

OurTown

The Newsletter of Cheltenham Civic Society

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YOUR REGULAR UPDATE ON HOW WE ARE WORKING TO KEEP CHELTENHAM A GREAT PLACE TO THRIVE



This was the state of Cavendish House in the week before this year's Gold Cup Festival. NB: Spot the pigeon!

Canada Life triggered this disgrace

Canada Life is one of the leading financial institutions operating in the UK. It's likely that many residents of Cheltenham will hold pensions and other investment policies with them. Regent Arcade in the High Street and Cavendish House are just two of the many UK assets the company owns.

But does Canada Life show any real respect for our town? Clearly not.

Armed with the common knowledge that the Sports Direct takeover of House of Fraser spelt the

end for the department store on the Prom, Canada Life entered discussions about redeveloping the site with Cheltenham Borough Council (CBC) more than six years ago.

But those discussions have been held behind closed doors and no plans have ever emerged into the light of day in all of that time.

Cheltenham Civic Society (CCS) has repeatedly asked Canada Life to engage in public debate with us over the future of this key site. But we've

been batted away with vague promises of future engagement. Earlier in March, we wrote to their CEO, Emma Watkins, about their lack of progress. Our letter highlighted the adverse impact their premature closure of the temporary market stalls in CavHouse is having on the town centre and, potentially, Canada Life's own corporate reputation. But we're waiting for their full response.

Though CBC managed to clear the debris seen above before Race Week, it has been slow in . . . *cont./page 2*

What's in OurTown this time

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OPINION

Cheltenham deserves better

Four years ago, we ran a robust campaign highlighting Cheltenham's fine buildings, parks, shops and restaurants – but also the dreadful condition of the public realm tying them together. It urgently needed a coherent plan. Four years later, there has been little visible progress and in many respects the situation has deteriorated.

Where work has been done, it has worsened matters. Last year's resurfacing of The Strand was widely condemned for its poor quality, yet Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) refused to correct it even under warranty. GCC still has not adopted the paving outside John Lewis, installed six years ago, because it fails to meet required standards. GCC also moved to replace sections of the Promenade's York stone paving with tarmac, which required us to rally strong public opposition before it was reconsidered. And the town is still blighted by tarmac cowpats from complacent highways management.

Meanwhile Cavendish House stands empty with no clear redevelopment plan, despite our warnings years ago about the damage this would cause to the town centre. Begging and rough sleeping paraphernalia are increasingly visible on our streets while surrounding businesses – paying substantial rents and rates – struggle.

Cheltenham is home to 120,000 residents and 7,500 businesses. It attracts 2 million visitors annually, generating nearly £200 million for the local economy. Yet despite repeated promises, the town centre still lacks a coherent long-term strategy.

With the inevitable confusion of Local Government Reorganisation looming, further delay seems inevitable – a delay the town can ill-afford.

Enough is enough. Cheltenham needs decisive leadership to deliver a plan to reverse the decline. ●

Andrew Booton, CCS Chair



In a quest to learn what townsfolk thought about the future of CavHouse, Cheltenham Civic Society ran a stall in the Prom for several days in July 2024. 85.5% of people registered their support for our development ideas.

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acting – CCS having highlighted the issue to CBC much earlier in February. And the initial result of CBC's action merely moved the problem to the Minster Churchyard, itself a heritage site.

The CavHouse site is the single most important development site in the town centre.

Our major frustration is that next to nothing has happened since it first became clear that House of Fraser had no future in the town.

In April 2024, we tried to engage with Canada Life directly but their development management consultant replied saying just that: "We're keen to engage with the Civic Society and are just completing our formal PreApp process [with CBC's planners]. I would hope to be in touch in late May / early June to arrange a briefing, as part of our consultation exercise."

May and June that year passed without a word. So in the summer of 2024, we tried to stimulate a public debate ourselves.

We ran a stall outside CavHouse for several days that July and engaged with hundreds of passersby presenting our idea for creating an enclosed space linking the Prom with Regent Street to them and asking them for their views.

An astounding 85.5% of them said that they supported our ideas.

But though we publicised this exercise widely and sent the feedback we received to both Canada Life and

CBC, it all fell on deaf ears, and nothing has been heard ever since.

When we contacted Canada Life's development manager a few weeks ago to ask if he was even still on the case, we received this answer after a week: "CL are in active pre app discussions with the planners [at CBC], as the options for Cavendish evolve. Be assured when we reach a consensus, your Society, as a key stakeholder, CL [sic] will have an early sight of the proposals."

So not even the words have moved on much in the last two years!

We really despair at their lack of action and urgency. CavHouse may be just a line in a massive spreadsheet of UK assets for Canada Life, but it is hugely important to Cheltenham as the site forms the fulcrum of our town centre and the future vitality of the town's heart depends on it.

We are also sorely disappointed by CBC's apparent laissez-faire attitude. We have urged them and offered our help on many occasions over the years to work up a town centre master plan to guide future development. And we've specifically suggested that they prepare a development brief to steer the CavHouse redevelopment.

Our core belief is that there should be public participation in planning, not a stitch-up – so planning should be done with us, not to us!

But instead we get nothing – no engagement, no master plan, no brief and absolutely no real action! ●



THE CAVENDISH HOUSE ENCAMPMENT: A question of balance and timely action

As an engaged civic body, Cheltenham Civic Society naturally extends its sympathies to those facing genuine hardship and homelessness. We realise that dealing with vulnerable people is a sensitive matter. However, compassion for individuals must be balanced against the need to maintain a safe, clean, and welcoming environment for the 120,000 people who live in Cheltenham, as well as all those who work here or visit our town.

Following the closure of Cavendish House, an opportunistic encampment of tents soon appeared in the recessed doorways of this prime retail location. On the 15th of February, the Civic Society formally drew the Council's attention to this developing situation.

What followed was a deeply frustrating period of inaction. While the Council has recently congratulated itself on its 'swift' response, the reality is that it took 17 days for any visible public action to be taken. During this time, the primary response from the authorities appeared to be a wringing of hands, citing 'complex issues' and the vulnerabilities of the individuals involved. These are valid social concerns, but they should never be used as an excuse for administrative paralysis.

We must be clear: it is entirely unacceptable that around half a dozen individuals should be allowed to cause affray, generate significant amounts of dirt, and bring squalor to the town's premier business district.

Furthermore, we must ask the obvious question regarding these campers: where did they come from? They did not appear out of thin air. They were residing elsewhere before they saw the opportunity to occupy the Cavendish House entrances. Allowing a handful of people to effectively hold the town centre to ransom is a failure of public realm management.

When the Council finally acted, the outcome was bitterly disappointing. The problem was not solved: it was merely relocated.

The tents were moved to the Minster churchyard – the true jewel in the crown of Cheltenham, a space painstakingly cared for by dedicated volunteers. To add insult to injury, absolute filth and mess were left behind on the Promenade for others to clear up.

Ultimately, the handling of this situation resulted in the worst of all possible worlds. It failed the townspeople and local businesses who expect a well-managed public realm, and it failed the homeless individuals who require proper, structured support rather than simply being shifted from a retail doorway into a historic churchyard.

If Cheltenham is to protect its reputation and its streetscape, we must demand a far more proactive, realistic, and genuinely swift strategy from our local authorities in the future.

Urgent call for a Town Centre Forum

Cheltenham is rightly celebrated for its architectural heritage, yet a walk through our town centre reveals a public realm in a truly dreadful state. From pervasive graffiti and redundant, dilapidated phone boxes to poorly placed infrastructure and stubborn litter, our shared spaces are simply awful.

Rather than simply lamenting this decline, we must realise the potential we have to reverse it. The root of the issue lies in the current repetitive and fragmented communications between the various bodies responsible for our town. For the Civic Society's public realm forum, Successful Streets Group (SSG), this is a daily reality. Our very limited resources expend huge amounts of energy trying to secure solutions to the smallest issues, which too often vanish into an administrative void. And we are painted as whingers and moaners simply because we ask for normal standards.

The Civic Society has been asking for a dedicated Cheltenham Town Centre Forum (CTCF) for years. In fact, such a forum was recommended to councillors by the Local Government Association four years ago. CTCF would ensure all points of view are represented. Residents' views would be voiced by the Civic Society, businesses' views by Cheltenham BID / Chamber of Commerce, and the two Councils' views by senior officers or councillors, with perhaps occasional representation from the Police. This simple structure would finally bring together the people with the power to get things done – and in a cooperative way.

It's all simple stuff! At any one time, there are a finite number of problems in the town centre. Through the CTCF, these could all be identified, discussed, and action taken.

Problems can either be fixed or not – if there are good reasons why some cannot. Whatever the case, this straightforward transparency would keep everyone informed and properly pin the problems to the people responsible.

There are huge benefits for all parties in taking this step. The CTCF would cost almost nothing to establish, yet it would radically increase the efficiency of communications and the speed of actions taken. It would eradicate the excessive numbers of duplicated meetings, emails and phone calls, misunderstandings and excuses.

Given these obvious shared advantages, why-oh-why will GCC and CBC not jump at the suggestion and establish it without further ado?

The CTCF is a positive, practical way forward which really could transform actions and attitudes and be a ground-breaking, sensible initiative. It is time to end the current senseless and highly inefficient modus operandi and get on with delivering the high-quality environment Cheltenham deserves – via the CTCF! ●

Hugh Curran, SSG Chair



LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION: What it means and what Gloucestershire's civic societies are proposing

The Government's English Devolution White Paper proposes Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) across many counties, including Gloucestershire.

In practice, this would replace the current county and district council system with larger unitary authorities responsible for all local services.

The Gloucestershire Amenity Societies' Association, of which Cheltenham Civic Society is a member, has written to council leaders across the county.

The aim is to ensure that any changes do not weaken local democracy, planning quality or heritage protection.

While simplifying governance may bring benefits, there is a risk that decision-making could become more centralised and further removed from local communities, and that planning, conservation and design quality could lose priority within much larger authorities.

Our proposal is simple: keep planning close to place.



GASA is asking that any new council structure includes:

- ▶ Planning boards organised around towns and settlements, rather than one centralised committee.
- ▶ Local conservation, tree and

enforcement officers assigned to defined areas, maintaining genuine local knowledge.

- ▶ Formal roles for civic and amenity societies in planning, conservation and public-realm discussions, as Cheltenham Civic Society already enjoys with Cheltenham Borough Council.
- ▶ Town centre forums bringing together councils, civic groups, businesses and police to strengthen stewardship of place.

GASA has also made an offer. Civic societies hold a deep reservoir of local knowledge and voluntary expertise about the character and history of Gloucestershire's towns, villages and landscapes.

Used well, this can help new authorities make better, faster and more trusted decisions.

LGR is coming. Our aim is to ensure it strengthens local voices, participation in planning and civic pride rather than weakening them. ●

Conservation Areas review

Cheltenham Borough Council has appointed Purcell to undertake its periodic review of the town's Conservation Areas. Work is due to begin this spring and is expected to last around twelve months.

Under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, local authorities must review their conservation areas 'from time to time'. This includes reassessing boundaries, preparing or updating Conservation Area Appraisals and Management Plans (CAAMPs), and consulting the public on proposals for preservation and enhancement. Any such proposals must be considered through public consultation, with the authority taking account of the views expressed.

In practice, this means defining what gives each area its special character and setting out clear guidance for its future management.

Cheltenham's existing CAAMPs largely date from 2008 and are now in need of updating.

These statutory duties are intended to ensure that Conservation Areas are properly managed, that their special interest is preserved or enhanced, and that local communities are involved in decisions affecting their surroundings.

The Civic Society will be consulted as part of the review. We would like to see:

- ▶ A stronger emphasis on the Section 72 duty to preserve or enhance the special character of Conservation Areas.
- ▶ The creation of Conservation Area Advisory Boards, drawing on local expertise, particularly important as governance shifts towards a unitary authority and decision-making becomes more remote.

- ▶ An honest assessment of how well the existing Conservation Areas have been managed and their character has been conserved and enhanced.
- ▶ A more rigorous reassessment of boundaries, including removal of areas that no longer justify designation, enabling the council to focus resources effectively.
- ▶ A clear action plan to keep CAAMPs active and relevant, including:
- ▶ A Heritage at Risk list to prioritise action on vulnerable buildings and structures.
- ▶ A repair and enhancement plan targeting sites that make a neutral or negative contribution to their Conservation Area. ●



Civic Voice: its future shape and why networks matter

Andrew Booton is leading Civic Voice's Strategic Review Group to consider an important question: what should Civic Voice look like in the years ahead?

Civic Voice provides a national voice for civic and amenity societies in England – championing better planning, high quality design, heritage protection and public participation. Like many voluntary organisations, it has faced financial pressures and questions about how best to support member societies in a changing world.

Following discussion at its 2025 AGM and subsequent meetings, members expressed clear support for Civic Voice to continue but with reform. The Review Group is examining governance, funding and membership

structures to create a leaner, volunteer-led organisation with strengthened accountability and resilience. One of the strands it is following is the concept of Civic Conscience – see panel below.

For Cheltenham Civic Society, the outcome matters. National advocacy can amplify local concerns on planning reform and design standards – issues that shape every town.

But civic work does not operate only at national level. We are also members of both the 12-society Gloucestershire Amenity Societies' Association (GASA) and the West Midlands Amenity Societies' Association (WMASA). These networks allow societies to share experience, develop common

responses and build relationships across council boundaries.

That cooperation is particularly important in the context of Local Government Reorganisation. As structures change, established networks help ensure community voices remain heard and coordinated.

Strong civic advocacy works at three levels: local scrutiny, county and regional collaboration, and national policy shaping. Each depends on active participation, not passive membership.

As Civic Voice considers its future shape, the message is clear: the civic movement is strongest when it is connected, constructive and prepared to engage. ●

Civic conscience

Every town needs more than development, investment and growth. It needs a civic conscience.

A civic society's role is not simply to oppose poor schemes or defend old buildings, though sometimes it must do both. Its deeper purpose is to ask consistent, informed and sometimes uncomfortable questions:

- ▶ Is this proposal truly sustainable?
- ▶ Does it enhance local character and appearance?
- ▶ Will it age well?
- ▶ Does it contribute positively to the area?
- ▶ How could it be better?

The civic conscience represents the interests that the system structurally undervalues: beauty, memory, coherence and stewardship.

No professional body is mandated to do this.

No statutory authority is incentivised to do it.

This role is structurally missing elsewhere in the system.

Civic conscience is about long-term stewardship. Elected members change, officers move on, developers come and go. Civic societies remain. They carry institutional memory, understand the evolution of place and provide continuity in debates about design quality, heritage, transport, housing mix and environmental performance.

Importantly, civic conscience is constructive. It is not keyboard

commentary or reflex objection. It requires research and analysis, policy understanding, debate, thoughtful responses, dialogue with decision-makers and the confidence to propose alternatives. It also means recognising good design – through our Civic Awards, for example – and welcoming positive change.

At its best, a civic society helps raise expectations – encouraging higher standards of architecture, better public realm, stronger sustainability and evident pride in place.

Civic conscience is not about nostalgia. It is about responsibility: ensuring that what we build today becomes the valued heritage of tomorrow. ●

Help to conserve our town's heritage, encourage high standards of design and educate everyone about our urban environment.

Make a real difference by joining Cheltenham Civic Society.

Join us for just **£20** a year.

Go to our website: <https://cheltcivicsoc.org> and click on the 'Join Us' button.



Parmoor: Phase 1 is nearly complete. Phase 2 (residential) will start soon.



Planning policy

Why it matters and what we are doing about it.

The sexy bit of planning is development control, or development management. This is the day-to-day business of deciding who gets permission to build what and where. Think 131 Promenade, the development of the former Black and White site or 86-90 Winchcombe Street.

These are all development control issues, along with several thousand smaller cases decided by the planners each year in Cheltenham.

Their outcomes affect people directly, and many development control issues generate a lot of interest, even alarm and anger. In the planning forum we look at five or six planning applications that are out for public consultation each month. We may object to proposals, support them or say: "not too bad, but could be better". Our comments go to the CBC planners and are posted on-line. I think our views are valued by the local planners and often have an impact.

But planning decisions should be made in the context of approved planning policies and determined in light of them. CBC planning officers'



Controversial since Covid: 131's 'temporary' tents have challenged the limits of not just planning policy but both the council's and the planning inspector's decisions.

reports on planning applications show that approved policies are used to decide whether or not to give, or recommend, approval, and what conditions to impose. When we send in our views on applications, we draw on our own agreed planning principles but also reference relevant planning policies.

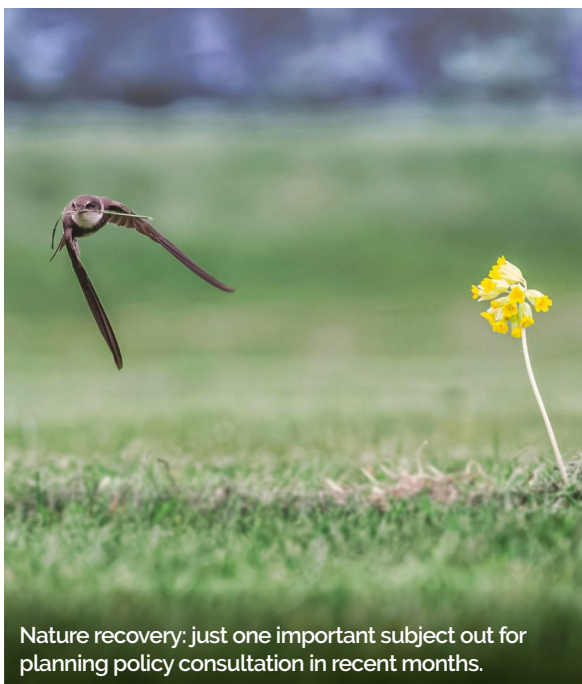
Just consider how important it is to

have policies in place that – for example – encourage the best use of land, support a vibrant town centre, protect valued heritage and green space, protect and restore nature, and mitigate and adapt to climate change. Without these policies, how can planners judge applications, and how can citizens' groups like ours adopt credible, persuasive and consistent positions towards applications?

So this is why we have been focusing recently as much on the 'up-stream'

policy context as on what comes out of the pipeline as current planning applications. This may not be as exciting or as immediately relevant as the latest planning application but unless we get the policies right, we get bad outcomes.

This is a time of great policy flux - nationally, regionally and locally. The government's commitment to "get Britain building" and "remove the blockers" means that nationally planning policy is being overhauled to make it quicker and easier to get planning permission, with more emphasis on decisions taken in the context of a reliable plan-led system: these ideas emerge in the draft new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The county is looking at policies to restore nature across rural and urban Gloucestershire. Ahead of local government reform, Gloucester, Tewkesbury and Cheltenham are working on a new strategic and local plan to replace the 2017 Joint Core Strategy. In Cheltenham the recently adopted Climate Change Supplementary Planning Document is being followed by another on nature restoration. So, lots of proposed new



Nature recovery: just one important subject out for planning policy consultation in recent months.



planning policy is out for consultation, and our Planning Forum has had an unusually busy time considering how the Civic Society should respond to requests for our views.

You can find what we have been saying under three headings on the Downloads page of the CCS website: <https://cheltcivicsoc.org/>

These are responses to:

- i) national planning policy consultations, notably on the NPPF,
- ii) strategic and local plan consultations, and
- iii) local planning policy consultations.

There is a lot of detail in the 50 or so pages of commentary and many topics are covered, but here are a few highlights from a long list:

- ▶ We proposed an alternative vision for Cheltenham in 2040 to the one put forward (righthand boxes)
- ▶ We called for a master plan to guide the future of the town centre, along with some key policies (see bottom box)
- ▶ We called for a Supplementary Planning Document on nature recovery in Cheltenham (a draft has since emerged)
- ▶ Commenting on the latest draft NPPF, we supported the idea that properly-managed heritage buildings can be an important economic asset to towns.

Crawling over wordy consultation texts may not be everyone's idea of fun. But if we truly care about our town, it is essential to have the right planning policies in place. The society's Planning Forum will continue to work on this front as well as responding to a regular stream of planning applications.

In the adjacent boxes, you will find two brief examples that should give you a sense of what our policy-related work has been about. Keep a watch on that Downloads page of the website where our views will appear. ●

Adrian Phillips
Planning Forum Chair

A vision for Cheltenham in 2040

The three local authorities put forward this draft vision for our town in 2040:

"Cheltenham will become the new cyber capital for the UK, bringing with it a catalyst for growth and change in Gloucestershire, creating a destination of global significance. This will be ignited by the Golden Valley Development, a pioneering Garden Community integrating hi-tech business, residential and leisure uses. Cheltenham declared a climate Emergency in 2019 and has a target of reaching net zero by 2030, working with residents, communities and businesses to achieve this. The number of affordable homes will be increased and a fabric first and energy efficient approach to homes will be achieved through the housing investment plan and residents will benefit from a more modern, financially sustainable and efficient council. Development and regeneration opportunities will be facilitated to support more town centre living to ensure that Cheltenham's growth and prosperity continues."

We thought that failed to capture much that is unique about our town, such as its architectural heritage, its cultural standing and its green setting. These should shape its development in the years to come as much as the factors identified in the draft vision above. So we put forward a slightly shorter and rather different vision:

"Cheltenham is one of the most prosperous, beautiful, culturally rich and inclusive towns in England. It offers an outstanding example of town centre living, care for heritage and heritage-led regeneration. It is noted for the value it places on nature through its parks, a network of biodiverse-rich green spaces and trees in every street. It has become the cyber capital for the UK, with the Golden Valley Development, successfully integrating hi-tech business, residential and leisure uses. Cheltenham reached its target of net zero. It has adapted its housing stock to climate change and there are many more affordable homes. Its transport system prioritises public transport and active travel. Life in Cheltenham is healthier, happier and less stressful than in 2026."

Policies to guide a town centre master plan

Late last year, Cheltenham, Gloucester, Tewkesbury and the county council issued consultation topic papers on housing density, retail, residential above shops and town centres. Responding to the scope of these, we focused on the urgent need for a Master Plan for the centre of Cheltenham. The Civic Society has argued for this for some time, but here we set out a number of policies relating to the topic papers which we think should be included in such a plan: build to higher densities; build higher; put parking underground; create more living space over retail in the town centre; shrink the town centre; keep a watch on Airbnb, etc; make for a better living environment in the town centre; take care not to imbalance development within the town centre; control demolition and promote reuse.

These very brief headline policies are explained in our full comments on the CCS website.



Our heritage at risk

Two of our town's most prominent churches – St Luke's and Holy Trinity – are still on Heritage England's 'Heritage at Risk' list. Here's how the Diocese of Gloucester is tackling the problems.

The Diocese of Gloucester covers most of Gloucestershire, parts of South Gloucestershire, and small sections of neighbouring counties – ranging from the Welsh border to Lechlade and from Chipping Campden to Chipping Sodbury. It is responsible for 380 church buildings, 24 of which are on the Heritage at Risk register and there are others that have also been identified as 'vulnerable'.

St Luke's and Holy Trinity in Cheltenham remain on the November 2025 update of the Heritage at Risk list.

Their story though is not one of decline – it is one of active partnership, strategic investment and long-term planning supported by the Diocese.

Holy Trinity is a Grade II listed church built between 1820–23 to designs by George Allen Underwood, with later additions by John Middleton.

A major reordering in the late 1990s improved flexibility. A toilet block was added fifteen years ago, and in 2020 the church completed a £600,000 roof renovation following a significant fundraising campaign.

But despite its vitality, the building faces serious conservation challenges.

Holy Trinity contains 172 wall monuments, largely by Lewis of Clarence Street, and a complete set of floral stained glass installed by Middleton in 1877–78. Today, the deterioration of these stained-glass windows, alongside masonry degradation to the tower and parapet, has led to its inclusion on the Heritage at Risk Register.

The Diocese is taking an active, hands-on role in addressing these issues through expertise, oversight and financial support.

- ▶ **Specialist Conservation Guidance:** Through its Care of Churches team led by Adam Klups and Rory Wilson, a full stained-glass restoration programme is nearing completion.



Holy Trinity church, Portland Street.

- ▶ **Strategic Phased Restoration:** The Diocese is coordinating a phased restoration plan for the tower – prioritising urgent structural repairs.
- ▶ **Financial Support and Grant Aid:** The Diocese has provided generous financial assistance toward architect and contractor fees, reducing immediate pressure on the Parochial Church Council.
- ▶ **Enabling Sustainable Fundraising:** While over £500,000 must still be raised locally to complete both the stained glass and tower projects, diocesan backing gives credibility to fundraising efforts and strengthens applications for external grants.
- ▶ **A Model of Partnership:** The case of Holy Trinity shows

how the Diocese of Gloucester is tackling heritage risk not simply by preserving buildings, but by:

- combining environmental responsibility with conservation,
- providing expert technical guidance,
- investing financially at critical early stages,
- supporting parishes to plan strategically and sustainably.

The result is a church that continues to serve its community energetically while safeguarding its historic fabric for future generations.

Heritage may be at risk – but through diocesan partnership, it is far from neglected.

In summary, conservation repairs and upgrades are ongoing at Holy Trinity, including a recent external survey of the tower which it is intended be followed by recommended repair works.



St Luke's

The 2024 Quinquennial Inspection Report by James Rees RIBA of Falconer & Gilbert Scott Architects observed that several roof areas have been retiled since the previous report.

The timeline below shows recent works at St Luke's, with a programme of works ongoing as funding allows. Regular inspections and repairs are ensuring that the roofs are water-tight, thus allowing the current focus to be on repointing and repair of masonry. Being a large and complex building there is a need for constant inspection and conservation repairs.

2019 – Water ingress caused an outbreak of dry rot in the south aisle, which spread to the south transept, compromising the integrity of the gallery structure. With the fungus eradicated and roof repairs complete, the gallery was repaired and transformed into a new office.

2020: Combined squirrel damage to leadwork and decayed roof tiles caused a further outbreak of dry rot. Affected areas were overhauled, with three roof pitches being stripped and retiled.

2021: Dry rot was identified again, this time to the suspended ground floor to the south transept which has now been replaced.

2023: A fabric repair programme addressed defects in the external masonry and work started in 2024. This is a long process which is being phased over the next 3-5 five years as funds allow.

2025: Internal reordering works were carried out which included enlarging the nave dais, complete with audio jacks and power points, which allow large groups to rehearse and perform to the congregation.

Rev'd Patrick Wheaton reported that for the external appearance of the building, the PCC have a programme for progressing through repairs to stonework, glazing and ironwork. These all maintain the existing heritage as these things bear public witness to a place of Christian worship, and also bring aesthetic pleasure to our community. Alongside this, we keep the grounds neat and have a coffee van trading – which helps to make the

whole site appealing to visitors while also presenting a place of Christian spirituality and peace. Located opposite the hospital this is an important aspect of our mission.

Internally, we have undertaken developments – some in response to maintenance needs such as damp and dry rot – to facilitate worship and mission. We have partitioned the south transept to create a lower space suitable for Sunday children's groups, and midweek hire by external users. Currently this includes a counselling service and addiction recovery group.

The upper space has been converted into a church office. Another recent major project has been the extension of our dais. This is to facilitate weekly worship, but also to provide a larger 'performance' space for external users. Our church school is central to this. Enacting this is in infancy, and has further human resource needs, but we were recently able to host a Cheltenham Learning Partnership public speaking event.

The majority of funding for these projects has been overwhelmingly drawn from congregational giving. Future projects include extending toilet provision, internal painting and redecoration and enhancing the entrance area. We do not intend to remove the pews.

The project that places St Luke's on the Heritage at Risk Register is the need to replace the church roof. The chancel roof was done in 2017. The cost was c.£90,000. Most came from within the congregation, but Gloucester Historic Churches Trust provided a generous contribution of £20,000. Ongoing maintenance to gutters, pointing and flashing is doing its

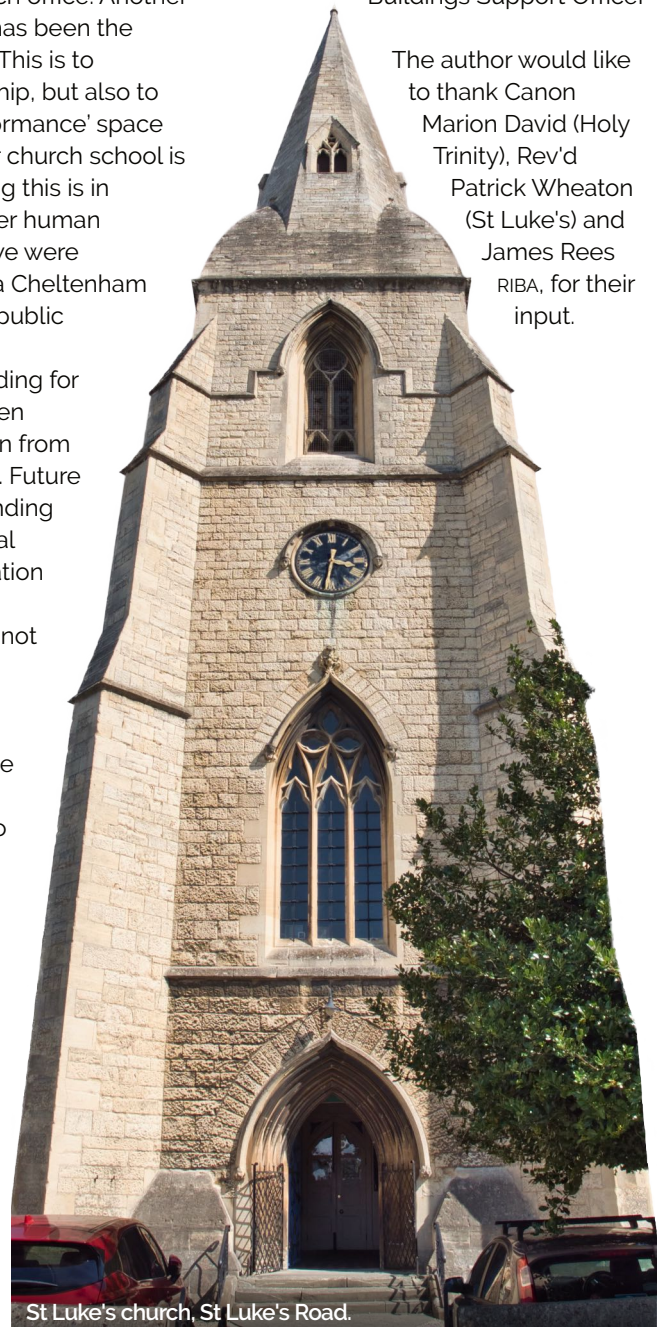
best, however we will have to tackle the rest of the roof at some point.

This will require significant external funding and we have been endeavouring to show how we have a clear vision, and evidence of commitment, in order to access funds.

One significant question will be around balancing ecological and heritage priorities. Replacing an entire roof gives a generational chance to consider solar power generation. However, we are aware permission will be difficult to achieve. ●

Rory Wilson RIBA, Church Buildings Support Officer

The author would like to thank Canon Marion David (Holy Trinity), Rev'd Patrick Wheaton (St Luke's) and James Rees RIBA, for their input.





'High quality design'

Andrew Booton asks: "what does that term really mean?"

'High quality design' appears throughout the planning system, particularly in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). However, it is rarely defined. But is often asserted in applicants' Design & Access statements as though frequency equals proof – it does not.

Too often we hear the cliché that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder'. Taken literally, that would make planning impossible. If beauty were purely subjective, there could be no design codes, no conservation areas, no heritage protection, no basis for preferring a well-proportioned terrace to a blank concrete box. Every decision would collapse into personal taste.

Planning, however, is a public, evidence-based process because qualities such as proportion, coherence, harmony, enclosure, material integrity and human scale can be observed, tested and debated. Tastes may vary but judgement is not arbitrary. Hiding behind subjectivity is an abdication of responsibility.

What high quality design means

High quality design is the extent to which a proposal functions well for users, responds positively to its context, and contributes to local character and identity. It is durable, sustainable and adaptable. Above all, it enhances a place rather than merely avoiding harm. Nothing is so meekly dangerous as the phrase: "Well, it's no worse than what was there before" – an expression that was used by CBC's planners to justify the new garages and concrete wall alongside the River Chelt at Cambray Court.

This approach aligns with the draft NPPF's emphasis on well-designed, beautiful and safe places (para 16(b)), and with the structured principles developed by the former Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE): character, enclosure, movement, legibility,

adaptability and quality of public realm. Thus it encompasses the space between buildings as well as the buildings themselves.

What it is not

High quality design is not a style. High quality design is not a fashionable façade, premium cladding alone, 'modern' for its own sake, a historic pastiche or an unsupported assertion. And it is certainly not established by repetition of the phrase. Quality must be demonstrated – not declared.

How it should be applied

- 1. Proper contextual analysis.** Before design begins, there must be a clear understanding of surrounding scale, massing, fenestration, roof forms, materials, street rhythm, spatial character and key views; and of how natural features like trees and water relate to buildings. In conservation areas, proposals must show how they avoid becoming neutral or harmful contributors but have a positive impact. Without this baseline, 'quality' is not anchored.
- 2. Clear design rationale.** Applicants must explain what is being respected, where contrast is introduced and why, and how character is preserved or enhanced. "This is high quality because it is modern" is not a rationale, whereas a sentence such as this is: "This responds to the established plot rhythm, local material mix and colour palette."
- 3. Objective testing.** Quality should be evidenced through verified drawings, street scenes, material specifications, environmental assessments and townscape analysis. If it cannot be tested and demonstrated, it cannot be relied upon.

A working definition

High quality design is development that not only serves its purpose but also demonstrably improves the appearance, character, function and long-term resilience of a place, evidenced through contextual analysis and measurable performance.

If 'high quality' appears dozens of times without comparison or evidence, it is branding not planning. This is not about architectural ego. It is about enduring place-making: development that works well, reads well and ages well.

Five Questions to ask when 'High Quality' is claimed

1. Compared to what?
2. Against which objective criteria?
3. How does it respond to documented local character?
4. What measurable public benefit does it deliver?
5. How will it have performed in 30 years?

If those questions cannot be clearly answered, 'high quality' is being used rhetorically rather than demonstrably.



Around Town: PUBLIC ART



Sandford Park: Weathered Man, 2006 by James Gould.



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1:	Cavendish House – Editor
2:	Promenade stall – Editor
5:	Parmoor CGI – EDW
6:	131 – Editor; Swift – Pexels
8-9:	Holy Trinity and St Luke’s – Editor
11:	Weathered Man – Editor
12:	Circumspice – Mike Rigby

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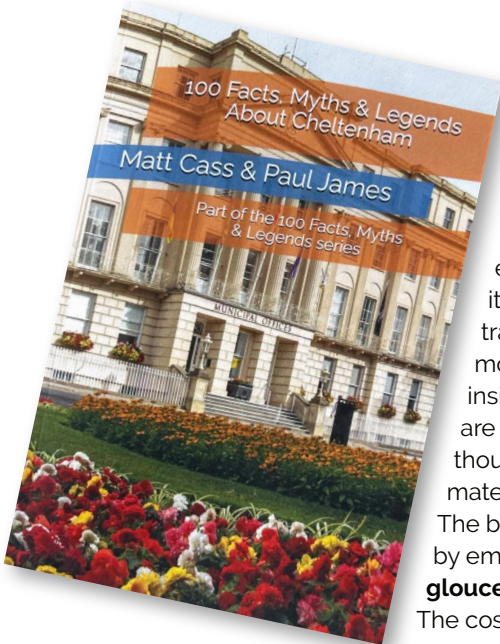
NB: Individual points of view expressed by correspondents in OurTown should not be taken as being representative of Cheltenham Civic Society CIO.



Plans to redevelop the Lansdown Industrial Estate are forthcoming. In response, artists based at the site spent a single day last May documenting its distinctive industrial landscape and heritage through a plein air competition. Each artist selected their own subject, format, and medium, and the works were judged at the end of the day.

This book records that event, featuring the winning pieces along with a curated selection of highly commended works. It also includes a timeline and narrative outlining the site's industrial history. The book is available from wtscollective.co.uk for £12.00.

Cheltonians will recognise many of the entries in this compact collection, but its range is wide – sport, buildings, transport, notable events, legends and more – so there are plenty of surprising insights into the town and its history. We are reminded of the details of what we thought we knew and introduced to new material in a clear and straightforward text. The book can be ordered from the authors by email: gloucesterpaul@gmail.com
The cost is £7.99.



Circumspice 21



Miami Beach Moderne? Not quite. Where in the town is this, and why is the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition of 1934 so significant for interwar suburban development and style? **Rig**

The answers to this mini quiz* can be found on the Society's website: cheltcivicsoc.org/category/news

*Unfortunately there are no prizes!



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