

The refurbishment of the Maltings Arts Theatre
- continued

experience, but four or five times a week, four times a day? Squeeze out live performance to the extent suggested, and an important part of our everyday lives, whether we are young or old, is lost. Remember that subsidy is not a dirty word. And what about community activities? The Society, for instance, would like to continue here with its annual Awards Evening in future years.

However, the emphasis being placed on good management is to be welcomed. We suggest that the crucial business of marketing should be kept firmly in-house, so that the theatre staff can develop into a truly successful team.

If this is the last chance saloon for the Maltings, don't forget that if we lose it, we lose a crucial cultural link through to the arts centre mooted in the City Vision.

As it is the only intimate and fully-equipped performance space in the city centre, if culture means anything at all here, it should be cherished and not diminished in the name of cost saving.



Marion Hammant

Arch of Triumph - plans to rebuild Euston's famous Doric Arch

Some of its actual stones have been found dumped in the River Lea in North London, so a restored arch would be a mixture of original and new.

This will be symbolic, for it will mark a return not only to valuing our heritage, but also to bringing back some dignity and distinction to our public spaces, and thus condemning those more blatant acts of architectural vandalism of the sixties.

That equally symbolic decision – to demolish the Arch - was taken at government level, despite the best efforts of various campaigners, including John Betjeman.

Modernisation at all costs seemed to be the theme – and the costs could be seen throughout the country, in the effect on our towns and cities of enclosed shopping centres, unfriendly tower blocks, disfiguring ring roads, and those pedestrian subways that no one liked using except those up to no good. Even a place like Bath saw its City Fathers approving the demolition of hundreds of Georgian terraced houses. Madness!

Thankfully, St Albans escaped some of the worst of such excesses. There was a plan for an inner ring road, which, besides other horrors, would have cut through part of St Peter's churchyard. Luckily, this was shelved. However, St Peter's Street wasn't so fortunate, as a number of modest but historic buildings in our central streetscape were lost and replaced with contemporary buildings of no merit.

Even by the Seventies, we seemed to have learnt nothing – witness the proposals for an Arndale type covered shopping mall on the Maltings site. The formation of the Chequer Street Action Group, a useful hotbed of opposition to the scheme, showed that St Albans citizens had to be that extra bit revolting if they were not to see their city become an urban clone. It taught the Civic Society a thing or two about effective future campaigning too.

The return of the Euston Arch would be a good omen – one to remember when the City Vision gets going. Planners and architects, please take note.

Eric Roberts

Membership Matters

Welcome to new members:

Simone Ryder, Cathie Herbert, Keith Vinter, Helen Bassill, Sonja Read, Jon Knight, Richard Newell, Peter and Gillian Keir, Hilary Humphries.

Society Events - Winter 2009/10

Wednesday 16 December

The local paper; news, views and debate
Matt Adams (Editor, Herts Advertiser)
The Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street at 8:00pm

Wednesday 20 January 2010

Developing a Public realm strategy for the District
Cllr. Beric Read (Overview and Scrutiny Committee)
The Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street at 8:00pm

Saturday 30 January 2010

Residents First weekend, Clock Tower opening
Seasonal punch, shortcake and views - free
2pm to 4pm

Wednesday 17 February 2010

St Peter's Churchyard refurbishment
Paul Cartwright and David Curry
The Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street at 8:00pm

Wednesday 17 March 2010

Good quality, small scale, domestic homes in urban settings
Simon Conder, architect (winner of our 2007 award).
The Cross Street Centre, Dagnall Street at 8:00pm

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 | Winter 2009/10

President: Geraint John

Chairman: Peter Trevelyan 01727 843656

Chairman's and Editors' Notes

As reported in the Autumn Newsletter, the Editor's post is vacant - and remains so. Meanwhile, Peter Trevelyan (Chairman) and Eric Roberts (Committee member, and past Editor) have together prepared this edition. If you have any comments, do write to the Editors at 3 Abbey Mill End, St Albans AL3 4HN or email ptrevelyan@aol.com.

The former Odeon cinema may, dare we say it, rise from dereliction and become a cinema again – thanks to James Hannaway of The Rex, in Berkhamsted.

Ever since the For Sale boards went up at the end of last year, we've been on the edge of our seats, waiting and hoping for this thrilling news. This has encouraged us not to give up on this landmark Art Deco building and to speak out at various Planning Committee meetings and appeal hearings.

The reaction from the Council and, in particular those Councillors who in June 2008 approved its demolition for flats, will be awaited with great interest.

Many of you will have attended the meeting organised by James Hannaway at The Rex on Sunday 29 November. The venue was deliberate: he wanted to show St Albans residents what The Odeon could become. And most of you will know that he needs £3 million by early January to purchase the building - £1 million of that is already spoken for - and a couple of million after that for total refurbishment. Now is the time for everyone to pull together to see what can be achieved.

The City Vision and the LDF have been much in public view this autumn. We hope you managed to visit the City Vision exhibition back in September. Full marks to the Council for making viewing so easy and accessible by hiring an empty shop in the busy walkway into the Maltings off Chequer Street.

Peter Trevelyan has represented the Society on the stakeholder's working group that lead up to the exhibition's options, so it was felt more appropriate to let individuals express their comments,



CITY VISION SWOP SHOP

Dorothy Westwood

thus no formal response was made by us at this time.

The City Vision exercise has been a quick, stimulating and effective exercise. However, it is but a non-statutory adjunct to the Local Development Framework (LDF), and could be described as more of a wish list for St Albans. It has offered positive ideas for all to consider and debate, and it should help to control and direct speculative commercial development.

It is the LDF, subject to approval by the Planning Inspectorate, which may prove more problematic. The Society has, as you may expect, commented at some length on the LDF. We make particular note that the Objectives set out in this document are contradictory - how is it possible at the same time to allocate up to 180 hectares of Green belt land for development, and to protect the Green Belt? It is also a requirement that the LDF contain planning policies for the control of development in the District, but none are on offer in the draft versions of the LDF. If policies appear in the final version, when will the public (or developers?) have their say on them?

In responding to the LDF, the Society has indicated it favours locating retail development in the Drovers' Way area at the back of St Peter's Street (but leaving the Aboyne Lodge School exactly where it is now). This area was the final destination for the Society's City Vision walks as part of the St Albans Festival and Heritage Open Days events. If you have never viewed the City from the top floor of the multi-storey car park, you are missing both wonderful views

of the Green Belt, and of the depressing 'armpit' of St Albans - the utter waste of space and lost opportunities along Drover's Way. Every St Albans and District Councillor should take a look soon, and then act together to bring forward the vital City Vision ideas for the regeneration of the City.

“Drovers Way – every St Albans and District Councillor should take a look soon”

Whether this should include a city centre supermarket or, as some people still hope, a department store, is open to debate. The Society's view is that the department store idea is past its sell-by date and highly unlikely in the current economic conditions. Instead, the way ahead is to offer a distinctive and different shopping experience, embracing the markets, and not to belatedly emulate Watford or Hemel.

Over on the other side of St Peter's Street, on what is termed the Civic Square and Civic Centre South sites, the Society supports expanded civic features in this area. Perhaps this could include a new museum, a cinema, arts facilities and other leisure activities. The various options and plans on display looked not unlike a giant Monopoly® board. What fun can be had moving things around; relocate the council offices, plonk a department store here, a super – market there. It all feels a bit like a giant swop shop – hence the cartoon, drawn by member Dorothy Westwood from an idea by Eric Roberts.

Chairman's and Editors' Notes - continued

The design of new buildings in the revamped city centre is crucial, as it could be wrecked by unsympathetic designs. Here is an opportunity for planners and architects not only to listen, but to do their best, with award-winning contributions to the City Vision.

Both the LDF and the City Vision are likely to come back again onto the public agenda. Make sure your views are known. It is your city and its future that is at stake.

Festive Pub of the Year? The Society continues actively to support efforts to promote St Albans as a shopping and leisure destination. This year it again not only championed but sponsored the Markets Traders category with a £500 contribution as part of the Retailer of the Year competition promoted by the St Albans Review. The competition committee is chaired by Cllr Roma Mills, and is made up of Cllrs Melvyn Teare and Salih Gaygusuz, council officers Maria Cutler and Charles Baker, Review editor Martin Buhaugir, and Eric Roberts from the Society.

Little Wonders, the toyshop in the Maltings, was the overall winner, announced at the Gala Evening held at the Arena back in June. Stanley Green's fabric stall was the Markets Traders category winner. Some dozen Society members acted as 'mystery shoppers' – thank you to all of them.

The competition will take place for a third year from May 2010 and, in the meantime, it has been decided to involve the city centre pubs, with a Festive Pub of the Year competition.

Nomination forms and how to nominate by text or telephone have been appearing in the Review during November and early December. So, if you aren't reading this weekly local paper you really are missing out on news and reports about the Society, and even our monthly column.

Talking of local newspapers, the Society frequently gets a mention in the Herts Advertiser too. That paper did us proud with an excellent spread, report and editorial following our Awards evening. The editor, Matt Adams, is our guest speaker on 16 December - see Programme of events.

The Railfreight Terminal Inquiry, which began on 24 November, and at which both Peter Trevelyan and Eric Roberts have registered to speak, will doubtless be reported on in future editions.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you all.

Peter Trevelyan & Eric Roberts

Civic Society Awards

It seemed appropriate, as the Civic Society Awards Group searched out the best building projects of 2008, that in this era of recession, the most praiseworthy schemes we viewed were ones involving restoration, renewal and repair – an architectural 3Rs for our credit crunch times.

As usual, on Wednesday 14 October 2009, the Maltings Arts Theatre was packed with members of the Society, guests and local dignitaries to find out who had won what.

We looked in vain for exciting modern design – an imaginative back extension in Hill Street was our most rewarding find. But mindful of our key criterion that an award-winning scheme must enhance the streetscape, we had to admire – and pass on.

More often we were faced with outright pastiche, as with the homes on the former Marlborough Motors site, or flats of the 'Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here' School of Architecture. And what could we say of the new multi-storey car park at City Station – except that it had destroyed the sense of space that used to greet the rail traveller arriving from London? An unworthy rival to the Abbey, which can still be seen from the railway line on the approach to the City (though may not, if the Railfreight terminal is approved).

So it was a relief to discover how much skill had gone in 2008 into the refurbishment (another R) of certain key edifices in the city. The most obvious was the Town Hall in Market Square, where careful restoration and improvement to accessibility had done wonders for this important city building. Definitely an award winner. But we had problems. The architect in charge was part of the Awards Group – we usually skirt delicately round his work – and much worse, the Council in its wisdom, or rather its need for funding, had let the ground floor catering contract to a firm with no understanding of its elegant Georgian interior, who had simply crammed in its own corporate neo-colonial fittings. After much discussion, the Group finally reached some sort of consensus.

Other refurbishments raised further questions. In the change of former commercial premises into living space (Express Dairies Offices, Kyngston House, 6 Romeland) did it matter if the need for privacy compromised the striking window designs, or the desire to create as many flats as possible destroyed the Victorian

integrity of an interior? The Awards Group decided it did.

It also mattered that in the case of Kyngston House (again) the Council had sold off a former hat factory, an historic relic of the city's industrial past, to a property developer, when with that space, those windows and that light it could have been ideal for artists' studios. Shame on the Council for lack of vision!

Thank goodness, then, for 37 Holywell Hill, where the 15th Century former monastery hospice had, after many different uses, been sensitively transformed with extensive renovation into a private dwelling – work that included the creation of beautiful windows that managed to be modern yet appropriate. And praise also for what the restoring of the elegant Georgian residence, 182 London Road, had brought to that busy and grievously rundown street scene (now, there's vision for you) and the completion, visible from Verulam Road, of the first stylishly appropriate replacement rear extension in a group of Georgian dwellings in College Street. The rest will follow!

However, our piece de resistance this year was the restored signal box at City Station. This project fulfilled all our criteria – and more: a nugget of St Albans' railway heritage, rescued from dereliction by voluntary effort and fund-raising, now a real community asset. Its refurbished companion across the way, the delightful Stationmaster's House, added to our pleasure.

A restorative year, then. The search is now on for prizeworthy schemes finished in 2009. Readers, please advise!

The Editors thank the members of the Awards Group – Marion Hammant, Donato Cinicolo, Jude Dyson, and Roy Darby – for their hard work over the years.

St Albans South Signal Box
THE CIVIC SOCIETY PLAQUE FOR 2008
Project by
St Albans Signal Box Preservation Trust
Architect: Melanie Canaway
Builder: Richardson Builders Ltd

Right
182 London Road – COMMENDATION

Far right
The Stationmaster's House,
Ridgmont Road – COMMENDATION



The refurbishment of the Maltings Arts Theatre

The following speech to the Council Cabinet Meeting on 3 November was made by Marion Hammant, on behalf of the Society.

“The Society is delighted that serious refurbishment of the Maltings Arts Theatre is being considered. It's an incredibly useful space – right in the centre of the city – easy to reach on foot, and its size – up to 200 seats – makes it ideal for all sorts of activities. These include small-scale professional theatre and performance, comedy nights, poetry nights, classic film, a wide children's programme, art exhibitions and scope for a variety of community bookings.

We all know its shortcomings. Who wants to go to the theatre climbing up several dismal flights of stairs, going past the public toilets and pushing into a cramped little foyer? There are challenges here – not the least of them being negotiating a better space and right-to-design deal with the Maltings' management.

So – refurbishment, yes please, and we're relieved to hear that capacity in the theatre should be reduced by only about twenty seats – if it were any smaller it would not be financially viable for many events - BUT we do have several matters of concern.

1. Why was there no public consultation about the possible revamping? The Council is usually so keen to consult. The Society did have the chance of a helpful meeting with Richard Shwe and Ian Holland, but that was only because we asked for it. The actual Maltings Users Group fell into disuse some years ago, but surely the people who go to the Arts Theatre in all sorts of capacities deserve some say. Who knows, maybe there are some bright ideas that hadn't been considered. Otherwise, it could be suggested that the whole thing is simply a cost-cutting exercise drawn up on orders from above.

2. It's proposed that there will be great flexibility in the facilities and use of the Green Room – alias the Digital Lounge – good! But where is the flexibility in the use of the main auditorium? It is hoped to save money by showing films: yes of course, cinema is an essential part of the arts

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