



www.leamingtonsociety.org

The Leamington Society Newsletter

November 2020

Chairman's Notes

Suddenly a lot seems to be happening in Leamington, despite the pandemic and the curtailment of normal life. The Town Hall now hosts Motionhouse's creation and rehearsal space in The Assembly Room, with a Post Office, open in lockdown, on the ground floor.

The Creative Quarter is beginning to progress at last, starting with a formal planning application for the restoration and conversion of the Grade II United Reformed Church to a new digital creative business hub, encouraging collaboration with other creative industries and the public. The application should be submitted by the end of this year. This will be followed by plans for Spencer Yard, already transformed by murals; do have a look if you have not seen them (pictured on page 3).

1 Mill Street is open, a building with a long and varied history, now imaginatively repurposed, providing hot desking, dedicated desks and flexible offices, production studio, meeting areas, events spaces and The Muse café relocated from Regent Grove.

We hope that the final work on the resurfacing of the paths in the Pump Room Gardens will be completed when the weather permits. Work will also start on minor improvements to York Walk, in readiness for the Commonwealth games.

Events and Talks

Witch

Finbar Hawkins
Thursday, November 26th, 7.30

The vision and hopes for Royal Leamington Spa in 2021

Andrew Day
Thursday, January 21st, 7.30

The Past and the Future of 1 Mill Street

Nigel Shanahan,
Thursday, February 18th, 7.30

Electric Square and Women in Gaming

Abbey Plumb
Thursday, March 18th, 7.30

Alas Network Rail have declined, so far, to spruce up the railway bridge over Princes Drive for the occasion. I do not know if a flurry of letters to the Chief Executive would help, but it might: Andrew Haines, Network Rail, 1 Eversholt Street, London NW1 2DN.

Finally, it is good to see so many people at our Zoom meetings. Please do invite your friends and neighbours as these meetings are free, and a good introduction to the Society. Some are available as recordings on our website.

Sidney Syson

Coming talks. These will be conducted using Zoom. The necessary code to connect will be circulated by MailChimp to members in advance of each meeting.

Joint meeting with the Leamington Literary Society

Witch. Finbar Hawkins will talk about his recently published novel *Witch* set in the Civil War and the witch hunts of 1646-7. It is a novel about Magick and realism, siblings and family.

He will explain the power of books and making them beautiful, lyrical, living things and how he created the illustrations to accompany his first novel, now on its third print run and with publishing deals in the Czech Republic and France.

Finbar is Creative Director at Aardman Creations, of Wallace and Gromit fame.

The vision and hopes for Royal Leamington Spa for Leamington Spa in 2021 Andrew Day, leader of Warwick District Council.

Will the coming year be better than the last? Let us hope so.

The Past and the Future of 1 Mill Street. Nigel Shanahan will tell us how he and his wife Dessie have transformed the interior of this elegant building while providing a valuable community asset for the town.

Distribution of this newsletter

While the country remains subject to restrictions due to the pandemic, the Society will continue to distribute its Newsletter by MailChimp. A small number of hardcopies will be printed and delivered for members who do not use email.

Spencer Yard murals



The perfect present

Why not give your family and friends one year's membership of the Leamington Society to give them pleasure and help the Society at the same time ?

I will provide a pack consisting of a card of the Bandstand, a leaflet giving details of all the Society's activities and a copy of the latest newsletter including membership until March 31 2022.

Email me mbegg@cbegg.com with your request and the details of the new member or members including their email and postal addresses, and telephone number. The price will be £17 for household membership or £12 for a single member – the extra £2 covers the cost of the card. This can be paid by cheque to the *Leamington Society* or directly to the Society's account, sort code 30-94-93, account no. 00184791.

Thank you for your support. I will of course encourage new members to renew in their own right in 2022.

Margaret Begg, Membership Secretary

The effect of Covid-19 and recent town centre changes on Leamington business

It is a privilege to be welcomed back to write for the Leamington Society. When I wrote last May, I reflected on the challenges ahead and the qualities of kindness, support, resilience, creativity and collaboration we witnessed, as local businesses met them head on. Since then it has been a rollercoaster for our town centre and businesses. Reopening in June was a team effort of mutual support. Inside their doors, businesses installed stickers, sanitiser and screens. Outside the doors the BID team welcomed customers back. Tapping into the 'town's DNA' our floral social distancing pavement stickers went viral and we worked to install lamp post covers and floral street crossings. Notably, the County Council temporarily closed roads to make space for social distancing.

Our attempts to 'bounce back' were supported by national incentives like 'eat out to help out'. Footfall steadily recovered to around 70% of normal. Alongside this, a new lens through which to view our town emerged with questions about what next? These addressed aspirations for improved health and wellbeing, the climate change agenda,

shopping locally and mobility changes with uncertainty about the road closure and critically, the impact of all this on our local economy and wider community.

Now we are back in lockdown again, and these questions remain.

The emerging dialogue has revealed a number of issues:

- the circumstances and needs of individuals and businesses vary widely, so we need to listen and learn from all;
- our town centre is an eco-system with interconnected elements (e.g. environment, highways, waste, economy, residents) so we need to understand these elements and their connections;
- timing is critical – both in terms of our Covid-19 recovery and future planning, so we must provide both short term support and consider longer term aspirations; and finally,
- our underlying values (e.g. equity, accessibility, transparency) need to be identified to shape our future dialogue and direction – what matters to us?

Alongside this, positive change is in progress. We recently welcomed the opening of the spectacular 1 Mill Street, offering a new way of working. Consultation on the Creative Quarter is underway. Plans for the Commonwealth Games are in progress including changes around the station forecourt.

Together, this suggests the need for a revised vision for our town centre – a ‘re-vision’ that brings together existing plans with an understanding of the future needs and aspirations of our town centre community. This is something that we will consider in the new year and we welcome support and feedback. In the meantime, I urge you to support local businesses. They need it. Please visit www.loveleamington.com to find out more.

Steph Kerr, Executive Director, BID Leamington

Re-Cycling Newbold Comyn

Since the golf course closed, WDC has been consulting on its future. In the most recent Masterplan, cycling dominates their proposals, including "skills oriented" and "cross country" tracks with a "family trail" shared with walkers. Most of these routes encourage energetic, strenuous, exciting cycling - which is fine in the right place, but

the Masterplan superimposes cycle tracks all over the landscape that it simultaneously designates an "extended nature reserve". Imagine the furore if WDC planned to impose a network of cycle tracks across the Leam Valley nature reserve.

The Comyn has been much appreciated by walkers lately; but as a former golf course it is not a diverse habitat and its development as a reserve will be a long-term project, needing natural connectivity across the area.

The District seems set on pursuing up to £400,000 from British Cycling (BS) – half the estimated capital cost of all these tracks – in return for making them the main feature. To join the BS funding short list, WDC plans to spend £55,000 on a hurried design for cycle tracks in early 2021. Meantime consideration of the needs for an effective nature reserve will be left as an afterthought, compromised by the rush to lay down cycle routes. Are Warwickshire Wildlife Trust being taken for granted as potential partners?

The District has stated that it wishes the Comyn's future to be for local use and specifically denies the intention of it becoming a "destination facility". However, entry to the cycle tracks would be free and BS is quoted as enthusing that that the facility will attract many cyclists, pulling in riders from far and wide as a "destination"

In the report, WDC shows pie charts registering interest in various activities. Notably absent was a specific question to show appreciation of the Comyn for peaceful walking. The report does note that of all the various proposals a nature reserve was the most valued; what it fails to acknowledge is that this reserve will be hugely compromised by busy cycle tracks criss-crossing the same landscape.

There is a possible compromise for the whole area. If cycling were concentrated in the NW half of the old golf course it could still link to the Champion Hill cycle area. Then the SE half of the old course could be transformed into a genuine nature reserve, extending the Leam Valley reserve. This would be a sounder long-term investment, compared with the short-term dash for cash, a small fraction of the suggested total budget of £8 to £10 million.

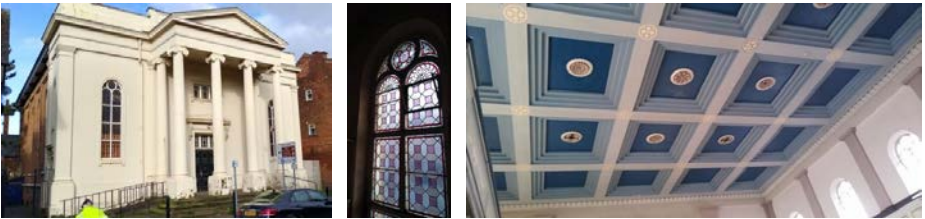
Richard Ashworth

United Reform Church and Spencer Yard proposals

CPD (Complex Projects Design) have published their outline plans for Spencer Yard – the URC and surrounding buildings, under the umbrella name of Leamington Creative.

The public presentation by CPD in November focussed mainly on the URC. This is in a semi-derelict state and deteriorating, while still containing attractive features.

The plans show how the interior could be converted into small units/offices suitable for start-up businesses, like IT enterprises. Apparently there is a shortage of such space in Leamington.



Conversion of United Reform Church (cgi)

The audience questioned the absence of any other form of creative activity, although there were nearby buildings that could be employed; also questioned was competition with the newly opened 1 Mill Street which also provides small units.

The presentation showed how this elegant listed Grade II Victorian building dating from 1836 might be saved. Previous plans for the building collapsed in 2012 when the

government ended the anticipated funding through Advantage West Midlands which would have involved converting the building for use by the Loft theatre.

If the present plan comes to fruition, much of the fabric of the building would be saved, albeit for business; the alternative could be demolition and redevelopment of the site.

The cost of the plan was not mentioned, nor how it was to be financed.

Archie Pitts

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE – Government consultation document

The Leamington Society disagrees with the opening statement that home ownership should be everyone's goal. Even if true for the majority in the long term, rented property should not be a 'second rate' option. Young people may want to move around the country, or even abroad, and home ownership might be too inflexible. Rented accommodation should provide the same standards as purchasing.

We agree that the infrastructure – the building of roads, schools, GP surgeries and green spaces – should be completed before people move into new homes.

The preservation of the Green Belt should not be a 'nimby' straitjacket to defend the *status quo* but a beneficial complement to developments so that an ecological balance is achieved with the increase in housing. Changes to the Green Belt should only be contemplated in exceptional cases.

One aim of the consultation is an improvement in design standards. Many Local Authorities, including WDC, already have 'Design Guides'. However, there is little evidence for their effect indicating that the political pressure to get houses built has reduced pressure on developers to conform, beyond lip-service to the design statements.

Increased housing density and brown-field site development have long been promoted by the Leamington Society and it welcomes the Government's interest in these issues. These measures need preliminary surveys and professional design services to develop high-quality solutions for public consultation, which are no longer affordable for Local Authorities. It is not their obstructionism which is limiting such development. Simply relaxing the planning regulations and allowing an uncontrolled free-for-all will result in conflict and the lowering of standards.

The obvious consequence of allowing uncontrolled upward expansion of existing development is that people living nearby would suffer, unless the work is well designed which cannot be taken for granted. We have already witnessed the conversion of offices to housing under the earlier 'Permitted Development' route, with seriously sub-standard accommodation created by unscrupulous developers. Exempting Conservation Areas from these looser controls will increase an impression of 'double standards' – emphasising the quality of these areas at the expense of those outside.

The planning process could be improved and updated but speed should not be at the expense of scrutiny and consultation. We need to ensure that any project makes a positive contribution to its setting. More housing is needed but only the right housing in the right place, also reflecting the need for energy conservation and optimum use of materials. Alternatives to the conventional methods, ranging from self-build to pre-fabrication, should be seriously considered instead of leaving matters in the hands of profit conscious developers, which has never been a formula for creative, imaginative, locally orientated solutions.

The Leamington Society was closely involved in the recently approved Local Plan and this cumbersome planning process also needs improvement. The long process does not encourage flexibility in a constantly changing scenario. For example, the imposed housing targets for the area bore little relation to real need – or with the Government's own ONS (Office National Statistics) data.

The Society thinks that planning solutions should be generated locally so that the particular needs of local communities can be addressed. Centralising control of the planning process enables the national Government to override the wishes of the Local Authority and by implication its citizens.

Richard Ward

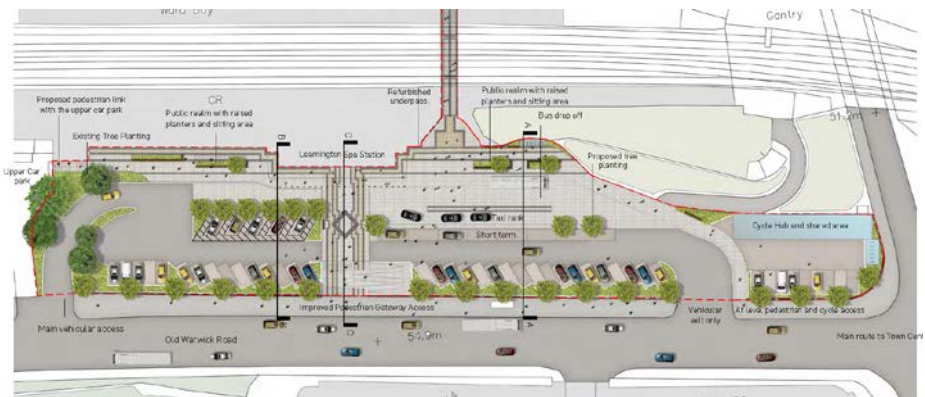
Redesign of station forecourt

A major redesign of Leamington station forecourt is being prepared. Work will start in 2021 and finish before the Commonwealth bowls at Victoria park in August 2022. The works should bring permanent benefits to the town. For details see

<https://www.warwickshire.gov.uk/leamingtonstation>

The changes will provide secure cycle storage on the forecourt and echelon car parking to ease manoeuvring into and out of spaces. The changes will also increase pedestrian space around the currently congested station entrance. Since nearly half of travellers arrive and leave on foot this additional pedestrian space is much needed. The cost of the cycle storage is being funded by a specific grant, already allocated.

There will be a reduction in all-day parking on the station forecourt (from about 90 to 50 places). Parking space is available further along Old Warwick Road and north of the station.



New layout proposed by WCC and consultants Atkins

The shabby subway will be cleaned and better lit making it more welcoming.

The works will be funded with a grant of £1 million from the Coventry and Warwickshire Local Enterprise Partnership, plus other monies.

Archie Pitts

Our town's bandstand

It is finished, completed, concluded, done – some may say "at last". After years of planning and preparation, followed by 28 months of site works, we are of course referring to the completion of the bandstand refurbishment in the Pump Room Gardens.

This Town Centre bandstand, one of a very few with an undercroft, once the centre

piece of Victorian outdoor life in the Town, which in recent years was sadly showing its age, has now been fully and expertly refurbished by Lost Art, as a major project, with the Leamington Society and Warwick District council as partners, funded mainly by the Heritage Lottery Fund but also by public subscription collected by the Society and with contribution from the District Council.



November 2020

© Jan Gillett

After removal of asbestos from the roof, the corroded and damaged cast ironwork was completely dismantled and taken away to the contractors' workshop, where it was repaired and re-painted before its return to site for reconstruction. The cracked concrete base was broken out and reconstructed. The door

to the undercroft was replaced and a bespoke cast iron grille fitted over the access for safety. The render around the base was replaced and painted, a narrow planting bed formed around the bandstand and the old damaged original steps up to the bandstand deck were replaced with new stonework.

The project was found to be anything but straight forward, with many difficulties encountered throughout, and the Friends of the Pump Room Gardens provided continuous supervision to ensure that only the highest standard of work was achieved.

Reconstruction was substantially finished by March 2019 but reopening the undercroft that had been wrongly sealed and making other final decisions into the works caused extended delay. However the end result, of which we are extremely proud, is that the bandstand is now as it would have been seen in 1889 when first constructed.

The overall project included improvements to the whole of the gardens, including resurfacing/reconstruction of the paths; rebuilding the wall of the raised planting bed along The Parade; provision of many new benches; drainage improvements; and the

creation of a landscaped area at the Western boundary. The majority of these groundworks have now been finished but defects in the new footpath surfaces have only been partially corrected and will only be completed when weather conditions permit next year.

Completion of the works should have heralded a season of events centred on the refurbished bandstand, but the advent of Covid-19 has sadly prevented this from happening, at least this year. We are all eagerly waiting for a time when it is safe to encourage public gatherings.

For a short film about the repairs in Lost Art's workshop see

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W3wBYdj4dgM>

Ian Bradbury, Chairman, Friends of Pump Room Gardens

Lily Crowther on Making Histories: New responses to the ceramics collection

As the topic was based on the Leamington Art Gallery and Museum collection of ceramics, it was shared with FLAG, who sponsored the excellent exhibition book. It is worth buying, if you have an interest in ceramics, and is free to FLAG members.

Lily invited eminent local potters to visit the collection and select items which would inspire them. The Museum has a miscellaneous ceramics collection, much of which was bequeathed by local benefactors and reflected their individual interests. The categories selected by the modern makers included Dutch and English Delftware; Japanese Imari china; Roman, British and Peruvian domestic pottery including early slipware; Staffordshire figures and plates and precious pieces of repaired blue and white china.

Inspirations and new pieces are displayed together in the Exhibition gallery and some new pieces are for sale.

The talk was well delivered and explained what might otherwise be a bewildering



Caughley tea bowl and saucer,
18th century,
repaired by Michelle Taylor, 2020

display, ranging from crude and lumpy jugs and bowls through water toys to a delicate garniture of elegant porcelain vases. My personal favourite was the blue and white china, previously repaired with glue and rivets. Those of us who watch *The Repair Shop* [BBC1 TV series] know that the modern ideal is to make any repair invisible. The Japanese have a different aesthetic: they repair china with golden glue, emphasizing the damage. This inspired the modern artist to repair with thread and textiles: gold stitching for the rivets, embroidered linen for the chips, which gives these broken objects interest and a new lease of life.

Well worth watching. Thank you, Lily.

Marianne Pitts

Looking ahead - what the railway can do in a 'new normal'

What a contrast to our normal "Leamington Station Friends" evening; a full hall and a good sprinkling of railway people in the front seats. But "Zoom" is enabling organisations to survive, and Ian Baxter attracted 50 or so people for an excellent update on railway matters in 2020.



After Bridget Riley

He started with HS2, setting out the big picture as it was always

intended, but has been lost in the drama of "High Speed 2".

The project is justified as much by the release of capacity on existing lines as it is by easing the passage of longer distance travellers, but it is a complicated story to tell and the popular press has made no attempt to do so. Taking the Coventry to Birmingham New Street corridor as an example he showed that the reduction in current London expresses will allow for a transformation of the local services to inner Birmingham stations, with consequent economic benefits to deprived communities. He instanced

many other areas where this will apply, and whilst it does not bring back the recently felled ancient pear tree it does redress the cost benefit balance.

He then turned to the current hiatus around the effect of Covid-19, and whilst the situation is still very uncertain he did clarify the big picture. In particular that although there will be an increase in homeworking there will still be a huge demand for travel. Already traffic is worse than before in some areas; people have to travel but go by car. Covid-19 presents a unique opportunity to rethink the whole basis of the railway system, but no doubt political biases and ambitions will dominate the decisions, as they have done for over 100 years.

We will always be in debt to Ian as the original sponsor of the Friends group, and it was great to hear him again.

Jan Gillett

The railways in 2020: an optimist finds hope

Ian Baxter gave the Society's annual talk on railways by Zoom on 22 October. Fifty members and guests enjoyed a well-prepared presentation on two main themes.

Inevitably, as one of those involved, Ian reminded us of the success of Chiltern Railways, now owned by the German state railway, in exploiting the underused asset of the Great Western's London-Birmingham route. Faster and more frequent train services, a new route to Oxford, and improvements at stations are its valuable contribution to the prosperity of our sub-region of the West Midlands.

He praised Chiltern, and the offshoot consultancy for which he works, for adding 'Parkway' stations to the network; though those who wonder what Warwick Parkway does which Leamington could not; why so few use Stratford Parkway; or what is the purpose of Worcestershire Parkway, where many trains can serve the city or the new station but not both, might be slightly warier.

Many see HS2 as a giant 'Park + Ride' for London, and, given its £100bn cost (and its destruction this very week of ancient woodlands close to Leamington), wonder whether it is worth building. Ian explained in detail that it will increase capacity for long-distance trains, leaving more room on existing routes, for example through Coventry, for slower trains. He admitted that the structural change in the demand for

travel which will be the railway's version of 'long Covid' puts HS2's revenue forecasts in doubt, and that it will bring no return unless the whole route, northwards as well as southwards, is completed.

Throughout, Ian dealt admirably and openly with members' questions. He concluded with a nostalgic glance at the last days of the GWR, bent on improvement as nationalisation beckoned. One saw a disconcerting similarity with HS2's builders, and with politicians including the current Prime Minister, pressing on regardless.

James Mackay

Trees

When the new Warwick District Council was elected in May 2019, the leader of the Council announced the ambitious aim to plant a tree for each resident of the district by the end of the council's tenure, May 2023. About 160,000 trees in all. Since then coronavirus intervened. The project, now known as *Trees for our Future*, has been extended to 2030.

WDC has identified eight sites, seven owned by it and one by Budbrooke Parish Council. Newbold Comyn will get trees this autumn or winter, as will the new Tach Brook park south of the river. The council will be guided on the planting of the trees by a community forester. £117,500 has been allocated to planning and planting over the period to March 2022.

There are ongoing discussions whether more street trees will be planted in Leamington as part of the project. This would help to restore the town's claim to be called *Leafy Leamington*.

We all appreciate trees and are saddened whenever we hear the chainsaw taking down yet another established specimen, so the present planting should help to redress the losses.

You can read more about WDC's current plans [here](#) (Item 5 of WDC Executive meeting, November 17, 2020).

Meanwhile Warwickshire County Council is encouraging residents, schools and not-for-profit community groups to apply for packs of free saplings from the Woodland Trust

plant www.woodlandtrust.org.uk. Of course trees can only be planted with permission of the land owner.

Archie Pitts

New members

Bob and Judith Cooke

Aline Shand

Sarah Rosenberg-Jansen and Friso Jansen

Officers and Committee

Chairman: Sidney Syson, 11 Astley Close, CV32 6PT, 01926 423 140

Vice Chairmen: Barbara Lynn, Apt. 53 Manor House, Avenue Road, CV31 3ND, 01926 831 414

Richard Ward, 3 Bell Court, The Maltings, CV32 5FH, 01926 422 750

Hon. Secretary and Membership Secretary: Margaret Begg, The Garden House, Clarendon Crescent, CV32 5NR, 01926 423 822

Hon. Treasurer: Marianne Pitts, 7 Kineton Hall, Lillington Avenue, CV32 5DR, 01926 885 532

Other Committee Members:

Richard Ashworth	01926 316 703	Ian Bradbury	07905 122 340
------------------	---------------	--------------	---------------

Clive Engwell	01926 420 454	Archie Pitts	01926 885 532
---------------	---------------	--------------	---------------

Carole Sleight	07768 617 081		
----------------	---------------	--	--

The Leamington Society is a registered charity. It is a member of the West Midlands Amenity Societies Association and the National Organisation of Residents' Associations. It exists to preserve the heritage and improve the character of Royal Leamington Spa and to encourage high standards of planning and architecture.

Charity No. 516078

Unless otherwise indicated, views expressed in these newsletters are the contributors' own and not necessarily the corporate view of the Society.