

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

BULLETIN

Number 57

February 2005

PUBLIC LECTURE

Alderman Colin Beswick, MBE, has lived a life of public service, in school by day and in the community undertaking numerous roles beyond the school gate. He was a City councillor for forty years, 1962-2002, and was mayor in 1970-71. For many years he was chairman of the planning committee. One of his community interests has been as a long-time member of the Trust, serving as Trustee 1972-76. We are therefore especially delighted to add our congratulations to Colin for his award in the new year honours' list.

It is as *City councillor* on the former Municipal Borough and on the present Durham District, with special reference to planning, that Colin has kindly agreed to speak to us. It promises to be a unique occasion. The lecture will be in

Alington House on 5th March, at 2.15pm, immediately following presentation of this year's Architectural Commendation.

ARCHITECTURAL COMMENDATION OF THE YEAR

The clear winner of this year's award is the extensive housing development of Highgate at Framwellgate Peth. The sloping area below the railway station had been allocated for infill by the planning authorities since clearance in the 1960s. (The Trust fully supported suitable reinstatement.) Now, after more than thirty years, and after earlier, half-progressed schemes for a hotel and for housing, the challenging and highly visible site has been brought to life with a distinctive, and distinguished residential quarter. The scheme eschews any attempt at modern interpretation or experiment. Instead, its motif is the unashamed replication of the Durham Georgian townhouse.



Highgate from Castle Chare

Success stems from its own authenticity, allied to sensitivity to site and context. It has a convincingly solid appearance, with no hint of facadism. The same conviction is evident from its inner street, as from properties lining the perimeter. Its Georgian harmony pervades in a composition where there is subtle variation in brick, render, roof height together with detailing of ridgeline and chimney, fenestration and portal. Appropriate floorscaping and street furniture complete the unity.

Houses lining Castle Chare, together with the new foot-bridge, link the area, functionally and visually, to St Godric's and the City centre. From the east Highgate provides the rising foreground to the station and viaduct; from Station Approach the rooftops of Highgate add foreground interest to the panorama of castle and cathedral.



Highgate - Internal Street

The success of Highgate stems jointly from the locally-based firm of RPS plc, in which the project architect was Sheila Hyland, and Taylor Woodrow Developments Ltd, which absorbed Bryant Homes at an early phase of construction, in which Neil Duffield remained as architectural manager. Commendation certificates will be handed out on 5th March.

Among other notable completions during the year was the rebuilding of Brown's Boathouse. The large metal and glass structure which originally threatened the site is now forgotten. The Trust can take pleasure in the outcome, not only in having opposed demolition at the public inquiry but also, along with the Planning Department, in influencing the detailing of the replacement submission when the monster pub was withdrawn. Despite the raised gable at the upriver end, the end result has retained the spirit of the old Boathouse, discretely articulating its evolution for those with historic knowledge to see.

A new landmark at Neville's Cross, on the site of the former ANSA garage, is the four-storey apartment block of Wimpey Homes. Its mass appropriately echoes that of the hotel opposite, but its apparent attempt to respond also to the style of the hotel is less successful. The two highway elevations present an uneasy collection of elements. Some see humour in the assemblage, but while humour in certain circumstances may be a legitimate motive, here the different components appear simply to have been assembled in the wrong order. An additional, unintended piece of humour in its name – Crossgate Mews - has recently been 'corrected' by the Local Authority. Monument Court, acknowledging the Neville's Cross monument opposite, is certainly more appropriate to the rear elevations. Here, in contrast to the highway elevations, fewer elements arranged in a disciplined and ordered manner are much more restful and pleasing.

A little to the north of the junction at Neville's Cross, on the site of the former service station, is Cross Valley Court, an acceptable slice of three-storey terracing. It stands isolated, however, bereft of neighbours. It might have looked at home at the junction; as it stands, it is the only example of its kind along the length of the A167 in the District.

A comprehensive review of the year would be ungracious not to make reference to the latest piece of good husbandry of our heritage by the University - the extensive roof repairs to the Music School on Palace Green. We are fortunate that many of the city's historic structures are in the custody of such a benevolent landlord.

WIDER CONTEXT 1. REGIONAL PLANNING

It has come as a surprise to many people that the massive (78%) rejection of regional government in the November referendum had little effect on the inexorable march towards regional planning and the role of the North East Assembly.

The North East Regional Assembly had been in existence for some time, with its 72 appointed members, although it was intended that it would either be replaced by an elected body or abolished if regional government was rejected in the referendum (Regional Assemblies (Preparation) Act, 2003). This "voluntary chamber", as it was called in the Regional Development Agencies Act, 1998, had no planning powers of its own, but nevertheless started work

in 1999 on strategic planning, under guidance from Government Office for the North East.

Then came the Planning and Compulsory Planning Act, 2004, which gave the Regional Assembly responsibility for the Regional Spatial Strategy, a framework for all local government planning activity. By now central government had rescinded the condition that regional government would only proceed with the backing of popular support. The November referendum vote, therefore, proved to be one against democratic accountability. There will be no elected Assembly.

The North East Assembly, calling itself "the voice of the region," is currently at the Consultation Draft stage in preparing its Regional Spatial Strategy. The Trust has responded, notwithstanding the disproportionate amount of glossy, 'apple pie' content of the Assembly's literature.

WIDER CONTEXT 2. LOCAL GOVERNMENT

The November referendum contained a second question concerning the tier of local government below regional level. Durham District, along with all other districts was to be abolished and replaced either by a single county-wide unitary authority or by three separate unitary authorities from the amalgamation of former districts. The voting figures were 50.6% in favour of the County and 49.4% in favour of threefold division of the County. In view of such an inconclusive result, the pronouncements of the Leader of the County Council, Mr Ken Manton, were interesting.

As soon as the result was announced, he was reported as saying that he would be "urging Mr Prescott to move immediately to a single unitary authority to govern County Durham" (*The Journal*, 6th November 2004). In the Council's newspaper, *Countywide* (December 2004) he wrote: "If a future government decided to reorganise councils in Durham, then we would urge them to base their decisions on the results of the referendum. Rather than subjecting us to another expensive review, from this poll they already know what people's preference for unitary local government would be." He followed this up with a letter to *The Times* (6th January, 2005) in which he claimed that in County Durham "the result provided government ministers with a clear indication of people's preference for the future shape of local government." A claim of overwhelming endorsement next?

"THE IMAGE OF A COUNTY"

As a statutory consultee for many a District planning application, the County Authority is frequently decisive when an objection is submitted on grounds of highway safety. It was therefore an extreme surprise in the autumn when the County Authority gave itself permission for an "Announcement Facility" alongside the County Hall roundabout. The stated reason was to do away with occasional temporary banners attached to railings near to the entrance to County Hall, and instead "install a device more

effective in communication and more suited to the image of a county authority.”

Described as a variable message sign with LED illuminated lettering, such features are a common sight on motorway gantries. Here, on a five-junction roundabout, strict lane, and change of lane, discipline is imperative.



Announcement Facility - seen from car

The motto, “Making a difference where you live,” is hardly a necessary message, and “Welcome to County Hall” is too late, since one’s vehicle has already been passed the entrance. These “fillers”, however, pale in relation to notices which use all three lines of the facility to announce an event, together with dates and application details. (To add to the challenge, the illuminated letters fade as one is passing owing to their restricted angle of projection). Is it really possible to safely navigate one’s vehicle and at the same time comprehend the message? To Trustees, the Highway Authority’s approval appears incomprehensible.

ENVIRONMENTAL CLUTTER

A comment often made in Trust writings is that small details can play a key role in influencing, for good or ill, appreciation of landscape or streetscape. It was therefore encouraging to learn in the autumn that both the Campaign to Protect Rural England and English Heritage announced programmes against environmental clutter. Attention was drawn to street furniture in general, but especially to the profusion of signs, multi-coloured tarmac and road markings, which are often duplicated, obtrusive and confusing, rather than simple and attractive yet functional.

English Heritage feels it necessary to produce a model streetscape manual for each region. CPRE suggests a “clutter audit” for every authority. Perhaps Trust members would like to compile their own audit. Two contrasting examples are offered here as a start. One is the redesigned roundabout at the end of Milburngate Bridge at the foot of Castle Chare. The traffic now moves more safely, but only after the erection of four dozen poles and signs. The other is the entry into Ushaw Moor from the east along Broom Lane. In a 300 metre section, in addition to the standard four 30mph and School pole signs, and between two yellow-painted bus stops, there is an endless succession of road markings: white ‘teeth’, yellow bars, white 30mph on

red tarmac, another yellow bus stop marking, a triangular, multicoloured school sign, more yellow bars, a white slow and another white 30 mph.

THE STORY OF A RECREATION GROUND

The outworkings of the planning process can sometimes frustrate a legitimate case and well-intentioned cause. A clear example is the Recreation Ground at Ushaw Moor, which some local residents, supported by the Trust, have sought to save from the inexorable advance of the housing scheme known as Huntersgate. Valid, and moral, argument has seemingly counted for little with those who interpret the law.



Highgate, seen through part of ‘polework’ of new Millburngate roundabout

After housing was first projected for three fields, one of which was the Recreation Ground, the District Authority ignored - and has continued to discount - a public petition against building on the recreation field. (The number of signatures was many times that shown to be in favour in later official consultation.) The Authority then declined to await publication of the Report of the Local Plan Inquiry, held by an inspector appointed by the Secretary of State, before deciding (December 2001) on its planning application to proceed with building on the greenfield site. And, when the Inspector’s Report recommended deletion of the site, and rescinding of the planning permission if it had been granted, the Authority simply opted to continue with the project.

A second, accompanying strategy of villagers in their attempt to save the Recreation Ground from bricks and mortar was to seek to register it as a village green. It was first submitted, with all necessary evidence, to the County Authority in May 2000. It took the Authority nearly two

years to announce (April 2002) the rejection of the application. All criteria had been satisfied except one, that of 'implied permission'.

However, the outstanding hurdle was seemingly removed when the Law Lords overturned the interpretation of implied permission in their ruling on the Washington case (November 2003). The Ushaw Moor Recreation Ground was therefore immediately resubmitted to the County. Since that time, what may be described as a blanket of prevarication has descended. It took eight months to elicit that the County was seeking advice from Queen's Counsel. When at last received, a year after resubmission, the advice was brief, but emphatic, that it should be rejected because of one failing. - The Recreation Ground, it was alleged, had been fenced off (by the developer) at the time of resubmission, and was therefore ineligible. In fact, the Recreation Ground, as the third of three fields involved, was not fenced off until six months after the resubmission. (Correspondence at the actual time of fencing with the Open Spaces Society, County and developer confirm the date.)

A request to the County to repudiate Counsel's advice and grant village green status is, apparently, too simple. Instead, the developer was asked for his "opinion." After more than two months the county are "still awaiting a reply," after which the Authority proposes to contact Queen's Counsel. Meanwhile, house building continues apace, and there is little doubt that the final planning applications – submitted under the name of Eshwood View on Christmas Eve – will be approved.

BEAUTIFUL DURHAM

Durham City was again very successful in its category of 'large town', winning Northumbria in Bloom 2004 for the seventh time and achieving a silver gilt award in the Britain in Bloom 2004 competition. As the award in 2003 was for silver, this indicates that the judges saw a significant improvement in the way that the city was presented in 2004. However, that coveted gold medal still eludes the city. This coming year it is hoped that by concentrating more on volunteers (see below) the city can convince the Judges that Durham is a worthy winner.



The Mayor, Mrs Mary Hawgood, the winner, Mr Jim McGarr and Dr John Hawgood

The City of Durham Trust award "for a long-term contribution to the local/civic amenity by a local resident" was presented at the Durham in Bloom Award Ceremony on 7th October 2004 in the Town Hall, by the Mayor, Mrs. Mary Hawgood.

The winner was Jim McGarr of 1, Deerness Court, Brandon. The citation read, "The Winner has been a great supporter of the Beautiful Durham Competition over many years. He has entered his garden and floral containers every year constantly trying new varieties of plants for added interest. He has not only maintained his own garden to a very high standard but also the grounds at his place of work. Wavin Plastics at Meadowfield is situated on a very exposed and windy industrial estate. A range of very colourful floral containers adorns the frontage of the factory. The well-designed permanent planting adds structure to the site. Overall the displays make it very welcoming for staff and visitors alike. All planned and maintained by Jim in his own time."

There is a generally held view that the national 'in Bloom' awards are the preserve of the City Council – that is that the judges are just interested in what the council workers achieve on roundabouts and public spaces. This is very far from the truth. Every year the judges are looking for evidence that everyone in the city, including owners of gardens, allotments, places of work, schools, public houses and retail areas, have made their own contribution to the way that the city looks, for the pleasure and delight of residents, workers and visitors. Everyone can help in this endeavour just by thinking about his or her own garden area, workplace or street. You don't have to specifically enter the competition itself to make a contribution. However, if you would like to enter, contact Andrew Jackson on 301 8693. Judging takes place in July.

K.T.

PERSONALIA

Trustees learnt with sadness the death in January of C.R.A.(Tony) Davies. A convivial man with an eye for architecture, which was expressed through his camera, Tony supplied illustrations for the front covers of several early Annual Reports. His many photographs of Durham's 16th-18th staircases in our Staircases book, however, will be his most lasting legacy. Tony was a Trustee from 1969-1981. His life "beyond" the Trust was acknowledged in a funeral in the cathedral.

FOR YOUR DIARY

The lecture after this year's AGM on 11th May will be given by Carol Pyrah, the new Regional Director of English Heritage, a body about to receive extra powers in our region. The general importance of its role in a historic City like Durham has long been acknowledged.

D.C.D.P.

