

CHESTERFIELD AND DISTRICT CIVIC SOCIETY

Response to Chesterfield Borough Council's proposed redevelopment of the station approach

SUMMARY

The Civic Society committee generally welcomes the Station Masterplan but would like to raise a few mostly minor points.

We feel that there should be an alternative plan for landscaping on either side of the new link road from Hollis Lane, in case it proves impossible to go ahead with the proposed commercial development along this road.

We would like to be reassured that there will be adequate parking for this commercial development, independent of the multi-storey car-park for rail users.

We wish to be reassured that the gradient on the pedestrian and cycle path from the station to the bridge over the Inner Relief Road will not be so steep as to make access difficult for any type of user.

We would like the new bridge over the Inner Relief Road to be as wide as possible, for Corporation Street to be reopened to motor traffic on a limited basis, and for the area between Corporation Street and Spa Lane to be generally improved.

We would like the Borough Council to acquire Kilblean House, next to the Stephenson Memorial Hall, and to restore it for use as an annexe to both the Pomegranate Theatre and the Museum & Art Gallery.

We would like the present access to the station via Crow Lane to be closed to all motor traffic as soon as the new link road from Hollis Lane is opened, and for Piccadilly Road to become a residential cul-de-sac, with access retained to Tapton golf course.

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Introductory

- 1 The Civic Society welcomes the opportunity to comment on this important scheme and was happy to assist by providing some historical information for the report which has been produced. Subject to the limitations imposed by the continuing lockdown, our response is based on email and telephone discussion amongst the committee, starting from a draft prepared by our chairman, Philip Riden. He himself should properly declare an interest as a local resident (of Owen Falls Avenue, on the Riverside Estate).

- 2 In general, the society strongly supports the Borough Council's proposals, which will transform the station entrance and the route from the station to the town centre. It will also greatly improve the use of adjoining parcels of land which are at present either vacant or occupied by buildings of no architectural merit. Combined with the Waterside Scheme, the new station approach will transform the appearance of the north-eastern edge of the town centre. This is important not just for the benefit of local residents but also because this is the part of the town which visitors arriving by train, or by car from Junction 30 on the M1, see first. It is not at present an edifying prospect.

- 3 We would like to make a small number of suggestions, some general, others more specific.

General

- 4 We understand that the scheme is to be financed from public funds and is not dependent on either a decision by the Government to proceed with the planned eastern arm of HS2 between Birmingham and Leeds or private investment. On the other hand, the scheme includes several buildings which are to be let to commercial operators, including factory, warehouse, office and retail units on the land between the new access road from Hollis Lane and the railway, at the station itself, and on part of the former Chesterfield Hotel site.

We obviously hope that tenants will be found for these buildings, preferably before construction begins, but we feel that the scheme should make alternative provision in case if it proves impossible to go ahead with some or all of them, either initially or ever. We would prefer to see definite plans for landscaping these sites if they are not built on.

5 The scheme includes a new multi-storey car-park which will contain more spaces than the existing surface car-park. We would like to be reassured that adequate provision has also been made for parking in connection with the proposed commercial buildings mentioned in the previous paragraph.

6 With the increase in residential accommodation (principally flats) planned or in progress in the town centre there may be an increase in commuting by rail from Chesterfield to Sheffield and elsewhere. At the same time, the new Hollis Lane–Brewery Street road is likely to be busy, not only with traffic going to and from the station but also to and from Waterside, or heading north towards Brimington and Staveley, or merely avoiding the town centre by heading for Hoywell Cross roundabout. Both factors will place pressure on the point at which the footpath and cycle path from the station to Corporation Street will cross the new road. A footbridge here is presumably impossible, given the levels, but we wonder if consideration could be given to an underpass.

7 Conversely (and we appreciate that this may be a reason why an underpass is not feasible) we are concerned that the pedestrian and cycle route between North Midland House and the bridge over the Inner Relief Road may be too steeply graded to be easily manageable by wheelchair-users and pedestrians with push-chairs or trolleys. As far as we can see from the consultants' report, the rise between this building and the bridge will be about 5m. but no figure is given for the gradient. It would obviously not be possible to make this a stepped path and we would like to be reassured that the gradient will lie within normal design limits for a path that can be negotiated without difficulty in all weather conditions (including snow and ice) by all types of pedestrian user. If an underpass was built, access to the basement of the multi-storey car-park could presumably be provided from it, which would reduce or avoid the need

for pedestrians to cross the new road.

Corporation Street

8 We are pleased that the Masterplan envisages incorporating (rather than bypassing) the upper section of Corporation Street, but with a realigned approach passing to the south of North Midland House, instead of the north. Corporation Street was Chesterfield Corporation's first essay in urban redevelopment, laid out as a grander approach to the Midland Railway's new station of 1870. The Stephenson Memorial Hall of 1879 forms a fine feature at the top of the road, and the buildings on the opposite side are well designed, if not especially remarkable, commercial architecture of about the same date. Since they have been cleaned and the ground-floor fascias tidied up the street picture looks much better. We are also glad that there will be a new bridge over the Inner Relief Road. What ruined Corporation Street was the decision to put a narrow footbridge at the end of the portion of the road which was retained when the Inner Relief Road was driven through (the consequent demolition of the buildings on the lower part of the road, other than North Midland House, was no loss). We would like to see the new bridge made as wide as possible, not merely to facilitate the safe and easy segregated movement in both directions of cyclists and pedestrians but also for aesthetic reasons, to get rid of the impression that Corporation Street is a dead-end with a small bridge at the bottom. If possible, we would like the bridge to be wide enough to take motor vehicles, even if it was not normally used for that purpose (it might be worth providing for emergency access to the station by this route).

9 We share what appears (from the press) to be the widespread local opposition to the county council's temporary closure of Corporation Street, which has unnecessarily inconvenienced the taxi trade and seems to have achieved very little. We see no reason why this road should not revert to being a taxi-rank, since it adjoins the Pomegranate Theatre and several bars with late licences, and is near the Winding Wheel, all of which generate a demand for taxis. To avoid the awkward right turn from St Mary's Gate, which obstructs traffic travelling north along that road, Corporation Street could be made one way, with vehicles allowed to enter only by turning left off Holywell

Street and required to exit via Station Road. Its use by motor vehicles could also be restricted to taxis, delivery vehicles, and drivers dropping off or collecting for the two theatres and the bars.

- 10 Although we appreciate that this area is not part of the present Masterplan, we would like to see thought given to improving the appearance of Station Back Lane, Station Road, Eyre Street and Spa Lane. This area was built up in piecemeal fashion in the second half of the nineteenth century, and has suffered from piecemeal demolition since the 1950s. We would suggest that this whole area needs re-planning, keeping some of the car-parking spaces, but redeveloping other plots to give it a more closely built-up urban feel in keeping with St Mary's Gate, the adjoining main road. At the moment much of the land seems under-utilised.
- 11 We wish to put in a particular appeal for efforts to be made to bring back into beneficial use the property adjoining the Stephenson Memorial Hall at its north-eastern end. This large three- and four-storey red-brick building was originally a doctor's house and surgery named Kilblean House; the ground-floor extension at its north-eastern end was presumably the surgery. The house lost its garden when the Memorial Hall was extended to become a theatre and as a result itself became a private temperance hotel. It was later a licensed club but has been empty for several years. It is not a building of outstanding merit and would not be eligible for listing, but it makes a handsome addition to the street picture and blends in well with the Memorial Hall.
- 12 We would like the Borough Council to consider acquiring the property and adding it to the Memorial Hall estate. We are not familiar with the current internal layout of the building (or what scope there is for altering the layout) but we can envisage several possible uses for it. If a large internal space exists (or could be created) it might be used as a studio auditorium alongside the Pomegranate and Winding Wheel main houses (for music and lectures as well as drama). Other rooms could be used as a gallery for temporary and permanent art exhibitions, which would, we feel, be a great improvement on the present upstairs room used for that purpose at the museum. For example,

Peak District Artisans, a group of professional artists whose membership extends as far east as Chesterfield (and also to Sheffield) has been looking for some years for a gallery in which its members could exhibit permanently, instead of having to rely on short-term exhibitions in hired rooms. There are similar groups in Sheffield and other cities within reasonable travelling distance of Chesterfield. It would presumably also be possible to offer catering for museum and more especially theatre visitors, perhaps including sit-down meals (which neither the Pomegranate nor the Winding Wheel has space to do), in a quieter setting than the bars on the opposite side of the road. There would be some passing trade for a café from people walking up from the station and the lure of food and drink might get more visitors into the museum, which it badly needs. The house is also big enough to provide extra office and storage space for both the theatre and the museum.

Vehicle access to the station

- 13 We wish to draw attention to a problem concerning the present arrangements for vehicle access to the station and the opportunity this scheme provides to get rid of the problem. We greatly welcome the decision to build a new access road from Hollis Lane through the old goods yard to the station, connecting with Brewery Street/Malkin Street and Brimington Road. Our view is that once this is built the lower section of Crow Lane (between the junction with Piccadilly Road and the station) could be closed to vehicles without any detriment to traffic flow and with considerable benefits to local residents. The county council has already closed (temporarily, but we believe that there would be widespread support for making the closure permanent) Crow Lane from the golf course entrance to Dobbin Clough Farm, and we would like to see both sections of Crow Lane closed as a motor road.
- 14 Crow Lane between Piccadilly Road and the station is a modern creation of c.1920. There was previously a footpath from the station which passed under the railway to give access to a cornmill on the Rother to the east of the line. Until shortly after the First World War Crow Lane ran on a different alignment from near the present golf course entrance, passing to the north of the adjoining bungalows and of Tapton Terrace, ending in a junction with Brimington Road near the northern end of the terrace. The original railway

bridge of 1840 over the Rother and the modern line of Crow Lane was joined by another when the Midland main line was widened, creating the present unsatisfactory layout, with poor headroom and a reverse bend, which requires light-controlled single-line working. The road presumably cannot be lowered to provide more headroom because of the proximity of the river, and could only be straightened at enormous expense, since it would involve rebuilding two bridges.

- 15 The use of Crow Lane to drive to or from the station brings a great deal of traffic onto Piccadilly Road, for which it was not designed. The road is now lined by houses on the whole of its eastern side (and part of the western side), and many of the older properties lack off-street parking. Although the county council has introduced a new parking scheme for the road, the fact remains that safely negotiating Piccadilly Road in either direction requires more than usual care and a good deal of give and take by drivers. The difficulties are aggravated during the morning rush-hour at certain times of the year by a low sun. Apart from the growth of traffic to and from the station, the road has carried a much increased load following the building of the Riverside Estate in the 1990s, since Wain Avenue, the main spine road through the estate, begins and ends in junctions at either end of Piccadilly Road. The junction at the southern end, near the traffic lights controlling the junction with Hollis Lane, Hady Hill and Spital Lane, becomes very congested during the morning peak.
- 16 For all these negative reasons, combined with the positive reason that a new road is to be built to the station, specifically designed for heavy motor traffic, with no frontagers or parked vehicles to get in the way, we believe that the lower section of Crow Lane could and should be closed to all motor traffic (including taxis). It could remain a pedestrian and cycling route to the station. Everything which the Piccadilly Road–Crow Lane route does at present could be done much better by the new link road and there would be a huge gain in amenity for residents of Piccadilly Road and the Riverside Estate. Piccadilly Road and a short section of Crow Lane would obviously remain open to give access to Rose Cottage, the nearby bungalows and the golf course, but above the golf course entrance we believe that it should also be closed

permanently to motor traffic. This stretch is narrow and is flanked by high banks on both sides. No frontagers would be significantly inconvenienced if this section was closed, since from the top of the hill Crow Lane is wider and flatter, and provides a better route out through Brimington Common.

- 17 We do not believe that the plan for the station would suffer in any way by the closure of Crow Lane, and indeed traffic flows along Brimington Road would presumably be improved by the removal of the junction with Crow Lane. The layout proposed for the station forecourt would not require redesign to accommodate the closure, and there would be no adverse effect on the proposal for a riverside walk on the left bank the Rother from near the railway bridge. The existing bridge over the Rother near the southern end of Tapton Terrace could also be closed to vehicles, since there is easier access to Tapton Terrace and the back entrance to Rose Cottage from the existing turning off Brimington Road near Tapton Bridge (which could presumably be improved). We hope that sympathetic consideration will be given to this idea.

Conclusion

- 18 Apart from these suggestions, we are very happy to support the Masterplan for the station and especially cheered by the repeated assurances by the Borough Council that funding for the project has been secured irrespective of what the Government finally decides concerning the eastern leg of HS2. Even if the line is not built, Chesterfield badly needs a new approach to the station, as it did in 1870, and we believe that this scheme is the best that could be achieved, given the constraints presented by the railway itself and the Inner Relief Road, which already compete with the river for space in the valley floor at this point. We hope that it goes ahead as soon as possible.

2 March 2021