



Taunton & District
CIVIC
SOCIETY
PROTECTING THE PAST &
INFLUENCING THE FUTURE

THE CIVIC

Sense

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CIVIC SOCIETY EVENTS

Meetings usually take place at the Library Meetings Room on the third Thursday of the month at 7.30pm.

More details on page 4.

Thursday, 21st May: David Gale of Gale & Snowden will talk about Sustainable Development.

Thurs. June 18th: Joshua Hart of the charity 'Living Streets', which campaigns on behalf of the pedestrian. This replaces John Upsher's talk on Stone and Partners, which will now fill the February 2010 spot.

Thurs. June 25th at 6.00pm prompt: Martin Blake will show us progress to date on a tour of the Somerset (Castle) Museum site.

Thurs. Aug. 20th: Mike Rowlands, 'A Tale of Two Cities; Bristol and Bath'.

Please reserve in your diaries **Wednesday, September 9th**, when we will take a coach trip to Sidmouth, to be guests of the **Sid Vale Association**, the largest and oldest Civic Society in Britain, (est. 1846).

Extra! There will also be a late summer opportunity to visit Dillington's new modern block...and to eat cake.

The Civic Trust THROWS IN THE TOWEL

'This has been an agonising decision. The Trustees are acutely aware of the Trust's fifty two year history and legacy' - Philip Kolvin QC

Returning from our last members' meeting I was shocked to receive the news that the Civic Trust had gone into administration... two hours earlier I had been promoting what appeared to be the first initiative on their behalf properly to address the needs of Civic Societies, through a Development Programme consultation document.

It became apparent last summer that the Trust was struggling, having lost the contract to run the Green Flag Award scheme, yet a move to smaller premises, a substantially improved website, and Griff Rhys Jones heading a drive to gain more members seemed to herald hope for the future.

It would seem that there were several failures to attract funding, including 'an unsuccessful bid to the Empowerment Fund', the scope of which apparently was to support such organisations as the Civic Trust or Civic Societies. Spokesman Kolvin also cites 'poor results from the fundraising appeal to our membership', and although he does not blame the Societies directly for the shortfall, he does state that 'the amount generated by Civic Society subscriptions is wholly inadequate to sustain even a skeletal movement'.

'With more than 700 active societies across the country, the Civic Society movement will continue and thrive.'

The Civic Trust had no input into the actual running of Civic Societies, and many are not affiliated, largely because there appeared to be little return for subscrip-

tions, and compared to the Trust's individual members Societies have always felt treated like poor relations. Kolvin himself admits

'I am acutely aware of the disjuncture between many societies and central office, which I suspect has long beleaguered the organisation'.

We wanted above all a strong national lobbying voice and public awareness of our existence, but certainly over the last decade the public may be forgiven for not recognising the Trust's name, let alone that of local Societies.

To be fair, as has been only recently, quite reasonably, pointed out, the Societies are too disparate in their aims and activities to advertise as a single brand. With what turns out to be its dying breath, the Trust produced its consultation document that offered...

'to put in place the most basic elements of a national movement – being press, policy, campaigning, web and education functions'.

By setting a basic standard for all participating societies, a national Civic Society image might have been achieved. But...

'That proved impossible in circumstances in which we did not have even individual contact details for members and there was no proper fund-raising function or capability within the organisation'.

Our response to the document, had the Trust survived, would have been to temper enthusiasm with cynicism,

the
civic
trust



View of proposed Paul Street Entrance from Fore Street

The Old Market Centre is now indirectly owned by the American J P Morgan group, and they are embarking on a substantial refurbishment programme, of which this is the first stage.

They clearly think that the centre is not sufficiently marked – indeed a visitor to the town could fail to notice it – so they are proposing to revamp the main entrances in the High Street, Fore Street and Paul Street.

The idea is to mount external brass or glazed banners, re-clad the Paul and Fore Street entrances in patinated brass and lay flamed granite paving in a random mix of Royal green, Royal white and Kobra (a mottled grey) out of each entrance across the public pavement.

In Fore Street the paving will go right to the kerb, and similar paving, interspersed with strips of Brathay slate will go from the Paul St entrance down the back of Cheapside, past Superdrug, almost to the entrance pillars of the old County Hotel (Waterstones), as well as out of the small High St entrance. The colours are not in accord with the palette set out in the Town Centre design Code, and ignore the guidance for the public

realm around the Market Cross and historic core.

A granite and brass clad “totem” panel is proposed to stand outside the Paul St entrance so that the OLD MARKET CENTRE logo will be visible to anyone looking up Paul St from Fore St.

Solid ceilings will replace all the existing cloudy rooflights except the central strip from the Paul St entrance through to Old Market Square. That central strip will no longer be an arch but single pitched glass (sloping towards the Fore St side). It is suggested that lighter solid ceilings in place of the other 4 rooflights will make the malls appear more spacious.

In principle refurbishment is welcome, but questions arise:

- Might variation from the general street paving be visually jarring, especially in Fore Street where the entrance is through a row of listed buildings?

- Will the granite paving look good despite the large number of service access hatches in Fore St and behind Cheapside?

- In the High St the new paving just stops at the recessed gutter about 10 feet out – does this look unfinished?

- Stronger signage in Paul Street is a good idea, but since it ends above head height, why must 3 feet of the public thoroughfare be lost to the “totem” slab that comes right down to the ground?

- Is it a good idea to lose over 50% of the rooflights? Lets us know your views – our contact details are below.



Proposed Fore Street entrance

Cricket Club – redevelopment of the Colin Atkinson Pavilion , 38/09/0081

This is the “new” pavilion, next to the Sir Ian Botham stand. The aim is to make it into a venue capable of supporting much larger conferences and banquets. The main external change is the addition of a new balcony able to hold 180 spectators, with a *brise soleil* in its roof and more prominent stairs at each end. Apart from a new lift tower, which improves disabled access, the appearance from outside the ground is little changed.

Internally many sub-divisions are swept away, to make a large open conference space on the ground floor, and a “Long Room” opening onto the new balcony at first floor level.

Other Planning News

The Swan Paul Partnership, that designed the big new children’s playground in French Weir Park, is to provide the landscape design of the flood protection scheme and associated land at Long Run Farm. This will be an important feature in Taunton’s future green infrastructure, and is to be in the style of a small country park. Good to see a local practise winning important contracts.

Graham Ward,
Secretary, Planning Group:
Tel: 01823 289605,
email planning@tauntoncivic.org.uk

Public Art & Design

The Council is progressing development of a plan to implement its Public Art and Design policy. The aim is not to scatter artworks around Taunton, but to work with developers to improve the overall quality of design – of buildings, the spaces – whether public or private – between and around them, and the general townscape. “Public Art” usually arouses a knee-jerk reaction about “useless statues” and “totally unnecessary overheads”, so the accent is on trying to show everyone that this is not primarily an art agenda, but a regeneration agenda, of benefit to inhabitant and developer alike. The plan will not be prescriptive but is intended to assist developers (and Development Management), and give a clear guide to what is expected of them. The consultants being used are quite impressive and we expect the plan to be agreed by the end of the summer.

well-placed for we now learn *'there was a need to increase income from societies four-fold'*. Kolvin continues: *'I still passionately believe in the civic movement, but it now needs grassroots members of vision and energy to start afresh with a new organisation, working within its means and building gradually from the bottom, rather than relying on the efforts of a relatively remote corporate structure'*.

How right he is. Over the next few months the Outer South West Federation of Civic Societies will consider how this can be achieved, as, no doubt, will other regional groups across Britain. In time we will put ideas before you, and should you and members of

other Societies agree and vote to be part of a new movement, such inter-Society communication and solidarity could be immensely important to our survival, growth and efficacy. We have also heard that the Civic Trust itself is looking to see if a new organisation might emerge to support Civic Societies.

The demise of the Civic Trust could become the dawn of a new era for Civic Societies, or it could leave us untouched, unmoved and going it alone – what do you think?

Comments to Fran Pitt at 01823 337188, info@tauntoncivic.co.uk, 10 Wellington Road, Taunton, TA1 4EG

The Firepool developer – St Modwyn

St Modwyn is a FTSE 250 company focusing on town centre regeneration, partnering industry in its restructuring, brownfield land renewal and heritage restoration. They claim to be the leading regeneration specialist developer in the UK. While profits fell from over £50m in 2007 to £8m in 2008, their assets exceed £1150M and their exposure to bank loans appears to be well under control. This, no doubt is why they were able to sign up – in the same week – for the £270M joint venture with Taunton in Firepool and also with Devon County Council for the £210M (7,000 jobs) “Skypark” employment site near Exeter Airport. They are based in Birmingham with a network of regional bases – ours is at Avonmouth — and employ over 200 staff.

Together with Axa they are redeveloping part of the Taunton Trading Estate as “Langford Mead” at Norton Fitzwarren, where Bookers has already moved in and the new Somerset Record Office is coming on apace.

Altogether they have a land bank of 5000 developable acres

and over 150 current schemes, including 18 in town centres, 75 on brownfield sites, 58 in partnerships and several major schemes with a significant heritage component such as Trentham Gardens outside Stoke. Many of these schemes are very much bigger than the ones in Exeter or Taunton – for example the old Rover site at Longbridge, 1000 acre brownfield sites like Coed Darcy at Neath, or smaller but very high value areas such as the Elephant & Castle in London.

St Modwyn have set up an Environmental Trust to provide support to the communities in which they operate by offering grants to groups seeking to improve their local environment.

They are clearly well equipped to deliver fairly high-tech buildings that fit Project Taunton’s low-carbon agenda, but words like design, architecture and public realm are noticeably absent from their publications – and they don’t seem to mention any awards for anything. That is fairly understandable for the majority of their business park sites – but a bit worrying in a town centre context.

REVIEWS

The AGM, as AGMs do, passed off without sensation or scandal. President Derek Beard conducted the re-election of chairman Frances Pitt, and serving committee members Pat Bazley, Roger Gilbraith, Graham Ward and Paula Ward were all re-elected. Andrew Knutt and Stephen Major stood down, as expected. We are happy to welcome Elizabeth Tansley as a committee member without portfolio, but we are still in need of an events organiser and a membership secretary

The Planning Group was augmented by four new members, Richard Bull, David Crawford, Andy Hayes and Stephen Major.

Roger Gilbraith reported on the Society’s finances and the chairman thanked those who have worked hard for the Society over the past year.

Stephen Major’s quiz was well organised and enjoyed, the winner Cllr Jean Algrove receiving an A-Z of Taunton, written by the owner of Brendon Bookshop.

Charlie Back, builder and philanthropist, is no great public speaker, as I’m sure he would agree, and in retrospect it would have been better to have toured the Mary Street Schoolrooms conversion a week later when the clocks went forward, for slippage in the building schedule meant the apartments were not fully lit. However, the ingenuity of fitting 3 maisonettes into the space could be appreciated, and the beautiful, exposed wood roof trusses could still be seen and enjoyed.

We have sent a £25 donation to the Open Door charity in recognition of Mr Back’s time spent in showing us around.

Simplicity and Diversity

It is a pity that the audience for the April meeting was rather sparse, because the talk was excellent. LDA Design has had a long association with Taunton, and Frazer Osment was able to give a concise summation of the town’s ‘masterplan’ problems that flew in the face of what we would normally expect from a design expert.

He advocates simplicity and diversity, growing a town to suit the needs of the community, rather than the modern fixation on buildings and spaces. Permeability is an issue because urban blocks can be too massive. Firepool is designed to have ‘pragmatic integration of site into surroundings’. The Taunton Design Code ‘fleshes out’ what the blocks should be – height, scale, massing, frontage, and the colours in keeping with Taunton’s ‘mauve, through browns to lime green’. A masterplan should provide a strong framework, with clear rules on the fundamentals, but allow flexibility in architectural style. Above all, there should be consistent application over time.

Questions were brisk, with general agreement that local government is ‘not brave enough to give developers flexibility and not rigorous about enforcing policies’, and that we ‘don’t sustain places very well’.

Fran Pitt

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Council Restructuring.

People say how lucky the public sector is to have job security. Not so, really – there have been 90,000 redundancies in Local Government in the last year.

Taunton is no exception. In a recent reorganisation all the strategy units have been slimmed down and brought together in one directorate. Ralph Willoughby-Foster's team has been absorbed and 3 of his 7 FTE staff have gone or are going. This will almost certainly seriously impact future local plan production.

Possibly just as important, his group are no longer in the directorate that contains Development Management and Economic Development. It is too early to say if this structural separation will weaken or strengthen the hand of the policy staff when applications are being considered, but my immediate reaction is of concern – have we come so far just to drop the ball now?

There will be a least one more round of redundancies but this has been postponed until October.

OPEN GARDEN

In aid of St Margaret's Hospice
Sunday May 10th,
2pm-6pm

Little Yarford Farmhouse,
Kingston St Mary TA2 8AN
An unusual garden of 3 acres set around a 17th century house with a tapestry of climbing plants, three ponds and a fine collection of trees from around the world.

Cream Teas
Advance tickets £3.50
On the gate £4
Tel: 0845 3459671

The Diary in Detail

Thursday, May 21st: David Gale, Sustainable Development. In the last newsletter I gave you David Gale's credentials, as one of the founding directors of the award winning practice, Gale & Snowden Architects, specialising in innovative ecological and energy efficient, low environmental-impact design...landscape professionals...permaculture...and so on. I gave you a nice little picture of one of their projects, and I bet you thought 'oh, here we go again, another PC talk on sustainability'.

Since then I have it on good authority that Mr Gale is thought-provoking and informative, not afraid of ruffling feathers with controversial statements and some most unusual ideas. Come along and find out if you love or hate his point of view.

Thurs. June 18th: Joshua Hart, Network Development Manager for Living Streets, the national charity that stands up for pedestrians, will talk about the impact of the great increase of motor traffic on towns and cities, and what we should do to lessen the effect of this.

In research at UWE in Bristol he found a dramatic deterioration in the social life of

LIVING STREETS
PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

streets with heavy traffic: - the average resident on a busy street was found to have less than one quarter the number of local friends compared with those living on a similar street with little traffic.

Town traffic is now 10 times what it was in 1950 – and our towns need to adopt policies to re-balance our transport systems so that health, safety, and quality of life once again take priority over vehicles. Joshua will explore possible solutions and suggest actions that we in Taunton can take to improve our town.

Martin Blake of Pollard & Sons Ltd, has offered us several visits to the Museum site over the period of renovation and conversion. **This tour on June 25th will start promptly at 6pm.** Hard hats and 'high viz wear' will be provided, and you are asked to attend in stout footwear—no sandals or high heels, please.

Please remember that our 'summer break' will be in July this year, therefore there will be no Thursday meeting

Summer/Autumn Visits

A striking new building in an historic Somerset setting – Dillington's new studio and accommodation block is uncompromisingly modern, highly functional, yet sits well in the landscape below Dillington House. It is the work of a young architect based in Bristol. We hope to arrange for a conducted tour in the summer or autumn – accompanied by tea and cakes (and Dillington has a good line in those) – watch for the booking slip in our next newsletter.



Wednesday, September 9th: the Sid Vale Association (SVA) has prepared an excellent itinerary for our visit to Sidmouth, a typically English seaside town in the old tradition.

Arriving by coach between 10-10.30am, refreshments will be provided and then our party will split into two groups to explore, from either end, Margaret's Meadow (owned and maintained by the SVA as a much-appreciated public amenity), and the Byes along the River Sid.

After we have picnicked, or possibly lunched in a sea front café, there is a tour of Regency Sidmouth, a chance to browse around the town's quaint museum and a conducted visit to the Jurassic cliffs as we take a sea front stroll.

So far, the cost of this day out looks to be £12.50 (lunch not included). There will be a booking slip in the next Civic Sense, and the trip will be advertised to other groups.

SUMMER ART GARDEN

In aid of the 10 parishes Festival
Bank Holiday Monday, May 25th
11am-5pm

Burges Meadow, Maundown,
Wiveliscombe

Artworks, workshops and demonstrations, story-telling, music, home-made food, wine, plants and pots, and more

Admission £3.50

01984 624564

www.10parishesfestival.org.uk