

August 2012

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Notice board

Our next meeting is on September 18th at 7:30 in Barter Books. Chris Mullin, author and former MP, will present the 2012 Civic Society Conservation Awards for the built heritage.



Essay competition



From left to right: 1st place, Jessica McNickle; 3rd place, Martin Murphy, 2nd place Rebecca Rogerson;

With Gill Parker and Elizabeth Jones from Alnwick Civic Society

Photo: Jane Coltman, Northumberland Gazette

June 2012 was memorable for Alnwick. Local organisations took the opportunity to celebrate the arrival of the Olympic Torch Relay with a variety of activities. The Civic Society was no exception.

Marjorie Deakin's Memorial Essay Competition has been held for the seventh year running and resulted in some sixty entries from the Duke's and Lindisfarne Middle Schools. The challenge this year was to imagine what it might be like to be one of the Olympic torches, describe the atmosphere of the crowd and what might just happen whilst being carried by the runner.

Some research was required into the history and symbolism of the torch and the rings. As always the entries were entertaining and the winners worthy of their certificates which were presented to them, with prizes given by Barter Books, in Alnwick Gardens at the Olympic Celebration Closing Ceremony on June 15th.

Our congratulations go to all of the entrants, and particularly to the three prizewinners - 1st: Jessica McNickle (LMS), 2nd: Rebecca Rogerson (DMS) and 3rd: Martin Murphy (LMS).



Inside: Inspired Alnwick (see page 4)

The society and social media: join the conversation

The day in January 2012 when the Civic Society started communicating through Social Media might not go down in history as one of the great milestones in the history of Alnwick. It hardly ranks with the introduction of turnpike roads in the 18th century, the railway in the 19th century, or the telephone in the 20th century. But the opportunity to use technology to link locals, visitors, business, and like-minded organisations is one that we could not afford to ignore.

Over the last few months we have started to establish an online community who share our interest, and we are now ready to move up a gear. Members, and others, can join in - by following the Society on Twitter (@AlnwickCivicSoc) and on Facebook (/AlnwickCivicSociety).

They will find information on local activities such as talks and guided walks. But they will also find a like-minded community, which

Newsletter changes

As you see, we are trying out a different form of newsletter. There is no point in re-inventing the wheel, so we have freely borrowed ideas that seem to work for other Civic Societies. But the readers of this newsletter are the members of the Alnwick Civic Society, and it is your views that count. So we need your feedback.

We hope you will join us in thanking all of the contributors for their efforts, and of course we all hope that you will approve of the changes.

We know that the fine people of Alnwick are normally far too polite to voice any criticism, but we trust that this time you will make an exception. We need you to tell us how to make these newsletters as useful and interesting as possible. In future, what would you like to see more of, and what less? How can we improve the format? Any ideas for future issues?

For inspiration there is a collection of more than 20 newsletters from other Civic Societies on the web: http://www.issuu.com/civic_voice

already numbers over a hundred organisations and individuals. These include council staff, local businesses, media (such as the Gazette), and organisations such as

@TheGeorgianGroup and other Civic Societies. Members have always found ways to share their thoughts - but few can reach such a broad audience. So naturally we hope that many will participate: suggest ideas, raise concerns, and point out examples of good practice. And these tools are not only for Civic Society members. Whether or not we contribute ourselves, we can all encourage relatives, friends, even wealthy benefactors, to join the discussion – whenever they want, and wherever they are in the world.

In the 19th century it was said that travellers on the Great North Road who visited Alnwick were “often surprised at the great variety of character exhibited”. Those who view our town through today’s technology are likely to be similarly impressed.

To save cost we have decided to print in black and white, and make a full colour version available in digital form. If

you would prefer to receive a copy in this format, or have other comments then please email peter.reed@aligre.co.uk.

We know that some who share our interests are not yet members of the society. If you know a like-minded neighbour, friend, or relation who may be interested in hearing more then please pass their details to any member of the committee. We will be happy to send them a complimentary copy of the newsletter, and we would welcome their comments as well. Another membership subscription would ensure that they can continue to stay in touch.



Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan

The vision grows

Last year the Government made it possible for local communities to prepare a land use and spatial plan for their own neighbourhood, with final authorisation by the local community affected. Community groups in Alnwick and Denwick have formed a Steering Group with the County, Town and Parish Councils to prepare our Neighbourhood Plan. Being recognised as a 'front-runner' attracted £20,000 of funding.

Over the winter, over 700 members of the Alnwick and Denwick communities completed a questionnaire on local priorities in which Education came top, followed by Transport, Shopping, Environment, Local Support Services and Heritage/culture. Concern was shown for local places in need of improvement: the Bus station, Market Place and the two halls around the Market. Responses were full of positive and challenging questions and comments.

The Civic Society executive committee volunteered to prepare the Heritage/culture topic. Drawing on knowledge of historic Alnwick and Denwick, several busy committee meetings, interviews with cultural attractions, and an open consultation at our AGM, David Lovie presented a draft Heritage/culture topic to the Steering Group on schedule (see right).

A second draft is currently underway, and refining continues. Comments and observations are welcome (please send them to David Lovie on davidlovie307@btinternet.com). There is more flexibility than usual to vary the content to suit our own locality, and we intend to make maximum use of this opportunity.

Next the Steering Group will face the task of resolving any conflicts between different topic papers, and finalise the contents, ready for a further round of local consultation and a public referendum.

This is all new territory, and it would be no surprise if the original intention to finish by December 2013 were to slip by six months or so.

Heritage/culture topic: first draft in a nutshell

Heritage:

Context: Heritage significance of Alnwick and Denwick, List of heritage assets, Key players, Constraining Factors.

Objectives: To maximise the potential of heritage to improve the environmental and economic quality of Alnwick and Denwick whilst encouraging local people to have a sense of pride, involvement and ownership.

Key issues and options: The visually coherent town and village, Recognisable gateways into the area, Boundary of the Alnwick Conservation Area, Threatened historic assets, New build in historic area, Erosion of townscape character, Threatened trees, Enforcement of regulations, Traffic/pedestrian imbalance, Revitalising historic spaces, Legibility of townscape, Enhancement of historic areas, Overall vision of a coherent, legible and sustainable historic townscape.

Culture:

Context: Cultural significance of Alnwick and Denwick, Definition of culture and list of cultural assets, Key players, Constraining Factors.

Objectives: To ensure that our current cultural assets have a viable future, to identify any cultural needs not currently served and to identify what provision should be made in the Plan to accommodate these needs.

Key issues and options: Uncertainty of external funding support, Problems of catchment area and demographics, Lack of current information and need for survey.



For more details see
www.alnwick-and-denwick-plan.org.uk

Alnwick's Inspired Heritage

National Civic Day, on Saturday 23rd June celebrates civic pride, so it was a fitting choice to launch a joint initiative between Alnwick Civic Society and Christians Together in Alnwick.

The project has developed a leaflet and website telling the story of 1,000 years of Christian heritage in the town. Every flavour of church is represented, with a map and brief descriptions of each church building in the town.

John Grundy, the well-known writer and popular broadcaster, recently gave a talk on this subject to Alnwick Civic Society. He welcomed the project: "This leaflet will enrich the experience of visitors to Alnwick because the town's religious buildings are not only a wonderfully varied group in their own right and far too little known, but visiting them is a brilliant way of exploring so many different corners of the town and the glorious landscape around it."

Andrew Duff, Christians Together committee member, project designer and co-author of the website and leaflet, says "These buildings tell an important part of the story of Alnwick - a spiritual journey down the ages from mediaeval monks to dissenting reformers and travelling preachers, from tiny chapels to splendid architecture. Although easily overlooked, it's a story that lives on today – at least a thousand Alnwick residents belong to one or other of the various congregations in the town."

David Lovie, co-author and Alnwick Civic Society committee member says "Some of our places of worship are prominent buildings with towers or steeples, whilst others are hidden away in Alnwick's ancient lanes. The trail has been put together to introduce people to these places and offer some glimpses of their hidden



histories - not just about the buildings, but also the people who shaped them over many centuries."

Space in the leaflet is short, so more details of these stories are provided in the trail website: sites.google.com/site/inspiredalnwick. Smartphone users with a QR code reader can point and click at the codes against each of the main sites in the leaflet and go directly to the more detailed story online to discover normally hidden features, pictures and stories about these buildings as they walk round.

A copy of the trail leaflet can be downloaded, and the website also includes service times for each church or congregation, as well as links to churches' own websites. Copies of the leaflet have been distributed around a number of locations in the town, including the Tourist Information Centre.

The trail was the subject of a guided walk as part of the Festival of Alnwick, and the organisers hope to run similar guided walks again from time to time.



Andrew Duff and David Lovie from Alnwick Civic Society with Alan Symmonds, Mayor of Alnwick, who cut the metaphorical ribbon to launch "Alnwick's Inspired Heritage" in Northumberland Hall.

Programme

Civic Society Conservation Awards

7:30 p.m. on September 18th, at Barter Books

Each year the Civic Society recognises projects that have made a noteworthy contribution to the built environment. We aim to encourage high standards in conservation and development and the purpose of the awards is to raise awareness, stimulate interest, and to recognise and reward best practice. The executive committee has been impressed by the quality of nominations this year, which covered a variety of different types of initiative.

Awards and commendations for those selected will be presented by Chris Mullin – Chairman of the Heritage Lottery Fund for the North East of England, author, journalist and MP for Sunderland South for 23 years until he stood down in 2010. His books include three acclaimed volumes of diaries; and the novel “A Very British Coup” which was made into a TV series. Members may also recall the revelation during the Parliamentary expenses scandal that the television in his second home was an old black-and-white set, for which he claimed a £45 TV licence. Chris is well known as an accomplished speaker, who will talk “On walled gardens and other matters”. With a book signing included, just 99 days before Christmas, we can look forward to a busy and entertaining evening.

Introduction to F. R. Wilson of Alnwick, Architect and Surveyor, with Marjorie Brown

7:30 p.m. on October 18th at Barter Books

The Dictionary of Scottish Architects tells us that Frederick Richard Wilson worked for Charles Barry on the Houses of Parliament before arriving in Alnwick in 1854 as site architect for Anthony Salvin - who was then restoring Alnwick Castle. Five years later he set up business on his own account at Alnwick, and served on the local Board of Health for 27 years. As Diocesan Surveyor for Lindisfarne he earned a reputation for careful work that respected the original fabric of many churches. To hear much more from an acknowledged authority on his legacy, make sure to put this date in the diary.

Any questions

7:30 p.m. on November 15th at Barter Books

Another of these popular sessions, where a panel of guests are invited to discuss topical questions submitted by members. Be prepared for further details of the panel to be announced, and questions to be invited, nearer to the date.

News in brief

Value of conservation

Research for English Heritage found that residents value living in a conservation area, and have a positive attitude to planning controls - particularly if they have experience of applying. Houses in, or near a conservation area sell for a premium over other properties - even after adjusting for other factors. The report is titled “An assessment of the effects of conservation areas on value”.

Castle Quarter

From Bailiffgate to Narrowgate, Bow Alley and the north end of Fenkle St has been dubbed “Alnwick Castle Quarter” by an expanding group of independent businesses. They are promoting the area for people seeking something a bit different, and have already achieved coverage in the Gazette, and a web presence: www.thecastlequarteralnwick.blogspot.co.uk

John Howells

The Committee was sad to hear of the death of John Howells, who was a valued member of the Executive Committee in the early days of the society. His passion for building conservation led to many years of service as a member of the Planning Subcommittee. It was the efforts of those, like John, who worked to establish the society, and to conserve our town over the last 40 years that enables us all to appreciate the heritage that they valued.

Core strategy issues and options feedback

Question 5 – Sustainable Development

Alnwick Civic Society (ACS) supports the principle that development proposals should contribute to the conservation and enhancement of Northumberland's natural, historic and built environment. The Society is concerned, however, that in subsequent sections of the consultation document, the built environment is severely neglected in terms of proposed policy. There is a disappointing imbalance in favour of conservation and enhancement of the natural environment. The document recognises the importance of the County's landscape to the economy and regeneration; this equally applies to the County's heritage townscape.

Please see also the Society's response to Q.104.

Question 31- Strategic Tourism Areas

The strategic importance of the County's towns to sustainable tourism is not sufficiently recognised. There is need for strong policies to protect the character and quality of our historic towns if their value to the tourism economy is to be maintained and developed. Policies should be based on a proper understanding of what gives towns their special character.

Please see also the Society's response to Q.104.

Paragraph 8.3 – Town centres and retailing

ACS considers that another key issue should be addressed in the Core Strategy: The need to secure comprehensive and co-ordinated environmental improvements within town centres

There should be a commitment by the authority in the Core Strategy to work with local communities to secure comprehensive and co-ordinated improvements to streetscape and pedestrian and vehicular movement.

ACS has sought for a number of years to secure streetscape improvements in Alnwick town centre and in 2007 undertook its own survey of central Alnwick. The study identified a range of streetscape problems in the historic town centre including difficulties for pedestrians, poor ground surfaces, harsh road markings and poorly designed and sited street furniture and signage. The study identified that many problems were due in large measure to the division of responsibility for the different elements of streetscape.

The declaration of an Historic Core Zone was proposed in which street furniture, traffic and parking control and equipment and signs are made subservient to the quality of the street scene, changing the balance between the convenience of pedestrians and that of vehicle drivers.

Question 34 – Identifying town centres and primary shopping areas

ACS agrees that the Core Strategy should define boundaries for the seven main centres. It supports the boundaries proposed for Alnwick as set out in Appendix 2. (It has no view on the boundaries of the other six centres).

Question 104 – Historic Environment

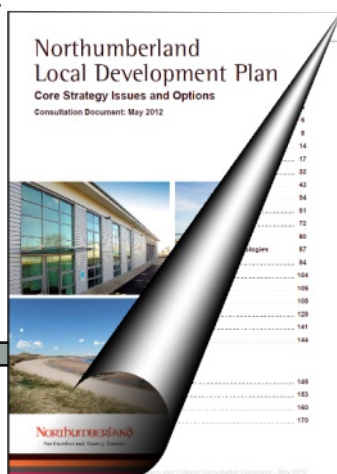
ACS agrees that there is a need for policy to protect and enhance the County's heritage assets and settings but considers that the scope of policy should be extended to protect and enhance the quality, character and distinctiveness of townscape and the built environment. Furthermore, such policy should be informed by a comprehensive townscape study.

The consultation document does not grasp the importance of townscape and the built environment. There is a marked difference in the approach to planning for the natural environment and to planning for the built environment. The document demonstrates a thorough understanding of the County's natural heritage assets and landscape character (eg the Green Infrastructure Study and the Landscape Character Assessment) but it fails to recognise the importance of the unique and distinctive character of Northumberland's towns to the quality of life of the majority of the County's residents, to the attraction of commercial and industrial development and to the development of the tourism economy.

A comprehensive townscape assessment is required to fill the gap in knowledge about our towns and to form the basis for policy formulation. Such a study should identify the most important townscape components in each town and how they combine to create valued environments. It should consider matters such as historical development, architectural character and quality, street patterns, landmarks, views and relationship with the surrounding countryside. The Historic Environment Record will form one part of the evidence.

In recognition of the value that communities place on our historic townscapes, we suggest that the County Council should encourage public participation in the development of a townscape assessment; consult with communities in decisions about scope, and the criteria on which significance is assessed; and consider how such involvement can be maintained and moved forward over the life of the strategy.

The Core Strategy should indicate how the impact of policies and decisions on townscape will be monitored.



Planning matters

Over recent years there have been a number of changes in planning at local and national level. Both the society and planning officers are looking to re-establish an effective dialogue.

The Alnwick-based planners have expressed themselves willing to meet a group from the society to discuss how an arrangement of benefit to us all can be set up for the future. We are making approaches to other Civic Societies to establish their position, and it will be useful to develop with other societies any method of working which helps the general flow of information and opinion to the improvement of planning debate.

Discussion with the authority on the subject of how we get maximum information and detail to the society should enable us to support the planning department in both safeguarding the environment and moving quickly to assist in fast and effective development.

The county council opening the door to improved discussion with the public in respect of the core strategy issues and options document is very helpful. This document, part of the programme of initiatives to the planning

process was placed in the public domain for comments. The society set up a sub-group to prepare comments on aspects of the core strategy that the society feels will need to be modified or re-thought (full text of response on opposite page).

Clearly the council intends to be fully open to discussion and ensure that information gets to the public and back as part of its ongoing responsibility, and in line with its statement of community involvement and overall aim to engage with as many residents, local groups and interested parties as possible.

It is good for both the core strategy and other planning matters that we can rely on receiving full support from the council in the dissemination of up-to-date details about the creation of the new planning rules and guidance.

In return, we hope that the general public of Alnwick (and society members in particular) will take up their pens or computer keyboards and pass their views and comments to the authority about the changes which will alter the way planning will work in the Alnwick area.

Viewpoint

Currently VAT is due on repairs to a listed building, but not on an approved alteration.

HM Revenue and Customs will remove this concession from 1 October 2012, and the cost of alterations approved under listed building consent will increase by 20%. Opponents fear that this will place more heritage at risk, but as the government sees it, the current concession is inconsistent, confusing, and encourages owners to alter rather than repair.

Whatever the rights and wrongs, the consequences of this change should concern members:

- The cost of some projects will increase by 20%. Where this is unaffordable more listed buildings could fall into disrepair - placing their survival at risk

- The current concession is an incentive for owners to gain formal planning consent. Removal could mean that work is carried out without consent

- Higher costs may encourage owners to choose smaller, less experienced contractors in order to avoid VAT or reduce cost in other ways. Quality of work could suffer; experience and skills may be lost

There is little that individuals or local bodies can do to reverse the policy, which has already been opposed by substantial national bodies such as the National Trust. What we can (and must) do now is watch out for unintended consequences.



Diary dates

Civic Society...

September

18th—Presentation of Civic Society Conservation Awards by Chris Mullin, who will also speak “On walled gardens and other matters”. Barter Books at 7:30 pm

October 18th—“F. R. Wilson of Alnwick, Architect and Surveyor” with Marjorie Brown. Barter Books at 7:30 pm

November 15th—“Any Questions?”. Barter Books at 7:30 pm

...and more

5th September–30th September, Bailiffgate Museum, “Our Agricultural Heritage”—an opportunity to see how people lived and worked the land in Northumberland.

6th–9th September, Heritage Open Days—see www.heritageopendays.org.uk for details.

Saturday 22nd & Sunday 23rd September: Alnwick Food Festival

3rd October–28th October, Bailiffgate Museum, “Alnmouth—Port of Alnwick”, an exhibition about the village.

About Alnwick Civic Society

Alnwick Civic Society was formed in 1974, following the defeat of proposals to re-develop the town centre with a modern shopping area. Since then it has sought to influence development proposals, especially in the town centre and conservation area, to ensure they protect and enhance our heritage.

The society has been involved in a number of successful high profile campaigns. It continues to pursue its objectives by providing a voice for members; through dialogue with planning and conservation professionals, and like-minded organisations; by offering advice, scrutinising and commenting on development proposals; and by recognising excellence, organising public meetings, developing guided trails, and a variety of other activities.

In response to recent changes to the planning system the society is heavily involved in development of the Alnwick and Denwick Neighbourhood Plan, and works with local partners to influence policy at a county level. It seeks to influence national policy in co-operation with other bodies within the civic movement, and was a founding member of Civic Voice.

All who share our aims can support the work of the society: by joining as an individual, family or corporate member; by participating in activities, sharing ideas, raising areas of concern and pointing out examples of good practice. Or simply by demonstrating pride in our town, and spreading the word about the value of our work.

Who's who?

President: Philip Deakin

Chair: Peter Ennor (peter.ennor@gmail.com)

Treasurer and Membership: Gill Parker

Honorary Secretary: Sue Smith

Chair of planning sub-committee: Michael Apted

Other Executive Committee members:

Elizabeth Jones

Brian Lamb

David Lovie (davidlovie307@btinternet.com)

Peter Reed (peter.reed@aligre.co.uk)

William Stafford

Caroline Stewart

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