

# STRATFORD-UPON-AVON-SOCIETY

## Group Reports to the AGM 9th March 2009

### Strategy Group Report

*The members of the group are Brian Wright (chairman), Bob Bearman, Kevin Bond, Peter Burgess, Will Hawkes, Ian Heggie, Leon Tanner and Peter Wilson.*

The main element in our work has been preparing the response to the District Council's draft Core Development Strategy, which was published in October. The Strategy is a key element in the Local Development Framework, which has taken the place of the old District Plan.

As the response contains most of the views developed over the year it is, perhaps, the best way of summarizing the year. For information it should be pointed out that whilst much of the work was done in 2008 these views were presented to the District Council in January 2009.

- a. We proposed changing the overall basis of the document to take account of the consequences of the credit crunch and the recession. We urged that the revision presented an opportunity for Stratford to think again about the quality of design in new housing and the public realm, look again at the changing nature of retail, prepare a new strategy for the town centre and to lead a discussion within the community about what kind of town Stratford should be in the first half of the century.
- b. Whilst the recession will have serious consequences for Stratford and its residents it may also be an opportunity in that two of the main sectors that will play a big part in the UK's recovery will be tourism and culture.
- c. We have been pressing for the Council and World Class Stratford to make the future of Stratford town centre a key priority for several years. The current economic situation makes this issue even more important. Like some other market towns we need to look at creating a centre full of vitality but, possibly, with fewer shops. This could mean more flats and houses as well as an extension of the work of bodies such as the RSC and the Birthplace Trust.
- d. Despite the cost implications we see the current situation as a key moment to introduce pedestrianisation coupled with new transport initiatives to move both residents and visitors in and out of the town centre. This can be done by preserving the Park-and-Ride coupled with moves such as the re-introduction of the electric trams and reform of the taxis to provide better connections within the town. We do have a serious worry that Stratford is starting to fragment as a tight-knit community with an increasing number of residents working and shopping outside the town.
- e. Far greater emphasis must be given to design in regard to both the public realm and housing developments. In the current economic circumstances tourism will become even more of a key industry and Stratford needs to present itself in a far stronger way. Some of the approach roads to the town are notable for their use of trees and grass verges and this needs to be revived. If necessary we must oppose density targets imposed by central Government to allow for new housing to be accompanied by green spaces. New housing could also be more adventurous so that we can get away from the "sea of red" that national housebuilders are imposing throughout the country.

- f. We would like to see the District and the Town make progress on the green front. In particular to explore whether Stratford should become one of the growing number of “transition” towns.
- g. We are concerned about the planning briefs for the three potential regeneration projects outlined for the town as a result of the work of World Class Stratford. In particular, we feel the brief for the Bridgeway/Bridgefoot project, with its call for additional retail units, is almost a rival to the town centre rather than complementing it.
- h. Given that the RSC is one of the main economic motors for the town and that the new RST, when it opens in 2010-11, will be a major event, there is painfully little in the Corporate Strategy as to how the town will relate to the new building. For instance, the new complex will include a café/restaurant area on the top floor that should become one of the focal points of the town both for theatregoers and non-theatregoers alike. This will increase the importance of the area within the town. Equally there is little in the Strategy about how RSC traffic will be handled.

**Brian Wright**

## **Planning Group Report**

*The members of the group are Leon Tanner (chairman), Peter Burgess, Paul Burley, Alan Dyke, Anne Grey, Alan Hawkins, Audrey Hillyar, Paul Standing, Brian Wright. . Robert Humber resigned from the Group in January and we extend him our thanks for his contribution.*

### **ACTIVITIES**

Until the beginning of this year, the District Council sent us selected planning applications for our comments and members have visited their offices monthly to check for other applications of interest and to meet planning officers. Our full Group then convened to agree our responses. The Council has now discontinued our meetings with them, along with other cost-saving exercises like not having applications available for the public at their offices. They will continue to inform us of applications that they think may interest us, but all information about these and other applications will be found from the internet. We are now adapting the pattern of our meetings to the new circumstances. We were consulted on about 50 applications in the past year with a similar number seen at the Council offices. We responded with some 30 objections and 25 comments.

### **THE PAST YEAR AND THE FUTURE**

The turn of the year saw a marked reduction in applications, not surprisingly considering the economic circumstances. It is an opportunity for us to take stock and some of what we find is disturbing. The town is far from its best. This is partly because of the major building works by the Avon where the RSC development is boldly going into its final phases, and the Bancroft works seem to have taken almost as long for a rather more ambivalent result.

As a pointer to World Class Stratford’s place in the regeneration of the town the Bancroft project is not promising. Some of the delay has admittedly been due to unforeseen events, but there is little sympathy in the town for that. This attitude arises from the apparent determination of the authorities to consult or inform in only the most minimal way about the project. Occasional wildly optimistic press reports and a couple of very poor leaflets are all that we have seen of the revised proposals, while on the ground the results are looking distinctly ordinary.

Our group has the feeling that the project demonstrates the lack of a sense of direction or an ambitious long-term view which too often characterises our local authority.

ventures. The gardens will clearly be freshened and altered, but they do not trumpet confidence or pride or a sympathy with the place in which they sit. They certainly do not look to be an exciting return on an investment of millions of pounds. In short, the process has been untidy and the result is ambivalent.

These two projects will soon be resolved. More worrying are the shabbiness of the town centre, the poor quality of design which has become the accepted standard for new housing and retail, and the lack of any sign that the authorities have remedies, or even that they are aware of any problem.

The next stage of the Urban Design Framework (Bridgefoot and the Leisure Centre area) will, by the time you read this, have been through its consultation stage. When the UDF was created, shopping was seen as the answer to all our needs and the UDF proposed additional retail both out-of-town (along the Birmingham Road) and in the centre (the Bridgefoot/Leisure Centre area and the Rother Triangle). Now we see more empty premises than ever in the centre yet the consultation asks for comments on the sections of the document as it was written before anyone dreamt that the whole economic picture was about to change so dramatically. This step-by-step approach doesn't suggest that any imaginative rethinking is proposed – it sounds like the sort of box-ticking and short-sighted analysis that informs so much decision-making these days. I hope that by the time I speak to you about these matters, I have to eat my words. But I fear it seems unlikely.

In a crisis, first responses are rightly cautious and defensive. But as we get the measure of our problems, the next step is to be positive about solutions – to see the opportunities that may both help us out of trouble and enhance our town. We need to urge our representatives to look further ahead than the immediate needs. Retailing is contracting and it is folly to expect the tide to turn and rescue us. Providing allotted units for housing will not necessarily create a good place in which to live.

Some elements of future planning will be unclear for quite a while yet, but the fundamentals won't change: Stratford is blessed with a history that gives it a culture and a fabric on which its prosperity depends, and they must be our priority. We must nurture them and find inspiration in them so that in the mundane matters of day-to-day life – providing houses, shops, workplaces – we do not smother what is special with hasty solutions that we will regret having to live with in the future. We have more than enough of those already.

We hope that our local and regional authorities will be stimulated by the challenges and commit to nurturing Stratford's built heritage and enhancing it. Little will be achieved if we just batten down the hatches until the storm passes. We must start defining now what we want the town to be as it emerges from these difficult times, find agreement on the vision we aim for and the standards needed to achieve it. The measures we are forced by circumstances to take in the meantime will then not just patch and make do, but will contribute to the regeneration that has begun rather unconvincingly in the last couple of years but which now demands our full and creative attention.

**Leon Tanner**

## **Programme Report**

**The 2008/09 Programme** got off to a lively start with a capacity audience for September's presentation on the future of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust by its new Director, Diana Owen, and project manager, Richard Kemp. In October, Ancient Monuments Inspector, Ian George, revealed the effect of legislative change in safeguarding our heritage. And in November, Michael Culverwell, Vice Cha

Orbit Heart of England Housing Association, spoke about social housing provision for the Stratford area.

In the interval between finalising this report and the AGM, RSC Executive Director Vikki Heywood will talk to the 18 February meeting about how the transformation of the theatres contributes to the wider ambitions for Stratford and the Midlands. And the Programme will end on 27 April with a review of the first year's operation of the UK's new energy performance labelling scheme for buildings by Dr Paul Davidson, Director of Sustainable Energy Group at the Building Research Establishment.

**The 2009/10 Programme** will be published in June. The 2009 meeting dates will be 21 September, 19 October and 16 November. Those in 2010 will be 15 February and 19 April. The 2010 AGM will be on 8 March.

**The Falcon Hotel** will continue to be the venue as it has again proved possible to negotiate very reasonable terms to hire the Verona Suite. Next year's deal will not, however, include opening the Garden Room Bar exclusively for the Society as members have not made sufficient use of it to cover the Hotel's staff costs. In future, non-members will be asked to pay a £1 entrance fee to all lectures, as has been the practice in previous seasons.

**Joan Burgess**

## **Photographic Report**

Photographs as usual have been regularly taken at meetings, of Speakers in particular, for publication if required. Also photographs were taken, by request, of the social visit to Holy Trinity Church and these were recorded on DVD and passed on for future use. A special set of photographs were taken for demonstration purposes for the Heritage Exhibition referred to below.

The Society again participated in the annual English Heritage Exhibition at the Town Hall in September 2008. The subject chosen to be promoted was the "Stratford Spine" which is an idea for an historic walk proposed by Bob Bearman. The walk begins at the Birthplace where Shakespeare started his life and terminates at Holy Trinity Church where the Bard is buried.

For previous occasions still photographs were used for the displays but because of the nature of the subject I felt a novel and appropriate idea would be to use video or moving format. The result was the highly regarded DVD produced by Ian Heggie and referred to in his Communications Report. The exhibition proved very successful in gaining support from Councillors and public alike and in my view could prove to be the catalyst for the Spine idea to reach fruition.

Holy Trinity Church chose The Spine as a main feature for their magazine "Trinity Times" using coloured photographs and map which added to the local publicity.

**Awards** No potential candidates came to mind but if anyone has any ideas in this matter the Society would be glad to be advised.

## **Communications Report**

*Members: Ian Heggie (Chairman), Beryl Downing, Ian Fradgley, Patricia McFarland, Brian Wright*

The group has re-formed under the chairmanship of Ian Heggie and now embodies the Web Advisory Group, represented by Ian Fradgley. Brian Wright has joined the group as deputy editor of *Talk of the Town*, which has been well received in its new eight-page format by both membership and local organisations in the town and beyond. There have also been four *News Updates* which have kept members informed on developments in the town from the Historic Spine and plans for the Town Hall to the proposals for the Eco Town.

A booklet focussing on Stratford buildings and traditions, combined with today's need to save energy, has been developed by Beryl Downing with the cooperation of Bridgetown Primary School and Stratford High School. The booklet compares Stratford at the time of the Mop fair with Stratford today, together with the issues associated with a growing population, changing habits and technology, and the impact these changes have on environmental sustainability. It will be used this year in the two schools' citizenship classes. The booklet is outstanding and last year won an award from the West Midlands Amenity Societies Association (WestMASA) and was commended by the Civic Trust.

The Group also supported preparation of the Society's DVD on the town's Historic Spine that was shown during the Heritage Open Day event at the Town Hall from September 11 to 14. The DVD was based on a concept developed by Dr Robert Bearman, who presented the idea to one of the Society's meetings in September 2007. The concept was then turned into a 15 minute DVD. The basic text was written by Peter Burgess, Jack Crimp provided photographs (as did Shakespeare's Birthplace, Friends of Holy Trinity Church and Colin Davis), Jeffery Dench did the voiceover, Guy Wolfenden provided the background music and the DVD was prepared by Oakslade Studios in Warwick. The DVD was a great success and has been widely circulated in the town. A revised version is currently being prepared to act as a walking guide for visitors.

Following the retirement of Jayne Pantazievits as press officer the Society received an offer of professional help from press and public relations consultant Richard Kemp who will issue press releases on behalf of the Society for the next twelve months and without charge. The Society has been pleased to accept his generous offer and Ian Heggie will be responsible, with the Society's chairman, for all press communications issued.

**Ian Heggie**

## **Social Programme Report**

It was disappointing that we had to cancel the visit to Arbury Hall scheduled for May because of a lack of support, only 9 people having booked to attend - and because of the cost of the coach the outing would not have been viable. We were, h

delighted with a response from members to attend our Chairman's event, a visit to Holy Trinity Church followed by a supper - this event was in fact completely sold out. In December, we joined forces with members of Warwickshire Local History Society for a visit to the Lord Leycester Hospital and a tea. This event was in fact so much oversubscribed that we arranged a second visit that was also oversubscribed. The Master gave us a splendid conducted tour and this event was a great success.

**Neville Usher**

## **Membership Report**

<b>Members</b>	<b>As at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2008</b>	<b>Net Gain/Loss 2007 to 2008</b>	<b>As at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2007</b>	<b>Net Gain/Loss 2006 to 2007</b>	<b>As at 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006</b>
Individual	132	1	131	3	128
Joint/Household	91	-3	94	4	90
Corporate	8	2	6	1	5
Corporate Web Sponsors	4	0	4	4	4
Student	0	0	0	0	0
Honorary	3	-2	5	0	5
Life	4	0	4	-1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>242</b>	<b>-2</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>Total Members</b>	<b>333</b>	<b>-5</b>	<b>338</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>327</b>
Mailing Only	8	-1	9		9
Councillors /Officers Mailing	16	0	16		

**Ian Fradgley**