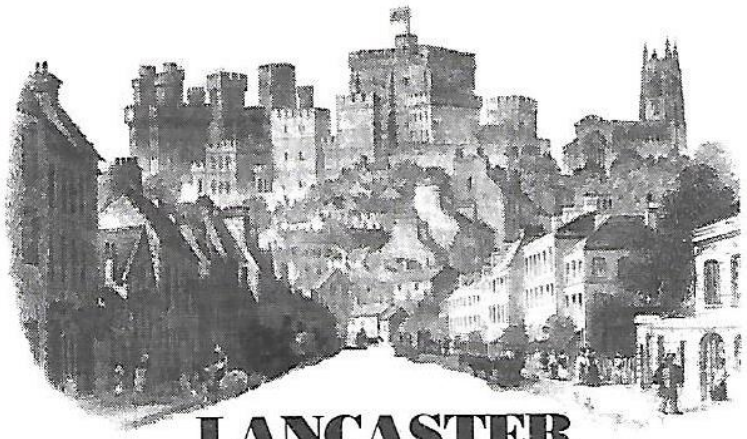


A HISTORY OF LANCASTER CIVIC SOCIETY

THE FIRST 40 YEARS

1967 – 2007

By Malcolm B Taylor
2009

Serialization – part 5

A. STRUCTURE AND WORKING OF THE SOCIETY

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People

The influence of the Town Hall in the activities and success of the Society has been emphasised earlier. It might possibly have been better to have referred to the key characters in the Town Hall in that section, rather than under this heading. However, it was thought more helpful to the reader's grasp of the subject to gather together in one section some of those who have helped to shape the Society's history.

All societies, and particularly voluntary bodies owe their success and sometimes very survival, to the enthusiasms of a few dedicated members. The Lancaster Civic Society is no exception. This chapter pays tribute to those who, in the author's opinion, have made exceptional contributions. Were it not for them, it is likely that the Society would not have achieved what it has for the community of Lancaster, and would probably not even have survived the first 40 years of its existence.

It may, of course seem invidious to devote a whole section to a subjectively selected list of people, at the risk of offending the very many who have also contributed their time, their skills, their enthusiasms, their love of what the Society exists for. The author agonised over this for a long time: was it right to single out a few for this treatment? In

the end, it was decided to risk the disappointment of those who are left out, if only to capture the importance of the contributions of those who are included. Those who are omitted, one hopes, will find some comfort in the other sections where recognition is made of the parts they have played.

This profile of people who have shaped the Society over the years would not be complete without mention of the Society's friends in the Town Hall. The continuing enthusiasm and consistency of the Society's activities over 40 years, and for the sometimes near miraculous appearance of new members to take on a critical baton, owes much to the knowledge that there have always been friends amongst the Council's senior officers. Thus this chapter divides quite naturally into Society and Town Hall.

Although they are not directly "People who have influenced the Society", Building Design Partnership deserve a mention under several aspects of the Society's activities. They provided all the secretarial support for two of the Society's most active secretaries. BDP have from time to time given helpful informal advice to the committee in its pursuance of planning matters. They have provided some notable speakers for members' meetings. They gave the first major financial contribution to the appeal fund for restoration of the Ashton Memorial. They gave to the City Bath Mill housing, and the ambience of the new market complex, one of the city's most prominent buildings: whether one likes the architecture or not, its quality has raised Lancaster's civic image, an image which will be with us for many years to come.

The Society

Peter Osborne

Peter was a founding member of the Society in 1967, and a member of the initial management committee. He was elected the Society's first secretary shortly afterwards, serving until 1972 when he left Lancaster to found the Lunesdale Civic Society. He was an active and persuasive secretary. Although such strong leaders as **JL Spencer, Harold Kellett** (the Society's first and second chairmen), **Guy Barton and Edward Mason** played a powerful part in laying down the Society's foundations, effective letters are not written by committees. Thus we should thank Peter for his early efforts to persuade the City to move on pedestrianisation, and his pivotal role in the **Mitre House** saga, for which there is an account in **Section C.**

Geoffrey Burnstone

Geoff joined the Society in 1973, becoming secretary in 1974, serving in that office until 1980 when he became chairman. He was a natural for secretary from the day he joined, and, one guesses, enjoyed every minute of his long service in that capacity. Sensitive to good civic design, civilised, urbane, sociable, but never afraid to express an opinion on

what he thought to be wrong. He left behind seven bulging files of all the business of the Society for those years: agendas, minutes, correspondence. Even though they have suffered from being stored in the damp Castle Hill HQ and Martin Widden's leaking attic, they almost deserve to be published in their own right. And he was good at tough, confrontational meetings: at his best when arguing for the best of design when he thought that someone was getting away with less. But he was always courteous, diplomatic. His many contributions to the letters columns of the Lancaster Guardian are still, today, remarkably vivid and eloquent arguments.

He also brought to the Society two initiatives which would be quite beyond the call of duty in most secretaries: the concerts and 9 Castle Hill.

In 1976, a time when the Ashton Memorial was starting to show signs of expensive distress, and needed all the publicity it could get, Geoff came up with an idea of how its vast, but hitherto unusable space could be turned to good public use: a chamber concert. Many of the great and the good came, and this did no harm at all when the time came for a public appeal for restoration funds. However, one can be quite sure that Geoff's primary thoughts were for the Memorial as a superb venue for professional and intimate music making. This and the following three annual concerts (the last in the Shire Hall), were resoundingly successful, and brought the Society and the City much good publicity. His energy was considerable, ranging from the logistics of borrowing the University's grand piano to provision of toilets. Neither should we forget the marvellous food provided by his wife, Pat.

His second initiative, with the perspective of time, may have been over ambitious. In the early 70s the City was wrestling with conservation of the cottages in Castle Hill. While the original idea may not wholly have been Geoff's, he certainly drove the idea forward to establish a permanent bridge-head, a headquarters for the Society in one of the restored cottages. What better place? And a few doors from the Tourist Information Centre, too. The venture started in 1974 when the committee approached the City Architect for "space for a small museum area". This grew into the taking over of a whole room, under the Society's total control. Most of the committee supported the venture, although a sizeable minority was not happy about the increased responsibility of owning and running real estate would bring. But Geoff on behalf of the Society signed a fearsome looking lease, and 9 Castle Hill was officially opened by the Mayor in 1980.

Use was always expected to be limited – open to the public only when volunteer stewards could be found, use by kindred bodies, exhibitions. But its primary use was only ever by the Society for committee meetings.

The opening of Castle Hill almost coincided with Geoff's elevation to the chairmanship in 1980. An honour well deserved, and he proved as good and popular a chairman as he had been secretary. However, whoever took over from Geoff as either secretary or chairman was going to find him a hard act to follow. A period of change in the Society's fortunes was going to be inevitable when a man with such charisma resigned such a pivotal post. But the existence of 9 Castle Hill may also have been a factor. In 1979,

strains on the Society's funds arising mostly from Castle Hill costs were reported by the treasurer, and subscriptions went up. By 1982 the secretary, treasurer and some of the longstanding committee members had resigned. For a time there was no secretary or treasurer. The burden of the Castle Hill HQ cannot have escaped the committee's notice as they locked up the building after every meeting. Previously, they had enjoyed the shelter of the offices of CE Pearson, followed by TH Mawson, and occasionally the Dukes Playhouse for their meetings – heated and lit not at the Society's expense – someone else's responsibility after slamming the door at the end of a meeting. And the damp was never cured. So Geoffrey Burnstone's last five years with the Society cannot have been as happy as his first seven years. He retired from the chairmanship, and from BDP in December 1985 to France, having served an extra two years as acting chairman. On the face of it, this was because a new chairman could not be found. One wonders, however if this was not a fiction: a more likely explanation was that the members did not want to let him go at the constitutionally ended three year term. (The damp in 9 Castle Hill became so bad that committee meetings were impossible, and the Society finally withdrew in 1985.

Martin Widden

Martin has greatly influenced the character and activities of the Society ever since he joined the committee in 1978, when he immediately became treasurer. Since then he has occupied all of the other officer posts, most notably as chairman. Apart from a brief spell away in USA in 1981/82, he has never been far from the centre of activities.

After a vacuum of a year in which the future of the Society was in doubt, he succeeded Geoffrey Burnstone as chairman in October 1985 – another inspired choice and one guaranteed to continue the dedication to the Society which Geoff had brought to it. On reading the Minutes of committee meetings, one is struck by their increased content after Martin's early chairmanship. This was not due to any new found verbosity in the secretary's style, but to the vigour Martin brought to the chairmanship. In a four week period early in 1986, he is seen immersed in the new Design Awards scheme, the Ashton Memorial re-build, the saving of St John's Church, a suddenly lengthened list of planning applications, the Market re-build and the Local Plan. He bravely acted as mediator/chairman in trying to achieve a consensus between market hall traders and Town Hall, after they had stopped talking to each other in the row over where the market hall ought to be in the whole development and whether it should be on two levels (it was).

He is seen from time to time attempting to escape from the chairmanship, but popular demand always brought him back. In 1987 he took on the secretary's job briefly, but was back in the chair in 1988, when he announced that this would be his last year. But he stayed until 1998, when he dropped down a point to be vice chairman. From 1999 to 2002 he was secretary again, but just when he was thinking he might escape again, the sudden resignation of the then chairman propelled him back into the chairmanship, where he remained until 2006. Happily he remained a member of the committee.

His achievements are many. Reference above to the period in the committee minutes is only a glimpse. As soon as he became chairman, the Society had a new image in the shape of its new logo, taken from the famous painting of Cable Street and the Castle. We suddenly had crisp membership and annual programme cards. We had for the first time a well designed, regular and always informative Newsletter. Membership started to increase, as did attendance at meetings (If you want to guarantee a good seat in a meeting now, get there 20 minutes early). Not all of this can be put down to Martin, but it is no coincidence that they have happened during his chairmanship.

Martin was a member of the Lord Lieutenant's steering group for raising funds for the Ashton Memorial restoration.

He was a member of the interviewing panel to select the designer for the Millennium Bridge.

Not least of his services to us all was the public stand he took against the monstrous barracks at the southern end of the University campus (described more fully in **Boundaries**). This demanded considerable courage, because he is a senior member of the University.

Many who occupy high positions in voluntary bodies often overstay their shelf life. Not so Martin. He is a modest and courteous man who always seems slightly surprised at any praise (and there is much) which comes his way. He will not thank the author for this well deserved recognition for all he has done for Lancaster, as well as the Society. His wish, after these years of service to hand on the baton to someone else was genuine.*

Roger Frankland

Roger's trademark height, black coat and fedora will be seen somewhere near the back of most groups engaged in some civic activity or other. His interests and his views are wide ranging and when he has something to say – which is quite often - he says it fluently and with conviction. His audience would do well to listen, or read. For all that, he is a modest person. He is totally dedicated to the Society and prepared to tackle anything which comes his way.

Roger has been a member of the committee continuously since 1977, 11 of them as secretary. That itself would be enough to earn him a place in this chapter, but that is only a part of his contributions to the work of the Society. Where to start? His major passion is the Ugly Walks. He did not invent them, but without his enthusiasm, they would have died many years ago. The Walks themselves can be found in Appendix 5. They seem timed to occur at the worst season of the year, typically cold or wet or both. So only the most dedicated of the members turn out with him. Strange, therefore, that

he persuaded Hilton Dawson, then Lancaster's MP, and councillor Jean Yates to join some of the Walks. Looking for broken gutters, shrubs growing out of roofs, redundant cables and wires, graffiti, illegal fly posting –and much more dereliction – cannot be a popular activity for most of the members, yet Roger is out there with his notebook, year in year out. Owners are lobbied to tidy up their premises, face his wrath if they don't and praised when they do. Some walks are repeated a few years later to check on what has and has not been done. The City is a much tidier place as a result of Roger's crusades.

The fact that Lancaster often boasts the widest range of buildings in Lancashire open to the public for the annual Heritage Weekends is entirely due to Roger's inventiveness in thinking up a new theme every year, researching likely and often unusual buildings, bullying owners to open their front doors, writing an itinerary, often accompanied by a descriptive booklet, persuading members to act as stewards – all this is down to Roger.

As if that were not enough, there are the annual summer visits. Here again, we find Roger thinking of new and often unusual places to visit, doing the legwork like selling the idea to the members, collecting their money, hiring a coach, doing a programme so that the main attractions of the place to be visited are not missed, arranging a tea, contacting the local civic society, getting everyone back safely.

Roger is now vice chairman of the Society.

Appendix 5 also lists Heritage Weekends, buildings visited and summer visits.

Keith Ingham

Charles Wilson's tribute to Keith on his resignation from the committee was that he had a "holistic attitude to design and the environment". Keith was the driving force behind the Bay Parkway alternative to a Heysham/M6 link road. He was a sensitive architect with a great attention to the small details, particularly lettering, which contribute so much to a satisfying street scene. His judgement on design issues was balanced and invaluable. His comments on planning issues were perceptive. His contributions to the work of the Society also included helping to form the Society's response to the 1985 Local Plan, an early enthusiast for the Design Awards, the first impetus behind the Windows leaflet.

He was a member of the committee for many years, but still kept in touch with the Society when he had to move to Manchester.

Perhaps his most remembered contribution will be his design for the Society's logo and letterhead, still with us today. Keith died in 1995.

John Champness

His chairmanship of a joint meeting by the Society, Halflife and the Friends of the Earth was praised, on the proposed nuclear power station at Heysham in 1979. (Will he be chairing another meeting, when government is expected to propose a third reactor on the same site?)

He proposed the scheme to clean up the Rail Station embankment in 1991.

John first joined the committee, briefly, in 1981. He served again from 1987 to 1997. Until he retired he was Conservation Officer for the County Council. He has written many books about conservation and architecture, as well as his well researched and informative city walking guides, which have been used as routes for Ugly Walks.

Leslie Rigg

At the 1997 AGM, Leslie was presented with a framed print in recognition of having served as a committee member for 23 years, and six as chairman.
Leslie was a charismatic, companionable and enthusiastic member. He also enjoyed the honour of being a City alderman and was always active in the City Council. A member of the board of the Dukes Playhouse, he provided (albeit sometimes noisy) shelter for committee meetings at the theatre. He and **Abbot Bryning**, also sometime chairman were rare examples of bonding between the Society and its elected councillors. Leslie died in 2002.

John Cousins

John's impact on the Society was out of all proportion to his three years' chairmanship, and even briefer term as secretary. His views on Lancaster's architecture were robust and provocative. He sought, and received highly readable and informative comment in Newsletters. In fact his considerable contributions to the Newsletters during his term of office were always thoughtful and wide ranging. It was great loss to the Society when he decided to resign from the committee in 2003.

Judith Clarke

Judith joined the committee in 1992 and served with quiet but firm distinction until 2005 when she retired from the committee. During that time, she had occupied the offices of treasurer, vice chairman and chairman. Her most noticeable achievement was perhaps her leadership of the restoration of St John's churchyard (See **St John's Church, Section D).** She also edited the Newsletter and arranged several exhibitions. The author has cause to be grateful for the immaculately presented correspondence and minutes files which she had maintained.

The Town Hall

Two Town Clerks and Two City Architects

The success or failure of any civic society will hang on its relations with its local authority. The *raisons d'être* of most civic societies, and certainly Lancaster's demand a close relationship with their local authorities in the creation of the best civic environment as they respectively see it. Both will have different agendas at times, and one test is how well they have contrived to co-exist over a long period. "How well" is an elastic definition, an expression deliberately chosen, because success has to be measured in terms of what both parties expect to get out of the relationship. If, say the authority is single minded and regards its civic society as a nuisance to be tolerated, and the society allows itself to be so treated, that is one way of expressing success. Not a very convincing definition of success some readers will argue, as the author hopes members of the Lancaster Society will agree. Then there is the society which itself is so single minded that it is always fighting its town hall. Again, readers may not recognise the Lancaster Society in this definition.

A dynamic in this crucial relationship is the working partnership between the politicians – the elected councillors – and their senior officers. There is of course a parallel relationship between the members of a society and its own officers, but it is by no means as crucial – civic societies may come and go, but the machinery of local government goes on forever. However, if there is one truth in this analysis, it is that for there to be a chance for long term success in the history of a civic society, the politicians must give their officers full power and authority to exercise their professional judgement, and all – councillors, officers, civic society - must respect the others' problems and opinions. This is the central theme of this chapter, and it will ask readers how lasting has been this respect, and whether it can hold into the future.

To extend for a moment the analogy of town halls and civic societies outlined above, our councillors may come and go, but the officers remain (or at least, the functions they exercise, remain). So it is interesting in looking at the history of the Society to enquire into the autonomy of the officers vis à vis the City's dealings with the Society and the councillors' capacity to interfere. During the formative years of the Society, it was very fortunate to have had two strong town clerks and two strong city architects whose political masters allowed, encouraged them, to exercise their professional abilities to the full. (At least, that is how it has appeared from front of house). During that period, it may be no coincidence that there was comparatively little contact between Society and councillors. So it is entirely appropriate to measure the success of the Society's relations with the Town Hall as seen through its relations with **Don Waddell**, who was town clerk when the Society was formed in 1967 (and, it has been seen, who played a

major part in the formation of the Society) and his successor, **Bill Pearson**, who had been his deputy. They were always approachable and receptive to the Society's lobbying. Similarly, at chief officer level, the Society's relations with the two city architects, **Allan Heppenstall**, succeeded by **Charles Wilson,** have been excellent.

Way back in 1967, it was unusual to find a chief architect in post in Lancaster's tier of local government (**Allan Heppenstall** had in fact been the first City Architect and Planning Officer, in post since 1961). Thus, the Society got off to a good start in having as its key contact one who had a design background in the built environment as well as a planning qualification. There was immediate common ground between him and a society whose aim was the encouragement of the best civic design standards. Despite the sometimes different agendas between Town Hall and the Society, there was always respect, and one believed, affection, between Allan and the Society's members. This was witnessed at the ceremony of presenting him with an illuminated address on the occasion of his retirement in 1979. In making the presentation, the Society's chairman, Leslie Rigg said of him "Allan is like the buildings he loves. He belongs; he is what is known as 'genius loci' – the spirit of the place". Sadly, he is no longer with us.

His successor, **Charles Wilson** was equally respected, and became enormously influential in the development of the city and in the affairs of the Society. He is still the Society's president, and although retired, continues to take a day to day interest in its activities. As city architect, and later chief development officer (even becoming town clerk in his final months) he brought with him a background in private practice which produced an active sympathy with the Society's civic aspirations for Lancaster. Similarly, **Bill Pearson** as new town clerk brought an unusual (for a local government officer) entrepreneurial attitude to his work. He and Charles brought some excitement to the civic scene which the society found stimulating.

Charles was a man of vision and wide experience. It was a turning point in Lancaster's history when he was appointed City Architect in 1979. He was associated with so many successes : reusing building stone, Ashton Memorial restoration, Moor Lane Mills, cottages and houses on Castle Hill, St George's Quay, White Cross, Design Awards, including restoration of Palatine Hall, Tax Office Dalton Square, Reebock HQ, Moor Lane Mill. The Society has much enjoyed his "state of nation" addresses at many AGMs. Sadly he had to retire before completion of Riverside Park and the Millennium Bridge in which he also played a large part. Charles was elected the Society's president, after the absence of a president for many years.

Charles' and Bill's retirements created a vacuum in relations with the Town Hall which still prevails. Although **Vic Crumley** remained as chief planning officer, and a good friend to the Society, the architects' department had been sold to Cumbria County Council, and is now a part of Capita. Thus the Society mourns the loss of a department dedicated to good design. Vic took early retirement in 2002. At his retirement presentation he coined the apt expression "critical friend" as meaning the Society's relationship with the Town Hall. He also said that "working with the Society had been never anything other than a pleasure".

Reg Haslam was a senior planning officer at the Town Hall, before he moved to Blackpool as chief planning officer. He was an energetic member of the committee in the 1970s. He will be chiefly remembered for two things: the first, his regeneration work for Morecambe, and in particular the TERN project. Second, for leading the teams which produced the 1986 and 1996 Local Plans.

The Society's Committees

The names of all who have served on the Society's committee are given in Appendix 1. There will be no surprises in their composition. As might be expected they come from a broad church. Their backgrounds span those with no particular civic background save a common desire to help to achieve the best possible civic design, professional designers with the same interest, members of the University (mentioned particularly because of the University's importance in having provided many of the city's residents who are University employees with a strong desire to live in a civilised community) and Town Hall staff who have greatly contributed to the Society's work.

The above probably represents a microcosm of the community which existed around the time the Society was formed. Not long before that, it would have reflected a declining industrial population, still dominated by the two dynasties, Williamsons and Storeys. A significant component of the new community was the arrival of outsiders, some to work and live in and around the City and some who found it an attractive dormitory town. But there are still many, (including members of the committee) whose background is the "old" Lancaster. Both have always worked harmoniously together and have respected each other's backgrounds.

We should never forget that committee work is often tedious, slow, and boring, with little immediate prospect of achieving its aims. Its work is all voluntary. Often it rests with the chairman and secretary to cajole and inspire their teams. It has been murmured at meetings and the occasional outbursts in the press that "The Society" has performed badly or not at all in some crusade. Critics should remember how extraordinarily difficult it is to maintain continuity in a particular activity when a key member has to drop out. It hurts the long suffering committee members when they are so castigated.

Generally, the officers of the various committees over the Society's history have sought to be consensual, mediatory, rather than confrontational. This has its disadvantages in some difficult situations, usually when the Society finds itself at the centre of some conflict. But would the membership want this to change?

The range of buildings which have provided shelter for meetings is worth a mention. The owners should be acknowledged and thanked. They normally have strong links to one or more of the Society's officers.

They have included:

The College of Art

the offices of CE Pearson, architects, Meeting House Lane (now closed)

the offices of Thomas Mawson, architects, Castle Hill (now closed)

the Dukes Playhouse

9, Castle Hill (the Society's ill fated *pied à terre* and now closed)

the offices of the Probation Service

the homes of committee members

the Friends' Meeting House

The committee (entitled the "Executive Committee" from the very beginning of the Society) started in 1967 by forming 4, later 5, working groups. This structure soon lapsed, remaining structurally the same until 1993, although a further attempt to spread the workload into groups in 1972 also foundered. . Over the years, centralisation in which the whole committee has debated the detail of all of its business has prevailed. Much of this had consisted of the sometimes laborious detail of planning issues occupying the time of anything up to eight members at any given meeting.

In 1993 the then chairman, Martin Widden, realised that this structure was not the best use of members' time. He proposed the re-introduction of groups and regularising specific tasks to deal with the issues which had occupied the committee's time almost since the Society was formed. The new groups would be Planning Matters, Publications, Projects. The committee would remain in overall control, and keep major issues (eg the Eastern Relief Road), Finance, Policy, Lecture Programme. Specific (ie normally one person) tasks would be Membership, the Newsletter.

It might be appropriate here to mention the Society's policy in financing its activities. It has always practised a low key approach. Only the acquisition of 9 Castle Hill caused the treasurer to warn the committee that they might be heading for trouble.

Apart from Castle Hill, the Society has existed on the most modest of incomes – enough basically to fund its membership records, and the minimal costs of speakers' expenses, its correspondence, newsletters, membership cards, subsidising a limited number of

plaques. Accommodation for committee meetings has been free, thanks to the owners, as has the use of the town hall banqueting chamber, thanks to the City Council. The Society has never ventured into expensive ventures some other societies have incurred. Funds have been accumulated which have allowed the Society to part-fund such expenses as exhibitions, the Design Awards scheme, and activities which encourage youth to appreciate good civic design.

In 1968, the Society decided to elect vice presidents (whether there can or should be vice presidents without a president might be a marginally interesting question). The then City Architect, and the University Vice Chancellor were elected. There appears to be no record of when, or if, they resigned. Col Darlington, County High Sheriff,* became president in 1970, resigning in 1973. Until Charles Wilson became president in more recent years, there is no record of any of these officers having played any part in the affairs of the Society, except Allan Heppenstall, mentioned above.

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