
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live



HERITAGE OPEN DAYS 10–18 SEPTEMBER

MEMBERS who receive their newsletter by post will find enclosed a leaflet giving details of properties in Chesterfield which will be open as part of the Heritage Open Days scheme; those who are on email should already have had a copy.

In the end we have assembled a list of eleven places to visit, several of which are not usually open to the public, such as SS Augustine's church in Birdholme (pictured). Some are putting on special events to mark their opening.

This is an improvement on what has been achieved in Chesterfield in

previous years, although there are some fairly obvious gaps in the list. We hope that in future more places will take part in Heritage Open Days, which serves as a modest contribution to the Borough Council's declared wish to increase the numbers of visitors to Chesterfield and to encourage them to spend more time and money in the town.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND WEBSITE

MEMBERS may have noticed that our website and social media presence (along with general publicity for that matter) have greatly improved in recent months.

We normally use items from our

newsletter, once it has been distributed to members, in our Facebook and web postings, but on the former we will also pick out other items of interest, including other websites and posts or will cover news-worthy items. This latter activity can sometimes be faster than our newsletter.

If you use Facebook it might be useful to follow our page, so you'll receive this information.

We would be interested to know your thoughts on our newsletter, website and Facebook presence, particularly if you have ideas on how they may be further improved.

AGM TALK ABOUT HISTORIC BUILDINGS TRUST

WE are pleased to announce that Peter Milner of the Derbyshire Historic Buildings Trust has kindly agreed to give a talk about the trust's work at our annual general meeting on Thursday 15 September (7.30 at St Thomas's Centre).

The DHBT has been operating successfully for half a century. Its very first project was the renovation of a small house at the top of Bacons Lane in Chesterfield (the last remnant of the capital message belonging to the manor of Boythorpe), whose successful outcome is recorded on a plaque on the building.

The trust later moved on to (much) bigger things, notably the restoration of the Midland Railway housing of the 1840s near Derby station and the

Butterley Company housing of 1796 at Golden Valley, near Alfreton, which appears to be the oldest surviving company-provided housing in the Derbyshire coalfield.



Probably the trust's best known current project is the restoration of Wingfield station (above), the only surviving North Midland Railway station building, and one of the few firmly attributable examples of the work of Francis Thompson still in a reasonably unaltered condition.

We hope to see as many members as possible at the meeting. Visitors will also be very welcome.

CHESTERFIELD SCHOOLS FOUNDATION: LITTLE SIGN OF PROGRESS



Hurst House: still at risk

THANKS to the Freedom of Information Act we have extracted a little more information about what is happening (or not happening) to secure the future of Hurst House and to place the administration of the charity which owns the property on a footing that complies with the law.

The county council, which remains the sole trustee of the Foundation, has agreed to the request of the Derbyshire Community Foundation (which is taking over the trusteeship)

to sell Hurst House and transfer the proceeds to the new trustee, rather than transfer the property itself.

We have been told that before the property can be offered for sale by auction an 'internal process' has to be followed by the county council. The first stage of this involves instructing an independent valuer to value Hurst House and the second (once the valuation has been obtained) is for the responsible cabinet member to decide to sell it.

This appears to be the procedure that the county council would follow in the case of property owned by the authority. Hurst House, however, does not belong to the county council, but to a charity of which the county council is trustee. It is questionable whether this procedure need be (or should be) followed in this case, where the guiding principle should be that a trustee must always act in the best interests of the charity.

It is clearly in the best interests of the charity to dispose of Hurst House as soon as possible, since it is producing no revenue (and has not done since 2014) and is costing the charity money to keep secure. A sale for £1 would therefore be in the best interests of the charity.

Even after eight years of neglect by the county council, Hurst House is worth a great deal more than £1. Our view remains that it should be sold without further delay and the proceeds invested for the benefit of the charity. If it was sold for restoration as a private residence to someone with the capital to carry out the necessary works, that would guarantee its future. Hurst House would then once again enhance the appearance of the Abercrombie Street conservation area, instead of detracting from it, as it does at present.

In 2018, when the county council agreed to offer Hurst House for sale by private treaty, it was put on the market at £420,000. If the property is eventually sold for auction for less than that figure, the difference between the two will be a quantifiable measure of how much the incompetence of the county council as a trustee since 2018 has cost the charity. If the Charity Commission was an effective regulator (which by common consent it is not), it would require the county council to repay that sum to

the charity.

The second reason for the delay in transferring the trusteeship to Foundation Derbyshire arises from the gross professional negligence of the county council's then principal legal adviser who, some years ago, advised HM Land Registry that the 28 acres of land forming the greater part of the site of Brookfield School was the property of the county council and that title to the land should be registered accordingly, as it was.

This land in fact belongs (and has done since 1928) to the Chesterfield Schools Foundation. When this appalling act of incompetence first came to light at a meeting in February 2020 Civic Society officers were told that it was a minor clerical error that could be corrected by an exchange of emails with the Land Registry.

The county council has now admitted (in a poorly phrased sentence) that 'The Land Registry has confirmed the registration cannot be corrected via correspondence and must instead involve a full application to the HMLR to rectify the land-ownership'.

Although the county council has also stated that it 'has not used any of the funds from Chesterfield Schools Foundation for officer time' in rectifying this error (had it done so, there would be have been good grounds for a very serious complaint to both the Charity Commission and the Local Government Ombudsman), the fact remains that a significant amount of officer time has presumably gone into preparing an accurate statement of the title for submission to HMLR.

This time has to be paid for. It is being paid for by the taxpayers of Derbyshire, who have no redress against an avoidable waste of their money. If a solicitor in private practice had made a similar error, the regulator would almost certainly have required them to correct the error at their own expense, not their client's.

Nothing further has been heard from the Charity Commission on this matter since we were told of their meeting in June with officers of the county council and Foundation Derbyshire. The Commission at that meeting indicated that it would contact the parties again on 31 August to establish what progress had been made towards transferring the trustee-

ship.

Given the length of time that has already elapsed without any resolution of the problem, we would prefer 31 August to be regarded as a deadline for the county council to demonstrate that they have actually done something, and for the Commission to ensure that they have done something. If there has been no progress, then the best course of action may well be to initiate a complaint against the Charity Commission on the grounds of its failure to achieve any progress.

DO WE WANT A MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITY?

ALTHOUGH Chesterfield Borough Council has said little in public on this subject, Derbyshire Dales district council has recently discussed the question at a full council meeting (as reported in the *Matlock Mercury*, 11 August).

Not surprisingly, as one of the smaller district councils in the region, its members are unhappy at the prospect of losing control of local government in their area, which they have realised is the likely outcome if the proposal goes ahead.

What is now proposed is a combined authority for what is to be called the 'East Midlands' but would in fact only include Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire. These two counties do not, on any sensible definition, constitute the 'East Midlands', which is normally also taken to include Leicestershire, Rutland and most of Lincolnshire, with Northamptonshire as always left in limbo.

In real life, these counties do not make up a unified region, whether or not you include Glossop, Scunthorpe, Grimsby or any or all of Northamptonshire.

The ridiculous name 'East Midlands' for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire seems to have been chosen to rhyme with 'West Midlands', which already has a mayor and, apparently, lots of extra government funding as a result. It also has a degree of historical and modern unity

which Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire conspicuously lack, mainly because of Birmingham's position as an unchallenged regional capital. Although Nottingham is by far the largest urban centre in the two counties, it is not a regional capital in the same sense as Birmingham.

The term West Midlands for a large area that includes four historic counties has also been in use for a long time. In the Reconstruction period towards the end of the Second World War a very successful West Midlands Group of local authority officers and university staff devised a detailed plan for the region, much of which was later implemented. Nothing like that happened in the East Midlands.

The current proposals for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire have so far been strongly opposed by the district councils, for obvious reasons.

Although local government is not a subject which attracts great interest beyond those professionally involved, it should do, since this proposed change will have a major impact on a town like Chesterfield that is unlikely to be beneficial. Big does not always mean better in local government, as the case of the metropolitan counties (and some non-metropolitan counties) set up in 1974 demonstrate. Who now remembers with any affection South Yorkshire or Humberside?

DERBY ROAD: IS THERE A SOLUTION?

THE county council has announced another of its 'online consultations', this time on how to reduce congestion on the A61 south of Chesterfield.

As letters in the *Derbyshire Times* have pointed out, this is almost certainly an insoluble problem. The A61 between Lordsmill Street and Storforth Lane cannot be widened unless half the houses along it were demolished. The houses are very modest nineteenth-century cottages which may well have outlived their useful life, but they remain people's homes and their owners probably do not wish to see them demolished.



Changing times on Derby Road: Storforth Lane junction c.1930 and the approach to Jaw Bones Hill today.

Traffic flow on this section might be improved by closing off more of the side streets, as appears to have happened since St Augustine's Road has been temporarily closed to east-bound traffic, but to make changes of this sort permanent would inconvenience both residents and motorists who use the roads to enter or leave the A61.

It might also be possible to modify the working of the traffic lights at the junctions with St Augustine's Road and Storforth Lane, but we suspect the improvement to traffic flow would only be marginal.

Traffic on the A61 has increased steadily over several decades. The last major improvements to the road were carried out in 1962–3, when it was widened and straightened between Cottage Hill and the Hunloke Arms in Wingerworth, and between Langer Lane and Longedge Lane. There is little scope for widening elsewhere between Chesterfield and Clay Cross.

It was assumed at the time that the use of the A61 by through traffic, especially HGVs, would decline with the opening of the Derbyshire section of the M1 in 1967, as it probably did. The later building of the A617 Hasland bypass should have taken away more traffic, and the closure of the Avenue Carbonization Plant eliminated a major source of HGV traffic

on this section of the route.

What appears to have happened is that private car traffic has built up on the road as a result of extensive house-building on both sides of the road, mainly in Wingerworth. The largest of these developments is on the former Avenue site, but there have been others at Cottage Hill and Mill Lane and at Ankerbold in Tupton.

It is not clear whether the implications for the A61 were taken into account when North East Derbyshire District Council gave consent for this new housing, which has also had the undesirable effect of reducing the green space between Wingerworth and Tupton.

The other new source of traffic is Clay Cross, where large areas once occupied by Clay Cross Company have been used for housing. This has improved the appearance and the quality of the town's housing stock, but there has been no commensurate increase in local employment.

This in turn means that most people of working age living in the new houses have probably joined the large number of longer-term residents who have, since the 1960s, commuted to work in Chesterfield. This process began when Clay Cross Company and the local collieries declined and nothing took their place.

Initially, most would have used what was then the frequent bus service from Clay Cross to Chesterfield (four an hour on weekdays, five on Saturdays). Today, their children and grandchildren make the journey by car and the bus service has contracted. The same is true of residents who live in the more recently built houses on Mill Lane, compared with those who lived on the Adlington council estate in the 1950s and 1960s.

These are social and economic changes which no-one can do much about. Without new housing, Clay Cross would have died when the company and the pits finished. As it is, despite the efforts both the district and county councils, it remains a deprived community, whose main asset is cheap housing compared with the nicer bits of north-east Derbyshire (like Wingerworth, just down the road) from where it is also easy to travel into Chesterfield.

Clay Cross has its own problems

of congestion, to which again there is no obvious solution. It is one of those towns where, if there was somewhere to build a bypass, it would have been built years ago. To the west of the A61 the ground slopes too steeply to insert a new road; to the east possible routes have been used for housing, the Tesco store and light industry. In this respect (but no other), Clay Cross is like the towns on the A6 as it winds its way through the Peak District: everyone knows that Duffield, Belper, Matlock and Bakewell need a bypass but there is nowhere to put one.

Two ideas that have surfaced recently should probably be dismissed as impracticable.

One is the reopening of Clay Cross station, which always had the disadvantage of being some distance from the town, where there was a goods yard, reached by a steeply graded siding. Clay Cross did not have a station of its own because it stands on top of a hill, through which the railway runs in a tunnel.

It would obviously be possible to rebuild a station at Hephthorne Lane, but who would use it and where would they park? By the time potential rail users had driven to the station, parked, bought a ticket and stood on the platform waiting for a train, they could be halfway down the A61 to Chesterfield, even if they were stuck at the Langer Lane junction waiting for the lights to change at Storforth Lane. It is sad but true that most people would choose the latter rather than the former way to spend their time.

Even more fanciful is that idea that if a cycle track was built alongside the A61 between Chesterfield and Clay Cross people would use it in preference to driving. Apart from the lack of space to build one through Birdholme, the fact is that, just as most people who live on the A61 go into Chesterfield by car these days, not by bus, so very few people use a bike as day-to-day transport.

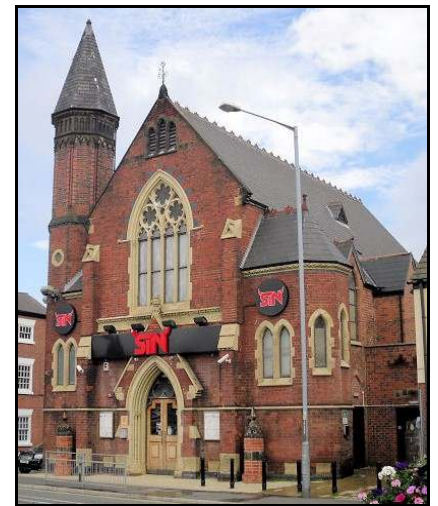
Anyone who knew Derby Road in the 1950s and 1960s will remember dozens of men streaming out of the Tube Works and Bryan Donkin at the end of a shift and cycling home along the A61. That age has gone, never to return, like the brown gaberdine coats, navy boiler-suits, cycle clips and flat caps the men used to wear.

Today, cycling is largely a recreational activity for the better-off, who dress very differently.

As it happens, part of the A61 already has a cycle track. The section between the Nethermoor Road and Ashover Road roundabouts in Tupton was rebuilt between the two World Wars as a three-lane road (the sort where you used the middle lane to overtake and hoped no-one was coming in the opposite direction), with a cycle track down its western side. It is still there, the grass gradually encroaching on the tarmac because no-one uses it, a little bit of road archaeology, like the Victorian cast-iron mileposts also to be found there.

The Chesterfield Cycle Campaign is entitled to press for improvements for the benefit of its supporters, but any idea that people will give up their cars to cycle between Chesterfield and Clay Cross if they were given a cycle track seems improbably optimistic.

MORE FLATS?



THERE appears to be no let up in schemes to convert the unused or under-used upper floors of town centre buildings into flats. The Civic Society committee some time ago agreed to support these proposals, as long as they did not create very small flats for which we believe there is a very small market.

For this reason we have supported a revised scheme to convert the first and second floors of a large block of c.1905 on Stephenson Place, but we would prefer to see four one-bedroom units rather than the proposed five,

two of them single-room bedsitters.

The most recent planning application is a revised version of one which was rejected some months ago to create flats in the former Primitive Methodist church on Holywell Street. This again we have supported, partly because the building has been empty for some years and it is difficult to see any other use for it. There is also room to create parking spaces at the back of the building, which other schemes have lacked.

GAZEBO SAFE

EARLIER this month a serious fire badly damaged parts of 194 Old Road, Brampton, the property known in modern times as Brampton Manor, whose future was the subject of a very drawn out planning application in 2020–1.

As far as we can establish from press reports and from what we have been told by the borough planning department, the fire was confined to the modern sports centre buildings which have been derelict for some time. None of the three listed buildings on the site is understood to have been damaged, including the Grade II* gazebo, the one closest to where the fire occurred.



This is welcome news, since the gazebo is a very rare survival. The only other example near Chesterfield of similar date and design is at Somersall Hall.

What would be even more welcome is for the owners of Brampton Manor, having secured planning permission for redevelopment as long

ago as last December, to make a start on site. We appreciate that they are doing their best to keep the property secure, but actually having men and machinery working there is likely to be the best way of deterring vandalism and arson.

NO FRESH NEWS ABOUT THE CYCLE SUPER HIGHWAY

THE county council's consultation about the planned East–West Cycle Super Highway has now closed and the results are presumably being digested. Meanwhile, in several recent stories, the *Derbyshire Times* has given a balanced picture of different views in the debate, including those of the local Green Party.

According to them, people who were previously opposed to the scheme have changed their mind once it was properly explained to them (presumably by the Green Party) and they saw the error of their ways. This will remind some readers of the way in which the European Commission invites member states to hold repeated referendums until its citizens grasp which way they should vote, or the approach of Plaid Cymru towards opponents of Welsh devolution, who, we are told, should not be condemned but pitied for not being bright enough to understand what is good for them.

The same story also printed, without any obvious attempt at irony, the comment (presumably by the Green Party) that once the consultation was finished, the county council would be able to start work on the scheme. So much for local democracy.

There presumably remains a chance that the new prime minister will be told so forcefully by the Treasury to reduce public expenditure that the more ridiculous projects of the Shapps era at the Transport Department will be axed, including the very unpopular Active Travel Programme.

OR ABOUT TAPTON HOUSE

THE Borough Council has said nothing further in public about its plans for Tapton House, since Coun. Dean Collins's unfortunate remark that 'the council isn't selling the house, it has put it on the open market', which is unlikely to have made the task of the authority's selling agents, Knight Frank, any easier. Some clarification from the council would have been helpful.

The closing date for offers remains 2 September, after which the council will have to consider what options it has open to it. In the meantime, the Friends of Tapton House have continued to press the council to retain ownership of the mansion and grounds and find a 'community use' for them, without suggesting where the council would find the funds to do this.

Liberal Democrat members of the council have supported this approach and described the proposed sale as 'Flogging off the Family Silver'.

As in the case of pressure groups in favour of the East–West Cycle Super Highway, the Friends of Tapton House are entitled to argue their point of view. On the other hand, their recent suggestion (on Facebook) that, if the council receives a bid from a local community group for the property, it should be accepted in preference to a higher bid from an outside buyer, is unlikely to find favour with the district auditor.

The Civic Society committee set out its views on the future of Tapton House in a detailed, closely reasoned, paper prepared nearly a year ago and available since then on its website.

We continue to take the view that the best way of safeguarding the future of one of the few Grade II* listed buildings in the borough is for it to pass into new hands, possibly for restoration as a single private residence or for conversion into apartments or perhaps a small hotel.