

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

BULLETIN

Number 94

Spring 2022

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durhamcity.org

THE SPRING TALK: “*Fuelling Durham – Past, Present and Future*”. Professor Jon Gluyas.

Coal was king. For more than 100 years the miners of Durham won coal for the nation and empire beyond [...]. Durham remains rich in coal resources but deep mining has ceased and surface opencast has all but gone too. Initially uneconomic, coal is, rightly, considered a fuel of the past given the copious emissions of greenhouse gases and particulate pollutants when it is burned. Now, Durham like the UK as a whole is a net importer of energy – electricity, natural gas and oil, with indigenous power generation from wind and sun occupying but a small portion of the overall county’s energy budget.

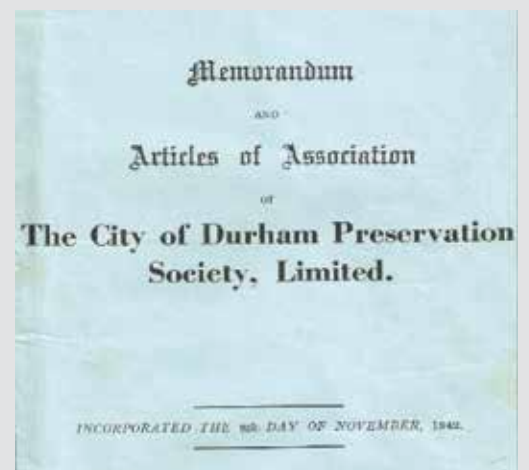
What does the future hold for a county committed to decarbonise within the next few decades? Can County Durham become energy self-sufficient and carbon neutral? Having achieved neutrality and self-sufficiency, might we even export skills and knowledge to help others meet their Climate Emergency goals? The talk will explore the possible energy futures to compare with the County’s energy past.

Director of the Durham Energy Institute, Jon is a geoscientist with 28 years in industry and 12 in academia. The first part of Jon’s career was in the petroleum industry, much of it being associated with improving our understanding of the subsurface and the relationship between the rock and fluids – water, oil and gas contained therein. Recognition of the impact of petroleum usage on the atmosphere and hydrosphere along with the realization that the Earth could deliver much more than fossil fuels and do it in a sustainable way led to a career change to academia.

Jon’s talk will take place at 2 pm on Saturday 2 April in lecture room ER 141 in Elvet Riverside. To book a place at this event, please visit <https://bit.ly/339eIzq>, OR you can watch via zoom by emailing zoom@durhamcity.org a day or so before the event to request the link.

THE TRUST’S 80th ANNIVERSARY: JOHN LOWE (CHAIRMAN)

The City of Durham Preservation Society was founded on 9 November 1942, an extraordinary expression of confidence in the midst of war. The name was not changed until 1966. We are celebrating the anniversary with a programme of activities that we hope will bring the work of the Trust to a wider audience, and later this year the Bow Trust is going to put on an exhibition about the City of Durham Trust’s history in the Durham Museum. Jon Gluyas’s talk will take us back to the time when, in 1944, the Trust successfully opposed the building of a huge coal-fired power station at Kepier, a structure that would have overshadowed the Cathedral. At the planned AGM for 24 September, John Pendlebury will talk about Thomas Sharp, influential author of *Cathedral City: A Plan for Durham* (1944).



Now part of a World Heritage Site, the Cathedral is still not immune from threats to its splendour and one of the activities we are planning is a day conference about the WHS and the current planning environment.

A major contributor to the Cathedral's splendour is its setting above the riverbanks and we are delighted to be involved with a number of practical initiatives to enhance the riverbanks in partnership with many other groups and agencies. Some details are given in the enclosed sheet. We are hoping that this involvement will help to introduce the Trust to young people. We also hope to establish links with the WHS Young Heritage Ambassadors and we shall have a presence at the WHS Festival to be held on 18 April (Easter Bank Holiday Monday).

We are planning to publish a set of cards with depictions by local artists of prominent Durham features. We have purchased a bench for the Botanic Gardens to commemorate the anniversary and will hold a picnic there. On 9 November itself we intend to hold a social event to celebrate the occasion. So lots to prepare and look forward to; we'll publish details on our website and in future bulletins as they become available.

A RIVERSCAPE IN NEED OF ATTENTION

Three separate initiatives are underway this year. See the supplement accompanying this bulletin.

YOU TUBE CHANNEL, "CITY OF DURHAM TRUST"

Thanks to the skill and initiative of Francis Pritchard, the Trust can now build a video library of talks and events. Martin Roberts's illustrated history lecture of last December, "**The Riverbanks of Durham Peninsular**", forms the inaugural item and the list should soon grow. See <https://bit.ly/3s3EgHO>.



QUALITY CONTROL AT COUNCIL PLANNING COMMITTEES

Anger has been felt at the frequently poor quality of planning reports from Council Officers, the important documents advising planning meetings before councillors take their decisive votes. A letter outlining the Trust's concern was sent on 3rd December to leading councillors and the relevant chief officers. We understand the letter is not being ignored.

Council resources are clearly under intense pressure, but the problem goes beyond the culture fostered by the national requirement to presume in favour of "sustainable development". Officers' summaries for councillors of national planning policy have too often been poor or selective, or referring in one case to an outdated version. This slackness has especially eroded due consideration of issues of transport sustainability. The immediate tipping point for the Trust's December letter was an officers' report contorting the terms of the County Plan to enable approval of an opportunistic and inadequately framed application by Banks to build 500 houses on former Green Belt land near Bent House Lane, as reported in our last bulletin.

The Trust also urged other enhancements of the local planning process — more time for the full consideration and clarification of complex material on major applications, allowing objectors more than a perfunctory few minutes at the meetings, and the full and adequate training of the councillors on committee.

As if to prove the Trust's point 2022 started with a glaring example of the need for such training. An application came in from Unbox Ltd to site four holiday units in repurposed shipping containers on Green Belt land behind the Poplar Tree Garden Centre at Shincliffe. This would be in clear violation of Green Belt policy, and was stated as such in the officer's report. All the same, the Committee on 11 January narrowly approved the application on superficial grounds — that it was only a tiny part of the Green Belt, would boost tourism in its small way, showcase Durham ..., nothing remotely amounting to the "very special circumstances" national policy demands if overriding Green Belt protections.

Equally disturbing was the confusion surrounding an application to demolish the Apollo Bingo Hall on Sherburn Road and replace it with a block of purpose-built student accommodation (PSBA), with 128 beds. The initial planning approval of 11 January was seen to address the risk of the old bingo hall becoming a derelict eyesore, but the replacement PBSA was granted partly on the basis of inaccurate, unchecked claims from the developer on the need for such a building, that there was a shortfall of 3,600 student bed-spaces

against the University's published expansion plans up till 2027. (In fact, the inspector approving the County Durham Plan had found sufficient allocation for student accommodation up to that time). A decisive error later emerged: that a statement of strong reservations from the University itself, uploaded to the planning portal on 7 January, had not been reported to the Committee. It was instead told the University had not responded. The University had found the proposed building inadequate in facilities and too remote from its main areas. It also refuted the applicant's claim that 3,000 students were in need of relocation from the City's viaduct area.



The Council's solicitor was informed of the error and the planning approval agreed in January was set aside. At the end of February a new date for the committee decision emerged, 8 March — awkwardly just when this bulletin must be in press. The case officer's report for the meeting still recommends conditional approval.

UNIVERSITY STUDENT NUMBERS ALREADY EXCEED THE TARGET OF 21,500 SET FOR 2027!

The case of the Apollo Bingo Hall raises larger questions for the future of the City. John Ashby's objection for the Trust on 11 January had underlined the fact that the City already now accommodates more students than the University's 2027 target of 21,500. The figure as of December 2021 is 22,220. The County Plan is already allocating space for new colleges on the University's own estate and any other such developments elsewhere must prove in each case "that there is a need for additional student accommodation of this type in this location" (policy 16.2). Opportunist large student blocks such as this take away space that could otherwise provide accommodation or facilities for local people. They usually make no contribution to the architecture of the City or to its communal life.

One positive development did seem to emerge from the planning muddle. Durham County Council was understood finally to recognize the need to get to grips with the question of student "need", of how much accommodation of what sort and where. The decision on the Apollo Bingo Hall ought to be a test of this belated recognition. The University itself does not fully help in that its responses to such developments will consider only issues of suitability of design and location, bypassing the issue of the impact of their numbers in the City. Untested claims of student need must not lead to developments that only enable student numbers further to overwhelm this small City, even beyond the many thousands allowed for in the County Plan. [STOP PRESS: the 8 March meeting approved replacing the Bingo Hall with a student block.]

John Ashby has written on student numbers and accommodation for the Trust's website (<https://bit.ly/3otIxlw>).

TWO MASTERPLANS

You wait ages in vain for a bus and then.... Last autumn two masterplans on the future of the City appeared from the County Council for consultation. However, the "*Durham City Framework*" is not the kind of holistic masterplan long advocated by the Trust, one encompassing measures fully to protect the World Heritage area from the creep of piecemeal damage, or to address the University's rampant expansion. Instead, it offers blandly promotional material on the vision/opportunities for the City, giving an undetailed list of local projects that range from the already complete or underway to the wished for. This last includes hopes for "levelling up" funds to help revive the dilapidated Fulling and Corn mills, and to support the possible conversion of Belmont Viaduct to a cycle path. The Trust response is posted on the website (<https://bit.ly/3v1YBPK>).

"**Sniperley Park Masterplan (draft)**". The County Plan approved in late 2020 included a "sustainable urban extension" at Sniperley Park, to take 1,700 new houses, a vast development. The Plan's Policy 5 is clear that such urban extensions require detailed and environmentally progressive masterplanning — the very policy travestied by the other such extension at Bent House Lane. Trustees welcomed this time the

ambitions of a masterplan drafted within the Council itself, intended to guide subsequent developer applications, as the County Plan stipulates. Councillor Elizabeth Scott, cabinet member for the economy and partnerships, said: “The masterplan will set out how the site will deliver a high-quality sustainable form of development.” It will be “an exemplar of design excellence and strive to be a carbon neutral development through its use of renewable energy, excellent sustainable transport connections, and the high-standard of its housing.” It is to include a new primary school, community buildings and attractive new parkland.

The Trust responded in a detailed and largely positive way to the public consultation on the masterplan and the associated “Healthy Active Travel Connectivity Plan”. The response is on the website (<https://bit.ly/34knrzh>), along with a related study on decarbonizing transport by Matthew Phillips (<https://bit.ly/32YOyzc>). The Trust’s response focused on embedding and realizing the best ambitions of the masterplan, on decarbonization, energy systems, links to the wider area that address the threat of severance, meeting high local design standards, public transport provision and improving the spatial design of the estate for walkers and cyclists. A major concern, as so often, is helping forestall the destructive side-effects of a culture of mass car ownership, very wary of future pressures from Sniperley on the local road network, and to avoid further ugly streetscapes in which cars dominate road margins, garden spaces and even block pavements.

As all too often in local planning, the best ambitions now risk betrayal. Last autumn, two developers jumped ahead of the Council’s public consultation and submitted planning applications for parts of the Sniperley site, Bellway Homes Ltd for 370 dwellings, and 1,550 from County Durham Land LLP (a total of 1,920, well over the 1,700 in the County Plan). Council officers and councillors were said to be annoyed by this piece of opportunism, but they are required by law to consider these applications in the normal way. The Trust responded critically to both: neither offers the required overall masterplanning nor gives that much promise of something better than another uninteresting car-dependent suburb.

Trustees take heart from a recent planning appeal decision that upheld the refusal of a comparable development in Cambridgeshire because it “fails to create high quality, beautiful and sustainable buildings and places which is a fundamental aim to what the [National Planning Policy] Framework requires.”

We hope that councillors overseeing plans for Sniperley will not be cowed this time into allowing anything but the “extraordinary development that responds to its special location and character” outlined by Councillor Scott.

POSITION VACANT, TREASURER FOR THE TRUST

Dr Malcolm Reed is stepping down as Treasurer for the Trust, effective from the next AGM sometime this summer. It is a role Malcolm has performed with unfailing expertise since 2015. He played a decisive part in the Trust’s switch to the status of Charitable Incorporated Organisation last year, and this has also considerably simplified the keeping of accounts. The duties can be described as vital but not onerous, and Malcolm will assist the new Treasurer during a transition period. **Any member interested in taking up this role should contact our Chair** (chair@durhamcity.org).

PERSONALIA

Trustees were sorry to hear that **Liz Brown** is stepping down after working hard as a Trustee since 2016. The good news is that Liz is doing this with a view to intensifying her work as County Councillor for Neville’s Cross, when she will need to avoid any perception of a conflict of interest.

It is a deep sadness to report the death late last year of **Janet Gill**, a former trustee who had stepped down in 2016 after 13 years of devoted service to the Trust. Once described as “our eyes on Elvet”, Janet was also a stalwart of the Elvet Residents’ Association. The ERA has erected a memorial bench at the Stockton Road Cemetery, to be “opened” by Jack Gill at 2.30 pm on Sunday 3rd April. Members are welcome and the Trust was pleased to make a contribution.

Another well-known face, **Roger Norris**, was lost to us in late 2021. Roger was former librarian to the Cathedral and always very active in local church life. He served as honorary secretary to the Trust for 6 years from the late ‘60s and as a trustee till 2006. He published books on the stained glass of the Cathedral and co-authored *A History of County Durham* (1990) with Douglas Pocock. Roger Cornwell gives a full tribute on the Trust’s website (<https://bit.ly/3L9zYWR>).

The Trustees