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# CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

# NEWSLETTER

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## Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live

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### SUCCESSFUL MEETING ON TOWN CENTRE

WE HAVE DELAYED producing a February newsletter so that we could include a report on the meeting on 27 February on the future of the town centre. This can, we feel, be judged a success. With an attendance of about 80 we filled the main hall at St Thomas's church centre and, with luck, may have persuaded some of the large number of non-members present that it is worth joining the Civic Society.

The three speakers all took a different view of the subject. Neil Johnson, the Borough Council officer responsible for the town centre, ex-

plained what the authority is doing, mostly with the help of additional government funding, to improve its appearance.

A project named 'Revitalising the Heart of Chesterfield' is aimed at making a walk from the station to the Market Place via Corporation Street, the churchyard, Rykneld Square and Burlington Street a more pleasant experience. This is alongside the planned redevelopment of the immediate surroundings of the station and the building of a new access road from Hollis Lane.

Plans for the Market Place itself include the concentration of stalls in the main market (east of the Market Hall), probably leaving a vacant area in the centre where people can sit, and using New Square as a venue for outdoor events. This plan, it must be

said, has not met with universal support from market traders, although it is common ground that, certainly for the regular weekly markets, there are no longer enough traders to fill both areas.

Mr Johnson stressed that there were limits to what the council could do. Apart from the obvious financial constraints, much of the retail and commercial property in the town centre that is current vacant, underlet or shabby (or some combination thereof) is privately owned. There is very little a local authority can do about this type of property (even if the building is listed or in a conservation area) until it actually becomes a danger to public health.

Mr Johnson mentioned the former Marks & Spencer store as a case in point; the other obvious example is the Eyre's building. The days are long past when a local authority could buy up such property and redevelop it, as Chesterfield Corporation did on a large scale between the two World Wars and in the 1960s.

Much of the inter-war redevelopment has worn quite well; fortunately the post-war plans to build a large covered shopping centre over the Market Place were eventually abandoned, or otherwise Chesterfield would probably now be trying to find the money to demolish the result.

Mr Johnson did touch on the possible redevelopment of The Pavements, the much smaller shopping precinct, opened in 1981, that was the final outcome of the 'Save the Market' campaign of the 1970s. This has a rather bleak facade to New Beetwell Street and may contain more shops

than the town can now support. With the growth of the Ravenside shopping centre further south again, some thought needs to be given of how best to create a welcoming 'Southern Gateway' to the town centre.

The second speaker, Dom Stevens, manager of Destination Chesterfield, spoke about what the business and professional community wished to see in Chesterfield, emphasising the need for the public and private sectors to cooperate in encouraging more investment in and around Chesterfield.

A good example of this is the Markham Vale development, where public sector infrastructure investment alongside the M1 has paid off with the creation of more new private sector jobs than the coal industry once employed on the same site. Another is the remediation and impending redevelopment of the former Staveley Works site by two private-sector developers (one of whom has been there since 1681), for which one of the main enabling factors is the proposed new road down the Rother valley between Chesterfield and Staveley.

New housing schemes like those at Staveley Works and Mastin Moor (another Devonshire Group development) should bring more purchasing power into both Chesterfield and Staveley, where Levelling Up money will, it is hoped, improve both the appearance and economy of the town.

The third speaker was Lisa Hopkinson, who spoke with great fluency and force on the work of her organisation, Transition Chesterfield, in campaigning for a more sustainable town. Transition Chesterfield does a great deal of useful practical work to fulfil its aims, such as repairing and recycling household items that might otherwise be discarded and encouraging poorer families to eat more healthily.

Lisa urged the need to improve the pedestrian approaches to the town centre, which are uniformly unattractive, if not threatening, and scarred by litter and graffiti. She also mentioned the poor state of the two rivers which flow close to the centre, both of which, especially the Hipper, are neglected and unappreciated.

After the three presentations there was a range of questions from the

audience, mainly directed to Mr Johnson. The evening was a good example of what a local civic society can usefully do, since it gave members of the public the chance to discuss issues which have previously tended to be raised in more limited gatherings. We will organise similar meetings in the future when there is an important matter for the town as a whole to discuss.

During the run-up to the meeting the society published a series of posts on its Facebook page and website, looking at some aspects of town centre renewal. These are still available to view on both sites.

The society's committee will now be looking at views expressed during the meeting, and elsewhere, to see if any of our existing policies and views need revising or new ones are required.



## WINDING WHEEL PLAQUE UNVEILED

A SECOND successful Civic Society event took place two days after the meeting at St Thomas's, when the Mayor, Coun. Tony Rodgers, accompanied by the Mayoress, unveiled our latest blue plaque. This commemorates the opening a hundred years ago this year of the Picture House, the first large purpose-built cinema in the town.

The building was extended a few years later to include a restaurant and ballroom on the first floor over shops on Holywell Street.

Absorbed in 1937 into the Odeon chain, the cinema was the most elegant of the three in the town centre. After it closed in 1981 the building was acquired by the Borough Council, which made an excellent job of restoring it both inside and out. In particular, the very fine plasterwork in the main rooms, and the equally

impressive polished wood in the ballroom, were retained. The building reopened as the Winding Wheel in 1987.

Thanks to the council's efforts what might otherwise have ended its days as derelict eyesore, like the ABC and the Gaumont, is now a great asset to the town, providing an additional multi-purpose venue that is especially useful at the present time, when the Pomegranate Theatre is closed.

Thanks are due to the council for both grant-aiding the plaque (and the one erected last year at the St Helena building of Derby University and a third waiting to be installed at the Pomegranate) and providing refreshments at the unveiling, which made the event a pleasant social occasion. There was also a chance for those who had not seen it before to tour the building.



## DOES ANYONE ANSWER LETTERS THESE DAYS?

THERE IS LESS progress to report with our efforts to install a plaque to mark the site of the Lancashire, Derbyshire & East Coast Railway's Market Place station.

As we reported in the last Newsletter, East Midland Railway have made a grant to the society to cover the cost of two railway-themed plaques. One will replace the badly worn and inaccurate plaque on North Midland House, the other we wish to place on the Portland Hotel, explaining that it was built to serve the station that once stood next door.

The owner of North Midland House has readily given consent to change the plaque on his building. In the case of the Portland we assumed that a simple exchange of emails or letters with Wetherspoons head office would achieve the same result.



It is now over a month since we wrote to Wetherspoons and sadly we are still awaiting a reply. An attempt to expedite matters by a visit to the pub produced a sympathetic response but no guarantee that a reply from their head office would be forthcoming quickly. This is particularly sad, since whoever designed the Portland's menu card was clearly aware of its history as a railway hotel, although it's a pity that a picture of a continental train was chosen for the card, rather than a view of the LD&EC station.

We hope there will be better news to report next month.

## CELEBRATING CHESTERFIELD 2023

ONCE AGAIN the Civic Society was invited to attend Destination Chesterfield's main annual event. This year there were fewer set-piece presentations and more panel discussions.

This had the drawback that there was no address by Huw Bowen, the Borough Council's chief executive, which in previous years has been by far the most informative, as well as the best presented, part of the morning. Instead, Coun. Amanda Serjeant, the deputy leader, briefly outlined the council's newly adopted 'growth strategy', the full text of which is available on the authority's website.

Among other points made at the start of the meeting was that the Northern Gateway building is already two-thirds let, as are two floors at the new Waterside office block. The older established business parks at Dunston and Sheepbridge are about 90 per cent occupied.

A panel discussion about Chesterfield's strengths made the valid point that house prices in S42, the favoured western and south-western side of the town, are about half the level of S17 (i.e. Dore and Totley), the equivalent district of Sheffield, and yet both are much the same distance from the Peak District.

This is true, but S17 is much closer to the nearest branch of Waitrose. Rather more important, it is also with-

in easy reach of Birkdale and Sheffield Girls' High, both first-class independent day schools, and the better non-fee-paying Sheffield schools.

The panel discussion made much of the high quality of further and technical education in Chesterfield, but carefully avoided the elephant in the room, the lack of any 'outstanding' (to use Ofsted's term; it is important to remember that 'good' is only one above 'requires improvement', and really just means OK) non-denominational secondary school in the borough.

Until this situation changes it will remain difficult to attract senior managers with school-age children to Chesterfield, for whom the leafy environs of Brookside, Holymoorside and Wingerworth will not be quite enough to outweigh the difficulty of getting children to and from school in Sheffield every day.



A good deal was also said about the University of Derby's provision in Chesterfield but there was no mention of the much older connection between Chesterfield College and Sheffield Hallam University, which (going back to its days as one of the country's best polytechnics) has traditionally recruited from Chesterfield schools. In particular, it has for many years offered a slower but perfectly sound route to chartered status for several branches of the engineering profession. It would be a great pity if this link was lost.

Perhaps at next year's event Sheffield Hallam might be invited to speak and exhibit. Neither was the case this year.

Another theme that was stressed was Chesterfield's central position in the motorway and rail network, and the relative ease of travel to most major provincial cities, not just London. This is also a valid point, but at present, in the case of the railways,

this advantage is being thrown away by the refusal of Cross Country to stop most of their trains at Chesterfield. Who wants to go to Birmingham by train if they have to change at Derby on what should be a journey of no more than an hour?

The town's central position and proximity to the Peak District were also emphasised in a panel discussing how more visitors could be attracted to Chesterfield and spend longer in the town. Few new ideas emerged, apart from the need to tackle anti-social behaviour and create 'safer neighbourhoods', which is not always mentioned in connection with encouraging tourism.



## A FUTURE FOR CANNON MILL?

AFTER A LONG PERIOD in which no-one has come up with any ideas and the building was clearly deteriorating, a proposal has now emerged for the re-use of Cannon Mill.

This is a grade II listed building owned by Robinsons, which stands at the southern end of their Walton site. It was rather heavily handedly 'restored' in 1957 in the belief that it was the last surviving building from the ironworks of Ebenezer Smith & Sons, founded in 1775, which stretched from Dock Walk to Wheatbridge Road.

This was not strictly true in 1957, nor is it today. When, that year, Philip Robinson published his history of Smiths, several ironworks buildings were still standing at the Wheatbridge Road entrance to Robinsons, including a warehouse containing the same early fire-resistant features as Walton Works, at the northern end of the site, which is now listed grade II\*. The

buildings on Wheatbridge Road were not listed and were demolished by Robinsons in about 1970.

Secondly, Cannon Mill as it stands today is a nineteenth-century flour mill, created from one of the casting houses at the ironworks. Careful comparison with a large-scale plan of Smiths' ironworks, prepared in 1788, suggests that only the east wall of the present building, which appears once to have been pierced by three large archways, was part of the casting house, and that the rest of the building is later. The memorial plaque on that wall presumably does date from 1816 (the date on it) but most of the building does not.

A local group seeking to use the building as a base from which to support young people has secured permission from Robinsons, who remain the owners of Cannon Mill, to carry out emergency repairs to the roof, where the purlins have failed at the northern end, leaving the gable-end wall (to which the purlins are no longer attached) at risk of collapse.

This is welcome news, but the expenditure involved will only be worthwhile if there is a realistic prospect of devising and executing a scheme for the complete refurbishment of the building. Both stages of that process are likely to be lengthy and the second will be very expensive.

If a larger-scale scheme does go ahead, or if plans to redevelop the

whole of the Robinsons site ever come to fruition, the opportunity should be taken to investigate the ground adjoining Cannon Mill, beneath which there may be remains of the ironworks, as shown on the plan of 1788.

Whatever is eventually decided, the most important point is that every effort should be made to restore Walton Works, which is now one of the very few fire-resistant textile mills of the late eighteenth century still standing anywhere in Britain. Cannon Mill is of local interest, but in the context of surviving remains of the iron industry of the same period, no more than that.

## A 'WORK PLAN' FOR THE CIVIC SOCIETY

The society's committee has agreed a form of forward-looking 'work plan'. This will involve looking at various 'civic' issues where we think it might be worthwhile either to have a view or refresh our views. We'll also look at what is happening elsewhere.

As a starter (and as explained above) we will be looking at the views expressed during our town centre rethinking exercise.

Our work plan might then look at the question of what should happen to the area immediately outside the core

shopping centre and of town centre use in general. This could include looking at whether retail and commercial activity might be focused in a smaller area, with housing in the wider town centre periphery area.

Our policy review could also, for example, help identify which buildings might be sacrificed for housing and what buildings are 'well-loved' and ought to stay.

Although the plan is fluid it will include revisiting our buildings at risk and uncared-for buildings list and determining actions we would like to see on these buildings.

We will probably look at how we can increase our partnership work to promote the civic good of the area. This could include work around Heritage Open Days and such things as interpretative displays in the town and a history trail (on which work is still in progress).

With our blue plaques scheme we need to prioritise those that require replacing and identify future plaque sites.

These are just a few areas on which we think the society will be better placed if it has a set of stated views on issues and some priorities. Of course, we'd very much welcome input from the wider membership, and particularly offers to join our committee (in which case do please contact our chairman). We'll be keeping members informed about our thoughts through the newsletter.