

Chair's Annual Report 2024

Cheltenham Civic Society remains a vibrant network of engaged citizens dedicated to fostering civic pride and shaping the present and the future of our town.

As a constructive and independent voice, we continue to work closely with local councils and stakeholders to:

- advocate for high-quality design and execution in buildings and public spaces
- protect and celebrate Cheltenham's architectural and cultural heritage
- encourage informed discussion and understanding of our evolving urban landscape.

Through proactive engagement, idea generation and community involvement, we strive to make Cheltenham an even more distinctive, attractive and enjoyable place to live and visit. Our influence continues to grow as a respected and visionary organisation, committed to ensuring that Cheltenham reaches its full potential, playing a full part in the wider civic movement.

I would like to thank our brilliant trustees, who always go above and beyond expectations and have helped build the Society's strong reputation as an articulate, authoritative, imaginative and determined influencing and campaigning group. I also extend my thanks to all the volunteers and specialist group members who have given so much energy and expertise to our activities and events. They continue to underpin the Society's success.

I am pleased to present my report and the Society's accounts for the year ending 31 December 2024.

Andrew Booton
Chair

Campaigns and Projects

Highways. We've been fighting for our road surfaces to be reinstated properly for over five years, in accordance with the New Roads & Street Works Act 1991 (NRSWA). Repeated failures by statutory undertakers (utility companies) as well as by the Highway Authority itself (Gloucestershire County Council (GCC)) led us to follow up on a threat we made two years ago to take legal action. We served a Section 56 notice on GCC under the Highways Act 1980.

The Daffodil Picture House opened on 5 October 1922 as the first purpose-built cinema in the town. Thus it was built before the Cinematograph Act of 1927, the arrival of talking pictures in 1928 and the creation of big cinema chains, whose large picture palaces became such a feature of Britain in the 1930s.

The Daffodil closed as a cinema in 1963 and became a bingo hall and then a furniture store. It looked very down at heel until the Daffodil Restaurant opened in 1998. The restaurant closed a few years ago, and the owners have now secured planning consent for the building to be used for a range of uses. It might be as a new restaurant or even a new cinema, but it could just as easily become a gym or a crèche. And the owner could also apply to demolish it and propose flats or offices in its place.

These threats spurred the Civic Society to ask Historic England to list the structure quickly, so that any future use of 18-21 Suffolk Parade has to be assessed in light of its historic and architectural importance. It is 'locally indexed' but this non-statutory recognition gives no tangible protection so we made a case to Historic England for formal listing to protect it.

Unfortunately, Historic England rejected our request. Subsequently, the owners have been granted consent to convert it into a four bedroom house so we hope that will at least preserve its most prominent features. We are working with the Council to update and strengthen local listing. This may be a test case for how we can use this form of protection to save valuable and loved local buildings like the Daffodil.

The **WWI Battlefield Crosses** project was finally concluded with the unveiling of a beautiful museum at Cheltenham Cemetery. The conserved grave markers have been displayed and interpreted, lit by solar-powered lighting in an off-grid former gravediggers' hut. Even the large utility box outside has been redecorated by local artist 'Danksy'. All this was made possible by the extraordinary fundraising efforts of Colin Smith and the enormous efforts of Steve Bryson, Freddie Gick, Sarah Harvey and Mike Rigby.

Consultations and Relationships

We continue to be an outward-looking society, playing our part in the wider civic movement as an active member of Civic Voice regionally through the West Midlands Amenity Societies Association (WMASA) and locally through the Gloucestershire Civic Societies' Group.

We have responded to government consultations on proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and the Government's planning reforms. Locally, we responded to consultations on the Cheltenham, Gloucester and Tewkesbury Strategic and Local Plan and Statements of Community Involvement. The Trustees are grateful to Adrian Phillips, Cathy Presland, Tess Beck and Robert Maitland for their judgment and articulate contributions.

Planning and Urban Development Advocacy

Our **Planning Forum** continues to perform to an amazing level. As well as considering and commenting on 52 planning and listed building consent applications, it has represented the Society at two Planning Committee meetings and submitted one nomination for formal listing to Historic England. To help our critics understand our role and interests, it has produced an informative set of planning principles – see sidebar – and sought to define the NPPF’s undefined term ‘good design.’ The Forum has worked with the owners of 102-104 Promenade and Cheltenham Cancer Unit to help shape proposals through constructive upstream engagement.

Meetings with Cheltenham Borough Council have explored training, conservation areas, a ‘heritage at risk’ register, and management by exception for conservation areas. Cheltenham Borough Council and the Society have agreed to work in partnership on the review of Locally Indexed buildings and on the drafting of a new heritage strategy. We will also support as required the Council’s periodic conservation area review.

The Society has produced proposals for the Cavendish House site, which closed in April 2024 as part of its attempts to shape planning further upstream. The concept of ‘Cavendish Square’ proposed to join the Promenade and Regent Street, open up vistas to the former county court and the Everyman Theatre and provide potential new municipal offices as well as a hotel or mixed use opportunities. A public consultation showed 85.5% support for the Society’s proposal and not a single person registered any disagreement. Engagement was genuine, positive and constructive, unlike so many so-called consultations we see from developers.

We objected to CBC’s Planning Committee about the inappropriate proposals for 131 Promenade and the former Black & White site. We continue to monitor the Golden Valley development and, like the 4,000-home Elms Park development on the town’s north west boundary, remain concerned about car dependence and its impact on – and lack of interaction with – the existing town centre.

The Trustees are grateful to Adrian Phillips, Chair of the Planning Forum, Tess Beck, the Forum’s Secretary, and the experienced members of the Forum who continue to dedicate such energy and erudition to fighting for the best architecture and planning for Cheltenham.

Public Realm

Our **Successful Streets Group (SSG)** champions

Cheltenham's public realm. The public realm encompasses all publicly accessible spaces, including streets, pavements, parks, squares and other open areas, designed for people's movement and interaction, whether publicly or privately owned.

SSG published its second town centre manifesto that called on both Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) and GCC to work more closely together. Learning from the first manifesto, it simplified the list of concerns and packed them into 5 key areas. It gained some attention but the stand-off between the two councils, despite their claims that they do cooperate, is evident in the lack of progress and improvement. We continue to press CBC to form a small but focused Cheltenham Town Centre Forum (CTCF) to manage the town centre effectively and efficiently. But there is reluctance to do so. This might be explained by the council's refusal to admit there is anything wrong or that only those ideas which originate from the council are worth following. Regardless, we are becoming impatient with the way the town centre is declining due to a lack of active management, no performance standards for cleaning and no coordination between authorities.

After our success with getting Cambray Place resurfaced in 2023, we issued a S56 notice against GCC under the Highways Act 1980, requiring the council to bring nominated streets within the town centre into a sound state of repair. GCC acknowledged the notice within two weeks and very quickly started to address the areas of concern. Some works were completed promptly and satisfactorily, such as replacing broken concrete slabs at the top of Regent Street, while others remain to be completed. We will continue to fight for these important improvements.

Parmoor

Parmoor seems to have had a troubled history from the start of its life. Since buying it, we have suffered unnecessary delays in the planning and listed building consent process, a period of the highest inflation for decades stretched our budgets and most recently, the sister building next door suffered the threat of a serious structural collapse, which necessitated the stoppage of all work on our building to comply with the health and safety risk assessments.

We hope to resume work as soon as it is safe to do so – possibly in the second quarter of 2025. Meanwhile we have been looking to control costs by adopting more innovative approaches. This is likely to include a ‘shell and core’ scheme followed by fitting out of the five units (four flats and the Civic Society’s own space), probably starting with the residential units first so that their income can be used to contribute to the final fitting out of the Civic Society spaces and addressing the exterior. We are still likely to need external financial assistance, which we think will be in the form of a loan or mortgage based on the expected rental values of the flats. We are encouraged by the strong income projections for the flats and the ability to produce an excellent finished building that is financially sustainable without placing an undue burden on the society.

Civic Awards and UnCivic Award controversy

We now run our civic awards every two years in order to maintain high quality standards and to ensure there are sufficient numbers of nominations coming forward. For the first time this year, we ran an 'UnCivic' category. This was an initiative we'd been considering for several years to try to identify examples of poor architecture and planning so that we could learn from them. To prevent the Society from being accused of partisanship or arbiters of taste we deliberately invited nominations only from the general public, who responded energetically! We filtered the shortlist to ensure that merely mediocre buildings were not confused with the worst structures. But a number of clear contenders still reached the shortlist. And eventually the judges recognised two buildings that they considered to be 'worthy' of UnCivic awards, with one clear 'winner'. Subsequent media coverage that confirmed these two buildings were indeed worthy of infamous recognition, which usefully told us that it was right to try this award category, despite opposition from a number of borough councillors, who felt the awards were too negative and judgmental. We disagree with that view and remain determined to use every opportunity to promote good architecture and planning, to discourage poor architecture and planning and to learn constructive lessons when things go badly in order to ensure they go better in future.

Membership

Membership stands at just over 400. We gained 34 new members and sadly lost a few due to moving away and deaths. We lost one corporate member and gained another. The big challenge is recruiting a Membership Administrator to assist with the admin side of membership, thereby freeing up the current Membership Secretary to devote more time to looking after the 'public-facing' side of things, i.e. the recruitment and retention of members. We would like to update our creaky legacy systems to bring us up to date with national best practice.

Heritage Open Days

Heritage Open Days (HODs) is our main community outreach event, which is part of the national Heritage Open Days programme, which also helps to satisfy our educational purpose. It is organised locally by Cheltenham Civic Society and funded by Cheltenham Borough Council.

Cheltenham Hindu Temple:
"Opening up these sites gives people the opportunity to learn, broaden the mind, ask questions and be curious."

St Philip and St James Church: "An excellent talk about two nineteenth century spinster sisters and their complicated but fascinating ancestry, family and contemporaries."

Cheltenham Bridge Club: "I often pass by this building and have always been intrigued about the building and to see the interior and the event. I was greeted very warmly, taken around and encouraged to join in the event if I wanted to. I was amazed how big and well kept the place was. A lovely afternoon, well spent."

This year's festival-goers enjoyed the biggest-ever programme of 73 events over ten days in September around the theme of "Connections - Routes - Networks." With everything free to visit or join, more than 2,300 people took part, with nearly all of the walks and talks being fully booked.

Between them, they visited and explored 25 open buildings, listened to 17 talks, joined 25 guided walks and attended exhibitions and other events. The festival also incorporated the South Cheltenham History Festival, offering a packed three-day schedule of walks, talks, and exhibitions.

Thank you once again to Sarah Harvey and her team of volunteers who work so hard not just to organise the programme but somehow manage even to run waiting lists, field last minute phone calls and seemingly make the impossible possible!

Our part in the Civic Movement

We continue to play an active part in the wider civic movement. We are part of the nine-society strong Gloucestershire Civic Societies' Group, which enables discussion and the sharing of best practice at county level. The West Midlands Amenity Societies Association is one of three regional groups for Civic Voice, stretching from Cheltenham in the South to Hereford in the west and groups on the fringes of Birmingham in the east.

Civic Voice itself has been reshaped and we expect further changes in 2025 to continue its path of reform and renewed energy. Within each of those groups, Cheltenham Civic Society enjoys a strong reputation for its forward thinking, strategic vision and professionalism.

Governance – challenge attracting new trustees.

We are fortunate to have an excellent board of trustees who work hard on their own portfolios and responsibilities, and contribute so much more to the works of the wider Society. I am immensely grateful to: Claire Attenborough, our Honorary Treasurer; David Shelmerdine, our Honorary Secretary; Hugh Curran who chairs the SSG and is our Membership Secretary; Sarah Harvey who heads up HODs; and Steve Bryson, our amazing PR and Comms officer.

Although well aligned in terms of the experience and dedication to our aims and work, they are always ready to challenge opinions and constructively shape decisions, setting high expectations of the Society's performance and integrity.

However, we are currently running with just six trustees holding eight portfolio responsibilities! Despite regular marketing and appeals, we have struggled to attract new trustees and volunteers. This is disappointing because we appear to have a well-engaged and relatively active membership, but translating it to trusteeships and task adoption seems elusive. We're hoping a more direct approach and the return of a formal and regular events programme will help us to attract new volunteers, especially trustees.

Peter Sayers

Shortly after our last AGM, our brilliant Vice Chair, Peter Sayers, was taken ill and died unexpectedly. Peter was imaginative, fun and one of life's net contributors who always give more to society than they take out. Recognising his photographic interests and his fascination with the High Street, we have decided to dedicate the digital remastering of the 1963 Paterson photo montage to his memory. Not only that but we have commissioned – with the help of a grant from Cheltenham Arts Council – an updated version of that montage so the two pieces of history can sit alongside each other in tribute to Peter. We think he would appreciate that memorial.