

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

BULLETIN

Number 67

October 2009

Trust Registered Office: c/o Blackett, Hart & Pratt, LLP, Kepier House,
Belmont Business Park, Durham, DH1 1TW

TRUST MEETING

Our autumn lecture will be given by **Janie Bickersteth**, the inspiration behind Climate Durham. Her topic will be '**Community Action on Climate Change**', a topic which is of concern to all. For us in particular, for instance, will aesthetics be compromised by adaptations that are being pursued or explored? Or what might be the repercussions if travel habits were to change? The lecture will be in our usual venue, **Elvet Riverside 1, room 141, on Saturday 24th October at 2.15pm**. Do come! (Christmas cards will, of course, be on sale.)

CHRISTMAS CARD

This year's Christmas card, a south-west view of Durham by W.R. Robinson, painted c.1845, has never been published before. It was first seen last year on the TV programme 'Antiques Roadshow' recorded at Auckland Castle. It was brought from Shepherds Dene, the retreat centre for the dioceses of Durham and Newcastle, to whom we are grateful for permission to use.

W.R. Robinson (1810-75) had a studio in Durham in the 1840s, having earlier practised in Richmond and subsequently in Sunderland. At first glance, the view might appear identical to the well-known Carmichael painting from Observatory Hill executed a mere five or so years earlier. (It was used as the Trust's Christmas card for 1996.) In fact the view is that from near the present site of Durham School chapel. This can be seen in the alignment of the Durham School building, erected in 1844, with St Oswald's church tower, or in the relative position of the cathedral's three towers.

The painting is one of three 'long views' of Durham from the western rim of the City by Robinson at this time, the other two being from Crossgate and the head of North Road areas. The amount of interest in this picture, plus the fine delineation of the distant architecture, will repay detailed scrutiny.

A complimentary card is enclosed, along with an order form. Please note we regret that we are unable to offer free delivery within the City this year.

THE MARKET PLACE

For several months Durham Market Place has been at the top of Trustees' agenda. Matters reached a head with the submission of a planning application in July by the County Council on behalf of Durham City Vision. Despite the inclusion of several elements in the overall package which promised environmental improvement, Trustees considered the aim of clearing the Market Place to create a bigger, safer area for a few events to be fundamentally flawed. The key feature here, of course, was the proposed relocation of the Equestrian Statue to the top end of the square. The public response, totally sceptical of Durham City Vision's assertion that a majority were in favour of movement, was immediately shown in our petition.

In little more than three weeks a record 6000+ signatures were obtained by those who agreed with the Trust's argument, which was based mainly on design/townscape grounds. (Here, Trustees would like to express their gratitude for the support of members, not least those who were 'fired' to collect signatures in their neighbourhoods. Thanks are also extended to Colin Wilkes, who allocated the Trust a prime site for its stall in the Market Place on two Saturdays.)

Our five-page response to the planning application expressed encouragement for what were considered to be several positive elements, while criticising the proposed treatment of both statues, seating and breaking up of the surface. Since these elements were almost universally opposed in the 150+ written submissions, and realising the short time-scale to which Durham City Vision was working if the £5.25M grant were to be obtained, Trustees offered an olive branch in the hope of facilitating progress. We suggested that the main aims could be achieved without clearing the Market Place, and offered to meet with them at a formative stage of an alternative proposal.



Trust Stall in the Market Place (Photo D.Pocock)

The next we heard was news of an amended, resubmission. Five days later we received a two-line response, noting our offer and offering to be in touch “if and when appropriate.” The resubmission, headed ‘Amended Details’, was accurately described by Durham City Vision itself as a “range of minor amendments.” Londonderry, for instance, was to move “just 26 metres”, instead of 27. (Our full response, to both original and revised submissions, can be seen on our website, www.durhamcity.org or on the Council’s web page).

Most recently the chairman of Durham City Vision has appealed to ‘protestors’ not to let anger over the statues cause the loss of a £5.25M grant. The response, of course, is neither one of anger nor confined to the statues. Criticism is almost universal among all groups, both within and outside the City, and both by the general public and by a range of experts. (The last-named group possesses an expertise, and local knowledge of the City, that far exceeds that of the engaged consultants.) If the money is forfeited – and we sincerely hope it will not be – then, in the Trust’s opinion, the blame must be laid squarely at the door of Durham City Vision itself.

EXHIBITION OF THE HISTORIC MARKET PLACE

Particularly timely is the new exhibition on the Market Place in the Durham Heritage Centre and Museum in St Mary-le-Bow. It is highly informative and well worth a visit. The museum is open at weekends during October,

2.00 - 4.30pm. Dennis Jones has kindly agreed to extend the opening after our meeting on the 24th if sufficient members are interested.

DURHAM MARKET HALL

While attention was on the Market Place, the Indoor or Covered Market was the subject of an appeal against the Authority’s refusal to grant permission for an extension of its mezzanine floor at the lower end of the Hall.

At the Inquiry in June the Authority reiterated its two grounds for refusal. Firstly, the extension did not preserve or enhance the Conservation Area (although an earlier permission for a bigger mezzanine floor along the left-hand, south, wall had been granted. The Market Company was prepared to cede this option for the proposed, smaller extension). Secondly, the extension was considered detrimental to the setting of the Town Hall (even though it would extend away from the Town Hall, whereas the recent, existing mezzanine ran towards it).

Your Secretary presented evidence for the Trust in support of what we considered an entirely appropriate feature in a venue much valued by both residents and visitors – and by the tourist authority. The Inspector’s Report, issued in September, found strongly in favour of the Market Company.

NEW AREA PLANNING COMMITTEE IN ACTION

This year’s Annual Report discussed what we considered an unsatisfactory arrangement of area planning committees ushered in by the new Unitary Authority. In the combining of former District committees, Durham was linked with Easington, with the committee completed by an additional third of councillors from across the County. It was evident that the wishes of ‘home’ councillors might easily be out-voted. Two early examples have already come to pass.

In **St Mary’s Close, Shincliffe**, there was a proposal for external modifications to a house in the award-winning development by Donald Insall. The Trust considered it contextually inappropriate, so did the Parish Council and so did the three ‘home’ councillors. At the Committee meeting the views of the last-named were thwarted as ‘outside’ councillors tipped the vote by one.

More recently, a proposal for a house at the rear of **Dryburn Road** in the City was again ‘carried’ by a majority of ‘outside’ votes despite widespread local opposition.

There is no suggestion that either decision was improper or undemocratic, but the new County Authority has hardly brought decision-making closer to the people.

SOUTH STREET DEFACED

To Trustees' disbelief, in late August it was noticed that South Street was closed for the application of 'anti-skid strips' and 'thermoplastic yellow lining.' For years, this precious street has had yellow lining, with parking spaces discreetly marked by setts of a more reddish hue. It now has what looks like strips of tarmac laid along the street edge and out around the parking spaces. On top have been painted the yellow lines – the paint has 'run' in places - and white for the parking areas. Moreover, a further permanent feature in yellow paint on the kerb at periodic intervals is a series of instructions left for the 'liners.'

Such treatment, in the Conservation Area, in a famous street with a world-renowned view of the Peninsula – and on the best setts in Durham – is a classic example of uncoordinated thinking, with the Highway Authority doing its own thing. – At least, that is what was assumed until a reply arrived from the County's Strategic Traffic Management Section. Ignoring the fact that it repeatedly referred to the surface as "cobblestones", the Section claimed that "officers from the Heritage and Design team inspected this area and...agreed that this was the most appropriate method." Unbelievable! Look out Owengate, beware Dun Cow and South Bailey!



Insensitive treatment of South Street (Photo D.Pocock)

LICENSING

Walkabout on the North Road closed in May and the site is still boarded up. (The Trust had gained widespread support for its campaign to save the Robbins Cinema previously on the site.) The venue opened five years ago after appealing its licence application to Durham Crown Court. According to the trade press, it had takings of £696,510 in its most recent full year, and it had a 35-year lease on an annual rent of £112,560. Although the takings may look high, in 2001 Walkabout bars were averaging annual takings of £2.3million each.

The Loft night club, next door to the Walkabout and previously in the news when the owners tried to open a

lap-dancing club, won the Best Bar None award in June as the best run venue in Durham. However, in August it started to run an 'all you can drink for £10' offer which, not surprisingly, was met with widespread public condemnation when the *Sunday Sun* ran the story. The Trust called on Best Bar None to strip them of the award, and we were pleased when, within the week, this was done.

The Trust continues to note planning applications for the conversion of former public houses into blocks of flats.

(R.C.)

THE CIVIC TRUST

The Civic Trust, without warning, went into administration in April. It would be too simple to attribute it to the economic downturn, although, since its foundation in 1967, the body had broadened far from a focus on architecture and conservation. In so doing it had become increasingly reliant on lucrative contracts, which, when suddenly withdrawn, caused its collapse.

A 'Civic Societies' Initiative' was launched in June, with encouragement from C.P.R.E. and the National Trust. The latter seconded Tony Burton to head the Initiative, the objective of which is "to explore options and build consensus around the provision of a national voice and support for the civic society movement by 2010."

Tony Burton has been visiting each of the regional groupings of the former body to explore the field, and a national convention is planned for mid-October. The N.E. Federation of Civic Societies met in Newcastle in July, when the visitor spent far too long in front of his flip chart, with delegates expected to volunteer details of present activities, and too little on possible future options. Members present were agreed on the need for a voice at national level, complemented by regional networking, but were not altogether sanguine about the present 'Initiative'.

PERSONALIA

Trustees were saddened to hear of the death in April of our former colleague, **J.B. (Jack) Scollen**. A gentle man, he sat at our table throughout the 1980s, combining an innate common sense with experience as a senior civil servant, tempered by war service in the Far East.

A current Trustee, **Dr Soran Reader**, has been missing from our table for several months as a result of serious illness. We wish her a complete recovery and hope that she is soon able to rejoin us.

D.C.D.P.

