

ECS AGM November 2016. 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.

This is my last chairman's speech as I come to the end of my three years in office. It has been a pleasure to lead and represent the society in a range of matters from challenging development proposals, speaking to radio and television, hosting our Saturday morning talks, and attending the unveiling of plaques. We have achieved a lot during the last three years, but it would not have been possible without the dedicated support and work of a small number of members who have worked tirelessly to ensure the society has an entertaining programme of events, with others monitoring and challenging development and proposals by developers and the city and county councils.

During the last year we have visited:

Exeter cathedral archives; Freemason's Hall; Cranbrook power generating plant; Bellair House at County Hall; Downes House, Crediton (home of General Buller); The Customs House; St Anne's Orthodox Chapel; the Research & Innovation Centre at the RD&E; Highways control room; Larkebeare House; Magdalen Road Almshouses; Newtown via a guided tour; had a Guided walk of Tiverton; and a Tour of Topsham.

And at our Saturday meetings we have heard about:

The work of the Exeter Canal & Quayside Trust; The Victoria Cross and links to Exeter; Devon bibliography and our printed heritage; Exeter City Futures; Exeter Community Forum; the Devonshire Association; Policing in Exeter; Development in the city and its hinterland; Future development planning for the city; and of course our hustings event in April with representatives from five local parties.

Ruth McLeish has again made a significant contribution to the society and already has events and speakers planned until next April. Thank you Ruth McLeish.

I would like to thank our secretary, Pamela Coleman, for yet another year of dedicated work organising the main committee, overseeing our open mornings, producing our newsletters and publicity materials, keeping you the members informed through emails and bulletins, and maintaining the website. She has given us many hours of her time over the past 6 years. Thank you Pamela Coleman.

The planning sub-committee, led by Pamela Wootton, are a dedicated group of just 4 members who scrutinise development proposals from the innocuous to the significant. Robust and appropriate objections have been made against many poor and inappropriate proposals, and they maintain an active dialogue with planning officers so they know we are on their case. Thank you Pamela Wootton for leading the team despite some spells of ill health.

Our Blue Plaque co-ordinator John Monks has worked through the year to organise the erection of two plaques to past Exonians. In April we unveiled a plaque to Harry Weslake, internal combustion engine engineer, in conjunction with the Crash Box and Classic Car Club of Devon with a great display of vintage cars. In June we unveiled a plaque to Robert Tosswill Veitch, renowned horticulturist, in conjunction with Bury Meadow Residents, which fitted well with the re-

introduction of the Veitch lecture at RAMM, and the completion of the Veitch trail by St David's community association. Joint working has proved very rewarding this year.

Work is still ongoing to erect a plaque at St David's station in recognition of the development of Penguin Books, and we are very frustrated by a lack of progress in erecting a plaque to James Holman, the blind traveller, because of a lack of permission from the building's owner. This is someone of international significance whose story must be told.

John has now completed and published a map trail of city centre plaques to support our audio trail. This follows the design used by independent traders so is part of a suite of trails for the city centre.

As reported in the last newsletter John has two new volunteers so we can now call them a team. Thank you John Monks.

Our River Canal & Quayside group and Highways & Transport group continue to monitor developments and proposals in their areas of interest and to have dialogue with local authorities. We heard recently that the canal will not now be handed over to the Canals & Rivers Trust by Exeter City Council and that the city will look to manage it more efficiently in the future. But we have heard that areas of the valley parks will be handed over to Devon Wildlife Trust for them to manage in the future. There is a lot to monitor in these areas and the chairmen of both groups would welcome more members support.

Thank you Peter Nickol and Peter Cleasby.

At last year's AGM I reported slow progress renovating the General Gordon lamp located at the top of Heavitree, but we managed to complete this and erect an information board, with a ceremony in May performed by the then Lord mayor, cllr Olwen Foggin. Susie Hewitt battled with the city council to get this work done over a period of nearly 18 months – who would have thought it would take so long? Thank you Susie Hewitt for your perseverance.

There are two sides to the society, that of history and general interest, and that of development and change.

The city's history and things of interest are there for us all to see, and with a little help from Ruth and other members and speakers we have got to know more about these aspects of the city.

Preservation of buildings and features of interest are more challenging for us. For example, should Honiton Inn in Paris Street be preserved or not? If it is spared by planners and developers will it look incongruous next to a tall building which will inevitably be built adjacent to it – or is it better demolished? We all have views about such proposals but should the society have a view? If it did have a view then I may have been in a position to comment about the proposed redevelopment of the site, but, not being an autocrat, I did not feel able to comment without consulting you first. But I do feel that I should have made a statement on behalf of the society.

Whilst we have a constitution and aims (albeit brief), we do not have any formal statements or document setting out what sort of development and preservation the society wants. I do wonder if the next committee should look to produce a document with statements to make our position clear.

The redevelopment of the bus station has drawn closer during the last year with planning approval for the Leisure Centre and Bus Station now in place, and outline planning approval in place for the retail element of the site. I am sure the new bus station will prove too small, particularly for passengers to queue in comfort, but its architecture is simple and functional. The Leisure Centre though has divided opinion between exonians and the committee, and I expect amongst you.

How many people here like the prospect of a leisure centre here, and its contemporary design? (A show of hands showed most of the 59 people present didn't).

I am divided about the leisure centre because when I visited exhibitions about this building I heard many people speak in favour of both its architecture and facilities. It is of course mainly those who object that make the most noise, but we shall now need to wait two years to see the completed building and what it has to offer.

In September we heard from the city council's head of development about current difficulties with the council's local plan, and how developers have found a way to ride roughshod over some council policies, resulting in developments which some feel inappropriate. As a result, the council will now work with EDDC, MDDC and Teignbridge DC to develop a Greater Exeter local plan, which will see the current plan torn up. We know that there is very little land left for major development within the city, and we can also see that development is happening just outside the city borders to the east, and soon to the south. Is this neighbouring development good or bad for Exeter? What is the impact upon the city, where will the next wave of development be proposed, and importantly for the Society – what will we do to monitor and influence it?

I believe that we should engage with those preparing the Greater Exeter Development Plan to ensure that Exeter does not suffer negative aspects of more people on our borders, travelling to and from work, and into the city for retail and leisure activities. In past decades the city council gained government approval to expand boundaries and swallowed up the villages of Alphington, Pinhoe and Topsham. But these days it is less likely that they will seek to expand the city's borders to bring what might be described as urban sprawl, under the control of the city. Later in this meeting there is a proposal for an addition to our constitution which encourages our membership to help influence such development. I encourage you to support it.

Two new influential organisations have developed over that past year that will be a force to be reckoned with, and will help to shape the city in the future. Both organisations have spoken at our Saturday meetings and left quite an impression.

Exeter City Futures is an independent not for profit organisation looking at improving many aspects of life and functions in the area. They will come forward with radical ideas that will challenge how we go about our lives, and I believe this will also challenge councils to act outside the box. The highways group keep in touch with ECF

Exeter Community Forum was established by the city council with area based community groups from across the city. They can reach out to local people to understand what they want and don't want, and I believe they are in a good position to influence city wide development and local services. I would recommend that you link up with any community group in your area and add your comments and support. We have a committee member sitting on the forum.

Earlier this year the government ran a campaign to encourage people to get involved with neighbourhood groups to develop neighbourhood plans – this is what their adverts looked like.

Some years ago people in the St James area came together to develop their own Neighbourhood Plan as set out in the Localism Act 2011, and theirs was one of the first in the country to be adopted in 2013. Their Neighbourhood Plan, a front-runner, was promoted by Government Ministers as an example to others. But earlier this year a central plank of their plan '*to deliver the long term goal of a balanced and vibrant neighbourhood in the face of ever-increasing student numbers*', was over-ruled by the courts as they tried to object to the planning application for student accommodation at the football club.

They now say 'The much vaunted promise that localism would deliver decision-making powers into the hands of local communities via democratically formulated Neighbourhood Plans has proved hollow.'

I agree with the Forum that there appears little legal basis for local communities to impose their views despite the Localism Act, and I wonder why people will want to waste so much of their time producing such a plan if it cannot be upheld. This is typical of recent government policy which seems to give priority to developers to build whatever they deem to be 'sustainable'.

Such crass government legislation is the reason why I believe Exeter Civic Society must stand up and insist upon a well written and robust local plan for Greater Exeter that puts people of Exeter and our hinterland first, rather than the interests of developers, and in some cases, local authorities. I hope you will support the new committee in this work.

I have enjoyed being chairman for the past three years, although it has been a major commitment of time and energy to monitor what has been proposed and happening. I am a big supporter of collective responsibility rather than autocracy, so it is time to hand on the baton.

I wish my successor well.

Keith Lewis
Exeter Civic Society Chairman 2013-2016