
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

No 29

www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk

April 2022

Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

TIME TO RE-THINK THE TOWN CENTRE?

THERE have been two pieces of bad news concerning the town centre in the last month.

The first was the decision by Marks & Spencer to close their High Street store and move to the building on the Ravenside retail park briefly occupied by Debenhams. This has been spun by the company as an opportunity to have a larger branch in Chesterfield with a wider range of stock. This may well be true, and it will be possible for customers to park closer to the store if it moves out of the town centre.

The downside is that the town centre is losing one of the most iconic High Street names which has for decades been an important status symbol for a place the size of Chesterfield: if you've got an M&S you're a proper town where people want to come and shop. Now it will have a prominent (and no doubt for a time empty) shop that will look unmistakably like a former Marks & Spencer store. This is not just another empty shop — it's an empty M&S shop.

Hopefully, another retailer (or several, if it can be divided) will be persuaded to go into the store and so avoid a long-term void in a very prominent position. Hopefully also, M&S's traditional neighbour, Boots, will not also decide to move out.

The second hammer-blow is also disappointing but probably less unexpected. The news that Eyre's is finally giving up the unequal struggle to run an independent department store in a not particularly prosperous town of 70,000 will hardly come as a



surprise to most people. It has for years been the sort of shop where people walk past and say 'I never see anybody in there'.

Few probably believed the story about selling off stock prior to a major refurbishment. What retailer spends that sort of money immediately after an unprecedented drop in non-food retail sales? Why did the company announce a refurbishment before they had the funding in place? How widely was it known that suppliers were dealing with the company on pro forma terms, implying that they had little or no cash? And why on earth did people give them large deposits for items of furniture, which they will now have lost, unless they can make a claim on their credit card?

It is almost inconceivable that another retailer will be found to go into a building the size and age of Eyre's store, or that a non-retail use can be found for the building. There is a limit to how many former shops

can be turned into flats, and a purpose-built department store like the Eyre's building, with its huge windows, high ceilings and rambling internal layout, is almost certainly unsuitable for conversion.

There is a third element in this equation: the future of what of most Civic Society members probably still think of as the ABC cinema on Cavendish Street. This has had various occupiers since the cinema closed, none of them an ornament to the town, and the long, bleak street frontage remains an eyesore. A lease of the building was put up for auction on 28 April and appears not to have been sold. It is now on offer at £375,000.

What should this building be used for, as and when the existing shop tenant leaves (their current lease expires in 2024)? None of the answers likely to occur to the sort of speculators who tend to buy this type of property is attractive. Few would wish to see it turned into an arcade of

cheap-jack shops, such as disfigured the former Gaumont cinema on Knifsmithgate for many years; it is obviously unsuitable for conversion into flats or a hotel; and attempts to run it as a night club have all failed.



Arguably, it is time to think seriously about how parts of the town centre should be used, given what appears to be a secular (rather than cyclical) change in retailing which will mean that a town like Chesterfield will have fewer shops in the future.

Although this shift in retailing is quite recent, Chesterfield has a specific problem which is deeply rooted in its history. Ever since the market place was moved in the 1190s from its original position on the north side of the parish church to its present site Chesterfield has had an odd layout, compared with other towns of similar size. All but one of the main roads in and out of the town are focused on the old market place. This means that traffic does not flow naturally into what should be its commercial heart around the market place. But there is no longer any reason to head for the area around the church, because the town's main market has not been there since about 1200.

That is ultimately why St Mary's Gate, Holywell Street, Stephenson Place (historically part of Knifsmithgate) and Cavendish Street (inserted into the built-up area in the 1830s) are less busy than they would be if they led into a modern market place. Chesterfield has been a successful market town since the twelfth century, but it has never been big enough to support two shopping centres. Around 1900 the streets near the church did see some new commercial building: as well as Eyre's there was the Stephenson Arcade next door, another large block on the opposite side of Stephenson Place (itself

created in 1905), and the imposing former Williams Deacon's bank at the junction with Cavendish Street.

Today this part of the town, although not particularly run-down, is something of a backwater and, on present evidence, retailing here is unlikely to revive.

Is this the moment to think about bringing more people back to live in the town centre? Until the mid nineteenth century much of the town centre was residential. The middle class then began to move out to the new suburbs, leaving only very poor slum housing in the centre, which was cleared away in the twentieth century.

Is it possible to reverse that process and use land left vacant by the retreat of retailing for new housing which will attract people back into the centre? This does not necessarily just mean more blocks of flats but also family homes with gardens and car-parking space, of the sort that have never disappeared from most European towns.

This would be a radical change in land-use in a town like Chesterfield, but is perhaps worth trying. It would surely be a better solution than leaving land vacant or using it for car-parks (few would claim that the appearance of Holywell Street and Saltergate has been improved by the creation of the Donut car-park), and there is a limit to how many new blocks of flats or offices the town centre can support, much less new shops.

TOO MANY FLATS IN THE WRONG PLACE

FOLLOWING on from this question, it is worth mentioning two recent planning applications on which the Civic Society has been asked to comment. Both are second bites at the cherry.

One is for the conversion of the first and second floors of 43 Knifsmithgate (the old gas showrooms) into four flats, for which an earlier application has lapsed. Although in general we have supported flat conversion schemes as a good way of bringing the upper floors of buildings with shops on the ground floor back into beneficial use, and bringing more

residents back into the town centre, we are not in favour of cackhanded schemes to cram very small flats into too little space.

The application for 43 Knifsmithgate falls into this category. All four flats are very small one-bedroom units with only a shower rather than a bath in the bathroom, and a living room with a kitchen in one corner. Who would want to live in a glorified bedsitter like this? We believe that it would be better to convert each floor into a decent sized two-bedroom flat, which would attract a better class of tenant, able to pay a higher rent and more likely to look after the property.

The second application is another attempt to solve the problem that is Burlington House. We have argued in the past that the only real solution is to demolish the entire building and start again. No-one has come forward with the capital to do that and so we have yet another cobbled together scheme for too many cheap, nasty flats in too little space.



The scheme also includes a proposed new third storey with another thirteen flats, and the conversion of the basement into offices.

We consider this scheme as misconceived as earlier ones. The flats are far too small and there are too many. Who would want an office in a basement with no proper natural light, overlooked by a street, when there is plenty of decent office space available elsewhere in Chesterfield?

The application is accompanied by a barely literate apologia by the architect which, larded with jargon that means little on closer analysis, attempts to justify what is proposed. It includes computer-generated images showing how lovely the frontage to Burlington Street will look if all the infill panels are turned into the currently fashionable shade of dark charcoal grey. They may look nice for a bit but will then become just as dated as the exposed concrete frame and the pillars which have made

Burlington House look so awful ever since it was built. There is no attempt to show what the back of the building will look like, which has always been even worse than the front.

We have urged the Borough Council to reject this scheme and can but hope that a new owner may eventually come forward with a much better plan for the site.

HURST HOUSE: THE FIGHT GOES ON

PERHAPS not unexpectedly, the Local Government Ombudsman refused our request to investigate the county council's continuing scandalous mal-administration of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation and recommended that we complain to the Charity Commission.

Undeterred by the previous refusal by that most useless of regulators to take any action, we have done this, and also put three specific questions to the county council under the Freedom of Information Act.

Neither the county council nor the prospective new trustee, Foundation Derbyshire, has explained why the proposed date for the transfer of Hurst House from one to the other on 28 February came and went. Foundation Derbyshire told us that there were technical and legal problems standing in the way of completing the transfer, which they were trying to solve.

This statement proves, in the light of a letter received from the county council, to fall somewhat short of the truth. We are now told by the county council that Foundation Derbyshire have asked the county council to sell Hurst House by auction and remit the proceeds to them, rather than transfer the freehold. The county council has said that it is considering this request.

Why it should take more than about thirty seconds of any officer's time to agree to this suggestion escapes us. After all, as long ago as May 2018 the cabinet member responsible for this area of county council policy, Alex Dale, resolved to do exactly that if Hurst House failed to sell by private treaty within six months. At no time since November 2018 has Mr Dale condescended to

explain why he decided not to implement his own resolution.

At first sight an auction appears to be the best solution to the problem that has existed since Hurst House fell vacant in 2014. During that time it has remained a listed building at risk, and no intended beneficiary of the charity has in practice benefited from it. In the meantime the county council has given away about a third of the charity's cash to the county council and has alienated on a 125-year lease at a peppercorn rent most of the site of Brookfield School, thus depriving the charity of a valuable income stream for the next century and more.

The Charity Commission has consistently refused to intervene in this scandal.

If, as we suspect, the problem over the transfer of Hurst House concerns the charity's title to the property, we are not convinced that an auction will get round the difficulty. Assuming that a purchaser at an auction instructs a reasonably competent solicitor to complete the transfer, that solicitor will presumably discover the same defect in the title as Foundation Derbyshire has identified, which we assume is the reason why the transfer has not taken place.

If this is case, clearly no sale will go ahead until the problem is resolved. Where we consider both the county council and Foundation Derbyshire are to blame is that, for over two years, neither side appears to have made any attempt to sort out this problem, and Foundation Derbyshire seems now to believe that an auction will solve it. If this is true now, why was it not true two years ago? Conversely, if told that there was a flaw in the charity's title to Hurst House, why has the charity's trustee failed to deal with the matter for more than two years.

Hitherto we have regarded the county council as chiefly culpable in this matter. It now appears that Foundation Derbyshire, an organisation with no links with Chesterfield and probably little interest in this charity, is also far from blameless. We are determined not to let either party off the hook, and will do our utmost to press the Charity Commission to take action.

STAVELEY REGENERATION ROUTE

Bryan Thompson, the society's former chairman, has commented on the article in the last Newsletter about this scheme:

Although I understand your concerns over the bypass not being dual carriageway, there is a counter-argument. That is, the easier it is to reach the town centre from the M1 the more likely the road will serve traffic which travels further. I have followed lorries from the M18, through Brimington, across to Newbold and to Chatsworth Road via Loundsley Green Road and Storrs Road. Amplified with a direct dual carriageway, additional traffic would harm the west side of the town. I recall the then chairman of the county council and the Peak Park Planning Board, Martin Doughty, firmly opposing the bypass because of the wider implications.

The convoluted single carriageway route should mean it should not attract more through traffic. There is nothing wrong in serving industrial and residential developments provided there are very few junctions as is proposed.

Specifically, I support the inclusion of a cycle route, but do not like tarmac footpaths adjacent to busy roads. Unless they are to function as emergency parking spaces, I think it is better to have a landscaped segregation with shrubs, trees and grass which is so pleasant that it encourages walking and running. That is effectively the advice by the Chartered Institute of Highways and Transport, which was ignored in other aspects for the east-west cycle route: see https://www.ciht.org.uk/media/4465/planning_for_walking_long_april_2015.pdf

Overall, along with the canal corridor, it ought to be an attractive feature to attract and retain investment, to travel and be discrete in the wider landscape. There ought to be significant tree planting and screening for nearby homes but I suspect the county council is likely to avoid such a commitment, as did along Loundsley Green Road.

CYCLE ROUTE: STILL NO NEWS

ASUSPICIOUS silence continues to surround the widely opposed plans for the cycle route through Brookside and the closure of Crow Lane. No-one has spotted any signs of building work starting; the Information Commissioner has refused to consider a complaint by one of our members over the county council's refusal to supply information about the scheme; and the Local Government Ombudsman has advised the Civic Society that it is still considering the county council's response to our complaint concerning the bogus and flawed online consultation exercise carried out a year ago.

All we can say is that we remain vigilant. Ideally, we would like to see the Government withdraw the offer of funding for the scheme, which would kill it stone dead, but at present there is no sign that Grant Shapps has cottoned on to the idea that, under present circumstances, taxpayers' money might be better spent on the Armed Forces than on cycle tracks that hardly anyone wants.



Meanwhile, Crow Lane remains open to light traffic. It appears not to be heavily used but there has been a noticeable increase in litter in the verges, mostly drink cans and fast-food wrapping. Virtually all this, we suspect, has been thrown out of motor vehicles. When the road was closed there was very little litter. This could be seen as an argument in favour of closing the road permanently, but one which has to be weighed against the case for keeping it open.

PROPOSED MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITY: DON'T TURN OVER AND READ SOMETHING LESS BORING

PROBABLY few readers of the *Derbyshire Times* (of whom there are too few anyway) noticed (or took much interest in) a short story on an inside page two weeks ago based on a leaked county council report calling for the creation of a 'Mayoral Combined Authority' (MCA) for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. Rather more may have spotted the follow-up story the week after, if only because it was illustrated by a picture of the leader of the county council, who claimed that an MCA was a great idea. In particular, he denied that the establishment of such a body would lead to an increase in council tax bills.

Anyone whose grasp of arithmetic enables them to count beyond ten without removing their shoes and socks will realise that Mr Lewis's protestations on that particular point are nonsense, since an MCA is a precepting body, i.e. it takes money off taxpayers through their council tax bills.

There are, however, wider issues here, which could adversely affect Chesterfield as one of the largest towns in Derbyshire or Nottinghamshire after the two cities which are administered by unitary authorities.

An MCA is essentially a species of regional administration of the sort which many people thought had been killed off some years ago. Unfortunately, like inflation, such ideas are never killed off. They just lie low for a bit, change their name, and then raise their head again. The argument for them appears to be that they are large enough to take over powers devolved from central government, which seems to be tacitly regarded as a good thing, although why is never explained. They will therefore have more powers than county councils.

The sub-text is that if you have a trans-county authority there is no need for fuddy-duddy little district councils alongside county councils, which can either be abolished or their powers and duties emasculated.

Those who subscribe to the view that government (central and local) is getting bigger and should get smaller will be instinctively hostile to the idea of any new public body at regional level, irrespective of whether it takes over functions from central government or local government, or finds new things to spend public money on. Those who believe that 'local democracy' should be just that – local and democratic – will be equally suspicious of the idea.

These are general points that apply to all parts of the country. In the case of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, there are several strong arguments against the idea, some of them deeply rooted in history.

First, why Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire and not Leicestershire (and Rutland) as well? Why not Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire, which also used to be part of the standard region called the 'East Midlands' which was abolished a few years ago. What have Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire got in common that makes them fit together so well that they should share a 'mayor'?

The only unifying factor was the coalfield, but that is now a memory, and even that only included parts of the two counties. What do Ashbourne and Retford, Buxton and Newark, Swadlincote and Worksop have in common? Just because two counties, created more than a thousand years ago, have a long common boundary does not mean that they make a coherent administrative unit today. That lesson was learnt painfully by the Church of England when it established the diocese of Southwell in its original form in 1884. It never worked and had to be unpicked in 1927, when the diocese of Derby was created.

'Regions' have never been successful as administrative units in England for various reasons. One is that those creating them have almost always used counties as building blocks. Only occasionally has this rule been broken, as when the Glosop district was initially excluded

from the East Midlands standard region in 1946 – it was added, for no good reason, in 1974. But counties themselves are not coherent geographical or economic units – that was not the basis on which they were created.

There is no infallible guide to what makes a coherent ‘region’, but today postcodes are probably the best clue. In Derbyshire, if you have an S postcode you tend to look to Sheffield as your regional centre, just as you do in places in north Nottinghamshire with the same prefix. An SK postcode means you look to Manchester. If north-east Derbyshire has to be brigaded into a bigger unit (for which there is no popular demand) it should be a region centred on Sheffield, not Matlock, and certainly not Derby or Nottingham.

As well as the fallacy that ‘regions’ can be made out of counties, there is also the myth that, if you create regions, you no longer need second-tier local authorities. This is, not surprisingly, an argument advanced by county councils and opposed by district councils.

Locally, the idea has nothing in its favour. Once regarded as a competent medium-sized shire county council, Derbyshire now has little to boast about. Few of the schools it still administers are anything to be proud of; the local press can always find pictures of unrepaired roads to go with a story about district councillors repeatedly complaining about potholes to no effect; its proposal to close care homes has aroused huge anger; the library service is a shadow of what it used to be; and it no longer runs the police service. What special claim has the county council to remain in existence?

If local government is to be reorganised in Derbyshire, the building blocks should be the district councils and Derby city council, probably with some amalgamation of existing dis-

tricts into larger units. Some services currently run by the county council could be devolved to the districts; others could be managed by joint committees or private agencies. Nottinghamshire, for example, has successfully transferred its libraries to an independent body, which also runs an archive service that is vastly better than that provided by the Derbyshire Record Office.

Ideally, Michael Gove, as the local government minister, will tell local authorities that he is not prepared to waste public money setting up any more mayoral combined authorities. But everyone who believes in good quality local government, delivered as close to the people it serves as possible, needs to remain vigilant in case this plan for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire gains traction.

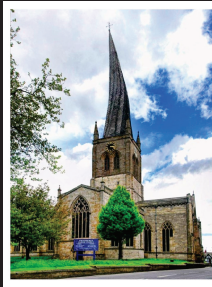
Finally, credit should be given to the Local Democracy Reporting Service, a BBC agency, for unearthing this county council report, and also a paper revealing just how bad standards of school education are in Derbyshire. This sort of investigative reporting represents all that is best about local journalism in Britain.



HERITAGE OPEN DAYS: MAKING PROGRESS

WE ARE MAKING reasonable progress with plans to promote Heritage Open Days in September. One of the local

churches has signed up and we are about to approach the others. The borough council’s museum service is to offer a tour of its store and will be opening the Revolution House, even though the main museum will be closed. We have written to the council asking if several other buildings they own can be specially opened. We will also be asking the University of Derby if it can offer tours of its St Helena campus. All these openings will be advertised on the national website for Heritage Open Days and we will do our best to publicise them locally.



What to see on a visit to Chesterfield

A guided walk round the town centre, describing buildings of interest, with an outline of the history of Chesterfield

A NEW TOWN GUIDE

WE ARE ALSO pleased to report that a new town trail is in draft. This will be the successor to similar booklets published in the past by the Civic Society. At present there is nothing that the Visitor Centre in Rykneld Square can offer visitors who want to look round the town and take away as a souvenir. The draft makes a small paperback booklet, illustrated in colour throughout, of 32 pages, which will obviously be a saleable publication. We may also produce a single-sheet leaflet for people who want a brief guide to the Market Place and a few other buildings, which we hope can be made available free.