
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

TAPTON HOUSE: PROGRESS AT LAST

THE Civic Society committee has welcomed the news that the Borough Council is to offer Tapton House and its immediate grounds (but not the park or golf course) for sale on a 999-year lease, after two years of trying unsuccessfully to let the property on a short-term lease as offices.

If a sale can be achieved, the taxpayers of Chesterfield will be relieved of the considerable cost of maintaining a large Grade II* listed building for which the council itself has no use, and a private capital can be used to renovate the mansion and restore the gardens. No conditions have been imposed concerning the future use of the building, although a 999-year lease (as opposed to a sale of the freehold) means that the council retains some control over what happens to it. The council also has powers as a local planning authority and, since Tapton House is listed II* rather than II, Historic England would have to be consulted about any changes to the fabric.

Various possible uses have been canvassed for the house, including conversion into flats, a hotel or a nursing or care home. Our view is that the building is unsuitable for any of these because of its internal layout. The alterations needed would be undesirable and probably unacceptable to Historic England.

For this reason we would prefer to see the mansion revert to being a large private house, as it was until the 1920s. The ground floor would need some reorganisation to make it man-



ageable as a house with (one assumes) few if any resident domestic staff, and bathrooms would need to be installed on the first floor. The top floor, which is mainly divided by stud partitions, could be converted into flats for staff or semi-independent relatives, or used to run a business from home.

At present the grounds are open to the public, but it would be possible to create a boundary giving the owner of the mansion a reasonable sized private garden while retaining public access to the park.

There remains the question of what to do with the school buildings of 1931. Some if not all of these appear to have been built on the footings of former stables and other out-buildings, and are connected at ground- and first-floor level with the

mansion at its north-east corner. The nature of the brickwork suggests that these buildings were erected for Charles Markham after he bought the Tapton House estate in 1873, and are not part of the original mansion of 1794 and 1811.

The school buildings are listed, but only because they are attached to a listed building. They would not merit listing in their own right. Internally they were quite extensively altered by Chesterfield College during their time at Tapton. In these circumstances, it is arguable that some or all of them could be demolished without loss, which would improve the setting of the mansion.

News of the council's decision to sell Tapton House has been greeted with disapproval by those who believe that it should be used in some way for 'the community'. Indeed, the Civic Society has recently received an abusive anonymous letter, said to be from three local organisations, none of which has a website or postal address, criticising our decision to support the council's sale of the property.

Suggestions of this sort are based on various misunderstandings. The first is that the estate was given to the council on condition that it be used 'for the people of Chesterfield', as if this was a binding covenant on the local authority.

This is not the case. It was given to the council unconditionally, with the hope that it might be used in this way. Most of the estate has been. The park has always been open to the public, and the golf course has always operated as a public course. The mansion, on the other hand, has never been open. After an abortive attempt to turn it into a museum, it was a

school for sixty years and then an annexe to Chesterfield College.

More fundamentally, suggestions for 'community use' of the buildings have yet to be accompanied by any realistic proposals for funding. It is possible that the National Lottery might meet some of the capital cost of conversion, but it would certainly not contribute to running costs. No-one has yet suggested a use which would generate sufficient income to make 'community use' viable.

The sale of Tapton House is being handled by the Sheffield office of Knight Frank and a well-presented sales brochure, including floor-plans, is currently available on the firm's website. They have also put up a conspicuous sales board at the entrance to Tapton Park, which should attract some passing trade. With luck, someone in a position to restore the mansion as an attractive, but manageable, country house, will decide to take on the challenge.

HURST HOUSE: THE BATTLE CONTINUES

IT IS NOW eight years Hurst House closed as a community education centre and five years since the Civic Society first complained to the Charity Commission about the negligent misconduct of Derbyshire County Council as sole trustee of the charity



Jacob Rees-Mogg MP, the Minister for Government Efficiency, who we probably have to thank for securing a reply from the Charity Commission to our latest complaint about Hurst House.

ity which owns the property. Hurst House remains empty and not a single young person in Chesterfield has benefited as intended from the charity since it was created in its present form in 2002.

After being given two rather different reasons why the transfer of Hurst House from the county council to Foundation Derbyshire was not completed on 28 February this year, as we were told was the intention, the Civic Society decided to lay a further complaint against the county council about its maladministration of the charity and, for the first time, also to complain about the performance of Foundation Derbyshire.

The Charity Commission responded to our letter in its usual way: it was ignored until we sent a reminder three weeks later. This we copied to Jacob Rees-Mogg, the Minister for Government Efficiency, with some observations about the efficiency of the Charity Commission. As if by magic, a reply was forthcoming on the day our second letter was received by the Commission.

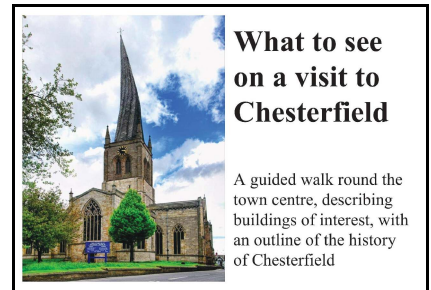
Civic Society members who have themselves had difficulties securing replies from Government departments may like to note this technique, which appears to work well.

The Commission's reply was in itself reasonable, if belated. It stated that our complaint had been studied and officials had decided to call a meeting with officers of the county council and Foundation Derbyshire to try to establish the reason for delay in completing the transfer.

We responded by suggesting that a month was quite enough time to arrange a meeting and stated that unless we were told by 17 June that this had been done we would make a complaint about the performance of the Charity Commission, as well as the two charities it is supposed to supervise.

At the same time, we have submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to Derbyshire County Council asking for certain specific pieces of information about their recent conduct as sole trustee of the charity.

Our view remains that Hurst House should be sold as quickly as possible, probably by auction, preferably with a view to its restoration as a private residence.



WHAT SORT OF TOWN GUIDE DO VISITORS WANT?

WE MENTIONED in the last Newsletter that we had drafted a new town guide, arranged, like earlier Civic Society publications, as a 'trail', suggesting a walk round the town centre lasting about an hour. With illustrations and a map, this would be a booklet of 32 pages, which could probably be sold for about £3 at the Visitor Centre.

There is a case for a much simpler single-sheet leaflet with short paragraphs about buildings in and around the Market Place, again accompanied by a map. The Borough Council have recently produced a leaflet on these lines, but this is not specifically a guide to historic buildings. This is being given away free, and it would be possible for a similar Civic Society leaflet to be sold at a nominal 50p or £1.

Both types of guide could also be made available electronically through the society's website, but we feel that at least some visitors would prefer a printed version.

The committee at its last meeting was slightly undecided as to which way to go, partly because we wish to avoid printing something and finding that we have a large unsold stock on our hands.

We would very much welcome comments from other members about which type of guide (or both) would suit Chesterfield best. A final version of a single-sheet leaflet has yet to be written, but we can send a reasonably final text of the proposed booklet to any members who would like to read it in draft and comment on it.

FAREWELL TO THE STATION HOTEL



SOME may have thought it would never happen (some thought it should never happen), but it has at last. Demolition contractors have finally moved onto the Chesterfield Hotel site. So far only the modern extensions at the back of the Victorian building have been tackled, but presumably within a couple of months it will all have gone.

This will create some useful temporary parking space close to the station and is obviously the first step towards redeveloping the site. We hope that before this happens the Borough Council will have extinguished the interest in the property currently held by the improbably

named Prestige Hotels (Midlands) Ltd (or should that be Prestige Red Shale Car-parks?), so that local taxpayers get the entire benefit of any redevelopment scheme.


Perhaps attention could turn next to the virtually derelict and equally unsightly former county police station and courthouse on Brimington Road, where again a temporary car-park would be an improvement on what is there now, pending the execution of a comprehensive scheme for the redevelopment of the entire station area.

NEW HISTORY OF HASLAND PUBLISHED

THE Derbyshire Victoria County History Trust is delighted to extend a warm welcome to all Civic Society members to the launching of its latest publication. This is a history of Hasland, including the smaller communities which lie within the former township – Grassmoor, Birdholme, Spital, Hady, Corbriggs and Winsick.

The book is an A4 hardback, uniform with the trust's previous title,

A History of
Hasland
including Birdholme, Boythorpe, Corbriggs,
Grassmoor, Hady, Spital and Winsick



Please join us for the launch event
7.30PM, WEDNESDAY 15 JUNE
Devonshire Arms
Mansfield Road, Hasland

VICTORIA COUNTY HISTORY
Derbyshire

Chesterfield Streets and Houses, and runs to 208 pages, including 20 pages of colour plates.

The book will be launched at an event at the Devonshire Arms, Mansfield Road, Hasland, at 7.30 on Wednesday 15 June, when the trust's editor will give a short talk about Hasland and the book will be on sale for the first time at £20.

We hope that it will be in stock from 16 June at Waterstone's and the Visitor Centre in Rykneld Square.