

# CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

## BULLETIN

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### TRUST OPEN MEETING

Our Spring lecture will be given by **Michael Richardson**, custodian of the Gilesgate Archive with its thousands of pictures and photographs of old Durham. Since his last talk to Trust members, Michael's collection has continued to grow. His most recent acquisitions will be the basis of his illustrated lecture, entitled "**New views of Past Durham**". It will be on **4th March, at 2.15pm in Elvet Riverside 1, room 141**. Immediately before the lecture there will be presentation of the plaque for the Trust's Architectural Award for 2016.

### DURHAM ARCHITECTURE IN 2016

The University's new **Ogden Centre for Fundamental Physics** was a clear winner of the Trust's architectural award for 2016. No building has made such a dramatic impact on the Durham scene since Dunelm House in the 1960s. Unconventional, angular, unpredictable - its striking form speaks of the exciting exploratory research by world-leading scientists within. There could hardly be a clearer example of the architectural aphorism of form following function.



**Ogden Centre for Fundamental Physics, winner of 2016 Award**

The apparent unpredictability of the outline is unified by bands of timber cladding, which sweep from Little High Wood and run parallel to South Road. The genius of significant architecture begins in its choice of, or adaptation to, site. Here, the structure is uniquely adapted to its location: it would be out of place in any other location.

It is perhaps no surprise that the interior eschews the conventional rectangular or repetition, yet there is remarkable coherence. Apart from a logical arrangement of staff rooms around the edge and meeting spaces and a conference centre in the middle, coherence comes from the hand of the architect being apparent throughout - in a unified colour scheme for surfaces, furniture and furnishings and, not least, in a series of patterned glazed screens to staff rooms.

The design of this remarkable building is by the world-renowned architect, Daniel Libeskind, from his studio in New York, with liaison in England by Wendy James of Garbers and James. Arup provided the necessary complementary engineering. One concluding thought is to surmise that the genesis of the present structure long predates the University putting the building out to competition, for the architect was acquainted with the University science site from the time his son undertook postgraduate research here in the physics department.



**Freeman's Reach Office Blocks**

In any other year the two **office blocks of Freeman's Reach** would have won the Trust's award. The approach here could not be in greater contrast, for whereas the Ogden Centre broke architectural conventions, the context for Freeman's Reach presented a different challenge. Architects Faulknerbrown, with Ben Sykes in the lead, have done everything right - from massing to materials - in producing a 'safe design' in a 'Durham idiom'. There is high quality hard landscaping, and pedestrian access to a riverside walkway for the first time. At the southern end the Archimedes screw is a point of interest - although the loss of the Bishop's Mill is still regretted.

The two blocks, built over the last four years, for two different clients, clearly come out of the same stable. There are, however, subtle differences in brick colour, panelling and fenestration. The upper floors are stepped up away from the river, a feature which, with the dark brick, reduces intrusion into a key view from Prebends' Bridge. If there is a defect of the scheme, it is that the northern block is one storey lower than the southern. Were it the other way round, the top floor of both offices would have enjoyed views of the World Heritage Site.

Two privately developed student accommodation blocks (PDSAs) were completed during the year, and were included in Trustees' assessment. **Chapel Heights**, named after the adjacent ancient monument, Magdalene Chapel, is at first glance an imaginative piece of place making, with a series of blocks diverging from a central access which focuses on the distant cathedral tower. A tree-covered sloping site of questionable stability meant that only half was developed. The consequence is a high density development, for which light coloured render hardly compensates. A dark quartz olive covers a highly angular roofscape, pierced by rectangular gables. Outside of the bulk of the accommodation, which constitutes a gated community, the entrance block swaps render for Northumberland sandstone and hosts a small tower. Its function is not evident; a lack of signs does not help, while an electricity sub-station is hardly hidden. The architects were D.L Design of Leeds.



**Chapel Heights PDSA**



**Gilesgate PDSA**

The second student development, at **Gilesgate**, is also a gated community, but only half the size of Chapel Heights. It is built on the site of the former DLI public house at the east end of the village green. Since it occupies the whole of the original linear burgage plot, the bulk of the development is largely concealed from the green. Here, contemporary architecture is adopted, while either side of the entrance a pastiche of the local vernacular is adopted. This worthy approach, however, fails to convince in its execution, in either massing or detail. The architects were Nathaniel Lichfield and Partners.

In concluding a round-up of the year's architecture, the transformation of the interiors of the former monastic buildings of the cathedral is in a class of its own. Although marketed as 'Operation Open Treasure', the work began earlier with the opening up of the Holy Cross Chapel and with the remarkable architectural space created by converting the restored western undercroft into bookshop and restaurant. The work of Chris Cotton and his team has been discussed in more detail in previous Bulletins.

## COUNTY PLAN

For several years each Bulletin has carried a major piece on the progress of the County Plan. It was expected that this time there would be comments on the Authority's Preferred Options, consultation on which should have recently ended. However, when central government announced that a Housing White Paper would be issued in January, the Authority withheld the document on the assumption that it could seriously distort its own basic calculations. At the time of writing, at the beginning of February, the White Paper is still awaited.

## ABOUT TOWN

A welcomed first in the city has been the hanging cover depicting the hidden facade of **Bishop Neville's Exchequer building** on Palace Green while it is undergoing restoration. One could hardly expect the cathedral to adopt the same approach during restoration of its **bell tower**. It must have been effort enough to surround the tower with scaffolding, working downwards from the top. Another temporary view, resulting from demolition of The Gates, can be glimpsed by east-bound traffic from the Milburngate roundabout. The back of The Markets and the serrated **silhouette** of Silver Street roofline echo prints of a former century. Unfortunately, the greater mass and height of the student quarters around a core of a cinema will result in the loss, not only of the silhouette, but also the view of the castle and cathedral.



A minor victory was achieved when, at the Trustees' request, a large traffic sign in Old Elvet, which suddenly appeared, was replaced by one half the size. On the question of signs, the usual pre-Spring proliferation of student 'To Let' boards confirmed the failure of an agreed voluntary code among agents. Action, however, may be on the way following the Authority's recent consultation. Trustees supported the option of a total ban. Encouraged by the possible move, they further enquired whether the possible ban, currently to be restricted to the Conservation Area, might not be extended to include the whole of the area within the Article 4 Direction.

**Cover, Bishop Neville's Exchequer Building, Palace Green**



**Original and replaced Traffic Sign, Old Elvet**

Trustees are dismayed at the manner in which a projected new **bus station** continues to be progressed. The initial motive - a new anchor store on the site - is questionable in the extreme. The station itself is being shifted sideways, with only a single extra stand and highly inferior manouvability. The architecture is contextually inappropriate, and will damage some key views. The roundabout is to be replaced by traffic lights and related to a new road system

which, apart from its unfortunate new geometry, threatens to prove grossly inadequate at peak times - far more so than at present. The cycling fraternity rightly object to the proposals.

Public consultation offered on all of the proposals has been inadequate and misleading. The few questions allowed for little meaningful or critical response. The Authority alleges that the response was generally favourable, but refused a Trust request to see the original 2016 returns. Moreover, we believe there may be some conflation of responses - and confusion in people's minds - between questions of renovation of North Road and proposal of a new bus station. There is also the question whether consultation responses of 2014 and 2016 have been kept entirely separate. In the last three months Trustees have sent three responses detailing several precise deficiencies in the scheme. The Authority's last response was unsatisfactory to the extent that a further eight pages of detailed argument were despatched. The reply simply informed us that our points would be covered in the forthcoming planning application, where evidence of public consultation would be given. - Use of the word 'dismay', which opened discussion of this topic, therefore seems a highly apt.

Another cause of dismay is the possible, or probable, demolition of Dunelm House as a result of the University seeking a certificate of immunity from listing, and the Secretary of State, over-riding Historic England, being "minded" to approve. However, a review is now to take place.

Trustees side with Historic England. Dunelm House is the city's most striking building of the 20th century. Brutalist in style, its mass is sensitively broken up with detailing of the Durham vernacular as it cascades down the river slope to guard the entrance to the gorge. It has become inextricably linked to Kingsgate Bridge, with which it forms a unified composition. This is, of course, no accident, since, concrete apart, Sir Ove Arup was creator of one and influential in the other. (The University's last Vice Chancellor extolled this 'togetherness' on the unveiling of the Trust's portrait head of Sir Ove on Dunelm House.) A list of other pertinent factors in defence of the building, including context, replacement, cost and use, convince Trustees that Durham would be the poorer for its loss. Accordingly, they have lodged an objection.

## **A NOTE FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY**

In 2015 we increased subscriptions, which have remained unchanged for years. Such action always leads to an 'untidiness' in our membership list, as some forget to adjust their payment, and a few decide to leave. Further complications occur when deaths come to light of which we were previously unaware, or, again, when members have changed address or moved into a senior category without informing us. This Bulletin is being sent to all in these possible categories where there has been no response to the 2015 rise. If you are in such a category and wish to remain a member, could I ask you please to contact me., either by email ([pauljofraeard@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:pauljofraeard@yahoo.co.uk)) or by letter to the Trust's official office given on the front of this Bulletin. Thank you. - Paul Beard

## **ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING**

You might like to make a note in your diary that this year's AGM is on Wednesday, 10th May.

**D.C.D.P.**