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# CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

# NEWSLETTER

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## Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

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The very fine main staircase at Tapton House.

### TAPTON HOUSE: TIME FOR ACTION

We reported in the last Newsletter that a Friends of Tapton House group was being formed, to try to secure the building for community use. Those interested have now held two public meetings and set up a committee.

The Civic Society committee discussed the future of Tapton House at its last meeting and agreed to publish on its website its own views, accompanied by a history of the estate, the mansion and the buildings erected for Tapton House School in 1931.

Our view is that the idea of 'the

community' using the former school is impractical, simply because none of the uses so far suggested would produce sufficient revenue to maintain the buildings. It might be possible to obtain a grant, most obviously from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, to cover some of the cost of adapting the buildings, but no benefactor will meet revenue costs for projects of this sort.

None of the other uses suggested in the last few years, including a hotel, flats, offices, nursing home or school, has attracted support from developers. For this reason the Civic Society committee now favours the sale of the mansion for restoration as a private residence.

What happens to the school buildings depends on whether anyone comes forward with a viable plan for their re-use, since no-one would wish to incorporate them into a private house (except perhaps the two-storey portion attached to the mansion). It is possible that these buildings (or some of them) might be adapted for 'community use', although a viable plan would have to be devised.

If no such plan is forthcoming, the best solution is probably the demolition of some or all of the buildings of 1931, which would enhance the setting of the mansion.

We can foresee two objections to this way forward, both based on a misunderstanding of the terms on which the Tapton estate was conveyed to the former Chesterfield Corporation and the law relating to listed buildings.

First, the estate was not given to the local authority on condition that it be used for the benefit of the people

of Chesterfield. That was a wish expressed at the time by C.P. Markham and we understand that there is no restrictive covenant in the title limiting the use of the buildings.

Second, although the buildings are listed grade II\* (the second highest level of protection), this does not mean that they cannot be altered or demolished. It means that before such work can be carried out, listed building consent (rather than planning permission) must be obtained from the local authority, and (in the case of grade II\* buildings) the view of Historic England taken into account.

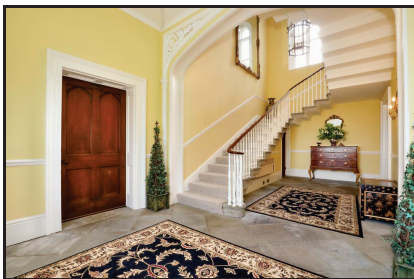
The school buildings of 1931 are listed, but only because they are physically attached to the mansion; they would not in their own right justify listing, since they are of no special historical or architectural interest. It might well be possible to secure consent to demolish or reduce the buildings. It could be argued, for example, that their removal would enhance the setting of the mansion.

The crucial point is that Tapton House is one of a handful of grade II\* buildings in the Borough of Chesterfield and its future must be secured.

The council, as a responsible owner, has kept the premises in good repair since Chesterfield College vacated, at considerable cost to taxpayers, who have received no income from them. It cannot be expected to do so indefinitely. The council has no use for the building itself and has tried and failed to let the premises on a short lease. It has, therefore, little option but to offer a longer lease with a wider range of uses in view, including the restoration of the mansion as a private residence.

This is in our view the course of action which is most likely to safeguard Tapton House. We hope, therefore, that the council will ask Knight Frank to market the property more vigorously than it has wished them to do up to this point, and that a buyer will be found with the resources to restore and maintain the mansion. If this happens, it is important that both the borough council as the local planning authority and Historic England ensure that work carried out on the mansion is done strictly in accordance with the law and to the highest possible standard.

There is now some urgency in this matter. Tapton House does not as yet seem to have been a target for vandals, thieves or arsonists, nor to have suffered from weather damage. That could change very quickly. It is therefore undesirable that there be any delay in the sale of the property, caused for example by prolonged consideration of plans for its use which we believe are well meaning but impractical.



Another fine entrance hall at a local house, in this case Dunston Hall.

## DUNSTON HALL: A SALUTARY TALE

**T**he importance of proactively enforcing the law relating to listed buildings is well illustrated by what has happened at Dunston Hall since its purchase by Mr D.A. Harrison last year. In this case, building work on both the mansion (listed grade II) and an unlisted outbuilding has been carried out without listed building consent (required in the latter case since the alterations affected the setting of a listed building). The setting has also been adversely affected by the building of a car-park in the grounds,

which has involved cutting down mature trees forming part of the parkland surrounding the mansion.

The building work has been carried out to further Mr Harrison's wish to change the use of Dunston Hall from a private house into a wedding venue with ten letting bedrooms.

Mr Harrison has applied for and obtained retrospective listed building consent for the work which he has carried out at the mansion, and has applied for but not yet received listed building consent for the work which he has carried out on the unlisted outbuildings. He has also applied for planning permission to change the use of the property. This application is to be considered by the borough council's planning committee on 4 October, when its officers will recommend that permission be granted, subject to a number of conditions concerning the use of the premises for weddings.

Given the way in which Mr Harrison has ignored the law relating to listed buildings over the last six months, we think it unlikely that he will comply with these conditions. His website continues to give the impression that Dunston Hall is available for weddings (it has no licence to conduct such events) and refers to a dining hall that seats 80 (one of the conditions recommended to be included in the planning consent is that the number attending weddings be limited to 50).

This sorry saga demonstrates that listing does not in itself protect buildings from undesirable alterations by an owner who has no regard for the rule of law as far as it concerns planning matters. The council appears to have taken the view that it had little choice but to grant retrospective listed building consent in the case of the alterations to the mansion, and will presumably take the same view of the application in respect of the alterations to the outbuilding.

Equally, it now has little option but to approve Mr Harrison's application to change the use of the premises to a wedding venue, since the necessary changes to the property have already been made.

The lesson to be learnt from this episode, as applied to Tapton House, is that every possible precaution must

be taken, when that property changes hands, to ensure that building work is carried out in accordance with the law, after careful consideration by both the local planning opportunity and (in this case, since Tapton is listed grade II\*) Historic England.



Wingerworth Hall, showing the range of c.1698 to the rear, now to have a bungalow built near it.

## WINGERWORTH HALL: ANOTHER LOST CAUSE

**N**orth East Derbyshire District Council has granted planning permission in respect of matters which were reserved when outline permission was granted in 2018 to build a 'modest, well designed' single-storey dwelling on a piece of land close to the two remaining ranges of Wingerworth Hall, which appear to date from c.1698. An application for full planning permission to build a larger dwelling on the same land was rejected by the authority in 2020 and an appeal by the applicant was dismissed by a Planning Inspector.

The decision by the council, despite opposition by an adjoining owner, means that building work can now begin. The council was in a difficult position because it had previously granted outline consent for a dwelling. The dwelling for which permission has now been given is smaller than the one for which permission was refused last year, and so could be described as 'modest', although this is simply a case of 'how long is a piece of string' (i.e. when does a modest dwelling become immodest).

Not even the council's own officers could bring themselves to describe the building for which drawings have been approved as 'well

designed'. It is in fact mediocre in the extreme, as the Civic Society has pointed out. Since North East Derbyshire's promised in-house conservation officer is not yet in post, all that could be included in the officer's report was a lame comment by the authority's external 'conservation adviser' that the design was unremarkable but acceptable.

It could be argued that since the late 1950s Wingerworth has been disfigured by hundreds of extremely mediocre houses and bungalows and so one more will not make much difference. The difference in this case is the impact the dwelling will have on the surviving remains of Wingerworth Hall. The Inspector ruled that the impact of the larger dwelling would be sufficiently adverse to justify rejecting the application. We fail to see how knocking a couple of metres off the size of the dwelling makes much difference.

There is also the question of whether the developer will abide by the conditions imposed in the consent. Earlier proposals were a blatant attempt to disguise a two-storey structure as a bungalow with high ceilings (one drawing even showed a staircase). Only vigilance on the part of the local authority (and the adjoining owner) will prevent footings moving closer to the plot boundary than the plan shows, eaves levels mysteriously rising, and similar 'mistakes' by the builder ('Sorry, guv, didn't realise the Velux windows were meant for another job').

We also understand that building work has begun on the (listed) south range of the Hall (known as Estate House) next to the site of the new bungalow. This has recently changed hands but no listed building consent has been sought for work there.

## STEPHENSON MEMORIAL HALL: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

The Borough Council has announced that it has applied for government funds to refurbish the Stephenson Memorial

Hall, including the Pomegranate Theatre and the Museum & Art Gallery. This is welcome news but there has been no mention of the possibility (as part of the scheme) of incorporating Kilblean House (the former Clifton Hotel) into the Memorial Hall estate, as we have previously suggested.

This seems regrettable for several reasons. The Memorial Hall itself can be refurbished internally but not easily enlarged, since it is surrounded on three sides by roads. It could be extended on the south if Kilblean House was demolished, but this seems an unnecessarily expensive solution, since there is already a perfectly good building on the site.



An early view of the Stephenson Memorial Hall, before it was extended to accommodate the theatre and before Kilblean House was built to its left.

Conversely, if Kilblean House is not to be incorporated in an extended Memorial Hall estate, what is to happen to it? The building has been empty for several years and no potential users have shown any interest in it. It has not even attracted the attention of any of the developers who seem to be scouring Chesterfield at the moment looking for empty buildings to convert into cheap flats. In its present state, Kilblean House adds to the unfortunate impression given to visitors who arrive by train and are immediately confronted by the former Chesterfield Hotel.

Not to take advantage of outside funding to bring Kilblean House back into beneficial use, alongside the refurbishment of the Memorial Hall, seems to us unfortunate.



Protestors objecting to the supposedly temporary closure of Crow Lane.

## STILL NO NEWS ABOUT ...

At least three issues that we have written about in previous Newsletters are still in a state of suspended animation:

Nothing more has been heard from the county council about its plan to ruin Brookside by building a two-lane cycle track along Chatsworth Road.

At the opposite end of the route of the proposed 'cycle super-highway', the period of 'temporary' closure of Crow Lane expires in December. The county council must then either reopen the road or seek consent for its renewed (or permanent) closure. As far as we know, it cannot continue to argue that closing Crow Lane makes everyone in Chesterfield healthier and less likely to catch Covid while walking or cycling to the Royal Hospital.

The long-running saga of what to do with Brampton Manor and the two other listed buildings on the site remains unresolved. The Civic Society committee raised no objection to the temporary 'winter igloos' remaining for a little longer, but expressed concern at the lack of progress with a long-term solution for the property as a whole.

As far as we are aware, the transfer of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation's freehold title to Hurst House from the county council to the Derbyshire Community Foundation has still not been executed, eighteen months after the county council resolved to make the transfer. This means that Hurst House remains at risk, since the present trustee refuses to consider the sale of the property and the prospective incoming trustee is unable to treat for its sale.



## A WARMER WELCOME FOR VISITORS TO CHESTERFIELD?

One of the general issues we discussed at our last committee meeting was whether visitors to Chesterfield could be given clearer guidance as to what to see in town. Few tourists spend the night in Chesterfield, much less a longer break, but quite large numbers stop off for a few hours. We feel that more could be done to entertain them after they have looked at the parish church and found somewhere to have a coffee (neither task, of course, is very difficult to accomplish).

Part of the problem is the layout of the town centre. Chesterfield is too large to have single car-park as the main point of entry, with a visitor centre next to it. Visitors arriving at one of the Saltergate or Beetwell Street car-parks can see the parish church in the distance and can probably work out how to get there; the same is also true of those arriving by train or at the coach station.

The visitor centre is well positioned for those who find the parish church, and is equipped with a good range of tourist literature, although much of this seems to be about places to visit elsewhere in Derbyshire rather than what to see in Chesterfield.

The committee felt that there was scope for a new leaflet guide, arranged as a walking tour, describing buildings of interest in the town centre, which would encourage more people to walk further from the visitor centre than the nearer café. A suitable guide would give visitors a better informed picture of the town and its history, encourage them to see more and spend more time (and money) than they would otherwise.

An extension of this idea, which might appeal to younger visitors, would be to mount small plaques with QR codes on buildings of interest, which people could scan to bring up on their phone more information about the history of the building. Small plaques would be less obtrusive than larger information panels (which few people probably

read in detail) and cheaper than the Civic Society's blue plaques, which we obviously can only install on a limited number of buildings.

The QR codes could be arranged to form a sequence that led visitors from one building to the next, in the same way as a map in a printed leaflet. We are not suggesting an electronic guide as a substitute for printed material (which we are sure some people would prefer) but as an alternative means of conveying similar information.

There is ample material in hand to produce guides of this sort and this is something which we hope to look at in more detail in the next few months.

## HOW WAS HERITAGE WEEK FOR YOU?

A related point is that this year's Heritage Week (10–19 September) does not seem to have made a large impression in Chesterfield. Some buildings probably were specially opened to the public but it was not easy to find out which ones or when they were open. In the past the Civic Society has tried to get various bodies to collaborate in a joint publicity exercise for Heritage Open Days, it must be said with little success. We may perhaps try to do more for 2022, so that both local residents and visitors can take advantage of what is on offer.

## BLUE PLAQUE NEWS

We are still waiting for the delivery of the plaques we wish to install at the Pomegranate and Winding Wheel (the one for the St Helena building has arrived), but we remain hopeful that we can arrange an unveiling ceremony for all three before Christmas.

We are also seeking outside funding for another plaque, possibly for 89 New Square. This is now a chapel but until 1970 was a bank (Sheffield Banking Company, later National Provincial). The present building dates from 1865 and was designed in the style of the seven-



teenth-century house that stood there before then.

The building was also the home for a few years of Barry Parker, one of the partners in Parker & Unwin, a locally important firm of Arts & Crafts Movement architects.

We also discussed at the last committee meeting the replacement of older plaques that are either badly worn or contain seriously inaccurate information (or both).

The worst culprit is the plaque on North Midland House, which, it is now clear, dates from the rebuilding of the Midland Railway station in 1870 and is not a surviving remnant of Francis Thompson's North Midland Railway station of 1840. The Civic Society has come under some criticism from local railway historians for this error, which was based on information available at the time the plaque was installed.

The other conspicuous problem is the plaque on the boundary wall of the bowling green on Beetwell Street, which retails the traditional, very silly, legend about the garden behind the Council House which stood on the site of the Municipal Hall, the Victorian building demolished in the 1960s. This plaque is also in poor condition and we would like to see it replaced with a modern one setting out an accurate history of an interesting parcel of land.





## AND FINALLY ... DO PLEASE COME TO THE MEETING ON 21 OCTOBER

Everyone knows that the dread initials 'AGM' are a reliable way of ensuring that people do not attend a meeting which they expect to be very boring.

Can we please (as the Civic

Society committee) make an appeal to all the membership to come to the meeting at St Thomas's church centre on Thursday 21 October, especially as we were not able to hold an AGM last year?

The business meeting should not take more than half an hour and we will then have a talk intended to introduce a discussion about issues which the society's committee have been concerned with over the last

twelve or eighteen months, during which time we have only been able to keep in touch with the membership as a whole through this Newsletter.

This meeting will be a chance for everyone to participate and put forward their point of view; they will also be able to raise other matters which they feel the society should be tackling. Some people might even be moved to offer to join the committee, which would be very welcome!