

Exeter Civic Society AGM – 21st November 2015

Chairman's Report

Dear Mr President, vice president and members.

I am really heartened that so many members are here today – nearly a quarter of membership. I am sure it's not just for the free lunch – I think you are here because you care about Exeter, its culture and development. You will know my main interest is the appropriate development of the city, but the society is providing a wealth of talks and visits which explore our culture, history and the day to day operations of important organisations in the city.

And we have continued to provide a programme of Saturday speakers and visits at least once a month, thanks to the splendid work of Ruth Mcleish.

During the last year we have visited:

The Lord Mayor, Percy Prowse, for tea at the Guildhall

Devon Heritage Centre

Toured Churches in Heavitree

The Met Office

Toured the Higher Cemetery

Bowhill House

The new Mathematics School in Rougement House

The transport control room at County Hall

A tour of the roof of Exeter Cathedral

A tour of the archives of Exeter Cathedral

Larkbeare House

A tour of the Freemasons Hall

And at our monthly Open Mornings we have heard about:

The Workers Education Association; work of the River, Canal & Quayside committee; Deller's Cafe; the 18th century Exeter balloon craze; the new Exeter Science Park; the Exeter Municipal Charity; the work of the Exeter, Canal & Quay Trust and a brief history of England!

Ruth already has events and speakers planned until next April.

Planning Sub-Committee

We have seen another active year with a small number of members working hard investigating, scrutinising and challenging proposals and developments in the city over the past year.

The planning sub-committee are a dedicated group of 4 that scrutinise development proposals from the innocuous to the significant, and as their long term leader Pamela Wootton says – **they are all important!** Robust and appropriate objections have been made against many poor and inappropriate proposals, as well as scrutinising such illuminating planning documents as the Design Development Principles Planning Document DDPPD – which I failed miserably to get past the first of document.

Thank you Pamela for leading the team despite some spells of ill health.

Grants to Good causes

It seems a long time ago that we agreed to donate £1000 to good causes and agreed to support the renovation of the General Gordon lamp in Heavitree and an information board about the Wesley brothers visits to Exeter. I am pleased to say that our £250 contribution enabled the Mint Methodist Church to complete their information board and it sits proudly at the entrance to the church on Fore Street.

Renovation of the Gordon lamp has though proved more challenging, and we must thank Susie Hewitt for all her efforts in chasing the City Council to get the lamp renovated, albeit at an expense of about £4500, with much of the cost going towards traffic controls to close part of Heavitree Road! Work is progressing well and the lamp will soon be back to its former glory, with a new lantern. We hope to erect an information board to explain why the lamp was erected. There are information sheets available at the AGM explaining the story behind the lamp.

Our £1000 has resulted in £5,500 being invested in these two projects with Susie working hard to raise additional funds for the lamp, and Janet Robb raising additional money for the Wesley Board.

Blue Plaques Scheme

This has been a quiet year for blue plaques with one erected to celebrate the City's Vanbrugh Sisters in early December, but we had a wonderful evening of readings and history at the DEI provided by John Monks and his daughter.

But John has worked hard throughout the year to develop an audio trail with the University's Placify organisation which will be available for people to download to their mobile phones and tablets as they follow our city trail of blue plaques and inscriptions. Members of the society have contributed their time to record information, and this work will be ongoing as John develops more plaques.

And on that subject, I can announce that the next three plaques are likely to be to celebrate two little known citizens of the city and one famous visitor.

Harry Westlake was a son of a director of Wiley's Foundry and went on to design cutting edge engine heads and carburettors in Exeter which boosted speed and efficiency of the internal combustion engine. His plaque is being sponsored by the Crash Box & Classic car Club and we hope they will put on a show at the unveiling next year.

James Holman, a son of Holman & Sons the chemists of High Street Exeter who despite becoming blind travelled the world more extensively than anyone else in the early 19th century, living off his meagre lieutenant's pension having gone blind in the navy. I believe we have a descendant of his here today.

Allen Lane was the instigator of Penguin books. On a journey home from visiting Agatha Christie in Devon he was waiting for a train at Exeter station but could not find anything interesting to read. At that point he decided that good quality contemporary fiction should be made available at an attractive price and sold not just in traditional bookshops, but also in railway stations, tobacconists and chain stores. The plaque will be erected at St Davids Station of course, and paid for by Penguin...

River, Canal & Quayside Group

The River Canal and Quay group is making great headway in investigating what is good, and not so good along the river and canal, as well as what needs to be developed and improved along the river and canal. John Monk's vision and argument for establishing the group 2 years ago has resulted in a group of about 8 members and demonstrated that the society and Exeter would be poorer without such a group focused on this area. And leadership of the group is now in the safe hands of Peter Nichol's chairmanship that has brought in some additional brainpower to swell the knowledge base within the group.

They have published a vision for the future of the river and canal and its environs as it passes through the City, and we hope this will help influence considerate development and conservation throughout the area and its environs.

They have established a good relationship with the Council's assistant director for public realm who recognise the group as a champion for the area and shared thoughts about development in the area. And whilst it is clear that the council has little officer expertise for the development of the waterways and the quay and basin area, there are some dedicated councillors working on a plan for the quay area.

We heard from the longstanding chairman of the Exeter Canal & Quay Trust in October about its work and working arrangements with city. For a trust with £1.5m in the bank this could be stifling investment into the buildings and fabric of the area, although It is difficult to argue that past investment has not made a significant improvement over the decades, but the area is at a stage where it needs to be carefully and sensitively nurtured, and its historical past celebrated in preference to over commercialism.

The canal could soon be handed over to the Canals & River Trust because the council do not have the skills to manage it, and fail to adequately collect the revenues from boat owners, or provide an adequate service for them. New management should be a positive thing, bring some creative ideas and investment. However, elsewhere the CRT has generated revenue from development along the waterways to fund management of the waterways they control. So we must be vigilant that this does not happen in Exeter.

The RCQ group hope to establish an independent Friends of Exeter canal to keep a watching brief on the maintenance, use and development of the canal and its environs. The society may provide initial support to such a group but we hope that it will become independent if it can generate sufficient members from the varied users of the canal, from walkers to boat users.

Highways & Transport

The transport and highways group was established in early 2014 under the chairmanship of Trevor Preist, who developed a well researched report into the consequences of ongoing house building and population growth in Exeter and in the parishes adjoining us. Traffic congestion during the rush hours appears to be getting worse with longer queues along our arterial routes, often starting when schools finish at 3.30 and lasting until beyond 6 o'clock. Trevor's report 'Rush Hour' shows how the number of cars will significantly increase as the city and hinterland expands over the next few decades unless the County and City Councils do something to improve public transport and improve the level of cycling to work – what other options are there?

The City is changing from a compact city with many jobs in the city centre accessible via public transport or on foot (City has a high % of people walking to work to large employers in the city centre – University, City Council, County Council, Hospitals and Schools), negating the need to use a car. But as the city expands with employment on the edge of the city and in neighbouring districts it becomes more necessary for people to use their cars because public transport does not service these areas very well.

Stagecoach will not run additional routes because they are not minded for growth greater than 3% a year – which equates to the city's population growth - disappointing.

DCC say they cannot invest in more quality cycle routes because of a lack of cash and they must now go cap in hand to the new LEP who now control funds for major infrastructure across the area.

In looking forward

Last year I mentioned the redevelopment of the bus station, residential development on the edge of the city, new supermarkets, a retail centre off Honiton Road, housing to the east of Pinhoe, new stations, hotels, and the start of the next local plan for Exeter.

Residential development continues across the city, but much of it is pastiche architecture and an uninspiring sprawl, with a few exceptions like the Heritage homes on Rydon Lane which are highly energy efficient – but does good architecture and emergency efficiency really need to be so expensive? Exeter City Council have done a good job building energy efficient social homes on underutilized sites, or replacing garages which are much too small for modern cars – they should be praised for this.

I hope that the council's next local plan will result in something much more inspiring. I attended a Civic Voice conference in October (civic societies umbrella organisation) and attended a talk by a Spencer de Grey – a partner in architects Foster + Partners. His focus was on cathedral cities and how they can be developed in a way that reflects their historical density, and maintaining their urban grain. He gave an example of the proposed expansion of Kings Lynn where an urban extension of 7,500 homes was planned eating up neighbouring fields. Foster + Partners came up with a plan to build on under-utilised sites in the town and car parks which resulted 8,500 homes without the loss of any green space. You will appreciate that much of this was flats, but they were 3-4 storeys and came with high quality social spaces. This is the model used in Europe and some of our larger cities, but if it preserves green space perhaps we should try it. I hope to promote this approach to ECC over the next year.

The City Council's future planning is now likely to be as part of a combined authority of the City, East Devon and Teignbridge aiming to share services but retaining political independence. I hope they will soon move towards formalising this and start looking at how growth will be planned across the area beyond 2026.

Civic Voice

This is a national independent organisation that is established to support civic societies, and to speak up for community groups in relation to civic matters, and supporting and advising them in shaping their local community. They campaign and support localism to enable local people to have a real say in shaping and developing their local community.

Exeter is not a member of Civic Voice – it's expensive for us to join, but executive committee has agreed to support 10 of our members to join the movement as individuals. We hope this will help members gain a broad understanding of what is possible locally and happening nationally. If you would like to look into this further please either speak to me or let Pamela Coleman know of your interest in taking up this opportunity.

I hope that better informed members will be able to contribute to the work of the society and help see that Exeter develops appropriately.

What are the big things for the city over the next year?

The bus station development – welcome but a concern – discussion after meeting...

The swimming pool – it's certainly very big now!

Housing in the Monkerton Area.

The development of Maclaine's warehouse into a theatre and entertainment venue.

Ikea?

Sandy Park building a 1000 seat conference centre.

Will Middlemoor get its supermarket, and if it does what plans will come forward for Heavitree Road police station.

Proposals for a new city centre theatre. Did you see plans for the Corn Exchange to be replaced on TV recently?

Will the Dean bring forward improved plans to reveal the Roman bath house on the Cathedral Green. Personally I hope so, and I hope the city council and others will do something to recognise our Roman beginnings.

And student accommodation – lots of it. The university's success and expansion is having consequences across many parts of the city now, but this growth will surely stop soon when there are sufficient rooms for the proposed 8,000 students expected in future years.

Highways: We can look forward to-

A new roundabout on Hill Barton Road; widening Bridge Road; new site accesses near the Matford Hotel to open up development south of Exeter.

Will the City Council defend its case for a new road from Harrington Lane to Pinhoe Road via Exhibition Way, against those that want to preserve Eastern Fields as a village green?

I have a few pet projects I would like to see considered over the next few years:

The development of the **Fore Street area** into an accessible and thriving independent traders quarter – maybe make Fore Street one-way. There are so many lovely buildings and history there.

A serious attempt by the **cycling fraternity to develop ideas for a high quality cycle network** as part of a plan to reduce car use. This could include making some roads one-way.

A green belt around the city consisting of quality public spaces, sports facilities and parks to prevent the city joining up with other communities. This will take long term campaigning and lobbying but it's an ideal time as local councils start to consider their next local plans.

Thanks

Thank you to the committee and helpers that support our everyday operations – lunch today for example.

I must thank Pamela Coleman in particular for all the hard work she has put in over the year to take-in membership fees, send out communications, produce the newsletters and stationary, and organise our major talks each year. She really does help us present a professional face to the public and the organisations we communicate with.

I am now entering my third and final year as chairman. I take great pleasure in working with those members that are challenging the authorities to do better for the city, and to be more ambitious for exonians rather than the corporate giants (how many do we need?), but I have not been successful in finding a deputy chairman (although Pamela Wootton has stepped in on many occasions) who will take over the reins this time next year. We are in a good place at the moment but we do need to continue to recruit new members and encourage them to become actively involved as the next generation of leaders for the society.

Keith Lewis
Chairman