

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

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TRUST OPERATION AND APRIL TALK

This bulletin is the fourth full update from the Trust to be published since the Covid 19 pandemic was declared. Despite the continuing programme of vaccinations, it is still too early to know the mode or date of the next **Annual General Meeting**, only tentatively planned for the second Wednesday of June. Operation through social media remains the current norm, as with Martin Roberts's successful talk on Kepier, given last December to an audience of over 100.

Part of this bulletin covers expert restoration work at Beaurepaire/Bearpark. We are delighted to announce an online talk on this for **Thursday April 8, at 7 pm**, given by **Rebecca Watkins**, founder of Dream Heritage CIC, in charge of the project. Her talk is entitled "**Rebuilding the Ancient Ruins; Rebuilding Community -The Story of Beaurepaire Medieval Manor House, Co. Durham**". To obtain a link to Rebecca's talk, email zoom@durhamcity.org by the day before if possible.

REVAMPED WEBSITE

The Trust has revamped its website. The new version is available at the usual address: <https://durhamcity.org/> We believe that the new website has three main benefits:

- (1) it gives much more detail about what the Trust is doing, e.g. in the form of responses to planning proposals and consultations that affect Durham City. The Trust does a lot of work in the background that is not immediately obvious. Members will be able to see what issues are affecting the City and what the Trust is trying to do about them. Members can be proactive by alerting the Trust to upcoming concerns;
- (2) it has a blog - the News section - where people can comment on postings, and make their own posts if they wish. This will provide an opportunity for members to "talk" about issues that concern them. **Anyone can comment on a post.** Trustees would be glad to publish occasional "guest posts" from members, so please get in touch if you would like to write something;
- (3) it is designed to be accessible by mobile devices as well as by PCs and laptops. This will make it much more usable.

However, like any website, it is a "work in progress". Some of the pages that will contain additional historical information about the Trust's activities are still being written. If you have any comments about the new website please email us at website@durhamcity.org.

BRIEF UPDATES

Common Land at the Sands. The public inquiry into the Council's acquiescence in Keir's appropriation and fencing off of common land at the Sands (the former coach park) has been postponed. Originally set for 26th January, it will now be held on April 27, extending into the April 28 and 29 if necessary. The Council has already issued long documents seeking to justify the seizure in retrospect, and these will be answered by the Parish Council and the Freeman, with the support of the Trust. A report will follow.

Dunelm House. A threat of demolition to Dunelm House lingers in the University's Estates Masterplan, but

look out for news on its gaining Listed Building protection. The Secretary of State is soon to announce a decision following Historic England's advice to List and following both C20 and the City of Durham Trust objecting to a Certificate of Immunity from Listing granted previously. Both the Guardian and Northern Echo have recently celebrated this Brutalist gem.

ANNUAL ARCHITECTURAL AWARD (2020)

No new building or restoration presented itself to mark the 30th anniversary of the Trust's award scheme. Dilemmas about contagion and social distancing that might have risen for any site inspection remained merely theoretical—there were no worthy candidates this year. 2020 did see completion of a vital renovation scheme at 34-35 Saddler Street, but its realization became a strange case of snatching defeat from the very jaws of victory.

Estate House, 34-35 Saddler Street

The very best of intentions have not succeeded in the case of Estate House, a prominent and extremely important heritage building in the heart of Durham City Conservation Area and on the principal route to Durham Cathedral and Castle. The building dates back to the C17 with later alterations and is a very rare survival consisting of two united timber-framed buildings where a considerable quantity of original timber continues to exist. It had long been in need of a viable use before the evident serious deterioration became irreversible. The Trust and the Parish Council both welcomed the comprehensive, well-researched and sensitive proposal in 2019 to carry out works that would safeguard the property. One note of caution was sounded at the time, that the proposed treatment did not retain the shop front with its highly distinctive small, blown glass panes and instantly recognisable in lay terms as Georgian/Victorian. However, there were practical structural reasons for the more robust proposal. What we did not expect was that the existing shop front's slight slope would be a great deal more prominent in the new shop front.



Before restoration



After restoration

It is not clear why the design chose to represent such an exaggerated sagging of the frontage. Indeed, the approved drawings suggest that it is the first-floor windows that are misaligned and have sagged the other way. The fact remains that this special heritage building is no longer in its distressing former state and is secured for many decades to come, but that its public face has an unsettling frown. The ungainly result is unworthy of this extraordinarily important building and the Trust could not grant it the Award it should have deserved. **John Ashby**

RESPECTING THE NEW COUNTY PLAN

A new **County Plan** was adopted last October and is now in force. A summary of it respecting Durham City was given in last autumn's bulletin. The **Neighbourhood Plan** now also has weight in local planning after its approval by a planning inspector, though it is still subject to a public referendum. At the time of writing, this is still due in May.

The onus now is to ensure that local plans are actually followed. Late last year the Durham City Parish Council formally approached the Trust and other local bodies with a view to working together to influence the major changes arising from the County Plan, with a focus on the City-wide impact of new housing

estates at Sniperley and off Sherburn Road. A felt need for alliances comes from the experience of repeated frustration with the quality of the planning process in Durham. The Trust is particularly concerned about two major schemes which diverge from the County Plan. The first is already approved, the second is due for consideration soon, possibly April 6.

1. The Aykley Heads Business Park. Last December the County Planning Committee gave outline planning permission for the long-advertised business park at Aykley Heads, to be realized over the following 20 years. It simultaneously gave full, immediate planning permission for a 3-storey office block to be built west of Salvus House. This is to form a “flagship” development for the new park.

While broadly supportive of use of this area for offices after the current County Hall is demolished, the Trust had offered detailed criticisms of the outline, as summarised in our last Annual Review. Of concern are the impact on Durham’s sensitive landscape and conflicts with the sustainable transport policies in the County and Neighbourhood Plans. It also became clear that the first “flagship” development flouts the County Plan. Policies 3 and 9 stipulate sustainable principles of development and of design, seeking to achieve zero carbon buildings, but the proposed scheme does not meet the minimum rating for non-residential buildings of “very good” in the Building Research Establishment Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM). “Very good” is only the third highest of 6 benchmarks.

The Planning Committee acknowledged that the building did not meet the Council’s own energy conservation standards but approved it anyway with the whole outline, falling back on the hope that the Aykley Heads scheme overall would later come up to standard. The argument was that there was no time for reconsideration without losing government funding for half the cost of the building, as promised in a “Getting Building” fund the previous August (oddly, before planning permission was granted). Claims were made in the planning committee that the energy standards of the new Plan had taken people by surprise, yet a public commitment to such high standards precedes the Plan by quite a few years, as do acknowledgments of their urgency. The Council declared a climate emergency in 2019.

A request was made to the Secretary of State to reconsider this sub-standard scheme on appeal. The request was refused on the grounds of respecting “localism”. However, that department’s own guidance is that a funding resource should only influence a planning decision if that money enables an application to meet required standards.

The Chairman of the Trust wrote a letter to the *Durham Advertiser*, concluding: “*What sort of example does the County Council’s approval of this substandard scheme for the flagship building in the business park at Aykley Heads set for commercial developers? What is the point of the newly adopted County Durham Plan if the County Council itself can ignore it at the first significant hurdle?*”

2. Sherburn Road/Bent House Lane. Members will remember that the Trust had opposed loss of green belt land to house-building at both Sniperley Park and off Sherburn Road. However, both are now to become “sustainable urban extensions” to the City, in accordance with Policy 5 of the County Plan.

Banks Property wasted no time with an outline planning application covering the majority of the site allocated off Sherburn Road, c. 17.25 hectares of the 18.7-hectare allocation. The new estate is hoped to form an exemplary “gateway” to the City. It is located on a sensitive site, mostly arable farmland to the east of Bent House Lane and west of the A1(M), sloping southwards into the Wear Valley. The Trust has engaged with Banks on the project, though as yet without feedback. Two requests to meet the Council’s



Site of urban extension looking south and east.

Head of Development and Housing were not answered, so the Trust finally submitted a 42-page objection, visible on the new website, <https://durhamcity.org/our-work/planning/>.

Banks's submission does not respect the County Plan. Policy 5 concerns Durham's "sustainable urban extensions" and stipulates that "*Development is required to be comprehensively masterplanned*" (emphasis added). However, Banks's proposal takes the thinner form of an outline application, and significant parts of it have more the character of a general advertising brochure than a committed and detailed account of specifics. Policy 4 of the County Plan allocates 420 new houses to this whole urban extension. Banks's outline application, which concerns most but not all of the site, is for "up to 440 dwellings and associated infrastructure". All other matters are reserved, except for two proposed points of access to the site. This leaves the development of individual plots to future separate applications concerning work by Banks's contractors. The risk is that these may be incongruously piecemeal, and fall short of stated aspirations. Key issues include: the nature and timing of energy sustainability measures, the mix of housing types provided (in accordance with Policy 15 of the County Plan), parking arrangements, the specific plot locations and the provision of open spaces, for how can an ambition for a high "yield" of "up to 440" dwellings not restrict possible landscaping measures, the space left for gardens and green areas? The Trust's submission includes specific proposals for helping screen the new housing estate.

Finally, like many transport plans submitted by developers, that from Banks seemed something of an add-on, devised after a maximum build is calculated. The Trust's critique made detailed and illustrated suggestions for genuine sustainable transport measures that would reflect current best practice. We now await the planning decision.

BEAUREPAIRE

The Trust is in supportive contact with the Yorkshire-based Dream Heritage CIC, currently working on an ambitious restoration project at the remains of **Beaurepaire Manor House** at Bearpark. The restoration is being led by **Rebecca Watkins**, a former Durham University archaeology student who also set up Dream Heritage.

As many members will know, Beaurepaire or "beautiful retreat" was, like Kepier, formerly a manor house and estate attached to Durham Cathedral Priory before the Dissolution. Its over 13,000 acre walled estate would have formed one of the "landscapes of supply" for the Priory, as described by Martin Roberts in his 2018 talk to the Trust. (Other such granges included Finchale and Pittington Hallgarth). The "Historic England" archive describes "5 ranges round 2 courtyards open to west, sloping down from top of north bank of River Browney".



The estate was repeatedly pillaged by incursions from across the border, including the Scots army defeated at the battle of Neville's Cross in 1346. After the Dissolution, the site was rented out as a farm, but the buildings were burned down during the civil wars of the 1640s. The place then became merely an informal quarry, and even the name "Beaurepaire" was worn down to "Bearpark". The ruins now have Grade II listed status, but had become subject to further neglect and vandalism.

Restoration work started in 2018 to clear away the vast amount of vegetation that covered the site, barring easy access to all but the "great hall". A feature of the project has been the keen involvement of local volunteers of all ages and some local firms. A small grant from Durham's Area Action Partnership gave support. Work has been slowed but not stopped by Covid restrictions, with 2020 seeing 80 tonnes of self-compacting gravel (donated by TARMAC) being laid on all the newly cleared room surfaces and as a perimeter path, to hinder weed growth on the masonry. Rebecca writes: "We at DREAM want to create a lasting legacy at the site of Beaurepaire, where the current volunteer group look after the site regularly; where schools can come for the annual re-enactment of the Battle of Neville's Cross; where people can visit and enjoy...". There is a call for more volunteers for 2021: contact dreamheritagecic@gmail.com. Drone footage gives a great overview of the partly restored site: <https://youtu.be/FFMylqyGMOA>.

The Trustees