
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

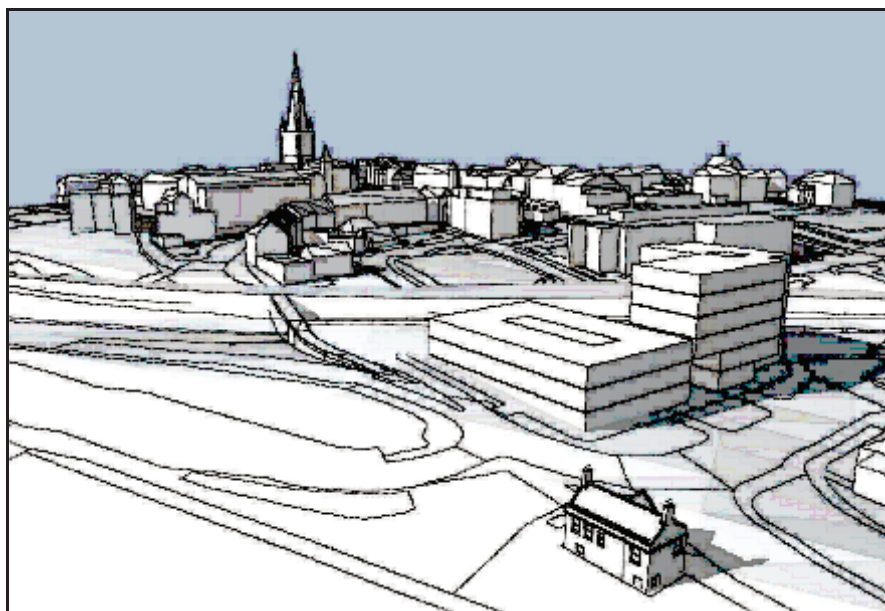
NEWSLETTER

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Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live



CHESTERFIELD HOTEL: SIGNS OF PROGRESS

Although there has been little to see on the ground, there is some movement to report on the redevelopment of the Chesterfield Hotel. The borough council and the inappropriately named Prestige Hotels (Midlands) Ltd, which regrettably still has an interest in the property, have applied for outline planning permission to redevelop the site with two new buildings, one of three storeys and the other six storeys.

The reason for the difference is that the lower building will avoid blocking the view of the parish church tower and spire from the station, which the borough council are anxious to do.

The Civic Society committee is supporting this application, although we are disappointed in the design and access statement submitted by the council's architects. Apart from some very poor English, this shows a lack of understanding of the history and topography of Chesterfield. These weaknesses could have been avoided had the firm spent £20 on a copy of *Chesterfield Streets and Houses* and used it for historical background.

The application has been opposed by Historic England, whose submission is concerned almost entirely with preserving the view of the church from the station, which as far as we can see the present scheme will achieve. It too shows no grasp of how the town has developed and uses meaningless phrases like 'a fine grained structure' when describing the medieval built-up area (what does a town with a coarse-grained structure look like?).

The Coal Authority has weighed in with its usual hyper-cautious comments about possible unrecorded coal workings, and public money has been wasted on an outside mining surveyor's report which says the same thing. *Chesterfield Streets and Houses* explains how the land on which the hotel stands remained undeveloped until the railway arrived in 1840 and that there is no evidence for mining, either in the Middle Ages or later.

The worst document submitted is from the county council's highways department (which now rejoices in the stupid name 'Place'). This patronisingly insists that the applicant (i.e. the borough council) should prepare a fantasy 'transport plan' for the site, showing how everyone can get there by bicycle, and is generously larded with references to websites extolling the merits of cycling.

We have suggested in our response (which can be read in full on the Civic Society website) that it would be simpler to rely on memories of how people got to the Chesterfield Hotel when it was open. None of the committee can recall traffic jams round Malkin Street and Brewery Street because too many customers had the temerity to arrive by car, or anyone having a heart attack because they had failed to cycle to the hotel.

While few would say they are actively opposed to encouraging people to cycle (or walk) if they wish to, we suspect even fewer believe that the county council should spend taxpayers' money bullying people into behaving in a certain way. Whatever delusions highway engineers and others harbour, the fact remains that most people prefer to travel by pri-

vate car and it is no business of a local authority to tell them that they should not, much less spend public money preventing them doing so.

Finally, we have urged that progress be resumed towards the demolition of the hotel buildings, which are becoming a bigger eyesore as every week passes. Even if the site was only used as a temporary car-park, it would look better than it does at present, especially for visitors arriving in Chesterfield by train.



An architect's impression of the new station approach and the walking route into the town centre. Note the unobstructed view of the church spire, over the top of the proposed three-storey building on the site of the Chesterfield Hotel

DON'T CALL IT THE 'HS2 STATION MASTERPLAN'

This phrase is used in several places in the architect's report on the Chesterfield Hotel planning application. Arguably, this is a mistake. The borough council has repeatedly said that funding for the redevelopment of the station approach (not to rebuild the station itself) has been secured independently of whether the Birmingham–Leeds section of HS2 goes ahead.

This is an important point. The longer the Government delays publishing its plans for capital investment in the railways the greater the suspicion must be that the Treasury, tired of tipping taxpayers' money into a bottomless pit to subsidise a mode of transport used by a limited number of people, is trying to secure the abandonment of the northern half of HS2. A cheaper and much less disruptive way of improving the service to London would be to electrify the Midland Mainline throughout.

If the Leeds leg is scrapped, there is the risk that, if the Chesterfield

station scheme is seen as an essential part of HS2, that too will lose its funding. This would be a pity, because the area round the station, and between there and the town centre, badly needs redeveloping, and the design proposed by the borough council has been widely supported.

We feel that it would be much better for the borough to minimise the connection with HS2 and stress that it is pressing ahead with the redevelopment regardless of the decision about the new railway.



Some of the 700 local residents who do not want Crow Lane closing permanently, whose views the county council appear inclined to ignore.

KEEP VIGILANT OR SEE CHATSWORTH ROAD WRECKED AND CROW LANE CLOSED FOR GOOD

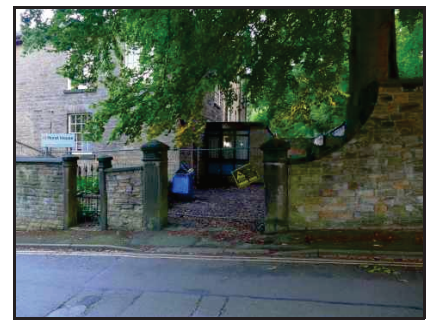
Suspiciously little information has been forthcoming from the county council concerning their plans to wreck the appearance of Chatsworth Road by building a two-way high-speed cycle track along it between Holymoore Road and Storrs Road, or to ignore a petition signed by 700 people and close Crow Lane permanently.

Our attempts to extract a response from the new cabinet member for transport got no further than an anodyne comment about the views of the public being taken into account, and no statement has yet been made by the county council on whether it is going to press on with the cycle super highway in its present form.

An ominous clue, however, is to be found in the county council's comments about the Chesterfield Hotel scheme. This mentions the Chesterfield Cycle Network and assumes that

this is a Good Thing that only Very Ignorant People would oppose. This suggests that the county council has no intention of taking any notice of the views of the vast majority of the public who do not cycle.

All the Civic Society can do at present is wait. We still have very good grounds for a complaint to the Local Government Ombudsman, since we have evidence that residents of a number of streets were not consulted as the county council claims to have they were, and we can also argue that the on-line 'consultation' was bogus. We will take action as soon as the county council makes an announcement.



Hurst House, which if sold could make an attractive private residence and the proceeds could be used to help children from poor homes in Chesterfield get a better start in life.

HURST HOUSE: CHARITY COMMISSION INTERVENES

We are pleased that the Charity Commission has agreed to investigate our latest complaint concerning the scandalous mismanagement of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation by its sole trustee, Derbyshire county council, which (among other things) continues to threaten the future of Hurst House, a grade II listed building in a conservation area.

In April 2020 the county council resolved to transfer its trusteeship of 46 educational charities to the Derbyshire Community Foundation, an umbrella organisation which administers several other charities, although none concerned specifically with Chesterfield.

Enquiries a few weeks ago established that since then the county council has failed to convey to the Community Foundation three pieces of real property which two of those charities own (i.e. Hurst House, the greater part of the land on which Brookfield School stands, and a playing field at Ambergate).

We do not believe that any reasonably competent solicitor in private practice would have failed to carry out this work in considerably less than the fifteen months in which the legal officers of the county council have failed to do so. These conveyances do not involve any consideration and there are no other potential transferees involved. We cannot see how this failure to complete the work can be described as other than gross professional incompetence on the part of officers of the council, whose salaries are paid from public funds.

While this conveyancing is in progress (or not), the county council refuses to consider approaches from prospective purchasers of Hurst House, despite the fact that it is clearly in the best interests of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation for the property to be sold and the proceeds invested for the benefit of the charity. The county council has refused to explain why it is in the charity's best interests for it to retain ownership of an empty and potentially deteriorating building. We do not believe that any reasonably competent trustee would take that view.

We have made these points to the Charity Commission, one of whose officials is currently investigating our complaint against the county council. The best outcome would be a firm direction from the Commission to the county council to complete the transfers as soon as possible, followed by an equally firm direction to the Derbyshire Community Foundation to sell Hurst House as soon as it is in a position to do so.

In the meantime, as we have said before, not a single young person aged between 11 and 25 who is or has been a pupil at one of six designated secondary schools in Chesterfield has derived any benefit from a charity established in its present form in 1991 to help such people. That is the other damning indictment of the county council's misconduct as trustee.



The site of the proposed car-park at Dunston Hall after mature trees forming part of the park landscape close to a listed building were cut down. Planning permission to build the car-park has yet to be granted.

DUNSTON HALL: WILL THE BOROUGH COUNCIL TAKE FIRM ACTION?

Events at Dunston Hall over the last month continue to resemble a textbook illustration of how a developer behaves when he thinks that Planning Acts only apply to other people.

The website advertising Dunston Hall as a wedding venue (for which it has neither planning permission nor a licence from the county council) has been modified very slightly after the Civic Society complained to the trading standards officer, but still mentions a dining room that seats eighty people, ten letting bedrooms, and shepherds' huts in the grounds, none of which have planning permission or listed building consent.

The application for a change of use (from a private residence to a wedding venue) has now been fleshed out with some additional information, including a plan of a proposed car-park with space for sixteen vehicles. How the eighty diners, intending to sit down to eat in a room measuring 15 ft x 24 ft, are to arrive in as few as sixteen cars is not explained, nor where the staff to serve them will park. Nor does the application mention that most of the work for the 'proposed' car-park has in fact already been carried out, including the cutting down of mature trees during the bird nesting season.

We understand also that work to convert an outbuilding into a room in which wedding ceremonies can be held is also under way.

Two neighbouring residents who would be badly affected by the proposed change of use have submitted strongly worded objections to the application. They draw attention to the lack of mains sewerage at the property, poor vehicle access, lack of car-parking, damage to the setting of a listed building, nuisance from noise, lights and smells, loss of privacy for adjoining properties and several other reasons why the applicant should not be allowed to go ahead. The Civic Society has written supporting their objections. All these papers are on the online file for the application (reference CHE/21/00430/FUL)

We hope very much that the borough council will reject the application for a change of use, and also the related listed building applications to make internal alterations to Dunston Hall itself and the conversion of an outbuilding. If it does, and any ensuing appeal by the applicant fails, there remains the problem of reversing the changes already made to the property.

Nothing can be done about the trees which have been cut down, apart from replacing them with saplings, but a local authority can take enforcement action against a developer who carries out work without planning permission. We would like to see the local authority take firm action in this case, since it involves a prominent listed building, if only to discourage others from doing the same.

SCHEME FOR FLATS AT HOLYWELL CROSS PRIMITIVE METHODIST CHURCH

An application has been submitted to the borough council to convert the former Primitive Methodist church on Holywell Street into nine flats. The building not been used as a church for many years and has been empty since the last licensed club there failed.

The Civic Society is inclined to support this application, since it will increase the supply of modestly priced flats close to the town centre, bring back into beneficial use a building that is threatening to become an eye-

sore next to one of the main car-parks used by visitors to the town, and reduce by one the number of town centre premises occupied by clubs with late licences. These all seem to us desirable objectives.



Holywell Cross Primitive Methodist chapel in one of the more sinful phases of its varied history. A developer plans to convert the building into nine flats without altering its external appearance.

One of our committee members raised the question of the retention of original fittings that may survive inside the church, and so we wrote to the architects acting for the developer asking about this point. We also suggested that the owner might like to sponsor a blue plaque on the outside of the building recording its history (we are still hoping eventually to install a plaque on the Central Methodist church on the opposite side of the car-park).

This email has not been favoured with the courtesy of a reply. We will probably still support the application.

SALTERGATE HOUSE: FLAT CONVERSION APPROVED IN PRINCIPLE

We are pleased that the borough council has approved in principle the conversion of the whole of the former North East Derbyshire district council offices on

Saltergate into flats, retaining the external appearance of the original Saltergate House, built for Chesterfield rural district council in 1938.

We are also impressed by the way in which the developer, James Holmes, some time before he can expect to begin building work or see any return from his investment, has had several men on site cutting back the overgrown vegetation along the street frontage of the building and putting up posters to make the boarded-up ground-floor windows look less stark. The building will never be an ornament in its present state but is no longer an eyesore.



The former district council offices on Saltergate after their new owner, James Holmes, had put in hand welcome tidying up work.

Mr Holmes has also draped a large banner above the main entrance offering what appears to be a remarkably attractive investment opportunity for those who wish to put money into his company.

Although the borough council has approved the conversion, officers have raised detailed objections to the layout of some of the 59 flats into which it is proposed to divide the building. They point out that several would lack adequate (or in some rooms any) natural light, while others would lack privacy because they overlook each other. In addition, 38 of the 59 have a floor area below the legal minimum, and in some the bedrooms are too small. This suggests that the number of units will have to be reduced.

Related to this (and relevant to other flat-conversion schemes proposed or in progress in the town centre), the officer points out that the market for flats in Chesterfield is 'fragile', especially for those which cannot accurately be described as 'high quality'. The report observes that, as the scheme stands at present, the flats proposed for Saltergate House will not be 'high quality', but more cheap and cheerful, and it is for these that there is a limited market.

We hope that Mr Holmes will take these points on board. We do not want to see Saltergate House turned into a warren of down-market flats that are difficult to let or sell to satisfactory lessees or tenants, and as a result the building ends up in poor condition with a poor reputation. The developer may have to settle for creating fewer flats but if these are of better quality there should be no difficulty finding good quality occupiers.

ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP SET UP FOR CIVIC SOCIETIES

Through Civic Voice, the national body for local civic societies, we have been told of the establishment of this new group. It is chaired by Craig Mackinlay (Thanet, Conservative), with vice-chairmen drawn from Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the former the senior figure of Yvette Cooper and the latter Sarah Olney. Its secretary is the director of Civic Voice, Ian Harvey.

This is welcome news, since it will provide societies such as our own with another channel through which to raise matters with the Government. Recent attempts to do this through Chesterfield's own MP have met with a marked lack of replies to emails.