

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

BULLETIN

Number 60

February 2006

TRUST LECTURE

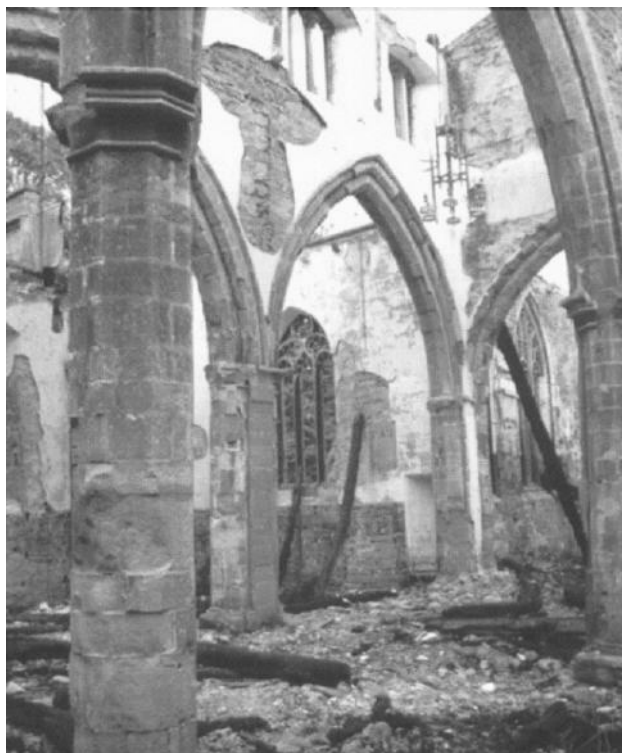
The Trust's spring lecture will be given by Mr Christopher Downs on *The Rebuilding of St Brandon's Church, Brancepeth* on **Saturday, 18th March at 2.15 pm**. Christopher is consultant architect to St Brandon's besides, of course, being consultant architect to the Cathedral. His lecture will take place in St Brandon's, immediately after the distribution of certificates for our Architectural Commendation for the past year.

ARCHITECTURAL COMMENDATION OF THE YEAR

The City Trust's annual award, open to all buildings constructed or restored in Durham District during 2005, has been won by two very different projects - the rebuilding of St Brandon's Church, Brancepeth, and by the new Visual Arts Centre of the Durham Gilesgate Sixth Form Centre.

In October 2005 **St Brandon's Church at Brancepeth** was rededicated and thus handed back to its congregation and village, seven years after fire had destroyed its roof, vaporised all furnishings and shattered the interior stonework of arcades, arch and window surrounds. The outstanding Grade 1 medieval church, which had been embellished by Cosin in the 17th century, was irreplaceable. While replication would have been a forgery, an alternative reconstruction presented a challenge of the highest order. The outcome, clearly meriting commendation by the Trust, is little short of a miracle.

The appearance of the external walls and north porch entrance give little or no evidence of the recent disaster. Surprise is thus the first reaction as one steps inside. The space is no longer heavy with furnishings, but is open and light, a space evoking peace: a building at unity with itself. A more satisfying proportion to the interior is suggested by a uniform floor level. Since it was raised by ten inches, the consequent equivalent 'reduction' in height of the arcade pillars by the same few inches reinforces the suggestion. (A raft floor was constructed to avoid disturbing extensive buried remains.) Harmony flows from a restrained colour palette: buff sandstone (Catcastle) flooring, light wooden



After the fire (C Downs)

(ash) ceiling and lime-washed walls. The last are punctuated by clear glass windows with patterns of leading derived from designs of medieval cross-slabs which were revealed in the restoration work. The windows, following the tradition of 'Northumbrian' glazing, are quite stunning.

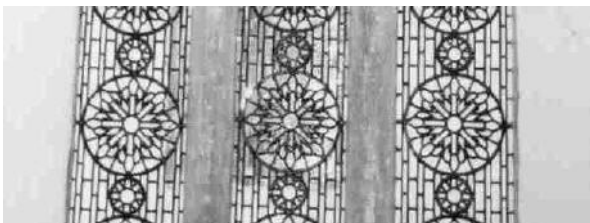
The architect responsible for all of this is Christopher Downs. The subsequent liturgical fitting-out and furnishing of the interior has been under the direction of Martin Stancliffe of York, including 'marble' hexagons around the font (shattered in the fire, but the Frosterley marble has been wonderfully restored by Hanna Conservation) and altar, lighting, seating and, not least, the olive-green, panelled cupboards.

Specialists, other than architects, have of course been crucial to the programme. Here, foremost acknowledgement must be given to Alfred March, structural engineer of Patrick Parsons Ltd, and to archaeologist Peter Ryder. The former had the daunting task of ensuring structural



Interior restored (C Downs)

stability, at the same time as trying to retain as much as possible, of the fire-ravaged arcades and walls. Peter Ryder had the initial task of sifting the debris and of excavating trial pits to ensure rebuilding did not disturb buried human remains, as well as undertaking a detailed survey of the damaged structure. The last exercise revealed not only numerous medieval cross-slabs, but also quoins towards the base of the tower, thus confirming the building's Anglo-Saxon beginnings. Not least, and crucial to the whole programme, were the organisational skills of the main contractors, MM Plasline Ltd.



Window glazing detail - North Transept (D Pocock)

If Brancepeth Church was the obvious choice for the Trust's Commendation, the qualities of a second building so surprised Trustees that they decided, exceptionally, to award a second Commendation for 2005. In more recent decades school buildings have hardly been characterised by their architectural quality, but the new **Arts Centre at Durham Gilesgate Sixth Form College** immediately attracts attention. Appropriately sited towards the end of the drive through the grounds from Freeman's Place, its satisfying curved form guides one towards the entrance of the main College building, which is itself thereby

enhanced. (Before arriving at the Centre, the first sight of its distinctive outline of sloping monopitch roof and perforated white rendering may well recall to mind Le Corbusier's famous chapel at Ronchamp.)

Externally, the steel frame exhibits terracotta cladding (echoing the red brick of the main building), glazing and white render. Inside, there are spacious studios and workshops for fine art, ceramics, textiles and fashion, together with an innovative 'Window on the Arts' programme, with a Chinese Artist in Residence. Confirmation of the whole project's success is the comment of the headteacher, Mr Mike Brett, that the new environment had instilled an enhanced sense of pride and enthusiasm among its users.

The architect for the Centre was Ian Scott of Niven Architects of Darlington, who had earlier created a Learning Resource Centre by an imaginative infilling of a courtyard. The contractors for this second successful project were also MM Plasline Ltd.



Visual Arts Centre (D Jones)



An echo of Le Corbusier (D Jones)

A new office building which has added interest to the architectural stock of the City is that of **Sunderland International Marine Insurance Company**, at the northern end of Aykley Heads estate. Relocated from Sunderland, the new building is designed by Garfield Nairn and Neil Robinson of Nicholson Nairn. Its north elevation is heavily glazed, rounded and rises from a sunken base. Its south elevation, with much reconstituted stone, is more classically symmetrical, with two identical wings divided by a vertical feature appropriately echoing the prow of a

ship. Some rounded windows are a further nautical echo. A feature of the interior is the provision of air-conditioning by means of a chilled beam system.

At a domestic level, Trustees noted the quality of renovation of two Victorian terraced properties, at **2 Flass Vale** and **21 Young Street**. The contribution, or contextual role, of such buildings in the experience of the overall townscape of the City should not be undervalued.

D.C.D.P.

MAJOR CONCERNS OVER MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

During recent months Trustees have been greatly concerned, not only over the content of several major developments, but equally on the less than transparent manner in which the applications have been processed.

1. South Street:

The confusion concerning the number of flats and parking spaces on the site of the former Library was outlined in the last Bulletin. An application for 27 flats and 27 car spaces was approved by the Development Control (= planning) Committee in April 2004; an amendment for 30 flats and 17 car spaces was refused in March 2005 against the recommendation for approval by the Planning Officer, who considered it to be "a minor amendment."

When Trustees subsequently discovered that, not only were the number of car spaces still 17, but, allegedly had never been 27, we - and not at least some Committee members - were puzzled. A special report by the Planning Officer to the November meeting of the Committee to clarify matters was highly unsatisfactory. He reiterated that car spaces had always been 17. The Committee Chairman immediately responded that this was not her recollection, or indeed what was stated in the Planner's reports in the Committee agenda papers.

The outcome? - A promise from the Planner to the Committee to try to avoid such confusion in the future. To Trustees he regretted that a lack of a shared understanding had given rise to frustration and/or annoyance, and pledged to try to ensure that his staff strove towards greater degrees of clarity and openness in the future. Unfortunately, Trustees were already experiencing a lack of openness with regard to a second major development, Walkergate.

2. Walkergate:

The last Bulletin also outlined Trustees' concern over the Walkergate scheme: in particular, over its excessive height where it abuts onto Clayport Library of the Millennium scheme. In this Bulletin we can report that that the height of the A3 Walkergate unit does indeed exceed that for which planning consent was given. The eliciting of this

fact took some six months. The following summary of our probing does not reveal the Planning Department in the best light.

When the steel framework made its initial appearance, Trustees wrote (30th June 2005) suggesting it exceeded the height given in the planning approval. The Planner's response was quite unequivocal: "I can assure you that the position of the steel framework is accurate and in accordance with the approved plans." Trustees were unconvinced.

An inspection of the planning file supported their suspicion. Letters revealed the concern of English Heritage, expressed during the consultation period, at the relative height of the Walkergate unit. This concern was acknowledged, and an adjustment made. In a letter (7th April 2005) to the Planning Department, copied to English Heritage, the architects agreed a "reduction in roof height adjacent to CLLL [Library] to relate to elevation of A3 units fronting the A690" Alongside, in the file, was the amended plan, stamped with the date of receipt (23rd April 2005) and signed certificate of approval. It was obvious that the amended plan did not conform to the height of the steelwork.

A (cordial) meeting with the Planning Officer (2nd November 2005) for an explanation was unsuccessful, for he was unable to offer one, and Trustees were advised to put their query in writing. Nearly a month later (8th December 2005), after a prompt, came the admission that the structure exceeded the height for which consent had been given by more than six feet.

In their accompanying letter, the architects argued that modification had been necessary to accommodate a ventilation extract from the car park and to mask tenants' plant on the roof, details which were not available when planning consent was given (July 2003).

(The last-mentioned argument is hardly convincing, since the original Walkergate scheme was submitted in March 1999, and thus for some six years it had been planned that a car park would occupy the lower basements. Similarly, the basic outline of the prominent structure alongside the A690 and abutting the Library had remained recognisably the same during the same period.)

More disturbing than the Planning Officer's false assurance to Trustees that the height was in accordance with approved plans, or leaving English Heritage with the assurance that the height had been lowered, was the statement of the Planning Officer in his letter of 8th December 2005 that he "was now in the receipt of an amended plan," and that he considered the increased height to be "minimal" When Trustees disagreed and asked him to request the Authority to require the developer to lower the structure to that for which planning consent had been

originally given, the action was dismissed as "a completely unreasonable request." The increased height, he reiterated, was "a modest and insignificant amendment" (18th January 2006).

3. Kascada Development (Old Ice Rink site):

Sadly, a third major proposal has recently surfaced, where clarity and openness are again of concern. A lack of publicity and manner of presentation to the Development Control Committee left much to be desired.

An application for 99 apartments and 150 car spaces on the Meridian Health and Fitness Club (formerly ice rink) site, with a 'cultural' building to replace Bishop's Mill, suddenly appeared in mid-December, with a special Development Control Committee called four days before Christmas, with a recommendation by the Planning Officer for approval. An earlier scheme had been submitted in March but withdrawn, so that the new application, despite extensive remodelling, was deemed an amendment and retained its earlier submission reference - and equivalent earlier position in the sequence of plans in the box available for public consultation. Nevertheless, the Trust is normally notified of amendments, even those of a domestic nature, if we have commented on the original application. It did not occur on this occasion. Trustees, however, 'heard' of the amendment, lodged a reasoned objection and your Secretary registered to address the Committee. The lack of a single submission from the public is a clear indication of the general ignorance of the important scheme.

At the Committee the Planning Officer's report gave but brief reference to damning submissions from English Heritage, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and from the World Heritage body, ICOMOS/UK, after that body had been alerted to the project by the Trust. (Its Secretary e-mailed the Trust, saying it considered the scheme to be "a test case", not least because the world-famous view from Prebends' Bridge would be harmed.) Uniquely in the history of the Authority, even the Department's Head of Cultural Services and her design colleagues were opposed. Two other facts could have 'sunk' the project. One, unmentioned, was the fact that the District is 30 per cent over its Structure Plan allocation for housing (and that there is a surfeit of the type being proposed). The other, dismissed, was the fact that demolition of Bishop's Mill was now permissible, whereas in the original application such action, before its withdrawal, was given as one of the reasons for recommending refusal. The Planning Officer concluded by saying that there was no basis for refusal, but members could still have an input through Conditions attached to the planning consent. (- Even if such a course were realistic, the comment surely carried echoes of the confusion surrounding the South Street application.)

The few members of the public present, as well as some Councillors, were taken aback when the application was approved by the Committee. Trustees, appalled by what by what they considered to be a less than fully objective

assessment, and notwithstanding the approval decision, immediately contacted the Government Office for the North East with a plea for a wider scrutiny. The result was that the Authority was issued with an Article 14, which means that it may not proceed further until the Secretary of State has decided whether he wishes to 'call-in' the application for it to be determined by a public inquiry.

D.C.D.P.

DURHAM IN BLOOM AWARD

The winner of the Trust's Award 'for a long term contribution to the local/civic amenity by a local resident or development' was Mr R Cheetham of Coxhoe. The citation said he has been a great supporter of the Beautiful Durham Competition over the years. He has entered his garden and floral containers for many years, trying new varieties of plants for added interest.



Mr R Cheetham

It was wonderful news that Durham City won Britain in Bloom in 2005, and a gold medal, after seven years of being runner-up. This means that the city is not eligible to enter this competition in 2006, in order to give other competitors a chance. If the city wins its class in Northumbria in Bloom, then it will be eligible to enter for Britain in Bloom 2007.

Darlington won the 2005 Northumbria in Bloom final, beating Durham by one point. In order to prevent this anomaly happening again, (ie Durham winning the Britain in Bloom but not Northumbria in Bloom) Northumbria in Bloom are to introduce the same marking criteria as Britain in Bloom, together with the medal system (gold, silver gilt, silver, bronze), in addition to the overall category winner awards. Judging for this takes place in late April and mid-July and we would ask members to be aware of, and take action about, any litter, graffiti or other detritus which detracts from the city being a beautiful place to live, work and visit.

K.T.

FOR YOUR DIARY

This year's **AGM** will be held on Wednesday **10th May** at 7.30pm in Elvet Riverside, room 141. It will be followed by an illustrated lecture by your Secretary entitled *The Futures of Durham*. Based on more than three decades of 'Durham-watching', it will suggest that a series of choices recently made or being contemplated threaten to overturn the delicate balance between conservation and development for our historic City.

