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NEWSLETTER

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SAVING THE CRANES

Could it be that one of Rotherham's most intractable heritage problems is at last going to be solved? After trying for more than 16 years to persuade the borough council to use its powers to save and restore the former Three Cranes Inn, we have secured an assurance that it is going to happen.

The Three Cranes, the oldest secular building in the town centre and featured in the folk song "Sam Firth to Rotherham Statts Went," ceased to be a pub in 1907. It later housed Wakefield's Army Stores but has been almost completely unoccupied for a good many years and has been allowed to fall into a serious state of disrepair despite its status as a Grade II listed building.

Over the years, our society has made many approaches to the borough council with suggestions about how the problem could be tackled, using compulsory purchase powers and collaborating with a trust or commercial company, but we never achieved a positive response.

Now our hopes are high that this important old building – or what remains of it – is going to be saved. At a recent well-attended meeting, the council's conservation officer Peter Thornborrow, gave a lecture on timber framed buildings and, when pressed by us at question time, gave a firm assurance that the Three Cranes building will be saved and restored with the use of cash from the Townscape Heritage Initiative, a scheme which our society has strongly supported.

BLENHEIM HOUSE

Blenheim House, in Doncaster Road, has a special place in Rotherham's history but, only a couple of years ago, it was vacant, derelict and threatened with demolition. Now, following intervention by our Society, it will be repaired, improved and brought back into use.

The owners had applied for permission to replace the house with a five-storey block of 24 flats. We had been trying for some years to persuade the council to create a conservation area including that length of Doncaster Road – and, at last, we succeeded. The application was withdrawn and permission sought to convert the house to contain six flats with a further 12 in a new building at the rear. That plan was turned down but a new application, reducing the total number of flats to 14 with a maximum height of three storeys, has now been granted.

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CIVIC THEATRE – THE FUTURE

The future of Rotherham's Civic Theatre has been under discussion by our executive committee a good deal in recent months. The council's plans for the redevelopment of the town centre include closing – and, presumably, demolishing – the present theatre and replacing it with a new, larger, theatre combined with a new library and arts centre on the Forge Island site currently occupied by TESCO.

In our comments on the plans, we argued that no justification had been advanced for abandoning the present theatre and we followed that up with an opinion poll at the 2008 Rotherham Show. Visitors to our stand were invited to say whether they thought the theatre should be closed and replaced or, alternatively, retained and improved. An overwhelming majority took the latter view.

We then set up an open meeting to which we invited representatives of organisations which regularly book the theatre. Here, the majority favoured moving to new premises but all were agreed that a 500-seat theatre, which the council proposes, would be much too big and beyond the financial scope of amateur societies.

Our next step will be to contact RODA, which represents the local amateur operatic and dramatic societies, with a view to co-operating in a further meeting to which we should invite the council's head of leisure services, Phil Rogers. We take the view that genuine consultation, which must be a two-way process, is essential.

CIVIC CENTRE - WE PROTEST!

Our Society lodged a formal complaint about the short time allowed – a mere 21 days – for members of the public to express a view about the plans for a proposed new civic centre to be built on the former Guest and Chrimes site. We were given a short extension of two weeks.

It was just enough for the executive committee to give the plans some thought and we have sent a reply expressing our serious reservations on several features of the scheme. We have also complained about a "statement of community engagement" in which the would-be developers, Evans Regeneration and Investments, Ltd., claim to have had comprehensive consultations with "local community groups."

Since they say it was done in consultation with council officers, we are asking why our society, which has been in regular contact with the council's planning officers for over 40 years, was not included.

THE OLD HOSPITAL

One of Rotherham's most prominent and best loved old buildings is facing an uncertain future. The Doncaster Gate Hospital has become surplus to the needs of the health service following the opening of the new community health centre at Greasbrough Road.

Many thousands of Rotherham folk have been associated with the hospital, as individuals or through family connections, during its 136-year history and we are working, along with other organisations concerned with the local heritage, to ensure that the essential historic features of the building are saved.

Assurances have been given by the primary care trust and the local authority that a design guide will be produced to safeguard the frontage and core of the old building in any future redevelopment. We suggested more than six months ago that the council should consider acquiring the building and using it for various purposes within the scope of the museum service, which is always short of space.

At the very least, we said, it could provide storage facilities out of range of the floods which, in 2007, damaged 40,000 items stored in the town centre. It might also be possible to adapt some rooms for display purposes and reduce the number of items which members of the public never see.

Karl Battersby, strategic director of economic and development services, said he would ask culture and leisure services staff to explore these ideas but we have heard no more about that. We are very pleased, however, that the council has agreed to extend the town centre conservation area to include the whole of Doncaster Gate. This will strengthen the position of the planning board if it becomes necessary to turn down an application for an inappropriate development.

GOOD NEWS ABOUT BOSTON CASTLE

It is almost seven years since the Friends of Boston Castle was formed with backing from the Civic Society. A bid for Heritage Lottery funding was submitted in 2003. Since then the Society, in consultation with the Borough Council, has worked persistently to gain funding for the project. Hopes have been raised and then dashed. Secretary Janet Worrall says "It has been an interesting journey".

At long last a first stage bid for funding has been successful. A second stage bid is to be submitted in June and there are high hopes that funding will be granted in September.

Ten out of ten for perseverance!

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