

Berwick upon Tweed Civic Society Newsletter



November 2013



FROM THE CHAIR

I wish this, my penultimate editorial for the Newsletter, could be more uplifting, but it cannot. I feel like a character in 'Alice in Wonderland' running in ever decreasing circles to stand still. In short, despite many efforts, nothing over the last five years seems to have changed.

There are some real disappointments; Youngman's Corner on Hide Hill is still derelict. The Playhouse site has not been transformed into an urban garden and the town is increasingly invaded by street clutter, with cars parked on pavements and dustbins left on the streets. The Moneyshop has opened in a prime location in a building restored with a 75% grant from public funds and we are expected to be pleased that it is no longer an empty shop.

The signage and livery of the shop are the subject of an ongoing planning application which remains undetermined. The Conservation Officer is working hard to reach a satisfactory conclusion to ensure the shop frontage fits the original THI scheme. Meanwhile, we live with the livid yellow and their customers live with the remorseless loan repayments.

Some sections of Development Services, Planning, do not appear to be as responsive as one might expect. Requests for information can take many weeks to be answered, if indeed they are answered at all. An ongoing discussion about unauthorised works on a listed building in a conservation area did eventually get a response. It was not one I wanted, or indeed expected. The officer did not consider the unauthorised works resulted in 'demonstrable harm either to the listed building or the wider conservation area.' My response, that I understood carrying out unauthorised work on listed buildings to be an offence, is so far unanswered.

The fourth paragraph and I must be more positive! Thanks to the efforts of local people Serendipity has opened on Marygate and the Bazaar in Bridge Street. The market has been much more vibrant over the last few months and we have enjoyed three local festivals. It is possible, if hard work, for local shops and services to thrive. Research published this year by the national charity Living Streets is persuasive in its belief that, despite out of town outlets, internet shopping and smart phone commerce, people still like to get together to socialise and feel part of a community.

They make the point that ‘too many high streets are treated as corridors for cars rather than places for people’. People arriving on foot visit more shops and spend more money than people travelling by other means. A study in Bristol found that pedestrians tended to visit more shops than those arriving by car. We should reclaim our streets; parking is not the answer to high street regeneration.

A surprising fact is that The Department for Transport approved design guide Manual for Streets places pedestrians, then cyclists at the top of the road users hierarchy.

In Berwick, most people would agree that we should value the local distinctiveness and character of the town. If we understand what we have and what is locally valued, then this can inform decisions about how new buildings and redesigned open spaces can enhance what is already there. The parks projects, Castle Vale and Coronation Park could be a blueprint for such aspirations. It is now well underway and will, I feel sure, be a great success.

Some of our legacy money has funded the restoration of the double serpent seat at Fisher’s Fort. It is, as most of you will know, a great delight for visitors and locals alike to climb up and enjoy the view. It has been most pleasing over the last few weeks to see many people doing exactly that.

Finally, and I cannot believe I am writing this in late October, don’t forget the Christmas party. Please complete the enclosed slip and return it as soon as possible so that suitably festive arrangements can be made.

The clocks will have gone back by the time you read this. So, all good wishes for warm and comfortable winter.

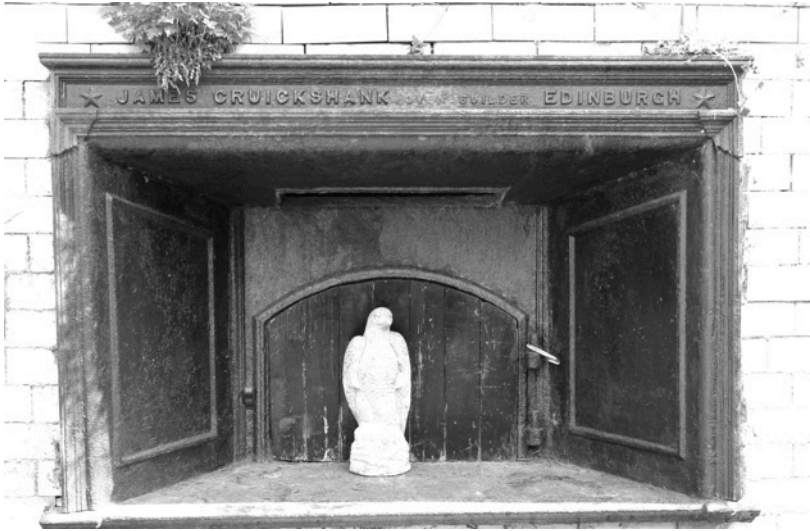
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EVENTS AND PROMOTIONS

EXCHANGE TO BERWICK

This summer a group from Alnwick Civic Society visited Berwick on the first of our exchange visits. After coffee and scones in Bridge Street (consumed



appropriately around a pair of nineteenth-century bakers ovens) they were taken on a tour of the town by Alison Cowe.

For a taste of the town's different aspects and of the work of the civic society and other groups, they looked at Dewar's Lane, Youngmans corner, the Playhouse and the Quayside, before following the river to the recently listed New Bridge and rowing club.

A walk up the Shamell Braes revealed how the outside of the fortifications worked; there followed a sun-drenched half mile around the walls from Meg's Mount to the Magazine. The Lion's House allotments were looking fabulous with the sea glittering behind.

After pottering down Ravensdowne and talking about the Governor's Garden and St Aidan's House, the tour finished at the Main Guard where the group could see tourists appreciating another dimension of the society's activities.

THE RETURN MATCH

In September a group of Berwick members enjoyed an interesting return visit to Alnwick. We were treated to coffee, ‘singing hinnies’ and savoury biscuits in The Grange, the home of Peter Ennis before a tour led by Philip Deakin.

Alnwick is of course famous for its castle and gardens and an interesting town centre. But we were taken on back streets and shown the real life of the town in the past – told how the artisans lived in houses on the street and had their workshops at the rear. Large arches led through to the workshops, many of which were demolished to make room for residential buildings. We saw the “pinfold” (the animal pound) now used for car parking and wondered if there had been one in Berwick, then looked at a school founded by the Duke in 1810, now the town library. One of the quaint pieces of architecture in the town is an Egyptian style door looking like a pyramid entrance on the front of the Mechanics’ Institute.

In the Methodist church we saw the pulpit complete with candle holders where John Wesley preached in 1748. He thought it a ‘skeleton of a building’ but we thought it was lovely with coloured windows and glorious yellow gold walls which glowed in the sunlight. In the 19th century it had been divided horizontally, giving a church in the upper part and meeting rooms and kitchens downstairs.

Alnwick was the first town in Northumberland to have gas street lighting and we were shown evidence of the old lamps. We also visited the remains of a Chantry, believed to be the oldest building and the first school in Alnwick, dating back to 1440.

Some of the ‘pants’ of Alnwick were viewed. Pants is probably derived from ponds – many of them are fountains and drinking troughs. They were used for domestic





water supply into the 19th century; the earliest dates back to 1759. Many of the streets of Alnwick are on routes of streams so the pants have a natural water supply controlled by a Valve House. This makes the spectacular floods in Alnwick featured on the television last year more comprehensible.

We were surprised to learn that the 1768 Pottergate Tower was not part of the town defences but was built by the Aldermen of Alnwick as a monument to themselves! There are now plans to convert this to a holiday home. It was altogether a very interesting and informative day.

QUESTION TIME: A VISION FOR BERWICK

The theme of the Civic Society's recent meeting was 'Vision for Berwick'. Four guests were invited to share their views of how they saw, or would like to see, Berwick developing. They were

Chris Burgess, county archaeologist

Gavin Jones, county and town councillor;

Ed Swales, director of the Portas Town Team

Alexis Widdowson, headteacher of Berwick Academy.

There was general agreement among the four speakers that past and future are inextricably linked in a town so rich in Elizabethan and Georgian features.

Chris Burgess saw Berwick as Northumberland's jewel in the crown' with a unique quality. There was though a need to ensure that this heritage was made the most of. He pointed to the Castle and the Barracks as two under-exploited assets while stressing that buildings are only worth investing in if you can find a use for them.

Gavin Jones too pointed to the richness of Berwick`s heritage, citing the character of Bridge Street, and the need to promote knowledge and interest in such remarkable assets. UNESCO recognition could help a great deal, he suggested.

Once here visitors would also discover a place of increasing cultural range, such developments as the Watchtower and the Autumn Festival adding to The Maltings` quality shows. However, against a background of struggling small shops, a sustainable economy was essential if the town was to be a vibrant place retaining its young people.

Ed Swales was in no doubt as to Berwick`s potential. What is missing though he argued is footfall. Berwick, tucked away at the top of Northumberland, may not get as much attention as Alnwick or Morpeth. Under Scottish rule, he reminded us, Berwick had been a place of considerable importance. Might it get back to something like that? What might be the effect of Scotland going independent? Berwick is the natural hinterland for much of the Borders.

The need for a sustainable economy had been stressed by now but Alexis Widdowson thought the term needed some discussion. In a town like Berwick, with a high proportion of retired people, you could have a fairly prosperous population without it providing sustainable employment for young people. Without adequate employment opportunities young people will move away. Enterprise and creativity she saw as ingredients of a thriving economy, and here school could play a part. She wondered too how much money Berwick people spent in Newcastle and Edinburgh.

Questions to the panel revealed that the Portas team prefers working with expert groups rather than holding large meetings; that parking is still a contentious issue; that boat trips look likely to be confined to Tuesdays and Thursdays for the time being; that signage intelligently conceived and placed can offer useful enlightenment; that any marina plans would have to take into account the presence of a working

dock, and that there has been talk of reviving the Spittal ferry.



HERITAGE OPEN DAYS

The Open Days weekend fell on 13/15 September and so it did not coincide with the Beer and Food Festival, as it has done in previous years. It was interesting therefore to see how numbers held up. In the event it was very successful with 19 sites spread across Berwick, Spittal and Tweedmouth listed in the handbook. As part of our contribution to the Open Days, the Society had funded the popular information leaflets and the posters.

Venue	Both days
The Main Guard	235
The Magazine	298
The Parish Church	123
The Masonic Hall	165
St Andrew's Church, Wallace Green	75
Heritage Open Day Craft Fair, where the Society had a stall.	575

Jim Herbert had organised many of the sites but of the ones stewarded or overseen by the Civic Society, the numbers were impressive and only a little depressed by the dreadful weather on the Sunday. As always, we are very grateful to all the members who had volunteered to steward the sites.

EUROPEAN WALLED TOWNS

The October meeting was held jointly with the History Society. Dr David Bruce of the University of Bristol is the academic adviser to the European Walled Towns group. His talk was most apposite because the Walled Towns Symposium is to take place in Derry this year. Recent publicity has given us a sense of a community of walled towns. Few of us probably realised that there are as many as 147. Or that there are 50 million visitors a year, providing up to 66,000 jobs and generating an income of around \$1bn a year.

Heritage is the draw. A third century map of the Roman Empire shows a pattern that looks very much like a blueprint for present day Europe and a 17th century map clearly showed 'Barwick' at a time when the walling of towns was a necessity. Later on, walls could be retained or knocked down.



Dr Bruce divided towns into three groups: there were state capitals such as Istanbul, free cities such as Lucca and outpost towns such as Londonderry; these were representative examples.

The Walled Towns Friendship Circle, founded at Tenby in 1989, aimed to encourage friendship visits and mutual understanding, increase tourism, develop joint marketing strategies and increase worldwide awareness of walled towns.

Tourism is now seen as particularly important with some towns developing specific reputations - Pirano for its restaurants, for example. More could be made of these towns financially if visitors could be persuaded to stay longer, though there are often difficulties about access and accommodation that stem from the very reason for the town's existence, obstinately embedded in its design.

Zoreen, Lady Hill, thanked the speaker for offering such fantastic insights into the background and current position of the walled towns.

NOVEMBER SILENT AUCTION

The advertised auction is cancelled; we learn that a similar event is planned for three days before our date.

CHRISTMAS PARTY, FRIDAY 6 DECEMBER

It is hoped as many as possible will will come to this party, which was very enjoyable last year. An information sheet about the evening with menu choices and a ticket application slip is enclosed with this newsletter.

AWARD FOR THE WATCHTOWER

The Berwick Watchtower, Tweedmouth's new gallery, has been open for over a year now and already has a busy record of the exhibitions and events promoted there. Last month the gallery received further recognition in the shape of the Society's annual award for the building or project considered to make an outstanding contribution to the town.



The driving force behind the conversion is Kate Stephenson, who needed a permanent home for the huge images that her late husband, Ian Stephenson, had created. He is represented in the permanent collections of the Tate and the Whitworth Galleries and of the British Council. His work was described in the *Independent*: 'Emptiness filled with matter. Solids filled with space.'

The gallery was originally built as a Presbyterian church in 1848, and later became the the Kingdom Hall of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Now the light has been let in as part of an ambitious scheme of restoration to provide a cavernous but luminous gallery space that can also be used for performances. The demanding technical work behind the conversion was all undertaken by local contractor, M.T. Richardson.

The Chair of the Civic Society congratulated Kate and Michael on the vision behind the scheme and on the quality of the work. Not only had a historic building been given a new lease of life, there was a huge legacy, the ambitious programme of work from visiting artists which changes every month. The venue will also host musical events and is equipped with a recording studio.



In previous years, the Society's award has gone to the Granary Gallery, and the conversions at Short's Mill and Bridge End. The Tweedmouth public housing refurbishment, the Spittal promenade improvements, the conversion of Freeman's Court and the refurbishment of Tower Pottery have all received similar recognition.

MEMBERSHIP

Membership is £8 per member or £12 per couple. We hope you will agree that the meetings, newsletters, local action and national membership of the campaigning Civic Voice are well worth your continued subscription. Please note that subscriptions to the Society are due in January. Therefore, we kindly remind members who have not yet paid to complete a standing order or issue a cheque to the address below.

If you have any questions, please contact our Membership Secretary, Catherine Seymour on 01289 303919 or write to her at 23 Quay Walls, Berwick upon Tweed, TD15 1HB or e-mail: contact@berwickcivicsociety.org.uk.

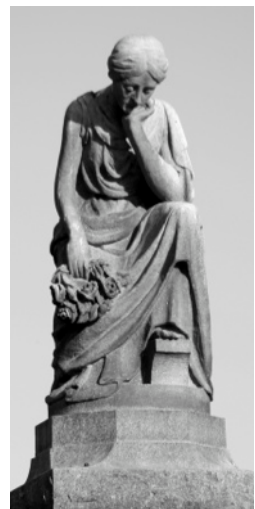
FROM CIVIC VOICE: GET INVOLVED!

All of England's Grade II listed buildings are to be surveyed in a major project by English Heritage who are calling for an "army of volunteers" to determine which of the 345,000 Grade II listed buildings in England are at risk from neglect. The process is part of the body's annual Heritage at Risk survey.

Simon Thurley, CEO, English Heritage said 'For the heritage sector, this will be a project in which we can all pool our expertise to best effect. Organisations such as AHF, Victorian Society and Civic Voice could not only run local surveys but help volunteers move on from identifying buildings at risk to doing something about them.'

Civic Voice and War Memorials Trust are working together to develop a programme to support local communities to improve their understanding of their war memorial heritage throughout the centenary of the First World War. An application is being made to the Heritage Lottery Fund for a four year project under the Heritage Grants programme.

This project will undertake a national survey of the condition of our war memorial heritage and provide communities with the tools to protect and conserve them for future generations. The centenary of the First World War is an opportune moment to build on people's interest.



MAIN GUARD

During the summer we had 4988 visitors to the Main Guard. Anyone who doubts the value of keeping the museum open in the summer months has only to read visitors comments to know they are involved in a worthwhile project.

People visit Berwick from every corner of Great Britain and from all quarters of the globe. Browsing through the Visitors Book on one page are entries from Canada, Australia, Co Durham and Plymouth and on another Virginia, Oregon, Musselburgh and British Columbia. It would be intriguing to learn why someone from Iraq was in Berwick and others from Russia and South Africa, Holland, Guatamala and the Czech Republic, Cornwall, Devon, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, London, Aberdeen, Glasgow and Lincolnshire. Almost a geography lesson.

And then the comments! Tomas (who must have been about 8) thanked us for the colouring, Derrick thought it was 'rather spiffing'. Josie said it was 'cool'! The most common comment was that it was interesting – some people wrote at length and others one word – my favourite was 'WOW'! Visitors appreciated the history of the town and encouraged us to take care of it.

For members who don't know, the Main Guard is the Civic Society's official headquarters and is opened to the public everyday afternoon except Wednesday from June to September. It is run by member volunteers organised by co-ordinators who are in charge two weeks at a time. There is a permanent exhibition in one of the rooms about the history of Berwick and a changing exhibition in the other

room – this year it was about the battle of Flodden Field. (Who knew that the body of the Scottish King James 1V was brought to Berwick after the battle?) We sell books and leaflets and cards and of course ask for donations – the building is not cheap to run ! If you like to meet people it is a pleasant way to spend part of an afternoon and we are always in need of more help. The Main Guard Museum opens next summer – let us know if you are able to take a turn.

