



All the 'Birmingham visit' photos by Cynthia Fletcher



Birmingham visit

Some 70 members went as St Albans' 'ambassadors' to Birmingham on 8 May. The Lord Mayor and the Chairman of Birmingham Civic Society extended a warm welcome with a civic reception in the Banqueting Hall (above) and this was followed by guided tours of the city, Bourneville, and Kings Norton's St Nicolas Place.

The write-up by Bryan Hanlon is on the website. As Bryan says: "the visit gave a real taster of what Birmingham has to offer."

Talk by architect Robert Adam

Some members of the Society attended the talk at the old Town Hall on 12 May, organised by the Hertfordshire Association of Architects. Robert Adam gave a robust defence of 'traditionalism' and presented interesting examples from his own practice. It made a fascinating comparison with Simon Conder expounding 'modernism' at our own Society meeting only a few weeks ago. We look forward to continuing the discussion of architectural styles and design at our Awards ceremony in October.

Membership Matters

For up to date information on events and other Society matters go to the Society's website www.stalbanscivicsociety.net.

Forthcoming Society Events

Sunday 20 June

Walk: Desperately seeking Arthur Melbourne-Cooper, St Albans' film pioneer, lead by Marion Hammant. Meet at the City Station entrance in Ridgmont Road at 11.00am for a walk of 90 minutes ending at the Odeon. Free, but donations for the renovations of the Odeon welcomed.

Thursday 24 June

Annual General Meeting
The Octagon Centre, St Peter's Church, St Peter's Street 8pm.
Members only. Light refreshments.

Advance Notice

Saturday 25 September 2010

Visit to Dover via Canterbury.
Tickets from Bryan Hanlon 851734

To join or renew membership

Subscriptions are renewable on 1 April each year

Individual Members	£10
Family Membership	£15
Unwaged Members	£7
Residents' Associations	No charge
Corporate Membership	£50

To join or check payment details please contact the Membership Secretary, Bryan Hanlon, tel: 01727 851734.

The Society acknowledges with gratitude the support from the following Corporate Members:

- T&B (St Albans) Ltd
- Debenhams Ottaway
- Rumball Sedgwick
- DLA Town Planning Ltd
- National Pharmaceutical Association

St Albans CIVIC SOCIETY

Newsletter | Summer 2010

President: Geraint John

Chairman: Peter Trevelyan 01727 843656

Chairman's and Editors' Notes

This edition has again been prepared by Peter Trevelyan (Chairman) and Eric Roberts (Committee member). If you have any comments, do write to the Editors at 3 Abbey Mill End, St Albans AL3 4HN or email ptrevelyan@aol.com.

Annual General Meeting. This takes place on Thursday 24 June. Members are invited to attend - the annual report and accounts, and nomination forms are circulated with this Newsletter.

The Future of the Society. Many thanks to the 38 people who attended the meeting on 21 April. The committee recognises that there are some important decisions to take. We hope that members will come to the AGM and continue the discussion.

The Herts Advertiser reported our meeting of 21 April, and included an editorial. It is worth quoting in full, as it also relates to the cinema campaigns:

“There must have been times when the influence of St Albans Civic Society has wearied councillors and residents alike.

The watchdog group wields a lot of influence and it will fight equally strenuously for what it likes and against what it doesn't.

Supporters of the multi-screen cinema planned for the council car park in Bricket Road probably blamed the Civic Society for the scheme being scrapped even though it would have been a huge eyesore. Yet cinema entrepreneur James Hannaway, who has bought the old Odeon in London Road to restore it to a cinema, benefitted greatly from Civic Society support.

Wherever you stand on the need or otherwise for a Civic Society, there is plenty to thank the bunch of stalwarts for over the years and a relief to know that despite the loss of some of its long-serving members, there will be others coming up behind to keep it going.

(Herts Advertiser 29/4/10)



A traffic gyratory around St Stephen's church! See 'Postscript' to 'An Inspector Calls' on page 3

Look out for the new logo of Civic Voice.

The organisation is the new national voice of the civic society movement. It is spearheaded by Tony Burton, an energetic campaigner with a background in the National Trust and CPRE. One issue that will exercise all member societies is the level of financial contribution to be made to keep this

organisation afloat. We have paid the required £500 this year, and it looks as if this will rise significantly next year. Should this be paid for by increasing subscriptions?

Odeon Cinema. Well, St Albans did it! The necessary £1m plus was raised, and this enabled James Hannaway to acquire the former Odeon building. We hope that the Society's £2,500 loan (and we stress it is a loan) helped in some small way. Our concern, as we set out in the previous

newsletter was first of all to save the building from demolition. The fact that it hopefully will become a beautiful cinema, open and accessible to all, is icing on the cake! The long haul to raise the further monies needed to refurbish the building starts now. We have written to Mr Hannaway asking how he envisages the Society could be involved. At the time of going to press, we are still awaiting a response.

Society Website. After several false starts, we are delighted to say that the Society now has an active website, up and running, and under the direct, day-to-day control of the Committee. Type 'St Albans Civic Society' into Google and you should get straight there. Comments and observations are welcome and can be sent either through the contact email address on the website 'links' page or to Peter Trevelyan on ptrevelyan@aol.com



Samuel Ryder leaflet

With this newsletter, exclusively for members, comes a copy of the new trail leaflet jointly written and sponsored by the Society. The trail has been a long time coming but we are pleased and proud to be associated with this project which makes a start towards commemorating one of St Albans' more famous citizens. Hopefully this will lead to some permanent exhibition and, following the creation of the Samuel Ryder Foundation (www.sryder.com) which the Society is also supporting, a statue in a prominent position in the City.



An unusual view of Ryders' Seeds Hall showing its curvaceous glass roof

Westminster Lodge

The Westminster Lodge proposal was granted planning permission at a somewhat unifying three-hour meeting of the Planning Referrals Committee on 28 April.

The Society supports the principle of leisure development here. However, as in this case, where a Council is both the developer, and also decides on its own planning application, issues of probity and political expediency can arise.

In order to address this, Councils are instructed to conduct their business in an open and transparent manner, one of the tests that can be applied is: 'whether a fair-minded and informed observer, having considered the facts, would conclude that there was a real possibility of bias?'

The conundrum is that there is often no means of establishing whether any councillor was biased or attached unspoken weight to non-planning considerations. Where the credibility of a well-publicised proposal put before them by political colleagues is at stake, it must be difficult to ignore everything but direct planning considerations. But how would anyone know if this bias existed? Here is the crux of the matter.

This particular decision was taken only a few days in advance of local elections, the scheme featured in election leaflets, and the committee was addressed by the leader

of the Council. Voting was on party lines, and permission was only granted on the chairman's casting vote. Surely that 'fair-minded observer' would be uncomfortable with this situation. It would be right if the Overview and Scrutiny Committee were to probe the decision-making process in this case.

The Society has other points. The Abbey Theatre is a close neighbour, and also has an important place to play in the future of leisure provision in the City. The theatre needs room to expand and improve its facilities, whereas the current proposal seems to constrain its site and restricts its options. The size of the pool is relevant. If the population of St Albans is set to expand, and other facilities are being closed, surely more water space is needed?

There is an obvious comparison with the equivalent leisure centre in Hemel Hempstead which has twice the water space and includes a lido. The loss of diving facilities is also regrettable, especially if Team GB does well in the 2010 Olympics. And the scheme was criticised by English Heritage, Conservation and Design, and the Architects' Panel.

The Council has announced (18 May) that it is hoping to start construction by December 2010. Might this be just a little too hasty?

Peter Trevelyan

An Inspector Calls

Most people don't take much notice of the planning system until it starts to affect them. That's understandable, but in certain situations, despite the negative attitude of many, including would-be developers, being a NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) is no bad thing.

The planning system does appear to be loaded in favour of the applicant. For a start, the objector has to give definite planning reasons, not ones based on sentiment or personal opinion as to why an application should be refused. Then there are the hurdles of any decision being made either under officers' delegated powers or by councillors on a planning committee.

If a plan is refused, the applicant can appeal. But if an objection has failed, no such appeal route exists for you, nor any organisation like a Residents' Association or Civic Society. So it's hardly a level playing field.

What's more, the Planning Inspector appointed to determine any Appeal is based - in Bristol. A Hearing may be in public, but it may be only in writing. Either way, that final decision is taken out of local hands.

Those two large houses recently built on the land between King's Road and Offa Road are a case in point. The Council refused the application. The Developer appealed. An Inspector was called - and gave approval. The houses appear too big

for the site, and local residents, seeing now what's happened, wonder who allowed this. Alas, it's too late. Perhaps they should have got involved in the planning process earlier.

While we await the outcome of the Inquiry held by another Bristol-based Inspector into the railfreight terminal, your Society continues to monitor the weekly planning lists.

Who knows what's going to come up next? Perhaps something near you - reason enough to support an organisation whose core activity involves planning. While we can't please everyone, there's said to be safety in numbers. Through membership, you may be ensuring that the Society is still around when you just might need it.

Eric Roberts

POSTSCRIPT: Since this article appeared as our monthly column in the March St Albans Review, we have had another decision by a Bristol-based Inspector, granting permission for the second stage of the King Harry playing fields development. This could have far-reaching implications such as moving the 'King Harry' public house, a listed building, and driving a traffic gyratory



around St Stephen's church. Maybe all is not yet lost, and the spending cuts could still adversely affect the scheme.

Meanwhile, the Society salutes the efforts of Barrie Mort, outgoing chair of Verulam Residents' Association, who led the campaign to try to save the playing fields.

We continue to wait for the result of the Railfreight Inquiry. Together with two other railfreight proposals in the London Green Belt, this will be an interesting test for the credentials of the new Government. The Society spent a good deal of time and money opposing this scheme, which, if approved, will have considerable negative impact on St Albans' environment, image, road and rail networks.

Maltings Arts Theatre

In our Winter 09/10 Newsletter carried Marion Hamant's presentation to the 3 November Council meeting over plans to refurbish and change the way the Maltings functions. Things have moved on.

In April, the Cabinet met to consider a proposal to press ahead with a £500,000 scheme. This would not only refurbish, but create a 110 seat 'art house' cinema.

The Society has some experience of using this venue. We felt the change of emphasis to more films, just as the Odeon cinema is coming along, and reduced seating, would make this special venue unrealistic and uneconomic for other activities and live performances. The existing 190 seat capability needs to be retained for costs to be covered.

So we produced a paper outlining our concerns, and circulated it by email to all councillors. A response was received from one councillor asking "who were our consultants?" and implying that the Society

should not question the wisdom of the Council. We restrained ourselves, and interpreted this as a rhetorical question.

At the Cabinet meeting, I was invited to speak. It seems that the Cabinet took note of what we were saying. The portfolio holder, Councillor Teare, accepted that there was inadequate information in the proposal.

It was agreed that a more detailed and properly researched business plan should be put before Cabinet in September. Subsequently, the Cabinet's proposals have been called in by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee, with an invitation to the Society to speak at the meeting.

To recap - we are all for a revamp of some of the Theatre's functions - particularly the reception area. But not a wholesale change which would diminish its viability and use as a community facility by all age groups and tastes. *Watch this space!*

Peter Trevelyan

RETAILER

OF THE YEAR

The Society continues to support and sponsor Retailer of the Year which helps celebrate and promote the City centre's shops and markets. It is again championing the Markets category - many thanks to those members who have acted as 'mystery shoppers'.

The Gala Evening, at which the awards will be presented, is on Monday 21 June in the Arena, 7.30 for 8pm. Tickets (in advance) cost £5 available at the box office and Tourist and Information Centre. This includes wine, buffet and entertainment. Look out for the nominations and then winners in the St Albans Review.

Filippo's Italian deli is one of the delights of St Albans' Saturday market

