
CHESTERFIELD & DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

NEWSLETTER

No 44

www.chesterfieldcivicsociety.org.uk

September 2023

Facebook: <https://m.facebook.com/103866642097524/>

Campaigning to make Chesterfield a better place to live



LIVELY AND SUCCESSFUL AGM

FEW annual general meetings of any organisation, the Civic Society included, are usually very exciting but our meeting on 21 September was something of an exception.

To everyone's surprise and great pleasure, the usually vain appeal by the chairman for new blood for the committee met with an immediate response and we now have three new members, which should do much to reinvigorate its work. We are most grateful to the three who have come forward.

Second, we were very fortunate that the managing director of Stone Castle Enterprise, Dan Patrick, had agreed to speak about his plans for Tapton House. We made it clear that members of Friends of Tapton House were welcome to attend, as long as Dan was given a courteous reception and a fair hearing, and this was the outcome.

No property developer is under any obligation to explain to a local civic society what his plans are, much less to make a round trip of a fifty miles on a weekday evening after a full day's work to do so, and for this

reason alone he deserves credit.

Dan spoke with great candour about the problems his company had had during the pandemic, and how he and his fellow directors had rebuilt the business. He then outlined his plans for Tapton House, which were on the lines we described in the last Newsletter.

Dan's talk attracted a good deal of questioning, most of it critical, which he dealt with very well. He may not have convinced those doggedly opposed to any scheme for residential conversion for Tapton House (who have conspicuously failed to produce a viable alternative) but he probably allayed the fears of those who had doubts about the details of his plans.

There is no doubt that Dan and his colleagues have done a huge amount of preparatory work at their own expense on Tapton House, and it is clear that the Borough Council have investigated very carefully the soundness of his company's finances. On the evidence available so far, Stone Castle's plans undoubtedly offers the best (if not the only) chance of securing the future of Tapton House.

Finally, great credit is due to the *Derbyshire Times*, who agreed to send a reporter to the meeting, and to the representative who attended, Tom Hardwick, for producing a full and accurate report for the paper, based on extensive note-taking.

It is easy for local residents to take the *Derbyshire Times* for granted, because it has been around for so long. This is unwise: dozens of local weekly papers have closed in recent years as their traditional mainstay, classified advertising income, has

collapsed. The *Derbyshire Times* has not merely survived but has arguably been transformed in the last few years. The small reporting staff, largely working from home, manage to produce a paper that covers public affairs (as well as softer stories, sport, entertainment and much else) to a standard not seen in the paper for many years.

'DEVOLUTION': THE WASTE OF THE PUBLIC'S MONEY GATHERS PACE

A RECENT press release from Destination Chesterfield illustrates the continuing capacity of central and local government to waste taxpayers' money on projects few taxpayers want at what is supposed to be a time of extreme stringency in public finance.

The report described a meeting held last month at which 'local leaders from a range of sectors' listened to the chief executives of Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire explain how plans to give 'extra powers and funding' to the two counties and the two unitary authorities within them, an area that continues to be misleadingly described as the 'East Midlands', even though it comprises only part of the Government region of that name.

The establishment of the almost universally unwanted 'Combined County Authority' still requires parli-

amentary approval, although this will be by Statutory Instrument, rather than primary legislation. It will therefore probably slip through the Commons largely unnoticed. So confident are the promoters that there will be no delay that they have already appointed an 'Interim Chief Officer', who will be joined by an 'interim team as the region's devolution plans progress'.

Nothing was said in the press release about the salaries and other costs that will have to be paid as a result of these appointments, although presumably the Freedom of Information Act could be used to find out how much the taxpayer is so generously donating to this cause.

Even to convene a meeting such as the one held in August comes with an opportunity cost. The head of paid service at Derbyshire county council receives a salary of £161,000 and presumably her counterparts at the three other authorities are paid on similar lines. Simply for them to be out of the office for half a day represents a measurable loss to the public service, except that the public sector never thinks like that, whereas in the private sector the benefits of such a meeting would be set against the cost.

More generally, the news of these 'interim appointments' gives the lie to Barry Lewis's ludicrous claim some months ago that the setting up of this new authority will not add to public expenditure. Perhaps there should be a whip-round to buy some pocket calculators for members and officers of Derbyshire county council who actually believe what their leader says.

In fact, it gets worse and moves into 'You couldn't make it up' territory when we learn from the same press release that the newly appointed 'interim chief officer' brings to the post 'a wealth of experience', some of it gained as chief executive of Birmingham (yes, Birmingham) city council. And then there is the question of how Derbyshire county council, which appears to be on the verge of following Birmingham into insolvency, can spare any of its taxpayers' cash to help fund the preparatory work that has gone into setting up this new body.

Meanwhile, central government is bribing the local authorities in the two

counties to fall into line behind the proposals by doling out £18m. of taxpayers' money while negotiations are still in progress. This is to be used to improve housing, transport and 'skills provision' (presumably meaning hand outs to local further education colleges). Keep your eye skinned for any signs of improvements in these areas.

'DEVOLUTION' AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

FOR ANYONE who believes in local democracy, the setting up of this combined authority will be a sad day. It will have an elected 'mayor' (voting for whom will probably attract about as much interest as voting for the police and crime commissioner in each county does at present) but no elected members.

This will leave the mayor with virtually dictatorial powers in areas where powers and duties currently exercised by either ministers (accountable to Parliament) or local councils (accountable to the electorate) are transferred. The dangers of this have become clear in London since the creation of an elected Mayor with control of public transport and a share in the control of the police.

If the scheme for Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire goes ahead it remains to be seen what happens to local democracy in our own area. Until recently, the serious betting was that the four principal authorities would survive more or less unscathed and that the losers would be the districts, which would be seen as an irrelevance, too small to carry any weight in a world dominated by a regional 'mayor', two counties and two cities.

It now looks as though this situation may change. If Derbyshire county council's financial position deteriorates further and the Government puts in a commissioner to run the authority, this may be seen as an opportunity to consider whether two-tier local government in the county has come to the end of its useful life.

Similar-sized county councils elsewhere have been abolished without the roof falling in, and their powers and duties transferred to enlarged

unitary authorities. Derbyshire divides fairly naturally into areas centred on Derby, Chesterfield and Matlock, perhaps with the northern High Peak transferred to Greater Manchester, where arguably it really belongs.

Unitary authorities on these lines would carry more weight than the existing districts and there would no longer be the uncomfortable division of powers between two tiers of local government, with the tension that can sometimes lead to.

Arguments about economies of scale in having services run for the whole county by one authority no longer carry the weight they used to. The day of the monolithic local education authority is drawing to close as the remaining non-fee-paying schools are transferred to academy trusts, and highways could be run by a joint service. Social care might even be done better by smaller authorities.

Overheads need not be increased by splitting the work of the county council between three or four unitary authorities, and might be reduced if all the county council's offices were sold off. Does any local authority really need a building as big and ugly as County Hall any more?



CHATSWORTH ROAD: FEARS REALISED

MEMBERS who live on or near Chatsworth Road, or use the road regularly, will be familiar with the delays caused by the building of the cycle super highway, another unwanted gift from the county council, courtesy of a central government subsidy. The nuisance caused by the road works is transient, the disfigurement of one of the most pleasant suburban roads in Chester-

field and the inconvenience and potential danger the cycle track will cause to residents and roads users will be permanent.

At the same time all council taxpayers in Derbyshire can feel annoyance that it now appears clear, as members of the Civic Society have argued from the start, that the scheme will not be completed for the £1.68m. grant from the government. Although the county council continues to deny this, an indeterminate additional sum will probably have to be found from local taxation, an expense that will contribute to what we are told is the imminent insolvency of the county council.

Several Civic Society members are continuing to try to establish exactly how much money will have to be found in addition to the grant. It remains to be seen how much this works out at per cyclist who uses the road. There have been stories in the national press recently claiming that cycling is now on the wane, after its popularity during the pandemic.

In the meantime, the society's past chairman and Chatsworth Road resident, Bryan Thompson, has summed up the current position on the ground:

The problem is the difference between the application of a principle over the practical. Were there to be a plausible need for commuter cycling along Brookside, then spatial segregation is the right thing to do. However, it ought to be assessed in the context of *all* users of the highway, adjoining land users and amenities.

However, the Johnson government-led advice (in a circular known in the jargon as LTN 1/20) was about being bold, which could be interpreted 'as never mind the detail, if it can be made to work on paper and it seems OK on the ground, then do it'. This is where it breaks down, as there really is not enough space for all modes of transport because the nature of the traffic. There are a number of reasons for this:

(1) This is a designated route for wide loads and is used for this purpose. Now the police have to stop traffic for 700m because there is insufficient space.

(2) It attracts non-escorted large and long loads, such as quarry equip-

ment, telecom towers, hay lorries with draw-bar units. Now vehicles run across the white line markers.

(3) This is a planned major route for quarry lorries to and from the Peak District, with some now using Storrs Road to bypass the town centre.

(4) It is a main visitor entrance to the national park and therefore traffic includes caravans, camper vans, and motorcycles.

(5) It is well used by emergency vehicles that require passing space to make speedy progress (now provided by vehicles mounting the footway).

(6) It is an interregional route for car and lorry traffic, which has increased since the building of the Chapel en le Frith bypass and more recently the Stockport bypass.

(7) It is a commuter route from villages to the west to and from the M1.

Locally generated traffic includes homes, local services and a large secondary school which serves a large area, most with direct access onto Chatsworth Road, plus Somersall Lane and its awkward access. All these properties have to be serviced and in this edge of town location vehicles need to turn round (that is now quite difficult for some).

Overall, the road can be so busy that at peak periods standing traffic normally backs up to Brookfield Avenue and not infrequently to Westbrook Drive.

Despite changes, traffic speeds often exceed 30mph, especially east-bound.

The footways afford access to Holymoorside village and local services, a park and a popular footpath network. Although the footway on the south side is the preferred route, safe and swift crossing points along desire lines are important. The south side footway attracts family groups and is more popular when footpaths are muddy.

Street lighting is only on the north side of the road.

The bends in the road have been the cause of accidents or difficult situations.

During the pandemic I visited other cycle superhighways on the internet and on Youtube, both in the UK and elsewhere. They do not have

this scale of traffic constraints, or there is good spatial segregation and landscaping. What we have is under-designed and penalises local households and walkers. The benefits for cyclists are questionable.

I have also read several research papers on generating modal shift from cars to public transport (by creating minor traffic hold-ups by omitting right-turning lanes and bus lay-byes to help persuade drivers to cycle etc.), cycling and walking, safe walking for children and adults including perception of safety, effect of distraction on drivers, cyclists and pedestrians, designing for walking where there is heavy traffic, impact of heavy traffic on walking and lower use of buses.

Overall, *earlier objections remain* and it is quite apparent that those most affected ought to have been consulted at the outset.

Chatsworth Road is problematic all the way down to Markham Road. In an ideal world, where local consultation mattered and the government grant was not over-prescriptive, other sustainable opportunities could have been considered (and in the wider context of the length of Chatsworth Road). For instance, the direct cycle route to Holymoorside from Somersall Lane, possibly with a spur along an extended footpath to Brookside Bar.

Then a speed activated set of traffic lights on a Toucan/Pelican crossing on Chatsworth Road near to Brookside Bar to deter speeding and give cycle and walking access to the north side of the road and footpath network.

Add in a safer crossing point at Somersall Lane, a few bollards to push traffic and vehicle overruns away from sections of footways and a Toucan crossing at the Storrs Road junction (plus landscaping).

The visual impact would be minimal and there would be a better balance of space for all modes of transport leaving most people appreciating the improvements. As it is, the cycle interest as been over-represented and walking, an under-stated objective of LTN 1/20, is heavily compromised, which in turn may affect bus usage.



UNINTENDED (BUT ENTIRELY FORESEEABLE) CONSEQUENCES IN TAPTON

MOST of the debate over the cycle superhighway was focused on the damage to Chatsworth Road, but there was also opposition to the closure of the upper section of Crow Lane. This came mostly from people for whom it provided a useful short-cut into Chesterfield, avoiding the heavily congested A632 from Calow.

Local residents were generally in favour, since it enhanced the attractions of Crow Lane for walkers, although they still have to beware of cyclists, especially those riding downhill at high speed virtually silently.

A new problem has now arisen, which could (and arguably should) have been foreseen. Like water, traffic will find a way through almost any obstacle put in its way. What has happened is that those driving from Calow now avoid the A632 by using Dark Lane, Wheathill Lane and Pettyclose Lane to reach Paxton Road and then Brimington Road (and the same journey in reverse to get to Calow).

The three lanes between Calow and Paxton Road are all as narrow as Crow Lane. They are less steeply graded but still have high banks and sharp corners, reflecting their original function (like Crow Lane) to provide access to the medieval open fields of Tapton and offer an avoiding route round Chesterfield for drivers of pack-horse trains who did not wish to go through the town. Sadly, Anglo-Saxon road builders did not foresee the rise of the 4 x 4 SUV.

Understandably, residents of Paxton Road, itself a wide if fairly steep

residential road, are not happy with this turn of events and are pressing for the route via Wheathill Lane to be closed as a through road.

This could be done quite easily, since there is very little housing on the route, but it would simply throw more traffic onto Manor Road, which links Calow with Brimington. This traffic would then join the A619 at the notoriously congested Brimington gyratory.

Stopping up Manor Road as a through route would be much more difficult (i.e. unpopular), since it is fully built up with several side streets. Residents would not be happy if they could only get to their homes on Brimington Common via either Brimington village or Calow but not both, or could only get to one but not the other if they were driving from Brimington Common. This would be especially true of those who worked at the Royal Hospital or had to get there as patients.

A possible solution might be to make Manor Road one-way south-bound, but then how would people who worked at the hospital and lived in Brimington or Staveley get home, except by making a lengthy detour through either the town centre or Inkersall?

This appears to be one of those traffic conundrums to which there is no easy answer, not that there is any sign that the county council is looking for one.



SETBACK AT ROSE HILL CHURCH

WE ARE very sorry to report that the borough council has rejected our request to have Rose Hill United Reformed Church designated a 'Community Asset'. This would have delayed any sale by six months, giving the arts

school that currently leases the Eastwood Rooms attached to the church more time to raise funds to buy the freehold and repair the roof.

The owners of the business have recently announced their intention of doing this, and the general feeling locally is that they are by far the best people to take over the church. It is ideally suited to their work, they need additional space, and both the exterior and interior of a very fine building will be safeguarded.

We are still studying the details of the letter from the council setting out the reasons for their decision (which are frankly expressed in rather impenetrable legalese) but we hope, despite this setback, that the school will still be able to buy the property.

Fortunately, the building is unsuitable for almost any other use which could be devised, nor is it a marginal candidate for retention. The church is both architecturally important and historically significant, and stands in a prominent position in the Town Centre Conservation Area.

For these reasons it would be possible to mount a strong campaign against any suggestion of demolition or inappropriate change of use.

This is not a nondescript brick-built late nineteenth-century Primitive Methodist Bethel in a back street on Whittington Moor that would make an ideal secondhand tyre garage: it is the second oldest meeting-house in a town in which Dissent plays a very important part in its religious history. It is a superb building, internally and externally, and there is an appropriate new user ready and waiting to take it over.

Any suggestion of demolition or an inappropriate change of use will be met with implacable opposition from the Civic Society.

HURST HOUSE: ARE THEY TRYING TO GET IT BURNT DOWN?

EARLIER this month we were contacted by a neighbouring resident concerning the state of Hurst House. The not very substantial deterrent to unauthorised entry – a



piece of Heras fencing secured to the original gatepost with a chain and padlock – has been removed with bolt cutters and the grounds are being used for various antisocial (and mostly illegal) activities. There is so far no evidence of forced entry to the house itself, although this can only be a matter of time.

We have written to the county council, as sole trustee of the Chesterfield Schools Foundation, the charity that owns Hurst House, asking them to reinstate the fencing, and to also to expedite the sale of the property, which they have supposedly had in hand for over two years, and about which the Civic Society has repeatedly made complaints to both the county council and the Charity Commission.

Little would be served by setting out here yet again the scandalous mismanagement of the charity by the county council, but this saga has now been dragging on for so long that there must be a suspicion that they would not be unduly worried if someone did break in and burnt Hurst House down. The ruins could then be demolished on the grounds of public safety and the county council could sell the site for redevelopment. A cleared site might well be easier to sell than what was once an attractive early nineteenth-century private residence which has fallen into a terrible state since the county council left it empty nearly ten years ago.

For this to happen would be a further indictment of the county council's failings as trustee, although if past performance is any guide the Charity Commission would take absolutely no action.

Several houses on Abercrombie

Street have been carefully restored in recent years, including No. 28, which stands on the opposite corner of the junction with Sheffield Road, and most recently its neighbour at No. 26. These attempts to improve the overall street picture are being hampered by the county council's neglect of Hurst House and could potentially be seriously damaged for good if the property does have to be demolished.

We have also written to the borough council asking if, as the local planning authority, there is anything they can do to ensure the integrity of Hurst House.

DUNSTON HALL DEVELOPMENTS

THE OWNER of Dunston Hall has submitted a further planning application, this time to refurbish more of the former farm buildings to the rear of the mansion as retail outlets.

He already has listed building consent to carry out urgent repairs to the same buildings and this work is proceeding, accompanied by archaeological recording and monitoring, which the Civic Society requested when we supported the earlier application. We have yet to see the results of the archaeological work.



A restored out-building at Dunston Hall, showing the remains of cruck-framed construction (Courtesy Tony Reed Photography)

We have supported this new application, since clearly the buildings in question need to be brought back into beneficial use.

Four separate buildings are itemised in the application. Two of these appear to date from the 1820s, when Dunston Hall Farm was built and farming activities were moved away from the Hall. They form part of the overall layout of the Hall but are not of great significance.

A third building is dated 1713 and appears, from the information supplied by the applicant, to date entirely from then, when the Milnes family, who owned the estate, evidently carried out some improvements.

The fourth building is the most important, since it is cruck-framed and appears, on present evidence, to form part of what was one of a three-sided range of farm buildings contemporary with the building of the Hall c.1600.

If this hypothesis is proved by dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) this will make the entire range far more important than its present Grade II listing implies. By analogy with a barn of similar date at Brampton Manor the buildings should be upgraded to ancient monument status, something which Historic England has so far refused to consider.

A date of around 1600 will also add to the evidence that cruck construction, certainly for out-buildings if not residential buildings, continued far longer in north Derbyshire than used to be believed.

For all these reasons it is important that the entire range be thoroughly recorded (and the results published) before refurbishment begins, since once the buildings are back in use it will be very difficult to unravel their history.

WORK PLAN

SOME months ago the committee adopted a 'work plan', which started a process of looking at various policies and activities. These included our blue plaques, revisiting our policy on the town centre conservation area, looking at buildings at risk, and how best to work with others to promote the civic good of the area.

Having reviewed our blue plaques, the next part of our plan will involve looking again at buildings at risk or un-cared for. A good example would

be 2 St Mary's Gate, which is now in much worse condition than when the photograph below was taken.

Details of our thinking on this subject can be found on our website under the subheading /unloved-buildings/. We would love to hear from members who have views on this list, and in particular whether we have missed anything. Please contact our secretary or chairman with your views.

BLUE PLAQUES: THE NEXT STEPS

THANKS to the efforts of one of our committee members, Philip Cousins, we now have an up-to-date survey of the physical condition of our blue plaques and the historical accuracy of the information on them.



This has confirmed our suspicion that a number fall short of an acceptable standard on at least one, and often both, tests. One of the worst offenders is illustrated below

We now hope to replace some of the older plaques, starting with the one shown here and also the one on the Peacock on Low Pavement, which

was not a 'guild hall', any more than the garden of the former Council House behind Low Pavement has been a bowling green since the thirteenth century.

Plaques like these do the Civic Society no favours and tend to perpetuate a mythical folk history of Chesterfield which has no basis in fact and is misleading for both residents and visitors.

Our recent plaques have been produced to a much higher standard and should remain in 'as new' condition for much longer than those made twenty or thirty years ago.

The next step is to seek outside funding for this programme. We can put some money of our own into this, but we will also need some grant-aid.

Meanwhile, we still have one plaque awaiting installation at 87 New Square and two at the makers which will commemorate two of Chesterfield's three stations.