
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

No 28

www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk

March 2022

Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

THIS IS NOT THE BRIMINGTON– STAVELEY BYPASS THAT HAS BEEN WANTED FOR DECADES

A COUPLE of weeks ago the county council announced a route for a new road to run from the north-eastern edge of Chesterfield to the north of Brimington, ending at Staveley.

At first sight, this scheme might be mistaken for a revival of the age-old plans for a bypass to relieve Brimington and Staveley of through traffic, an idea first suggested by C.P. Markham in the early 1920s, when he suggested that a motor road be built along the bed of the then disused Chesterfield Canal between Chesterfield and Staveley.

Congestion on the A619 between Chesterfield and Staveley has got incomparably worse since Markham's day, and especially since the opening of the Derbyshire section of the M1 in 1967, for which the road provides a very unsatisfactory means of access to Junction 30 and all points north. The road is heavily congested with both local traffic, especially vehicles travelling from places on the A619 to and from Chesterfield, and long distance traffic, including large numbers of HGVs, going to and from the motorway. Traffic is frequently stationary in Brimington and Staveley, with consequent damage to the air quality in both places.

It has been widely agreed for many years that a new route to and



from the motorway is needed, comparable to the A617 dual carriageway between the Horns Bridge roundabout and Junction 29, which has removed most through traffic from the old road through Hasland, as well as making Heath a much pleasanter place to live.

In case anyone has been deluded by press reports into thinking that what the county council proposes between Chesterfield and Staveley is a high-speed link to the motorway, or that it will relieve Brimington and Staveley of congestion, they should look carefully at the drawings and text currently displayed on the county council website.

There they will find that the new road is not called a bypass, but the 'Chesterfield to Staveley Regeneration Route'. It will not be a four-lane dual carriageway with a 70 mph speed limit, like the A617, but a single-carriageway road with a 40 or 50 mph speed limit, pedestrian footpaths on both sides, and a two-way

cycle track down one side.

The new road will start at the roundabout near Sainsbury's store and, skirting the edge of the large housing estate currently being built there, will run to a junction with Brimington Road North and Station Road at the northern end of Whittington Moor. It will then follow the Rother valley round the north of Brimington and Hollingwood, with a junction on Works Road to provide access to Barrow Hill, and will end at Hall Lane in Staveley.

From there drivers heading for the M1 will be able either to follow the existing A619 to Junction 30 or, if they like exploring uncharted territory, take the Staveley Northern Loop Road which leads to Junction 29a. For those who do not know it (which must be at least 90 per cent of the local population), this is the road you cross on a overbridge as you leave Staveley on the present A619 going towards Norbriggs, which has very

few vehicles on it. It was built by the county council several years ago but no-one has ever explained why.

The county council claims that the new road will bring several benefits. It will provide a more efficient route from the A61 to the M1; improve local journeys and the reliability of bus services between Chesterfield and Staveley by removing traffic (presumably meaning longer distance traffic) from the A619; and improve air quality, especially around the Brimington gyratory.

The first of these is clearly true, although the benefits will be far less than would be achieved if the road was built as a four-lane dual carriageway intended to provide better access to the motorway. How far the second and third will be achieved will depend on how far local people use the new road in preference to the present A619. For a journey from Staveley to Chesterfield, for example, the new road probably will be quicker, but for journeys from Brimington to either Chesterfield or Staveley the benefit is less obvious.

Most crucially, as the county council states, the new road will facilitate the building of new houses and 'employment growth' (in other words the building of new factories and offices – employment does not 'grow' alongside a road of its own accord, like a grass verge) on brownfield sites to the north of Brimington and Hollingwood, as proposed in the Chesterfield Local Plan.

This is the most important point, which reveals the true thinking behind the new road. This road is not being built principally to bypass a congested section of the A619 or to provide better access from Chesterfield to the M1 for northbound traffic. It is being built to open up for development land on the floor of the Rother valley which at present is either derelict former industrial land or low-grade farmland.

There is nothing necessarily wrong with doing this, but the purpose should be made explicit and the county council should not pretend that Brimington and Staveley are finally to get the bypass that Charlie Markham first proposed a century ago.



SO HOW DO YOU REGENERATE STAVELEY?

TO BE FAIR to the county council, it has not called the new road a bypass; instead it is the 'Chesterfield to Staveley Regeneration Route'.

It is not clear how much regeneration the road will provide for Chesterfield itself, for which a high-speed dual carriageway going at least part of the way to Junction 30 on the M1 would be much more use. For the borough as a whole (including Staveley and Brimington) it will open up more land for development.

In the case of housing, it may slightly reduce pressure to build on the more attractive western side of the town, if poorer quality land can be used on the floor of the Rother valley between Whittington and Staveley. On the other hand, most people, if they can afford to, want to live on the leafier side of Chesterfield, in the catchment area of what are perceived to be the town's better schools and closer to the Peak District, and it remains to be seen what sort of houses developers can be persuaded to build alongside the new road. The best approach might be to concentrate on decent, lower priced homes for working-class families currently living in poor quality houses in the same part of the borough, where further demolition would not go amiss.

No-one will object to the provision of more employment in this area, for which there appears to be a demand. At Destination Chesterfield's recent 'Celebrate Chesterfield' event, the borough council's chief executive, Huw Bowen (who never indulges in empty triumphalism on these occasions but always gives a clear and measured account of what the local

authority has achieved), was able to report that the council's own business estates are fully let, and that more land is to be prepared for factories at Markham Vale. This is excellent news in itself, and also suggests that if sites are provided alongside the new road there will be a demand for them.

Meanwhile, what of Staveley itself, for which the council has secured central government funding to 'regenerate' the poorest community in the borough? Schemes are already being sketched out to improve the built environment (for which there is a great deal of scope) but what will that achieve in the longer term, once the gloss has worn off the new buildings and better designed public realm?

Here it is worth recalling what has remained a fundamental dichotomy of regional policy since that concept first emerged in the 1930s. Do you take workers to the work or bring work to the workers? In general, public policy since 1945 has pursued the second objective, partly because the first was very unpopular before the war and, except in the case of very isolated mining villages in the North East, it is no longer seen as desirable to demolish whole communities. No-one would suggest that Staveley, or even parts of it, should disappear.

Equally, no-one would deny that great efforts have been made over the last fifty years to 'bring work to the workers' in places like Staveley, with a fair degree of success. Markham Vale is the largest, most recent and most successful of several similar schemes.

So why is Staveley still so run-down, with far too much poor quality housing, poor shopping and leisure facilities, schools that rank no higher than 'good' in Ofsted terminology, and poor health and life expectancy? These topics were discussed at another recent Destination Chesterfield event, held at the Speedwell Rooms in Staveley (itself a less than inspiring venue, it must said, that rather emphasised the problems the town faces).

Instant solutions do not come out of events like this one, which concentrated particularly on education and training, but two points were stressed during discussions held in small groups. One was that 'regeneration' is

not just (or even mainly) about getting rid of tatty shopping precincts or making Staveley Hall look more 'historic'; it is about getting people (especially young people) into work (and keeping them there), getting them into decent housing (whose occupants are for that reason alone less likely to be ill and die young), and providing them with better schools and training opportunities.

These points are of course all interrelated: better educated people get better jobs and earn better money which enables them to live in better houses, have more money to spend on better food and take advantage of better leisure facilities, and so make fewer calls on the National Health Service and live healthier and longer lives.

Like the debate over the best approach to regional policy, these are not new ideas. They were most famously expounded in the Beveridge Report of 1942, the blueprint for rebuilding post-war Britain, when much was achieved, even in places like Staveley. Somewhere along the line the plot has been lost. It needs to be found again, and the funding from government used for more than tubs of plants in shopping malls or inaccurate interpretation panels supposedly explaining the history of a handful of old buildings.

That said, an informed knowledge of any community's past can help in planning its future, and in this respect the Civic Society's expertise may be of some value.

HURST HOUSE AND THE CHESTERFIELD SCHOOLS FOUNDATION: THIS SCANDAL CANNOT CONTINUE

CIVIC SOCIETY members will not, we hope, be growing tired of repeated references in this Newsletter to the failure of Derbyshire county council over many years properly to discharge its obligations as sole trustee of the second largest charity in Chesterfield. As we have explained several times, there are two



unrelated issues here.

One is the threat to the survival of Hurst House, a listed building in the Abercrombie Street conservation area, which has now been empty for eight years.

The other is that since 2002, when the charity was remodelled into its present form under a Charity Commission Scheme, not a single young person in Chesterfield has benefited from the charity.

More than two years ago the county council secured the consent of the Charity Commission to transfer its trusteeship of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation, another large charity from which two schools in the Ripley area benefit, and 44 much smaller educational charities, to Community Derbyshire. This is an umbrella organisation which administers a number of charities and has hitherto had no interests in the north-east of the county.

That transfer has yet to take place. The reason given for this is that there are problems concerning the title of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation to two pieces of real property owned by the charity. One is Hurst House, the other is the greater part of the land on which Brookfield School stands. Civic Society officers who have been most closely involved in this matter have a shrewd idea as to the nature of these 'problems', although we have been unable to confirm our suspicions.

On the other hand, we have no doubt that it is wholly unacceptable for any solicitor employed in the public service to fail to complete the transfer of two pieces of real property over a period of two years. Any solicitor in private practice who provided such a poor service to their client would have been reported to the Solicitors' Regulation Authority long ago. In this case the client is a charity whose sole trustee is the employer of the solicitor who has so conspicu-

ously failed to carry out their client's instructions. This means that the client has no means of securing redress for poor service.

We complained a year ago to the Charity Commission about this delay. Anxious as always to uphold its well-deserved reputation as Britain's most ineffectual statutory regulator, the Commission refused to take any action.

Most recently, we were told by Community Derbyshire that 'it was hoped' to complete the transfer of the real property (and thus the trusteeship) by 28 February 2022.

At about the time that deadline passed without the transfer being completed, we were in contact with the Local Government Ombudsman over the East-West Walking and Cycling Route. As an incidental outcome of this, we were told that the Ombudsman can under some circumstances investigate complaints against a local authority in its role as charity trustee, and were encouraged to write to him with details of our complaint against the county council.

This we have done, and our complaint is currently receiving an initial examination by the Ombudsman, who will decide whether he can investigate it.

Our complaint is simple and is based on the familiar test of 'reasonable competence'. Would a reasonably competent solicitor in private practice have failed, over a period of more than two years, to have completed a conveyance of these two pieces of real property, however complicated the titles that were being transferred? We do not believe that a reasonably competent solicitor would have performed so badly and it is for this reason we have asked the Ombudsman to investigate.

Presumably at some date in the future, these transfers will be completed and Community Derbyshire will replace the county council as sole trustee of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation. As soon as this event occurs, the Civic Society will press Community Derbyshire to take two actions without delay.

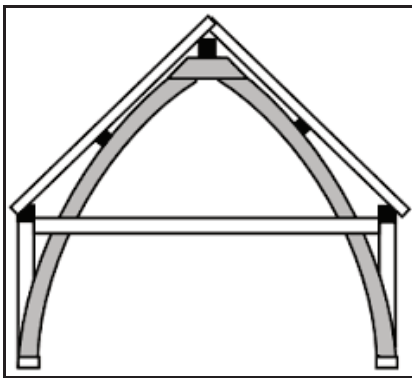
One is the sale of Hurst House, since it cannot possibly be the best interests of the charity to retain possession of an empty building which is a liability not an asset for the charity.

We will strenuously oppose any attempt by Community Derbyshire to seek the demolition of Hurst House on the ground that a cleared site will be more valuable than land with a derelict building on it.

The second is that the Chesterfield Schools Foundation must henceforth be administered in accordance with the Scheme of 2002, so that young people in Chesterfield benefit from it, as they have so conspicuously failed to do during the county council's thirty years of scandalous neglect of the charity.

DUNSTON HALL OUTBUILDINGS

WE HAVE NOW submitted our observations on the application for listed building consent for the conversion of an outbuilding at the rear of Dunston Hall into a function room in connection with its new use as a wedding venue. Our views were summarised in a recent article in the *Derbyshire Times* but may bear repetition here.



Clearly, the building has to be brought back into beneficial use and extensively repaired. We have no objection to what is proposed, but we would like to see the building work preceded by a proper archaeological record being made of both ranges of outbuildings (both of which are listed grade II), dendrochronological ('tree-ring') dating of the surviving cruck trusses, and possibly limited excavation of the interior. This must all be done at the owner's expense, including the publication of the results.

We also wish to see repairs done to the second range of outbuildings, pending a full restoration.

The most important point to emerge from the application, in two reports prepared for the owner, is that both ranges, which meet at right angles, contain cruck frames and there is evidence for a return at the opposite end of one of the ranges. This suggests that there was originally a U-shaped range of outbuildings at the back of Dunston Hall, enclosing a farmyard, and that the whole range was cruck-framed.

If this proves to be the case, it would be a very rare survival and would almost certainly justify increasing the protection of the buildings from Grade II to II*, if not scheduled monument status. As yet, Historic England, on being presented with the evidence currently available, has refused to take any action.

The existing description of the outbuildings in the official list, written in the 1970s, is grossly inadequate. It mentions the cruck-frames and calls them 'medieval', as was commonly the practice fifty years ago. Unless they have been reused from elsewhere, they are almost certainly not medieval, but probably date from c.1600, when the older part of Dunston Hall was built.

As so often, the historical section of the 'heritage statement' submitted with the application is nonsense. For this reason, we included with our submission to the council an accurate outline of the history of Dunston Hall, which was built by the Milnes family, who were lead and iron merchants.

Ours is currently the only submission from consultees of any value on the planning file for the application (CHE/22/00111/FUL). The common form response from Historic England, refusing to become involved, is not merely useless but arrogant, verging on 'What are we paying these people for?' territory. We are apparently no longer paying them to comment on listed building applications, even when their own listing text is decades out of date.



RINGWOOD HALL: A CURIOUS DECISION

THE borough council's planning officers have recently refused an application from the owner of the Ringwood Hall Hotel to convert a derelict kitchen garden some distance from the main house (which is grade II listed) into a spa.

We find this decision surprising. The kitchen garden is not itself listed and the application was therefore for planning permission, not listed building consent.

One of the council's conservation officers, in a report on the application, has treated it as a listed building application, since it relates to a structure within the curtilage of a listed building. This seems to us an odd approach. There is in fact some doubt as to whether one wall of the kitchen garden is listed or not.

The report refers to the glass-houses within the walls of the kitchen garden and suggests that they are of historic interest. In our own submission, made following a visit by three Civic Society members, we pointed out that not only do they look obviously recent, but they bear no relation to the layout shown on the 1918 large-scale Ordnance Survey map.

The council report complains that there is no heritage assessment included with the application, but it is not clear why one is needed for a planning application to alter an unlisted building of no special interest. Such documents are in any case, as we have often observed, rarely of any value.

The report describes the Civic Society as 'generally supportive' of the application. That is not in fact what we said. We strongly supported a scheme to bring back into beneficial use a derelict and unsightly part of

what is otherwise a very attractive estate and a popular hotel. There were no objections to the scheme from either other consultees or members of the public.

As quoted in the *Derbyshire Times*, the manager of the Ringwood Hall Hotel has tactfully expressed thanks for the thorough and constructive comments made by the council, and has indicated that his company proposes to resubmit the application. We hope that next time it will be granted.

‘CALL FOR SITES’

THE BOROUGH COUNCIL has announced a ‘Call for Sites’, inviting members of the public to suggest pieces of land which might be developed for housing, employment, public open space or the ever-popular ‘Gypsy and Traveller sites’.

At first sight this looks like a curious inversion of the usual procedure whereby a local planning authority designates land for a particular purpose in its Local Plan, developers then seek planning permission to use it for that purpose, and local residents object. The current opposition to further house-building at Dunston on land designated in the Local Plan for housing is a case in point.

Cynics might suggest that this is an ideal opportunity to suggest to the council that a piece of land next to the home of someone you particularly dislike would be ideal for some objectionable use – a caravan site or a refuse incinerator immediately spring to mind. It might also be objected that the identification of the best use for a particular piece of land is surely what planners do and so why is the council asking members of the public to do their officers’ work for them.

A more serious objection would be that designating land use over an area as large and, for the most part, as densely built-up as the Borough of Chesterfield, often in the face of complex competing claims, and then embodying the conclusions in a Local Plan, is a skilled job best left to people with appropriate qualifications

and experience.

In fact, as the relevant page of the council’s website explains, it is a requirement in national planning guidance for the council to carry out a ‘call for sites’ at least once every five years as part of the process of revising the Local Plan. The council are obviously not obliged to accept the suggestions made.

It is just possible that some useful suggestions will emerge from this exercise. It seems rather more likely that a good deal of officers’ time will be diverted into explaining to both councillors and members of the public why a particular suggestion is impracticable, and that in the end the only changes made to the Local Plan will be those made by officers with a specialised knowledge of the subject.



BLUE PLAQUE SUCCESS

BY COMMON CONSENT of all who attended, the unveiling of the plaque at the University of Derby’s Chesterfield campus on 7 March was a great success. The University were exceptionally generous in their welcome and provided an excellent lunch. The majority of those present, as intended, were former pupils of St Helena School, who all seemed greatly to enjoy themselves. At least three afterwards joined the Civic Society.

The plaque was unveiled by Dr Maureen Strelley, a former pupil and retired Bolsover GP, who made an appropriate and much appreciated speech about how much the school had meant for so many of its pupils. The plaque itself now makes a hand-

some addition to the entrance to the campus.

There was a brief opportunity at the event to see something of the St Helena building, which has been refurbished to a very high standard by the University. We are hoping that it will be one of the buildings opened to the public as part of Heritage Week in September.

We also hope that later in the year it will be possible for the Mayor to unveil a plaque at the Winding Wheel.

CYCLE SUPERHIGHWAY: NO NEWS BUT REMAIN VIGILANT

THERE is no further news about this scheme, beyond what we said in the February Newsletter. The Ombudsman is currently investigating several related complaints from the Civic Society and individual members, one of whom has also complained to the Information Commissioner about the way his enquiries to the county council have been handled.

Nothing more has been heard about the proposed permanent closure of part of Crow Lane to motor traffic.

HERITAGE OPEN DAYS

We are making steady progress in our efforts to make more of Heritage Week in September. We have a more or less final list of buildings we would like to see opened to the public, and will now write to their owners in the hope that they will be able to cooperate. The first to respond is St Thomas’s, Brampton, which will be putting on a special open day to mark the occasion.

We will report further developments in later issue of the Newsletter as we get nearer to September.