

OurTown

The Newsletter of Cheltenham Civic Society

Issue 43 • Summer 2026

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



Architectural masters student Cynthia Hartmann's attractive proposal for the redevelopment of Cavendish House.

Is Canada Life listening now?

In late May Cheltenham Civic Society (CCS) revealed a stylish proposal for the redevelopment of the now boarded-up Cavendish House. It had been drawn up by Cynthia Hartmann, a masters architectural student at the University of Gloucestershire, with some guidance from members of our Planning Forum. It has been well-received by just about everyone who saw it in the local media or on Facebook and our website.

We emailed details to every

Borough Councillor and the main senior officers but, disappointingly, only one third of them clicked through to read the full story on our website.

Cheltenham Borough Council's (CBC) senior officers initially reacted with some interest, but that was soon stifled by their formal response (see inside).

We know it also reached the site owner, Canada Life, but again there was no initial reaction to the scheme, which we thought demonstrated far

more progress than they had achieved in six years of discussions with CBC.

We then presented the scheme to Max Wilkinson MP, who enthusiastically organised an online meeting with two of our trustees, himself and two senior staff from Canada Life. That at least opened the door after several years of our knocking. We are now in correspondence with their head of communications and have sent them full details of Hartmann's scheme and our financial assessment. ... cont./2

What's in OurTown this time

Pages 2-5 CavHouse progress • **Pages 6-7** September's Heritage Open Days • **Page 8** North Place and S56 progress
Page 9 Historical town map • **Page 10** Mary Body Blue Plaque • **Page 11** Around town • **Page 12** AGM and Circumspice

... / continued from page 1

We've also sent them a detailed example* showing how consultation with local interest groups and the public can achieve positive results if it starts with a blank sheet of paper when or even before the developer begins formal pre-application talks with the planning authority. (So around six years ago in the case of Cavendish House.)

We hoped that these documents might begin to prise Canada Life from their shell. And we are pleased to report just before we go to print that there has been some movement. In their most recent communication following the meeting engineered by Max Wilkinson, Canada Life has requested further details and information on Hartmann's scheme and we are currently endeavouring to supply them with that information.

So we do seem to have moved at least one step forward with Canada Life. And hopefully they will take some inspiration from Hartmann's ideas and recognise the potential shape of a development that townsfolk would support and that we could endorse.

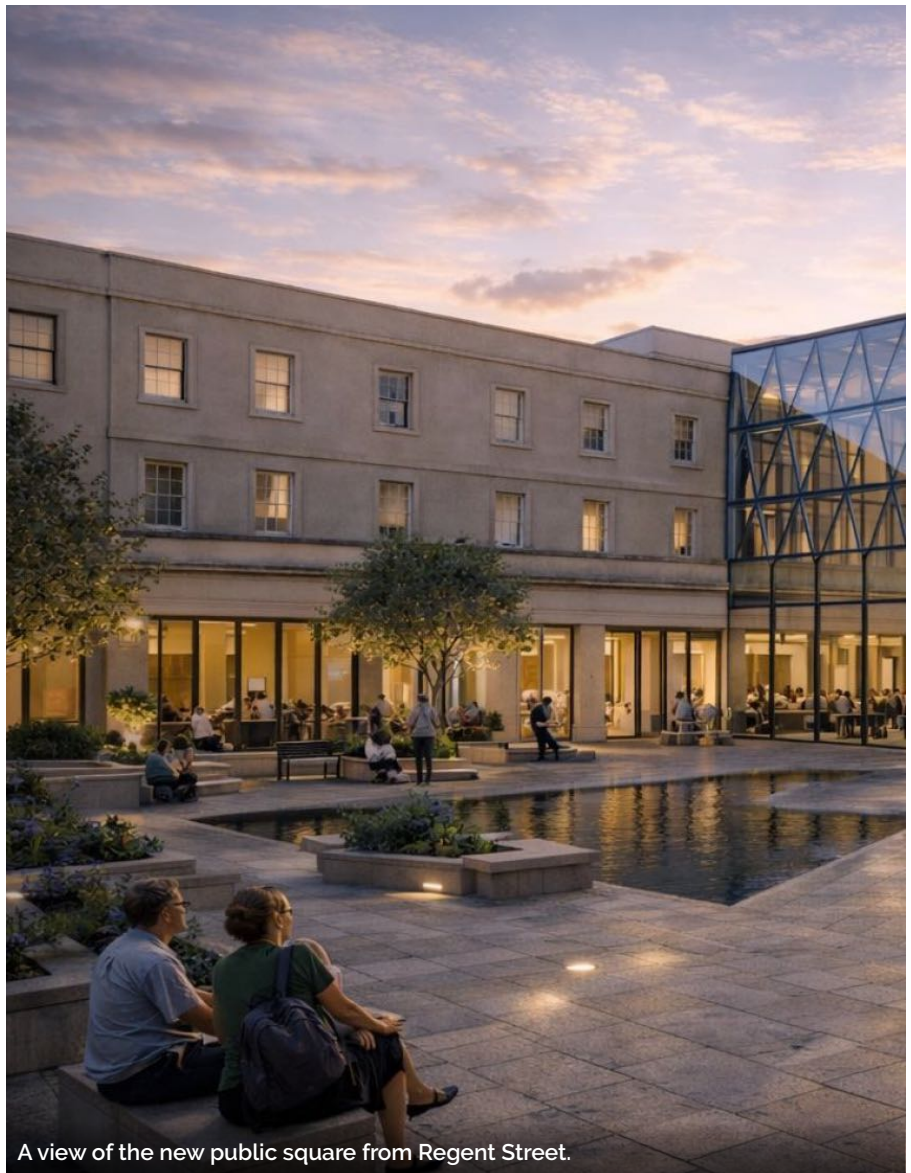
CCS will continue to strongly encourage Canada Life ***"to engage openly and constructively with us, so that we can act as a critical friend and help them to deliver a scheme – over a sensible timescale – that is both great for Cheltenham and well worthwhile for Canada Life's investors."***

But plans still have to get past CBC and they and Canada Life seems to be taking an inordinate amount of time in coming up with an agreed approach. We hope the planners will be looking for something quite outstanding for this site and will be excited by our Cavendish Exchange initiative. ●

* Provided by one of our trustees, who was an expert in this field prior to retirement.



A view from Regent Street of the public square and the thoroughfare to the Prom.



A view of the new public square from Regent Street.



CCS Chair, Andrew Booton, with architectural masters student, Cynthia Hartmann, outside Cavendish House.



Cavendish Exchange proposal could create a new heart for Cheltenham

As Cynthia Hartmann's proposal shows, the empty Cavendish House site could become a vibrant new town centre destination, complete with a grand public square, elegant new shopping arcades, cafés, restaurants and 60 or more new homes.

The visionary scheme, known as "Cavendish Exchange", has been created in just six months as part of Hartmann's architectural studies. The £100 million scheme reimagines the town centre's most prominent and problematic vacant buildings as a lively mixed-use quarter, reconnecting the Promenade with Regent Street and the Everyman Theatre.

The plans in effect represent a bold and detailed iteration of the initial concept put forward by CCS in 2024 as part of its long-running campaign to make sure that any development proposal will benefit the town, not just the investors.

This development proposal would create what many believe Cheltenham has long lacked – a true civic heart and

town square capable of bringing new life, energy and footfall into the town centre. At the heart of the scheme is a complete reimagining of the building's tired 1960s façade. In its place, Hartmann's design introduces a series of elegant, glazed double-height arches, creating a far more refined and visually striking frontage befitting Cheltenham's Regency character and international reputation.

A grand central archway would form a prestigious pedestrian route from the Promenade through into the new square and onwards to Regent Street and the Everyman Theatre – creating a natural flow of movement, activity and footfall across the town centre.

At ground-floor level, shops, cafés and restaurants would animate both the Promenade frontage and the new public square, while upper floors would accommodate a major food hall or destination restaurant and 60 or more high-quality residential apartments overlooking the Promenade and the square.

Explaining her vision for the project, Cynthia Hartmann said: "Fifteen years of working as an interior designer in buildings teaches you to read them differently. You understand how people move through space, where they linger, where they leave.

"Cavendish House has the presence of a landmark and the character of a barrier. What drives people away is the decades of architectural compromise layered over it.

"It occupies one of the most strategic and prestigious sites in Cheltenham, and for years, it has worked against both the streets that define it and the legacy of the town.

"This proposal sets out to exchange that: reconnecting streets, restoring a frontage, and creating the kind of mixed-use public destination that successful town centres are built around – to create a new heart for the town.

CCS's hope is that Cynthia Hartmann's scheme inspires both Canada Life and CBC to endeavour to deliver something just as good. ●



CAVENDISH EXCHANGE cont.

This is CBC's response to our scheme

Thank you for your email and for continuing to share the Civic Society's concerns and ideas regarding this important site.

Cheltenham Borough Council, in its role as Local Planning Authority, is currently engaged in active pre-application discussions with the landowner in respect of Cavendish House. Constructive advice has been provided to the applicant, and we are now awaiting a further iteration of proposals. We have made the applicant aware of the strong local interest in the site, including the Civic Society's engagement and aspirations, and we will continue to encourage meaningful dialogue as proposals evolve.

While the pre-application process is, by its nature, informal, confidential and undertaken at the applicant's discretion, it remains a valuable opportunity to shape emerging proposals in a positive

way prior to submission. Advice given at this stage does not prejudice the Council's formal consideration of a future planning application, and all proposals will be subject to full public consultation and assessment against planning policy at that point.

We fully recognise the significance of this site to Cheltenham town centre and to see it brought forward in a way that enhances the Promenade, strengthens connectivity, and supports wider regeneration objectives. These priorities have been clearly reflected in the advice provided through the pre-application process to date.

We are aware of the Civic Society's recent Facebook article and I will ensure this is shared with the applicant for their awareness.

It is important to be clear that Cavendish House is in private ownership, and the Council does not have direct control over when or how the site is brought forward. While we

will continue to engage proactively with the landowner and strongly encourage progress, decisions relating to investment, timing and the form of development ultimately rest with them.

We fully appreciate the frustration caused by the length of time the site has remained vacant and share the ambition to see it brought back into active use. The Council remains committed to working constructively with the landowner and other stakeholders to support the delivery of an appropriate and high-quality scheme.

In the interim the landowner took on board advice regarding managing the façade and the public art installations have now been concluded alongside the removal of the bridge. ●

Tracey Birkinshaw

Director of Planning & Building Control

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



Join us for just **£20** a year.

Go to our website:

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

CAVENDISH EXCHANGE cont. CCS Chair, Andrew Booton's reply

While we appreciate the update, it is difficult to avoid a sense of profound disappointment at the position that has now been reached.

It is our understanding that CBC and Canada Life have been engaged in pre-application discussions concerning this site for at least six years. Despite that lengthy period of dialogue, no scheme has emerged, no planning application has been submitted and one of the most important sites in the town centre has now fallen vacant and is boarded up.

This outcome is particularly frustrating because the negative consequences were entirely foreseeable. Since Sports Direct bought House of Fraser almost eight years ago, the Civic Society has repeatedly warned that closure of Cavendish House would have a significant impact on the vitality of this part of the town centre. We are now hearing directly from local shop owners and business managers that footfall on this section of the Promenade has fallen by about 40% since the store closed earlier this year after the chaotic rates episode. Whether that figure is exact or not, there is no doubt that the effect on the surrounding area has been severe.

In that context, it is difficult to focus on matters such as the condition of the hoardings. The real issue is that the hoardings should never have been there in the first place. We should not be celebrating artwork on temporary boarding; we should be lamenting the fact that boarding became necessary at all. Equally, the artwork itself was only required because antisocial behaviour in the doorways inevitably led to vandalism and deterioration. These are symptoms of a wider failure to bring the site forward, not successes in themselves.

The continuing lack of progress is now affecting not just the appearance of a single building but the vitality, attractiveness and economic health of the whole town centre. Cavendish House occupies a strategic position affecting both the Promenade and Regent Street frontage with wider implications for the conservation area and Cheltenham's image as a whole.

This stagnation is precisely why the

Civic Society has sought to contribute ideas and stimulate discussion. We fully recognise that our proposals carry no formal authority and are not yet development schemes. However, they serve an important purpose: they begin to explore options, engage the public in a conversation about the future of the site and to shape the conversation around an appropriate style and shape of development at a time when there are real concerns about the architectural quality of new schemes in Cheltenham. We believe it is better to have an open discussion about possibilities than to leave the community excluded from a process that has already been running behind closed doors for many years.

What concerns us most is the apparent acceptance that the Council's role is simply to wait for proposals from the landowner. While we recognise the primacy and principles of private property ownership, local planning authorities possess a range of planning, regeneration and place-making tools that can be used to encourage, facilitate and, where necessary, compel progress on strategically important sites. Cavendish House is undoubtedly such a site. Yet the impression remains that the Council is largely waiting for the applicant to decide what to do and when to do it.

The Civic Society remains willing to engage constructively and positively with both the Council and Canada Life. However, after six years of discussions and no visible progress, it is increasingly difficult to reassure residents, businesses and visitors that there is any meaningful momentum behind the site's redevelopment.

Importantly, this is not simply a frustration felt by the Civic Society. We are hearing repeatedly from residents, traders, business owners and town centre stakeholders who cannot understand why such a prominent site has been allowed to remain in limbo for so long. There is a growing perception that nobody is truly in charge of the process and that the town is being asked simply to wait indefinitely while discussions dawdle on behind closed

doors. That is not a viable position for a site of this importance.

We expect Cheltenham Borough Council, as the Local Planning Authority, to act as an authority. The public rightly expects leadership, direction and firmness when the future of a strategically important town centre site is at stake. Residents and businesses contribute to the public purse, elect local representatives and have a legitimate expectation that their interests will be actively represented. The Council's role cannot simply be to wait passively for proposals to emerge; it must also champion the public interest and provide the leadership necessary to secure progress where progress has stalled.

This is not merely a planning matter; it is also a political matter. Cavendish House sits at the heart of Cheltenham and its prolonged vacancy is having visible consequences for the town centre's economy, vitality and appearance. While we appreciate your response as a senior officer and the constructive engagement we have had with officers, it is disappointing that politicians have thus far been silent on an issue that is attracting such widespread public concern. Given the significance of the site and its implications for Cheltenham's future, we would welcome a clearer political voice and stronger civic leadership alongside the professional planning process.

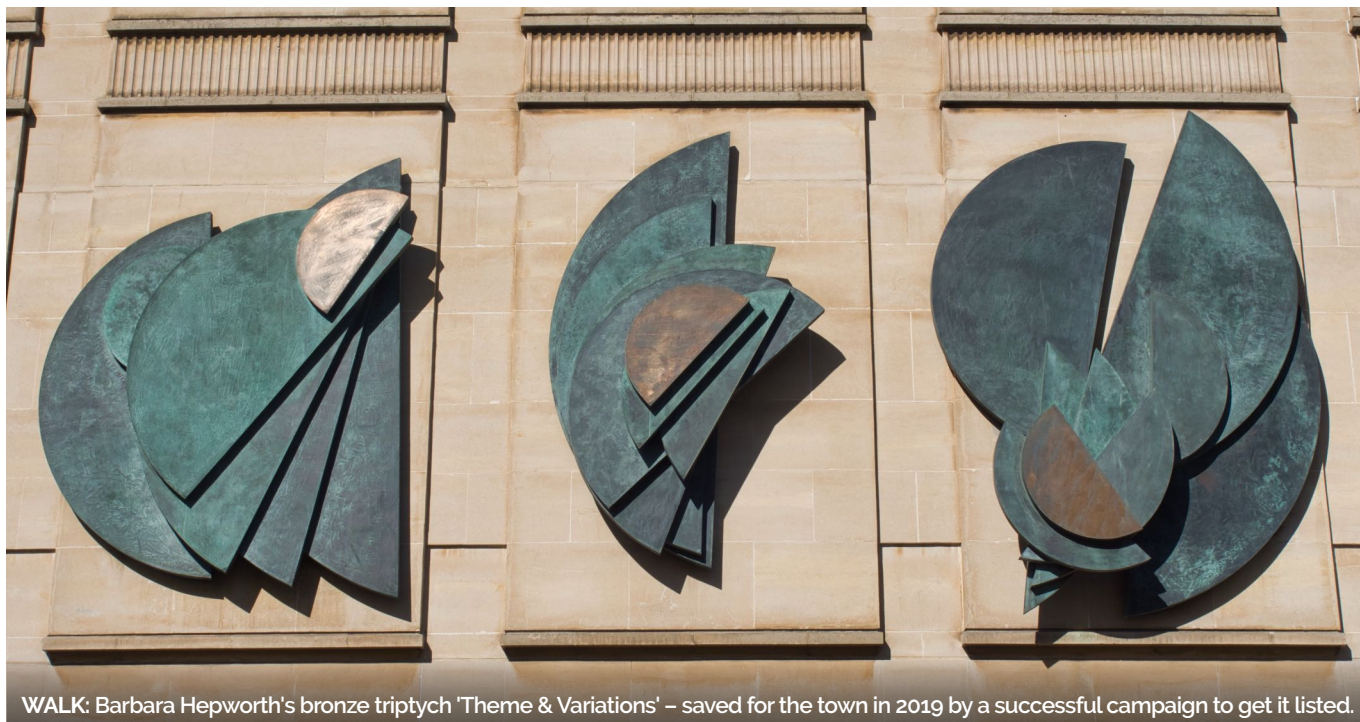
The Civic Society will continue to contribute ideas, encourage debate and strongly advocate for positive solutions. However, it should not fall to a voluntary organisation to provide the impetus for action on one of Cheltenham's most important redevelopment opportunities.

After six years of discussions and no visible progress, the public is entitled to expect greater urgency, stronger leadership and a clearer sense of direction from all those involved. Are we just to hope that both the Council and Canada Life will recognise the strength of public concern and work together to bring forward a credible and deliverable vision for this pivotal site? ●

Andrew Booton, CCS Chair

Heritage Open Days 2026

FRIDAY 11TH TO SUNDAY 20TH SEPTEMBER



WALK: Barbara Hepworth's bronze triptych 'Theme & Variations' – saved for the town in 2019 by a successful campaign to get it listed.



TALK: Everyman Theatre history.

With over 20 new events and many returning favourites, Cheltenham Heritage Open Days is 10 days to explore and learn more about Cheltenham – its buildings, stories and people. From open buildings, talks, exhibitions, music and walks, it's all FREE to explore!

Come along to Cheltenham Farmers' Market on The Prom on Friday 31st July between 9am and 1pm to pick up a brochure and find out more.



WALK: Town centre public art trail.



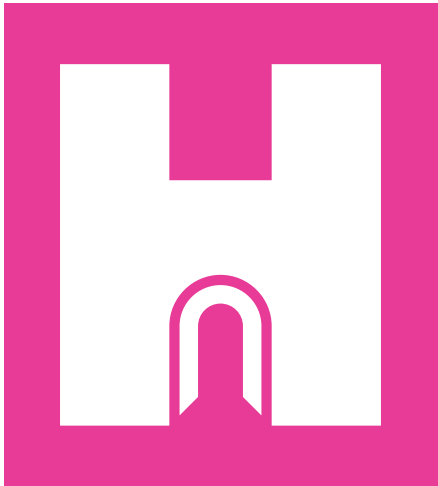
BUILDING: Cheltenham Town Hall.



WALK: Stories of World War II.



WALK: Sherborne Village Bat walk



BUILDING: Pittville Pump Room.



BUILDING: Cheltenham Minster talk and tour.



TALK: Cheltenham from On High.



WALK: Cheltenham's Industrial Heritage



EXHIBITION: 10-year art retrospective.



TALK: Guided tour of All Saints church.

North Place now in view



North Place homes nearing completion – described as ‘prison block chic’ by one of our members. Just visible on the left is one of the curved bays on the back of the Grade II listed St Margaret’s Terrace, which boasts one of the most attractive Regency rears!

When Cheltenham Civic Society objected to the redevelopment of the former Black & White Coach Station site, we warned that this scheme would fail one of the town’s most important gateway locations.

Sadly, what has now been built confirms our concerns. We’re now lumbered with this monstrosity for many years to come.

We should not be surprised. During the planning process, we and many others raised detailed, material objections, especially around the statutory duty to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the

conservation area. Those concerns were not given the weight they required.

The wider issue is that Cheltenham deserves better.

Our planners are failing in their statutory duty towards the conservation area. They are not acting as a local planning authority by shaping developments but are kowtowing to the profit-driven demands of developers.

Part of the problem seems to be poor understanding of aesthetics based on CBC’s unfathomable fixation with ‘contemporary’ architecture, which is not of a high enough standard to warrant inclusion in

conservation areas.

We trust the Planning Committee to make the more difficult planning judgements. But their poor understanding of their statutory duties, of conservation areas and of aesthetics and design showed in their woeful debate of the case. Perhaps their names should be engraved on a plaque and placed on this site so that their failure can be remembered!

The unoriginally named ‘Arkle Court’ joins Uncivic Award winner Dowty House in an area now marred by terrible developments.

When will we learn? ●



CCS gears up to see Gloucestershire County Council in Court

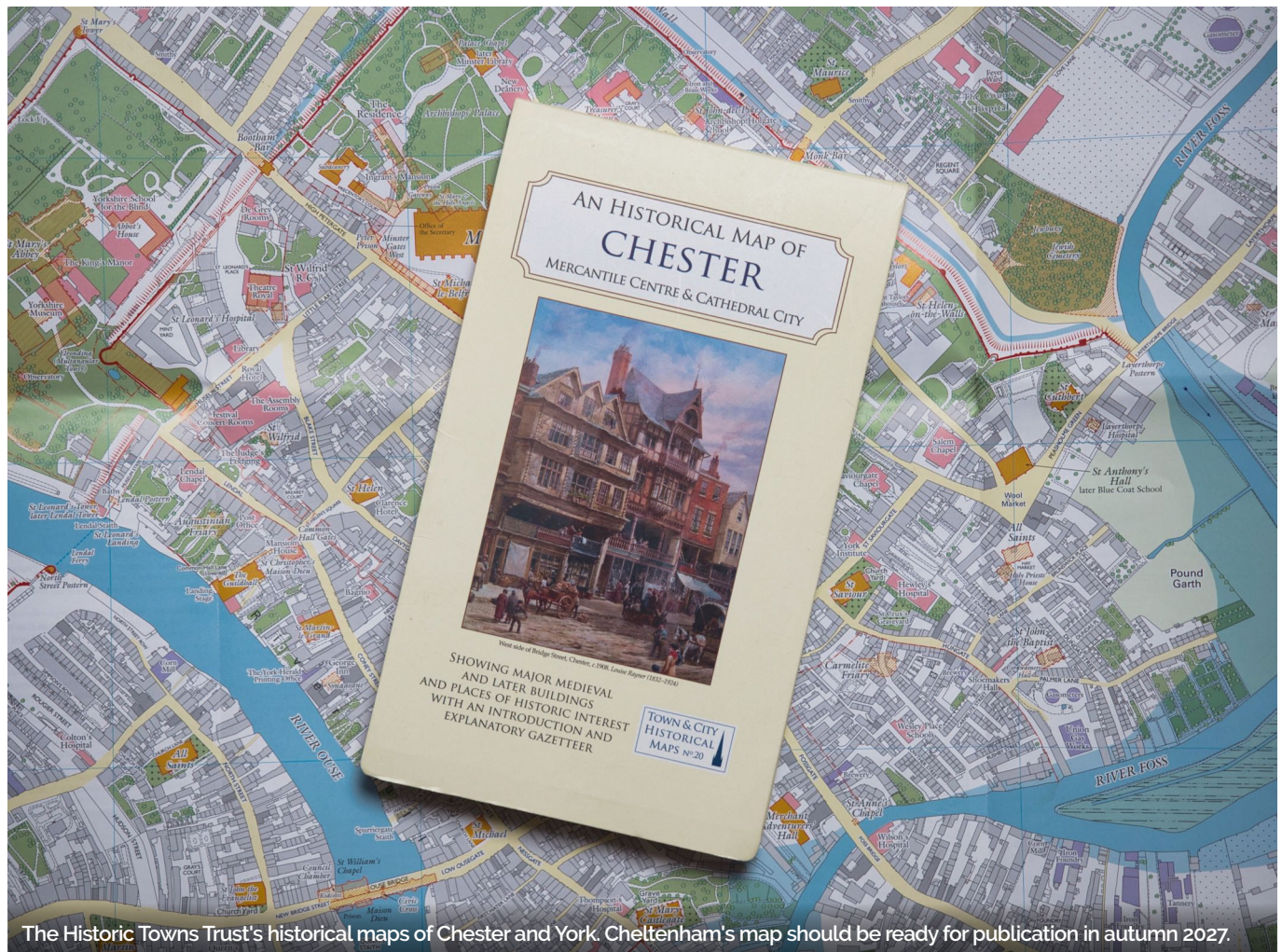
In May, Cheltenham Civic Society again served a Section 56 notice on Gloucestershire County Council (GCC) over the condition of the Promenade and the Strand, seeking to compel the authority to bring these highways into proper repair.

We met GCC’s new Cabinet Member for Highways, Cllr Mark Harris, and two officers on site, agreeing a four-week

deadline for a response. GCC has since requested more time because of staff absences, which we have reluctantly granted.

Meanwhile, CBC, GCC and Cheltenham BID have launched a public survey on the same two streets. Disappointingly, despite campaigning on these issues for more than five years, CCS was not invited to participate.

The survey focuses on physical improvements but overlooks long-term management of the public realm. We continue to call for a Town Centre Forum, as recommended by the 2023 Local Government Association’s Peer Review of CBC. With Local Government Reorganisation approaching, effective local stewardship has never been more important. ●



CCS-led project team starts work on new historical town map

With the initial help of a donation of £10,000 by one of our members, Cheltenham Civic Society is leading a campaign to produce a prestigious historical map of Cheltenham.

The map will be created by working in partnership with The Historic Towns Trust (HTT), which is a national charity that produces atlases and maps that display the history of British towns and cities. The finished Cheltenham map – to be based on the Ordnance Survey map of 1920 – will illustrate and explain how the town developed over hundreds of years.

CCS has already set up a project board led by Sarah Staniforth CBE and our Planning Forum Chair, Adrian Phillips CBE, and including local historians, geographers, heritage experts and educators. One of their first tasks is to seek and employ a project coordinator to pull together all of the information needed and work

with HTT on the map's preparation, with HTT's cartographer producing the detailed artwork.

HTT has been in existence for over 70 years and is part of a Europe-wide programme. The atlases and maps they produce are of very high standard: they are beautiful productions in their own right and great tools for education and citizen engagement around local heritage. And, of course, all the maps are sold by 'all good booksellers' as well as on-line by HTT:

<https://www.historictownstrust.uk>

Ours will probably retail at £12-14.

Among the towns for which HTT has recently produced maps are Bath, Oxford, Cambridge, Canterbury, Bristol, Swansea, Perth, Chester, Bradford, Coventry, Ipswich and Hull. Each map is produced through a partnership between HTT and a local group – such as a civic society or a historical society.

As well as appointing the coordinator,

our project board has a target of raising £25,000 to cover the remaining cost of all the design and production work.

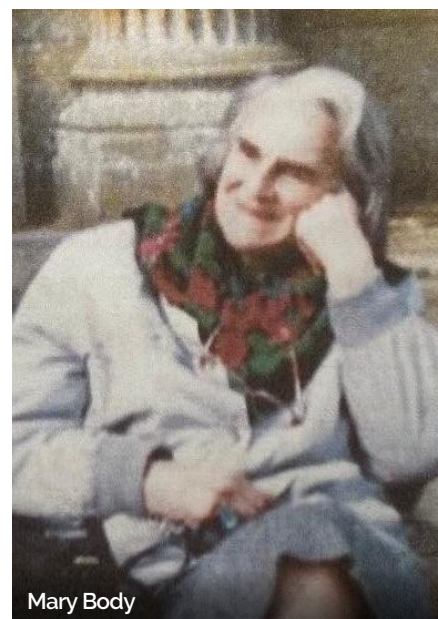
CCS member Colin Smith – who raised much of the funding for the Society's successful WWI Battlefield Crosses Museum two years ago – has volunteered to undertake this fundraising for the map.

So in the next few months he will be leading our efforts to secure a main sponsor for the map. Our targets are likely to include the major employers in the town – so if you just happen to be a director of one of those companies, we would love to introduce you to Colin!

We will shortly appoint the project coordinator and launch the project at the Pittville Pump Room on 15th September as part of the Heritage Open Days festival. We aim to complete the research and production work by autumn next year, in time for a launch during 2027's LitFest. ●

First Blue Plaque to celebrate Cheltenham codebreaker

MARY BODY'S SECRET LIFE COMMEMORATED ON HER SWINDON VILLAGE HOME



Mary Body

A new Blue Plaque was unveiled in late June by Cheltenham Mayor, Cllr Martin Horwood.

The plaque – at 'Homestead' in Swindon Village – commemorates the life of Mary Margery Body. It is the first Blue Plaque in Cheltenham for a Bletchley Park and GCHQ codebreaker.

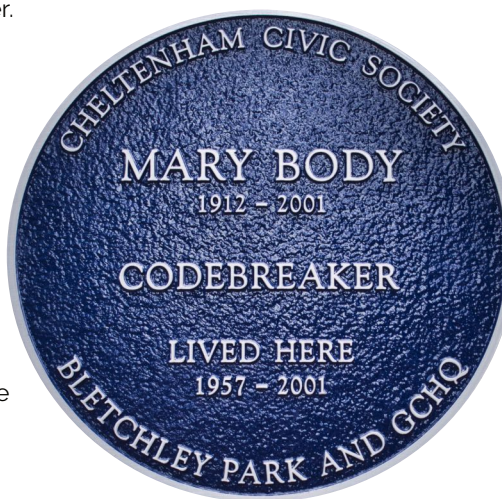
Her contributions to British intelligence during and after World War II remained unrecognised during her lifetime. But her story has since emerged as a testament to her service and commitment to our national security.

Mary was recruited to Bletchley Park for cypher work by the renowned codebreaker Dilwyn Knox and she worked in The Cottage there from 1940, contributing to breaking the German Enigma codes – a critical intelligence effort that helped shorten the war by at least two years.

Her work involved long, repetitive tasks that played a key role in intercepting enemy communications – including those related to German submarine movements during the Battle of the Atlantic. Being a speaker of Italian, she probably worked on Italian traffic too.

After World War II, Mary continued her intelligence work with GCHQ, including a posting to Australia and two detachments to Washington, DC.

Settling in Cheltenham in 1957, Mary bought Homestead in Church Road, Swindon Village, where she developed a garden that became her passion. She was also the first contributor to the Swindon Village History Project, and actively supported local heritage and



community engagement. She died in 2001 and was buried in St Lawrence Churchyard, close to her home.

Cheltenham Mayor, Cllr Martin Horwood, said: "Mary's story is typical of so many that bind Cheltenham to the history of both Bletchley Park and its successor GCHQ, so important both to our town and our country. It's wonderful that the Civic Society blue plaque now recognises her

contribution, which she herself kept dutifully secret for so long."

Cheltenham Civic Society Chair, Andrew Booton, said: "This Blue Plaque is the first one in the town to mark the contributions made by those who worked at Bletchley Park and GCHQ. Mary Body was one of our town's many unsung heroes who worked in complete secrecy, and we are honoured to commemorate her life's work.

"This is the only plaque to mark the contribution of those who have worked at Bletchley Park and GCHQ and have lived in the town. There are certainly many others. Should we consider a general memorial in the town that acknowledges their contribution to the nation and our local community?"

Cheltenham Civic Society has created two Google maps that anyone can use to explore the town to find all of our plaques and learn about the people and events that helped to shape Cheltenham.

Links to both of the maps – for both Blue Plaques (people) and Green Plaques (events) – are on the Commemorative Plaques page, which can be found in the secondary menu at the bottom of each page on the Society's website:

<https://cheltcivicsoc.org> ●

Around Town



Cheltenham College's Thirlestaine House on Bath Road: one of Cheltenham's five Grade I listed buildings.



Key contacts

Andrew Booton:	Chair	chair@cheltcivicsoc.org
Hugh Curran:	Successful Streets Chair	ssg@cheltcivicsoc.org
Steve Bryson:	Editor of OurTown	comms@cheltcivicsoc.org
Adrian Phillips:	Planning Forum Chair	planning@cheltcivicsoc.org
Karen Fish:	Membership Secretary	membership@cheltcivicsoc.org

Enquiries

✉ enquiries@cheltcivicsoc.org

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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.



<https://cheltcivicsoc.org>

Photo and image credits

PAGE

- 1-5: Cavendish Exchange images – Cynthia Hartmann; Booton & Hartmann photo – Editor
- 6-7: Hepworth, Pump Room, St Peter's & Minster – Editor; other HODs images – participants
- 8: North Place and slabs – Editor
- 9: HTT maps – Editor/HTT
- 10: Blue Plaque unveiling – Editor;
- 11: Thirlestaine House – Editor
- 12: AGM – Editor; Circumspice – Mike Rigby; Parmoor – Andrew Booton

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More than 40 CCS members attended the Society's AGM at the New Club on 17th June. The formal business – including confirmation of Karen Fish as our new Membership Secretary – was followed by a wide-ranging discussion of current issues. The full accounts for 2025, together with the Chair's Annual Report can be found on the CCS website: <https://cheltcivicsoc.org/downloads> ●

Circumspice 22



Where in the town is this fine house? What part might it have played in the nation's fight against the spread of Bolshevism and Revolution? **Rig**

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

*Unfortunately there are no prizes!



The first members to see the space that will become our 99-seat meeting room.

CCS members had the opportunity to visit Parmoor on Saturday 4th July. The building is now watertight and has been subdivided into the two residential floors and the upper ground level community space and facilities for CCS. The next stages are to create and fit out the two flats on the lower ground floor and to repair the front façade of the building. ●



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