

# THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY LEICESTER GROUP NEWSLETTER

The national charity campaigning for the  
Victorian and Edwardian historic environment

SPRING 2018

## Buildings at Risk in the City Centre



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## Buildings at Risk in the City Centre



The City Council has received an application to demolish Fleet House (above), on Fleet Street, Lee Circle. Built c1900 to the designs of an unknown architect, this was for many years the head office of British Steam Specialities (BSS), who moved out some time ago following takeover by the Travis Perkins Group.

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to have been built as a boot and shoe factory, probably in about 1860-70, and has some similarity with the former boot and shoe factory on Wellington Street, which we succeeded in getting listed in 2016. Aerial photographs show that the building extends back a considerable distance, and we assume the rear range was probably the factory with offices and packing facilities behind the elaborate façade. Latterly used as a nightclub, but abandoned several years ago, this building is also on the Local List, but not listed by Historic England. We have voiced our objections to demolition.

The north-east quarter of the city within the inner ring road has relatively few buildings of any distinction, and can ill-afford to lose either of these two fine reminders of its industrial past. Both would be susceptible to sympathetic re-use, whilst retaining their essential character.

**Chairmen's Annual Report** - delivered by Neil Crutchley at the AGM on 6th February

The Leicester Group enjoyed a busy and generally successful year with a series of interesting and well-contrasted talks on subjects as varied as Belgrave Hall, architectural competitions, the Gothic revival in Staffordshire, Crowns in Conflict, Leicester's Secular Hall, Charles Dickens in Leicester and the Great Exhibition. Attendances have been in the main, very good with John Florance's Christmas lecture on Charles Dickens attracting over 50 people.

Each of the summer outings attracted a good turnout, with one exception, as this fell on one of the wettest days of the year and had to be re-scheduled. May's Uppingham Road walk revealed some surprises both in its architecture and its former social standing. Then in June, our annual coach outing was to Hull – the city of culture, and this proved a great success, there was plenty to see and for many, the city's history and the quality of its buildings came as a revelation. The weather was kind in July for a well-supported evening walk in the Western Park district, which took in domestic, ecclesiastical and educational architecture but a day of incessant rain forced last-minute re-scheduling of August's John Flower walk in the city centre. Many who had booked were unable to attend on the revised date, but those who did so said it was

an excellent evening, so this is something we may do again. Finally, the weather was much better for the September afternoon visit to the churches in Houghton-on-the-Hill and Stoughton, both of which have significant Victorian work and in Houghton's case a magnificent Victorian rectory and grounds, which we also viewed.

Last May we took part in the Leicester Heritage fair organised by Leicester Civic Society and a number of visitors showed interest in the Society and its work. This year the fair is on Saturday 26th May and once again, we will be having a stall.

This coming spring and summer we have various events planned including a 40th birthday photographic exhibition, a dinner at Devonshire Place and a garden party in June at Pat and Peter Carr's house in Ratcliffe Road. There will also be a day outing to Northampton, an afternoon visit to Woodhouse Eaves, a guided walk in the Friar Lane area and a visit to the Abbey Pumping Station museum.

On the campaigning front, we had a success in our application for listing status of the main section of the former Fenwick's building on the corner of Market Street and Belvoir Street. Thanks to Peter Ellis for making the application. We supported the Civic Society in their successful campaign to save the old Black Boy pub. As reported in our front page story, we are concerned about an application to demolish Fleet House, the former British Steam Specialities head office in Fleet Street, Lee Circle. Not far away is 80 Wharf Street South, a very distinctive although sadly neglected Gothic revival former boot and shoe factory with buff brick frontage and striking detailing, which is also under threat. These buildings are monitored and discussed at the Buildings Sub Committee chaired by Richard Lawrence, and we make our views known through membership of the City Council's Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP).

Our co-chairman Peter Ellis, attended the National AGM in Birmingham representing the Group. Neil Crutchley and Grahame Lees attend the City Mayor's Heritage Partnership and Grahame is also our representative on the Diocesan Advisory Committee. A small contingent represented the Society at the unveiling of the impressive statue of suffragette Alice Hawkins in Leicester's new Market Square on 4th February. This event achieved national newspaper and television coverage.

We were saddened by the death of long-standing committee member Eileen Chambers who was often the first person you met as you arrived for our meetings. Her kindness, willingness to help in any way she could and knowledge of Leicester made her a delightful colleague and an inspiration to so many of us. We miss her.

Finally Peter and I would like to thank the committee members for their hard work and patience and also all those who have helped the Society in any way, not least David Rhodes who has taken on the role of technical officer and has the screen and projector set up for each meeting and deals with the speakers' requirements as far as presentation goes. Also many thanks to vice president Grahame Lees who has constructed secure storage to enable our effects to be kept at Bishop Street Church between meetings.

Finally thank you to our members, for supporting us so loyally over the past year. We hope you will continue that support in the coming months.

## **Treasurer's Report** - delivered by Peter Ellis at the AGM on 6th February

The Balance Sheet for 2017 shows a small loss of £108.17. This is not significant – we still have a healthy bank balance, and the reasons for this small excess of expenses over income are easily summarised. Donations to speakers, which include travelling expenses and sometimes lodging, were £250 higher than in 2016; some speakers charge more than others, some are local and others come from further afield, so this figure will always fluctuate. Additionally we re-printed the publicity leaflet that we distribute to information centres etc, at a cost of £170.

The small donations which attendees make on the door at each of our meetings now comprise the largest single source of income, at over £600, and the sales of books donated by members has raised almost another £100 – a welcome contribution to the running costs of the Group. Subscribers to our local mailing list, for which the subscription remains at £7, also help to defray running costs, particularly those who opt to receive our newsletter by e-mail, since there are no printing or postage costs to be offset against those subscriptions.

All our walks and coach trips made a surplus in 2017, and overall they contributed £475 to our funds. I submit an annual report to Priory Gardens each year, and for 2017 I reported four outings of less than a whole day, supported by a total of 72 participants, and our seven meetings during the year had a total attendance of 270 – by coincidence, these are exactly the same figures that I reported for 2016. The one difference was our solitary annual coach trip – the visit to Hull in 2017 attracted 34 participants, against just 16 for the previous year's visit to Stoke-on-Trent. Against a background of falling interest in full day coach trips, reported by all the Regional Groups, this was a welcome improvement. It becomes more and more difficult to organise coach trips that cover their costs – coach hire gets increasingly expensive, and coach trips do not seem as popular as they were. Some Regional Groups have abandoned them altogether, but we still try to have at least one coach trip a year, but how long we will be able to continue depends on your support.

Apart from the expense items already mentioned, room hire is down from £490 in 2016, when half our meetings were still at Wellington Street, to £280 in 2017 (that's 7 meetings at the very reasonable charge of £40 each). Printing and postage for the newsletter is the only other large item – another significant increase in postal charges could cause us problems!

*Turning to membership:* At the end of the year, we had 47 full members of the Victorian Society living in our catchment area – basically the city and county, and 23 of our local mailing list subscribers had renewed for 2018. Reminders are enclosed with this newsletter, in the hope that those who have not yet renewed will decide to continue their membership. The number of national members is five down on last year (seven non-renewals and two new members) – the national membership in our region continues to fall (as it does for most other regional groups except London!), whilst the number of local subscribers hovers around the mid-30s, as it should be this year if most of those who were members last year renew when they receive the reminder.

## Building Sub-Committee Report

Developers still seem confident that the demand for student accommodation in the city will continue its exponential rise, and hardly a month goes by without another massive scheme being proposed. Not all of these involve the demolition of Victorian buildings of course, but the bulk and stultifying blandness of many of the submitted schemes seems likely to change the face of the city in a way which many of us find unwelcome. The Victorian Society, along with other amenity and heritage groups, is represented on the City Council's Conservation Advisory Panel (CAP), and the Panel can make representations to the Planning Committee in respect of heritage and conservation issues.

Sometimes our suggestions bear fruit - the latest plans for development at 1 St Albans Road, discussed in the previous newsletter, may not be to everyone's liking, but the new accommodation block is considerably less overpowering than originally proposed, and there is hope that the fine Stockdale Harrison house may be restored to something like its original appearance.

Of particular concern at the moment are two buildings in the Lee Circle area of the city, Fleet House and 80 Wharf Street South - see cover story. Both are unlisted and both are by unknown architects, but they are both too good to lose.

There is good news to report as well. The restoration of what is now called Queen's Building (formerly Shahista House) facing the Curve theatre on the corner of St George's churchyard is particularly welcome. This fine building, by Harding and Toppott of c1900, has been in a very poor state for many years, and has been partially let to a variety of unsympathetic tenants. The recent restoration, by Leicester architects Staniforth's has created a number of apartments on the upper floors, many



of which are already occupied, and the ground floor and vaulted basement will shortly be opened as a restaurant.

More good news in 2017 was that St Saviour's Church (GG Scott, 1875-77) seems finally to have found a new owner keen to restore it to its original purpose as a place of Christian worship. The Redeemed Christian Church of God have published plans for sympathetic upgrading of the church's facilities and the adjacent school house, and we wish them every success.

The massive development now taking place on Vaughan Way at the junction with High Cross Street may seem of little interest to the Victorian Society, but the hotel and office complex is planned to have a concourse at the rear, formed by closure of Great Central Street to traffic. The former Great Central station and adjoining Parcels Office will be restored and brought into use for a variety of activities. This fine unlisted building by Alexander Ross (1897-99) has languished unloved for too long and these plans are to be welcomed.



## Recent Leicester Group Activities

**Crowns in Conflict - Queen Victoria, European Royalty and the Tragedy of World War I** - A talk by David Humberston - Tuesday 3rd October

David Humberston skilfully guided us around the complex tapestry that was European royalty in the 19th century.

The death of Queen Anne in 1714 had been followed by 116 years of four King Georges of The House of Hanover, followed by George IV's brother, the Duke of Clarence who become William IV. After his death in 1837 his niece, the young Alexandrina Victoria, became Queen, thus heralding the beginning of the longest reign in England's history up to that time.

Victoria's German relatives were anxious for her to be allied with the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha dynasty, and paraded Princes Ernest and Albert before her, as possible husbands. Queen Victoria fell in love with Albert, and they married in 1840. Princess Victoria was born in 1841, followed soon after by Prince Albert Edward, known as Bertie, and Princess Alice. Eventually there were to be nine children of the marriage.

Whilst Victorian and Albert were happily building their family, the maelstrom in Europe continued apace, with Bismarck exerting his influence in Prussia. In 1856 the 15 year old Princess Victoria was introduced to Prince Frederick, eldest son of the King of Prussia. They were married in 1859 and the young princess was coldly received by her new relatives. By 1861, Queen Victoria's eldest son, Bertie, was studying at Cambridge and living at Madingley Hall, but had displeased his parents with his behaviour. Prince Albert was sent to visit him, hoping to persuade him to change his ways. Albert became ill on his return home, and died soon after of suspected typhoid fever, aged 42.

Queen Victoria was overwhelmed with grief, blaming her son for Albert's untimely death. Being the eldest daughter at home, Princess Alice bore the weight of her mother's crippling grief. Despite the court being in deep mourning, Alice's marriage to Prince Louis of Hesse took place at Osborne House in 1862. She wore white for the ceremony, but then had to change into a mourning dress; the event was described as 'more like a funeral than a wedding.' Princess Alice was granted a dowry of £20,000 which was more welcome to the impoverished Hessians than the princess herself.

In 1863 Bertie was married to Princess Alexandra of Denmark, and her sister Dagmar married into the Russian royal family. Thus the strands were drawn together into the complicated theatre of war, plots and subterfuge that was 19th century Europe. The children and grandchildren of Victoria and Albert played a pivotal role, she was indeed 'the grandmother of Europe.' David Humberston brought these dynastic alliances to life with a dazzling succession of portraits from the royal houses of Europe.

At the time of Queen Victoria's death in 1901 her eldest grandson had become Kaiser Wilhelm II. He was instrumental in the drive for German supremacy, which culminated in World War I. As the war progressed, the German connections of the British royal family became an embarrassment, and in 1917 King George V and his family decided to relinquish all titles held under the German crown and to change their German surnames to something more English. On 17th July the King proclaimed "...that as from the date of this our Royal Proclamation, Our House and Family shall be styled and known as The House and Family of Windsor."

More than a hundred years after the outbreak of World War I, historians, scholars and descendants of those who made the ultimate sacrifice, are still debating whether this 'war to end all wars' could have been prevented.



## The History of Leicester's Secular Hall

A talk by Ned Newitt - Tuesday 7th November

The home of the Leicester Secular Society (founded 1851), Leicester's Secular Hall is the oldest dedicated secularist building in the UK and, apart from Conway Hall in London, the only one still in use for its original purpose. In November Society director Ned Newitt gave us an illustrated talk, explaining how the Hall came to be built, how it survived the 20th century and how the Society hopes to maintain it into the future.

Opening in March 1881 on Humberstone Gate (then one of Leicester's main thoroughfares), the Hall was financed by the Secular Hall Company through member subscriptions, 1,000 shares at £5 each. The Leicester ironfounder/engineer Josiah Gimson (1818-1883) was the largest investor, along with elastic web manufacturer, Michael Wright (1818-1881).



The young architect W Larnar Sugden of Leek was chosen to design and supervise the building. His family, (also secularists) were personal friends of William Morris and like Morris, Sugden was strongly influenced by the medieval guild tradition. He designed the building in a Flemish renaissance style, employing carefully selected local materials and tradespeople. Painted tiles on the frontage were by William De Morgan - the only known example of his tiles being used in this way. Inside two rare wall panels containing Dutch arts and crafts tiles by Durlacher Freres were recently found concealed behind mirrors in the lecture hall. The terracotta busts depicting five 'free-thinkers', Socrates, Voltaire, Robert Owen, Thomas Paine, and, most controversially, Jesus, were created by sculptor and phrenologist Ambrose Louis Vago.

The Hall's facilities reflected the Society's aims to "develop man's physical, mental and moral powers without dependence on the doctrines of God and spiritualism". They included a lecture room, library, reading room, bookstore, billiard rooms in the basement and other amenities including a bar, all open on Sundays. Interestingly - as Ned pointed out - while the Society resisted the dogmas of church and chapel, signs of religion still featured prominently in the Hall's architecture and the way business was conducted. Members held services (not meetings) and sang hymns before and after the main event.

The Gimson family's generous support allowed the Hall to be run along financially relaxed lines but after the death of Sydney in 1938 things became more challenging. Attendances dropped and economy and pragmatism gradually took precedence over higher ideals, with dance bands becoming a regular attraction. Sadly, the fabric of the building deteriorated. Stone sculptures were removed due to frost damage, iron railings

lost, and broken stained glass replaced with clear. During the 1960s interior woodwork was painted crimson. The Society managed to fight off threats from commercial developers in the '70s and '80s, before the Hall's unique cultural and architectural value was finally recognised in 1990 when it was awarded Grade 2 listed status

Since then the Society has refocused on its original mission. A refurbishment of the ground floor was completed in 2014 and Ned is currently leading a Heritage Lottery Fund bid to fund a full restoration of the Hall and at the same time adapt it to meet modern standards. Any help would be most welcome!

### **Charles Dickens, Leicester and his Public Readings**

A talk by Dr John Florance - Tuesday 5th December 2017

Charles Dickens' first public reading at Leicester's Temperance Hall on 29th October 1858 was from *A Christmas Carol*. Radio broadcaster John Florance confounded our expectations; choosing instead to immerse us in the exuberance and linguistic invention of Dickens' world and to give us some fascinating insights into the author's attitude towards the industrialisation, mechanisation and urbanisation that was overtaking 19th century Britain during his lifetime.

John's connecting thread was that miracle of the Victorian age, the railway. Dickens lived at a time of great railway expansion. He was 18 when the Liverpool and Manchester Railway opened in 1830 and he observed the building of Euston Station in 1837 from his family home in Doughty Street. By the time of his death in 1870, there were over 15,000 miles of track. But Dickens was deeply ambivalent towards the railway. When it finally featured in *Dombey and Son* in 1846 it was the destruction of the working class community of 'Stagg's Gardens' (thought to be based on Somers Town close to Euston) which was given prominence and the railway's disfiguring impact on rural and urban landscapes horrified him as much as the later excesses of the 'railway mania'.

Dickens had very personal reasons to be wary of railway travel. On 9th June 1865 he was returning from France with his mistress, Ellen Ternan, when their train was derailed near Staplehurst in Kent. There were ten fatalities, 49 were injured and Dickens was spared only because he was in the final carriage, which was left hanging in the air over the broken bridge. Helping to tend the dead and dying left a deep impression on him, and although he continued to use the railways for his speaking tours, he never really recovered. After his next appearance in Leicester on Friday 25 January 1867, he found the return journey from the Midland Station so alarming that he left the train at Bedford and wrote a letter to *The Times* warning the public about it.

Dickens' view of England was profoundly influenced both by his childhood experiences - the idyllic family life in rural Kent, the financial worries which forced his father into a debtor's prison and himself into a boot blacking factory - and by his adult experience of the world which the Victorians, with their new technologies and boundless ambition were creating. It was a dramatic stage buffeted by forces no-one could control but also where people's small kindnesses towards each other remained a source of hope. Many thanks to John for bringing the era so vividly to life for us.

## Summer Programme - 2018

All our activities, including visits, are open to all subject to space limitations.

Our booking form 'Green Sheet' is only sent to members living in Leicestershire. If you do not receive a booking form, but wish to participate in a bookable activity, the form can be downloaded as a PDF from our website, or booking enquiries can be made direct to Carole Face - 0116 267 5946

Please see 'Booking Conditions' on the Green Sheet

### Thursday 10th May Dinner at Devonshire Place

To mark the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Leicester Group of the Victorian Society, members and guests are invited to a dinner at **The Morley Suite, Devonshire Place, 78 London Road, Leicester**  
7:10 for 7:30pm

Cost £23.00 per head - Cash bar available

Devonshire Place has a private car park entered from Prebend Street.

(Closing Date for bookings: 1st April - see Green Sheet)

### Forthcoming events organised by the Leicester Civic Society



Saturday 5th May: NEW Guided Walk by Jim McCallum: 'The Capital of Non-Conformity'. Expert guided tours of four of Leicester's historic chapels. 10:30am from Great Meeting, East Bond Street. 2 hours 15 mins. £4.50. Advance booking.



Saturday 12th May: English Landscape Coach Tours: 9:30am from Secular Hall, 9:45am from Premier Inn, Narborough Rd.

"The Shropshire of AE Housman". Lunchtime in Much Wenlock, Wenlock Edge and Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Caer Caradoc, afternoon at Stokesay Castle. £33.50 (conc. £31.50) Further discounts for English Heritage and Leicester Civic Society members. Advance booking.

Saturday 26th May: 2018: Leicester Heritage Fair. Bishop Street Methodist Church 10:30 - 4:00 Admission free. Leicester Civic Society, Leicester Group of the Victorian Society, etc.

Saturday 2nd June: Following the Society's AGM 10:30am at Newarke Houses Museum. 'Joseph - The Life, Times and Places of The Elephant Man'. A lecture by Joanne Vigor-Mungovin. Civic Society Members free. Non-members by donation.

Saturday 16th June: NEW Guided Walk by Cynthia Brown: 'Radical Leicester'. From the Clock Tower at 10:30am. £4.50. Advance booking.

Booking required for walks and tours as noted - please book through: Stuart Bailey, 48 Meadow Avenue, Loughborough LE11 1JT. 01509 266818. Cheques to: 'Leicester Civic Society'.

**Tuesday 22nd May**  
**Full day coach trip to Northampton**

A chance to explore three remarkable buildings:

**St Matthew's Church** (Matthew Holding, 1891-94) – Victorian Gothic at its most spectacular, together with (post Victorian) works by Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland. **The Guildhall / Town Hall** (EW Godwin, 1861-64, with extension by Holding and Jeffery, 1889-92) – richly decorated to celebrate Northampton's place in British history. **78 Derngate** (interior by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, 1916-17) – a challenge to the Victorians. This is Mackintosh's last major commission and his only house in England.

Cost £35 – which includes all admissions and tours, morning coffee and cream tea.

Participants must make their own arrangements for lunch in the town centre.

Coach will depart from Glebe Road at 9:15am and leave Northampton at 4pm.  
*Please note that there are three flights of stairs to be climbed at 78 Derngate.*

Places are limited due to restrictions at Derngate.  
(Closing date for bookings: 20th April - see Green Sheet)

**Saturday 16th June**  
**40th Anniversary Garden Party at Swallowcroft, 36 Ratcliffe Road**  
By kind invitation of Pat and Peter Carr

Join us at Swallowcroft for an early summer buffet lunch. Help celebrate 40 years of the Leicester Group of the Victorian Society in this fine house designed by Amos Hall, one of Leicester's best known Victorian architects. Given favourable weather, the secluded rose garden should be at its best, and an ideal place to stroll and chat with fellow members.

Meet at 12:30pm for lunch at 1:00pm.

*This celebratory event is to thank members for their support, and there will be no charge for members and their guests, but numbers are limited so please book early to avoid disappointment - see Green Sheet.*

**Tuesday 10th July**  
**Guided walk around Greyfriars Townscape Heritage area**  
*Led by Sophie Noon and Mike Taylor*

Sophie Noon, project officer for the city's major heritage/regeneration scheme, will lead a walk showcasing what has already been achieved in this area, and outlining further plans. Mike Taylor will present a number of 'House Histories' illustrating the changing fortunes of the Greyfriars area.

Meet at Richard III statue, Cathedral Yard, at 7:00pm

Cost £5.00

(Closing date for bookings 16th June - see Green Sheet)

## Meetings Programme - Spring 2018

All lectures will take place in the Bishop Street Methodist Church  
10a Bishop Street, Town Hall Square, Leicester LE1 6AF at 7:30pm.  
Our meetings are open to all, but we ask all attendees, whether or not they are members,  
to register in order to comply with Fire Regulations, and to make  
**a contribution of £2.50 per person**  
towards the costs of room hire and other expenses.

**Tuesday 6th March 2018**

### **Cathedrals, Roof Tops and More: The Restoration of Old Buildings**

*Dr Jonathan Castleman - formerly of Norman & Underwood*

Looking back on 35 years' experience at one of Leicester's oldest family businesses, Norman and Underwood Ltd, working on some of the UK's and world's finest buildings. Dr Castleman was the seventh generation of the family to run the business and will be talking about a variety of projects he has worked on, from Leicester Town Hall to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

**Tuesday 10th April 2018**

### **From the Blitz to the Big Bang The post-war redevelopment of the City of London**

*Christopher Costelloe - Director of the Victorian Society*

The City of London has a unique combination of rich, dense and ancient architecture, huge property values, and a massive commercial incentive for continuous redevelopment. This has kept it at the heart of the national debate over how our cities should evolve ever since the Second World War. It has been a unique laboratory for experiments in the treatment of buildings that would not be viable elsewhere. This lecture looks at how the treatment of historic buildings in the City has evolved since the Blitz, moving from clearance, to incorporating fragments in new buildings, to façadism, to pastiche, and finally to the intricate reshaping, moving and sculpting of historic buildings which is now commonplace in the City.

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