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# CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

# NEWSLETTER

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No 32

[www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk](http://www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk)

July 2022

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## Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

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### TAPTON HOUSE: KNIGHT FRANK SEEKING RESOLUTION

**T**HE Borough Council's selling agents, Knight Frank, have been actively marketing Tapton House for several months and have reported some interest and viewings. The firm has now written to everyone who has expressed interest inviting a definite statement of intent if they wish to proceed.

The property remains available on one of two tenures: a 999-year lease at a peppercorn rent, or a short-term rental lease. In both cases Knight Frank have asked for details of the proposed purchaser or tenant, their intended use for the property, and any conditions a purchaser or tenant would seek before proceeding (e.g. planning permission, a building survey, or site investigation).

In the case of the sale of a 999-

year lease, the firm wishes to receive a definite offer price and confirmation that funding is in place. For a short-term lease, in addition to the proposed rent, they are seeking the proposed lease length, rent reviews, repairing obligations and any option to break during the term.

In both cases, not unreasonably given the nature of the property, Knight Frank wish to have some background information about the purchaser or tenant, including financial track record, and the target time-scale for the completion of the sale or lease.

All this suggests that the Borough Council wish to conclude either a sale or lease as soon as possible, ideally before the winter sets in and the building is threatened by weather damage. Even if they were not in a position to move into the property, a new owner or tenant might be better placed than the council to increase security around the mansion and its immediate grounds. This we feel is urgently needed, not least to guard

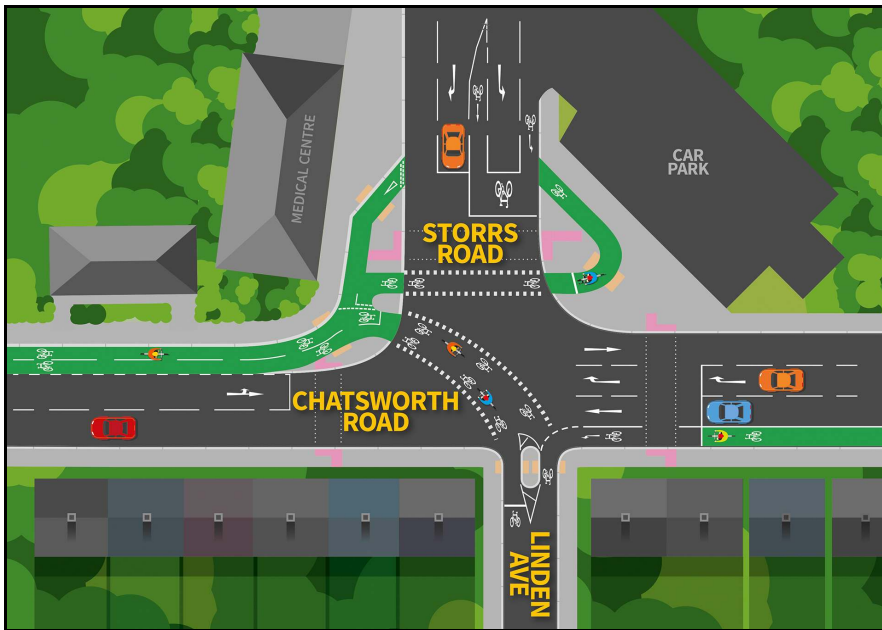
against the risk of deliberate arson or accidental fire damage.

If any Civic Society members know of anyone who might be interested in taking on Tapton House, which urgently needs a new use and new investment, we would urge them to contact Knight Frank and discuss what would be involved. The present impasse cannot continue indefinitely or the mansion will become seriously at risk, despite the best efforts of the Borough Council to protect it.

Since the agents wrote to interested parties, Tapton House has been discussed at a meeting of the Borough Council, one outcome of which is a statement by the responsible cabinet member that no decision has been made as to whether to sell the mansion and grounds and that discussions with other interested parties are continuing. This comment gives the unfortunate impression that there may be further delay in finding a solution that will guarantee the future of Tapton House.

### EAST-WEST CYCLE ROUTE: LAST CHANCE TO OBJECT

**B**ECAUSE of the high level of public interest in the issue, we felt justified in issuing a 'News Extra' as soon as we became aware (just after we had distributed the June Newsletter) that the county council had published three statutory orders in connection with the east-



west cycle route.

One of these would close part of Crow Lane to motor traffic, a second would reduce the current 40 mph speed limit on Chatsworth Road through Brookside to 30 mph, and the third would allow the county council to build the planned two-way, high-speed cycle track along the north side of Chatsworth Road between the junctions with Holymoore Road and Storrs Road.

We hoped that members interested in this issue (and others) would circulate news of the publication of these orders as widely as possible. This does seem to have happened. One of our members, at consider personal expense and effort, hand-delivered notices to a large number of houses on and near Chatsworth Road, and the local Liberal Democrat councillors produced a special issue of their *Focus* newsletter as well as canvassing in the ward itself.

At the Crow Lane end of the route (although not in Brookside), the county council put up large ‘Have your say ...’ notices alongside the road.

In these circumstances, it would be difficult for anyone who feels they will be adversely affected by the scheme not to be aware of what the county council is doing. This in turn means that local residents who do not want Crow Lane closing or a high-speed two-way cycle track in front of their driveway on Chatsworth Road will have only themselves to blame if they fail to enter an objection and this

deeply unpopular project goes ahead.

The county council has been trying to channel expressions of opinion for and against the scheme via an online questionnaire. The Civic Society does not, as a matter of policy, take part in such exercises and we have written a letter to the chief officer concerned reiterating our objections to the Chatsworth Road section of the route. We have supported the reduced speed limit on the A619 in Brookside and offered no opinion about the closure of Crow Lane, since our members are divided in their view of the merits of this proposal.

We have also advised people who have contacted us saying the county council website is not working that they too can simply write a letter. As with all letters to the county council, it would be prudent to send it under Signed-for cover (i.e. what used to be Recorded Delivery), since this makes it impossible for the authority to deny that they have received the letter or that it arrived after a deadline.

It is, of course, quite likely that the county council will ignore protests from local residents and will insist that a majority of respondents to their survey are in favour of the scheme. As has often been observed, the controlling Conservative Party has no votes to lose in Chesterfield, and with its large majority can safely ignore the small Labour and Liberal Democrat groups (with 14 and four members respectively, out of a total of 64; there is also one Green Party member). There is, unfortunately,

little anyone can do about this.

One possibility is that, assuming that whichever candidate becomes Prime Minister in September remove the present Transport Secretary, his successor may review (or be told to do so by the Treasury) his department’s spending commitments. If so, scrapping the Active Travel Programme might come high on a list of ways in which the Transport Department under competent leadership can waste less of the public’s money than it has done under Grant Shapps.

## MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING?

*Bryan Thompson writes:*

I am sure that there are those who would view the local reaction to the three-quarter-mile cycle superhighway along Chatsworth Road and the closure of Crow Lane for through motor traffic as much ado about nothing. After all, public interests were consulted and many were supportive, at least in principle. Public consultation yielded support for the east–west walking and cycle route; the word ‘walking’ being added late on, presumably to reflect national guidance. So, what’s the problem – a couple of bunches of nimbys spoiling an opportunity for government funded investment? Well, no, it is more like the play with secrets and trickery.

There is a well-established, uncontroversial plan for cycle and walking routes around the town which also link to the Peak District and towards Sherwood Forest. The issue is in the detail and the process that led to a new route and a design for Chatsworth Road:

- 1 Effectively creates two long clearways one for cycles and one for vehicular traffic, which reduces the width of Chatsworth Road.
- 2 Removes the much-valued medians that allow more visible, safer exiting and right turns without blocking traffic; and allows space for traffic to be clear on of oncoming vehicles, some of which are very large, to move away from people on the pavement and overtake parked vehicles.

- 3 Removes the island bollards which help deter dangerous overtaking and aid safer crossing for pedestrians, especially when traffic is stationary.
- 4 Replaces the four island bollards with three zebras crossings. One and sometime more require walkers to cross from behind standing traffic.
- 5 Ensures long tailbacks at busy times, when vehicles such as bin lorries, buses, removal vans, delivery lorries stop to load and unload.
- 6 Removes on-street parking from the north side, so homes will take deliveries from over the road, probably not via a zebra.
- 7 Ensures that parking across pavements clear of the road on the southside will be commonplace, deterring and even obstructing walkers and limiting sightlines for emerging traffic.
- 8 Presumes walkers will use the narrower and for many less convenient north side
- 9 Compounds the difficult problem for walkers crossing at the Somersall Lane junction by adding cycle crossing over Chatsworth Road that runs onto the pavement and down the narrow footpath at the top of Somersall Lane.
- 10 Degrades the attractiveness of this well-used entrance to Chesterfield through the clutter of signs, crossing lights, zebras, narrowed road junctions, road markings, coloured cycle path and associated wands.
- 11 Well short of Holymoore Road the superhighway becomes a shared path with walkers.
- 12 The island bollards on Baslow Road near the Holymoore Road junction will be removed and it seems walkers should cross by walking down to the Toucan lights at the end of the superhighway and returning up the new footpath.

In Brimington the scheme restricts a convenient country lane between Brimington Common and the railway station to cyclists and walkers.

Originating with the pandemic and a national desire to reduce pressure for space on public transport, improve

public health and sustainability, the idea was to promote more walking and cycling – ‘active travel’. As an emergency action, around the town busier pavements were temporarily extended into roads and Crow Lane was temporarily closed to through motor traffic without public consultation.

The government offered funding for cycle and walking schemes provided they met certain points-based criteria. Street closures for through traffic and cycle superhighways scored well. Grants do not allow for amendments, but do allow for trials where a scheme is contentious. There are website tools that indicate where there is a theoretical demand to link residential areas to schools, colleges, public services and town centres.

The county council rightly consulted other bodies; and worked up a detailed plan backed by data first, without revealing its initial proposals to the general public, even though it contained obviously controversial elements. Those designing the scheme are likely to have understood the harmful implications for those most affected. This lack of openness was not in the public interest.

Last year the county council’s cabinet accepted a report that agreed the east–west walking and cycle route. It did so in the knowledge that, there were some complaints from those most directly affected that their community had not been consulted. However, had they been, the problem was that the website survey was biased to gain support for the project – a push-poll, and many more households which were barely affected were also consulted.

At a public meeting our local MP called it gerrymandering – manipulating a polling boundary to dilute the impact of opposition. That is a sad comment on local government. Despite case law and the risk of a costly judicial review, the council got its desired result. In respect of procedure, the Ombudsman took a dim view of the council’s inability to demonstrate its claim that the most affected communities had been consulted. Was it trickery?

The last hurdle is the Traffic Regulation Orders, extending the 30 mph speed limit on Chatsworth Road, restricting access to the superhighway

to cycles *and* emergency vehicles, and restricting motor traffic along Crow Lane. Aware of past criticisms, the council has posted notices in the areas affected by the TRO. There is a determination to produce a fair report to the cabinet in September but unfortunately, there are glitches:

- 1 Notices are a source of complaint as there is a minor error in the wording which implies 22 July was a Sunday. Others appear to have had difficulties accessing the weblink. You are advised to use [www.derbyshire.gov.uk/walkcyclerroute](http://www.derbyshire.gov.uk/walkcyclerroute) or [place.permanenttro@derbyshire.gov.uk](mailto:place.permanenttro@derbyshire.gov.uk).
- 2 Some complain that the website form does not have enough space for comment. You can send an email, ideally structured to help analysis but it *needs* to include your address.
- 3 Not everyone who made earlier representations received a direct notification, which of course disadvantages those who are most affected. Yet those in Walton who are unaffected by the TRO are being consulted.
- 4 Although addresses are mandatory, it appears that the council report will not distinguish between those directly affected and others. This is highly contentious.

The council’s extension of the deadline for comments to 5 August is welcome. If you have a view, then please inform the council and your ward member.

A recent survey by local ward members indicates that some are unaware of the council’s intentions. This is a little worrying and raises wider questions about effective communication, which was part of the problem last year.

As for the scheme itself, it is quite probable that Crow Lane could be adapted to deter but not stop through motor traffic.

Chatsworth Road and Baslow Road are different. The scheme funnels a quart into a pint pot badly at the same time as road improvements elsewhere help to draw more lorries through the town. Without repeating details, it is poor for pedestrians, bad for hundreds of local residents, hinders traffic flow, is an undesirable

cycle experience and it is intrusive – a modern exemplar of Ian Nairn’s ‘Outrage’ (see the June Newsletter). And yet this section is so hard to justify in isolation.

Poor infrastructure in whatever form is a disinvestment and that takes time and money to rectify. Official national advice (LTN 1/20) recognises that some schemes will be contentious:

*Trials can help achieve change and ensure a permanent scheme is right first time. This will avoid spending time, money and effort modifying a scheme that does not perform as anticipated. If there is a dispute about the impact of a road change, we recommend trialling it with temporary materials. If it works, it can be made permanent through appropriate materials. If it does not, it can be easily and quickly removed or changed. However, it is important that the scheme is designed correctly at the beginning, to maximise the chances of it working.*

This part of the scheme has aroused considerable public interest including on the part of the local MP at a Westminster Hall debate and among councillors. It is clear that many local residents who are affected are opposed to it in its current form. It would be fair to conclude that ‘there is a dispute over the impact of the scheme’. At the very least a trial ought to be undertaken before permanent work.

Of course, there is an alternative which has tangible benefits and has a connecting bridge installed in anticipation. Surely it is better to do the job properly rather than badly, even when the latter is part funded nationally.

Ultimately, Shakespeare’s play does end harmoniously. Let us hope that our county council now serves our communities better through meaningful involvement and our communities engage and support democratic local government more strongly. In practice that is our council providing a practical planned attractive walking and cycle route which the Civic Society believes local communities and many cyclists and walkers would much prefer.

## HURST HOUSE: LITTLE PROGRESS BUT PRESSURE WILL BE MAINTAINED

**W**E continue to extract information very slowly, purely thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, from both the Charity Commission and the county council in our attempts to save Hurst House from destruction and to re-establish on a proper footing the oldest and second largest charity in Chesterfield.

Since the last Newsletter we have received a letter from the Charity Commission seeking to justify the lease granted by the county council in 2011 of the site of Brookfield School, which has deprived the Chesterfield Schools Foundation of a significant income for a period of 125 years. We have yet to receive a reply to our latest requests for information from the county council as to exactly the cause of the delay in transferring both that property and Hurst House to the Derbyshire Community Foundation, a saga that has now been dragging on for over two years.

We continue to take the view that the date of 31 August, when the Charity Commission intends next to review progress, should be seen as a deadline. If there is no visible sign of progress, then the step is to make a complaint about the failure of the Charity Commission properly to regulate the Chesterfield Schools Foundation or to take action over the incompetence of its present trustee.

It is worth noting that the property on the opposite side of Abercrombie Street from Hurst House, Ashton Lodge, which a few years stood empty and neglected (like Hurst House), has now been renovated into a very attractive private residence currently on sale at £895,000. Hurst House was obviously not worth anything like that in 2018, when the county council failed to execute their own resolution to sell the property, but this does illustrate that there is a strong market for houses in Abercrombie Street. If Hurst House had been sold four years ago the Chesterfield Schools Foundation would be a

great deal better off than it is today, and the appearance of the Abercrombie Street conservation area would be much improved.



## BURLINGTON HOUSE: SCHEME FOR FLATS TO GO AHEAD

**A**FTER the rejection of earlier schemes, mainly because the floor area of many of the proposed flats was below the statutory minimum, the Borough Council earlier this month approved new plans for the conversion of the two upper floors of Burlington House into flats, and the addition of a third floor.

The Civic Society wrote in support of this latest scheme, but unfortunately our detailed submission failed to be added to the file for the application and was not referred to in the officer’s committee report.

Although some would argue that there is a case for demolishing what has been described as an exceptionally ugly building, especially the elevation to Church Lane, and replacing it with one that would enhance, rather than detract from, the appearance of the town centre conservation area, that is not going to happen in the near future. This being the case, conversion into flats is probably the best achievable short-term solution.

The Civic Society committee has consistently supported flat conversion schemes in the town centre, since we feel that the town would benefit from having more people living in it, and in any case buildings should be used, not left empty. On the other hand, these should not be done at any price. Some recent proposals have been for very small flats which only people of very limited means would wish to

live in.

Despite the revisions that have been made to the Burlington House proposals, there may still be the risk that the flats will be bought by speculators who will rent them out to vulnerable people with nowhere else to live. This is not something anyone would wish to see in a town where great efforts were made by the local authority in the twentieth century to sweep away a bitter legacy of very poor slum housing. We do not wish to see new slums created.

## CIVIC SOCIETY AT REGENERATION ROUND TABLE

**T**HE Civic Society was pleased to be invited to a discussion meeting earlier this month, convened by Willmott Dixon, one of Britain's oldest construction companies with a continuous history, to consider how a town like Chesterfield can be regenerated by the private sector.

The meeting was small, exceptionally well organised, and therefore productive. It was unfortunate that, because of another meeting, no-one from the Borough Council could attend, but the private developers, builders, architects and others who were represented put forward sensible ideas about what can and cannot be achieved in a not particularly prosperous medium-sized town like Chesterfield.

One of the questions that was raised by several speakers was whether the current slump in demand for shop and office space in the town is cyclical and there will eventually be an upturn, or whether the change is secular, and there will have to be a fundamental reconsideration about the use of space in the older built-up area.

Three large sites, none of them in the heart of the modern retail area around the market, currently stand empty: the former Eyres' store, the former ABC cinema on Cavendish Street, and the former North East Derbyshire District Council offices on Saltergate.

The last of these may be the easiest to deal with: ideally McCarthy Stone might be persuaded to revisit their plans to build a supported living

complex on this site, now that it seems unlikely that we shall be getting any 'Homes by Holmes' there.

If that idea does not work, it is not difficult to visualise new private housing on the land. Unfortunately, it is also easy to visualise speculative builders using what have been described as the same uninspiring stock designs that have disfigured two adjoining sites (the former football club ground and the former NHS land near Spencer Street). Arguably, what is really needed is for the site to be re-developed as a high-status residential enclave close to the town centre, comparable to what was achieved in the 1840s with The Terrace (69-79 Saltergate) or in the 1900s with Tenynson Avenue.

It requires rather more imagination to see most of one side of Cavendish Street, or a large part of Holywell Street, being rebuilt with similar houses, but neither is inconceivable.

To put it another way, what else are those two large sites going to be used for? It seems very unlikely that retailing will ever return there (much less a cinema), or that offices could be developed successfully. There are probably enough car-parks in the town centre and neither would really work as public open space. Why, then, could both sites not become residential (as they once were), with either good quality mansion flats or good quality (probably terraced) houses, aimed at people who want to live close to the town centre.

Such an idea might seem odd to those who have known Chesterfield for the last half century, with all its main streets lined with shops, interspersed with the occasional cinema or public building, but perhaps it is time to think of more radical change in the town centre.

## CHESTERFIELD IN 2027

**A**T the end of the discussion at the round table, the chair invited everyone to say what they would most like to see happen in Chesterfield over the next five years. Several speakers, including the Civic Society representative, chose the completion of the new approach to the railway station as the highest

priority.

At the moment this part of the town looks frankly dreadful, and yet there are firm plans in place (said to be fully funded) to transform it in a way that has won widespread support. There was also general agreement that, even if new building did not proceed as quickly as hoped, it would be better to clear currently derelict sites and use them as temporary car-parks than leave empty buildings standing there.

In this connection, it is worth recording that the Chesterfield Hotel has now been largely demolished and should be gone completely before the end of August. On the other hand, there seem to be no plans to demolish the former county police station and court-house opposite, which is just as unsightly. Both pieces of land could be usefully turned into car-parks, close to the station and not far from the town centre, for a few years until work on the masterplan for the station approach can get underway.

The *Derbyshire Times* carried an embarrassing two-page feature a few weeks ago highlighting how much dereliction there is near the start of Brimington Road. There is no quick solution to this problem, but even the removal of one or two particularly unsightly buildings would be a start.



## HERITAGE OPEN DAYS: A LIST EMERGES

**A**FTER a good deal of hard work by both our own secretary and representatives of the places concerned, we have assembled a reasonably full list of buildings which will be open specially under the Heritage Open Days scheme at some point between 9 and 18 September. The list is not as long as we might have liked (some people just don't reply to letters or emails) but is an improvement on previous years. At present, we

know of the following that will be opened for at least one day during this period:

Elder Yard Unitarian meeting house  
Rose Hill United Reformed church  
The Ragged School, Markham Road  
St Thomas's, New Brampton  
St John's, Newbold  
SS Augustine, Birdholme  
Spital Cemetery  
Revolution House, Old Whittington  
Chesterfield Museum stores  
Chesterfield Football Club  
West Studios, Sheffield Road  
Tapton Lock visitor centre

We are still trying to arrange for a couple more buildings to be opened. Nearer the time, when we have a final list, we will try to obtain as much local publicity as possible for Heritage Open Days in and around the town.

In addition to making use of a searchable national website (<https://www.heritageopendays.org.uk/visiting>), we are also listing local properties taking part on our own website: <http://www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk/heritage-open-days/>. We will be featuring some of the more unusual properties on our Facebook page nearer the time.

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

**W**WE have arranged an annual general meeting for 15 September at the Suite (the smaller meeting room) at St Thomas's Church Centre, Chatsworth Road at 7.30 p.m. After a short business meeting there will be a talk by a guest speaker. We hope to see as many members as possible on this occasion, full details of which will be given in the next Newsletter.