

Saving a town centre from the bulldozer – and so much more

Godfrey Holmes looks at how the 60-year efforts of Chesterfield Civic Society have ‘saved’ so much of this historic town.

EVERY SOCIETY, LIKE EVERY INDIVIDUAL, HAS A FINEST HOUR. Last year marked the 60th anniversary of the formation of Chesterfield Civic Society: a healthy offshoot of the town’s Chamber of Trade. And its finest hour? Undoubtedly: constructive and persistent intervention to prevent Chesterfield’s historic - in many ways unique - Market Square being bulldozed out of existence to become a soulless shopping centre.

Chesterfield Borough Council chose out of 10 bidding candidates the Hammerson Group - they of the monolithic Victoria Centre in Nottingham - to “transform” the town centre. By December 1967, it seemed it was all a “done deal”; and in a far quieter age, with no Facebook, Twitter or mass petitions, the council reasonably expected their master-plan would go through on the nod. After all,

Matlock’s had. And Mansfield’s had.

Tony Aldous of English Heritage takes up the story of a counter-attack:

“The Vice-Chairman of Chesterfield’s

Civic Society gave evidence (to Derbyshire County Council’s “Consultation”): “We have no wish to see the ancient Borough of Chesterfield reduced to the status of urban nonentity – no matter how modern...

The authors of the submitted Plan have written off the existing centre as a slum ripe for re-development.”

(The Society then) “came closer to touching the real psychological nerve-root when it complained that not only were historic buildings being needlessly

sacrificed but (the Professor Allen) Plan showed “a lack of understanding of the aesthetic and symbolic value of buildings enduring in their original setting.”

After many other representations, and some setbacks, Hammerson in 1974 withdrew both its original blueprint and a slightly watered-down scheme.

Concurrently, the new Civic Society was turning its attention to Eyre Chapel in Newbold. The Eyres - powerful local farmers and landowners

- were Roman Catholics at a time when the rest of the nation was fiercely Protestant. Back in the 13th Century, the Lord Mayor of Newbold had inaugurated a Chapel dedicated to St. Martin, exactly at the point

“We have no wish to see the ancient Borough of Chesterfield reduced to the status of urban nonentity – no matter how modern...”

The Peacock – another historic building ‘saved’ by Chesterfield Civic Society.





Above: A model of the Hammerson scheme for Chesterfield town centre redevelopment. The developers withdrew from the project in 1974 as opposition to the scheme grew.

four key pathways across Derbyshire met.

Came Henry VIII's dissolution of the nation's monasteries, and although they had been forced to relinquish the valuable Manor of Newbold, the Eyres retained ownership of their Chapel - and unwillingly paid for the privilege of dissenting. Then followed a precious three-year period: the reign of King James II, 1685-88, when the Eyres could be openly Popish. Even then, their chapel was ransacked by Protestant mobs, its tombs broken open.

Some of Queen Victoria's Ministers did, however, adhere to Roman Catholic Emancipation. That allowed the safe 1887 restoration of Eyre Chapel, and the re-interment of bones. That though was not the end of the story. A new Catholic Church in Littlemoor, barely 150 yards away, now known as St Hugh's, led to abandonment of the older sanctuary. Hidden from view, Eyre Chapel was first used as a store-house, then fell into dereliction.

Throughout expensive and meticulous rebuilding of the forgotten Chapel, and during six intervening decades, Chesterfield's Civic Society has never lost faith in the project. Early on, a Plan of Future Viability was

rolled out: the letting out of the building to everyone from the Oddfellows to U3A, from family reunions to monthly meetings of the society itself - bolstered by a request from the Town's Eastern Orthodox Congregation, that they too might worship therein. In 1992, the Friends of Eyre Chapel came into being.

Although two campaigns well-fought might have tempted any other group to rest on its laurels, Chesterfield's Civic Society thankfully did not disappear. First the indefatigable Bryan Thompson assumed Chairmanship of the Society, in time succeeded in that role by renowned historian Dr Philip Riden.

And the list of triumphs is there for all to see: Blue Plaques unveiled here and there across the town; sculpting of a full-sized George Stephenson statue to stand outside the re-modelled Chesterfield Midland Railway Station; the procurement of National Lottery funding to reinstate iron railings round the Crooked Spire; extension of the Town Centre Conservation Area; restoration of several original shop frontages; making Chesterfield a more attractive destination for pedestrians; retaining of the character of the Grade



Above: One of several Blue Plaques put up across Chesterfield by its Civic Society.

Below: There's a new lease of life for the historic - and forgotten for so many years - Eyre Chapel in Newbold.

II-listed 1857 Market Hall during renovation; saving The Peacock Inn and identifying new tenants for it; and persuading a reluctant Royal Mail to demolish its totally abandoned multi-storey car park fronting both Markham Road and Beetwell Street. Long may Chesterfield's Civic Society prosper. ■

