

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

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TRUST OPEN MEETING

Our autumn lecture will be the second of **Martin Roberts'** annual lectures to the Trust. The title is **"Travelling with Pevsner: Revising County Durham,"** and will be on **Saturday 22nd October at 2.15pm** in Elvet Riverside 1, room 141. With his experience at English Heritage, production of the definitive work on the city's architecture and founder of the County Vernacular Society, Martin was the obvious person to be asked to revise the classic work. Members will need no reminding that he is an engaging and informative speaker.

TRUST CHRISTMAS CARDS

Trustees decided not to produce a new card this year in view of disappointing sales in 2015 and with no clear view expressed at the AGM in May. Members are therefore invited to consider purchasing cards of some past years - at half the cost, or less, of a postage stamp. (Cards without greetings make a distinguished notelet, of course.) The cards available are shown in the illustration; an Order Form is enclosed.



Trust Christmas Cards

COUNTY PLAN

Members will be well aware that after five years of preparation and consultation, the County's proposed Plan was found inadequate. At the end of the first phase of the examination in public (EiP) the government-appointed inspector gave the Authority three options signifying that withdrawal of the Plan was perhaps the only practical course.

The Authority's response was to seek - and obtain - a quashing of the inspector's Interim Report by judicial review on grounds of the inspector's conduct of the examination. In May our Annual Report mentioned that the Authority had not raised any objection or questioned the examination procedure before the inspector's Report. The County Authority was questioned on this fact through a Freedom of Information request; interestingly, confirmation of this sequence in the County's action was not received until after the judicial review decision had been published.

The County expected quickly to 'refresh' the Plan and re-enter the process at the third stage, what it termed the 'Chester-le-Street' stage, so-called after the location of the EiP. The Authority, however, was ordered to go back to square 1. Hence, the recent six weeks consultation on Issues and Options, which ended in early August.

The Trust submitted comments on forty issues amounting overall to more than 20,000 words. In general, Trustees found the consultation document both disappointing and flawed. Disappointing because, rather than the promised 'fresh start', it appears to be re-introducing options and approaches from the Plan it was forced to withdraw. (The foreword to the consultation document actually contains the strange comment that the High Court decision means that the county council can prepare a new Plan "without the inspector's interim report having any bearing on the way forward.")

The document's flawed nature could be attributed to its production before publication of the latest official projections of population and households. The published figures confirm the Authority's projections to be excessive, a factor emphasised by the Trust and its fellow groups throughout the EiP. (Our own figures were much nearer the mark.) There is little indication, however, that the Authority is willing to trim its 'ambitious plan.'

A concentration on Durham City, necessarily at the expense of the rest of the county, remains the key to the Authority's strategy. Aykley Heads is the economic hub. To this end, County Hall is expendable and Green Belt encroachment is possible. (In the press, 6,000 is still being quoted as a potential figure of employees, while the Head of Regeneration has recently elevated the description of the site to being the best in Europe. Nothing is said of the necessary step change in recruitment, problem of accessibility or effect on other sites.)

Both the northern and western relief roads are retained in the document despite the inspector having agreed strongly with the view of opponents that neither was justified. No new evidence is produced; in fact with regard to the western relief road the document both disregards actual traffic volumes and exaggerates the scale of congestion.

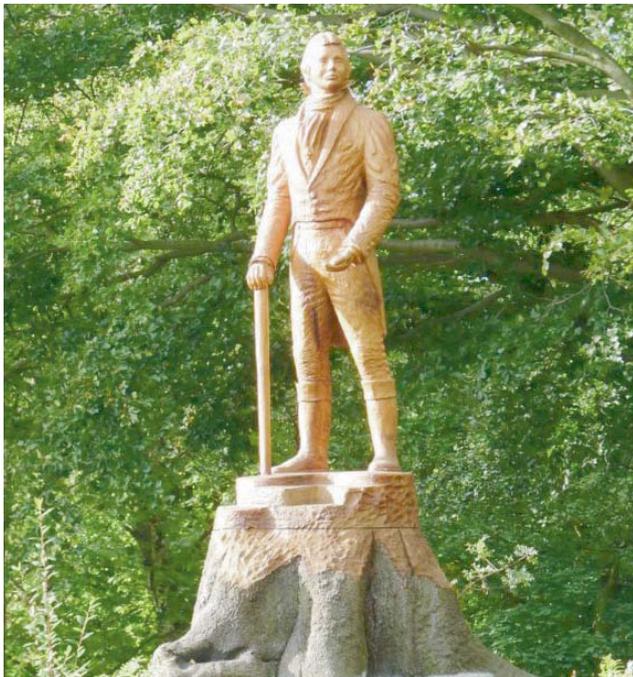
Again, in contradiction to the Interim Report's findings, encroachment onto the city's Green Belt is envisaged in three of the four optional distributions of housing within the county. (The fourth is hardly a contender, given the context of other key strategies.)

An accompanying over-arching strategy - that for sustainable transport - was summarised by Trustees as being neither sustainable nor a strategy. For some reason, a relocation of the city's bus station was incorporated in the discussion.

For a comprehensive summary of all our responses members are invited to consult the Trust website at <http://durhamcity.org/cdp/I&o/index.html>.

ENRICHMENT OF CITY EXPERIENCE

Two important projects were completed in the summer One was the cathedral's **Open Treasure project**, the long-awaited and audacious scheme to tell the history of more than a thousand years of history in priceless objects housed in structures which themselves date from monastic times. The climax, the display of Cuthbert's coffin and artefacts within the unique architectural gem of the Great Kitchen, brings to mind the reaction of Pevsner on first seeing the peninsular group from the outside : one of the great architectural experiences of Europe. We are indebted both to Dean Emeritus Michael Sadgrove for the vision and to Chris Cotton and his team for masterly adjusting Grade 1 structures to new uses.



Wooden sculpture of William Wharton

Although a mere one hundred years old as the city's public open space, the history incorporated in **Wharton Park** constitutes an important part of our city's evolution. The comprehensive restoration of all its diverse sections has recreated a civilised environment. Near the restored Battlements is an oak carving by Tommy Craggs of William Wharton, the original creator of the park. Dotted around are discreet display boards which help inform visitors, who will also doubtless appreciate the cafe, especially if they have toiled on foot to the summit of 'Windy Hill'. (For those who arrive by car, a helpful addition would surely be provision of a car spaces indicator at the narrow, steep entrance off Framwellgate Peth.)

APPREHENSION FOR THE CITY

In our Annual Report attention was drawn to the surge in speculative, purpose-built student accommodation blocks (PBSAs), and the consequent social and economic effects on a city where the number of family houses converted to student homes is well into four figures. At the time a surplus of spaces appeared inevitable, but since then the university has announced a step change in its growth of student numbers. Its Management Plan of 2013 spoke of 1800 additional students by 2020; now, according to its press releases a new Plan expects to have an extra 4,000 students by the mid-2020s, plus another 1700 transferred from Stockton. The general context is the government's removal of any cap on the number of undergraduate students that can be recruited. The justification for the size of Durham's increase is said to be the need to maximise numbers in order to maintain the university's global ranking.

- While the majority of citizens of Durham are proud of its university, its continued increase does raise fundamental questions concerning the relationship between institution and city, not least to a conservation society concerned with the overall character of the city. Thus,

- What is the university's relationship to the city in which it has made its home? Is there an optimum or appropriate size for the institution in a city a fundamental characteristic of which is its smallness, its surprising smallness? A distinguished former chancellor of the university described it as "a perfect little city". Can expansion continue without proper recognition of this fundamental characteristic?

- Even if the university can accommodate all the required new and enlarged buildings on its own extensive parcels of land, what will be the effect of vastly increased student numbers moving between them, including the traffic to and from the areas of PDSAs and student housing? How much more will the city's narrow streets – and pavements – be able to accommodate? (Currently, some 5,500 live 'off-site', sufficient to have given rise to the number of student house-letting offices rivalling the number of traditional house estate agents.) A significant proportion of the projected increase will be added to those living outside of colleges. And is it not understandable that some residents have already described the city as a university campus? Durham certainly has by far the highest proportion of students to residents of any university town in England.

Is it realistic to assume competing universities will not decide to 'up their game' And if they do, will the response be another round with even higher student numbers for Durham in a sixth University Master Plan since 1947?

These are hard, fundamental - to some, perhaps, disrespectful - questions, especially for those who would point to regional economic benefit and regeneration derived from such growth. But they are questions which the Trust cannot evade. Those with long memories will remember the day-long conference devoted to teasing out the qualities of Durham which we held in the 1980s in response to the threat of widespread development. More recently, the discussion contained in the Trust publication, *The Futures of Durham* (2004) remains highly germane to the present situation.

QUESTION OF SIGNS

None can be ignorant of the plethora of signs erected about the city as a result of road works, gas repairs and demolition of part of The Gates. Diversions associated with Milburngate Bridge and Framwellgate Peth and Waterside have not been easy for pedestrians or cyclists, while the diversion of the A690 at Neville's Cross raised some eyebrows. Here, the diversion of the A690 south along the A167 was intended to be much longer than that observed by most motorists, who ignored the four signs not to turn right into Lowes Barn Bank ("Low Barn Banks"). The quarter mile route to Stone Bridge was intended for buses only, all other traffic was supposed to carry on to the Honest Lawyer and return through Meadowfield, a journey of more than five miles.



Motorists queuing to turn right into Lowes Barn Bank to avoid a five mile diversion.

Signs of a different kind, which have multiplied in recent years, are the double-sided, pavement advertising boards. Not content with hanging- or projecting- signs, an increasing number of premises have added these so-called A-boards. In Silver Street, a street of no great length, there may be a dozen such boards on the pavement. They add nothing to the townscape, besides being a nuisance when streets are crowded, and being a potential obstacle to those with impaired vision. Interestingly, while the County Authority will only consider complaints about individual boards, York has recently banned them from its streets.

PERSONALIA

Julie Hepple resigned her trusteeship in August. Ever since her election in 2003 Julie has been our eyes in the Claypath side of town, both alerting us to possible planning proposals and in reporting views and concerns of residents. We are reassured that, although no longer at our table, our lines of communication remain fully open.

Two months earlier we were saddened to learn of the death of **Trevor Coppock**, who, together with his wife Fleur, was ever vigilant in the North End of the city. For many years Trevor also acted as Trust postman over a wide area, a task for which we were very grateful.