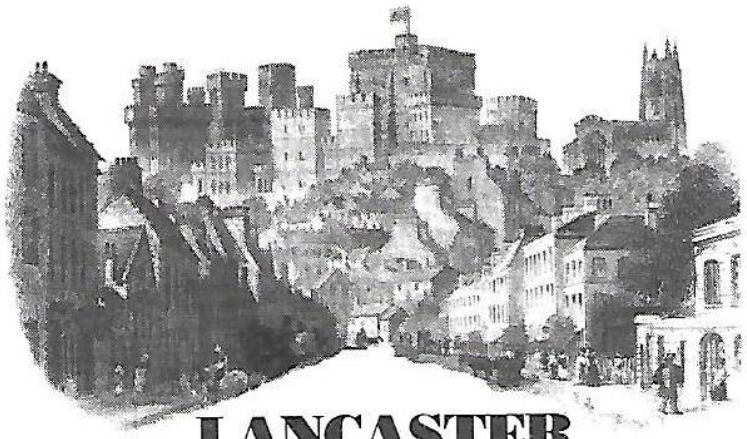


A HISTORY OF LANCASTER CIVIC SOCIETY

THE FIRST 40 YEARS

1967 – 2007

By Malcolm B Taylor
2009

A. THE SOCIETY AND THE TOWN HALL

As possibly the largest single influence on the early success of The Society, this subject deserves to be the first to be recorded.

For any civic society to succeed there must be dialogue between it and its town hall. Dialogue should be based on mutual respect. From the society's view point, respect comes with a dialogue which comprises neither sycophantic agreement with the town hall, nor constant opposition (although at times, the latter might seem the more accurate situation). For a society to achieve its aims of securing the best possible civic environment, it has at times to be pragmatic, recognising that there are often hidden forces within the town hall which will conflict with some of the society's aims. On the other hand, the society must learn when it should persist in long and bloody sieges, when it is sure it is right, and where there is a vestige of success. If in the end an important battle is lost, the society should not hesitate to seek maximum publicity in condemning the outcome. An adverse decision well publicised may produce town hall (or developer) caution when the next controversial proposal appears. From the town hall's view point, it should respect the society's role as the keeper of the taxpayers' civic conscience (its "critical friend", a title to appear later), as representatives of the community in complementing the role of the councillors. It should respect the independence of a body whose members usually include professional designers who can often see a better way forward without the encumbrance of the town hall's political baggage. A sensitive town hall will take soundings from a civic society it respects before committing itself to major decisions which affect the civic scene.

How have events lived up to this model over the years?

The Society hit the ground running when it was formed. As will have been seen in **Beginnings (above)** and **People (in Section E below)**, Lancaster had a town clerk who, in sponsoring the replacement of a dysfunctional body, planned for this one to succeed. If he had a hidden agenda, it was only that the new society might provide manpower for some of his pet civic projects. In return, he offered secretarial help and Town Hall space for meetings (the latter continues to this day). Most civic societies could live happily with such a relationship.

Unlike many local authorities of its size, Lancaster also had a city architect. Most towns had to make do with a city engineer, who however professional he may have been would probably have rated the state of his roads and sewers as more important than sensitively designed street furniture. There was mutual respect from the first day between the city architect and the Society. Many of his staff took an active part in running the Society without prejudicing its independence from Town Hall politics. The agenda of a local authority council is not always shared by the town's civic society, since the society will always strive for the best possible civic result. However, the Town Hall is subject to awkward constraints like pressure from developers, complying with government policy, and the need to maximise income (eg having reluctantly to accept

B&Q's prominent red fascia in Aldcliffe Road). Sometimes, one sensed that while Allan Heppenstall was privately supportive of the society's determination not to compromise good design, his position demanded that he took a more neutral position. But that did not prevent him from the occasional use of Society lobbying to support his case.

Another indication of the Town Clerk's and City Architect's regard for the Society was the many surviving letters to the Society personally written and signed by them. One is accustomed to getting letters from local authorities which, while rubber stamped by the senior officers are penned by anonymous employees sheltering behind initials. Nor should we forget that senior officers of the County Council engaged with the Society when demanded by circumstance. The Clerk to the County Council personally intervened in the Mitre House saga and the County's chief engineer openly commented to the Society during the interminable fighting over the various bypass proposals. These high level exchanges do illustrate recognition by Town and County Halls of the contribution made by the Society.

Substantial support for the Society's aims also arose from the existence (again unusual for a second tier local authority) of a substantial City Architect's and Planning Department. Not only would they provide a source of enthusiastic Society supporters, but their work usually recognised good civic design. In the early days, the City Architect was also the Chief Planning Officer, but when the two functions separated, the Society continued to gain, as the City Architect proved a good friend to the Society as indeed did his deputy, who made a substantial contribution to the work of the committee. Sadly, neither are any longer with the City.

Both City and the Society were fortunate in the choice of the successor to the Allan Heppenstall when he retired. Charles Wilson brought with him a keen awareness of good architecture and was himself a hands-on designer. He was responsible for building the then City Architect's (and now) Planning Department in Palatine House. Those who have penetrated its entrance lobby will testify to the still fresh and modern ambience of its design.

One might perhaps at this point pause to consider the politics of engagement between Society and Town Hall in these early days, as a contrast to what was to follow. The natural courtesy of these early and powerful players, and the welcome by the Society of Town Hall staff onto its committees resulted in a relationship which enabled many good things to happen. Some readers might think it a little too cosy. The Society would have felt uneasy to be confrontational, whereas, with hindsight, one might wish that it had bared its teeth more often, to set the precedent which today's climate needs. But it had a Town Hall it could do business with.

Change began as early as the 1970s. One cannot be sure of any particular event which started the process. Perhaps the forced marriage of Morecambe and Lancaster affected attitudes. Perhaps the development world became stronger as a powerful, largely unseen (by the Society and local taxpayers) force in the built environment. Perhaps increasing government control of local authorities has affected attitudes against a

background of growing government reliance on the private sector. Certainly, local authorities all over the country were replacing their architects' departments by faceless "Property Maintenance" third tier officers. In any event there was a nationwide shift from local authority to private sector building development. Perhaps the changing pattern of central government funding influenced a local authority's priorities. The City has been seen as not as prudent as it might have been as guardian of the tax payers' money. But one funding aspect is certain. In the early days, much good civic design was achieved on the back of a locally shaky economy, with high unemployment. The arrival of the University, expansion of NHS activities and increasing prosperity generally has changed all that. Shortage of cash cannot be blamed as a factor for the increasing remoteness of Town Hall from Society which was developing. All this speculation has the makings of a fascinating study, but way beyond the scope of this book.

Recent years have seen abolition of the City Architect's Department and transfer of its remaining staff to Cumbria County Council, and then its absorbtion within that ever hungry management enigma, Capita. Only a conservation officer now remains as a tenuous professional design contact between City and Society. The Society becomes increasingly apprehensive whenever a new commercial development opportunity emerges. Exchanges between Society and Town Hall become increasingly frosty. Is there any longer sufficient expertise within the Town Hall to engage in debate with the developers which on the one hand will benefit the local economy, and on the other safeguard the need for good design?

A further curious vacuum has persisted to this day. There is hardly any mention in the Society's files of contacts with elected councillors, either at City or County level. One would have expected that any lobbying campaign would have started with enlisting the support of the appropriate councillors – or at least to learn their views. And in the reverse direction, one might have expected any councillor with a concern for good civic design to seek Society comment before debate started in the Council Chamber. This puzzle may have something in common with the Society's reducing dialogue with the Town Hall.

A disappointing end to a key chapter in the Society's history?

Planning Applications

In a city where so much is worth preserving and where change has to be treated with great sensitivity, it hardly needs to be said that a civic society would be expected to make this subject one of its core aims. So it has proved for Lancaster's civic society. There will have been few committee agendas which have not dealt with current applications or the consequences of applications granted. A start was made shortly after the Society was formed in 1967, when Guy Barton agreed to examine applications at the town hall monthly. Many have been raised at members' meetings, discussed in

Newsletters or been brought to the attention of the public through letters to the Lancaster Guardian, or at public meetings.

Depending on the composition of the many committees over the years, the ebb and flow of dealing with applications has fluctuated from being a challenge for the keener members or (occasionally) a chore which had to be done. Committees often include members who are professionally qualified in either architecture or planning who can advise on or lead informed response. As a result the comments returned to the City planners have been received with respect, if not always welcomed. However, it is clear from reading committee minutes that the process of getting hold of applications in time for comment, deciding on those requiring comment and returning comments within the Town Hall's timetable has often been a difficult and frustrating activity for the Society. One of the recurring problems for the committee has been the emphasis which should be placed on the individual application. Sometimes an urge not to let the minutiae of any application escape unchallenged has resulted in an ennui both for the committee and the planners which has allowed the more important issues to escape. There is no answer to this problem, bearing in mind that committees change in their compositions, their enthusiasm and their priorities for this often thankless job. However one thing is certain: over the forty years of this history, the Society's many committee meetings have never treated as other than a priority, planning matters over all the other and many activities in which they have involved themselves.

How to maintain consistent interest in planning applications has exercised the minds of all committees. Ideally, an informed group pores patiently over an application and a balanced judgement ensues. Often, there is no such group, and continuum is maintained by one or two dedicated people. The danger here is that the basis for opinion narrows and the views of one are presented as if they are the opinions of a whole committee. There has also been frustration when whole committee meetings become tied down with weighty planning applications. Recent committee structures have tried to overcome this by delegating planning matters to subcommittees.

Timing of committee meetings and the City's programme for dealing with planning applications has not always been easy, as is mentioned above. An important meeting between the committee and the chief planning officer took place in January 1997, when these issues were raised, and solutions sought.

For many local authorities, regard for the civic environment is not always at the top of its agenda. Even when it is, decisions can be made by councils, which unless advised by professional designers and planners, can be unfortunate and their consequences impossible to reverse. Even where professional advice is available, it can be ignored through pressure of other priorities. Lancaster has been fortunate and far sighted over a good part of the span of this history to have had some strong chief officers who believed in the need for sensitive urban design. In the early and middle years the City, unusually for a second tier authority, had a chief architect and a substantial department who fought for good design, sometimes at the expense of pressure from others with different agendas. It might reasonably be guessed that the Society would often find itself pushing

at an open door in its desire to preserve good design. It is an independent body (and, in Lancaster's case a respected body) to support the planners' decisions when they are right, occasionally arguing a better case when they are wrong, and providing some solace when planning committees overturn everything. Indeed it often tacitly assisted the council's professionals in beating off the philistines. We do not have to be too cynical to be able to accept at face value the almost annual assurances by the City Architect, succeeded by the City's Director of Development and Planning, succeeded by the Chief Planning Officer, that the Society's comments on planning matters are always respected and welcomed. This gives the lie, one hopes, to some of the members, who in their darker moments have been heard to wonder if the Society's views are taken seriously enough by the City.

It has been difficult to decide what material to include or exclude in this account, so comprehensive has been the Society's involvement in planning matters. It would make very tedious reading if every application were listed. Instead, some of the key developments in Lancaster in which the Society has had a hand have been chosen for specific mention. However, it would be grossly unfair to the many hours put in by many members not to acknowledge the minutiae which informs the civic scene. There must now be hundreds of shop fronts, shop signages, street furniture, tarmac replaced by setts, street lighting and fittings, windows, doors, fly posters removed, which have not escaped the Society's attention. Each perhaps may be of little significance by itself, but a great deal of the credit for the total effect on Lancaster's street scene must go to the Society's efforts. If you glance casually by day or night, and you see harmony, the Society has had a hand in it.

Local Plans

Plans of various intentions produced by local authorities and required by law, come and go, largely unnoticed by the public. By the time they have been published, the public consulted, the draft changed and re-issued, public enquiry held, the inspector's report published (usually late), a bemused public has lost the plot. Government policy then changes, or a recession has started, resulting in no money to do anything, or the Town Hall chooses to ignore the bits of the inspector's conclusions it doesn't like - it is time for the next Plan, and the newborn Plan is quietly buried. The cycle goes on. So it was with the 1996 Local Plan, which, however, did arouse some (relatively) passionate debate. There were two principal reasons: one, the roads problem (discussed more fully in **Roads**), revolving mainly around the much fought over "Western Bypass" (aka the Heysham-M6 Link), and two, how Lancaster was to absorb the considerable housing demanded country wide by government and Lancaster's allocation of it by Lancaster County Council.

The Society entered the fray with enthusiasm. A group was formed to advise the committee on how the Society should respond. The Chamber of Commerce's views

were sought. On the question of roads, the Society was not convinced that the "Bypass", while perhaps benefiting Heysham had been shown to reduce city traffic to the extent of justifying the cost of the new road. It argued instead for the doomed Eastern Relief Road (which had not been mentioned in the draft Local Plan). It considered that proposals for better public transport were inadequate and asked for a dedicated bus lane through the city.

It argued that the numbers of new green field houses were unsustainable, bearing in mind the likelihood of insufficient expansion of trade to support the numbers required to occupy the houses: in short, the numbers proposed were a recipe for Lancaster to become a dormitory town. Attractive open country had been zoned for the major part of the new housing. In the process of putting its seven page comments together, the Society convened a meeting with the district bus users' group, and Stagecoach, the bus operators. The aim was to produce a better public transport system and less congestion.

The Society gave evidence at the enquiry, which it found an uncomfortable experience. The large team of barristers hired by the City were intimidating, and the programme for the attendance of the various witnesses went out of the window. The Town Hall ignored the part of the inspector's report rejecting the bypass western option, and continued to press County and government for the road. The inspector called in the outline planning application for the green field housing. However, before the enquiry was complete, government decided to transfer the housing allocation to East Lancashire, resulting in a complete embargo on all new housing for the city except brown field. Of the proposed improved public transport, modest though it was, there is little trace. As will be seen elsewhere, more recent history has seen collapse of the western bypass option.

So, perhaps the fate of the 1996 Local Plan was a pyrrhic (and expensive for the ratepayers) victory for both the Society and the Town Hall?

Postscript: the Town Hall could not wait for publication of the inspector's conclusions before giving planning permission for a part of the green field housing. The Society objected, unsuccessfully.

B. CHRONOLOGICALLY RELATED EVENTS

Nightingale Hall Farm
The Castle
Roads and Pedestrianisation
St George's Quay, Luneside East and West
The Music Room
The Lancaster Canal at Aldcliffe Road
MitreYard and Mitre House
Bath Mill Housing
British Rail
Sainsbury's Store
Magistrates' Court House
St John's Church
Ashton Memorial
Central Area Redevelopment
The Bus Station
Cottams Farm
Kingsway
Marton Street Housing
Museums Crisis
Conservation Areas

A recurring difficulty during the writing of this history has been one of chronology. The reader deserves some signposts to remind him where he is supposed to be at any given point between 1967 and 2007. No satisfactory answer has appeared, simply because

while some events can be pinned down precisely as having originated at one time, and terminated at another, for others it has proved difficult to pin down start and end dates. **Section E, Structure and Working of the Society** suffers the same problem. However, both sections have attempted to place events in chronological order.

The dates given in brackets do not pretend to be accurate and are intended as an indication of the periods over which the Society was interested or became active.

Nightingale Hall Farm

(1967-2006)

Nightingale Hall Farm, such a bucolic name for an industry which has caused so much misery to its neighbours, is a supreme euphemism for what was until 2006 the factory of Fats and Proteins (UK) Ltd, where animal carcasses were rendered down to recover valuable fat products. The smell was so disgusting at times that it had to be experienced to be believed. Transport of the carcasses was also a problem, when insufficient sheeting of vehicles caused spillage of the rotting remains of animals on to roads.

Over the years the Town Hall attempted either to impose conditions which would prevent smells escaping from the works, or to close down the venture entirely. It even prosecuted the owners without success. Timing of the only prosecution the Town Hall risked was unfortunate being just after the last foot and mouth epidemic, when, arguably, Nightingale Hall's activities were, briefly, justified as being in the public interest. Improvement was always short lived.

Over the years the Society has added its voice to the many protesters, but missed a vital chance at the beginning. The first planning application, in 1971 for "the construction of an animal waste processing unit", was seen by the Society's committee, who declined to comment. Having secured permission the operators then predictably, applied for permission to erect a 90ft chimney. The committee resolve to "enquire", but there is no further record

Nightingale Hall Farm was a major blot on Lancaster's civic landscape, lying as it did next to a housing estate, a large school, and near to Williamson Park. Its emissions effectively forced the City to exclude a substantial part of the abandoned Moor Hospital site from the last Local Plan as a prime housing opportunity.

Relief finally came in 2006 when a major fire caused such damage as to persuade the operators to cease production. New regulations requiring zero emissions no doubt helped to concentrate their minds. In 2006 outline planning permission was granted to build housing on the site. Thus ended one of the most sordid stories of Lancaster's history.

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The Castle

(1967-present)

No account of the Society would be complete without mention of the Castle – Lancaster's largest, most prominent, and historic[al] building. More a massif, than a building.

Truth to tell, there hasn't been a lot to engage the Society's attention over the years. Comparatively little of the Castle is accessible to the public, and the part which is has been used only to hold an AGM and a concert. It has been included as one of the buildings to visit on a Heritage weekend. The Society has had little occasion or opportunity to enquire into its maintenance or appearance which does not change much. This is of course due to the fact that the greater part of it is one of HM's prisons.

Both City and Society became quite excited several years ago, when its lease was about to expire. Plans were explored for its future use, but perhaps it is as well that the Home Office decided to retain it, because the cost of any conversion and maintenance would have been astronomic. Only its becoming a major national monument will make any sense.

The most momentous happening in recent years was a symposium, arranged by the Society and the Lancaster Archeological and History Society about its history held at the Storey Institute (another institution not featuring much in the annals of the Society) in 2002. This was very well attended, showing that there is much interest in the Castle. Continuing denial of access (unless you wish to become a guest of HM) was seen to be very frustrating. Copies of an account of the proceedings are said to be in preparation and available through the Society.

Roads and Pedestrianisation

(1967-present)

<u>Historical Context</u>

As road traffic became the primary means of transport, Lancaster, amongst the many other towns up and down the country has had to struggle with the ensuing problem of choked roads which were never intended to cope with the volume and which continues

to grow. Any long term solutions have yet to appear, so Lancaster has had to develop its own short to medium term solutions. The Society has played its part in many ways – alerting the public to the growing threat to the civic scene, promoting and supporting solutions, holding meetings, castigating local and central government when they appeared to be taking the wrong approach or just not acting.

Lancaster has been on the main north west through-route between England and Scotland since before recorded history began. Typically, being at the lowest fordable part of a major river was the very reason for its existence. By the 20th century it lay on the only trunk route for motor traffic. By 1961 when the M6 was opened, the city centre was often paralyzed. At first, the M6 seemed the long term answer, particularly as it became connected with the national motorway network. However, as we know, such relief was short lived, and the town centre and its single road link to Morecambe became an ever-worsening problem for local traffic, a problem added to by the increasing importance of the port of Heysham where road rather than rail became the primary means of transporting goods to and from the port.

During this period (post 1961), other measures of improving traffic flow were either introduced or discussed at length. A new one-way gyratory system introduced in 1972 separated north-south from south-north traffic. This was and still is quite a confusing maze for new visitors but at first worked well for the locals. However, it had the effect of concentrating the more successful shopping and commercial activities within its boundaries (coincidentally, the boundaries to be seen on Mackereth's map of 1780), to the occasional detriment of those on the other side. Such important areas as Dalton Square, the town hall, and the castle found themselves on the "wrong" side. The extra pedestrian crossings necessary to re-connect the two sides have grown to the extent that they now inhibit the improved traffic flows originally intended. One measure (now quite dead) to relieve city centre traffic was the colloquially named Eastern Relief Road (but officially the City Centre Relief Road).

Communication to and from Morecambe was greatly improved by conversion in 1971 of the old "Greyhound" disused railway bridge over the Lune to a road bridge, thus providing a second road river crossing. This complemented Skerton Bridge and enabled Morecambe traffic to be separated as it crossed the river. However, in recent years, this route too has become near impossible at times. In fact, even upon its opening, public, councillors and the City Engineer himself were complaining that until its north side was linked to an eastern relief road, congestion would continue.

Bypasses, or Heysham/M6 links

Enter a further solution: the Heysham/M6 link. For many years (at least as far back as 1985), the local politicians have strongly promoted two variations of a high speed dual carriageway link between M6 and the port. The western variation they always favoured comprised a route which left the M6 at junction 33, and crossed the Lune via a new bridge at Salt Ayre. The variation they did not favour (the northern link) left the M6 at junction 34 and connected with a new road (now built) through White Lund to Heysham.

The western road would provide a connection for traffic to and from the Lune industrial site (now called Luneside West), whose traffic now has to enter the already congested gyratory centre traffic. The northern road would be much shorter, would occupy a largely clear corridor created for it by the planners and would avoid the need for a new river crossing. However it would require the re-modelling of M6 junction 34, itself requiring construction of a new river bridge.

The option to be chosen (or indeed whether any such road would help Lancaster's traffic problems) has been hotly debated over the years and has generated several public consultations and exhibitions. On publication of the last Local Plan, the inspector rejected the western option. In fact, it has been an open secret that the County Council's officers always favoured the northern option (presumably why a corridor for it has been preserved for all these years), so it came as no surprise that Government have now intimated that if there is to be a road at all, it will be the northern option. As this chapter is being prepared (summer 2006) it has been announced that the County Council intended to seek planning permission for the northern link in the Autumn of 2006. There may be a public enquiry. The NIMBYs north of the river protested when they realised that the western option had been abandoned and the northern option accepted. This required further consultation and modifications to the route – despite their opportunity to protest at previous consultations. If government proposals to promote a new generation of nuclear power stations are successful, it seems almost certain that the Heysham site will get one, thus practically guaranteeing that there will be a northern route.

This brief introduction to Lancaster's road traffic problems forms the background to the Society's involvement in various other schemes, which will now be explored.

Bay Parkway

In 1985, there was already much controversy over the County Council's two schemes, described above, for a Heysham-M6 road, which were supported by the City Council. Only the Society amongst the many objectors put forward an alternative solution. In linking M6 and Heysham their Bay Parkway proposed to use existing roads as far as possible. It would connect to an upgraded M6 junction 34, widen Caton Road to four lanes, connect through a complex new junction at Skerton Bridge taking the whole of the centre's north/south traffic from the Eastern Relief Road, to a further widened Greyhound Bridge which would take the whole of the Morecambe traffic. The route would continue under Carlisle railway bridge along a widened Morecambe Road as far as the current bend, but continue straight on along a short section of new road past Salt Ayre, to join the new road to Heysham from White Lund. Skerton Bridge would be closed to road traffic but there would be a new road across Rylands Park connecting the western end of Greyhound Bridge to Torrisholme Road. Unlike the official Heysham-M6 link road, it was intended as a low speed road (it could hardly have been otherwise, given all the complex junctions involved).

The County Council's response, as agents to the Department of Transport was polite but non committal, although at this stage, they were not ruling it out. The Town Hall actually supported it. However, the County Council later warned of the possible difficulties of strengthening an already widened Greyhound Bridge to take a fourlane road. The Society continued to lobby the County Surveyor and central government from 1986 to 1989, against increasing determination by City and County to press government for funding for what was now termed the "Western Bypass". The Society continued to reject both western and northern options, pressing for the Bay Parkway as the better scheme. One has the feeling, with the great benefit of hindsight that the Society might have realised (perhaps they always did?) that the County Council never did take the scheme seriously, although the coup de grâce was not delivered until June 1989, when the County Surveyor sent a detailed rebuttal supported by traffic flow projections.

Two lessons emerge:

- The Society had embarked on a scheme involving highway engineering of great complexity, without the professional resources to demonstrate feasibility, or to argue with the experts at County Hall

- There was always a strong political lobby demanding its own scheme for its own reasons which would have taken an equally strong lobby to defeat

But should the Society have put forward an alternative route and persisted with it for so long? Logic would suggest probably not. However, it was brave enough to challenge the big boys, and may well have forced them to examine the robustness of their own schemes with greater care than would otherwise have happened. This, together with the Society's subsequent support for the northern option may have helped in defeating the western option.

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The Eastern Relief Road (City Centre Access Road), now known as the Canal Corridor

The road has a history of some obscurity. Like the whole debate about Lancaster's traffic problems, it has surfaced from time to time, then resumed its slumbers. Even the origin of the title is obscure. The Society, as indeed did most of the public, used the title ERR, whereas in recent years City and County have preferred to call it the City Centre Access Road.

The corridor for the route came about through the quite unconnected space left by clearance of derelict property along a line to the south of the canal between Penny Street Bridge and Bulk Road. One suspects that a part of the continuing ambiguity about the need for the road arose because the cleared corridor was already there, growing rose bay willow herb, so why not use it to relieve city centre traffic? On the other hand, there has never been any properly researched exercise independent of the fortuitous existence of this corridor, with projected traffic flows on how the through traffic

problem might be solved. Instead, the establishment has intermittently relied on the Heysham/M6 link as the answer to everything. Nevertheless, hope for the road was never entirely extinguished until recent years.

The first reference in the Society's archive is in 1969, when the City Architect said that the road would commence in 1973. An editorial in the Lancaster Guardian argued the need for an eastern road to relieve city centre congestion.

A joint paper was prepared by Friends of the Earth and the Society in 1974. The District Transportation Committee and the planners had proposed the road, but, the paper argued, neither the public nor the two societies wanted it. It thought rather optimistically that construction could start within a year. Objections were mainly on the grounds of appearance and noise of a virtual urban motorway so near the city centre. It quoted the now well known mantra that new roads only attract more traffic. There is an echo of the later Society-* proposed Bay Parkway, as an alternative. There is mention also of the need for an improved M6 junction 34. All good prophetic stuff. (One cannot resist noting that "when petrol reaches the price of 75p - £1 ***a gallon***, cars will be used less").

The Society called a public meeting at the town hall that year, attended by more than 200, chaired by Abbott Bryning and addressed by Don Waddell, the Town Clerk, who defended the road. Debate was lively and a motion passed rejecting an Eastern Relief Road.

Whether at its own initiative, or in response to public pressure, the County Council produced a consultation leaflet in June 1987, with a reply slip for comment. Nothing is known of public response, but the County Council dismissed any idea of a wholly or partly one-way route, and recommended two-way traffic. A dual carriageway would not be necessary. The leaflet also proposed a further road from Greyhound Bridge to Damside Street, improving access to St George's Quay. There would be a public exhibition and a decision taken whether or not to include the scheme in the forthcoming Local Plan. Neither of these happened but the County Surveyor addressed a meeting called by the Society. That the two authorities did not follow up the scheme is further indication of their ambivalent attitudes to it.

The Society's attitude to the ERR changed over these years. Strong opinion against became strong opinion for. To what extent this change was due to abandonment of Bay Parkway and the then cautious support for the Western Bypass (later to be changed to support for the Northern option) might still be an interesting debate. Since 1987 the Society occasionally (and usually unsuccessfully) pressed the City for its policy on the ERR. In 1979 Don Waddell wrote a good fence-sitting letter to the Society, still appearing to support the road. The circulatory system had reached maximum capacity. Surveys had been carried out. The road had been included in a submission to the County for 80/81, but he doubted if funding would be available. Later that year, the County asked the Society to participate in development of the N. Lancs Structure Plan, with particular reference to the Town Clerk's letter (above).

Sniping continued through 1980s: Bill Pearson (the new Town Clerk) continued to stonewall: he was awaiting information from the City Engineer. In 1981, the scheme was said to have been dropped in favour of an alternative route for the bypass (which looks suspiciously like the doomed western Heysham-M6 option). There was no mention of the road in the 1986 Local Plan, which annoyed the Society, who had hoped it would provide opportunity for further debate. In 1997, three members of the committee met three councillors who opposed the road, and in 1998 met a County Council senior engineer. It was clear that both councils now opposed the road. In 2001, the City issued a City Centre Strategy discussion paper, to which the Society replied comprehensively and acknowledged that the Eastern Relief Road was now dead.

Since then, planning consent has been granted for building over a part of the corridor (**Marton Street Housing see p…**), and there are plans by a developer, Centros Miller) at an advanced stage and favoured by the City to build over most of the remainder. If all this materialises, where will the City find space for the displaced parking?

Pedestrianisation

The Society registered its interest in a car-free city centre in 1970, when it thought that the City was dragging its feet in developing proposals. The City Architect was lobbied. The City was pressed again for action in 1971, when, as a start, the Society suggested partial traffic exclusion from Penny Street, if full exclusion was not yet possible. In 1972, the Society appointed a study group to comment on “a report on a circulatory traffic system for the city centre”. The group’s report went to the City and the press. In 1973, the City Architect announced that full pedestrianisation would commence shortly.

Pedestrianisation on the scale we now enjoy would not have been possible without the City’s bold and visionary proposals to alter fundamentally traffic flow through the city. One of its most far reaching reports which was to affect the City’s civic ambience (its consequences appreciated today and for a long time to come) was published by the Town Hall in 1972. It proposed the current traffic gyratory system which divides north from south bound traffic, and, crucially, releasing streets which could become traffic free. At that time, pedestrianisation nationally had not developed on the scale now adopted in many town centres and motorists still expected to be able to stop outside the shops they wished to visit. Consequently, the City was at first cautious about the streets to be converted. But it was a bold proposal and ultimately created the comfort the pedestrian now takes for granted over a large part of the centre.

When the City announced that the whole scheme had been adopted, public response as witnessed in the columns of the Lancaster Guardian was muted. There is little record of any reaction to the new traffic routes. While strangers even today curse the system, the locals took to it with few problems. This contrasts with Kendal which has tried and abandoned several solutions over the years and may at last have found the answer. So the City deserves our thanks for having devised a robust and carefully developed system. There was some opposition to pedestrianisation, led by a Lancaster Guardian

editorial, on the grounds that shopkeepers would lose trade. Whenever argument started, well penned letters from the Society appeared, putting down the doubters with strong argument for the proposals.

The Society had made many and detailed proposals including the need for landscaping. Initially Cheapside was excluded, but in the end, the City included all the streets now pedestrianised. In the event, we had to wait a long time for finalisation. Work started with Market Street, Market Square and New Street, then into Cheapside and Penny Street and finally Church Street. Hard and soft landscaping was to a high level of specification, as was street furniture.

A survey of shop fronts had been carried out in 1970, with the encouragement of the City Architect and a report submitted . By 1972, little seemed to have happened, and the City Architect was asked what action had been taken. On pedestrianisation the Society renewed its pressure on retailers to improve their frontages, and during 1982 and 1983 produced a detailed criticism of shop fronts. This was welcomed by the City Architect. (Lancaster now has a centre for which its residents and visitors should feel well pleased, although some shop fronts would benefit from a re-visit).

Thus, it will be seen that the Society had commented at length on the development and detail of the proposals, generally welcoming them, but adding many points of comment, including disappointment at the “back burner” approach to pedestrianisation, when the City was procrastinating. However, it is doubtful if such comments would have been as successful today, now that we no longer have a City Architect’s department.

In recent years, the attractively designed pavings have suffered a pounding from heavy delivery vehicles and the City has been slow to repair them. Chewing gum is an unlovely pollutant, as are fly posters. Some might think that the areas which have been completely re-paved seem rather more bland than the original surfaces. The Society has also complained about plastic Father Christmases and a threat of piped music.

The Society has had to watch carefully the diminishing cobbled or stone setted areas in the city. Typically, where repairs have had to be made, the cobbles have been replaced by tarmac, as a much more easily maintainable and cheaper surface. However there have been some successes. Dalton Square and Friar Street, and the triangle at the bottom of Moor Lane have been expertly re-surfaced with setts.

In 1977, the Society and others representing the commercial life of the city were invited by the City’s Director of Community Services to take part in a consultation on the future of the city centre. The meeting was inconclusive, but the Society published a discussion paper “Towards Improving the Lancaster City Centre”, covering human activity, transport, conservation, design and open spaces. Of immediate concern was the need to reduce unnecessary traffic from the centre, and encourage the use of public transport. The Society’s paper was well received, although the section urging re-consideration of the Eastern Relief Road (now re-titled the Canal Corridor Route), will not have been a welcome suggestion to a council by now implacably opposed to it. The

paper was updated in 2000 to coincide with the City's intended plan to produce a Lancaster Town Centre Strategy. The paper still considered that traffic problems remained a priority, but it was thought that this was only one of the reasons why the city was not thriving as a retail centre. The Society urged that a city centre manager should be appointed. Whatever the reasons – probably connected to the political manoeuvring resulting from the inspector's report on the 1996 Local Plan – the initiative was dropped.

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