
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

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Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live



HOW BRIGHT A FUTURE FOR THE TOWN CENTRE?

THE *Derbyshire Times* recently reported a discussion which it organised in conjunction with Destination Chesterfield on the future of the town centre. The business people who attended were generally optimistic and felt that the Borough Council's planned expenditure (from Levelling Up funds made available by the Government) would help to make the town more attractive to visitors.

This is all good news but the discussion as reported in the paper did not really touch on the problems likely to be caused by what appears to be an imminent and unavoidable recession. Consumption is likely to fall, and a town like Chesterfield, in one of the less prosperous parts of the country, will almost certainly suffer worse than towns of similar size in the South East or Southern England. There was a passing reference to the impact of the impending sharp in-

crease in energy prices on traders (although not on consumers) but no mention of business rates, which tend to be a constant source of complaint from shopkeepers facing competition from online retailers.

In reality, there isn't a great deal either a single local authority or an organisation like Destination Chesterfield can do in the present situation. If there is a downturn, Chesterfield will suffer, worse than some places and less badly than others. All that can be done is for all concerned to make every effort to promote the town as a place to live and do business, keep it looking as smart as possible, and do everything to enhance its appearance.

It would be fair to say that at the moment this is happening in the town centre, although the same cannot be said of some immediately adjoining areas, particularly along Brimington Road and around the station. The sooner concrete progress is made with planned improvements to the station area, the better this side of Chesterfield will look. At the same time the proposed new houses and flats in the

Waterside Quarter will provide more homes within walking distance of the station and the town centre.

On the downside, there is the still unsolved problem of three very large empty buildings close to the town centre (Eyre's, the ABC cinema and the North East District Council offices) for which constructive solutions are urgently needed, as well as several smaller empty buildings.

Unfortunately, in the face of rising interest rates, this is not a good time to persuade developers to take on large, complex projects in a town like Chesterfield. We can but hope that someone will come along and see the potential to redevelop these sites.

MAJOR OVERHAUL FOR BIRDHOLME HOUSE

THE *Derbyshire Times* has also recently featured the proposal by CCS Media to make major internal changes to their premises on Derby Road near the junction with Langer Lane. This company has owned Birdholme House for some years and has greatly improved its external appearance, although unfortunately with the loss of the barn and stables which once stood alongside, and the replacement of the latter with an unsympathetic modern office block. On the other hand, the property looks much better than it did when it was the headquarters of Harry Camm's



plant hire business.

The current proposals will create larger spaces inside the house, to suit modern needs, involving some removal of original internal walls. The interior has in fact been altered a good deal over the years and, apart from the main staircase, there does not appear to be much left inside that could be described as ‘original’.

A useful by-product of the application is the submission of detailed plans and elevations of the property as it exists today. From these it is possible for the first time to appreciate how the seventeenth-century house was extended in the eighteenth century, after it was acquired by the Hunloke family of Wingerworth Hall.

It is now clear that the first house on the site was a three-storey ‘tower house’, with three rooms on each floor plus a staircase tower. This is a characteristic type of small gentry house in north Derbyshire and south Yorkshire, of which Cutthorpe Old Hall is a well-preserved local example.

At Birdholme House, as at Duns-ton Hall, the original structure was later enlarged and to some extent disguised by new building. Tower houses do not seem to have been built after about 1630, and so Birdholme House is probably earlier than the rather vague ‘late seventeenth century’ date which has traditionally been ascribed to it. The first owner whose name can be firmly linked to the property is Joseph Bludworth, a member of a local merchant family, who paid tax on five hearths there in 1670. It now seems unlikely, as has been suggested in the past, that he was the builder of the house.

The heritage assessment accompanying the planning application fails to grasp any of these points. It even manages to describe as a ‘footpath’ the tramway which once ran through the front garden of the house on its way from Wingerworth Ironworks on Storforth Lane to pits at Speighthill Wood in Wingerworth.

TAPTON HOUSE: THE GREAT DEBATE AT LAST

AFTER months of mostly ill-informed discussion in the press and on social media, the future of Tapton House was finally debated by the Borough Council when it formally received a petition from the Friends of Tapton House.

The council’s deputy leader, Coun. Amanda Serjeant, reiterated her authority’s position, although she appears not to have corrected one of the more serious errors in the preamble to the Friends’ petition. Tapton House is not listed Grade II but Grade II*.

This is an important distinction, since Grade II* listing protects the interior as well as the exterior of a building. Almost any scheme for the re-use of Tapton House will involve alterations to the interior, whereas none is likely to have very much impact on the exterior. The higher status also means that Historic England’s views must be sought on any conversion, although given their recent track record locally it is questionable whether any views will be forthcoming or, if they are, whether they will be of any value.

The meeting heard the usual dubious claims as to the ‘historic’ importance of Tapton House. Few people in Chesterfield have probably even heard of the Wilkinsons, who built the property, and to describe them as ‘influential’ in the town’s history is questionable. George Stephenson’s connection with Tapton is traditionally exaggerated and it is not clear what influence if any he had in Chesterfield during the ten years he lived in retirement there as a tenant. The one family who did live at Tapton House for half a century as owner-occupiers and were undoubtedly very important in Chesterfield in their day were the Markhams, but the claim that ‘If there was a single building in the entire town ... that represents our story it would be Tapton House’ is an overstatement.



Violet Markham, perhaps the most famous resident of Tapton House.

Perhaps the most constructive news that came out of the meeting was Coun. Serjeant’s announcement that the council had received seventeen approaches from prospective purchasers. This is more than some might have expected and, even after the unrealistic dreamers have been eliminated, the council should be left with a shortlist from which a suitable lessee can be found.

It is particularly gratifying that at least one proposal is for the restoration of Tapton House as a single private residence, since that is the solution that would probably involve least change to the interior of the mansion.

IT'S YOUR MONEY THEY'RE SPENDING

WHILE we await an announcement from the Government as to how they propose to reduce public expenditure (or, perhaps more realistically, reduce the rate at which it increases), it may be worth mentioning three local issues which illustrate how easy it is for any government to spend other people's money in return for what many would regard as dubious benefits. Or, as Mrs Thatcher used to say, it isn't 'public money', it's the public's money.

WHAT CAN BE DONE WITH THE A61?

IN its issue of 13 October the *Derbyshire Times* ran a story under the headline '£50,000 boost for A61 improvements'. Those who read the item in full would have realised that this was unfortunately misleading in two ways.

The Government (via the quango Midlands Connect) has indeed given £50,000 to the county council, but the county council has to match that with a similar sum, making a total of £100,000 of public expenditure.

Nor is this money going to bring about any actual 'improvements' to the A61 between Chesterfield and Clay Cross. It is going to be spent on preparing a 'business case' for consideration by Department for Transport.

The use of this phrase will puzzle readers with experience of preparing business cases in the real world, where the cost of taking a certain action is compared with the likely receipts that will arise as a result. No additional income will accrue from 'improving' the A61, because (with minor exceptions) people do not pay to use roads in this country. As applied in this context, the phrase is meaningless and the proposed exercise almost certainly pointless.

Anyone who seriously believes that it is possible to 'improve' this section of the A61 should read the report prepared by AECOM, the engineering consultancy already emplo-

yed by the county council to look at what might be done to improve traffic flow on what is by common consent a very congested main road. The report is available on the county council website.

AECOM's main finding was that there was virtually nothing that could be done, except at an enormous expense, mostly coupled with serious damage to the environment, for example by building a new road round the edge of Chesterfield golf course at Walton. Now another £100,000 is to be spent coming to the same conclusion. This looks like a case of repeating the same experiment over and over again in the belief that you will eventually get the result you want.



Government Buildings, Chalfont Drive, Nottingham.

SO HOW MUCH DOES A MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITY COST?

As we announced in the last Newsletter, unless the Government can be persuaded that here is a good place to save money, it looks as if the taxpayers of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire are going to get a mayoral combined authority (MCA), whether they want one or not.

Depending on which end of the telescope you are looking through, an MCA can be seen as either the devolution of central government powers to regional bodies of the sort which the Conservatives have in the past abolished, or the creation of a third (or fourth, if you include parish councils) tier of local government. Given the present need to reduce, not increase, public expenditure, neither will sound to most people like a good idea.

Suggestions that an MCA will bring decision-making 'closer to the people' will also seem laughable to anyone who remembers the East Midlands government office in Nottingham, which never took the slightest notice of what 'the people' wanted.

Conversely, it is difficult to see how a body with power over two counties will be more 'democratic' than a district council serving at most 100,000 people. Even under the present regime, Derbyshire County Council is frequently described as 'remote' and 'arrogant', usually when it makes further cuts in its services.

More fundamentally, why do we need another level of local government? The creation of an MCA will undoubtedly drain influence from at least one tier of local government, and it will almost certainly not be the county council that will suffer.

Nothing has so far been said about how much this unwanted innovation will cost local taxpayers. An item in a recent issue of *Private Eye* may give a clue. This concerned the creation of an MCA covering Cornwall, where it is proposed to pay the 'mayor' £80,000 a year, twice what the current leader of Cornwall County Council gets. Cornwall is larger than either Derbyshire or Nottinghamshire but has a much smaller population than the two counties combined. This suggests that a 'mayor of the East Midlands' is likely to get a good deal more than £80,000. For doing what?

AND FINALLY ... WHAT FUTURE NOW FOR THE CHESTERFIELD HIGH SPEED CYCLE TRACK?

IT IS a sobering thought that on 11 November it will be a year since the Civic Society convened a meeting at Brookfield School to discuss whether anyone affected by the scheme wanted a two-way high-speed cycle route building along Chatsworth Road. The vast majority of the 350 people present said they did not.

Since then nothing has happened

on the ground and we have had another 'consultation' on particular aspects of the scheme. The county council has said nothing about the outcome of this consultation.

It is just possible, if the Treasury does manage to make serious inroads into the Department for Transport's budget, that the Active Travel Programme will be scrapped, a decision that would be very widely welcomed in many other places besides Chatsworth Road.

We can but hope, although it probably wouldn't hurt for anyone strongly opposed to the cycle route to write to the Chancellor telling him how

welcome its cancellation would be.

EXHIBITION BY BOLSOVER CIVIC SOCIETY

WE ARE delighted to help publicise an exhibition being put on by Bolsover Civic Society. Their chairman, Bernard Haigh, has sent the following details:

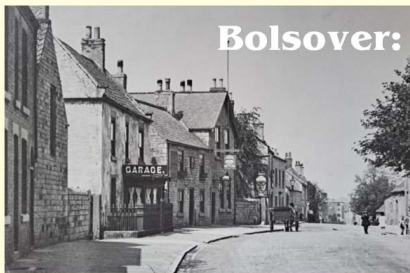
Bolsover Civic Society is holding a two-day exhibition at Bolsover Library on Friday and Saturday 11

and 12 November celebrating our town.

In addition to the society's large collection of archives, photos and film documenting Bolsover's history we have the Derbyshire Record Office, Bolsover District Council, County Local Studies collection, Bolsover Camera Club, Family History Tracing, exhibits from Beltane Pottery and the Coalite Plant, our Peter Fidler collection, 'Women of Bolsover' project and much more besides.

An exhibition not to miss for anyone interested in the past, present and future of our town.

Bolsover Civic Society



**Bolsover: 'A Gem of a Place'
Discover Your Town**

**Bolsover Library
Friday 11th and
Saturday 12th, November
10am-4pm**

- Old Photos, film and Video of the town in the past
- Valuable Archives of Bolsover's history deposited in the Derbyshire County Record Office, County Hall
- 'Seventy Years of Bolsover Camera Club'
- Bolsover exhibits rarely seen, from Chesterfield Local Studies Library
- Family History Tracing with experts on hand to help you trace your Family Tree
- Plans of the bid submitted to the government by Bolsover District Council to convert the Co-op building, Town End into an Arts Centre for the town as part of the council's 'Levelling Up' bid. Council staff are on hand to answer questions.
- Exhibits from the former Bolsover Beltane Pottery
- Exhibits and photographs from the former Coalite Plant
- Models from the recent successful 'Women of Bolsover' lottery bid.
- Light Refreshments



Admission Free: All Welcome