
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

FURTHER GOOD NEWS ABOUT BLUE PLAQUES

We are delighted to announce that, after we reported our award of £1,000 for installing blue plaques, subject to finding £500 in matching funding, one of our members (who wishes to remain anonymous) has very generously donated the whole of this sum to meet the grant from the Borough Council. This means that we are now in an even better position to press on with the installation of more plaques, as quickly as we can find suitable buildings, obtain the owners' consent, and get the plaques made.

We hope to be able to report further progress, subject to the limitations imposed by the renewed lockdown in the next Newsletter.

SIR REDVERS BULLER TO COME UNDER FIRE?

No sooner has the Civic Society helped to save Rhodesia Road than the possibility arises that a quartet of unassuming streets off Derby Road may become a target for the anti-Imperialist renaming brigade.

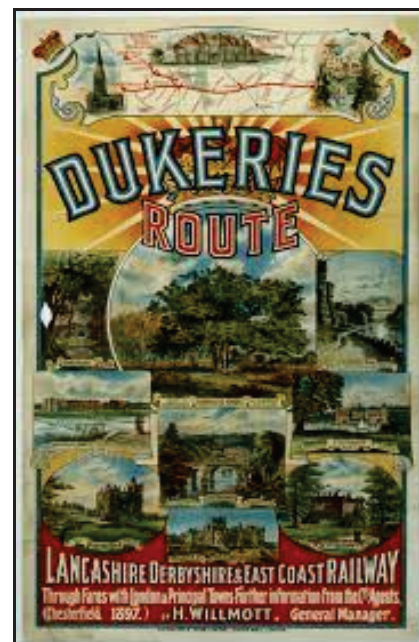
Baden Powell Road and the three smaller roads off it, Redvers Buller Road (illustrated), Dundonald Road and Lord Roberts Road, were built

just after the end of the South African War (1899–1902). Baden Powell Road originally ran as far as the junction with Summerfield Road and was later extended to join Park Road. All four roads are lined with modest terraced houses and some corner shops.

The scheme was developed by the colourful figure of Augustus William Byron (1856–1939), a Chesterfield estate agent. He was distantly related to Lord Byron, the poet. Perhaps his best known venture was the Lancashire, Derbyshire & East Coast Railway, which famously never reached either Lancashire or the East Coast but built a hopelessly unprofitable line from a station in the Market Place to near Lincoln and was taken over in 1907 by the Great Central.

Byron was also behind two early, failed attempts to establish a tube-making works on the site later occupied by the third, successful Chesterfield Tube Co. on Derby Road. That is why there is a Byron Road near the St John Ambulance headquarters.

Byron's particular talent seem to have been to promote schemes which involved little of his own money and



a great deal of other people's. In the case of the tube works, he bought the land on which it was built (by a separate company) and kept back a portion at the southern end of the site to develop for housing for those employed there. He did not build the houses himself but sold plots on 99-year leases to local contractors, subject to strict covenants, which is why the houses have a relatively uniform appearance.

Byron made much of his service in the South African War. Strongly backed by the *Derbyshire Times*, he stood in the Khaki Election of 1900 as the Unionist candidate for Chesterfield, always referred to in the paper as 'Lieut. Byron'. Reports described him addressing open-air meetings mounted on the very pony that had



fearlessly carried him into battle in South Africa. He was not elected.

Presumably for the same reason he chose street names with South African connections for his new estate. Those commemorated were R.S.S. Baden Powell, the 12th Earl of Dundonald, Lord Roberts of Kandahar and Sir Redvers Buller, all of whom were senior commanders in the war. The only one with any local connection was Baden Powell, who married the daughter of Harold Soames, the owner of Brampton Brewery.

Redvers Buller was a Devon man and it is his statue in Exeter which has recently come under threat. There is no good reason for this vendetta to be extended to Chesterfield. With their present names, these four streets are an interesting footnote to the history of Edwardian Chesterfield and should be left alone.

In later life Byron retreated to the French Riviera, where he claimed to be the most distant subscriber to the *Derbyshire Times*. He had a copy sent to him every week.

HOLME BROOK FOOTPATH ARCH REPAIRED

A few years ago we made enquiries to establish who was responsible for maintaining the cut-out steel surround at the entrance to the footpath which runs from Chatworth Road roundabout up the Holme brook valley to the country park. It proved to be Mecca as operators of the nearby bingo hall and we tried to arrange a meeting with their surveyor to discuss refurbishment. This never took place and recently our member Darrell Clark took direct action by having potentially damaging vegetation removed from the brickwork. Soon afterwards, with no further intervention by the Civic Society,



we noticed that the brickwork had been repointed. This is all to the good but we remain intrigued as to how this came to happen so quickly after Darrell had demonstrated the need for the work by getting rid of the unwanted plants.

WHY IS CROW LANE BEING DUG UP?

Civic Society members who have taken advantage of the temporary closure of Crow Lane to enjoy a quiet walk may have been surprised to find the county council carrying out work there. Several stretches have had the top surface removed. This may seem odd, since the road has never been heavily used and has been resurfaced within recent years. But, as the county council explained when asked, no decision has yet been made as to whether Crown Lane is to be closed permanently and in the meantime it has to be kept in good order for all road users, including cyclists who are particularly vulnerable to potholes

IMPROVING ELDER WAY

Anyone who has ventured into the town centre in the last few weeks will probably have noticed that street works have begun on Elder Way. This is the 'public realm' part of the overall improvement of the road, linked with the private-sector redevelopment of the former Co-op store into a hotel.



This scheme promises to be make the road look much more attractive and is to be warmly welcomed, although the real breakthrough will be

to find a new occupier (and if necessary a change of use) for the former Co-op food hall on the opposite side of the street from the department store. This is at present one of the biggest of the depressingly large number of empty retail premises in the town centre.

The illustration shows what the complete scheme is expected to look like.

BOROUGH COUNCIL UNDER THREAT?

The *Derbyshire Times* in its issue of 31 December ran a useful story reporting an exchange between the leader of the Liberal Democrats on the borough council, Paul Holmes, and the local government minister, concerning plans for the introduction of single-tier local government in counties like Derbyshire which at present have both a county council and district councils. Coun. Holmes was told that at present there are no plans for further changes.

This will be welcomed by most if not all Chesterfield residents. The news is also important in view of the plans floated by the county council and Derby city council for them to become unitary authorities and for second-tier councils to be abolished. The fact that the Government is not planning any immediate action does not, however, mean that the threat of a takeover by the Kremlin in Matlock (illustrated) has gone away for good.



Although the Civic Society committee has never formed a collective view on this question, I wrote a follow-up letter in a personal capacity to the *Derbyshire Times*, suggesting how a small number of unitary autho-

rities could successfully replace the county council. The paper did not publish my letter and so, in case it is of interest to Civic Society members, it may be worth including here. Any comments from members would be welcomed for inclusion in the next *Newsletter*.

“Paul Holmes is to be congratulated for bringing to light the Government’s latest thinking on local government reform in Derbyshire, but constant vigilance is still needed in view of the county council’s declared wish to become a unitary authority for the entire county outside Derby. This would be the opposite of what has happened in every other county in which single-tier administration has been introduced, where district councils have formed the basis of unitary authorities and the county council has been abolished. For one authority to run all services in an area the size of Derbyshire would create a remote, undemocratic, unaccountable, inefficient monolith which should be avoided at all costs.

It is in fact quite simple to devise a single-tier system for Derbyshire, based on a modest reorganisation of existing districts. An enlarged Derby City Council could absorb South Derbyshire and possibly some parishes to the north of the city; what remained of Amber Valley and Erewash could be merged to form a single authority for the south-east; Derbyshire Dales and the southern parishes of High Peak could form a viable unitary for the rural west (and perhaps take over County Hall); Glossop and adjoining parishes in the north of High Peak could become a unitary authority within the Manchester City Region, where they properly belong; and Chesterfield could absorb North East Derbyshire and possibly also Bolsover, unless the parishes concerned preferred to be transferred to Bassetlaw and Mansfield, with which historically they have closer links.

Reorganisation on these lines would create unitary authorities quite capable of dealing with the Government. Where a specialist service is clearly best run on a county-wide basis (the Derbyshire Record Office is an obvious example) a joint com-

mittee could be established. If it was deemed undesirable to break up the county council’s well-regarded technical services departments they could be converted into a private consultancy, as was done successfully some years ago in Berkshire. The old idea that only a county council is big enough to run education no longer carries weight, given the progressive transfer of schools to academy trusts. In other words, it is difficult to find compelling reasons for the continued existence of Derbyshire County Council and impossible to build a credible case for making it a unitary authority for the whole of the administrative county.”

A FRESH START OR JUST A NEW NAME?

A small item in the *Derbyshire Times* on 7 January announced the transfer of Whitecotes primary school in Boythorpe to a multi-school trust from 1 January. From next September the school is to be renamed the Walton Peak Flying High Academy, pupils are to get a new uniform, and there will be ‘investment in the school site and its learning environments’, which is presumably eduspeak for tackling a backlog of repairs.



What the story does not mention is that the academy trust which had previously run the school received a damning report from HM Inspectors six months earlier, had evidently failed to improve the school, and was obviously told to hand over to a new body. This is the Flying High Trust (hence the meaningless new name), which runs 27 other primary schools,

mostly in Nottinghamshire. The only one near Chesterfield is at Poolsbrook. Most, but by no means all, serve poor communities.

The report also omits any reference to a lengthy history of failure at Whitecotes, dating back to an earlier ‘inadequate’ assessment by HMI in 2015, when the school was still under county council control. On that occasion as well it failed to improve and was removed from the local authority’s hands the following year.

Once again the county council has failed children in one of the poorer parts of the borough, as has a successor trust. Hopefully the new managers will finally make it possible for all the children at the school to grow and flourish.

MORE HOUSES IN WINGERWORTH

North East Derbyshire District Council have approved an application to build another 180 houses in Wingerworth, on previously undeveloped land to the east of the Deerlands Road estate and Hockley Lane, despite significant local opposition. This means that more of the limited remaining open space on that side of the parish will disappear. The site is not far from Smithy Pond (illustrated below), one of the attractive surviving historic features of this part of Wingerworth.

The new scheme is very close to the estate now approaching completion on Derby Road south of Nottingham Drive. The two are effectively separated only by Hanging Banks, a narrow band of amenity planting dating from the early nineteenth century. Further building in this area heightens the risk of the built-up area creeping towards Derby Road and New Tupton.



Outline consent for the scheme was granted on appeal in 2017, despite strenuous opposition from local residents who raised the familiar (and well-grounded) complaint that Wingerworth has become grossly over-developed, placing extreme pressure on local services.

In 2017 the county council's archaeology officer drew attention to the important (and unexpected) discovery of a Romano-British settlement on the Derby Road site, as well as other points of interest. Characteristically, the local planning authority appears to have ignored this submission and to have imposed no requirement for archaeological investigation in advance of development.

The 'Heritage Statement' submitted with the 2017 application was the usual superficial recital of the obvious and in particular failed to take into account the discoveries on Derby Road, which considerably revises the received view of the history of settlement in Wingerworth.

Sadly, it appears that the recent change in political control at North East Derbyshire has not led to a change in the policy traditionally followed by previous Labour administration since 1974. This seemed to be to allow anyone to build what they liked in Wingerworth because everyone who lived there was a middle-class snob who would never vote Labour anyway, so it didn't matter if the local environment was ruined.

Meanwhile, we still await the outcome of the appeal against the local planning authority's refusal to grant permission to build a timber-framed bungalow in the grounds of Wingerworth Hall, which was mentioned in Newsletter 13.

AND IN BRIMINGTON

Earlier this month the Civic Society was invited to comment on an application concerning outstanding aspects of a planning application (which was granted in 2018) to build 150 houses on land to the north of Northmoor View, a turning off Manor Road just south of the main built-up area of Brimington village (Borough Council reference



CHE/20/ 00869/REM). The picture above shows the land, on either side of the footpath, which is to be built on.

As at Wingerworth, outline planning permission for this site was only granted after an appeal by the developers following rejection by the borough council, and in the face of a great deal of local opposition, including a petition with over 600 signatures.

In this case, however, the developers were required to fund some preliminary archaeological excavation, which revealed modest but definite evidence for Romano-British occupation and also slag, which appeared to be the product of bloomery (probably medieval) ironsmelting. This has led to the imposition of a condition under which more extensive excavation must be carried out before the site is built over.

This in turn means that the site has the potential to produce fresh information concerning two aspects of Brimington's history: the possible occupation of the hill-top site of the later village during the Roman period; and the exploitation in the Middle Ages of the ironstone found in the Coal Measures on which Brimington stands, using bloomery furnaces. These were powered by natural draught and for this reason were often built on south-west facing hillsides, as is the case here.

None of this will be much comfort to those residents of Brimington who did not want another 150 houses, probably 300 more cars and perhaps 400 more school-age children in their village, putting pressure on local roads, schools, doctors and other services, but that battle has been lost. As the Planning Inspector concluded at the end of the appeal inquiry, there was no overriding argument against

allowing the scheme to go-ahead, however much many local people did not wish it to.

HS2 EASTERN LEG STILL IN DOUBT

The borough council has recently published online a brochure entitled *Don't cut here! A case-study of why the economies of Chesterfield and Sheffield need HS2 in full*. This restates the case for building the whole of the Eastern Leg (2B) from Birmingham to Leeds, instead of either abandoning it completely or foreshortening it to end at East Midlands Parkway or Toton.

Arguments for and against the Eastern Leg have been widely aired in both the national and railway press. There is no doubt of the benefit which would accrue to Chesterfield if the line was built, not least because almost all the cost would be met by taxpayers who do not live in the town.



The problem remains that it is impossible to say whether the previously strong case for it has been fatally weakened by changes in railway passenger traffic as a result of Covid. No-one knows if the growth in traffic seen over the twenty years since the partial privatisation of the industry will resume once the crisis has passed, whether numbers will level off at around the 2019 figure, or whether they will remain well below that for the foreseeable future. In other words, is this like the Armed Forces asking for funds to fight the last war, rather than the next one?

It remains to be seen how quickly the Government can make a decision, given that HS2 is likely to be caught up in the wider debate as to how to reorganise an industry that is currently absorbing £800m. a month of tax-

payers' money.

In the meantime, it might be a good idea for someone to work out the cost of electrifying the existing Midland Main Line through to Leeds, which would speed up the London service at much lower cost, and more quickly, than building HS2B.

A SOLUTION FOR DERELICT LAND AND BUILDINGS?

The Housing Secretary, Robert Jenrick, has announced a consultation on the possibility of giving voluntary organisations (local community land trusts) the right to buy property which local authorities and other public-sector bodies are sitting on and doing nothing with.

Civic Voice, the representative national body for local civic societies, has welcome the proposal, although it is less clear where these local land trusts would find the funds to buy unwanted land and buildings, or what they would then do with the property. At present the only community land trust operating in Derbyshire is based in Youlgreave.

In Chesterfield the problem appears not to exist on a large scale, if at all. Certainly in my time as the Civic Society chairman, we have not been approached by anyone complaining that the Borough Council (or even North East Derbyshire) is sitting on derelict estate that could and should be returned to beneficial use. In the case of the one large property of which this might be said (Tapton House) there is no doubt that the Borough has done all it can to find a new occupier.

On the other hand, we have been asked several times about derelict property in private ownership and why can't someone do something about it. The Chesterfield Hotel is the obvious example, but in the last *Newsletter* we also raised the case of the former iron foundry on Hipper Street West.

More conspicuously, there is the case of Saltergate House (the old district council offices, illustrated), which McCarthy & Stone announced



several years ago was to be redeveloped as a retirement complex but in practice nothing has happened. On a smaller scale, we were approached, also several years ago, about the unoccupied house at the eastern end of the main street in Calow and asked what we could do.

The short answer, of course, is that a civic society can do little or nothing. The more serious problem is that local planning authorities can apparently do very little either. There seems to be nothing to stop a private owner simply walking away from an empty property and letting it fall down.

Certainly in Chesterfield, if voluntary bodies were also empowered to take over such properties there would be a good deal of scope for a local land trust to do so.

OFFICES INTO FLATS: WHY NOT?

Civic Voice has also expressed disquiet about the Government's proposal to relax the controls on converting offices in town centres to other uses, principally residential.

There have been several such schemes in Chesterfield in the last few years, the largest probably on the north side of Knivesmithgate (illustrated), but there have also been proposals, mentioned in previous *Newsletters*, for Burlington House and the east side of Stephenson Place.

The Civic Society committee agreed some time ago to support all such schemes, on the grounds that they would make better use of empty upper floors above shops and by bringing people back into the town centre would increase patronage of shops, cafés and pubs.

Civic Voice does not support the

policy, arguing that unless normal planning controls are retained the outcome may not necessarily be a 'high quality residential environment or vibrant, diverse, and planned centres'. It is also unhappy that the relaxation would apply in conservation areas as well as elsewhere.

On the basis of what has happened in Chesterfield this seems an unnecessary worry (although some would say that the town centre is quite vibrant enough, especially on Friday and Saturday nights). Converting half a dozen office blocks into flats is hardly



going to transform the town centre. If there is no longer the same demand as there was fifty or a hundred years ago for shops with offices over them, surely it makes sense to convert the buildings to a new and more profitable use, rather than leaving them empty. Above all, more flats in the town centre will increase the supply of (usually) modestly priced accommodation close to everyday services. It is difficult to see how this can be a bad thing.

This change of use is simply a reversal of the process by which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, better quality private housing in the centre of a town like Chesterfield was gradually converted into shops and offices as middle-class families moved out to the new suburbs. The trend began with the development of Abercrombie Street and Lower Newbold in the 1840s and continued up to

the First World War.

Changes like this illustrate the point that towns evolve all the time. Not only do they generally grow bigger but land use within the older built-up area changes. Even with modern planning controls this process cannot be completely arrested. To some extent market forces and public taste must be allowed to play a part.

What planning controls can do is

ensure that change is generally for the good and brings with it a pleasanter and healthier urban environment. No-one wants the centre of Chesterfield to go back to the world of congested slum courts and back alleys that the redevelopment of the 1920s and 1930s largely swept away, when working-class families were able to move into modern houses on the new

suburban council estates, with bathrooms and gardens. But if people now want to move back into the town centre, into well-appointed modern flats, why should they not be allowed to do so? And why should the owners of such property not be able to seek the most profitable use of their capital, as long as others do not suffer as a result?