



Planning
Group News...

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Paul Atter-
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THE CIVIC

Sense

DIARY DATES

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

Thursday, 18th September: County Heritage Officer Tom Mayberry on the progress of the Museum project

3.00pm, Sunday, 5th October: visit to the Dunster Tithe Barn now rescued and restored by Somerset Buildings Preservation Trust as a community facility. The architect, Chris Mitchell, has very kindly agreed to escort us and answer questions. Refreshments will be available, so although we go by our own transport, our hostess, Mrs Oliver, would like an indication of numbers.

7.30pm, on the **fourth** Thursday, 23rd October at Wellington Junior School Hall: Dennis Dodds on the Nynehead Country Park Project. Hosted by Wellington Museum and Local History Society. The Junior School is on South Street opposite the Bulford Road mini roundabout. Park in the Bulford Car park, opposite the Cottage Hospital.

Thursday, 21st November: see next Civic Sense

Celebrate 50 years of the Somerset Record Office at a Family Open Day, Saturday 27th September, 10am-4pm

Regional Spatial Strategy

rewritten by central government: so much for public consultation.

You'll have seen the headlines about the target of 21,800 new homes by 2026 for Taunton Deane. For Taunton this is a 67% increase over the current stock – the highest increase in the whole south-west. But this is not just about housing, or Taunton. The Regional Spatial Strategy has just been comprehensively rewritten (284 pages of changes!) by central government. The proposed changes seem to reflect a one size fits all approach, and much of the text relating to the characteristics of the region has been deleted. Local and regional planners must wonder why they bother – but if the proposed changes are enforced – which is likely, given their origin - they have to start to work out how they can meet central government's diktat.

There is even greater stress on development in key towns and cities, but the approach recommended by the Examination Panel of distinguishing between these by role and function has been weakened. Taunton, Wellington and Bridgwater form one Housing Market Area, but the new version does not define roles for the towns, so undermining the basis for a concerted development plan. That helps nobody.

Bland Approach

The same bland approach is taken to market towns, coastal settlements and rural areas. While this might remove some pro-

hibitions about development in the smaller towns and rural areas, it seems (given the general thrust of the strategy) to be more likely to create a blanket discouragement to any development that might sustain economic life outside the major towns. Indeed, I get a feeling that since rural areas present unpalatable problems (like dependence on the car) the strategy is refusing to come to grips with their needs.

Lower jobs to housing ratio

While there is a general attempt to match jobs to housing more closely, for Taunton it is not good news: the forecast 16,500 new jobs means that the ratio of jobs to dwellings will decrease from 2.45 in 2006 to 1.89 in 2026. Although the ratio change is partly explained by the forecast decrease in people per household, and by an increase in retired people, it does not hint at prosperity. While green interests will applaud the deletion of the concept of a Second Strategic Route to the South-West, this, again, is probably economic bad news.

The Secretary of State's own consultants voice concerns about the deletion of the strong regional policies on sustainable construction (policy G1) and micro generation (policy RE5) in favour of weaker national policies – they say "Policy G was probably the single most important and valuable policy for sustainability in the whole Draft RSS. Removing ...Policy G significantly

Planning Group News Brief

You will all know by now that we (and others) have failed to prevent the Council from hiring out part of the Cider Press Gardens to Loch Fyne. At least people did show they cared, and thanks to all those who wrote in and objected as individuals. All too often, however, the public's lack of awareness and apathy make it too easy for corporate interests to dictate the kind of town we live in.

In the last newsletter I flagged up the two planning applications from Somerset College: to date only 3 members of the public have commented on the Sports Hall relocation into the Green Wedge, and there are no objections or comments – apart from ours – about the dismemberment (and probable eventual complete destruction) of the existing Arts and Design building. Jeremy Gould, head of the School of Architecture at Plymouth has written an appraisal that says this is a notable example of “new brutal-ism” and worthy of Grade 2 listing. It is one of the few distinctive modern buildings in Somerset, and was conceived under Tom Murrow's direction.

Of course, we agree that the College needs to have improved facilities, and it should be said that the new highly functional Arts and Design building will almost certainly be more adaptable and serve the future needs of the College far better – indeed on the inside the building may well be excellent. While we have some reservations about the treatment of the exterior, it would be quite acceptable in another place (it may be better than the blue Atrium building but the combination of the two is not felicitous), if something so distinguished were not being sacrificed, and if its site were not so cramped.

Both of these applications were passed unanimously and virtually without any debate at the last planning committee – so at least the western half of the existing Arts and Design building will soon be demolished. The apparent lack of concern about the existing building is disappointing, even if the decision is seen as being the only obvious way forward given the constraints of the site and the unwillingness of the Learning & Skills Council to fund refurbishments.

OTHER NEWS

There seems to be a never-ending supply of reviews and consultations. Recently the Government held one to find out why people didn't respond well to consultations. I believe a lot of the responses were along the lines of “what's the point if it makes no difference?” Three current examples are

- The RSS (see front page article).
- The 2007 Planning White Paper – there were about 31,000 general, and 1100 detailed (and thoughtful) responses, most of which objected to the proposals to reduce consultation and weaken local democratic input – and that made almost no difference to the Bill that is currently going through parliament.
- There is a “Killian-Pretty” review into speeding up the planning process. Killian is chief executive of Essex County Council and much involved with the Thames Gateway project and Pretty has just stopped being chairman of Barratt Homes. (so really independent thinking there!) It will probably result in a further weakening of opportunities to comment or object.

So, returning to my first thoughts, perhaps it is not so surprising that the public appear apathetic – but perhaps we ought to be thinking more about how we can engage them? Kevin McCloud is hammering away about the need to involve people in his new TV series about attempts to regenerate Castleford (in “The Big Town Plan”, Channel 4). Some of the projects seem to go decidedly pear-shaped.

Now, what town regeneration projects are *you* concerned about?

81 Dwellings on Kings College Sports fields south of the Convent (38/2008/131)

Charles Church has applied to build on what was the walled garden of St Joseph's Convent. They are proposing using St Joseph's Field as the main entrance (thus passing through the new Convent development) and having a supplementary inward access off South Road 20 yards north of Holway Avenue, with all exits being via the Convent and St Joseph's Field.

King's College have put in a companion application (38/2008/137CA) to demolish the sports hall that is now on the site. They may hope to allay Sport England's concerns over loss of facilities by an intensive development of pitches at the back of the main college.

The site is a conservation area mostly surrounded by a grade II listed wall. English Heritage has objected strongly to the whole idea, and residents of the Convent development who have recently installed gates because of opportunistic parking problems fear that if the gates are removed the problems will return.

We consider that there are traffic and parking issues on South Road and in St Joseph's Field, that the overall design has overbearing elements and is out of character with the area. However, we do not disagree with building houses here, although the Local Plan currently allocates it as recreational open space.

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

Midas at Tangier Waterfront – Footbridge across the Tone (38/2008/372)



One of the obligations (in lieu of play and open space contributions) arising from the major development at Tangier was to build a footbridge from the western end of the site across to French Weir Park.

Midas put in an application earlier this year (38/2008/159) that was withdrawn due to problems with the Environment Agency. The purpose of the bridge was to give direct public access from the south bank to French Weir Park, but Midas have sought to use it primarily as a flood escape route from the flats and have positioned it accordingly, so it is not where planners intended and lands in Clarence Street rather than French Weir Park.

The design also uses gabions in an inappropriate manner. We shall object on both grounds. [Graham Ward Tel 01823 289605](tel:01823289605)

Two Moors Music Makes a Meeting

Meeting in the chapel was a novelty which most members seemed to enjoy, and although our speaker shunned the lectern (and microphone), the acoustics were quite good: there were no complaints from the back pews, anyway.

Penny Adie is bright and bouncy, and it is entirely in keeping with her restless energy that she ranged free at the front. Her talk was likewise a little capricious, until Alexander Ferguson moved to a side pew and pinned her down with pertinent questions, drawing out a remarkable and engaging story.

The October Two Moors Festival originated as a way to bring people back to Dartmoor and Exmoor after foot and mouth. It was meant to be a one-off, but was so successful it had to continue, and it has taken over the lives of Penny and her husband, John. We can only admire the effort and dedication put into running it every year.

The first festival was paid for from the Foot and Mouth Recovery Fund, but without government help since, John spends all year seeking sponsors; if it wasn't for this, tickets would have to be sold at £75 rather than £8 to £18. The venues for the 27 or so concerts are usually churches, with musical instruments transported from one to the other - the festival piano appeared on national TV when it disastrously fell off the lorry. Through 'the incredible generosity of Bosendorfer, Vienna', they now own 'one of the best pianos in the world'.

The unique integration of top flight professional and local amateur performers 'raises the level of lesser groups', and is much enjoyed. The involvement of children 'ticks education boxes', and councils are finding that the popularity of the festival brings economic benefits. Tickets now sell quickly, and one village dweller was outraged to find he was too late to buy one for the concert...in the church next door.

Regional Spatial Strategy, continued from page 1

weakens the RSS, leaving many of the statements elsewhere as little more than pious hopes and rhetorical flourishes, not backed up by action, and leaving the challenge of sustainable construction to local planning authorities to cope with individually as best they can rather than supporting them with a coherent and consistent regional framework."

They also note that "The greater the growth (in the key towns & cities), the more that it will change the character of the settlements concerned and the more it will place strain on their services and infrastructure. This in turn will make it more difficult to achieve quality of life objectives and to deliver development within environmental limits" and go on to say "We also have concerns about deliverability. There is a real danger that, in an effort to achieve the housing targets, even those policies on development quality and resource efficiency that remain...could be compromised. This risk has increased...given the downturn in the economy and the house-building sector in particular".

The region's transport policy has been entirely rewritten. Apart from the deletion of the A358 dualing, there are clear instructions to reduce local usage of main routes, e.g. the M4 & M5. "Improvements to road junctions that will reduce the rate of road traffic growth and congestion on the corridors of national and regional importance".

Improvements? The new policies are less specific and demanding on anything that improves transport as most people would define it. Car usage in towns and between neighbouring towns is to be strongly "managed down". Walking, cycling and public transport are "in" - but there is also avoidance of commitment to improve services or infrastructure. This is at odds with the stated aim of making the key towns more attractive places in which to live and work.

And back to housing - where will it all go? Well, 11,000 in Taunton itself, 4,000 to the north east (along the A38 to Bridgwater), 3,000 in Comeytrowe (not in the green wedge as has been claimed) and 2,800 across the rest of the Deane.

Let us know what you think at the next meeting.

WE HAVE MAIL!

(Views expressed by correspondents are their own and do not reflect the views of the Society)

Dear Editor,

Support is growing from Somerset arts groups and U3As for the restoration of the Taunton Gaumont as an arts and entertainment centre which would include a Tier 1 theatre. Fifteen groups have now joined the campaign representing almost 2,500 members.

A Tier 1 theatre would allow full scale Opera, Ballet, West End musicals and Orchestral and Choral concerts to be performed in the town as well as performances by leading international artists such as Kylie Minogue, Katherine Jenkins, Darcy Bussell and Elton John.

If you would like to see this kind of production in Taunton a word with your local councillor or a letter to the Gazette would be of assistance.

Jim Laflin

NEWS IN BRIEF

Our website is 'closed for refurbishment'. Andrew Knutt, whose company, ADK designed and sponsored the original, will employ new technology to ensure that committee members will be able to update the site on a regular basis. Currently, we are sifting through the old content, deciding which features to keep.

There has been concern about July's sudden change of venue. Worry not, it was due to a strike by Library personnel, fortuitously just before the newsletter was printed, but too late to include explanations.

The Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership is soliciting views on its draft plan for managing the hills from 2009-2014. View the plan and make comments at www.blackdown-hills.net.

From the Civic Trust's *Grass Roots online magazine*. Six members of Crewkerne Civic Society went to Wadham Community School to meet year-nine pupils as part of the project on behalf of steering group 'A Better Crewkerne and District' to de-clutter Crewkerne's conservation area. During a visit to the town centre, the society and youngsters conducted interviews, identified examples of the unwanted street signs and noted their location.

A government-backed report on cutting household waste has suggested 52 measures, such as a ban or tax on junk mail, and, by including gardens in planning regulations, restrictions on fast-growing plants, trees and flowers. Meanwhile the Local Government Association has found rubbish collected for recycling by at least 4 councils has ended up on Indian farmland.

Paul Atterbury Evening Highly Acclaimed

With 'the Atterbury Event' we stepped out of our comfort zone, and must admit to some nervousness. The fees for speaker and venue were greater than we have previously risked, and selling tickets to the general public was new to us. Sales were sluggish at first: we were disappointed by our members' initial response, and worried that the advertising wasn't quite right.

Yet, incredibly, it was alright on the night. More than alright – the weather was unusually balmy for this year and guests revelled in the elegant surroundings, sitting with a cool drink or ambling, glass in hand, through Gertrude Jekyll's formal garden. The Bampfylde Hall was pleasant and airy, the chairs comfortable, the slide projector actually worked, and people kept arriving.



Mr Atterbury was fashionably late, and we gave a collective sigh of relief when his trade-mark blazer was spotted across the lawn. He proceeded to hold a near-capacity audience enthralled as he traced the Arts and Crafts movement that spawned the suburban house, comfy chairs and the flower-

filled cottage garden. The story unfolded seamlessly, from Pugin to Lutyens, and ended surprisingly with the cenotaph and WWI war graves, which Lutyens designed. A skilled lecturer and undoubtedly expert in his subject, he was happy to chat to members of the audience, and sign books from a stall set up by Brendon Books.

Thanks to Stephen Major for his original vision of a big fund-raiser, and to all those who put time and effort into administering it: because of them, Civic Society finances have been seriously boosted. We are being urged to hold a yearly event – any suggestions?

What the attendance sheets say about our meetings

Attendance sheets were introduced at meetings in 2001. Now that we have amassed enough to bear scrutiny, we have come to some conclusions. For instance, our best year was 2004, when numbers were often in the 60s, but 2008 has seen a drop in attendance, which is surprising as we have so many new members

So what was special about 2004? It was quite heavily history based: The *History and Architecture of Taunton Castle* with Bob Croft, Tom Mayberry's *100 Years of Taunton's History*, and Diana Hartnell's *Taunton Deane's Historic Buildings*. We had the usual Council-based offerings - *The development of Silk Mills Crossing and the Inner Relief Road*, as well as *The Urban Design Framework*. Developer Philip Fry gave us *From Poundbury to Hillyfields*, and Russell Lillford expounded on *The Somerset Buildings Preservation Trust*. Conservator Ian Constantinides was possibly our most memorable speaker with *How Little Things Have Changed in the Building Trade*. But we have had most of these elements and some excellent speakers this year, yet without attracting the numbers.

Also, we have realised that our annual break in August would be better taken earlier, in June or July, as few of our members have children and so go on holiday earlier in the summer. Constructive comments on attendance at meetings and the programme are requested, as well as thoughts on the summer break.

Fran. Tel 01823 337188 info@tauntoncivic.org.uk