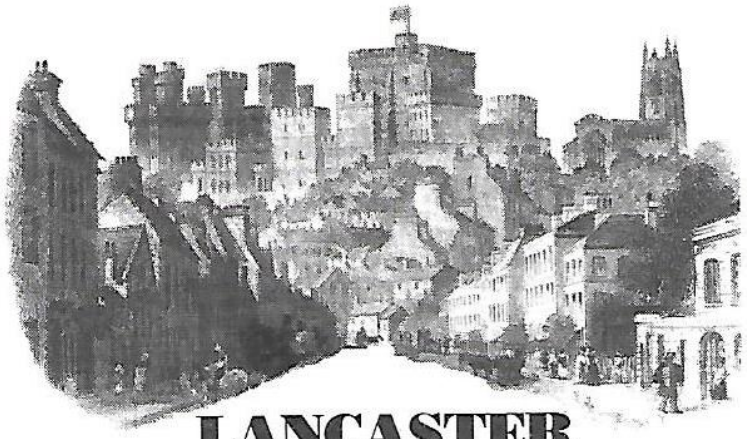


A HISTORY OF LANCASTER CIVIC SOCIETY

THE FIRST 40 YEARS

1967 – 2007

By Malcolm B Taylor
2009

St. George's Quay, Luneside East and West

(1967-present)

The view of the Quay from the other side of the river is incomparable. Gillow's Custom House has been sensitively converted into a Maritime Museum and the vista must be one of the finest riverside elevations in the country, with Mitre House, the Castle and the Priory Church rising above it as a backdrop. Its continuation east well complements it with attractive new housing, the millennium bridge, and a discreetly screened Sainsbury's. The last of the warehouses east of Carlisle Bridge has now been restored. Infilling, mainly housing, respects the vernacular. It may surprise readers, therefore, that there is little reference to the Quay in the Society's files. Perhaps the quality of restoration has been such as to require little comment?

One matter of consequence on which the Society has commented at length has only indirectly concerned the buildings. The Quay is notoriously vulnerable to flooding. In 1988, the Society did comment on the Town Hall's proposals for flood defences, and the residents were not happy. This saga continues.

Visually, the scene changes abruptly to the west of Carlisle Bridge. To the right lie the remains of Lancaster's last boat building yard, now an industrial unit. To the left are warehouses of a later period, decaying and not a pretty sight. Behind them the abandoned gas works site and the visually notorious gasholder once scaled by a brave Society contingent, and now happily gone. This is the site of Luneside East, where proposals have been made by the North West Development Agency for high quality, architect-designed housing and workshops in an "Urban Village". The Society has approved the scheme and encouraged its construction, although with misgivings about retention of the warehouse façades and traffic access. Further along still, we come to the remains of Lune Mills, Lord Ashton's linoleum fortune generator. Here too housing is proposed for what has been titled Luneside West. This site suffers the problems of heavily contaminated ground. The Society opposed this scheme on strategic planning grounds, poor access and the risks of flooding, urging that Luneside East should have priority. However, one might predict that the west site will not proceed until it is known whether or not there will be a new bridge over the river. Unless there is, it is difficult to imagine that the traffic generated will be allowed to use the only two existing access points at Cable Street and Meeting House Lane.

The Music Room

(1968-1973)

The Music Room in Sun Street is now one of Lancaster's civic jewels with a spacious open paved space to show off its main elevation. Such an assured restoration belies its condition and uncertain future at the time the Society was formed. It was a ruin, with its priceless plaster ceilings facing imminent collapse. It was used as storage by a local business man and obscured on all sides by decaying buildings.

From 1968, the Society constantly pressed the City for action, even if only to preserve the ceilings (it was clear that it would be difficult to find a public use for the whole building). The City's response was negative. They did not intend to find any funding: their only positive

response was to undertake to clear the approaches if another party came up with a viable plan to save the building. By 1969, nothing having happened, the Society became quite desperate for its future. The Trust which owned it was being wound up and the City still declined to provide funding. So the Society started the process of becoming a public charity so that they could take it over (presumably with the idea of appealing for funds). There was some indication that the City was shifting civic responsibility to the County. The Historic Buildings Council advised that the Music Room should be restored and that a grant might be available. In 1970, the Landmark Trust became interested in adding it to their portfolio of architecturally interesting holiday homes, a prospect the Society warmly welcomed. The City Architect suggested that the Society be represented at talks with the Trust, but the Music Room's future was not yet secure. The Landmark Trust would only buy if a grant was forthcoming. Hiatus followed, and the Society proposed compulsory purchase to concentrate minds. Then the Trust claimed they were being held up while the occupier was waiting for the City to find him alternative storage.

By 1971, more promising signs appeared. The Trust had appointed CB Pearson as architects and asked them to cost repairs and conversion of the top floor to holiday accommodation (they estimated £30,000). The City would buy and clear the ground in front of the Music Room. Late in 1971, purchase by the Landmark Trust was complete. However, it was not until 1972 that the City made formal application for purchase of the land, and 1973 before work started.

While the Society would not claim all the credit for having saved this remarkable building, it has to be acknowledged that for two critical years they were the only body to agonise over its future. It is reasonable to speculate that without their efforts, there would today be no Music Room. Holiday makers now enjoy the compact but comfortable top floor flat with views over the city. The exquisite middle floor with its plaster ceilings is occasionally open to the public. A long term use for the ground floor shop unit continues to be elusive.

The Lancaster Canal at Aldcliffe Road

(1970-present)

The section of the Lancaster Canal between Penny Street Bridge and Portland Street had been the hub of the canal's commercial activities and comprised considerable wharfage and buildings. When trading ceased on the canal, the area fell into disuse. By 1960 all that remained on the Aldcliffe Road side was a highly visible wilderness of derelict buildings, mess and weeds (although, being open to the road, a convenient parking lot for shopping in the city). On the Hospital side the original stabling was being used as a punting hire business, while British Waterways maintenance buildings comprised their local depot. Also on this site lay the Packet Boat Dock in a ruinous condition.

The Society had been pressing the City to devise a plan for rehabilitation for many years. Here lay a potentially attractive water amenity, with a rather greater area of open water than is normally to be found on a canal – and within minutes' walking distance of the city centre. In 1968 the Society was in touch with the canal trust. The City Architect drew up a scheme. There was considerable discussion at the 1974 AGM, but nothing really happened for several years.

Also in 1974, Oliver Rix, then one of Lancaster's car distributors, proposed to build a boat chandlery, hotel, restaurant and boat showroom on the basin. But Heppenstall was doubtful. The Society wanted the Aldcliffe Road side to be retained as a public open space and the City wanted a marina. But British Waterways had other intentions and the site remained derelict. In 1993, the University acquired the site for student residences as part of its policy of maintaining a presence within the City, and part of the solution for expansion and the pressing need for further residences. The design solution was too grey but not unpleasant, with vague acknowledgement of the vernacular. The two blocks have matured quite well, although one still feels their massing and greyness to be over dominant. The blocks enjoy the grand title of Chancellor's Wharf. Ambience on this side has been enhanced by the construction of a charming canal users' service station which won a well earned Design Award in 1998.

On the hospital side, the stables were acquired by Westmorland Breweries, and converted to the Waterwitch, now one of Lancaster's most popular pubs despite the absence of any parking nearby. The brewery commissioned a footbridge to attract customers from the Aldcliffe Road side. This won a design award in 1987, which has always been a puzzle, being pedestrian in both meanings of the word. British Waterways tidied up their maintenance shops, an always attractive range of buildings, and kept their maintenance wharfage in good order. They restored the packet boat house in 1996. Restoration is a term which could be challenged, since there is now nothing of its past and true function left internally, but it had to receive a qualified welcome, since if nothing had been done the structure would no doubt have collapsed by now.

Shortly after the packet boat house was saved, BW put the whole of its maintenance site on the market for office and domestic use, having moved their operations to Galgate. To date nothing has happened and the expensively restored packet boat house remains isolated and empty. The yard is once again being used by BW for maintenance. Leisure use of the canal has expanded considerably over the years, accelerated by its re-connection to the national network, and the distant prospect of re-opening the northern end to Kendal. Since there is some indication of saturation in berthage at busy weekends, one must wonder why BW themselves have not redeveloped the whole site for leisure use. At present the site has been earmarked as one of several sites in the city for housing.

Mitre Yard (which later became Mitre House*)*

(1971-1973)

The splendid views of the Castle and the Priory Church are underpinned by the harmonious massing of the buildings below them. This is particularly so in the views from Cable Street – an aspect important enough to be chosen as the Society's logo. The substantial buildings which flow down the hill below the north east sector of the Castle which comprise Mitre House are actually government buildings and a multi-storey car park, mundane enough functions perhaps, yet fully satisfying the architectural vernacular we would expect from such a dominant and historically important part of the city.

Their visual impact as a whole tends nowadays to be taken for granted. However, had it not been for the Society's strenuous efforts in the planning stages, it might have been very different. In May 1971, the plans were under discussion between the City Architect and the Society, although the planning authority was then the County Council. The Society condemned the design. It was "neither good reproduction architecture nor good modern architecture". A photo montage produced by the Society showed a bland wall of concrete, glass and cladding, which, together with Pye's warehouse (now happily replaced by slightly intimidating housing), would have been a disaster for the city. The Society urged that the buildings be designed by an architect familiar with the needs of the site and complained that insufficient time for consultation had been allowed. In a strongly worded editorial, the Lancaster Guardian agreed, pointing out the lack of transparency in dealing with planning applications, compared with Lunesdale Rural District Council and Garstang, where, they said, applications were made public at every stage. The City's reply was not encouraging. The Town Clerk said that there had been every cooperation between the scheme's architect, the developers and the City Architect. He dismissed the Society's request for an RIBA-led design competition. The City passed the plans, while the County attempted to "improve" them. The City's rigid refusal to compromise is rather surprising, given their usual support of the need for good design. May we infer that they were under instruction from a higher authority? (But they were capable of standing up to the County, as we will see later, when describing the Magistrates' Court saga).

By August, the Society sensibly concluded that the problem was not going to be solved at either City or County level. It was a government scheme and would have to be tackled at government level. Serious lobbying then started. Letters went to Peter Walker (Minister for the Environment), Elaine Kellett-Bowman (the City's MP), the Civic Trust – and through them the Royal Fine Art Commission (RFAC – now CABE), Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, Col Darlington (the Society's president), the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and Duncan Sandys.[who was head of the Civic Trust] Government reacted by wriggling. R Graham Page, the Minister responsible fence-sat, by attempting to argue that Government involvement comprised only the taking of space in a developer's scheme. Direct your protest, he said, to the planning authority (his later letters became more conciliatory, however, when he acknowledged government awareness of the site's sensitivity). In November, Sir Patrick McCall, Clerk of the County Council, indicated to the Society that he was taking a personal interest in the scheme, which one feels was a crucial intervention. He was clearly annoyed that a notice of the scheme had not been placed in the Lancaster Guardian. The RFAC sent comments to the County and the City, but considered them confidential, so would not divulge them to the Society. However, they suggested that the Town Hall might be prepared to tell the Society (they did not).

In December, interim victory for the Society came when the planning application was withdrawn. In view of the Department of the Environment distancing itself from the design, the Society continued to harry the County as planning authority during January 1972, pressing for the architect's replacement and a competition. Despite RFAC's willingness that the Society should see their comments, a firm rebuff wrapped in considerable bureacratic-speak came back from the County on the grounds that the report was confidential as between RFAC and County. Could their comments have been so condemnatory that the County was ashamed that it had not already rejected such a banal design? Were they to be seen as pressure to planning authority and developer for a better scheme? Perhaps so, because the Society then received a letter from the developer's consultant architects, saying that they had appointed William Whitfield as an architectural consultant. Whitfield was a highly respected architect who had a national reputation for civic design in sensitive situations and had been instructed to consult with all the parties. So arose the Society's second interim and nearly final victory.

Whitfield sent the Society a montage of his proposals, although he was always careful not to reveal his precise contribution to the scheme, ie he was never named as “the architect” superseding the named consultants. The committee was happy with what it saw but would have been happier to see a sketch design. However, in November the Society was invited to the Town Hall to see the detailed drawings. It criticised some of the details, but generally welcomed the design. Whitfield gave a presentation to a Society meeting in February 1973.

This saga has been recounted in some detail, because it is a fine example of the power of sustained and properly planned lobbying aimed at the right people and illustrates how a mere civic society can stir things up at the highest levels of government. It is but one example in the Society’s history of a successful outcome to a battle which took nearly two years in the winning, although not all of the Society’s battles have been so happily resolved. One or two curiosities in this account remain. One is the word “transparency” which was, and to an extent still is, absent from the vocabulary of our supposed servants: our government, county and town councils. Had there been a Freedom of Information Act then and had the Society used its powers (which it surely would have done), what would we have learned about the private briefings? And would things have been brought to a speedier resolution? The second is the strange reluctance of the Town Hall to become involved in the struggle: in most of the Society’s dealings with the City Architect, there has been a happy synergy.

All of the Society’s contributors to the Mitre House story are difficult to identify as long as correspondence files remain missing for this period. The only record in the files, apart from the Minutes book, is the Summer 1975 Newsletter which mentions the influence exerted by the Society, describes construction work in progress, that the buildings are for 350 staff for various DoE Departments, and there will be 280 car park spaces. The Newsletter reminds us that a great deal of one of the Roman Forts built on the site is now buried for ever, but that most of the Bath House will lie outside the site and be open for public viewing. However, the hand of Peter Osborne (then secretary) dominates letters from the Society that survive. This and more of his work for the Society is recognised in **Section E.**

A fitting postscipt to this chapter might be the reprimand sent to the Civic Trust by the Society in December 1978, when the Civic Trust awarded all the credit for a successful building to the City, the Royal Fine Art Commission, and the County Council Planning Department. It was made very clear to the Civic Trust that only the Society’s protests saved Mitre House from a banal design. They were asked to publish a correction in the Lancaster Guardian. The author has not found any evidence that they did.

Bath Mill Housing and what happened after it

(1975-1976)

Housing as a subject for civic concern has occupied the Society ever since it was formed. An initiative supported by the Society - "Living Over the Shop" recounted a scheme for getting more of the community to live in the city centre. The Society has always supported the need to consider urban infill sites (now known as "Brown Field") in preference to further encroachment into the countryside. As substandard city centre housing continued to be removed, there was often pressure from commercial interests to replace it with commercial property. For a housing developer it is easier and generally cheaper to build on green field sites than face the complications of infill.

At times this has seemed to be a losing battle – a problem common to the whole country, where the population as it grew more prosperous and mobile, sought to live outside the urban boundaries, causing corresponding emptiness in the centres after the workers had gone home.

The City was earlier than some authorities in recognising and reversing this migration when Bath Mill, part of the Williamson empire and one of the enormous cotton mills at the side of the canal, was closed in 1972 and demolished. Not only did it provide a source of stone for buildings, it released a site suitable for low cost housing. Bath Mill resulted – a leafy vernacular car-free low-rise collection of houses, with an attractive frontage to the canal and good views over the city centre (and over the blighted corridor for the now defunct Eastern Relief Road – see **Roads** in this Section). Is it too fanciful to compare it with Poundbury, Prince Charles' "fantasy "village"? It is still an attractive place to stroll through, and a role model for later low cost, high density housing. The Society encouraged its conception in 1975.

So, Bath Mill should have been seen as an example of how to build attractive low cost housing to government cost yardsticks. Was it? Sadly, no. It seems to have disappeared from public attention without trace, except for those who live there, apparently happily. For several years after 1975 there was little housing movement in the city. Then, in 1996 to the Society's dismay, the latest Local Plan, although demanding the infilling of brown field urban sites, rather spoiled the image by designating a new, large satellite village on attractive farm land to the south of the city. The Society protested loudly and gave evidence at the public enquiry. While the inspector's report offered little hope for reversal, a cautiously happier result followed. Government reversed its policy for large scale green field housing throughout most of Lancashire, in favour of improving the East Lancashire towns, so forcing cancellation of the bulk of the satellite village (although developers were allowed to get away with some of it, even before the public enquiry, and the inspector's report was finalised). At about the same time, a near frenzy of brown field building started. Demographic change is probably more the reason than Local Plan enactment. The amount now built, and to be built if one includes the Luneside village next the Quay, and the substantial Standen Park development at the Moor Hospital site, greatly exceeds what was included in the Local Plan, and would probably satisfy the then government and County requirements of Lancaster, without the need for satellite villages on green field sites. This was all good news for the Society.

Some of the brown field housing now built, whilst unremarkable, acknowledges a vague Georgian vernacular, with a nod here and there to Lancaster's maritime past. Stone appears to have been used as a facing throughout, but it is mainly artificial stone. The City's landbank is long used up. However, there is much to admire. Housing on and behind the Quay respects the vernacular well. The quite high rise development further towards Greyhound Bridge, near

Sainsbury's is exemplary. Thus, the superb view across the river from the Greyhound Bridge survives. The Crosby Homes apartments behind the town hall received one of the Society-sponsored design awards. However, density seems to get ever greater, and there are now examples of monolithic massing which is a little threatening. The cliffs both sides of St George's Quay where it joins Cable Street now dominate what should have remained an open and pleasant view. There are two pleasing examples of new privately funded student apartments in Penny Street. Taking the city as a whole, the Society has reason to feel moderately pleased that new housing has not compromised the civic scene.

British Rail

(1976-1982)

The Society made two ventures into matters concerning the railways, one surprising, the other in keeping with the Society's sometime preparedness to get its hands dirty.

The surprising one involved the Dorrington Road allotments, an episode probably long forgotten by most members.

In 1976, it was brought to the attention of the then secretary that several Dorrington Road householders who had exercised squatters' rights over many years to cultivate spare railway land had been given notice to quit by British Railways on the grounds that it was not in the business of providing allotment gardens. (The land concerned was unusually extensive for what would normally be embankment or cutting, because it had remained surplus after housing sidings and engine sheds for the old North Western Railway before the route of the main line was changed). The Society consulted those Dorrington Road residents who wanted to formalise their use of the land, which might include extending some gardens. Proposals reached the point where the Society agreed to manage the land for a trial period. Then it all fizzled out, probably for the simple reason that the Society was not in the business of running allotments either. Echoes of the ill fated 9 Castle Hill? (see page…)

The second initiative concerned the steep embankment opposite the ticket hall of Lancaster Castle Rail Station. During the last years of the George Fox School, this land, always in the ownership of BR, became increasingly overgrown with brambles, weeds and embryonic shrubs. This increasingly unsightly area, in a fairly prominent public place, offended the Society. BR was not going to improve it, so the Society volunteered to clear and replant it.

Cautious agreement by BR extended over four more years, during which the Society continued to hope that permission would be given. But in 1992, BR sold the land to building developers, thus ending the scheme. Not for the first time had the Society's good intentions had been stifled by bureaucracy - see **St John's Church** (see page…).

Thus ends the Society's only two contacts with British Rail (now, of course, superseded by Railtrack).

Sainsburys' Store

(1980-82)

As early as 1972, government funding was allocated to clearing and landscaping Green Ayre. In 1976 British Rail applied for permission to build offices and a hotel. It was either refused or they did not proceed.

By early 1980, Green Ayre Station had gone, together with its complex of railway lines which had linked the various railway destinations – Lune Valley, Morecambe (via the Greyhound Bridge), Glasson Dock and Castle Station. The site was almost empty, but some engine sheds remained in which various youth activities took place. But the site was unattractive and ripe for development. Supermarkets were in the ascendant, so it is hardly surprising that several applications had been submitted.

The Society expressed concern about the effect of a supermarket on existing shops, the market, and the likely impact on parking. However, Sainsbury's was known as an environmentally careful developer and when it became the favoured applicant, the Society supported the application. In 1983, the Society clashed with John Whitelegg and Action 2000 about the need for a Sainsbury store. The Society was not quite so keen on the store by 1985 when the plans showed that respect had not been shown for the existing building, Lancaster's public baths before Queensway replaced them.

The secretary wrote to Sir John Sainsbury, reminding him that Sainsbury's had promised an architectural competition for the design. The company withdrew the proposal. Sir William Whitfield was again consulted and privately expressed concern. The City Architect backed the Society's protest, but did not involve the City in the matter (perhaps acknowledging that the Society was achieving a result which would be acceptable to the City?). In the end, there was no design competition, and, while the final design was not as dramatic as seen in some of Sainsbury's stores, its quiet competence has suited the site. More importantly, perhaps it is that Sainsbury's did retain the shell of the old baths, which is all that the passing traffic sees.

There is no doubt that the Society was the primary influence on achievement of a modest civic success.

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