

# The Chester Civic Trust NEWSLETTER

February 2019

## THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Our New Year Honours are now in their 13th year and they continue to attract attention in the City beyond the confines of our own membership. Journalists attended the presentation ceremony on 7th February 2019 from both the Chronicle and the Standard and the Chronicle's article appeared online the same day, which helps us spread our message and promote our organisation.

This year saw far more nominations in the "Good" category than in the "Bad" and "Ugly" categories put together. The judging process involved a first for my 10 tenure as chair of the judging panel; the judges were in unanimous and vigorous agreement as to the project that should be the winner of the Chairman's Special Award. That winner was the renovation of Oakfield House at Chester Zoo. For those who haven't yet seen it, a trip to the zoo will be well worth it to see Oakfield and stop for a drink or a bite to eat. It is now a gastro pub that has been beautifully restored with breathtaking attention to detail and the addition of a conservatory (though that term does not do the extension justice) that is so good it looks as if it has always been there.



*Oakfield House - Chester Zoo*

The other award winners in the "Good" category were the footbridge and canal side access restoration at Cambrian Road, for which the volunteers involved in the project deserve enormous credit; the Memorial Garden in Cromwell Road, Ellesmere Port (another first in terms of the extension of the reach of the awards) which has turned a derelict building into a beautiful WWI memorial and the Chester Household Waste Recycling Centre which is an absolute triumph in terms of logistical design.



*Representatives from Chester Zoo receiving their certificates for the Chairman's Award from Civic Trust Chairman Christine Russell.*

The judges commended the "unequivocally contemporary" Skye Homes new housing development near Weston Grove, Upton and the project to overhaul and subsequently maintain the grounds of St Mark's Church in Saltney, another great example of what can be achieved by committed volunteers.

In terms of the "Bad" and "Ugly" winners, the Publicity Committee agreed that there is value in highlighting where things are not done well, in the hope that it brings about change. The judges concluded that those worthy of mention were the deterioration of the maintenance of the passageway from Northgate Street Row to St Peter's Yard; the former Quicks Garage building on Lower Bridge Street (which has been highlighted before in these awards); and the derelict landscape of the former bus station. This has been highlighted by us before too and will, it is to be hoped, at least be partly addressed by phase I of the Northgate Development. The judges also felt that there was a need for the reimagining of subsequent phases, following House of Fraser's withdrawal from the scheme, to include housing and also retail units of a type and scale that independent retailers will want to occupy and can afford.

My thanks, as always, go to the judges who dedicate their time to viewing the nominated buildings and projects and participating in the deliberations. This year's judges were Philip Harrison, Geoff Clifton and Andrew Needham. Their insightful and clear thinking made chairing the panel a pleasure.

**Nick Clarke**

# WREXHAM ROAD PERMISSION

The largest housing development in Chester since the 1980s has now got planning permission. On 8th January this year the Council's Planning Committee gave approval to two applications for the building of houses, a school, a local shopping centre, playing fields and a park on land off Wrexham Road that had been removed from the Green Belt by the CWAC Local Plan Part 2 in 2015.

The Chester Civic Trust has taken a close interest in the Wrexham Road scheme through its many stages of designation, design and approval because this development will have a major impact on the city as a whole, and the quality of life for those who will live within the new development.

We have been particularly concerned about the design quality of the development and the impact of the volume of traffic it will generate particularly into the City Centre, before the long awaited Western Relief Road has been constructed.

Overall we considered that the scheme presented in the planning applications is a missed opportunity to create a special new neighbourhood for Chester that is not only successful as a place to live but adds to the high quality architectural and urban design heritage of Chester with strong local distinctiveness.

We are also concerned that the continued absence of an adopted development brief for the site means that there is no comprehensive vision for the future of the site that can guide future planning applications. However, the Planning Committee report states that Council officers are in the process of reviewing the draft brief, with a view to updating it before the outstanding outline application for the site is considered.

The Civic Trust had prepared a comprehensive account of our concerns about the original planning applications that were made for the scheme, and has had two meetings with the council officers to discuss our concerns. Revised applications were made to take account of concerns raised by us and other consultees. We are pleased that the officer's report on the applications for the January Planning Committee quotes most of the Civic Trust's concerns and tries to address them.

The result is not the scheme that the Civic Trust would have liked to see but many improvements have been made. The Wrexham Road frontage will be well landscaped but the new houses along it will only be standard developer house types



designed to showcase their scheme rather than the entrance to the historic city. Within the development there are some areas of anonymous suburbia with little sense of place or local character.

The result is a scheme that is far from special but is functional and will broadly serve the needs of its future residents. The glaring omission is a community centre which is a fundamental requirement for any new neighbourhood of this size. The issue of the Chester Western Relief Road is also unresolved. The Planning Committee's report states that the Council is committed to working with neighbouring councils to identify an alternative route for the relief road, but it is difficult to see how any line to the west of the recently abandoned protected route will have any significant impact in removing traffic from Wrexham Road or the Grosvenor Bridge.

This is not the end of the story because a third outline application (17/05201/OUT) for the whole site, covering the same area as the approved applications, is outstanding, and the development brief that will guide future decisions about the site is still awaited. Therefore CCT will continue to be vigilant in the coming years over the details of the various phases of the scheme as they are presented.

**Andrew Pannell**

## FORTHCOMING LECTURES

### FROM VICTORIAN CEMETERIES TO THE 21st CENTURY HIGH STREETS

Our final two Lectures of the season have contrasting themes. On Wednesday 20th March, MIKE HIGGINBOTTOM, a lecturer and writer specialising in architectural and social history, will give an illustrative talk on Victorian cemeteries. Mike will argue that it is impossible to understand nineteenth-century England without an appreciation of the Victorian attitude to death.

CATHY PARKER, Professor of Marketing and Retail Enterprise at Manchester Metropolitan University Business School, will give a talk about how the radical

changes in the retail environment, such as the proliferation of online shopping, is putting tremendous pressure on the UK High Street and town centres. This will be a very timely topic as the future of the Northgate development is yet to be determined.

Our Lectures will resume again in the autumn. If you would like us to consider a particular speaker or subject, please contact Christine Russell (email [russellcm@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:russellcm@hotmail.co.uk)) or Val Shannon (email [valshannon2003@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:valshannon2003@yahoo.co.uk)) or drop us a line at Bishop Lloyd's Palace.

**Christine Russell**



# MEMBERS' SURVEY - What You Said

Last year a survey of members' opinions was distributed with membership renewal forms. 250 forms were distributed and 47 returned, ie 19%. Not impressive but par for the course for this sort of questionnaire. Allowing for joint memberships, the total response represents the views of about 60 members.

Most responses gave multiple reasons for membership of the Trust, and concentrated on the interest of members in various aspects of the Trust's work, such as history, conservation, planning issues and the future of Chester, as well as members' enjoyment of lectures and visits. Many people cited their support of the Trust's aims, including financial support, and some gave it as their only reason. Others gave social reasons such as meeting like minded people.

To indicate the level of interest in the Trust's activities, an average score out of 5 was calculated for each of the 10 activities listed in the questionnaire:

Evening lectures	3.6
Policy and plans	3.3
Members' talks and socials	3.1
Daytime and weekend lectures	3.0
Day visits	2.9
Projects etc	2.8
Walks	2.7
Overnight visits	2.4
Conferences and festivals	2.3
Overseas visits	2.2

These figures demonstrate a good level of interest in all the Trust's activities, particularly lectures.

The high score for policy and planning raises the question as to whether there is enough opportunity for members to engage with these issues.

The high figure for Daytime lectures indicates a largely unmet wish, especially as several respondents stated their inability or unwillingness to take part in evening activities. It is curious that Conferences and Festivals, which usually take place in the day, don't score higher. Perhaps they don't always get enough publicity.

Comments on the Trust's activities, including visits, were many and varied. In general, members are very happy with their experience of trust events and praise their organisation. Some people think that visits are too busy and (therefore?) too expensive.

About a third of respondents might support meeting to eat before lectures, and a similar proportion favoured socialising in a pub afterwards. More than half would like at least one of these opportunities.

Handbridge and the railway station were by far the most popular pick up points for visits, with St. Paul's and Delamere Street tied for third place.

Two thirds of members are willing to pay their subscriptions by direct debit.

The draw for a bottle of Three Choirs English sparkling wine was won by Caroline Holton.

**Donal Farrell**

## 12th out of 10,000!

The Chester Canal runs from Ellesmere Port to Nantwich through Chester. Early last year the canal and its setting were designated as a Conservation Area.



Chester Civic Trust decided to enter the new conservation area for the Civic Voice competition to find England's favourite Conservation Area. There were 248 other entries from a total of over 10,000 conservation areas in the country. The Chester Canal made the shortlist of 18 and the final winner was decided by a 'people's vote'. The run-away winner was Swindon Railway Village and Port Sunlight came second. Chester Canal Conservation Area was a creditable 12th.

More good news. The closure of the Chester Canal towpath through the Northgate Cutting in Chester was raised by several people during the voting period. This is due to prolonged wrangling between Cheshire West and Chester Council and Canal and River Trust as to who is responsible for the rock face. They have now, at last, decided to split the cost of making the path safe, and work may have started by the time you read this.

**Ann Farrell**

## UKRAINE - big, diverse and largely undiscovered

It's not too late to book a place on the trip to Ukraine 18-31 May. The itinerary includes the vibrant historic cities of Kiev, Lviv and Odessa, stunning countryside, ancient castles, UNESCO World Heritage Sites and warm welcoming people. £2165pp / £350 single supplement includes flights

from Manchester, hotels, meals, transport, entrance fees, guides. For information / bookings please contact Christine Russell on 07976313336 or russellcm@hotmail.co.uk or Val Shannon on 01244 683072 or valshannon2003@yahoo.co.uk

# FUTURE OF DEE HOUSE

Chester Civic Trust is a member of a working group that is examining the best options for the future of Chester's Dee House. The working group includes representatives from the Chester Growth Partnership, Cheshire West and Chester Council members from across the political spectrum, the Civic Trust, the Archaeological Society and a number of other organisations.

The Executive Committee of the Civic Trust has agreed to support a proposal from the Cheshire Historic Buildings Preservation Trust to apply to the Architectural Heritage Fund (AHF) for a 'Project Viability Grant' for Dee House. The AHF is a charity that promotes the conservation and re-use of historic buildings for the benefit of local communities.

At the last meeting of the working group, members were given presentations by leading archaeologists, Tony Wilmott, a senior archaeologist with Historic England and the co-author of the Chester Amphitheatre Project and Professor Stewart Ainsworth from the University of Chester and a former senior investigator with English Heritage. The speakers agreed that Dee House is a building of major historical and archaeological importance and is a prime asset that should be preserved for the future of Chester.

The Roman amphitheatre and Dee House, built around 1730, both play a significant role in Chester's 2000 years of history. Tony Wilmott's expert view is that little of the amphitheatre survives beneath Dee House. The professional recommendation is that 'this remains undisturbed'. Professor Ainsworth concluded his presentation by stating that 'The Roman amphitheatre and Dee House are part of a unique

urban landscape which encapsulates over 2000 years of Chester's history. Although the amphitheatre is arguably its most high profile component, excavations have shown that it was only used for 80 years or so of the site's 2000 year old heritage. We need to appreciate the value of Dee House and its legacy.'

The next meeting of the working party will focus on developing an understanding of the structural condition of Dee House.

**Christine Russell**



# FERGUSON'S GANG

by Polly Bagnall and Sally Beck, published by National Trust Books, 2015

Ferguson's Gang was a group of brilliant women, aided by two men, born near the beginning of the twentieth century to a life of privilege. They were highly educated, dutiful and ethical, with a great love for the English countryside. Too independent to work in a conventional, hierarchical organization, they decided to work for a cause by themselves, keeping their identities secret. This book reveals the identities of all but two for the first time. The remaining two have been made known only recently.

At meetings which consisted of celebratory lunches catered by Fortnum and Mason, they resolved to buy properties for the National Trust. Once chosen, they started to collect money. At first this consisted solely of Victorian coins. When they reached their goal, they delivered a bag of

Victorian coins with a note or poem in eccentric style, wearing masks purchased at Harrods. The National Trust sent them a receipt in the same amusing style. They sometimes donated money to other worthy properties including the Roman Amphitheatre Fund in Chester. Most of these activities took place in the 1930s.

If you are not put off by the descriptions of silliness at some of the meetings, you will find a seriousness of purpose and information about preservation societies. All the way through the book, the authors compare the amounts donated to prices of that period which I found very helpful.

**Kay Eley**

# STOP PRESS - NORTHGATE PLANS

AHR architects, whose lead architect is a local resident, are working up detailed designs for a new market, six-screen cinema, public square and car park in the heart of the city centre and we are keen to get your views on the proposals as they emerge. A shop unit in The Forum will be open between 9am and 12pm every Monday, Wednesday, Friday

and Saturday for people to drop-in and give their views, as well as images being available online for feedback on the website: [www.chesternorthgate.com](http://www.chesternorthgate.com) There will be a formal consultation from 20 March to 18 April, before the planning application submission at the end of May.

# THE MARLBORO(RO)UGH ARMS

A recent visit to Blenheim Palace for a meeting of Europa Nostra, the pan-European federation of heritage NGO's and individuals in more than 40 countries, reminded me of an event 34 years ago and Chester's tenuous link in St. John Street to John Churchill, the victor of Blenheim and 1st Duke of Marlborough.



In March 1985 a flurry of letters arrived on my desk at the Town Hall following a change of the name on the sign from MARLBOROUGH to MARLBOROROUGH. The Chester Chronicle reported the news in an amusing article. *"Don't laugh"*, wrote the reporter, *"but Chester seems to be boasting one of the most hilarious spelling mistakes in the country"*. Plane loads of Japanese and American tourists, it continued, had been *"rolling around in hysterics"* as tour guides pointed out the MARLBOROROUGH ARMS.

But it was not a joke to an old soldier from Blacon who had been *"firing round after round at the amiable Cyril Morris, Chester's director of technical services."* Responding, I suggested that the signwriter had probably been entertained a little too generously by the landlord at lunchtime and I was sure the error would be corrected when the sign was repainted.

This explanation only brought another fiery response in the post from the old soldier – with copies to the Chronicle newsdesk and Whitbread's Brewery – claiming that the sign was a *"breach of good manners"* against the Marlborough name. Even Hitler was dragged into the row as the old soldier fumed that Hitler's dreams of a greater Germany might well have become a reality without a Marlborough to lead us. *"Of course"*, the reporter concluded, *"if that were the case, poor Cyril would be getting angry letters about the Addolf and Anchor, or maybe the Pig and Guerring."*

Now, over thirty years later, the signwriter's error remains and has been incorporated in more permanent and solid letters and tourists are given an entirely different explanation. In a tour of the city's "spooky history" it is claimed that this misspelling was no accident and that a 19th Century signwriter was so spooked by the ghost of a former landlord who had slit his own throat that he had rushed to finish the sign and did not even notice his mistake.

**Cyril Morris**

## DEE BANKS LIGHTING

The Dee Banks Conservation Area is a striking part of Chester's skyline, rising up from the River Dee and containing an attractive mix of mostly Victorian houses. In 1996 the Chester City Council appraisal document for the conservation area urged that 'older Victorian lamp standards should be kept and replacement lamps should be in keeping with these.'

That recommendation has been completely ignored over the past twenty years. Totally functional lamp standards have been erected and made still more ugly by replacement LED light fixtures. On the stretch of Dee Banks above the river these lamps are particularly unattractive, standing as they do opposite listed John Douglas houses, other Victorian villas and silhouetted against the Chester skyline.

A group of local residents is now trying to get the modern lights replaced by more traditional lamp standards. The houses on this stretch of Dee Banks are part of the Dee View Estate, a management body for the area dating from the 19th century. The Estate has recently replaced the lights on Letter Box Lane and Private Walk with traditional standards and these would be very fitting on Dee Banks as well. A modest partnership between the Council and the Estate to replace the lights would bring some real environmental quality back to this busy stretch of road.



Modern standard in Dee Banks



Victorian standard on Private Walk



# TRUST EXASPERATED BY STUDENT FLATS APPLICATION

The Civic Trust has objected strongly to an application to vary a planning permission for student accommodation in Hunter Street, so that it could be made available for other residents, such as racegoers and key workers.

Such applications represent a final stage in the planning disaster of speculative student accommodation development in the city over the past ten years.

The Civic Trust argued as early as 2012 that the unplanned provision of purpose-built student accommodation in Chester by speculative developers bore little relationship to the likely demand created by higher education institutions in the city. The University unfortunately played a passive role in this situation and the University's own projections of student numbers proved over-optimistic. The local planning authority was slow to react to the need for a more strategic approach but belatedly produced the 2015 Supplementary Planning Document on Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and Student Accommodation. It has sadly proved impossible to implement this council policy to prevent excessive student accommodation schemes; councillors, to their credit, have attempted to do so but on appeal the Planning Inspectorate has consistently undermined the aims of strategic planning by taking a narrow legalistic approach to such developments.

This proposal is a shameless admission of development failure by the applicant and must be judged in tandem with similar applications. The Civic Trust fully supports the arguments made by the Council's Highways Officer, Cheshire Police, local residents' groups and by private individuals. In summary our objections are:-

1. It will be impossible to either define or limit occupation to 'racegoers' or 'key workers'. In practice the accommodation would be let to whoever was prepared to pay for it. The application essentially seeks to convert the building into residential accommodation by the back door. The size and quality of provision in normal residential use would, however, be very low, more like a hostel.

2. The car parking provision does not accord with residential car parking policies. It will be impossible to prevent the occupiers owning cars and hence being likely to park in unsuitable locations in the vicinity. By definition, 'key workers' are likely to need cars for their work and 'racegoers' are very likely to drive to the city and seek to park.

3. Turning the building over to a mixture of 'racegoers', 'key workers' and students would introduce an incompatible body of occupants, further reducing the quality of accommodation. The behaviour of short-term racegoers - and probable stag/hen parties - would conflict with the needs of the other groups. The needs of students and 'key workers' will not necessarily be compatible either.

This proposal seeks to rescue development failure at the expense of good planning principles and local environmental quality. The application must be refused and the applicant encouraged to either offer the building at rents attractive to its intended student clientele or transfer it to a body that will do so.

**John Herson**

# PRESENTATION OF BLUE PLAQUE FOR TWO REMARKABLE WOMEN

A blue plaque commemorating Phyllis Brown, first female Mayor of Chester; and Kate Clarke, the first Sheriff was revealed outside the Town Hall recently. The plaque was commissioned jointly by the local council, CW&C, the University of Chester, and the Civic Trust. It will be placed on the front of the Town Hall. Thanks to everyone who contributed to the cost of the plaque at the February lecture given by Emma Rees, Professor of Literature and Gender Studies at the University of Chester. The collection raised £113 and further donations made the figure up to £150.

**Christine Russell**

*Pictured above, from left: Professor Rees, Christine Russell and Jean Evans for the Civic Trust, and Samantha Dixon, Leader of CW&C Council.*



# THE CENTENARY OF THE WWI ARMISTICE - Projected at the Castle

Chester Civic Trust was approached early in 2018 by Chris Matheson MP and Mike Mercer of The Albion pub, with the idea of commemorating the armistice at Chester Castle. The Civic Trust's Heritage Committee came up with the idea that a suitable tribute would be to project the names of all those Chester residents who gave their lives in the Great War onto the Castle wall

Without a budget it was nevertheless decided to make this a reality, and with the generous support of many local businesses, we were able to put on an event which proved very popular. The 1189 names of the fallen were projected onto the walls for three nights, 9-11th November. The event was attended by over 1100 people and the live stream on facebook (by Big Heritage) was watched by over 7000 people. The cathedral, St Mary-on-the Hill and St Mary's Handbridge tolled their bells 1189 times each. A video of this was watched 1500 times! We were supported by the Royal British Legion, who raised over £700 from those attending.

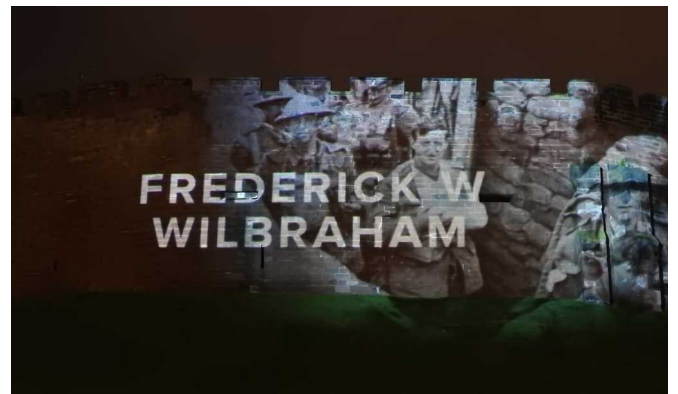
The Civic Trust would like to thank all the organisations who gave time, permission and equipment to make this event possible:

English Heritage; The University of Chester; Cheshire Military Museum; Cheshire West and Chester Council; Chester History and Heritage; Good for Nothing Chester; Royal British Legion;

Dandy's Topsoil; Share; Macfadyen Ltd; Big Heritage; Chester Zoo; HSS Hire; Annemarie Macfadyen; Liz Preedy; Jocelyn Camilla Design; Liam Grindley Creative; CSP Audio Visual; Chester Cathedral; St Mary-on-the-Hill; St Mary's Handbridge; source PR; Chester Operatic Society; St Werburgh's School; Cllrs Richard Beacham, Matt Bryan, Razia Daniels and Neil Sullivan.

And finally, all the people who volunteered to help with set up and marshalling, and the politicians and other members of the public who helped read out all the names.

**Steve Langtree**



## CHRISTMAS PUDDING QUIZ

On December 11th, Bishop Lloyd's Palace was packed for Stephen Langtree's entertaining and informative Christmas Pudding Quiz. The 'Europeans' were the winning team, and each of its members was presented with an individual Christmas pudding.

Steve Langtree with helpers in festive spirit.



## PRESENTATION OF AWARD FOR STORYHOUSE

On December 17th Joan Humble, Chair of Civic Voice, presented the Civic Design Award for 2018 in the 'Best Re-use of an Historic Building' category to Storyhouse, and also the 'Overall Winner' award for all categories; awards which were reported in a previous newsletter.

**Donal Farrell**

*Pictured from left: Joan Humble, Samantha Dixon, Leader of the Council, Christine Russell, and Kate Mylchreest, Development Officer for Storyhouse.*

## A BIG THANK YOU TO MEMBERS

Your generous donations at the Julian Richards' lecture meant we could send £270 to Médecins Sans Frontières. We were also able to send £150 to help to fund the erection of the blue plaque to Phyllis Brown and Kate Clarke.

## DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

Lectures are held at the Grosvenor Museum at 7.30pm

### Wednesday 20th MARCH 2019

Lecture: VICTORIAN CEMETERIES  
with Mike Higginbottom

### Wednesday 17th APRIL 2019

Lecture: THE FUTURE OF THE HIGH STREET  
with Professor Cathy Parker

### 26th – 29th APRIL 2019

3 day visit to GLASGOW  
– places may still be available

### Tuesday 21st MAY 2019

Ken Golby on Holiday Camps. 2.30pm at  
Bishop Lloyd's Palace. Flier enclosed in this mailing

### Friday 24th MAY 2019

Guided walk of Liverpool's China Town, led by Billy Hui. Starts 10.30am. Flier enclosed in this mailing.

### Saturday 25th MAY 2019

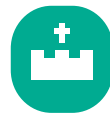
"Launch" of Heritage Festival at Chester Races  
Roman Day

### 21st – 29th JUNE 2019

Chester Heritage Festival. Flier enclosed.

### 29th SEPT - 3rd OCT 2019

5 day visit to BRISTOL area including Bristol,  
Gloucester, Cirencester, Tewkesbury, Wells & more  
– details to follow



Published by

## The Chester Civic Trust

Registered Charity number 504634

Our office in Bishop Lloyd's Palace is open between  
12pm and 2pm, Monday to Thursday.

If you would like to join The Chester Civic Trust,  
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Any comments can be addressed to the authors, or the Civic Trust, or the editors.