

Chesterfield & District Civic Society

A future for the site of the Chesterfield Hotel

Background

- 1 The Chesterfield Hotel was built in 1876–7, a few years after the Midland Railway rebuilt its station at Chesterfield on its present site (a short distance to the north of the first station of 1840). The hotel stood at the foot of Corporation Street, which was itself laid out by the Borough Council in the early 1870s as a more impressive approach to the station than the original road, part of which survives as Station Back Lane.
- 2 The hotel, which is built of brick with pitched slate roofs on a quadrangular plan around a central courtyard, was extended three times. Two more or less matching wings were built at either end of the original block, one on Corporation Street and the other on Malkin Street. The last extension was much less satisfactory – in brick which did not match that of the earlier phases, with windows that were not the same size or shape, and a flat roof.
- 3 The setting of the hotel was not improved by the decision to sever Corporation Street as a motor road when the Inner Relief Road was built, separating it from the other commercial buildings higher up the street, and leaving it in not very splendid isolation, flanked by minor roads on three sides and the Inner Relief Road on the fourth.
- 4 The hotel was known for most of its life as the Station Hotel, and was renamed the Chesterfield Hotel in the 1980s, presumably because the older name had rather down-at-heel connotations, although the later name was essentially meaningless.
- 5 The Station Hotel set out from the start to be Chesterfield's leading hotel. For much of the twentieth century it was one of Mansfield Brewery's leading residential houses and was featured a good deal in the company's advertising. It was a three-star hotel, whereas its nearest rival, the Hotel Portland of 1899, also a railway hotel, was Chesterfield's two-star hotel.
- 6 For many local people, the hotel is probably most affectionately remembered as a function venue, rather than as somewhere to stay. It was for decades the place to have an engagement party, wedding reception, retirement do or whatever. It was a popular choice for club dinners and lunches, as well as business meetings, fashion shows, trade exhibitions and the like.
- 7 Hotels of this sort in not particularly wealthy medium-sized provincial towns have not had an easy time in recent decades and for most local people it was probably disappointing, rather than surprising, when it ceased trading. It was presumably a very expensive building to maintain and, despite the efforts of recent operators, was arguably doomed from the day the Casa opened on Whittington Moor, which (despite its uninspiring location alongside a four-lane

dual carriageway with an outlook onto car dealerships and a supermarket) does provide Chesterfield with a good class modern four-star hotel.

The recent past

- 8 After the Chesterfield Hotel closed it was sold to its present owners, Prestige Hotels (Midlands) Ltd. Despite its impressive name, this appears to be a shell company run by a syndicate of business people living in south-east England, whose registered office is a modest private house in Hertfordshire. It was incorporated in 2016 with issued capital of £1, and its most recently available balance sheet shows assets valued at £0.98m. and liabilities, principally it appears a mortgage on the Chesterfield Hotel, of £1.07m. We have been unable to locate any hotels, prestigious or otherwise, in the Midlands or elsewhere, owned or operated by the company.
- 9 It is just possible that the company did once intend to reopen the building as a hotel, although the only work they did was to board up the ground floor to make the building look even worse than before they bought it. An attempt to install short-term tenants as 'guardians' fell foul of public health and fire safety legislation. It seems rather more likely that the company intended from the start to sell the site on, probably with a view to it being redeveloped by others with more capital than themselves.
- 10 Some time after the property was sold, Chesterfield Borough Council announced ambitious plans to redevelop the whole of the approach to the station, up to the top of Corporation Street and including land on either side of the road, much of which is either unoccupied or currently used as temporary car-parks. All of it is extremely unattractive and the area gives a very poor impression to visitors arriving at the station. The area clearly needs comprehensive redevelopment and the council's plans have been generally welcomed.
- 11 The other major development in recent years is the Waterside scheme, occupying a large area immediately to the north of the Chesterfield Hotel. This promises to transform what has for years been a very bleak area, comprising the site of the former Trebor sweet factory, Arnold Laver's timber yard, S. & J. Kitchen's engineering works, and the old Great Central Railway station and goods yard. The retention of the Chesterfield Hotel (and for that matter the former county police station and court house on Brimington Road, now largely unoccupied) would seriously detract from the setting of the Waterside development.
- 12 Arguably, the whole area from the Inner Relief Road to the northern end of Waterside needs completely redeveloping as a mixed-use area, including a good proportion of reasonably priced housing. It is simply not practicable to retain prominent, but architecturally unremarkable and economically unviable, buildings on the edge of what is meant to be a prestigious landmark development. At the same time, it would be impossible to create a new approach to the station if the hotel building was retained.

The future

- 13 For all these reasons, the Civic Society believes that the Borough Council was right to allow the Chesterfield Hotel to be demolished. Civic societies are dedicated to campaigning for the improvement of the built environment in their local community. They are not 'preservation societies'. Improving the built environment sometimes means demolishing buildings which have outlived their useful life. The Chesterfield Hotel falls into that category.
- 14 We believe that what is now important is that whatever takes the place of the Chesterfield Hotel enhances this very run-down part of the town. We need to look forward, not back. The current owners of the site are proposing that it should be redeveloped with a commercial building with car-parking, as part of the Borough Council's overall scheme for the improvement of the approach to the station. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this idea, given the nature of the area and the current usage of the adjoining buildings, but we would like to suggest a possible alternative.
- 15 Although another residential hotel on the scale of the Chesterfield Hotel is unlikely to be economically viable on this site, it could be argued that there is a demand for some hotel and catering services in this part of the town. People sometimes have time of kill waiting for a train and would prefer to do so in more comfortable surroundings than a station buffet; business and professional people come to Chesterfield by train for meetings and do not wish to venture further from the station than necessary; and there is a demand from local business people for somewhere to meet for a drink or a meal within walking distance of the town centre (which the Casa is not). The site is also close to both the theatres in Chesterfield, especially the Pomegranate, and there should be a demand for pre-theatre meals or drinks afterwards (neither the Winding Wheel nor the Pomegranate serves food).
- 16 It might be argued that this market is already catered for by the licensed bars higher up Corporation Street. These, however, appear to be aimed at a predominantly young leisure market, have late licences and are essentially drink-led operations, sometimes accompanied by loud music. There is a demand for this type of outlet, but it is not going to attract the market outlined in the previous paragraph. Somewhere with a more traditional, not to say quieter, offering, serving tea and coffee during the day, light lunches and a simple (but good quality and traditional) dinner menu in the evening might.
- 17 Could such a venue also offer residential accommodation? Obviously not on the scale the Chesterfield Hotel once did, nor as somewhere for coach operators to accommodate large numbers very cheaply (a market catered for in Chesterfield principally by the Ibis, it appears), but an operation on the lines of a 'restaurant with rooms' might be viable. People sometimes wish to stay close to a station if they are leaving early the following morning, and some people arriving by train might wish to stay as close to the station as possible. Once again, the Chesterfield Hotel site has the advantage of being within walking distance of the town centre, if people have business there. We believe it might be possible for a good quality restaurant also to offer a limited

amount of overnight accommodation for both business and leisure travellers.

- 18 Another possibility, which would be an innovation for Chesterfield, would be to include in a restaurant-with-rooms development a small number of service flats catering for those who wished to stay in Chesterfield for more than a couple of nights but not for long enough to rent an unfurnished flat on a shorthold tenancy. We are thinking of business and professional people working in Chesterfield for between a few weeks and a couple of months on a temporary contract, who would like more than just a hotel room to live in during the week and do not want to rent a room in a private house. Flats of this sort – with one or possibly two bedrooms – would have a modest kitchen (comparable to the facilities provided in some student accommodation) but the assumption would be that the tenants would have most (and possibly all) their meals in a restaurant that formed part of the development. This would obviously provide something of a captive market for the restaurant, especially midweek, when there is likely to be less demand from non-residents. If a new building on the site of the Chesterfield Hotel was a three-storey development, the ground floor would have the usual range of restaurant, bar, lounge and kitchen, the first floor a small number of good quality letting bedrooms, and the second floor perhaps half a dozen flats.
- 19 Finally, it is worth stressing how centrally Chesterfield is placed for the main-line railway network. As in most provincial towns, the emphasis tends to be on the service to London (which is very good), but thanks to the town's position between two major junctions in the rail network, it is also possible to get direct trains to Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Newcastle, Edinburgh, Norwich, Bristol and Birmingham, as well of course as Sheffield, Nottingham and Derby. Not many towns the size of Chesterfield can offer this. This might also be a selling point for anyone thinking of basing themselves in a service flat close to the station in Chesterfield, which would at the same time be within easy walking distance of the facilities available in a medium-sized town.
- 20 We hope that when the redevelopment of the Chesterfield Hotel site comes to be considered, the case for continuing to use it in the same way as it has been since the land was first built-up in the 1870s will be borne in mind, rather than settling for just building another office block, which could go elsewhere in the town.

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