much narrower than it is today. The only building on Stephenson Place to survive from before the rebuilding is the Rutland Arms, a corner of which seen on the extreme left of the picture below.



The Civic Society committee agreed some time ago to support all proposals of this sort, on the grounds that any addition to the housing stock in Chesterfield is to be welcomed, and especially new accommodation in the town centre, which brings under-occupied buildings back into more productive use, creates more footfall for local shops, pubs and catering outlets, and may reduce antisocial behaviour, littering and vandalism.

Details of the scheme can be found on the borough council's planning website (reference CHE/20/00772/FUL). The drawings deposited with the application include a couple of superbly detailed elevations of the building as existing, which are a very useful historical record.

## NO NEWTS AT BANK CLOSE

Another application on which we have been consulted this month concerns Bank Close, the early nineteenth-century house off Hasland Road which has for some years been a care home. The owners wish to build some new houses in the grounds and were granted permission a couple of years ago, subject to several conditions. These they feel they have now met and are seeking per-

mission to go ahead. Their application reference is CHE/20/0073/REM.



The Civic Society committee supported the original proposal and agree that the reserved matters have been dealt with. One of these concerns the possible disturbance of that ubiquitous delayer of building projects, the much loved (or maligned) great crested newt. The application includes a 'reptile survey' which failed to locate a single newt. Members who have ever wondered how to find newts can learn more from the report (it involves cutting roofing felt into small squares). All that was found at Bank Close was a solitary dormouse.



## CHESTERFIELD HOTEL: DEBATE CONTINUES

Our website manager and monitor, Ian Thomason, reports a continuing debate on social media about the demolition of the Chesterfield Hotel, which is at present being stripped of its contents, none of which (according to the *Derbyshire Times* of 11 December), could be salvaged.

This is a damning indictment of the former owner, Prestige Hotels (Midlands) Ltd. Apart from the sad case of the baby grand piano (said to have rotted beyond repair), at a more mundane level there was a large quan-

tity of perfectly good furniture that could have been given to charity, and several hundred metres of good quality curtaining that could have been repurposed to help poor families. If only the borough council had been able to buy the building as soon as the hotel closed this scandalous waste might have been avoided.

There has also been some criticism on social media of the Civic Society's support for the demolition of the building, coupled with a reference to the former court house nearby on Brimington Road. I tried to answer the points made in a reply concerned partly with the hotel and partly with my view of what I conceive to be the role of a civic society. It may be of interest to repeat here what I wrote for the benefit of members who are not avid followers of social media:

Ideally, the Civic Society would have preferred to have seen the Chesterfield Hotel refurbished, if not as a hotel, then possibly as flats. We suggested that it could be marketed as serviced apartments, close to the station for people commuting to work elsewhere. No-one came forward with a scheme on these lines.

The major problem is that the building is of no historical interest (in the precise sense of the phrase) and not of sufficient architectural merit to be listed. The original phase of building and the two flanking wings are reasonably in keeping with each other, but the overall effect was ruined by additions to the rear, which were of unsympathetic design and executed in materials that did not match the older part of the building.

The building also had a very poor internal layout as a result of its piecemeal construction, which would have made it much harder to modernise. The previous owners did nothing to maintain the building, which accordingly deteriorated. Taking all these things into consideration, the Civic Society committee's view was that it would be better to clear the site and erect a well-designed new building.

The borough council are currently thinking of an office block but the

committee feels that apartments might still be a possibility, given its proximity to the station, possibly with a licensed restaurant on the ground floor. Offices can be built elsewhere, but there should be scope for flats (possibly serviced) and a bar-restaurant near a station.

The short-term future of the site is clearly as a temporary car-park, which may help to reduce on-road



nuisance parking near the station. A longer-term plan will have to wait until the borough council adopts a detailed plan for a new approach to the station, with a bus/rail interchange, which is in turn dependent on the scheme for a new access road to the station from the bottom of Hollis Lane going ahead.

The future of the former county police station and court-house on Brimington Road (pictured above) has not, as far as I know, been settled, although there is a presumption that the block will be demolished. It is currently badly under-occupied and looks in a poor way as a result. It might be possible to find a new use for it, although I am not aware that any suggestions have been made. I have no special knowledge of its history or who the architect was, but the building is not listable.

The very shabby adjoining building, currently occupied by a second-hand dealer, I would say has no viable future, nor does the former light engineering works opposite.

As regards the wider function of the Civic Society, we try to stress that we are not a 'preservation society' or a 'heritage society'. We take the view that we should, as a group of interested lay-people, campaign to im-

prove Chesterfield as a place to live. This includes the retention of buildings of architectural merit (very few buildings in a town like Chesterfield are of 'historic' interest) but also the replacement of buildings, of whatever age, which detract from the appearance of the town. I am afraid the Chesterfield Hotel now falls firmly into the second category.

We are also concerned that redevelopment schemes should enhance the appearance of the town and make it a better place to live (for example by reducing traffic congestion) and improve the facilities available to residents and visitors. In particular we support the borough council's policy of creating (or to be more precise re-establishing) more homes in the town centre as the demand for shops (and possibly also offices) declines.

All this work is best underpinned by a sound knowledge of the history of the town and in some cases of individual buildings, so that inaccurate claims about 'historic buildings' or an 'historic town' can be avoided. It is for this reason that the Civic Society has for many years installed blue plaques on buildings of particular interest. More detailed historical research is the province of the Victoria County History, a London University local history research project, which is currently working on Chesterfield, and of individuals with a lay or professional interest in the subject.

The Civic Society is also concerned about Chesterfield as a social organism and an economic entity. This includes encouraging steps that will create new employment in the borough, and pressing for the improvement of public services, such as the maintenance of highways, education, the relief of poverty and environmental health. All these aspects of its work were the subject of items in its most recent (November 2020) *Newsletter*, sent monthly to members.

If any members would like to comment on what I have said here (for or against), I would be happy to include their views in the next *Newsletter*.