

Chair's Annual Report 2025

The work of Cheltenham Civic Society is guided by its charitable objects:

- To promote high standards of planning and architecture.
- To educate the public in the geography, history, natural history and architecture of Cheltenham and its surroundings.
- To secure the preservation, protection, development and improvement of features of historic or public interest.

This report reflects on how effectively we have met those objectives over the past year.

GOVERNANCE

The Society continues to be well governed by inquisitive, engaged and dedicated trustees who are prepared to challenge proposals, test ideas and make well-reasoned decisions in the best interests of the charity and the town.

Like many voluntary organisations, however, we continue to struggle with trustee recruitment. Committee work appears increasingly unattractive to potential volunteers and it remains difficult to attract people willing to take on the responsibilities of governance. We have explored different approaches to managing expectations and making trustee roles more accessible, but without significant success.

As a result, a small number of trustees continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of the workload. We remain without a secretary for a second consecutive year and this inevitably places additional pressure on those who remain active while increasing our vulnerability to unforeseen departures.

By contrast, we are generally more successful in mobilising volunteers for specific projects, events and community activities. Such opportunities provide clear objectives, defined timescales and visible outcomes that many people find appealing. This contribution is enormously valuable and reflects the bottom-up spirit of the civic movement. Nevertheless, strengthening our trustee base remains a priority if we are to sustain and expand our activities in future years.

COMMUNICATIONS

Benefiting from the vision and expertise of Steve Bryson, our Communications Officer, the Society has continued to exert influence across a wide range of issues, from celebrating local successes to challenging poor planning proposals and promoting more ambitious ideas for Cheltenham's future.

Our quarterly full-colour newsletter, *Our Town*, enjoys wide circulation among members, councillors, our MP, media outlets and other local stakeholders. Our website and social media channels continue to provide a professional and authoritative voice for the Society.

Over the past year we have increasingly focused our social media activity on Facebook, which provides stronger local engagement than either X or Instagram. This approach is beginning to yield dividends, generating greater visibility, wider participation and more informed public debate. At the same time, our national

engagement remains valuable in helping us maintain connections across the wider civic movement and among those shaping the placemaking agenda.

We remain extremely grateful to Steve for the substantial amount of work undertaken behind the scenes to ensure the Society remains visible, influential and effective.

PARMOOR

Parmoor continues to be a challenging renovation project. For much of the year, work was suspended because the adjoining building became structurally unstable and threatened to collapse. We understand this was not due to ground conditions, which would have posed a wider risk to neighbouring properties, but rather to the removal of load-bearing walls within that building.

The situation was particularly unfortunate because Parmoor itself had already lost much of its internal structural strength as a result of the catastrophic fire. With both buildings originally constructed as a pair in the early nineteenth century, the instability next door created an unacceptable risk to contractors and volunteers, who were forced to leave the site until the danger had passed.

We intend to recover both direct and consequential losses from the owners of the neighbouring property. In the meantime, Leckhampton Builders have worked hard to make up lost time and restore momentum to the project.

We now look forward to entering the refit stage, where for the first time we will see the building being rebuilt rather than dismantled. After years of setbacks, it is encouraging finally to see tangible progress.

PROMOTING HIGH STANDARDS OF PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE

This remains the Society's most visible and, at times, most demanding area of activity. During the past year we have engaged extensively with the planning process, reviewing applications across the town and making representations where proposals have fallen short of the standards Cheltenham deserves.

We have consistently advocated for well-designed, contextually aware development and sought to ensure that decision-makers properly discharge their responsibilities towards Cheltenham's historic environment.

Planning Forum

Our Planning Forum – led by Adrian Phillips – continues to provide a valuable platform for informed discussion of planning and development issues. It enables members and the wider public to explore complex topics, from national policy changes to significant local proposals, in a way that is accessible while remaining grounded in expertise.

The Forum met eleven times during the year. We said goodbye to longstanding members Bruce Buchanan, Rob Rimmel and Judie Hodsdon. We welcomed architect Katharina Hoerath and conservation specialist Karen Radford, although Karen was unfortunately only able to remain with the Forum for a short period.

Minutes of meetings are published on the Society's website.

During the year the Forum considered 58 planning applications and commented on a number of important policy consultations issued by local and national government.

Planning Applications

Among the most significant applications considered were:

- **131 The Promenade.** Despite strong objections from Historic England, the Georgian Society, Cheltenham Borough Council's own conservation officers and ourselves, planning permission was granted for a metal-framed pergola structure in front of these Grade II* listed buildings. We remain disappointed by this decision and believe insufficient weight was given to the significance of the heritage asset and its setting.
- **Prinbox Works.** We objected to proposals for new housing on the site of a former light industrial building in Lypiatt Street, arguing that the design failed to preserve and enhance the character of this part of the Central Conservation Area. Despite representations to the Planning Committee, permission was granted. The decision reinforced concerns about the degree of attention being paid to statutory conservation duties.
- **Golden Valley.** We did not engage directly with the planning application process for this major development but instead published a series of questions regarding its wider implications for Cheltenham. These were published in Our Town and subsequently addressed by the council.
- **Pittville Pump Room.** We objected to proposals for a temporary café west of the Pump Room. These proposals did not proceed and we welcome the subsequent decision to make greater use of the Pump Room itself as a venue.

Commenting on Policy

The Society also responded to numerous policy consultations, including:

- National Planning Policy Framework.
- City/Town/Local Centres Topic Paper.
- Residential Above Shops Topic Paper.
- Housing Density Topic Paper.
- Joint Strategic Local Plan Urban Capacity Study.
- Retail and Town Centres Study.
- Nature Recovery Strategy.

Members of the Planning Forum also contributed to the Heritage Action Plan and Cheltenham Tree Strategy.

PRESERVATION, PROTECTION AND IMPROVEMENT

Successful Streets Group – The Importance of the Public Realm

The Successful Streets Group – led by Hugh Curran – exists to protect and improve Cheltenham's public realm – the streets, spaces and infrastructure that shape everyday experience of the town centre.

Too often we encounter poor coordination, inadequate quality control and a lack of strategic oversight, resulting in avoidable defects, repeated repairs and unnecessary expenditure of public money.

For more than five years we have advocated the creation of a Cheltenham Town Centre Forum bringing together the councils, Cheltenham BID, the Civic Society and the police. Such a forum would allow recurring issues to be addressed strategically rather than through a succession of individual complaints.

Current concerns include redundant telephone boxes and advertising kiosks, poorly located cycle hangars, excessive street clutter and the growing use of inappropriate tarmac infills in historic streetscapes.

We are also increasingly concerned by the quality of work undertaken by Gloucestershire County Council's highways contractor, Ringway. Barriers frequently remain in place long after works are completed, repairs are often unsatisfactory and defects can persist despite repeated reports.

One significant success this year was preventing the installation of a large tarmac strip through the Promenade outside Cavendish House. We led a highly visible public campaign and organised a petition that attracted more than 2,000 signatures within little more than a week. The proposal would have caused substantial harm to one of Cheltenham's most important civic spaces and exemplified the tendency to prioritise short-term savings over long-term quality.

The resurfacing works at The Strand remain another example of poor workmanship and inadequate quality control, with defects continuing to be evident despite the work having been undertaken under warranty.

The Group has an active programme of work and, like many parts of the Society, would benefit from additional volunteer support. The work continues.

EDUCATING AND INFORMING THE PUBLIC

Education remains a core charitable purpose and underpins much of what we do. Through our Planning Forum, publications, public engagement activities and Heritage Open Days programme, we continue to make heritage, planning and placemaking issues accessible to a wider audience. Heritage Open Days remains our flagship educational initiative.

Heritage Open Days

Cheltenham Heritage Open Days 2025 took place from 12–21 September and comprised 55 events attended by more than 2,500 people, representing our largest attendance to date.

The programme included open buildings, exhibitions, walks, talks and an online play that was selected by the national Heritage Open Days team as one of its highlights.

Many events were fully booked, with waiting lists for some of the most popular activities.

New events included viewings of Pate's Grammar School's stained-glass window, an exhibition of full-sized reproductions of the Quaker Tapestries, Lodge Park walks and talks, Boarding and Lodging Houses for Visitors to the Spa, and the History of Sandford Park walk. Returning favourites included the ever-popular tour of Cheltenham Ladies' College.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive:

"Hello, just a thank you to all at HODs for the walks and talks this September. My friends and I thoroughly enjoyed our outings finding them not too strenuous, informative, inclusive and interesting."

"I would just like to say thank you so much for organising all the Heritage Open Days. I really enjoyed all of them and learned more about the history of Cheltenham in one week than I have in all the time I have lived here."

Planning is already underway for Heritage Open Days 2026, which will run from 10–20 September.

Our thanks go to Sarah Harvey, her team and all the volunteers whose dedication and enthusiasm make this programme possible.

SUMMARY

Across all three charitable objectives, the Society has remained active, engaged and relevant. We have promoted high standards in planning, provided meaningful opportunities for public education and taken a firm stance in the protection and improvement of Cheltenham's built environment.

The past year has also underlined the limits of influence. Achieving consistently high-quality outcomes depends not only on advocacy but on the decisions and actions of others – developers, officers, contractors and elected members. Where those fall short, the Society's responsibility is to challenge constructively, present evidence and persist.

Success cannot always be measured by the number of battles won. It must also be judged by whether important issues are identified, whether public debate is informed and whether standards are defended. By those measures, Cheltenham Civic Society continues to make a significant contribution to the town.

My sincere thanks go to our trustees, committees, volunteers and contributors whose time, determination and expertise underpin everything we achieve. I also thank our personal and corporate members for their continued support.

Together, we remain a respected and independent voice for Cheltenham's heritage, environment and future.

Andrew Booton
Chairman
Cheltenham Civic Society

