

CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

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LECTURE

At our autumn Open Meeting **Martin Roberts** will give his annual illustrated lecture, this year entitled “**Early Durham Architects**”. The term “architect” seems to appear first in Durham with the death of the mysterious James Clement in 1690. In the early eighteenth-century Thomas Shirley emerges in the building accounts of a number of significant buildings in the county, while the name of John Bell is far better established in current literature as the designer of his own buildings, and the clerk of works / executant architect, implementing the design of others. The mysterious, the emerging and the established, these three architects will be the subject of the talk. It will be held on **Saturday 19 October, at 2.00 pm in Elvet Riverside 1, room 142.** *All are welcome.*

THE COUNTY DURHAM PLAN

Events affecting the future development of the City continue to unfold with disconcerting speed. An Independent Inspector was appointed for the draft County Durham Plan and he took everyone by surprise by initiating a phase of the **Examination in Public** sooner than expected. July saw him issuing sharp forensic questions for Durham County Council, with further specific questions emerging also for consultees in early September. Mr William Fieldhouse is an experienced Inspector, coming to Durham after examining the London Plan.

The hearings, the major part of the examination, will commence at 9.30am on Tuesday 22 October 2019 at **The Glebe Centre**, Durham Place, **Murton**. Representations were made that Murton is a relatively inaccessible location for a plan that concerns people across the whole county, compared to a transport hub such as Durham City, and especially challenging for non-motorists. The official guidance outlines an examination procedure strictly led and closely managed by the Inspector. Examination hearing sessions will take place over 12 working days up to Thursday 5 December. Members of the public not registered to speak are still welcome as observers.

The Inspector is limiting the number of speakers in the **EIP**. In a coalition formed with the **City of Durham Parish Council** and the **Friends of the Durham Green Belt**, Trustees from the County Plan sub-committee and allies have registered to speak on the issues highlighted in the Trust’s detailed and lengthy consultation response, as previously summarised on the Trust’s website. They will argue, essentially, that the Plan repeats the proven flaws of the 2014 Plan, in the form of the two unneeded, expensive and environmentally destructive relief roads, a housing allocation that still puts too heavy a burden on Durham City (expected to take 42% of the County total while more deprived areas are passed over), and that the accompanying green belt losses in both cases cannot be defended by any plausible appeal to the necessary “exceptional circumstances”. Other major issues on which representations will be made include: the pressures caused by Durham University’s steroidal expansion, the colonisation of more and more of the City by student housing in various forms, and the need for more housing for older people.

The County Council, after the consultation on the resubmission draft options had ended, announced that there would be further documents on the relief roads late in the year. Since then the surprisingly early dates for the **EIP** have emerged, and it remains to be seen whether this information will now be admissible. The documents are understood to be revisiting the roads’ effects on landscape, and the challenge of raising

money for the proposed Western Relief Road, mainly through a levy on new housing in the Green Belt at Sniperley Park. In the meantime, the Northern Relief Road has made a premature appearance as part of a regional bid for 16 transport schemes in a national competition. Any show of confidence in securing funding must seem hollow, given that competing highways schemes are not likely to be for contexts where local traffic is in decline, as it has been in central Durham for over a decade now.

The Inspector's role is to consider whether the Plan complies with the relevant legislation and is "sound". It is not part of his role to make improvements to the Plan, provided that it is judged sound and legally-compliant, but an Inspector can recommend "main modifications" in order to render the plan "sound". Failing that possibility, Mr Fieldhouse can insist that the Plan be withdrawn. Objectors to the Plan must be hoping that their demands, such as the scrapping of the proposed relief roads, can be met and categorised as "main modifications", so that an acceptable plan can emerge without the whole thing being withdrawn a second time (in which case government-appointed commissioners would take over the process, a severe humiliation for the County Council).

On 6 September the Inspector issued a penetrating, full list of matters and questions preparatory to the hearings, a focussing and filtering exercise in which all recognised consultees are invited to reply, as well as the Council. Trustees have been favourably impressed by the acumen of the Inspector's questioning. The Council had already been offering some significant alterations to its evidence, with numerous "minor modifications" being added in May in newly submitted documents on Durham City traffic. This shuffling must question the strength of the Council's evidence base and the weakness of consultation procedures based partly on now outmoded data. In its replies to some of the Inspector's preliminary questions the Council has also offered to make some "main modifications". With matters developing fast, it should be noted that this bulletin is going to press mid-September.

THE NEW COUNTY HQ (THE SANDS): A CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY?

Also taking Trustees and others by surprise, if only from continued disbelief, was the beginning on 12 August of construction work for a new County Hall on the former Sands car park, and of a proposed multi storey car park opposite. The open-air car park was closed despite it being the height of the tourist season. The former coach park was fenced off, despite it being common land and not yet deregistered. This is an encroachment at odds with the Commons Act of 2006, which protects such land from development or restriction of access.

Two parties in particular, both important to the prosperity of the City, are known to be affected by the loss of the Sands car park. Tourist coaches may now be encouraged to bypass Durham altogether, wary of the clumsy new arrangements for dropping off and picking up visitors at Freeman's Place while based at a new coach park at Belmont. Secondly, some market traders, with vehicles only suited to an open-air car park, are feared unlikely to be seen again.

The ruthlessness of the Council in pursuing this development, against massive and well-informed local opposition, highlights what must be called **a crisis of legitimacy** concerning the County Council as a planning authority for Durham City. The crisis relates not just to the inappropriate nature of the site itself, its relative inaccessibility by road, its proneness to flooding, the awkward and damaging displacement of tourist coaches, but the way it was given approval. Durham City is the focus for a disproportionate amount of proposed developments in the county but its councillors find themselves repeatedly trapped in a decision-making process whose committee structures place them always in a minority, and in which voting on major planning decisions takes place along lines that suggest party political conformism rather than considered individual scrutiny.

The now customary interruption of the famous Durham skyline by cranes is set to continue for several years at least. An application from the **City of Durham Parish Council** for judicial review of the scheme had earlier been knocked back by a judge.

THE 'DURHAM CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN'

As well as the draft County Plan, another important planning document has been out for consultation. The **Durham City Neighbourhood Plan** is to be the chief planning document of the Durham City Parish Council, established last year. This document sets out the aims and principles for the future development of the central area of Durham City, sensitive to its heritage, social make-up and natural environment.

Many of the large-scale developments in the City since the abolition of the City Council in 2009, and some before, have been damaging to the City's unique character, and the Neighbourhood Plan gives hope for mitigation and improvement in the future, even though the final say on planning applications remains with the unitary County Council.

Trustees welcomed many proposed policies, such as those designed to protect the distinctly green character of much of Durham, the desire for a central art gallery and a City Centre community hub. Also welcome was a proposed correction of the absurd omission of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation blocks from the rule that new homes in multiple student use should not normally be allowed if the area within 100 metres already has 10% student housing. Trustees welcomed proposals on "affordable housing" and for "Housing for Older People and People with Disabilities".

Trustees endorsed proposals that large developments that might affect the world heritage site or the surrounding landscape be required to submit a "master plan" outlining their overall scope and final impact. This would ensure that unwelcome large-scale change cannot occur by piecemeal development, as was recently the case in the Green Belt with the new sports facilities near Maiden Castle, which have since been likened in appearance to Newcastle airport.

NB Several Trustees are also members of the Parish Council, or the Neighbourhood Plan Working Party, and it should be recorded that they took no part in drafting the Trust's consultation response to the Neighbourhood Plan. All such Consultation Responses are examined by the Parish Council before the Plan's submission to the County Council for Independent Examination (to avoid any conflict with the County Plan, national policies and legal requirements). There will be an examination by an independent inspector and local referendum before possible adoption.

CITY CENTRE OUTLETS

The decline of the City Centre as a shopping centre shows signs of being at least slowed, with the clothes retailer M&Co opening in August, replacing Marks and Spencer on Silver Street, and the department store T J Hughes opening on the former British Home Stores site in High Street. However, these new arrivals are chain stores, while high business rates and rents are still being said to be deterring independent retailers from the area. Sites are still opening on the new Riverwalk, the replacement for the Gates shopping centre. The intrusive and aggressive bulk of Riverwalk's design is partly mitigated by the uniquely spectacular views of the peninsula from its walkway high over the river.

Riverwalk is less a new shopping centre than part of an emerging large pleasure quarter for the City. Outlets already opened or planned are very much geared towards eateries and leisure, centred on the six-screen Odeon cinema. In addition, the planned development at Milburngate, whose construction began this summer, is also to include new bars and restaurants and "a boutique cinema". Both Riverwalk and Milburngate will be opposite some comparable sites across the river at Walkergate, and Trustees question how far these new developments are viable or took account of each other in their planning. It is also noted that there is still no specific provision planned for anyone walking from Riverwalk to the Milburngate complex. Instead they will either have to descend to river level or divert to cross at the busy Milburngate roundabout.

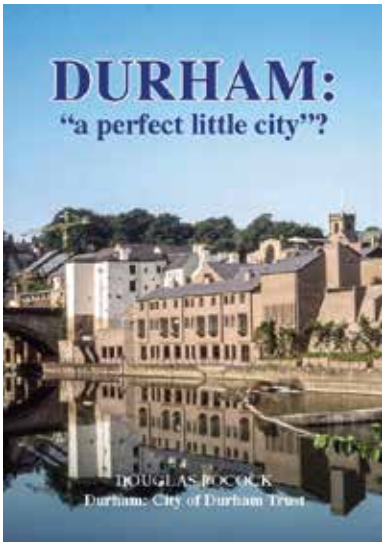


PERSONALIA

At the AGM in May Dr Malcolm Reed was reconfirmed as Treasurer. The post of Hon Secretary remained unfilled, the various tasks being distributed among the Trustees. At their next meeting they reconfirmed John Lowe as Chair and Roger Cornwell as Vice Chair. In the absence of a Hon. Secretary John Lowe has been leading Trustees into a different but effective modus operandi for considering and responding to planning applications. Roger Cornwell had stepped down as Chair last year after he had been elected to the new Parish Council. He was warmly thanked for his years of strong leadership as Chair and Trustees very much welcomed his willingness to take up the post of Vice-Chair.

Lucy Szablewska has stepped down as a minute-taker for the monthly meetings, her place being filled by Jan Hutchinson. At the AGM Lucy was elected to serve as a new trustee, as was the architectural historian Dr Adrian Green. A third valuable recruit is Michael Hurlow, co-opted in August (subject to approval at the next AGM). Michael is a landscape architect, very active in supporting the World Heritage Site Coordinator. These appointments consolidate the Trust's architectural expertise in particular, after the large gap created by the retirement of the highly respected local architect, Dennis Jones.

The main event of the AGM was overwhelmingly to mark the retirement as a Trust officer of **Dr Douglas Pocock**, and to honour his extraordinary contribution as Honorary Secretary since 1974, more than half the Trust's life-time. For many people, Douglas, with his gentle but authoritative demeanour, effectively embodied the Trust. A professional geographer, he helped define the World Heritage Site created in 1986 and to establish a continuous Green Belt around the City. Douglas is not only a well-published local historian but also the author or editor of most of the Trust's own publications.



Douglas's farewell talk at the AGM, "Durham: 'a perfect little city'?" recalled the eulogy given the City by Bill Bryson in his *Notes from a Small Island* (1995), and surveyed the many changes to the City since. The question mark in the title says much.

Both Trustees and members thanked Douglas warmly for his indispensable place in the recent history of the City. He was wished every happiness, unburdened of the reading of some 1,000 planning applications a year. Finally, both Douglas and Dennis Jones were among the first four members of the community to receive "**good citizen**" awards from the City of Durham Parish Council. The awards formally recognize those who have made an outstanding contribution to the City.

NEW PUBLICATION, CHRISTMAS CARDS

The booklet of Douglas's farewell talk *Durham: 'a perfect little city'?* will be on sale at the autumn open meeting. The Trust has not commissioned a new Christmas card this year, but a stock of previous cards will be made available. A full list of Trust publications, with order form, is available on the Trust's website, <http://www.durhamcity.org/>

NOTICE

Just as we went to press came the painful news that, after a cruel illness, Gillian Pocock died on Sunday 8th September, the funeral being held at St Margaret's on 30 September at 2pm. Trustees, members and many people in Durham will be united in sending the deepest condolences to Douglas and his family for the sad loss of a wife and mother.

The Trustees