

# The Chester Civic Trust NEWSLETTER

June 2019

## REVISED NORTHGATE PROPOSALS

An application for planning permission for Phase I of the Northgate Development is expected imminently. The application will cover the strip along Hunter Street covering the old Library, the new market square, market and cinema and down to the proposed multi-storey car park on St Martin's Way. The design concept is to reflect rural Cheshire in living green walls as well as Chester's traditional timber frame construction. There will now be a better visual connection

The proposals for the Market Square are generally welcomed but the legibility of the Market needs to be much clearer and brought into the square. The apparent lack of light in the Library arcade will produce an unattractive tunnel effect. We also have concerns about an over-reliance on restaurants in the development, a fickle use with frequent voids through market failure. More residential uses in the Market Square could test the market for Phase II of



*The proposed car park*



*Proposed Market Square looking west*

with Storyhouse. 782 spaces are planned in the car park, the same as now provided in the Market car park. A cycle hub is proposed on the St Martin's Way frontage as well as a bus stop.

the development. There is also a need to clarify the planning parameters for the south side of the Market Square relating to Phase II.

Two wings will be added to the west end of the existing Library building. The Library frontage will access the arcade through to the Market Square. The elevations on the eastern side of the Market Square will be visually modulated to reference the character of Chester's historic city centre.

The Civic Trust will doubtless respond formally to the actual proposals when the application has been lodged.

**John Herson**

The Civic Trust generally welcomes the proposals and is keen to see progress. We do, however, have some major concerns. There needs to be an Environmental Impact Assessment on local residential areas. The car park is too visually dominant and might be at least one storey lower. More generally there is an over-emphasis on cars in the scheme. We have always been dissatisfied with the lack of clear proposals about vehicle circulation, principally via Northgate Street and Hunter Street, and about vehicle access, particularly for public transport. We remain concerned. A single bus stop on St Martin's Way will not suffice. Bus access into the scheme is essential. A 'shopper hopper' is not enough. The cycle hub on St Martin's Way is also in the wrong place, too far from the middle of the development.



# A MACKINTOSH FEST IN GLASGOW

Glasgow was a prosperous city in the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century. During this period there was a remarkable flowering of the arts.

The Civic Trust group visit in April began with a guided walk around the splendid Victorian and art nouveau architecture, led by Niall Murphy from the Glasgow City Heritage Trust.

Charles Rennie Mackintosh is the most celebrated and influential architect of the 'Glasgow Style'. We visited many Mackintosh 'attractions' including the reassembled interior of the home he shared with his wife and collaborator, Margaret Macdonald, in the Hunterian Art Gallery. Their original house was destroyed in the 1960s. The House for

an Art Lover in Bellahouston Park is an amazing building that was completed in 1996. It was inspired by a design created by Mackintosh in 1901, but never built.

The Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum was a hive of activity - masses of children viewing Dippy, the Natural History Museum's diplodocus on tour, supporters of Extinction Rebellion having a sit-down protest and an organ recital in progress. The Mackintosh and Glasgow Style Gallery in the Museum is the world's largest display of work by the key Glasgow artists.



## Zaha Hadid's Riverside Transport Museum

Other treats in the programme included viewing the Riverside Transport Museum on the banks of the Clyde, winner of the European Museum of the Year award, designed by Zaha Hadid, plus a guided tour of the monuments and mausoleums of the Glasgow Necropolis.

On our journey to Glasgow we enjoyed a lunch in Kirkcudbright where we discovered the artistic history of the town and its links with artists like S J Peploe, E H Hornel and Jessie M King. On our return leg we detoured to visit the World Heritage Site at New Lanark, a lasting testament to Robert Owen, the pioneering social reformer.

We packed an awful lot into four days and are very indebted to Ruth Davidson and Karen McKay for their meticulous planning and organisation.

Christine Russell



*Members outside The House For An Art Lover*

# STUDENT ACCOMMODATION UPDATE

In the last newsletter, there was an article expressing the Trust's opposition to applications to vary the planning permissions for student accommodation in order to allow other categories of residents and visitors to use them; despite not having normal parking provision. In the case of the WatkinsJones development specifically referred to, the

application has been withdrawn, no doubt in response to widespread opposition. This is welcome news, but we must expect continued pressure from developers on this front, and it is to be hoped the local authority presents a firm and consistent stance on the issues raised.

# MINING AND POTTING: A Visit to North Staffordshire

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In addition to providing an insight to the industrial development of Staffordshire our visit to the Potteries on 12 March took in some unusual locations; underground in a coal mine and the inside of a Bottle Kiln. Our first call on a wet March Morning was the Apedale Heritage Centre where we explored the mining heritage of North Staffordshire. The visit commenced with a local delicacy, the famous Staffordshire Oatcake, here served with melted cheese. Thus fortified, we were guided around the mining museum learning of the Roman origins of mining in Chesterton and the more recent social history of the local collieries, including the tragic Minnie Pit Disaster of 1918, when 156 men were killed. Memorials on display showed some of those who perished came from three generations in the same family.



*These women are always right*

Following the museum tour, we set off down the drift mine. The coal face is accessed via an incline sloping into the hillside rather than by a cage lift in a vertical mine shaft. Donning hard hats with lamps we were led by volunteer guides, who carried electronic gas detectors, a sort of digital canary, which reminded us that we were not entering a risk-

free environment. The coal face was wet, dark and cramped. On turning back for our return up to the Heritage Centre it was clear that the light at the end of the tunnel was some way away.



*Bottle kiln at the Gladstone Pottery Museum*

After our brief shift down the pit the group were ready for lunch at The Quarter close to Hanley Museum. The final stop was the Gladstone Pottery Museum in Longton. In the Grade II \* listed building, the factory has been in operation since the 1780s. Here we were able to explore the inner workings of a bottle kiln where pottery is fired at temperatures of 1250C. Our guides gave us an insight into the incredible skill of the craftsmen who tended the kilns and accurately maintained a correct temperature by eye without the benefit of thermometers.

This was an intriguing and interesting trip, thanks to organisers Karen McKay and Chris Russell.

**Graham Catlin**

## A VISIT TO OVERLEIGH CEMETERY

The planned visit to the garden cemetery at Overleigh was very popular with members. Many thanks to Karen Mckay for organising several additional visits.



*Some of the oldest graves in the cemetery*



*The unusual memorial to Robert Turner, often thought to be Joseph Turner's tomb.  
More on Joseph Turner in a BLP lecture in February 2020*

# THE CHANGING FACE OF THE HIGH STREET

Simon Quin, the Co-Chair of the Institute of Place Management, rounded off our 2018/19 Winter Lecture Season with an excellent thought - provoking presentation on 'The Future of High Streets and Town Centres'. The topic was timely as a planning application for Northgate Phase I is expected in late May. Whilst Chester has fared better than other places in the North West, there have been store closures leaving a number of empty shops in the city centre.

Nationally the phenomenal growth in online shopping in recent years has led to great turbulence on the high street and the closure of 1 in 5 shops. If the trend continues, analysts predict 900,000 retail jobs will be lost by 2025. Online sales in the UK are the highest in Europe. Nearly a third of non-food goods are now bought online. It's not only shops that are disappearing - banks, building societies, estate agents, insurers and travel agents are also deserting the high street and digitising their services.

A recent Report by the House of Commons Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has called on the Government to level the playing field between high street retailers, who are paying more than their fair share of tax while online retailers, like Amazon, are not contributing enough. Amazon's UK business rates amounted to 0.7% of their UK turnover while high street retailers are paying considerably more. For instance, New Look, with a branch in Eastgate Street, is paying 6.5% of their turnover in business rates.

Another challenge faced by businesses in towns and city centres is absentee or uncaring landlords. Around 30% of UK commercial property is owned by overseas investors. Many have little engagement with local Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) and are unwilling to show a more flexible attitude when reviewing leases and setting rent levels.

The future of many high street ‘anchor’ stores is far from rosy. Debenhams, House of Fraser and Marks and Spencer have all announced store closures. These will leave great voids in the heart of many towns and cities. The House of Commons Committee recommends that large scale retailers should consult with local authorities when considering the closure of a large store in order to discuss alternative uses like smaller units and residential use on upper floors.

How do we rebuild the viability and vibrancy of our towns and cities? Is the answer provided by the conclusion of the House of Commons Committee Report the right one?

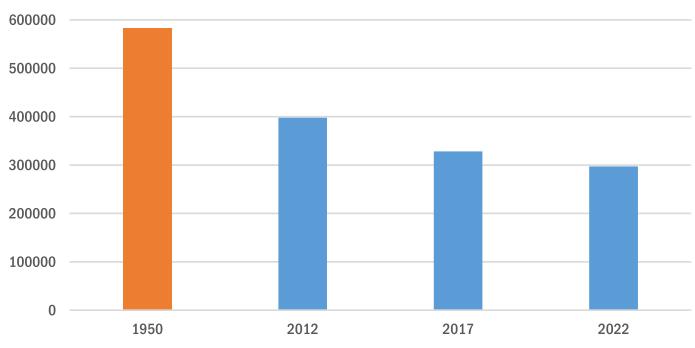
"we are convinced that high streets and town centres will survive and thrive in 2030 if they adapt, becoming activity-based community gathering places where retail is a

smaller part of a wider range of uses and activities. Green space, leisure, arts and culture, and health and social care services must combine with housing to create a space that is the ‘intersection of human life and activity’ based primarily on social interactions rather than financial transactions. Individual areas will need to identify the mix that best suits their specific characteristics, local strengths, culture and heritage. Fundamentally, community must be at the heart of all high streets and town centres in 2030”

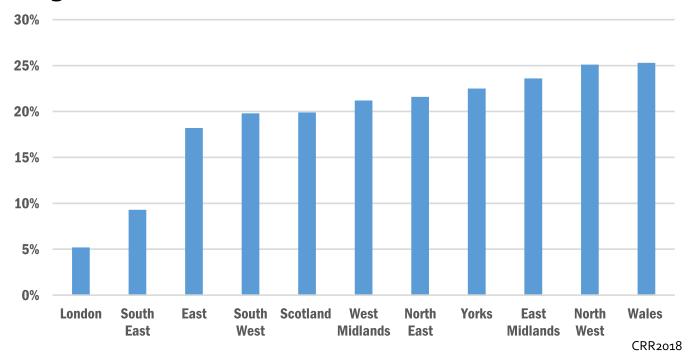
The proposed Phase 1 of the Northgate with a 6 screen cinema, new market, public square and space for a gym seems to tick a number of boxes!

**Christine Russell**

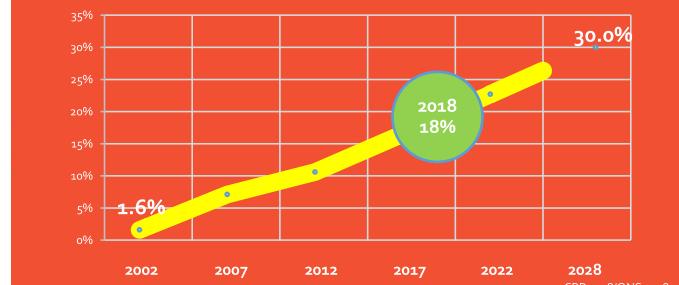
Forecast 23.6% drop in stores 2012-2022



## Regional differences in closures



# The growth of online spending



# HERITAGE BUILDINGS AT RISK

‘Buildings at Risk’ are usually Listed buildings and Scheduled Ancient Monuments that, for one reason or another, have fallen into disuse or disrepair.

Historic England requires local planning authorities, to submit details of any grade 1 or grade 2 star Listed buildings which are considered to be 'at risk'. In the case of grade 2 buildings, the situation varies, with some local authorities having their own up-to-date registers while others, like ours, relying on a survey which was completed many years ago.

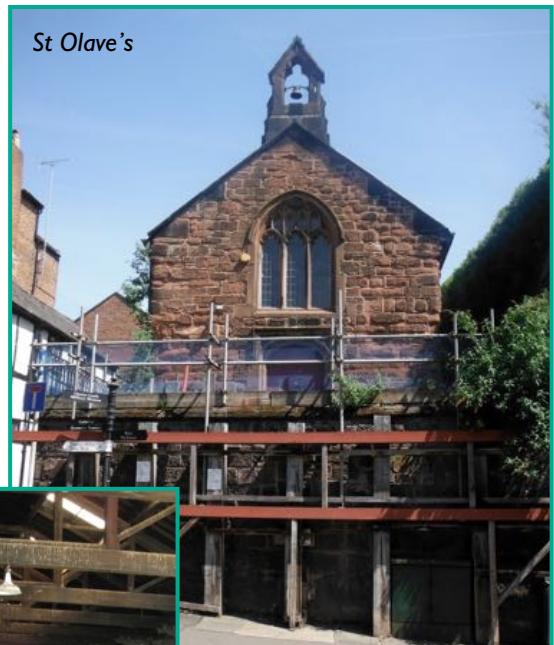
The most obvious example of a building at risk in Chester is Dee House (Listed grade 2) but there are several others, such as St Olave's Church in Lower Bridge Street, St Paul's Church, Boughton (Listed grade 2), Napier House and Colvin House at Chester Castle, and the Flat Shed at Tower Wharf (used for the building of flats, a sort of barge).

All of the above are very much on our radar! The Civic Trust and the Cheshire Historic Buildings Preservation Trust regularly draw attention to these wasted assets and work together to help find viable solutions. It is often a very slow process, but we may have some more positive news to report in our next newsletter.

# **Stephen Langtree**



*Interior of the Flat Shed*



# DESIGN IN CHESTER AND PROPOSALS FOR QUICK'S

*The New Works Committee is considering recent proposals for the redevelopment of the long vacant Quick's building in Lower Bridge Street. It will make representations on behalf of the Trust in due course. In the meantime, readers may be interested in the personal views of Steve Langtree, vice president of the Trust, as expressed in a letter published in local newspapers. What do you think?*

Sir,

A letter appeared in the Daily Telegraph a few weeks ago criticising the design quality of new buildings in Chester. It was a damning indictment of our historic city, especially as we have one of the first conservation areas in the country.

The correspondent singled out the architects for this parlous state of affairs. I wonder if he is right, or whether the responsibility is spread wider than that?

There are architects based here in Chester, and elsewhere, who understand the evolution of our city, its historical context, its urban form and grain, and its vulnerability to excessive and inappropriate interventions. The trouble is that these architects are not those who are designing the current wave of hotels, care homes and student accommodation.

If developers choose architects and designers who lack the necessary skills and sensitivity then it must surely fall to our local planning authority to uphold its design policies and refuse permission.

We should, of course, encourage developers to adopt a contemporary design, but every scheme must respect its context.

The next test is the redevelopment of the former Quicks' garage site in Lower Bridge Street where the scheme currently on offer fails totally in virtually every respect! Let us hope that our planners are sufficiently robust to demand a more appropriate design for this highly sensitive site and to avoid permission being granted on appeal.

Ultimately, the reputation of our lovely city will rest on the success or otherwise of the long-awaited Northgate development. So, there are plenty of challenges facing Chester and the letter in the Telegraph might prove to be a timely reminder.

Yours faithfully,

**Stephen Langtree, Chester Civic Trust**

# DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

**SATURDAY 25th May 2019**

"Launch" of Heritage Festival at Chester Races Roman Day

**21st - 29th June 2019**

Chester Heritage Festival  
Programme enclosed

**FRIDAY 28th June 2019**

BLP Event. White Star Line - C Paley Celebration  
Details enclosed.

**FRIDAY 5th July 2019**

Visit to Bakewell and Haddon Hall  
Details enclosed

**WEDNESDAY 12th & TUESDAY 18th June**

Children's Workshops at BLP

**WEDNESDAY 10th July 2019**

Shotwick Park Walk  
Details enclosed

**THURSDAY 26th September 2019**

Chester Civic Trust AGM  
7.30pm at St Mary's Creative Space

**SUNDAY 29th September to**

**THURSDAY 3rd October 2019**

Visit to Bristol area including Bristol, Gloucester,  
Cirencester, Tewkesbury, Wells & more

**WEDNESDAY 16th October 2019**

Lecture at 7.30pm at Grosvenor Museum.



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Any comments can be addressed to the authors, or the Civic Trust, or the editors.