



CHELTENHAM CIVIC SOCIETY

Annual General Meeting

Chairman's Report

~ ❧ ~

Introduction

Maxine Melling indicated her intention to step down as the previous Chair no later than Autumn 2018 and invited expressions of interest for a replacement. I was unanimously appointed chair on 10 October 2018 by the Executive Committee but will (in accordance with the constitution) step down after the AGM unless appointed by the members for the forthcoming year.

By way of introduction, I moved to Cheltenham just under 2 years ago. I searched for a Civic Society in the town because I love architecture and urban development. Civic societies are usually well connected and a good starting point to make friends in a new area too. I was impressed with the quality of events, quickly became involved with the Planning Forum and was then approached as a possible successor to Maxine. I felt I would be able to build on Maxine's achievements and help to take the Society to its next stage of development. In particular, I was eager to strengthen the Society's voice in helping to address some of the town's issues, to develop relationships across the town, and to help shape the town rather than passively comment on what others were doing. With a degree in Urban Development, a Masters in Rural Estate and Land Management, and plenty of public leadership experience, I hope I can add value to the Society and our town.

My interests so far have included shaping a strategy to set the Society's direction of travel, establishing the Society as a 'critical friend' of the town by reframing the Boots Corner trial debate, working with Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) to find a permanent home for the Great War Grave Markers, and strengthening links with others, including businesses, CBC, the Business Improvement District (BID), Cheltenham Development Task Force (CDTF) and others. If elected as Chairman, I would like to build the Society and position it as the leading voluntary group in Cheltenham, whose opinions are actively sought and valued, and whose activities and interests make it a first choice for membership and collaboration. In doing that, I would like to make it more efficient by reducing its administrative burden and enhancing its membership benefits. This includes going cashless, improving our event forecasting, reducing our administrative costs and making the Society more sociable.

Overview

Cheltenham Civic Society offers its members an engaging events programme, exemplary projects, and informative and educational communications links. The Society is respected in the town and is perceived as a 'force for good' in its role as a critical friend and driver for improvement. None of this could happen without the initiative, vision, imagination, sound judgment and sheer hard graft of the Trustees and the Volunteers who make it all happen. It's not a good thing to name people because one always leaves someone out, but the unsung heroes are those who turn up at events and do the catering, washing up, furniture arrangement and locking up. Without those people, our Society would not be what it is today.

After the AGM's formal proceedings, there will be an Open Forum to consider ideas and issues and members are encouraged to bring up general points at that stage.

Events and Activities

Supporting **Street Pride** as part of **National Civic Day** was one of the highlights of the year. Twenty volunteers, mostly CCS members, but also some others from the community and, of course people from the BID, CBC and our MP, did a great job of auditing the High Street. We produced a detailed report and are working with key people to move things forward. I won't pretend this has been speedy and it will require continued application to generate improvements. Since the audit we have had a meeting with many of the volunteers to go through the findings and come up with priorities, which align with the report actions that are listed on our website.

Freddie Gick has put together and managed the phenomenal **Great War Grave Markers Project** to conserve, research and permanently rehome wooden crosses that were slowly rotting in Cheltenham Cemetery. His attainment of a National Lottery Heritage Grant deserves particular mention, as does the development of a partnership with Pittville School whose students researched the memorials and produced a pamphlet and exhibition. You will be able to see the exhibition at Parmoor House as part of this year's Heritage Open Days.

Heritage Open Days are always a highlight of the year. Mike Bottomley and his team do an outstanding job and this year was no exception. We supported **Cheltenham Remembers** and also celebrated exceptional women who have made a difference in the town. We also had some new venues this year, including the Bowling Club and Leckhampton Court. Our **Blue Plaques** have continued to recognise those who have contributed to our town and beyond.

As ever, Lesley Whittall has laid on some fascinating talks, covering subjects as diverse as John Lewis' new store, Cheltenham's industrial buildings and the use of Montpellier Gardens. Whilst the subject matter has always been well received, Parmoor House as a venue has been found wanting. Its heating and ventilation, acoustics, shape and layout compromise the enjoyment of our talks and whilst we are attempting to improve this on a temporary basis, there is no doubt that we have to question the longer term ability of Parmoor House to meet our needs, especially as we grow our membership. Having considered the pros and cons, the Trustees have approved a proposal to seek new

accommodation and dispose of Parmoor House, subject to the development of detailed plans and consultation with the membership. This is something members will probably wish to address in the Open Forum.

We were disappointed not to be able to stage the Paterson Memorial Lecture due to a change in our booked speaker's diary, and the Civic Awards due to a scarcity of nominations. Both of those will be remedied this year.

Our **Planning Forum** has continued to consider planning proposals and provide considered, objective and well-received feedback to Cheltenham Borough Council's Planning Department and Planning Committee. This activity is not the preserve of professional architects or planners but a valuable vehicle for assessing developments in the town. It is also far from being a NIMBY voice. Indeed, it continues to press for bolder, more imaginative schemes that reinforce Cheltenham's uniqueness and special character.

We continue to innovate and influence. This has included the establishment of **The Agora Group** to undertake research and develop policies, including feedback on public consultations. We continue to share good practice and ideas through active participation in the West Midlands Amenity Societies' Association (WMASA) and the Gloucestershire Civic Societies' Group as well as the overarching body for civic societies, Civic Voice.

Charitable Objectives

The Society is established for the public benefit for the following objects in the area comprising Cheltenham and its environs:

- (a) To promote high standards of planning and architecture in or affecting the area of benefit;
- (b) To educate the public in the geography, history, natural history, architecture, urban design and planning of the area of benefit;
- (c) To secure the preservation, protection, development, improvement and care of features of historic or public interest in the area of benefit.

I believe we are meeting these objectives with confidence and innovation in our programme and projects. The last point, however, deserves attention in the coming year as a lack of enforcement activity on listed building and conservation areas is becoming evident. We will need to work with Cheltenham Borough Council and others to address this concern.

Governance

We have developed a strategy for the next 3 years to take the Society to its next developmental stage. This will include:

- (a) **Purpose and Outputs.** What is our Society for, in both senses - what is its purpose and what do we stand for? What do our members want from their Society and what should we be doing for our town?

(b) **Membership.** Our membership numbers sit at just under 300, which I consider to be very low for a town of 116,000 people and 5000 businesses, and which is dominated by conservation areas and listed buildings. We will engage more effectively with members according to their desires and interests, and adopt a more active approach to corporate membership.

(c) **Finance.** The Society is quite well off but we must ensure our charitable objectives continue to be met and that our assets serve us, not the other way round.

We will lose half of our trustees this year, mostly through automatic rotation although several have stepped down due to other commitments. I pay tribute to James Hodsdon, our Vice Chair and Blue Plaques Coordinator for all that he has done on the Executive over the past 5 years; to Chris Healy, our outgoing Treasurer for his hard work; to Lloyd Surgenor for his steady hand and wisdom; to Lesley Whittall especially her curation of our enviable events programme; to Bruce Buchanan, notably for his knowledgeable contributions to the Planning Forum and management of our Civic Awards scheme; and to Maxine Melling, our Chair for the past 3 years, who has done so much to further our cause and influence. On behalf of the Society, I offer our sincere gratitude and best wishes for their future endeavours.

Andrew Booton
Chairman
3 March 2019