

# CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

## BULLETIN

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### **SPRING OPEN MEETING: postponed**

**We regret that, due to a family bereavement, Professor Gluyas is now unable to give the lecture scheduled for Saturday 14 March.**

We hope to rearrange the Spring meeting in a few weeks time, and will of course let you know when we have details. In the meanwhile, please tell any friends and acquaintances who may have been intending to come along.

### **THE COUNTY PLAN: EXAMINATION IN PUBLIC**

For both the county and the nation more widely the end of 2019 and the beginning of 2020 will have been a time of major decisions shaping future decades. For County Durham, however, sight of the final picture is still only imminent, yet to emerge. The Inspector of the County Plan, Mr William Fieldhouse, cannot now be expected to publish his final report until after Easter, with a view to adoption in the autumn. The Plan will determine planning policies for the county till 2035 and was subject to a full **Examination in Public** at The Glebe Centre in Murton from 22 October till 4 December 2019, with a supplementary session later announced for 6 February 2020.

This much-needed Plan is of huge scope and with much to support, but the public focus was inevitably on points of contention. These are, principally, the Council's proposals for two relief roads near Durham City, for building on the Green Belt at Sniperley and off Sherburn Road, and on possible measures to curtail the colonization of Durham by an ever-growing University. With the Bulletin going to press in mid-February, members may also wish to check the Trust website for further significant news, [www.durhamcity.org/](http://www.durhamcity.org/) We plan to print a full account of the examination process in the Annual Report in a few months' time, written by John Lowe, Chairman of the Trust.

Until the final picture is clear, there are only impressions and interim developments to report, but the Trust believes its representations have been well received on the whole. The Inspector seemed sceptical of the supposed benefits of the relief roads, requiring the Council to outline what changes to the Plan would ensue should the roads be dropped (for the Western Relief Road "the Plan's overall spatial strategy for the distribution of housing would remain largely the same", and the envisaged developer contributions towards the cost of the road would simply be redirected at other measures against congestion, while the Northern Relief could be dropped with no other change in policy). Mr Fieldhouse was supportive of measures to

restrict the building of extensions to homes in multiple occupation (student houses) in Durham City, requesting the Council to draft a main modification making such extensions subject to the same restrictions on the allowed density of students' units as already apply to whole buildings. He insisted that the Council delete a reference to the possibility of building on a large, additional area of Green Belt at Aykley Heads after the current plan period ends (the site supporting the Council's widely advertised, if fictional, "6,000 new jobs").

Participants were struck by the Inspector's mastery of pre-submitted material, and his very tight control on proceedings, requiring only specific answers to specific questions. His task is to determine whether the overall plan is "sound" (i.e. positively prepared, justified, effective and consistent with national policy), and to suggest, as the inquiry proceeds, the "minor" and the "main modifications" needed to make it sound. "Main modifications" are those considered significant enough to require a further six-week process of consultation. Only once this is completed, along with the Council's subsequent responses to consultees, can the Inspector offer his final report and recommendations.

On submitting the Plan last year, on 28 June, the Council sent a separate letter to the Planning Inspectorate formally requesting that the Inspector appointed also "recommends modifications to the County Durham Plan, as may be necessary to ensure legal compliance / soundness" ("Main Modification Letter to PINS"). While this may be a formality, the impression given to participants has been that the examination process has been part of the actual composition of a plan to a surprising degree, as both the Council and the Inspector propose one main modification after another in order to make the Plan sound. To date there have been over a hundred entries in the ongoing "Schedule of Main Modifications" as published by the Council on 29 October 2019, while Mr Fieldhouse has since instigated more than seventy in "action points" arising from the hearings, as well requiring a supplementary day of hearings in February.

If the Plan were to be found "unsound," government-appointed commissioners would take over the process, with all that means in terms of continuing and damaging uncertainty for future planning in the County. The impression given observers is that both Mr Fieldhouse and the Council are working flat out in their determination to avoid any such outcome. (One trustee, an academic, was broadly reminded of a quip made by a research student finishing a thesis under intense pressure: "I'm going to finish on time, no matter how long it takes!").

## **NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN FOR DURHAM CITY**

What should be the final, third phase of consultation on the Durham City Parish Council's Neighbourhood Plan ran from 6 January until 17 February 2020. Trustees warmly supported the plan, whose main strengths for central Durham City were described in the last bulletin.

A Neighbourhood Plan can give guidance, make recommendations and identify issues at a much finer grain than the County Plan. Full appendices list and characterize specific sites. A caveat is needed, however. Because many policies in the County Plan were deemed to be "strategic" this means that they will trump proposals on the same issues in the Neighbourhood Plan. For instance, although the main modifications emerging for the County Plan currently describe a policy restricting HMO extensions along the lines of that in the Neighbourhood Plan, the two plans differ in their policies on the building of yet more purpose-built student accommodation blocks in the City—and it is the County Plan's policy that will count. In draft, this is to seek to site all PBSAs on the University's own estate, and only to allow their building elsewhere subject to tests as to their need, design, accessibility and impact on local amenity. Trustees broadly welcomed the desired restriction of new PBSAs to the University's own estate. Nevertheless, that estate includes some valued green areas, such as the Racecourse, and there remains concern that these may be vulnerable after 2027, when the current University Masterplan gives way to a still uncertain future. Would the University, striving to compete with other expanding universities for the income students bring in, continue to expand?

Trustees who were actually involved in drafting the Plan naturally excluded themselves from the consultation. The County Council will now have submitted the Neighbourhood Plan and consultation responses to an independent examiner. He or she will consider whether the Plan meets the basic conditions and other legal requirements, or what modifications might be necessary. The Council will then arrange a referendum, and a majority "yes" vote would finally make the document part of a statutory development plan for the central area.



## ARCHITECTURAL AWARD FOR 2019

There was a clear winner this year of the Trust's annual Architectural Award for a new building or major refurbishment. In October 2019, the University's proscenium arch theatre at 40 North Bailey, the "Assembly Rooms Theatre", re-opened after 14 months of renovations. This superb refurbishment, financed by £2.5 million pounds from the University, has been an example of how close student engagement and dedicated voluntary work can inspire architects to work well beyond the minimum of their brief, achieving far more with their budget than might have been envisaged.

PH Partnership Architects were the main firm responsible, having previously worked on the performance space at the Sir James Knott Hall. There was also vital work from Stage Electrics, a company who help design and install the technical elements of theatres, and the aid of a former colleague from the theatre, Jonny Browning, who worked on the recent renovation of the Mark Hillary Arts Centre in Collingwood College.

The main challenge was to give the theatre acceptable disabled and wheelchair access despite tight spatial constraints. This was achieved by the installation of a platform lift and provision of an audience balcony at the top of auditorium for people in wheelchairs. A small new bar has been built and the box office has been attractively redesigned on the ground floor. The whole building has been redecorated and rewired, and the public spaces fitted with effective acoustic panels. The auditorium has kept a version of the previous red and grey colour scheme, and the fine wooden panelling and the decorated ceiling. Colours are restrained, cheerful but not garish. There are now quieter fold-down chairs, 175 seats (fewer than before, making space for the wheelchair balcony).

With over 100 productions annually, the building is home to Durham Student Theatre, which has 30 theatre companies, and to two professional northern theatre companies (Elysium Theatre Company and Grim Up North). The Assembly Rooms Theatre now possesses the material context it deserves for its outstanding contribution to the cultural life of the City.

Externally, the building remains an eccentric if not unattractive blend of architectural styles, with a rounded Dutch gable at the top and an art-deco style foyer at the bottom. A discrete entrance to the new lift has been added to the left of the entrance porch. The old windows have been replaced with double glazed softwood windows and, at night, a well-judged lighting scheme invites entrance from the street.

Trustees wondered if a panel might be displayed somewhere outlining the long and varied history of the building. It was built as a ballroom in the eighteenth century (assembly rooms), with conversion to a theatre in 1869, after Durham's Theatre Royal was destroyed in a fire. It became the home of the Durham amateur operatic group and doubled as Durham's first cinema. Purchased by the University in the 1930s, it became a theatre once more in the 1950s. During the new reconstruction work, it was discovered that one supporting wall on the far side of the basement was a medieval defensive structure, sadly no longer visible.

In considering the Award for this year, trustees also visited St John's College's new **Learning Resource Centre** on the South Bailey, **Student Castle** at the bottom of Claypath, and the **Teaching and Learning Centre** on South Road. While all had merits, none matched the refurbished Assembly Rooms in quality or in the challenge overcome. Reports on these, and on city-wide developments related to the University expansion, will appear in the forthcoming review of the year.

*Images courtesy of the Assembly Rooms Theatre*



## CITY CENTRE DEVELOPMENTS

Several years after some first proposals, plans for a **new bus station** on North Road emerged in early January, with two public consultation events held almost immediately after. An earlier proposal had placed a new bus station in the current position of the roundabout at the top of North Road, marring the long street views of the railway viaduct. However, the new building would simply occupy the same constrained footprint as the current one. The proposed frontage along North Road is unambitiously functional, and a great chance to improve the appearance of North Road has surely been lost. However, the internal spaces are much improved, becoming two storeys with expanded facilities. The Trust advocates the creation also of a travel centre, with better physical and information links with the railway station.

A second pedestrian entrance from North Road is proposed, on the west side. It seems the capacity of the station would be no better than that at present, already under strain. (This is surprising perhaps, given national recognition of the need to expand public transport). It is also not clear where the needed security and bus company staff are to be accommodated. Buses will follow the same movements down North Road as before. If approved, demolition of the existing bus station would be in the late summer or early autumn, with construction starting in early 2021.

Construction work continues at the site of the former Sands car park. The designated area of Common Land to the north of the site is now occupied by the developers and closed off, illegally, even while the case for redesignating the area remains before an inspector.

Despite objections from the Trust and from the Parish Council, Council planners have approved the garish sign on Framwellgate Bridge which marks the “Revolution” pub. This intrudes visually on the views of and from the World Heritage site, but commercial considerations prevailed. This pub was formerly “The Bishop Langley”. It has also been learned that the “The John Duck” on Claypath is to be rebranded “The Drunken Duck”. In both cases, names with a meaningful local reference have given way to market-researched handles from a national chain.

The body overseeing the World Heritage Site has recently put in its application to UNESCO that the site be extended to embrace Durham’s historic river banks. A decision is expected in the late summer or early autumn.

## THIS YEAR’S ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Trustees have agreed that the AGM should henceforth be put back a full month to the second Wednesday in June, being this year **Wednesday 10 June**. This is to allow more time for the preparation of the full accounts, and it has the incidental benefit of spreading our lecture programme more evenly through the year.

This summer sees the 600th meeting of trustees since the Trust was founded in 1942. At the AGM in June, Dr Douglas Pocock will look back at the work of the Trust during these decades of major change. More details in due course.

## POSITION VACANT

The retirement last May of the veteran Honorary Secretary, Dr Douglas Pocock, inevitably posed a challenge for the Trust. However, while Douglas’s expertise is still missed, the practical deficit has largely been met by the Secretary’s various tasks being distributed to trustees. The Chairman has stepped into the role of highlighting significant planning applications, and of sending in letters of objection, comment, or support, always in consultation with trustees.

Nevertheless, the role of Honorary Secretary is still vacant, though now with the assurance that the duties involved need not be the full gamut of tasks that Douglas came to take on, but are open to discussion and agreement. Expressions of interest should be sent to the chairman, [chair@durhamcity.org](mailto:chair@durhamcity.org).

*The Trustees*