

FROM THE TRUST'S ARCHIVES

Boathouse Inquiry

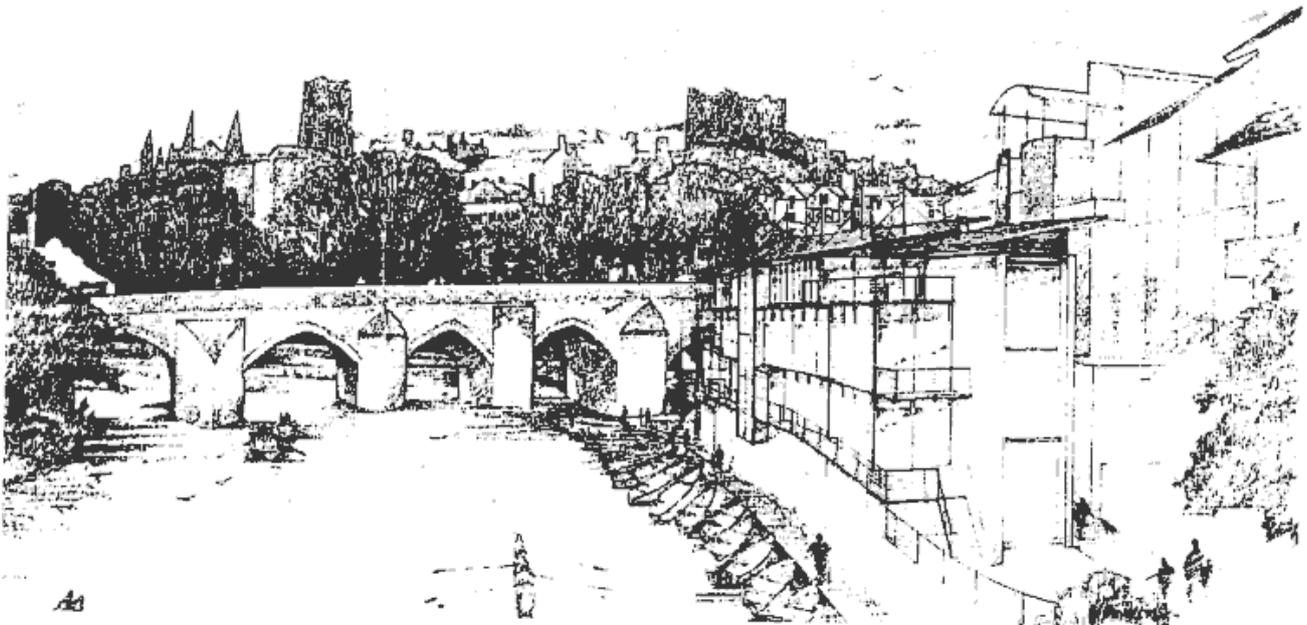
Our appeal for signatures on the public petition to save Brown's Boathouse elicited a magnificent response. Thank you, Trust members! In one month we achieved over 4000 signatures. This figure is by far the biggest for any planning application in the history of the District - in fact, some forty times bigger! If public opinion decided inquiries, then there could only be one outcome but, of course, as we have found, the world of planning is more complex...



... and the wider world just as surprising! Despite all indications, Brown's Boathouse has now been saved, as you can read below.

During the three full days of the October Inquiry, six expert witnesses presented the case for Leftbank Developments Ltd to demolish the Boathouse and replace it with a four-storey bar/restaurant. The first witness presented a structural survey showing the Boathouse to be unsound, with the cottage part alone requiring £270,000 to stabilise it. Another outlined the requirements of a return on capital of 20-25% in order to yield a net annual profit of £750,000. The architect of the replacement building admitted that the glass and metal structure contravened Local Plan policies for the City's Conservation Area but held that it conformed, if not to the letter, then to the spirit of the law.

Another witness presented two landscape approaches to show that demolition of the Boathouse was acceptable. In the first approach, unfavourable qualities of the Boathouse included its uniqueness, not being typical of the Conservation Area, not having the appearance of a traditional boathouse, having no significant historical association, even turning its back on the refurbished space between itself and Old Elvet Bridge! The same witness then extolled the positive contribution to the Conservation Area of the proposed new building although, strangely, it was claimed it would not "impact" on the view of the Peninsula from New Elvet Bridge (see illustration).



Bar-restaurant as proposed by Leftbank Developments Ltd

Another planning witness claimed that the Boathouse was incongruous and out of scale in its setting, overpowered by the Prince Bishops scheme and harmful to the appearance of the Conservation Area. He reiterated that there was no architectural or historic interest. The replacement building would overcome these defects. He also noted that a large public house had police blessing and conformed to Local Authority zoning and to the desire for a vibrant city centre.

The Local Authority fully supported the application. However, it could hardly explain away its consistent negative reaction to Leftbank's first, similar proposal, repeated at the submission of the revised version in April 1999, when the Planning Officer wrote: "I am still unable to support the demolition of the existing building and its replacement with a greatly enlarged pub/restaurantthe reasons are primarily to do with the value of the existing building, and the scale and design of its replacement and the adverse impact it would have on the wider Conservation Area and World Heritage Site."

It is true that, under Trust cross-examination, one of the witnesses admitted to "factions within the Planning Department", but that hardly explains the volte-face.

Opposing demolition and replacement were English Heritage and the City Trust. The former body was disappointing, and appeared to concede too many points. The Trust's case was built on six strands:

One, the Boathouse, not the replacement, was the building which exhibited 'good manners' with regard to the existing townscape and Conservation Area context. And context was more than adjacency to the Prince Bishops building. In this cause, we presented supporting letters from ICOMOS/UK - whom the Local Authority had not consulted - and from our Patron, Sherban Cantacuzino.

Two, central government Planning Policy Guidance and Durham District Local Plan were quoted to show they strongly favoured retention of the boathouse, and not a building of the type proposed.

Three, attention was directed to context and scale of the proposed (drinking) use. The 1,000-capacity pub, in the context of 4,000 other drinking spaces for the city centre already firmly in the pipeline, all set within the narrow confines of Durham's historic streets and vennels, was held to be the potential for anti-social behaviour and social disorder. The most recent volatile night-time history of central Newcastle was cited.

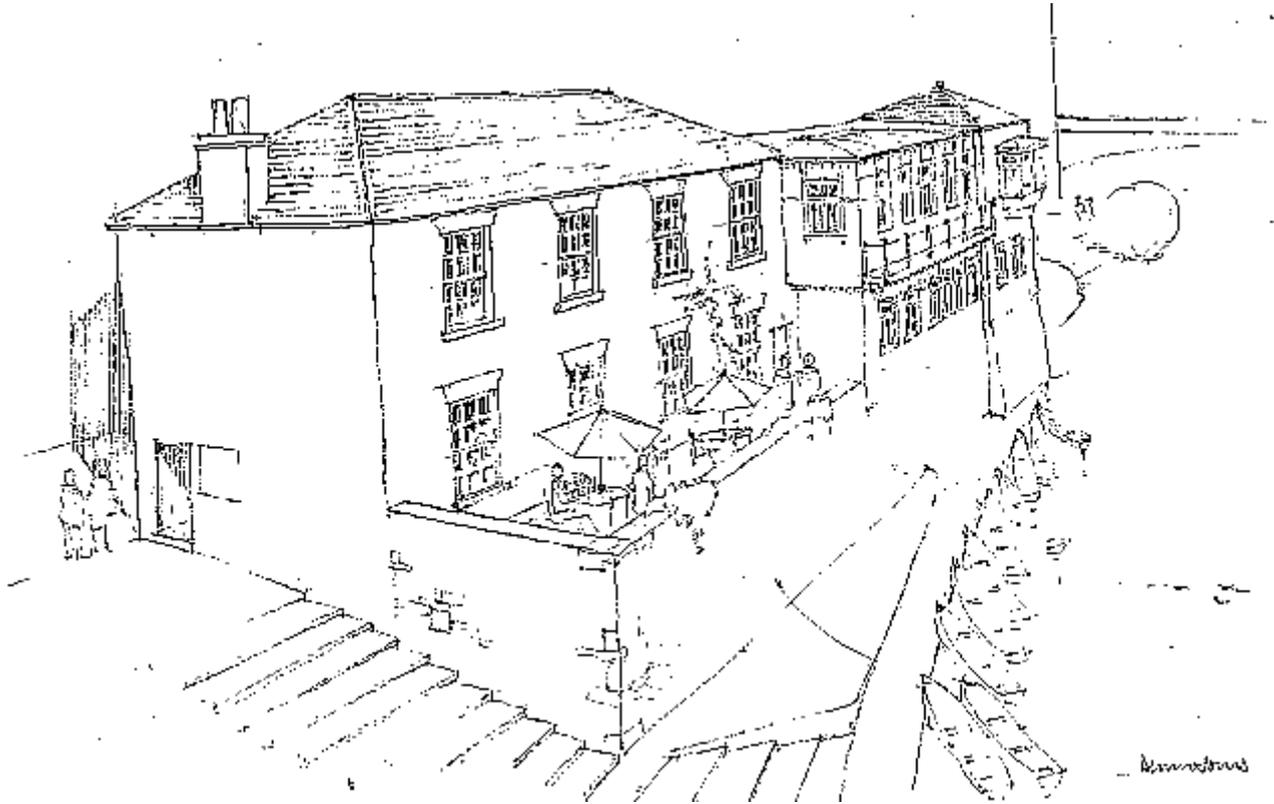
Four, the architectural and, especially, historical interest of the Boathouse had been greatly undervalued by the Local Authority and Leftbank. The original 1830s cottage is still clearly visible. It stands witness to the country's oldest regatta, has seen the design and production of racing craft from the beginning and been home to notable occupants.

Outstanding in the last respect was the occupancy in the 1860s of John Hawks Clasper, part of the most famous rowing family ever produced by our country. His Tyneside father, Harry, with whom he rowed, was acknowledged world champion and a legend in his lifetime. Father and son can be credited with designing the modern racing craft. John built boats for Oxford and Cambridge universities. The Trust presented a letter of support from the Clasper descendants, who were puzzled at what they viewed as proposed vandalism. In view of our findings, and the recent interest by English Heritage in listing hitherto neglected categories, there could well be a case for listing the building.

Five, the quite unprecedented support for our petition revealed the public's overwhelming wish for the Boathouse retention.

Six, retention and alternative use was a viable proposition. The structure may be poor, but Trustee Dennis Jones showed that he had restored worse, and for considerably less outlay than that

quoted by the applicants. Moreover, the latter's client-led scheme with the huge profit requirement, was foreign to the local entrepreneurs with whom he had regular contact, and who would be interested in the kind of sensitive restoration and renovation he suggested. A sketch of his proposal is reproduced here.



In summary, the Boathouse was worth saving, and it was possible so to do. However, the Inspector and Secretary of State did not agree with this conclusion. Trustees are now investigating what, if anything, can now be done.

Date: 22 November 2001

Brown's Boathouse Saved

Plans to demolish Brown's Boathouse and build a new glass-and-steel pub have had to be scrapped after the developers discovered unexpected problems. They have decided instead to keep the Boathouse and convert it into a café-bar. This unexpected turn of events has been welcomed by the Trust, which had suggested such a modest solution when the mega-pub was first mooted..



The developers discovered that there is a major water main running right next to the Boathouse, so close that it rests on the foundations. The developer can't take the risk of damaging that, he'd be liable. Also, they would need to build a very expensive dam in the River Wear to construct their foundations.

Instead they've put in a new planning application to keep the boathouse and convert it to a café-bar. This is something that we welcome very much. So too will the people of Durham and particularly the 4000 that signed the petition organised by the Trust. They'll be grateful for a strategically placed water main and for a company that has decided that if they can't go ahead with plan A, then they'll opt for plan B which means the boathouse should get a new lease of life.

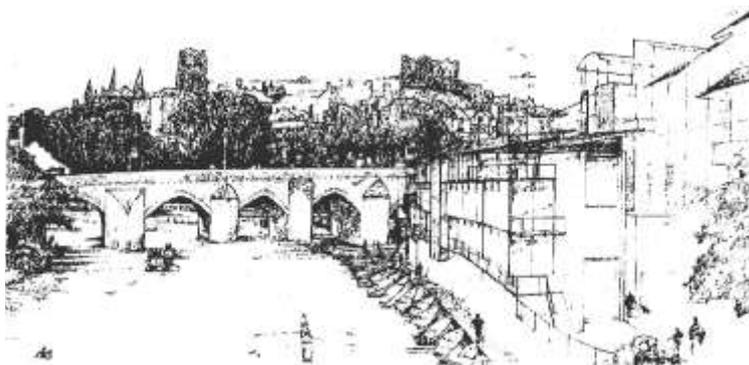
Most people know Brown's Boathouse - it's where you can hire boats in the summer and its where, for over 150 years, racing boats have been made and repaired. It's part of the local scene. When the Trust learned of plans to knock it down and replace it with a glass and steel mega-pub with room for up to 1000 drinkers we were horrified and organised a campaign to save it. We collected over 4000 signatures on a petition.

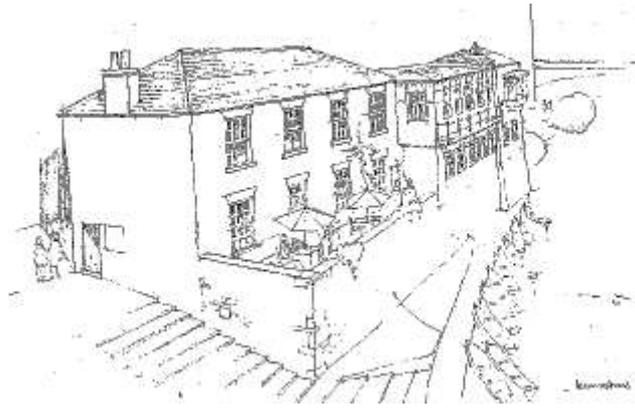
The plans were the subject of a public inquiry in October last year. We presented all the arguments why the Boathouse should be saved, and of course handed in the petition. But the Inspector's report recommended the plans could go ahead.

We were naturally disappointed, as were members of the public who kept asking us: how could they do such a thing?

The Trust is now writing to the City Council, urging them to approve the planning application that will save the Boathouse. It seems other planning applications are in the pipeline, to tidy up the building and the area between the Boathouse and Elvet Bridge. We await these with interest, and they will be subject to our usual scrutiny.

The drawings below show how the new pub would have looked, and the renovation proposed by the Trust's architect, Dennis Jones.





Date 22 November 2001