

# Exeter Civic Society

## Newsletter - Spring 2018

### From the Chairman, Peter Wadham

Dear members I hope you will agree that Exeter Civic Society has started the New Year with a Punch.

Our open meeting of Feb 3rd filled the large Hall at Belmont Chapel. It was well attended by members of the City Council and all the political parties, Society Members and the Public. Cllr Phil Bialyk as Portfolio holder for 'Health, Wellbeing, Communities and Sport' agreed to attend and fielded questions until the last one had been answered, something he need not have done, but for which I thank him very much.

We called the meeting as so many of us thought it was timely for the Society to make a stand publicly over the delayed redevelopment of the Exeter Bus and Coach Station site with a large part of Paris St and Sidwell Street. I called the meeting "Back to the drawing board" as the present scheme has completely stalled and is now quite out of date for everyone from developers, City Council and not least Citizens.

Exeter Civic Society have watched development proposals for this large area for 40 years, the scheme back then included an underpass from upper Paris St to New North Road with a "fish net" development closing off Sidwell St. directing shoppers into a new retail area on the Bus and Coach Station site, Exeter Civic Society strongly opposed this and, it failed due to a down turn in the economy---- The present scheme by Crown Estates has stalled due to similar reasons of poor retail trading figures.

Our meeting showed that Exonians are angry and want action and fresh thought without delay. Cllr Bialyk explained that his group on Exeter City Council have for many years made the promise to the electorate that they would build a fine new Swimming Pool and Leisure Centre-----he told us he intends to keep his word. Crown Estates are in the business of making money from retail development and have the leaseholds of the buildings in Sidwell Street and Paris Street, but clearly have not got the interest from large retailers and restaurants in moving into any new buildings on this site. And then last but not least are the thousands of us that use the Bus Station each week and work and spend money in Exeter.

In a perfect world I would invite the interested parties (which includes the County Council as highway authority) to find a top town planner and to draw up fresh designs to the benefit of all interested parties.

The one hundred people at our open meeting were not short of ideas of how this important area of our City centre should be developed.

Myself and the Civic Society Committee would welcome hearing from members on this or any other subject on or about the City. If you would consider a more active part in the Society please contact me as I'm always happy to talk to you.

**Regrettably there is no Planning Report in this newsletter as Pamela Wootton has not been well. We wish her a full recovery.**

## Report of Bus & Coach Station Public Meeting 3 February 2018

Exeter Civic Society hosted a successful public meeting on Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> February to give people an opportunity to question Councillor Phil Bialyk about the redevelopment of the bus and coach station site. Representatives of the conservatives (Andrew Leadbetter), Lib Dems (Vanessa Newcombe), Green Party (Lynn Wetenhall) and Bob Crawley of Exeter & District Bus Users Group, were also present to put their position in respect of the council's proposals. The meeting lasted for 2.5 hours and was attended by nearly 100 people.

The Society set out its expectations of the city council to review proposals for the whole of the remaining site bounded by Sidwell Street, Cheeke Street and Paris Street; ensure that the site is developed in accordance with their own Development Principles, including better connections to neighbouring streets and shops; have a market square which will support start-up businesses; have mixed retail and residential units including social housing; and build a better bus & coach station that meets the needs of passengers, and to consider the redevelopment of the existing bus station.



Attendees were mainly concerned about the suitability and capacity of the proposed bus station to support the city into the future as it continues to grow. And questions were raised about how a smaller bus station could possibly support the council's emerging strategy to reduce congestion and the number of cars on the city's roads. There were many calls for the council to refurbish the existing perfectly functional bus station (as has been done successfully at Bristol), but Cllr Bialyk told the meeting that the option of refurbishment has not been considered and he did not intend to take this back to council officers. This brought questions of who is in control at the council, officers or councillors. Cllr Leadbetter stated that the County Council's position is that the bus station should remain open until work is ready to commence on the new facilities.

Louis Joyce of Exeter Swimming Club talked about the lack of publicly available high quality sport facilities in the city, particularly for swimming. Whilst the Pyramids pool can support some of their events, this will not be the case at the proposed Leisure Centre which they will not use after it replaces the Pyramids pool. The club are calling for a 50m pool elsewhere in the city as part of a sports village which can be divided up into zones to support a range of swimming activities, and that Sport England have bespoke designs that will cost a lot less than the council's proposed Leisure Centre. His presentation was met with loud applause. In reply to this Cllr. Bialyk stated that such a facility has not been investigated, was not a city council responsibility, and that the council are still working on their Sports Strategy.

There were calls for the council to undertake better and earlier consultation about its proposals in the future. Past consultation has come late in the day, not giving people a real opportunity to have their say on the fundamentals of proposals.

### **From Hazel Harvey, our President**

Den Perrin died in December 2017. He was very active in Heavitree local history, listing tenants of the shopping street, beating the parish bounds, listing WWI fatalities and selling *Discovering Exeter Heavitree* so enthusiastically that it sold out. He compiled *Public Inscriptions* for the Discovering Exeter series and made sure that plaques were put on the ruins of St. Loyes Chapel and the tower of St. Edmund's Church on the old Exe Bridge. When David Moorish was unable to attend the commemoration of W.G. Hoskins (the founder of the Exeter Civic Society) in Oxford, Den organised a video of his talk and saved the day.

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## Blue Plaque to Charlie Brewer and Mary of Exeter unveiled.

By John Monks

After a countdown led by writer Sir Michael



Morpurgo, teenagers Tamara and Joe unveiled the Civic Society's latest blue plaque in West Street watched by a crowd of around 70 people.

The plaque commemorates Cecil "Charlie" Brewer and his second world war carrier pigeon Mary of Exeter whose repeated flights across the English Channel with top secret military messages won her the Dickin Medal, the highest award for animal bravery.

Tamara and Joe, members of the Freefall youth arts group based at Exeter Phoenix, are working with other young people to bring the story of Charlie and Mary to life in an animated film project organised by Exeter's Double Elephant Print Workshop with Heritage Lottery funding. It is due to be completed next year.



The plaque unveiling, which attracted considerable media coverage, was the Civic Society's first to celebrate a partnership between an animal and its owner. A gathering at the Picturehouse Cinema afterwards was attended by Civic Society members, members of Charlie Brewer's family and representatives of the PDSA, whose founder Maria Dickin inaugurated the Dickin Medal. The medal, inscribed "For Gallantry", and Charlie's special constable's uniform were among items on view.

Michael Morpurgo commended the Civic Society's celebration of Charlie and Mary. He wondered whether his uncle who was in the French Resistance had met Mary, and then gave a reading of his latest story, "All I Said Was", which also features a pigeon.

Cecil Brewer, who preferred to be known as Charlie, was born in Church Lane, St Thomas, in 1895 and apprenticed as a bootmaker at the age

of 15. He moved to West Street in 1922 where he set up his workshop and bred and trained homing pigeons in a loft above the shop. In the 1940s he enrolled his prized pigeon Mary in the National Pigeon Service and took on the duties of Special Constable with responsibility for control of war pigeons in the area.



The story of Charlie and Mary is a remarkable account of an ordinary citizen's dedication to duty but it is also a thought-provoking reminder of the roles humans have required animals to play in bad times.

Mary, "the bird who never gave up", needed 22 stitches as a result of her wartime flights. Her wounds weren't stitched by a vet but by Charlie himself who was a master shoemaker and used his skills with needle and thread. For a time, Mary also wore a small leather neck support, tenderly made for her by Charlie who nursed and restored her. After the war Charlie and Mary raised money for charities including the Red Cross.

Homing pigeons contributed greatly to wartime communications because after being dropped into enemy territory they could fly home often unnoticed. The secret intelligence Mary brought from occupied France to her loft at West Street was collected by military motorcyclists. Charlie was also decorated for his service at the end of the war. Mary died peacefully in her loft in 1950 and her grave is in the PDSA Pet Cemetery in Ilford with other animal heroes. Charlie died aged 90 in 1985.

Also present at the unveiling was 94-year-old Bob Reeves who remembers Charlie Brewer and Mary well, and was instrumental in getting the small memorial to Mary installed in Northernhay Gardens near the Exeter War Memorial several years ago. Mary is also depicted in the mosaic beneath St Thomas railway bridge.

## Unveiling of Blue Plaque to Elsie Knocker, the heroic WW 1 nurse

Exeter Civic Society's blue plaque to Elsie Knocker was unveiled by Paul Baker, the regional director

of the Royal Air Forces Association, on 4 November 2017 (photo on next page). The unveiling was attended by the Lord Mayor of Exeter and about fifty members and guests of the Society. An appreciation of Elsie's life was given by local historian Todd Gray, there was a display of archive photographs from the Imperial War Museum and a reception, generously provided by Patrick and Mark Simpson, the owners of the property. This enabled the Society to view the magnificent interior of no. 1 Barnfield Crescent, the home of Thomas Shapter (1809–1902), the noted physician and epidemiologist.



Elsie was born here on 29 July 1884, baptised as Elizabeth Blackall Shapter, the daughter of Dr Lewis Shapter, surgeon at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital and granddaughter of Thomas, who had by this date moved to London. Elsie, as she became known, was orphaned at an early age and adopted by Lewis Edward Upcott, a teacher at Marlborough college. She trained and worked as a nurse and midwife and married Leslie Duke Knocker in 1906 but the marriage was dissolved after the birth of her son. She became an enthusiastic motor cyclist which is how she met Mairi Chisholm.



On the outbreak of war in 1914 she volunteered with Mairi Chisholm (on the right) to work as despatch riders on the western front but they soon

found that their nursing skills were more in demand. Working independently they set up a first aid post in the cellar of a bombed out building on the front line in Pervyse and from a series of locations in that town they worked for four years in atrocious conditions, during which time they cared for some 23,000 casualties. They

had to raise funds to support their work and, when they visited the Barnfield Hall in 1916, Exeter citizens raised sufficient to run their dug-out, two ambulances and one lorry for three months. They were visited by King Albert of Belgium and other dignitaries and were awarded the British Military Medal in 1917 for rescuing a wounded pilot in no-man's land. In 1918 they were invalided out following a gas attack. Elsie finished war as an officer in the Women's Royal Air Force. In 1916 she had married a pilot, Baron Harold de T'Serclaes but they separated after the war when he learned of her divorce.

Between the wars Elsie had a variety of jobs, at one time running a knitwear shop in Torquay. In 1939 Elsie joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force as a senior officer working with RAF Fighter Command and was twice mentioned in despatches. On 3 July 1942 she lost her son, Wing Commander Kenneth Duke Knocker, who was killed when his plane was shot down over Groningen. She withdrew from the RAF after her son's death but was active as a fundraiser for the Royal Air Forces Association during and after the war. The Red Cross arranged for her to acquire a cottage at Ashtead through the Earl Haig Homes charity which she called Pervyse. In 1964 she published her memoirs, *Flanders and Other Fields* and died in 1978 aged 94.

While they were celebrities during and after World War 1, being known as the angels or madonnas of Pervyse, the two women became relatively forgotten until recently and a memorial to Elsie in her native Exeter was long overdue. Thanks are due to Ernie Milverton who for some years has been campaigning locally for her recognition – and for the recognition of other women who dedicated themselves heroically as nurses, clearing up the carnage that men had inflicted on the world.

As well as her autobiography there is an excellent work on her life by Diane Atkinson, *Elsie and Mairi Go to War: Two Extraordinary Women on the Western Front* (Cornerstone, 2009). The Wikipedia article at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elsie\\_Knocker](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elsie_Knocker) also gives links to other sources, both printed and online and there are a large number of

illustrations as well as her diaries and some moving images at the [Imperial War Museum](#).

Many of these sources miss the sting in the tail – what happened to her second husband, the Baron de T'Serclaes. Far from dying in 1919, as the *Oxford dictionary of national biography* entry states, he in fact died in Rome in 1952. After the separation he took up with another woman who also went under the name of Baroness de T'Serclaes. During World War 2 he informed on Antwerp resistance fighters and those protecting Jews. He fled from Belgium in 1944 and in 1947 was tried in absentia by the War Council of Brussels, stripped of his honours, and sentenced to death by firing squad. He remained in hiding, initially in Austria and then in Italy and was never brought to trial. Elsie cannot have known of this as she continued to be known as the Baroness de T'Serclaes until her death.

Ian Maxted

## Tour of St. Mary Steps Church

On a cold and overcast day, around 20 Civic Society members congregated to hear a fascinating talk and take a brief tour by two of its churchwardens.

The current church is "high church" borne out of the Oxford Movement of the nineteenth century and was one of the earliest churches to adopt its rituals.

Its began as a Heavitree stone-built church in the 12th century (dated precisely by the Norman stone carved font), through to a sideways enlargement in the 18th century, when its pews were added.

It stood strategically just inside the West Gate on the main road into the city (Stepcote Hill), allowing traders from as far away as Dartmoor to give heartfelt thanks if they had managed not to get mugged on the way!

The ceiling of the older part of the church is 15th century and recent cleaning is said to have



exposed original painted stars when viewed close up.

The rood screen (added in 1865) is an interesting

blend of an older smaller one, in the newer part of the church, which was rescued from the demolished St Mary Major church on Cathedral Green and a larger one being a Harry Hems-carved masterpiece of illusion that makes the two parts hard to spot. There are many other examples of Harry's work throughout the church.

There are many more interesting facts but this short article gives me just time to mention the modern stained glass window behind the altar by artist John Hayward (1929-2007 - who thought it his second best work) and, of course, the clock outside. Two of many interesting facts about that being that "Matthew the Miller" was not originally flanked by two sons (they came later) and that the dial is made of stone.

Really this just a very small taster and the church is well worth a visit to uncover more fascinating facts than I have space for here.

Sandra Semple

## River, Canal and Quayside Group

The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal, formed originally under the wing of ECS, is one of the founding members of a new umbrella organisation for community groups that are concerned with parks and other green spaces, Exeter Green Spaces Network. It aims to enable the sharing of resources, expertise and experience. Other groups already signed up include Ludwell Life, Friends of Eastern Fields, and Park Life (Heavitree).

FESC continues its programme of volunteer work-days; consult their website for details:

[www.friendsofexetershipcanal.co.uk](http://www.friendsofexetershipcanal.co.uk)

The RCQ group itself hasn't been active recently, and I'd like to renew my regular appeal for any recently-joined ECS members with an interest in the waterways to contact me at [pnickol@phoncoop.coop](mailto:pnickol@phoncoop.coop)

As part of ECS's programme of events I shall lead a walk from the Quay to the canal basin and on to Trews Weir, concentrating less on the historical aspects which are well covered elsewhere, and more on current developments. This is due to take place on Saturday April 7, but please look out for ECS announcements confirming the date and other details.

**Peter Nickol**

## Upcoming Events

### **Sunday 25th February 2.00pm.**

Return visit to County Hall led by Bill Horner, the County Archaeologist.

### **Wednesday 28th March 2.00pm.**

Visit to Stonemason's Yard led by Chris Sampson who is in charge of the Stonemasons at the Cathedral. £7.00 charge for Society members.

### **Saturday 7th April 11.00am.**

Walk along the Quay/River led by Peter Nickol

### **Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> May 14.30-16.00**

Guided Tour by Red Coat Mike Richards on *Oddities, Curiosities and the Catacombs*

## **Open Mornings - please note that talks start at 10.45 am.**

### **Saturday 17th February 10.45am**

Andrew Jones will talk about the Role of the Church of England in World War I in Devon.

### **Saturday 17th March 10.45am**

John Monks will talk about the Blue Plaques scheme

### **Saturday 21st April 10.45am**

Richard Holloway will talk about Dr. N.C. Lovely

### **Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> May 10.45am**

Dr Julia Neville will talk about the Exeter Women Suffragists, the War and the Vote.