Letter from the Chairman - TrustNews Feb 2002

Few of you will know who I am, because until my retirement from the Bar in 2001 I was unable to find the time to do very much for the Trust. I read the annual Report, the newsletters and the Hampshire Chronicle and heard from my wife, who did work in the city, what was going on in Winchester. As a family we moved to Winchester in 1970 just as the great controversy over the route of the M3 was stirring. The Trust was actively involved in all of that and was able to call upon a very wide range of talents from among the membership. The Trust is still thriving and able to call upon a similar wide range of talents from among the membership.

I have been Chairman since November 5th 2001 and in that time I have come to realise the important and valuable work that the Trust carries out on behalf of its members and the wider constituency of the City itself. While I did one or two planning enquiries at the Bar I was not a planning specialist. It is a very narrow speciality and I found myself doing a very wide range of legal work as a junior barrister on the Western Circuit. At least I got to know the towns and major cities of the West. I have appeared in Court from Penzance to Aldershot. I became a Q.C. in 1984 and moved to London criminal chambers in 1987.

What I learned principally at the Bar was the infinite variety of the human dilemma. Are we chaotic warring animals or are we profoundly civilised? There are no quick answers to this just as there are no quick answers to planning dilemmas because it is impossible to satisfy everybody. What I have discovered in just over two months as Chairman is that the Trust is an active organisation. There are many people who give a lot of time to it and who bring a lot of experience from many fields. I had never been fully aware of what the Trust did on a day to day basis. It is substantial. I have already attended two full planning meetings, been on a site visit to Salters Lane and Dean Lane, met the leader of the County Council and the leader of the District Council and attended a long session of a working party of the main planning committee in the council offices. I have also seen what is done by those who scrutinise the planning applications made within the City area and the reports which are made to the Planning Committee.

A Bit of History

It is 44 years since the Trust was founded and in that time it has had successes and failures in what it has sought to achieve. However, as I find my feet in this role I have been looking and learning about what the Trust has done in that time. There is an old plan for the centre of Winchester from the 50's which shows what would have occurred had the developers of that day been successful in demolishing most of what is now the shopping area and the streets between St George's Street and North Walls. It would have devastated the city centre as we know it. Happily, the Trust was founded to preserve as much as possible of the existing structures. It was successful and the logo which we bear shows an outline of the Chesil Theatre, formerly St. Peter's Church. It was saved for posterity as were many other buildings including the Heritage Centre itself.

In 2000 we altered our name so that it would reflect what the Trust was seeking to achieve. The word preservation had lost some of its magic and gives too much a

sense of living in the past. The Trust will keep on doing what it has always tried to do, namely seeking to maintain the special character of Winchester but to place it in a society where change is necessary and unavoidable.

AGM and Workshop

The first act of my chairmanship was to attend a Workshop which had been arranged by members of our committee to follow up a talk by David MacKay on "The Good City" delivered by him at our annual general meeting. He is a distinguished architect practising in Barcelona after training here in England. He gave a most stimulating address and gave us ideas which we would like to see put into practice in Winchester. The Workshop was very popular and showed what we are trying to do to encourage participation by our membership in the future development of Winchester. I would like to thank the members of the Policy Group who contributed so much to making the Workshop such a success.

My Aims



As the new boy on the block I want to ensure that the Trust continues to thrive. There are a great many challenges to face as a result of central government wishing to see greater density of housing in city centres. Developers see this as an opportunity to maximise everything and the Trust can play a part in trying to ensure that good quality design is the order of the day and that the City remains a 'good city' in which to live. There are plans for the development of Friarsgate which includes the bus station opposite the Guildhall. It is an area where the mistakes of the Brooks Centre must be avoided. Potential development at Barton Farm must be resisted as we believe that other sites in the county are more suitable. Park and Ride remains something to cause excitement. There are many other issues which will continue to concern people living in Winchester. We intend to continue our monitoring and would like to take a more pro-active role in ensuring that development, especially at Friarsgate, contributes to making Winchester the great place it is in which to live.

Increasing the Membership

While I am learning what is involved in helping to run the Trust I want to try to double the membership and to try to involve more people. I have already a number of ideas about increasing the corporate membership of the Trust. This is the first TrustNews. It will keep members in touch with what we are doing. We want to hear from you with your views and ideas as to what you would like us to be doing on your behalf. I realise that many of you are happy to continue to support us with your annual membership payment but not to take part. (I confess that was my attitude until retirement). However there must be some of you who want to express a view and we intend to start a letter section in TrustNews. Please write to us. All views are welcome and if you know of any newcomer to Winchester please try to get them to join.

Robin Merton

Finally, I would like to record my appreciation, and yours, of all the work Robin Merton put into the chairmanship of the Trust from 1997-2001. His ceaseless hard work, thoughtfulness and care in dealing with issues and people, and his good humour set an example which will not be easy to follow.

Roger Backhouse Q.C.

Development Control - TrustNews Feb 02

It seems that the perils evident now, at the beginning of 2002, will be with us for the rest of the year - and, unfortunately, probably for much longer.

This could be said to be the Time of the Developer, for not only has it been decided that Hampshire and other south-eastern counties should accommodate many additional people, but also that Urban Capacity Reports should be produced in support of emerging Local Plans. It now seems the effect of these instructions is to be compounded by a further proposal that our local authorities should be relieved of the responsibility of deciding whether new developments in the area are desirable, apparently to "make the system work better for business", according to Lord Falconer, Minister for Housing, Planning and Regeneration. Never mind whether this would be better for business - what about Winchester and other similar towns?

It seems unlikely that the consequences were ever considered when the Urban Capacity Reports were proposed. We understand the aim of these studies was to show the sites on which development would be possible, rather than where it is either desirable or acceptable. It is unfortunate that in Winchester neither the developers nor their agents appear to have appreciated this, perhaps because it wasn't made clear in the report. As a result, many Wintonians have received letters stating that their land had been highlighted on the map accompanying the letter "because it is the Council's view that the land is likely and available to be developed within the next 10 years". This was not the impression the Council intended to give, even though it is keen to accommodate as many extra people as possible throughout the city in accordance with the directions of PPG3 (Planning Policy Guidance Note 3: Housing). This is a policy the Trust agrees with in general terms, but only when it is

applied with skill and forethought as outlined in the Vision document and summarised in the Policy Chairman's report.

The Development Control panels have consequently been faced with many schemes incorporating the mantra of increased density within Winchester's boundaries. These range from one or two dwellings in gardens described as "gold mines' by local estate agents and schemes on back land plots acquired by buying adjoining portions of long rear gardens, to sizeable development on large sites such as Salters on Salters Lane, and Chilbolton Court on the corner of Sarum Road and Chilbolton Avenue. It is easy to see that schemes of the size of the last two will have a considerable effect on the infrastructure of their surrounding areas, but when several small- to middle-sized schemes by different developers are proposed in a neighbourhood, it is less easy to appreciate what their cumulative effect will be. This is because, having been made in separate applications, they will be considered individually and, unless there is an overall brief for development in the area, the peripheral complications that could arise will not necessarily be considered.

Having made large investments acquiring the land, developers want to proceed without delay, so that we are almost under siege, for no sooner has one proposal been seen and perhaps refused, than an amended scheme takes its place, or another development is proposed nearby. The Planners have to cope with this situation throughout the District, and they must feel somewhat like Hercules trying to cut off the hydra's nine heads: as fast as they deal with one scheme, two more spring into existence.

This constant running from behind and making decisions on such an ad hoc basis does not bode well for the future. There are already signs that in some areas the characteristics that make them special are being whittled away, and there is no evidence of there being any strategy for coping with this flood of proposed developments. It is essential that this influx should follow guidance based on what is good for Winchester, and not be solely developer-led, as at present.

Developers build their schemes and move on, but we are left trying to cope with the damage that has been done to the character of our City.

Shione Carden

Policy Group - TrustNews Feb 2002

The development pressure described in Shione Carden's report, means that these are troubling times for all who are interested in the future of British towns and cities. If we are to avoid piecemeal dilution of the character of our city, the challenge must be accepted and managed by the City Council rather than left to take its course in the hands of the developers.

The present government commissioned the Urban Task Force, under the chairmanship of Lord Rogers, to advise it on urban policy. The Task Force produced its report in 1999. Good design is now government policy. In November 1999, Nick

Raynsford, then Minister of Housing and Planning, addressing a planning conference, said that good design was probably the single most important economic lever that local authorities have. “if your council does not think that good design matters, tell them to go and look at Bilbao or Barcelona", he continued.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions issued PPG3 in March 2000. Besides demanding that local authorities use brown field sites in preference to green field ones where possible, it sought to increase the density of housing in our cities to between 30 and 50 'housing units' per hectare (from the post-war average of about 25 units per hectare). But it said little about how this should be achieved. Put in a nutshell, it is the Trust's contention that the right approach for Winchester is to return to "the traditional urban forms" of streets, squares, courtyards, terraces and open spaces, in place of the car based suburbia we have built since the war. This was set out in the Trust's discussion paper “The Future of Winchester: A Strategic Vision" published in January 2001 (copies available from the Heritage Centre). However, the Trust also recognises that it is much more difficult to design the denser traditional city successfully than it is to design suburbia, and we have little or no experience in the last fifty years of how to do this.

David Mackay and the ‘Good City Workshop’

Because of this the Trust invited David Mackay, an architect who practices in Barcelona and who is an advisor to the British government on urban design, to address the Trust's members after the AGM on the 5th November 2001 on the subject. A summary of his address follows this report. He also agreed to participate in a workshop, which was held the following morning on the subject of the 'Good City'.

The workshop tackled four topics each moderated by experts. The topics were: Living in the 'Good City'; Retail and Other Services; Transport, Access & Movement; and Periphery & Neighbourhoods.

Over sixty people attended the workshop, including members of the Trust and of the City and County Councils.

"On your Bike!"

David Mackay's inspirational address to the Trust was a real tonic. It high-lighted many lessons that we in this country need to learn if we are to achieve cities and large towns that are a delight to live in. This short summary tries to tease out the essence of his address.

The first lesson is that government at all levels, even in our 'democratic' society, can be the kiss of death when it comes to planning issues. Politicians and the public, with few exceptions, find the whole planning process boring and confusing. The officers who have to execute the planning decisions are so hedged about with rules and regulations that they may be forgiven for producing solutions that do not sit well in a particular location. He quoted the experience of Berliners who will tell you that the planners did more damage to the city than that inflicted by the war! Hard to imagine, but how terrible if true.

David Mackay suggests that we need to take a much more empiric approach to planning problems. Those responsible for making policy should quit their offices, leave the textbooks to gather dust and get out into the streets (on bicycles, we hope) and observe the real world. That is the one they are planning for - not some politically correct mirage that will not work.

One of the primary objectives of change, and change is inevitable and in some cases desirable, must be to retain the best elements of the past. By a process of renovation and repair change can be made acceptable.

But above all leadership must come from the politicians who will need a clear view of the way ahead. Added to that the architects of the scheme or schemes must be of proven ability. Matters must not be left to the architects directed by the developers, who are a pretty soulless breed, and generally only interested in getting the maximum return on the investment.

In essence what we need is a system that responds to the reality of situations. This will demand complicity of both public and private interests in a citizen friendly plan, using creative political objectives within a clear architectural structure.

Antony Proudman

Winchester District Local Plan - TrustNews Feb 02

I wrote about this plan in the last Annual Report. This brief article is to bring you up to date with the present position.

The broad guidelines for local planning decisions are given in the Winchester District Local Plan. This Plan is perpetually under review, and the Plan currently under study applies to the period up to 2011.

The first cockshy at a new Plan is called the "First Deposit". This is then commented upon by everyone from the County Council downwards through District Councils, Parish Councils and amenity groups such as the City of Winchester Trust, right down to private citizens.

The City of Winchester Trust has commented on the First Deposit, primarily objecting to the excessive number of houses that the District is asked to provide, particularly in Winchester City. We expressed doubt about the number of new shops that must be provided in the City Centre (stop-press news is that a new shopping survey will be carried out), and also feel that the Plan should exert greater control over development of the Bushfield Camp area.

These comments will produce a 'Second Deposit", expected in late summer/early autumn 2002, and this will form the base document for a year-long Public Inquiry, where again everyone from the County Council down to private individuals can have their say. It is almost certain that the City of Winchester Trust will be representing its views at the Public Inquiry.

From the Inquiry comes an Inspector's Report and the adoption of the new Plan - in this case sometime in 2006.

Antony Skinner

Letter from Robin Merton - TrustNews Feb 2002

Dear Members,

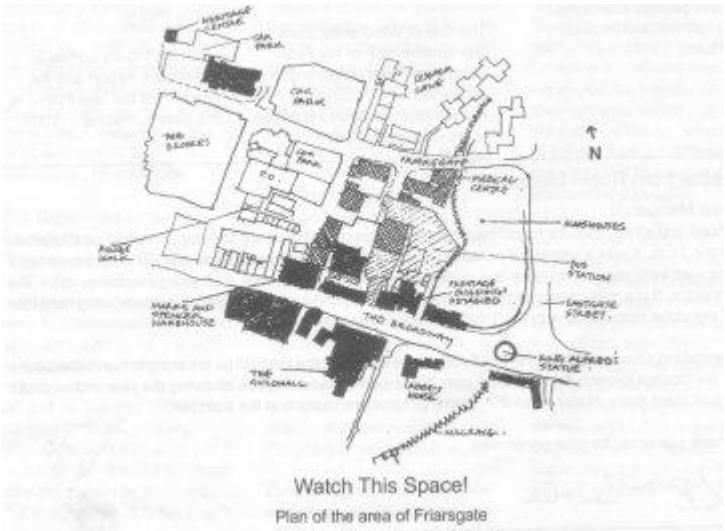
Thank you all so much for holding such a splendid reception to mark the end of my tour as Chairman of the Trust. It was a wonderful occasion and one that I much appreciated and will long remember. I am also very pleased to have the wonderful engraved glass bowl that you gave me to mark the occasion. It is a most generous and handsome present and it will be a constant and enduring reminder of my close association with the Trust over the last four years.

I am taking a back seat from the Trust's affairs for a few months but I will be returning to the deliberations of the Council towards the end of the year. I look forward to seeing you all during the year and no doubt I shall meet many of you when the 'Walks' programme restarts in the summer.

Thank you again for your generosity.

Robin Merton

Friarsgate Development - TrustNews Feb 02



Plan of Friarsgate area

The Friarsgate area, just like the Brooks, is of immense importance to the future character of the centre of the City, and the Trust is worried that its potential may be wasted by something as inappropriate to Winchester as the Brooks development.

The Brooks shopping centre was the outcome of pressures unrelated to the needs or wishes of the people of Winchester - despite the fact that the City Council owned the whole site. At Friarsgate where the City's ownership is very small, the ambitions of the primary landowner, Stagecoach, will naturally tend to take precedence over the good of Winchester. They already appear to have chosen a developer and an architect whose aptitude for handling such an historic area is suspect.

Unfortunately we cannot rely solely on the City Council's planning powers which are surprisingly limited. But in other cities it has been possible for the planners to exert their influence in representing "the public brief" so that developers have been persuaded to do something much more useful and in character.

This entails a very great deal of time and expertise on the part of the planners especially in the early stages, and the Trust's concern is that an already overstretched planning department will find it impossible to provide sufficient time and expertise to exert the necessary persuasion. It is too late to wait for the developer's proposals; to succeed in influencing the outcome on our behalf, the planners must very firmly lead the way from the outset. And this will not happen unless the City Council backs the planning department with the extra funds to resource this exceptional challenge. So far we are not convinced that this will be the case.

The Trust (which has considerable expertise but even less time) aims to help the planners in any way it can, with ideas, with comment, and with criticism when necessary. When promised a say in the brief for the Brooks we politely waited until it was too late - this time we cannot afford to be so circumspect.

TrustNews - TrustNews Feb 02

This news sheet replaces the twice-yearly Newsletter which the Trust has produced over the past ten years or so. The Council has decided that this shorter and more frequent "TrustNews" giving information about our policies, current issues, and activities will be more useful. We hope you like this first one (and we intend that future ones will be even shorter). Tell us what you think.