

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

EXTRAORDINARY BULLETIN

To form for members a first part of the Seventy-Eighth Annual Report of the Trustees, 2019-2020

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TEMPORARY SUSPENSION OF MEETINGS

The restrictions imposed to reduce the spread of the coronavirus have caused the Trust to cancel all meetings of Trustees and to postpone the AGM that was due to be held on 10 June. Advice from the Charities Commission has allowed us temporarily to set aside the observance of parts of the Trust's Articles of Association which would conflict with current Government emergency guidance and regulations. We will announce the new date of the AGM as soon as events allow.

Trustees whose terms of office expire this year will continue in office until the AGM is held. The officers of the Trust will continue to be John Lowe, Chair and Acting Honorary Secretary, Roger Cornwell, Vice Chair, and Malcolm Reed, Treasurer and Acting Company Secretary.

COMMUNICATIONS

The Trust continues to function largely thanks to email. If you do not already receive communications from the Trust by email but are willing to do so, please send your email address to trust@durhamcity.org. This will let us communicate with you more speedily and save the cost of postage. We shall of course continue to send mailings to those who wish to receive them through the post, even though we have your email. At the moment we can contact only about 30% of our members by email and we would wish to increase that significantly. Information about meetings and other important business will also be posted on the Trust website <http://durhamcity.org/>. If you have internet access, please check the site periodically for updates. Its home page also contains a form to sign up for e-mailings (another way to submit your address).

CONTINUING ACTIVITY

Trustees continue to respond each week to planning applications, and to engage with ongoing consultations on local developments and planning inquiries. You can check any planning applications that interest you on the County Council's planning portal at <https://publicaccess.durham.gov.uk/online-applications/> which holds responses that we have made.

SHERBAN CANTACUZINO

Trustees were saddened to hear of the death of Sherban Cantacuzino, CBE, D.Univ., FRIBA, a distinguished patron of the Trust. He was author of several books on architecture, was secretary of the Royal Fine Art Commission and chairman of ICOMOS/UK. He also founded the equivalent of the National Trust in Romania. His love of the Romanesque brought him into contact with us. He gave the inaugural lecture at our 50th Jubilee conference (1992), gave another lecture to members in 2003, and contributed to the Trust's 1995 publication, *St Cuthbert and Durham Cathedral: a celebration*. Sherban was unerring in responding to requests to send letters of objection in support of the Trust on major projects

John Lowe, Chairman of the Trust

ALREADY AN UNUSUALLY EVENTFUL YEAR

Even without the pandemic this has been an unusual, even decisive, year in the life of the Trust. Two important local plans have now both reached a very late stage. First is the **County Durham Plan**, set to

determine planning policy in the County up till 2035. This is yet to be finalized in that Mr. William Fieldhouse is still to offer his final Inspector's report. The prior six-week period of public consultation about the numerous recommended "main modifications" has had to be postponed. However, the main shape of the Plan is becoming clear.

Members will already know of the Inspector's welcome rejection in his post-hearings report of the proposed **Western and Northern Relief Roads**, as not "consistent with national policy or justified". He found that the adverse impacts of the roads would be substantial, unmitigable, and out of proportion to any minor benefits they might produce. Mr. Fieldhouse's conclusion vindicates almost a decade of intense work within the Trust. However, it is galling to reflect that it is essentially the same conclusion as was reached almost exactly five years before in the post-hearings report by Mr. Harold Stevens, the inspector whose subsequent rejection by the Council finally led to central government allowing it the cost, stress and delay of a repeated process.

Stricter guidelines on the building of purpose-built student accommodation blocks are in the Plan as well as overdue restrictions on the building of extensions to already existing HMOs, a projected policy change which has already led to the refusal of some significant applications for such extensions in the student-dominated City centre. Less welcome, however, is that it is still possible that the proposed Green Belt deletions will go ahead, allowing the building of an additional 1,700 houses at Sniperley, as well as the city extension site off Sherburn Road, for 420 houses.

The later, second part of this report will feature an eye-witness account of the Examination in Public by John Lowe.

The other important plan at issue has been the **City of Durham Parish Council's Neighbourhood Plan** which has completed almost all its many stages and is now in the hands of an independent examiner whose role is to determine whether the Plan is ready to submit to a local referendum of registered voters in the Parish. His report will undoubtedly include recommendations for improvements, particularly in the clarity of policy wording, and these must be agreed by the County and Parish Councils. However, because of the pandemic, the government has issued instructions that such a referendum cannot take place before May 2021. The plan will come into force if a majority of those voting support it.

NEW TRUST WEBSITE

Trustees warmly welcomed Ms Sue Childs as a new colleague, subject to confirmation at the AGM. Sue is engaged in a substantial updating of the Trust website, enhancing its facilities as a news site, archive, calendar, magazine and information resource. A **blog** will enable members to comment themselves on local issues or developments. Emulating the popularity of locally-focused Facebook sites, the blog can draw upon the Trust's deep fund of knowledge.

CITY CENTRE DEVELOPMENTS

Controversies continue about the **new County Council HQ**, approved last year despite near universal local opposition, and now being constructed by Kier on the site of the former Sands car park. As predicted by objectors, heavy rain soon led to the site being flooded. The Council pointed out that inundation last winter was restricted to the walkway along the edge of the building, which would itself be no lower than the Passport Office building immediately upstream. Nevertheless, when the HQ building floods in future and needs to be evacuated, then restored, the cost will fall ultimately to taxpayers, as will that of maintaining the void built beneath the building to take overflowing river water.

A new planning application has appeared, proposing the installation of photovoltaic cells and a terrace at the top of the new HQ. Trustees are concerned that this terrace and its "low level lighting" would exacerbate the intrusion of an already tall building in views of the **World Heritage Site**, especially from higher ground (the railway, the Crook Hall area).

The Planning Inspectorate announced in March a public inquiry into the Council's application to de-register the **common land at the Sands**, an area currently occupied by the developer, illegally but it seems with tacit Council consent. The Trust is working with the Parish Council and the Freemen in preparation for the inquiry, date uncertain.

THE NEW AYKLEY HEADS BUSINESS PARK

March 2020 saw the County Council’s publication of overall plans for the proposed new business park at Aykley Heads (<https://www.durham.gov.uk/article/22935/Aykley-Heads-update>), inviting comment from the public. The Trust responded in detail, and there will be further space for comment as specific planning applications emerge.

Relocation of the Council HQ to the Sands enables the development of a 14.6 hectare business park with a maximum office floorspace of 48,698m² . The park is hoped to attract “up to 4,000 private sector jobs” (the familiar claim of “6,000 jobs” is reserved for very hypothetical “future phases” for the wider area, after the Inspector refused to allow the emerging County Plan to anticipate a future deletion of a sizable green plateau from the Green Belt). The Council was confident of a strong and continuing demand for office space, but was not of course planning for the uncertainties that must now arise with and after the pandemic. The site will be laid out “campus style”, incorporating existing woodland. It is claimed not to be expected to overburden the City’s existing infrastructure.

The Trust welcomes the development of a major employment site in the City, though the map corresponding to the masterplan suggested various queries, comments and suggestions. The main issues were: a certain lack of ambition and of clarity in relation to reducing car use and parking on the site and the desirability of reducing the provision of parking spaces; the need to ensure viable bus services for the site, perhaps through a direct subsidized service up from the City centre. More thought seemed required to ensure attractive but practicably direct pedestrian routes through the park, and on the need for cycle routes to be clearly separate.

Aykley Heads is prominent from other high ground across the valley, and lies within the “inner setting area” of the **World Heritage Site**. Great care is urged with both the height and design of any new buildings added to this panorama.

ARCHITECTURAL AWARDS: WINNER AND OTHER BUILDINGS OF NOTE

The Trust’s Annual Architectural Award scheme was established in 1990 to recognize outstanding new developments or refurbishments in the City. As reported in the Spring Bulletin, the thoughtful restoration of the **Assembly Rooms Theatre** proved a clear winner of the 2019 award. Normally, a photograph would appear at this point, showing a plaque being presented to the Theatre Manager, Kate Barton, but this occasion must now await abatement of the pandemic.



There were other new builds or renovations to consider from 2019. The new **St John’s Learning Resource Centre** (Darbyshire Architects) represented a very difficult challenge for its designers who have accommodated sensitively a much larger building behind the narrow frontage space left by the former number 17 South Bailey (an undistinguished two-storey house). The solution was a building extending rather further back from the street than its predecessor. The frontage and entrance of the library extends directly from the corner of Etchells House on the south side to close to the rear corner of the “Parsonage” or Music Room on the other, in the vicinity of St Mary the Less. Very slightly higher than its neighbour to the south, the new building sustains a slight terracing along the gentle northward slope of the Bailey. The ground floor has a large glass frontage opening upon the historical Bailey, a superb outlook for a seminar room (though sadly the view is usually blocked by the College’s white vans).



The design of the frontage is unashamedly, even boldly, contemporary. It is simple, aptly functional and not at all a historical pastiche. It uses high quality materials, a restrained palette of dressed, suitably coloured sandstone, glass, and hardwood, with an attractively inset entrance porch. However, there was

some concern that the mullioned upper window looking onto the Bailey was rather large, out of proportion with those of Ethchell's house. Also, views from the south reveal a rather prominent clerestory which was felt to be obtrusive when lit at night.

Inside, the building has wide quiet corridors and bare white walls, with a suitably studious and contemplative atmosphere. Desks and bookshelves occupy two main storeys linked by a minimalist metal staircase. This is the Sir William Leech Library. At the far end of the library a large ornamental decorated window adorns the room. This also serves the practical function of screening off the view to the playground of the Chorister School below.



View from south side (Richard Hird)

The new **Teaching and Learning Centre** at Lower Mountjoy, off South Road, has been in use since October. Costing £40 million it offers state-of-the-art facilities for teaching, learning and conferences and hosts a wide range of learning environments and technologies, with lecture and seminar rooms all equipped to use educational technology and media. The maximum capacity of the building is 2,000 people. An impressive feature is the large space given to student learning zones and catering facilities, all busy but also quiet. This is not only a boon for students, giving them a quiet space to study, or to chat or have a coffee or meal in the large cafeteria. It should also ease congestion on Durham's pavements, as people will feel less need to head back to college or lodgings between classes.

The architects tried to respect advice from Council officers to avoid massing, and the Centre is a composite of rectangular elements each with a slightly different roof design. Trees toward the river screen much of the building from views from the Cathedral tower and it has been built into a mild depression in the hillside to further minimize its local visual impact. The building is the work of Partners: Turner and Townsend, Galliford Try, Faulkner Brown Architects, Space Architects, BuroHappold Engineers, Cundall, LUC, OOB, DPP Planning, and Hickton.

Finally, the high quality of much of the external finish recommended a closer look at the new **Student Castle** at the bottom of Claypath (CSP Architects), a block housing mostly postgraduate and international students (473 beds). This proved to be very much a building with two characters. All the lower-level communal spaces are well-designed and attractive, with a spacious foyer, a recreation area, a well-equipped gymnasium, spaces for quiet study, and a small buffet and bar for occasional use. A quiet inner courtyard is sizable and with an attractive variety of brick colour and window design. However, it is rather overshadowed (the back of the block, towards Freeman's Quay, consists of no less than 7 storeys). The old Palladium Cinema here has been preserved, incorporated into the new building off the courtyard. Its four rows of seats are newly upholstered, with due consideration for disabled access, as throughout.

The upper levels, however, though our party did not see inside personal rooms, felt far less welcoming. The very long identical corridors of door duplicating door felt disorienting, even rather like being in an M.C. Escher design.

NEW MEMBERS

This is a period of unsettling dislocation for all of us, but the work of the Trust in celebrating and protecting this unique city has not abated. Do you know someone who might be interested in joining us? If so the Trust's website (<https://www.durhamcity.org/index.html>) gives full details of the work of the Trust, and its public meetings and publications. The webpage gives access to an online membership form, or the membership secretary can be contacted at membership@durhamcity.org. Standard membership costs just £15 a year, with a lower rate of £10 for retired people and discounted joint membership. Life membership is available for £200.

The rest of this Annual Report will appear once a new date for the AGM is possible. It will contain the agenda, sections on Trust personnel, John Lowe's account of the Examination in Public, University developments (including controversies about expansion), a book review by Douglas Pocock, and a further update on local developments.

The Trustees