

# THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY LEICESTER GROUP NEWSLETTER

The national charity campaigning for the  
Victorian and Edwardian historic environment

SPRING 2012

*The following reports were presented at the Leicester Group AGM, held on 7th February 2012*

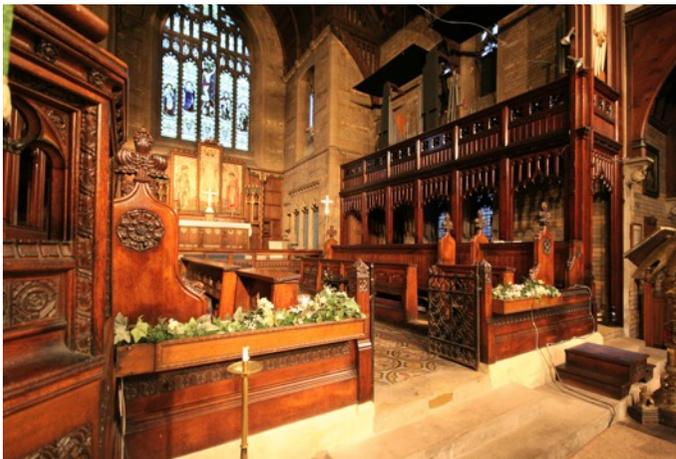
## Review of the Year

### **Buildings Sub-Committee Report - Year Ended December 2011**

The economic climate continues to discourage new developments, with a continued surplus of office space (albeit certain parties claim that this is not of a sufficiently high standard) and apartments. The only growth area has continued to be student accommodation and even here the City Council has announced an embargo on new planning applications. This is to allow it to investigate the actual strength of the underlying demand and also to see if it can reduce concentrations of such accommodation in particular areas.

The City Mayor has also at long last announced that it is intended to demolish the two main tower blocks housing the City Council due to the need for major structural repairs. Unlike Victorian buildings they were obviously not built to last! How they will be replaced is the next decision to be made and this could obviously impact on the demand for office space in both the short and long term.

As mentioned in previous reports owners and developers can also be reluctant to spend money on maintaining buildings. The worst example remains the former Donisthorpe's Mill on Bath Lane, on the edge of our time period. It is deteriorating rapidly whilst the Council works out the best way to enforce remedial work.



**St Barnabas Church is one of a number of significant Victorian buildings which have recently been put up for sale. This view of the chancel was taken during the Leicester Group visit in 2008.**

*For details of visits planned for 2012, see pages 10-11.*

## Review of the Year - continued

### ***Significant Areas of Activity or Concern***

**Former Eastgates Coffee House (Edward Burgess 1885).** In last year's report it was stated that this was suffering from severe external neglect. It is pleasing to report that not only were we able to get the building listed by English Heritage, but also that the owners have undertaken appropriate remedial work. These positive developments were covered more fully in the last Newsletter (Autumn 2011).

### ***Places of worship***

**St Saviours (George Gilbert Scott 1875-77)** remains a major concern. It has been closed for regular worship for several years and subject to slight vandalism. It was finally put up for sale during the year with little or no apparent interest. The adjoining vicarage has been sold with tentative plans for conversion into apartments.

**St Barnabas (Goddard & Paget 1884-86)** was also put up for sale but no news has been forthcoming.

**St Pauls, Kirby Rd (Ordish and Traylen 1870-71)** had been sold for conversion into offices, with plans broadly approved by the Conservation Advisory Panel, but this seems to have stalled.

**The Synagogue, Highfield St (Arthur Wakerley - 1889)** has been put up for sale in the last few months due to the movement away of its congregation. We await developments.

### ***Banks***

The former **HSBC Bank, Granby St (Joseph Goddard 1872-74)** has been sold to



the Hare Krishna Movement for conversion to a place of worship. Detailed plans for the conversion have yet to materialise.

Work continues at a slow pace on conversion of the former **NatWest bank in St Martins** (built for Pares Bank) by **Everard and Pick - 1900.**

*The former NatWest Bank in St Martins - elevation to Grey Friars*

## ***Other building types***

**Silver Arcade (Amos Hall 1899).** Work to refurbish this structure as a shopping development has started but appears to be proceeding at a very slow pace - hidden behind tarpaulins!

**Former Great Central Railway carriage sheds, Upperton Rd (1898).** This is now one of the few remaining buildings of the Great Central in inner Leicester. Developers wished to demolish it to build more student accommodation and a certain amount of vandalism occurred. The Council instructed that the damage be repaired and further plans are now subject to the previously mentioned embargo.

## ***Other Activities***

Throughout the year Jon Goodall has represented the Group on the City Council's Conservation Advisory Panel. The low level of activity is reflected in the fact that some meetings have been cancelled due to the shortage of items on the agenda. Jon Goodall has also attended the first two meetings of Sir Peter Soulsby's Heritage Partnership.

We keep an eye on activities at Welford Rd Cemetery via our membership of the 'Friends' organisation. It is pleasing to note that a small number of memorials have been restored in 2011, having previously succumbed to the dreaded "topple test".

During the year Christine Jordan stood down from the Sub-Committee due to pressure of work and, due to continued ill health, John Aston has moved away from the area to be nearer his son. We thank them both for their work. However we have been pleased to welcome on board Melissa Thompson..

Current Members of the Buildings Sub-Committee: Jon Goodall, Peter Ellis, Gwyn Jones, Janet and Richard Lawrence, Grahame Lees, Rowan Roenisch, Mike Taylor, Melissa Thompson. Thanks are due to members of the sub-committee and in particular to Janet and Richard Lawrence for their hosting of the Sub-Committee meetings. More volunteers are always welcome!

*Jon Goodall*

## **Chairman's Report - Year Ended December 2011**

In my 11th year as Chairman, I am pleased to be able to report that the Group continues to be in a generally healthy state both actively and financially. Further information on our finances can of course be seen in the Treasurer's report. We continue to liaise closely with the National Society and during the year a meeting of Regional Groups took place in Birmingham. I was unfortunately unable to attend but our Treasurer, Peter Ellis stood in for me. As usual this meeting discussed mutual problems and possible solutions, the main area being how we can retain and increase our membership. So do please recommend us to your friends!

Here I must express a note of sadness in reporting that Colin Cunningham (the previous national Chairman) passed away suddenly in the middle of the year. He was a good friend to this Group and always extremely helpful. Locally I must also report the death of Angela Miles in December. Angela was on our Committee for several years (even before I joined it) and was noted for her ability to make new members welcome. Sadly also Eileen Chambers, longstanding Committee member lost her husband a short while ago.

As regards other local conservation groups we continue to maintain good relationships, particularly with the Leicestershire Industrial History Society and the Civic Society. It is pleasing to note that the new City Mayor (Sir Peter Soulsby) has expressed significant interest in Leicester's heritage and how best to promote it. Inevitably financial constraints will influence this, which may well be where Groups such as ours can help out. As a starting point the Mayor has set up a 'Heritage Partnership' involving a variety of interested parties and I have attended the first two meetings on behalf of this Group.

Throughout 2011 we have had our usual selection of lectures on a variety of topics. Additionally during the Summer we organised a selection of trips and guided walks. I hope that you have enjoyed these and, as usual, we would welcome any feedback from you and suggestions for future speakers and places to visit. The year also saw, as I trust you will have appreciated, the long overdue change in the format of our newsletter. It is now in a more compact pamphlet form which we think is not only more attractive but user friendly - I personally always kept losing the odd page. Here I should particularly like to thank Peter Ellis for his efforts in redesigning the newsletter. Again if you have any comments or suggestions for further improvement, then please let us know.

During the year members of the Committee and the Building Sub-committee finally completed the sorting out and cataloguing of Dr Joan Skinner's archive covering the history of Leicester's factories. Joan, who passed away a few years ago, had donated her papers to the Victorian Society and we in turn have now passed these on to the library of the University of Leicester where they have been made available to a wider audience. To commemorate this, the University organised a day school which illustrated not only Joan's work but also the wide range of other material on the history of Leicester that they hold. Members of the public are welcome to visit the Library to access this.

Now may I turn to the Committee who help run the Group and certainly make my life easier. During the year Christine Jordan stood down due to pressure of work but we are pleased to welcome a new member - Melissa Thompson - who works for English Heritage. The remainder of the Committee have indicated that they are prepared to continue - Eileen Chambers, Neil Crutchley, Cliff Dunkley, Peter Ellis, Carole Face, Paul Griffiths, Marion Hare and Grahame Lees - many thanks for all your work during the year. Finally of course I must thank our Honorary President, Malcolm Elliott for his continuing help and advice.

*Jon Goodall*

## Treasurer's Report - 2011

Copies of the accounts for the year 2011 was distributed at the AGM. It has been examined and approved by our member Geoff Simpson, to whom the Leicester Group is grateful for continuing to perform this valuable service.

As Treasurer, I am pleased to be able to report that the Leicester Group made a small operating surplus of £489 during 2011. This figure is slightly misleading, as invoices for room hire for our two autumn meetings had not been received when the balance sheet was prepared. Hire of the room at Wellington Street now costs £50 per session, so our surplus is thus reduced by £100, and the Brian Allison fund (accounted separately) is effectively exhausted. The committee have decided that we will continue to honour the memory of Professor Allison by having a 'special' guest lecturer for the November meeting, but that it will be on a less ambitious scale than in recent years.

As usual, our most important source of income was from the trips and activities that were organised during the summer months. These activities are vitally important to the survival of the Group, and I hope we have put together a programme for 2012 which will prove attractive to members. In 2011 only one of our trips involved coach travel and the visit to Sheffield was organised around train travel, which seemed to work quite well. Guided walks and visits to places of interest within our local area continue to be popular and the ever-increasing cost of coach travel suggests that this may well be the pattern for the future. For these local walks, we charge a nominal sum, normally £5 per head, and the expenses of the guide and any donations to the sites visited are paid for from that income.

The only other significant source of income is the subscriptions paid by people who subscribe to our local mailing list, and we are grateful to them for their continued support. We had a total of 36 mailing list subscribers at the end of 2011, of whom 22 have renewed to date. Reminders are enclosed with this newsletter if they apply.

Looking back over previous years, the number of local subscribers has stayed more or less constant in the mid-thirties, with about two-thirds renewed by the end of the year. In contrast, the number of full members of the Victorian Society living in our area has declined steadily, from over 90 at the end of 2006, to just 66 now. Strangely, this is a far larger drop than has been seen in most other regions, where numbers generally continue to rise, although not spectacularly. The committee would welcome any suggestions for recruitment initiatives that could reverse this decline in Leicestershire.

Another increase in postal charges is expected in April 2012. We continue to encourage members to take the newsletter and other communications by e-mail. This obviously saves us money on printing and postage, and it also enables us to notify members by e-mail if any events crop up at short notice.

*Peter Ellis*



## **Orson Wright 1853 - 1913**

Without the foresight and enterprise of one man, South Wigston as we know it today would not exist. Orson Wright realised the great commercial possibilities of the area, which was served by three railway stations and two main lines. He encouraged manufacturers to establish their works amidst country surroundings, yet within easy reach of Leicester.

Orson was born on the 23rd July 1853 in Dunton Bassett, the second child of Joseph Wright and his wife, Maria. Joseph was a labourer who later became a grocer. At the age of eight, Orson scared crows in the fields and led plough horses before entering an apprenticeship with a Leicester carpenter and joiner. Orson married Ada Harris in 1874 and the couple had six children.

Orson started in business with his brother, but was soon working on his own account, building houses in Aylestone Park, Knighton Fields, Spinney Hill, Crown Hills, Woodgate, Newfoundpool and Fosse Road, including the Empire Hotel. He promoted and built the Grand Hotel, Leicester and was one of the five contractors to work on the Derwent Valley water scheme in Derbyshire.

Orson bought the Wigston Junction and Knighton Junction Brick and Tile Company, as well as the Wigston Ironworks. In 1883 he purchased the South Wigston estate, believing it was ideally placed for development. Within a few years, six hundred houses and many factories had been completed on the site. Although not on the scale of Saltaire, the streets are generally in a similar grid pattern and most of the housing is in terraces. There are some larger houses on Orange Street, Blaby Road (until many were converted to shops) and Saffron Road, built to house more affluent residents. Orson named two streets Dunton and Bassett after his home village and others Orange, Water (later renamed Park), Railway, Irlam, Garden, Healey and Timber to spell out his name. He established his own premises, Perseverance Works and home 'Venetia House' in Canal Street, (the house is now part of the Grand Hotel), before finally moving to Ashbourne House in Blaby Road.

He served as a Conservative councillor for Leicester City, the County and Wigston, was vice-president of the Leicestershire County Cricket Club and was a generous supporter of the Leicester Fosse Football Club. He was also a life governor of the Infirmary and helped to organise its sports days.

When Orson died on 10th April 1913, there were many glowing tributes. All local businesses closed and hundreds attended his funeral at St Thomas's church and lined the route to Wigston Cemetery. His children presented two stained glass windows to the church in memory of their parents. Orson Wright would be pleased to know that many of his fine, well-built Victorian houses have evolved into beautiful modernised homes, well-suited to 21st century family living.

## Recent Leicester Group Activities

### **The Churches of Sir George Gilbert Scott**

Dr Geoff Brandwood – 4th October 2011

Dr Geoff Brandwood, a former Chair of the national Society, returned to Leicestershire in October. In Scott's bicentenary year, Dr Brandwood concentrated on the work of Sir George Gilbert Scott as a church builder.

"Great Scott" was probably the first architect to be an international celebrity. His output was prodigious and few parts of the country are without a Scott church. Leicester was unusual for a town of its size, however, in having four examples – St John the Divine (1854), St Andrew's (1862), St Matthew's (1867) and St Saviour's (1877). Dr Brandwood's talk, illustrated with magnificent photographs, allowed us to see Scott's Leicester works in the light of his overall achievement.

It was clear that Scott's range was enormous, from large urban edifices to small country churches, from expensive commissions to economical contracts and from repetitious designs to brilliant ones. We were indebted to Dr Brandwood for a fascinating presentation.

*Paul Griffiths*

### ***The Professor Brian Allison Memorial Lecture - 2011***

### **The Mysteries of Northanger Abbey – Jane Austen and Victorian Gothic Architecture**

Richard Gill - 9th November 2011

This year's Brian Allison Memorial Lecture was given by the Leicester Group Hon Vice President, Richard Gill. Taking as his theme Jane Austen's most 'Gothick' novel, Richard demonstrated the inherent tension between the rational classical structure of the novel, and the irrational, 'gothick' elements of its plot. A number of well-chosen extracts, delivered in his inimitable style, illuminated the author's bemused disdain for the affectations of the contemporary taste for the fantastical literary works of Walpole and Beckford, both of whom were also active in the field of architecture. Although Walpole's Strawberry Hill is, mercifully, still with us; the spectacular collapse of Beckford's Fonthill was as fitting as the denouement of one of his novels.

The town of Bath itself, the setting for much of Northanger Abbey, demonstrated a similar tension between the late gothic splendour of the Abbey, and the Georgian elegance of the buildings facing it on Abbey Churchyard. Jane Austen died twenty years before Victoria's reign commenced, but the tension between the gothic and the classical, adumbrated so amusingly in her novel, was to culminate in the "Battle of the Styles" which shaped the architectural character of much of the Victorian age.

*Peter Ellis*

## Recent Activities continued

### The Splendours of Victorian London

Derek Seaton - 6th December 2011

The work of Sir George Gilbert Scott figured prominently in Derek Seaton's presentation, which formed part of our annual Christmas meeting. Well-known as a historian of Leicester, Derek strayed off his home territory for an entertaining gallop round some of the finest surviving Victorian buildings in the capital - many by Scott. Starting at St Pancras, as befits a visitor from Leicester, we travelled as far west as the Albert Memorial and the Royal Albert Hall, via the Houses of Parliament and the Foreign Office in Whitehall.

*Peter Ellis*



*The Battle of the Styles demonstrated in two of Sir George Gilbert Scott's finest London staircases - The Foreign Office (left) and St Pancras Hotel*

### Leicester's Musical Architecture

Neil Crutchley – 10th January 2012

January's meeting saw the welcome return of 'our own' Neil Crutchley. Combining his love of both music and buildings, Neil gave us a wonderful tour of Leicester's musical architecture, past and present.



*The Theatre Royal during demolition in 1957, with the tower of the Town Hall behind*

With visual and sound accompaniment, we journeyed from the Castle and the Guildhall via the Temperance Hall and the Palace Theatre to the Association Hall (of the YMCA) and the Fraser Noble Hall (formerly the Edward Wood Hall of the Baptist Church). Despite significant losses, a surprising number of the venues described and illustrated by Neil are still extant, though many are in poor condition, and few are now used for musical performance.

Musically, we remembered Liszt and Paganini at the New Hall of the Mechanics' Institute (until recently, the Central Lending Library), the first English performance of Carmen at the Theatre Royal and Dr Malcolm Sargent conducting 'Messiah' with the Leicester Symphony Orchestra at the De Montfort Hall. It was a truly entertaining evening.

*Paul Griffiths*

## **Forthcoming Events - Spring/Summer 2012**

### **Spring 2012 Lecture Series**

**Tuesday 6th March 2012**

**Art and Grog - the making of a Gallery for Art in Liverpool 1874-77**

Suzanne Macleod

See details of visit to Liverpool on 22nd May in conjunction with this talk

**Tuesday 17th April 2012**

**Shakespeare - the authorship question: a Victorian 'who done it' ...  
... still unsolved**

Malcolm Elliott

All lectures take place, unless otherwise stated, in the Small Hall (Room 3) of The Leicester Adult Education College, Wellington Street, Leicester at 7.30 pm. 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 per person**

towards the costs of room hire and other expenses.

## Summer Visits - 2012

### Tuesday 24th April

#### Evening visit to St George's Serbian Orthodox Church, Leicester

We will visit this rarely opened "Commissioners' Church" (**William Parsons, 1823-27**) in the centre of Leicester's new Cultural Quarter. St George's was the first church built in Leicester since the Reformation, and reputedly the most expensive C19 church in the county. Time permitting we may also look at other buildings of interest in the area. (Also see walk on 19th June)

Cost £5.00

Meet 7.00pm at St George's churchyard (opposite the Curve theatre)

(Closing date for bookings Friday 30th March - see green sheet)

### Tuesday 22nd May

#### Full day visit to Liverpool

We will be visiting the Walker Art Gallery (see talk on 6th March), St George's Hall and the Anglican and Roman Catholic Cathedrals.

Refreshments available at the Art Gallery, and elsewhere in the city centre.



*"And when did you last see your father?" William Frederick Yeames (1878)*

*In the collection of the Walker Art Gallery*

Cost £20 - coach only - there are believed to be no admission charges.

Departure from Glebe Road, Oadby (**ONLY**) at 8.30am - return approx 7.30pm

(Closing date for bookings Friday 30th March - see green sheet)

## Tuesday 12th June

### Visit to the stained glass workshop of Norman & Underwood, Leicester

Established in 1825, Norman & Underwood have worked on many major historic buildings both at home and overseas, using the same traditional craft skills and materials for almost two centuries. They are the oldest UK manufacturer of sand cast lead sheet, which is used on many restoration projects. The stained glass division has extensive experience in the repair and conservation of historic and often priceless windows from all periods, including leaded, stained and decorative glass and associated metalwork.

Our visit will include a video presentation on some of the buildings restored by N&U nationwide, and a demonstration of lead casting and glass cutting techniques. Coffee will be provided on arrival, and a light lunch at approx 1.00pm.

Cost: £10 including a donation to LOROS (Numbers Limited)

Meet at Norman & Underwood, The Freeschool Building, 170 Scudamore Road, Leicester LE3 1HP at 10.30am

(Closing date for bookings Friday 30th March - see green sheet)

## Tuesday 19th June

### Guided walk around Leicester's Cultural Quarter

#### Led by Malcolm Elliott and Rowan Roenisch

We will be looking at the northern side of the Quarter, starting with the important transitional factory discovered by Joan Skinner close to the listed Pfister and Vogel building and the splendid Alexandra House on Rutland Street. We will then walk to see the Secular Hall where we hope to inspect some recently-discovered William Morris tiles. After viewing the Age Concern building, we will return to the factories near the Phoenix Cinema before concluding the evening in one of the quarter's places of refreshment.

Cost £5.00

Meet 7.00pm at St George's gates (opposite the Curve theatre)

(Closing date for bookings Friday 5th May - see green sheet)

### Other visits planned - details in the next Newsletter

17th July (tbc): Evening walk in Belgrave area, led by Richard Gill

14th August (tbc): Evening visit to Huncote and Narborough

4th September: Afternoon visit to Beaumanor Hall, Woodhouse Eaves

St Andrew's, Jarrom Street (**GG Scott - 1862**) are planning to hold an open afternoon, probably on 23rd June, as part of their 150th anniversary celebrations. Details are not finalised - contact Paul Griffiths (0116 270 2121) nearer the date.

## General notes about visits

Please note that our visits may present a variety of hazards including uneven surfaces and stairs, low head heights, low lighting and building or demolition works. There may be stairs or uneven surfaces which cannot be avoided, and long periods of walking or standing. Should you have any questions about your ability to participate in an event, please contact us. Children under 18 must be accompanied by an adult. Participants are reminded that they participate in events at their own risk, and neither the Society nor its officers or servants accept any liability of any kind whatsoever, howsoever arising. The Victorian Society reserves the right to cancel, alter or postpone events if necessary.

**Cancellations:** No refunds will be given for cancellations for events costing £10 or less, but as a courtesy to others we ask that you let us know if you cannot attend an event for which you have booked. In other cases, cancellations will be accepted and fees returned up to a month before the date of the event, but will be subject to a £10 deduction per ticket for administrative costs. Separate arrangements may apply for weekend visits and foreign tours and terms will be clearly stated on the printed details in each case.

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 (see below) or booking enquiries can be made direct to Mrs Marion Hare .

### May we have your e-mail address?

Sending our Newsletter and notification of events electronically is convenient, green and saves the Victorian Society postage.

The Leicester Group Newsletter is available in PDF Format, which can be read on any computer with Adobe Acrobat Reader (available as a free download).

If you would be happy to receive the Newsletter as a PDF file please contact Peter Ellis ( [ellisdesign@talktalk.net](mailto:ellisdesign@talktalk.net) ) with your e-mail address.

E-mail also allows us to send details of events that may be arranged at short notice.

The views expressed in this newsletter are those of the contributors and do not necessarily represent those of the Editor or of The Victorian Society.

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