

Our Town



The Newsletter of Cheltenham Civic Society

Debate, ideas, news and provocations

2

March 2016

Your regular update on how we are working to keep Cheltenham a great place to live

Why aren't BLUE Plaques **PINK?**

Cheltenham's Blue Plaques scheme has honoured all sorts of eminent people since it came into the care of the Civic Society in 1980. The 59th Plaque was unveiled in 2015, to honour Dr Grace Billings.

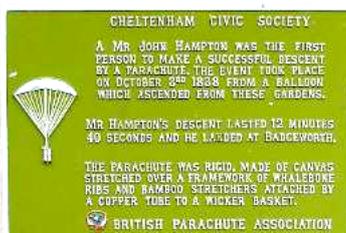
Which set us thinking – how come this was only the 6th Cheltenham plaque to commemorate a woman! Isn't it time we did better?

Not all Cheltenham's Blue Plaques are blue - 14 are green and some are brown, or grey, or white – you can find them all at openplaques.org/places/gb/areas/cheltenham/plaques.

The 59th plaque was to Grace Billings (née Stewart) (1872-1957), Cheltenham's first woman GP. The plaque is at the house where in 1899 she opened her first surgery, 6 Evesham Road.

Now, before we go any further, if you object to the appalling gender stereotyping in the headline (and who wouldn't?), our apologies. But it is only a headline! The underlying question is, however, an important one, as we intend to explore.

Becoming a doctor was a challenge to any woman in 19th century England: indeed, medical



degrees were only available (and to men only) at English universities from the 1830s – before that, you had to go to Scotland.

The first Englishwoman to qualify as a physician and surgeon in Britain was Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in 1865 (though she did not hold a degree until 1870). Grace Stewart graduated with a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery from Durham University in 1898. The next year she opened her Cheltenham surgery, and married Frederick Billings (descendant of the man who first developed The Park). His wedding present to her was a bicycle! (You can read more about Grace Billings in

Anthea Jones's article in the Local History Society's 2015 *Journal*, 31. See also the Pittville History website.)

Dr Billings's plaque is only the 6th in Cheltenham to a woman. Considering the town's population has been 50% female for years, this imbalance seems very odd. It is time it was put right. We have been asking round, and come up with a list of possible candidates (see page 5). Which of these women should we honour next? Or do you have a better idea?...



Dr Grace Billings
Photo courtesy of the King and Billings families

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SEE ALL THE CANDIDATES
and CAST YOUR VOTE on PAGE 5...

What are we up to?



SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

by
Roger Woodley

I've been Chair of Cheltenham Civic Society for two years – not long enough to achieve all the targets I set myself, but health reasons mean I have decided to step down now.

Here are some of the thoughts I shared with members at our AGM on 8 March.

First, the things a good Civic Society always does – and which people expect it to do.

Our programme of events has been lively and successful, and our social gatherings regularly over-subscribed. The meetings of our Executive Committee have also been lively, sometimes challenging, and always highly stimulating.

We've maintained our relations with bodies working in similar fields – the Borough Council of course, but also the Local History Society, Friends of the Wilson, Friends of Pittville, the Music Festival, Civic Voice, the Chamber of Commerce. And, as you have seen on page 1, we have put up a new Blue Plaque to enrich our town's collection, this one in Evesham Road to commemorate the first practice of Dr Grace Billings, the county's first woman GP. (Do have your say – see page 5.)

As always, we've commented regularly on all planning applications, an important Civic Society activity, which can be controversial, although this year has been quieter than some.

In April we shall see the return of Civic Awards, recognising our town's best restoration and new building work.

The Society led on Heritage Open Days and Civic Day, both activities putting us in touch with several local charities, creating important new

relationships. This last point led to my second area of reflection: growth and outreach.

We have established a county-wide forum of Gloucestershire Civic Societies, who meet regularly and form a lobbying group better placed to pressurize the County Council. Our own premises, Parmoor House, have proved increasingly popular for lettings to a wider public. A group of our members have got together to monitor the maintenance of the pavements and streets, with a view to achieving some improvement in their often shameful condition.

For our own management and protection, we are proposing, subject to the agreement of the membership, a new constitution, in an up-to-date form recommended by the Charities Commission.

I think we're communicating better. Members receive regular e-bulletins. Our new website is alive and buzzing. You're reading this in our lively new Newsletter, colourful, contemporary and occasionally contentious!

But what I'm most pleased about is that our individual membership has grown by 10%. More and more people attend our events. We now have five significant corporate members, whose contribution to our work will widen our influence



Maxine Melling

and bring important new links. Not least of the last-mentioned benefits will be the new Chair proposed to succeed me at the AGM: Maxine Melling, Pro Vice Chancellor (Operations) at the University of Gloucestershire. I was delighted that Maxine accepted our invitation to stand, and am certain she will bring to the Society a

breadth of vision and practical experience to boost substantially our unchanging aim of celebrating the delights of Britain's finest spa town.

WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS:

- Mr & Mrs D Nourse ● Councillor Chris Nelson ● Mr M B Lomas ● Mr Peter Sayers ● Mike Fish
- Canon Dr Tudor Griffiths ● Mr John Foulkes ● Mr & Mrs Westwater ● Maxine Melling & Brian Maidment
- Mr Andrew Dipple ● Mr Alistair C Graham ● Mr Andrew Lyall ● Miss Louise Davies ● Mr Derek Rue

Diary dates

Even if you are not a member of the Society, you are warmly invited to attend these events:

Wednesday 20 April

Civic Awards

Each year Civic Awards are made by the Society on behalf of the Borough Council to encourage excellence in the restoration of historic buildings, and other improvements in the town's built environment.

There are three categories of award: A new building or structure; Restoration, alterations or additions to an existing building or structure;

Improvements to the built or landscape environment.

Each year the awards are presented by a leading figure from the architectural world, who then gives a lecture on their perspective on architecture and conservation issues.

This year's speaker is

Victoria Thornton, OBE (*above*). Victoria is the founder of Open-City, London's leading architecture education organisation. Since 1992, Open-City has championed the value of well-designed places and spaces in making a liveable and vibrant city, enabling people to discover and understand how they can influence change in the built environment. **All welcome to both events:**

- Civic Awards presentation: 4 p.m. at The Town Hall
- Lecture: 7. 30 p.m. at Harwood Hall, Christ Church, Malvern Road GL50 2JH

Tuesday 10 May

'Strozzi Palace'

Power and politics in late 19th century Cheltenham

Michael Storm

presents the curious tale of the town's 'homage' to Florence – the electricity distribution station built by a romantically-inclined Borough Engineer in happy recollection of his honeymoon - allegedly.

- 7. 30 p.m.
- Parmoor House, 13 Lypiatt Terrace GL50 2SX



Tuesday 7 June

Great Witley Church & Witley Court

Before he designed Lypiatt Terrace and Montpellier Street, Cheltenham architect Samuel Whitfield Daukes created a magnificent palace – Witley Court – for the 11th Baron Birmingham. It was consumed by fire in 1937. English Heritage maintains it as a romantic ruin. In its gardens is the Neptune Fountain, reputedly the highest in England. The visit will also include Great Witley church – a true Baroque extravaganza.

- See flyer enclosed with **Our Town**



Saturday 18 June

Civic Day

Civic Day is a national event to celebrate the places where we live.

This year in Cheltenham we plan to use the occasion to debate the Civic Society's role in supporting work to regenerate the Lower High Street.

The Lower High Street is a significant place, and a historically important part of the town. We'll let you know more about this nearer the time, probably in one of the Chair's e-bulletins.

If you are not yet a member of the Society, please let us know (info@cheltenhamcivicsociety.org.uk), mentioning your interest in Civic Day. We'll be delighted to keep you up to date.

A thorn in our gardens?

The uncertain future of the Municipal Offices

At one time Cheltenham Borough Council was looking to move to new offices in North Place. Now it seems they are heading for something more modest: the old Nelson Thornes offices in Bath Road (renamed Delta Place). What next, then, for the magnificent Promenade building where they have been located since 1915? Civic Society member Diana Brown has her say. And Mark Sheldon, Director of Corporate Resources at CBC, puts his case.

DANGER!

The integrity of Cheltenham's most iconic and elegant building in The Promenade is under threat. A prestigious building, centrally located in one of the most beautiful streets in England, with 'grandstand' access to our prominent, well-placed war memorial – all giving a fitting backdrop to civic events. It is an appropriate, central site for our Council Chambers, Mayor's Office and vital public information offices, which would certainly be approved and understood by European tourists.

What may happen to the area around the Municipal Buildings if the site were sold to developers, i.e. a hotel, shops or offices? The Council would naturally wish to keep the Regency façade intact, but over time there would be pressure to allow the intrusion of unsuitable signage, advertising and even the extension of parking into the Long Gardens. There is a fashion now for placing restaurant furniture on pavements, with yet more signage. Would this be allowed? I notice that a restaurant at the south end of the Municipal terrace uses pavement space in this way, creating an anomalous clutter counter to the elegance of the buildings. Would any incoming commercial businesses continue to decorate the property with attractive flowers and Christmas lights, giving a spiritual 'lift' to passers-by?

Some views have been expressed about the need for more life and 'vibrancy' on this side of the Promenade. I would argue that it is precisely because the shops are restricted to one side, with the opposite side presenting an elegant and tranquil oasis, that The Promenade is admired so much. Put shops or hotels there and the spell is broken and it will lose its uniqueness.

Diana Brown



OPPORTUNITY!

Since 2009/10, the Council's government funding has been cut by £5.7 million to £3.1 million annually. However, it is now able to retain a proportion of the growth in business rates which historically went to central government. In order to maintain parks, leisure and cultural services, the Council has reduced costs and increased income. It has transformed the way it delivers services by setting up Ubico to provide waste and recycling services, the Cheltenham Trust to deliver leisure and cultural services, and by sharing services with other councils. Despite all this, there is still a budget gap of £4m over the next four years. And, as a result of reorganisation, there is now a lot of empty space in the Municipal Offices, which no longer meet the council's needs. Running costs of £700,000 a year can no longer be justified.

Delta Place means a relocation to purpose-built, modern, flexible offices. They are cheaper to run, and offer the opportunity to redevelop the Municipal Offices with a partner, rather than by outright sale. This gives us maximum influence over their future – and an opportunity to restore them to their former glory, and to regenerate Royal Well and enhance the setting of the Royal Crescent. The public will be able to access this iconic building, which could potentially be used for a hotel, retail and leisure. The regeneration scheme will create jobs, bring in additional business rates, and enhance the quality of the town, ensuring that Cheltenham remains a wonderful place to live, work and visit.

Mark Sheldon

Why aren't BLUE plaques PINK?

Continued from the front page...

Grace Billings's plaque is only the *sixth* in Cheltenham to a woman. (We do not count the green plaque to the caryatids in Montpellier Walk!) Four of those who have also been honoured by Blue Plaques are pictured below, on the left: *Top left: Lillah McCarthy* (1875-1960), who managed London's Savoy theatre; *Top right: Josephine Butler* (1828-1906), social reformer; *Lower left: Lilian Faithfull* (1865-1952) one of England's first woman magistrates; *Lower right: Marie Hall*, violinist (1884-1956). There is also a plaque to Lady Elgar sponsored by the Elgar Society.



We feel sure there are many more unsung heroines of Cheltenham who ought to be added to this illustrious number, with a Blue Plaque of their own. Here is our tentative list of candidates. Which of these should we honour next? Or do you have a better idea?

(As you will see, more research would be needed before honouring most of these women, including birth and death dates...a challenge! And – there is one inflexible rule: the house in which they lived must still stand.)

Mary and Annie Shaw of Dumfries House (now County House), Bayshill. Mother and daughter organised food parcels to Prisoners of War in 1915 – sending over 1000 a month by 1917.

Ethel Geddes, Commandant of Naunton Park Hospital, Cheltenham's first elected woman councillor.
Mina Ricketts Wethered OBE, of 8 Queen's Parade: co-ordinated supplies of clothing and bandages to hospitals at home and abroad from 1916 – a total of 7,500,000 items by the end of the war.

Edith How-Martyn (*right*), of Naunton Park Road: joint Secretary of the Women's Social and Political Union, the most militant of the suffrage organisations. She was imprisoned for two months in Holloway for "insulting and threatening behaviour" at the Opening of Parliament in 1906.

Edith Picton Turbevill (*below right*), leading figure in the YWCA, pioneering campaigner for female ordination, and Labour MP.



Harriet McIlquham, author of *The Enfranchisement of Women* (1892).

Dorothea Beale, amongst many other things, Principal of The Ladies' College 1858-1906.

Sarah Siddons: "while playing at Cheltenham in 1774 she met with the earliest recognition of her powers as an actress, when by her portrayal of Belvidera in Thomas Otway's *Venice Preserv'd* she won the appreciation of a party of 'people of quality' who had come to scoff."

Fanny Trollope (mother of the more famous Anthony), whose 1839 novel *The Widow Barnaby* lifted the lid on the social life of Cheltenham, "your trumpery town". (Did she ever stay here?)

Jane Cook, philanthropist, whose story is being told by Mike Bell in the current Cheltenham Local History Society newsletter.

Harriet Bowdler. At Hurlock Cottage, Jenner Gardens, next to the chapel, Miss Harriet Bowdler (the first "Bowdleriser" of Shakespeare) had her small school for young ladies.

We would include **U A Fanthorpe**, poet (died 2009), who taught at The Ladies' College for 16 years, but under the rules of the scheme, she will not be eligible for a plaque until 2029.



Our thanks to Neela Mann for most of these suggestions, from her recently published book, *Cheltenham in the Great War*. Thanks also to Hilary Simpson for her article about Grace Billings, the source for the biographical detail on the front page.

Find out more about Blue Plaques at openplaques.org and www.blueplaqueplaces.co.uk

Send your Vote, together with any other suggestions, thoughts, and further specialist knowledge on these or other candidates to Cecil Sanderson, Chair of the Blue Plaques sub-committee at csanderson@cheltenhamcivicsociety.org.uk, or to the Editor, c/o Parmoor House.

I would support a Blue Plaque for _____

My Name _____ Address _____

_____ Postcode _____ Phone _____

e-mail _____

I would be interested in helping with research

Cinderella of the Tracks

The heart-breaking tale of Cheltenham Spa Railway Station

by Alec Hamilton

Cheltenham Spa station is not a place to make us proud. The booking office is tired, the café minuscule, the loos just about passable, the glass canopy leaky, the forecourt tango of buses and cars hair-raising, the parking inadequate. The station's entire appearance piecemeal, dog-eared and, frankly, scruffy.

Compare that to just a handful of improvements elsewhere in the country – a wholly new station at Peterborough, upgrades at Nottingham, and the transformation at Reading, to name but three. All in all, Cheltenham looks like very much the poor relation. Even Abergavenny is getting lifts and a new footbridge! (For the full list, go to <https://www.networkrail.co.uk/improvements/access-for-all/stations>.)

From the operators' point of view – and the Councils' (Gloucestershire *and* Cheltenham) – the situation is indeed poor. Passenger numbers rise steadily (now 2,000,000 a year); the number of services increases; new destinations are added (Maesteg, anyone?); competition between operators gets fiercer – and there's new rolling stock on the way in almost every region. So how come Cheltenham is the Cinderella of the Tracks?



The 2013 vision – a civilised, modern, effective transport hub: more parking, more platforms. (Birmingham top left. London bottom right)

There's no shortage of ambition. First studies were carried out as long ago as 2007. And in February 2012 the Borough Council produced a 'Concept Statement': "a strategy which reinigorates the station... so that it becomes a convenient and comfortable hub... an attractive point of entry to the town."

A year later Jeremy Williamson set out the Cheltenham Development Taskforce (CDTF) vision in an application to the Department of Transport for "Major Scheme" funding (*as in the illustration above*): new 'bay' platforms, new facilities, new parking, and a bus terminal. (Plus some technical stuff about getting rid of London trains hanging about in the sidings, which would allow more trains to call at Cheltenham.) The price tag was £15.5M.

Alas, the idea of additional platforms was scuppered by Network Rail and First Great Western (now Great Western Railway) in February 2014 – and with that the CDTF scheme seemed to have stalled.

But a year is a long time on the trains, and in July 2015 the *Echo* announced, "Major £10M improvement plans for Cheltenham Spa station confirmed by Government." The extra platforms were gone. There was talk of an hourly service to Paddington; and earlier and later trains too. And even of cutting 12 minutes off the journey

What the public says about it. We asked Civic Society members for their views:

"I would love to see the entrance to the building restored - the original colonnade was beautiful." RK

"A complete revamp is required or, better still, a brand new station (a Cheltenham Parkway?)" RC

"A more direct line to London would be my priority, rather than a new station." BB

"It is miserable standing on those platforms. Why can't they make the waiting rooms comfortable?" GH

time to London. (Could those of us who treasure those lingering moments sitting in Gloucester station yet be disappointed, perhaps?)

Which brings us to now.

The £10,000,000 funding is all – amazingly perhaps – in place: with one tiny exception. Is the money from the Gloucestershire Local Transport Board in place? Yes. £3/4M from the Sustrans/Great Western Railway scheme? Yes. From ‘Access for All’, Network Rail’s nationwide plans to provide more lifts and ramps? Yes. From the National Station Improvement Programme (NSIP)? Yes.

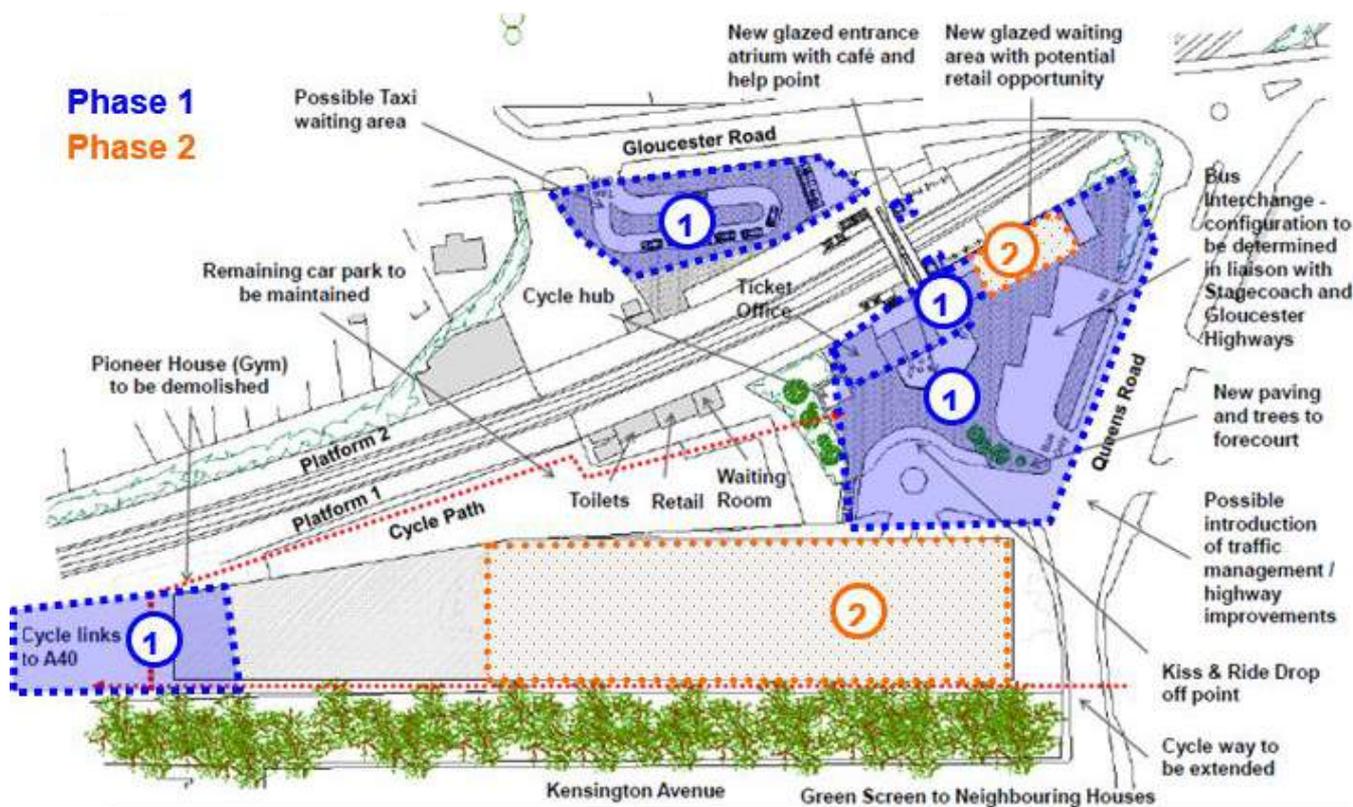
So, where’s the problem?

The last slice of the cake – the Commercial Facilities Fund, held by the Department of Transport, has not been released. Why not? Well, it’s complicated. The idea is for this chunk of money (about £700,000) to provide 70 more parking spaces, with a target of 400 spaces in the long term. But how and where seems to be a matter of continuing debate. It’s stuck.

In January 2016 a draft report appeared, prepared by Atkins Consulting for GCC – the ‘Cheltenham Station Travel Plan’. (To read it, Google ‘gfirstlep Cheltenham’.) At 64 pages, it will take you till Birmingham New Street (shiny, glitzy, bright) to read the whole thing. It breaks the Cheltenham station plans into two Phases (see below) – and at a glance you can see that Phase 1 (which only seeks to provide 70 parking spaces, behind Trimnasium) is ready to go. So all we need is – what? The go-ahead from Network Rail and GWR. What’s the hold-up? It’s taken us 8 years to get here. Leaves on the line? Wrong kind of snow? You tell me.



Reading Station – now we’re talking!



The 2016 vision - a phased approach.

Areas in purple marked ① for 2016/7. Areas in orange marked ② for 2018/9.

More opinions from Civic Society members:

“I like showing Cheltenham off to visitors. If they arrive by train, the dark and depressing station is a poor prelude to what the town has to offer.” JH

“Twenty years ago there were real flowers in hanging baskets. I hope that earlier ‘feel’ can be kept, but in a 21st-century design.” FC

“It’s a disgrace: poor drop-off arrangements and traffic management, horrible booking office, depressing architecture for a public building in a lovely Regency town - feels like a run-down backwater station in Eastern Europe in the mid-1990s.” FG

Alec Hamilton is a regular train traveller to London and Birmingham, proud possessor of a Senior Railcard, and subscription to Railway magazine.

How *do* I make my voice heard?

A practical guide for individual citizens



Our Town thanks Councillors Rob Garnham, Tim Harman, John Rawson, Lloyd Surgenor, and Max Wilkinson for their help in compiling this article.

What is the best way to get your point across?

How can you mobilize your local councillors to set the wheels in motion when there is something you passionately believe in – something crying out to be done?

We talked to five local councillors, and here is what, from their experience, they say:

The power of each of us is greater than we think. One individual (or a small group)’s imaginative idea to improve the town will usually find councillors keen to help it along and be associated with it – examples are the Holst Statue, and Pittville Gates: “Most of the time, councillors are receptive to creative ideas they think can improve the town.” Sceptical? Have you tried it?

Are you persistent, well-briefed – and (this can be a deal-breaker) is it going to cost money the council hasn’t got?!

Activism is powerful. Even when there has been little or no response to public consultation, councillors still want to be seen to respond to local opinion – making a noise is no bad thing.

One pensioner has, almost single-handedly, got the Borough Council to start work on improving the Royal Well bus station – letters to the Mayor, and to the *Echo*.

Bending their ears

And the state-of-the-art play area now being built in Pittville Park came from one individual bending the ears of the right two cabinet members.

Money is key.

It is usually easier to get the council to commit to one-off projects than money that needs to be found year after year. Better still, find someone to match-fund your proposal. If you can argue there will be some social, environmental or economic benefit (ideally, all three), that will be persuasive.

Your councillor can help you navigate the mechanics of council (who does what – finding the right person to talk to – and how meetings work).

Asking a “public question” at a council meeting will always get an answer from the relevant cabinet member – and you get a useful “supplementary” too, which you don’t need to write beforehand. Your councillor will even help you draft your question. Really!

How to complain

As to complaints – here are the rules:

- Face to face is best: when you see a councillor out and about, buttonhole her or him.
- Yes, you can phone – but e-mails communicate better. They need to be full of information, not opinion – and no vituperation!
- Make a case, don’t grind an axe.

And do bear in mind, yes, councillors do have extra leverage with council departments, but less with the public utilities – BT, Severn Trent, gas and electric – where it can sometimes be rather hit and miss.

All five of our interviewees emphasized they see themselves as “go-between”, “facilitator”, “intermediary” between you the voter, and the bureaucrats. They are on our side. Honest! Just don’t heave bricks at them.

In **Our Town** 3 we plan to address how best to raise **planning concerns** – what can you object to, and how – and what not?

And why it all takes so long!

The West: Not where you think it is

Two decades ago, Hesters Way was an area of real social deprivation, with poor housing, negligible facilities, and disaffected residents. Today, it's a different story: young energies and a 'hands-on' community spirit have turned it into a surprisingly dynamic part of town.

It's not even Hesters Way any more! The four council wards that include Hesters Way (the others are St Mark's, St Peter's and Springbank) are being steadily and gently re-branded **'West Cheltenham'**.

Just cosmetic? Cynics might think so. But the change of name reflects something of a change of direction. No longer an area in need of a hand up, West Cheltenham is beginning to spread its wings. There's a new purposefulness and confidence.

A case in point is the West Cheltenham Neighbourhood Development Plan (WCNDP). (You can see it all at www.hwpartnership.org.uk/resources/NDP+Summary+presentation+30+Sept+2015.pdf)



Other areas of Cheltenham have talked about Neighbourhood Development Plans (NDPs) – West Cheltenham's is up and running. Guiding hand is **Andy Hayes**, Manager of Hesters Way Partnership: "It all came out of the 2011 Localism Act. If you can find just 21 people (which we have) from across the whole community, you can form a Neighbourhood Development Forum. We then identify a development area, approved by the community and the Borough Council." The NDP can address all sorts of issues – housing, employment, retail, transport. The community is consulted on the detail, and in due course 50% must vote for it at a local referendum. Local authorities support those preparing NDPs: "Statutory status means WCNDP has far more weight than any parish plan or village design statement" adds Andy.

And it's not just about housing and shops. "There are about 50 businesses in the area too: Alstone Lane Trading Estate; Cheltenham Trade Park off Arle Road; The Bramery in Alstone Lane; The Vineyards off Gloucester Road – and then there's the Doughnut..."



There remains one big problem: the ugly, all too visibly unloved shopping at Edinburgh Place and Coronation Square. But even that is being redeveloped (*see above*), piece by piece, by a company specialising in "value" shopping centres, under the guidance of businessman Bob Marsden. Already one of the brand-new format W H Smith Local stores is in place (*left*), as well as Iceland, McColls, Farmfoods, Greggs and Lloyds Pharmacy. And, across the way, there's a new generation of contemporary buildings too – Gloucestershire College and Hesters Way Community Resource Centre (*see top of page*).

Entrepreneurial spirit and a sense of "we can do anything" is embodied in another West Cheltenham character – **Kevin Devaney**, Operations and Development Manager of Hesters Way Neighbourhood Project. Kevin says, "2017 is our 21st birthday. I've been here 10 years – and what progress we've all made: at the Hesters Way centre we can offer residents a doctors surgery, hearing centre, nursery, café, hairdresser, counselling services, IT classes, with

the Oasis sports centre just next door. We have over 40 volunteers. We arrange 15 or so outings a year for residents – incredibly popular; four large community events; and there are currently more than 40 active community groups here and at Springbank and Rowanfield. There's a real buzz, a real sense of community and neighbourliness. But there's still more for us to do." Other parts of Cheltenham that think well of themselves could learn a thing or two from the deeply un-complacent approach and attitude of West Cheltenham. We will be keeping an eye out for their next move.



CYBER-SPA

Last November, Jeremy Williamson told the Civic Society about the pressing need to bring “high value jobs” to Cheltenham. Retail and clerical work is not what we must aim for – they simply don’t generate enough local money. We need hi-tech, high skill jobs that offer big salaries.

How can the town attract this kind of enterprise and investment?

One strand might be ‘cyber’. What is it? Read on.

George Osborne was at GCHQ before Christmas, and said this: “If Britain is to be a world leader in cyber, and stay at the

cutting edge of cyber technology...we need to create a commercial ecosystem in which cyber start-ups proliferate, get the investment and support they need, and are helped to

win business around the world. We need an ecosystem in which our best people move in and out of institutions like this one [GCHQ], bringing the best minds into the private sector, and the latest innovation back into government.”

He announced that the government is to establish two ‘cyber innovation centres’, where cyber start-ups can base themselves, and receive “the best possible support”.

Talent

“Today I can announce that one of the two cyber innovation centres will be in Cheltenham, reflecting the extraordinary talent in this place, and our aspiration that this talent should help drive our cyber sector.”

He described a symbiotic relationship between cyber and government: “Start-ups need investment and first customers. And government needs to be able to procure excellent cyber security hardware and services.” He announced a £165M ‘Defence and Cyber Innovation Fund’ “to support innovative procurement across both defence and cyber security.” So – in layman’s terms – ‘cyber’ is clever software and systems that run and protect services like banking, hospitals and government itself. Just the sort of thing (we believe) they do at GCHQ. So could Cheltenham become ‘Cyber Spa’?

Alex Chalk MP, adds, “For years Cheltenham has missed a trick. Despite having GCHQ on our doorstep, we haven’t seized the opportunity to harness its enormous potential to generate jobs and prosperity for our economy.” He mooted the idea of a ‘tech hub’ in 2013 – so “our best people move in and out of GCHQ, bringing the finest minds and deepest expertise into the private sector, and the latest innovation back into government.”

Better links

Could ‘cyber’ do it for Cheltenham? Does GCHQ have the will to encourage it – even to allow it? And what else do we need? Better rail links. (Can

it be true GCHQ uses its own coaches to shuttle staff to London?). And more business space. There’s the rub. With the old Kraft and Chelsea Building Society HQs both now apartment complexes, and a rumour that Eagle Tower may go the

same way, Cheltenham is horribly short of places where bright young brains can dream up apps, platforms and other whizzery. The town can’t live on pensions for ever!

Where is Cheltenham’s Cyber-Business-Park? Will it be at Fiddlers Green? Or will it slip west to Gloucester? And what role for our University? In September 2015 the University opened a state-of-the-art facility for cyber security education and research. They now offer higher apprenticeships in Cyber Security, and work with the National Cyber Skills Centre on cyber security training for businesses. It’s all looking very promising.

If you want to know more about these issues, Google ‘Athey Cheltenham’.



Could there be dough in this nut?

What is 'Civic Voice'?

By Freddie Gick
Member of Cheltenham Civic Society and
Chairman of Civic Voice

“What do we do to make Cheltenham a better place to live?”

Civic Voice exists to underline to people in general, and Civic Societies in particular, that each of us has a personal social responsibility to contribute to our community's well-being.

I feel strongly that too many of us today are simply **consumers**, eating up the goods and services the state and others provide, without seeing that part of our own role as citizens is to be **contributors**, to do things and take actions that enhance the richness of our shared lives.

Civic Voice is a national body that lobbies, campaigns and co-ordinates on behalf of the entire Civic movement – but at heart it is a local, and indeed a 'localist' organization, operating at the grass roots. Here are just a few of the ways Civic Voice has made a difference locally here in Cheltenham of late:

WAR MEMORIALS 18 volunteers have surveyed Cheltenham's 70 war memorials in the last two months. This is part of its national programme recording the state of war memorials all over the country. Many of these volunteers are new to the town, and now are more aware of some of the local heritage issues in parts of the town they had never visited before. Now they want to get even more involved.

'ASSETS OF COMMUNITY VALUE' 12 people from Cheltenham worked to get protection, under the government's 'Community Right to Bid' scheme, for 24 local 'Assets of Community Value' (ACV), including allotments and public amenities like the Lido. The protection means that, if the current owners want to change the ownership of a property registered as an ACV, there is a six month 'window' when the community can make a bid to buy it, and preserve it as an amenity for local people.

CIVIC DAY is a Civic Voice initiative drawing together all kinds of local voluntary organisations. In 2015 more than 20 joined the Civic Society in putting on displays in Cambray Place to publicize their work and attract new supporters. In 2016 we hope to be focussing on the Lower High Street.

Incidentally, the handsome new Northbound Gloucester Services won the top award in the 2015 Civic Voice National Design Award programme.

But, yes, the focus of our work is to be a prompt to authority to think about and act upon the needs of local communities. This means meetings with Ministers, conferences, seminars in Parliament, talks and lectures. These are the tools we use to influence policy. For example:

- Our Collaborative Planning campaign aims to enable people to participate more directly in preparing either Neighbourhood plans or master plans for development sites. We will explore this and a process called a Charrette in the next issue of **Our Town**.
- 130 senior people attended our recent All Party Parliamentary Group meeting to hear leading speakers from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic England and both Houses of Parliament.
- The Select Committee looking at the impact of the Localism Act 2011 included in their final report the six suggestions presented in oral evidence by Civic Voice.

So, when you ask what Civic Voice is, and what it does, think about how you might become a stronger contributor to enhancing the quality of life in Cheltenham, working with the Civic Society and taking advantage of the programmes promoted by our national body. (www.civicvoice.org.uk)



The food team at Gloucester North



Freddie addressing the 2015 conference

Society in action

In **Our Town** 1 (December 2015) we invited you to vote on three problems where we felt direct action could improve the look of



the town. A very big ‘thank you’ to everyone who voted. The winner, by a substantial margin (as many votes as the other two put together) was

Painting rusty pillar boxes.

We have put it at the top of our list. Many thanks also to many of you who suggested other areas for improvement.

PRAG (Public Realm Action Group) was set up because, like many residents of Cheltenham, some members of the Civic Society felt strongly that the poor state of the public realm demanded action. It is being woefully neglected by the County Council Highways Dept.

We too often encounter uneven and broken pavements (as, *left*, in the Promenade); weeds growing in drains; localised surface-water flooding. More recently we notice a tendency to repair broken paving

slabs with grim patches of black tarmac.

Fit for purpose?

Other concerns include broken bollards, crooked posts and railings, and an excessive number of signs. This all tends to give an impression that nobody cares about our town. But the reverse is surely the case – there is simply a mis-match between what we, the citizens, would like to be the case, and what those with the authority and resources to do the work chose to do (or not). Out of this frustration comes the desire for direct action.

No matter how attractive the architecture of our town, if the public spaces and pavements are poorly maintained, and the streets un-swept, it creates a bad impression. National governments have been reducing financial support for local authorities, and council tax has not kept pace with inflation. So local authorities struggle to provide essential services and maintenance budgets are slashed.

However, other towns and cities still manage to maintain their public realm – why can’t Gloucestershire County Council? We have written to the Highways Department and our MP has lobbied on our behalf, but it appears GCC is oblivious. Which leads to the question: is the Highways Department fit for purpose?

Bruce Buchanan

AGM ‘Open Forum’: special report

At the ‘Open Forum’ after the AGM on 8 March, an exciting idea was raised by Dick Nickalls: a greater involvement in practical science. His idea is for there to be a place - a large workshop or lab, maybe even mobile - where people can go to experience 3-D printers and other technology, talk to experts about how they work, and learn hands-on how to use them. It’s something like what Newcastle University has called “Street Science” (at the 2014 Cheltenham Science Festival). Dick feels the Civic Society could take a lead on this. (We have asked him to write a piece about the idea for the next **Our Town**.)

Diana Brown raised the worry of “inefficient cleansing of our streets”, and suggested CBC should provide a regular patrol to combat the worst of litter: a “rapid reaction force” perhaps.

The “pastiche” debate was aired. As ever, the architects are in favour of Modernism, the laymen quite happy with pastiche. Impasse.

One more snippet – our new Chair announced the Society will shortly be on Twitter. Watch this space, technology fans.

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