

NEWSLETTER SPRING 2005

www.swindoncivictrust.org.uk

swindon
civic
trust

Welcome

This newsletter is following swiftly on the heels of our Winter edition which we hope you enjoyed. This one is a bumper edition and we'd like to thank all our contributors.

We have issued our proposals for locating the University within the town centre. This has two main benefits. Firstly it will give the town centre the impetus it needs to become a place to be proud of. Secondly it will avoid the university being positioned at junction 15 with the damage that will be done to the environment around Coate Water. We have reproduced a summary and conclusion of our proposals but would urge you to look at the full report on our website.

Since the press release two of our trustees have met with the University and Julia Drown and a synopsis of that meeting is also included later.

A debate on "Swindon – Whose Future?" was held on 16 March 2005 and Martha Parry was invited to join a panel to put the Civic Trust's views forward in response to the key note speaker, Professor Martin Boddy. We have reproduced the text of her five minute presentation.

We are proud to be co-sponsoring an event at the Swindon Festival of Literature because we feel that this festival adds so much to the quality of life in the town. Please look at our Events and "What's On" for full details of this and other dates for your diary.

A reminder – don't forget to join again. We've enjoyed having you as a member this year and we'd like you to be with us again next year.

Objectives

- To promote environmentally sustainable, high quality standards in local planning and development in Swindon.
- To protect and improve special features of historic and public interest in Swindon
- To help local people to inform themselves about Swindon's geography, history, and communities, as well as the decision-making processes which affect the built environment
- To encourage participation by community groups, and by individual Swindon residents, in fulfilling these aims.

The Committee

We are always looking for people who want to help us fulfil our objectives so if you are interested in helping then please contact one of the committee.

Kate Brailsford	Donald Brunwin
Brian Burrows	Alan Hayward
Terry Iles	John Monniot
Martha Parry	Roger Smith

Community Crossroads
Faringdon Road
Swindon SN1 5BJ

Tel: 01793 520592 or E Mail:
info@swindoncivictrust.co.uk
www.swindoncivictrust.org.uk

Swindon Civic Trust

Town Centre University Proposal

A launch event on the Town Centre University Proposal for the release of the Trust's Report was held on 16 February at the Pilgrim Centre in Regent Circus. The report explained in detail how Swindon's town centre could comfortably accommodate a major university campus and why land around the Coate Water Country Park should not be developed as a University.

The full 32 page report is downloadable from Swindon Civic Trust's web site, www.swindoncivictrust.org.uk. But we thought it may be useful to reproduce the introduction, summary and conclusion here.

Since the press release, representatives of the Swindon Civic Trust have met with the University and a summary of the matters discussed is also included.

The Report:

- Identifies a swathe of land running from Regent Circus, along Princes Street, through Whale Bridge and Carfax to North Star which could be used to house a university campus including provision of student housing. This could be achieved by reusing or replacing existing buildings, such as the existing Swindon College building at Regent Circus and the BT building at North Star. The report gives detailed facts about the size, ownership and likely availability of these sites.
- Explains that the development of a town centre campus would not compromise the New Swindon Company's plans to introduce new shopping, employment and housing into the town centre. Indeed, the employment, style and vitality that a university could bring would provide the impetus needed to make the regeneration of the town centre a success.
- Shows that proposals to develop the Coate site contravene government planning guidance.

It is well known that the University of Bath would like to build a campus at Coate and that the University has said it could not be accommodated in the town centre. However, the report uses the University's own figures to show that this is not so. The university needs a floor area of 119,000 square metres and we have shown that up to 550,000 square metres could be available, depending on the density of development and the height of buildings.

Furthermore, 75% of the core campus sites in question are currently owned by Swindon Borough Council, so accommodating the university is largely a question of the Council having the vision and will to make the land available for this purpose.

Siting the university in the town centre would be a double win for the town - enlivening the centre and saving Coate, one of Swindon's major attractions. Conversely, developing at Coate would drive another competitive nail into the town centre, compromise Coate's wildlife, prevent future expansion of the park and destroy the historical, scientific and literary heritage of this important area.

Conclusion of The Report

Our contention is that if the sites in the town centre potentially available for development were built to a general height of five storeys, with a few ten storey buildings, enough space could be made available for both the NSC's office, employment and residential requirements and the university's teaching facility, research and residential requirements. This would double the currently proposed density, but would increase the critical mass which would thus assist in the provision of finance required for effective public realm development. This would be a win-win situation.

Quote: "The development of the Coate site in association with the ICIA in the town centre and the retention of the Oakfield site is the optimum development strategy to meet all stakeholder needs, including the wider regeneration, economic development and SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT objectives of Swindon".

Specifically, the current proposals to build at Coate fail the sequential planning tests and flout planning guidelines. Not enough thought has been given to what could be achieved in the town centre and the rejection is based on a flawed analysis of the space required.

The UoB asks in the Lovejoy report:

QUESTION: Is the university situated in a high profile location?

RESPONSE: a town centre is a high profile location, particularly with finely architected buildings prominently located at town centre gateways. The University of Bath *IN* Swindon, not The University of Bath *AT* Swindon.

QUESTION: Is it available at "a reasonable cost" within "a reasonable timescale", as in value for public money?

RESPONSE: Most of the sites identified are owned by SBC, who hold the land on behalf of the people of the town. Thought has to be given to future use of the sites with respect to the long-term benefits for Swindon and its inhabitants.

QUESTION: Is the site available and can it be acquired?

RESPONSE: As part of the urban regeneration programme, if the sites identified are not owned by SBC, then it should be part of the NSC's remit to acquire those desired by the university by compulsory purchase.

QUESTION: What is the likely timescale for acquisition and development?

RESPONSE: As noted above, the town centre is at a unique position in that it is unlikely that so many sites will be available again in the foreseeable future. We urge SBC to have vision and to generate the will to accommodate the university and that gradual development is indeed possible and probably desirable.

QUESTION: Can a high quality campus environment be developed within an attractive setting that will appeal to staff and student alike?

RESPONSE: Yes – look at the other UK urban universities and Oxford & Cambridge! Would students prefer to live and study in a thriving energetic town centre, or would they prefer to be stuck out next to a motorway and a dual carriageway? And finally, all other considerations aside, what about the PEOPLE OF SWINDON – would losing the attractive and rural setting of Coate Water COUNTRY Park appeal to them?

Summary of The Report

This report and proposal puts an overwhelming case in favour of situating any proposed university in Swindon town centre. Detailed information is provided to substantiate the fact that space is available to meet the stated requirements of the University of Bath for a new Swindon campus as well as meeting the needs of the New Swindon Company for the urban regeneration of the centre.

The report also shows that the development around Coate Water as proposed in the Revised Deposit Draft of the Swindon Local Plan 2011 completely goes against Government planning guidance and fails the sequential tests required for giving preference to brownfield sites ahead of building on greenfield areas and the subsequent loss of valuable countryside. This failure is shown to be due to flawed assumptions about the land area required for a town centre university and an inflexible attitude towards becoming a part of the town's fabric – the University of Bath *at* Swindon as opposed to *in* Swindon – by not making use of the current resources available.

The document also gives examples and comparisons with other very successful urban universities that provide large economic, social and cultural contributions to the towns that they are integral with.

The fact that the people of Swindon have had minimal input into the location of the proposed university, along with Swindon Civic Trust's own consultation shows that the interests of "outside" bodies is being put ahead of the wishes of the local population.

The opportunity of having a world-class higher education establishment in the town should not be understated and the potential benefits for Swindon are huge.

Swindon Civic Trust - Meeting to discuss SCT's Town Centre University Proposal with the UoB

SCT Chair John Monniot, trustee Alan Hayward and South Swindon MP Julia Drown met with the Vice Chancellor of Bath University, Professor Glynis Breakwell along with the Directors of Communications and Estates on Tuesday 8th March.

Bath listened attentively to what we had to say about the situation in Swindon (which we don't think they had fully appreciated) and to our plans for a town centre location for the campus and the reasons for going there.

This was followed by a frank and honest discussion. It was clear that Bath sees the ideal solution to their expansion ambitions as a campus at Coate and is not prepared to consider any alternative.

Ideas were put to the university such as the possibility of getting extra government money for a town centre solution or of putting a greater part of the university in the centre (e.g. engineering/science at North Star) and also a joint approach to Swindon Borough Council to see whether they would help make town centre sites available. The university were non-committal to both of these.

SCT emphasised the strength of opposition to building at Coate, but the university did not appear to be interested in local public opinion or any further consultation on the location of the proposed campus.

The Trust is considering arranging follow up meetings with the South West Regional Development Agency, Swindon Borough Council and the New Swindon Company to pursue the town centre potential further. The University would be invited to attend.

Events Programme

The Executive Committee has formed a small sub-committee to run our new Events Programme. We intend the programme to be of interest to members of the Trust, professionals, decision makers and others concerned with heritage, planning and development issues affecting Swindon.

We plan to add an informal, social aspect to each event and, on this occasion, participants were invited to gather in the Glue Pot after the event.

Suggestions for future talks, discussions or visits are most welcome. Please contact info@swindoncivictrust.org.uk

Why did the National Trust Decide to Relocate to Swindon?

Our first event was a talk by John O'Keefe from the National Trust. He explained why the National Trust had decided to relocate to Swindon and gave a fascinating insight into the construction of their new headquarters building in the old railway works site. It features lots of natural light and natural ventilation – it is not air-conditioned. The designers of the building have pioneered new levels of sustainability.

Swindon was chosen because of its central location, transport links, local services and shopping and leisure facilities. Furthermore it gave the National Trust the opportunity to develop a brownfield site in a town centre location.

A social evening followed in the Glue Pot. While we did not win the pub quiz, we did win the beer round and when it comes down to it, that's what really matters.

Swindon "Whose Future?"

The Economic & Social Research Council organised a debate as part of Science Week at Steam Museum on 16 March 2005. This featured a presentation by Professor Martin Boddy of the University of the West of England. The event was chaired by Mark Waldron, Editor of the Evening Advertiser.

Professor Boddy looked at the pressures from central government for new housing development and how Swindon will need to rise to new challenges. His lecture answered a number of questions but he finished by leaving a number of questions unanswered for discussion by the audience and the four panellists:

Peter Andrews, Chief Executive of the New Swindon Company

Jemima Milton, Swindon Borough Council

Jean Saunders, Swindon Friends of the Earth

And our very own **Martha Parry**

Each gave a five minute presentation responding to Professor Boddy's lecture and putting forward the views of the organisations that they represented.

Questions from the audience followed and Mark Waldron gave each panellist the opportunity to explain their position on each topic raised.

The headline from the Evening Advertiser the following day was "**IS ANYWHERE SAFE?**" and their article started "Is nowhere safe in Swindon from the clutches of the developers?"

Now that it is clear that Swindon is being targeted for further expansion the role of the Civic Trust is even more important.

The following is the text of Martha Parry's response on behalf of the Trust – and very well it went down as well.

Response by Martha Parry on behalf of Swindon Civic Trust

The ESRC have once again provided Swindon with a contribution to the understanding of the town's continuing evolution, and the pressures driving change. This paper, and Professor Boddy's earlier body of work builds upon a record that goes back to Michael Harloe's 1967 record of the Murray-John years titled Swindon in Transition. It is a valuable record. I believe the ESRC also holds a large body of survey data collected in Swindon over the years.

It was brave of them to raise the question of "Whose Future?" in such a high profile way, and we must grasp this opportunity.

However, the paper presented only opens up that question, and does not go very far in answering it, other than to beg the answer "national and regional interests". It is clearly NOT a future that the people of Swindon have asked for. There is very little comfort here for those living in Swindon and trying to nudge the future in a humanistic, local direction.

Perhaps that is the real benefit of this event, in that it clarifies the "hijacking" that has gone on since the post-war years of Murray-John, Alf Bown and co. The challenge of this paper is to the people of Swindon to decide what they are going to do about the lack of direction and local control that reaches back to at least 1985.

The fundamental concern I have with all of this work, however, is its emphasis on economic and policy variables (as important as they clearly are), to the neglect of engagement with the community of real people who actually live in Swindon.

The Swindon Civic Trust was formed several years ago in response to a perceived lack of democratic participation and engagement in Swindon, particularly with issues to do with the physical, environmental, social and economic development of the town.

There had been a remarkable level of frustration among the local population with its local government long before the Audit Commission ranked Swindon near the bottom of the league in 2002. Indeed, the Council may have been the only people surprised by that assessment.

My point in bringing up this unfortunate evaluation, is that the people HAVE been trying to participate and have been demonstrably rejected.

The people of Swindon, in all the diversity of their aspirations, have been squashed between the forces of ignorance within their local council, and the external forces outlined by Professor Boddy. Both are beyond our ability to influence under current democratic processes.

I need only list the following community driven campaigns to ring the death knell of responsive local democracy in Swindon:

- The struggle to reclaim the Mechanics' Institution (which by-the-way first met in this room from 1843 to the opening of their own building in 1855) as a centre of community activity
- The Front Garden Action Group
- The Save Coate campaign
- The demand for a suitable central library
- The various crises surrounding the future of Swindon Town and the County Ground, both footballs in the developers' game.

- The Civic Trust's own on-going effort to locate a university in the town centre
- Most critically, the recent efforts to participate in the work of the New Swindon Company, in which local groups have had their fingers crushed in the so-called 'open door', when what they really wanted was a seat or 2 at the table. The list of Directors of this quango company goes a long way to illustrating Swindon's 'problem'.
- the footprint or physical boundary
- the number and mix of residents
- the number and mix of jobs and houses
- the density
- the amenities
- the economy
- the catchment served, etc.

The questions that Professor Boddy raises, and mostly leaves hanging in the air for us to engage with, lead the Swindon Civic Trust to add some further questions to the list::

- Why are local people so easily resisted by locally elected officials? Is there an underlying defect in our presumed democracy?
- Are other places less "top-down" in their planning and government? If so, why?
- Is party 'group' politics itself in some way part of the structural problem at the local level?
- What can local PEOPLE (residents, voters, citizens) do to achieve THEIR vision of a future for Swindon? What IS the people's vision of a truly holistic, sustainable future for this unique town, in this significant place?

Can the ESRC, perhaps by funding a local participatory planning project, help the people to reclaim some influence on their future? We would like to collaborate in a project along the theme of "How Big Should Swindon Be?"

"Big" might mean many things:

How can it be acceptable, that while local groups are valiantly struggling to engage in the current Local Plan Inquiry, we can be asked (at the same time) not whether ("oh, by-the-way") we want another 25,000 houses in Swindon, but where we think they might best fit: in the villages or in the green landscape between the villages? Hobson's Choice? Token consultation? Where is the democracy in this process?

In the Trust's internal discussions much thought is being given to the idea of continued growth as meaning "economic expansion and flexibility over time", rather than meaning "un-ending physical growth" which can only logically end up on the moon. We are not talking "small is beautiful" here, but considering the question "How big IS big enough, anyway?" Or good enough.

For our part, the Swindon Civic Trust will be hosting a range of discussions, lectures and activities over the coming months aimed at further exploring these questions. We hope you will be eager to join us in a ground-breaking, community-led effort.

In the meantime, the Swindon Civic Trust will be joining with other local community groups in an appeal for assistance to the ODPM (and to the European Court of Human Rights if

possible and necessary), using our local media to further popular understanding of the problem. This problem is, at root, one of a deficit in democratic processes.

This deficit has been identified by other academics and think tank analysts; it is being lived out on the ground in Swindon to such an extent that the resolution of Swindon's challenge could contribute to the development of democracy in our country.

Ultimately, the answers to the question "Whose Future?" in Swindon could be even more crucially relevant regionally, nationally and globally than we all think sitting here tonight.

Swindon Festival of Literature

Swindon Civic Trust is co-sponsor for an event at the Swindon Literature Festival this year.

David Marquand

– on the hollowing-out of citizenship!

Monday 9 May

7pm

Community Crossroads, Old Railway Museum, Faringdon Road Tel: 01793 466454 £4(£3)

What is "the public domain"? What kind of government can reinvigorate it? Can citizens collectively define what the public interest really is, through argument, debate, and negotiation? Is the exclusivity of professionalism in conflict with the inclusivity of

citizenship? What makes the public domain both priceless and precarious?

These are just some of the questions addressed in *Decline of the Public* by David Marquand, a book for our time, and maybe even our town. It explains the importance of citizenship, equity, and service for individual fulfilment and social well-being.

David Marquand has been Professor of Politics at Sheffield University and Principal of Mansfield College, Oxford.

We would also like to draw your attention to other literature festival events being held at the Community Crossroads by the Swindon Festival of Literature:

Tuesday 3 May – Roger Scruton

Thursday 5 May – Songs that tell stories

Wednesday 11 May – (1)Survivors' Poetry: (2) Glastonbury with Michael Eavis.

Saturday 14 May – (1) Guy Browning (2) John Berger & Anne Michaels.

For more details of these and lots of other great events then please visit www.swindonfestivalofliterature.co.uk

Gloucester Civic Society - Invitation

The Gloucester Civic Society contacted us recently through our Website and we have been invited to visit Gloucester this summer. It is likely to be an evening city tour (one hour) followed by a social evening at a local pub. The date is yet to be confirmed, but if this event is of interest, send an E Mail to info@swindoncivictrust.org.uk

What's On

Local Plan Inquiry

On the afternoon of **13 April**, the proposed **Croft Road/Hay Lane Road** will be discussed at the Local Plan Inquiry at the Pilgrim Centre, Regents Circus.

The appalling consequences of the proposed road will be pointed out and the alternative route with the rail crossing will be put forward.

Policies concerning **Coate** will be heard by the Inspector from 10.00 a.m. again at the Pilgrim Centre, Regent Circus on **19, 20 and 21 April**

The general public are allowed to come to the inquiry to observe.

Wilts and Berks Canal Trust Conference

"Let's get on with it"

Ellendune Community Centre,
Wroughton

Saturday 23 April

9.30am – 3.30pm

This is a must for anyone interested in the project. The objective is to inspire, inform and to share so ideas so that we can all move forward with confidence to see the canal open by 2025.

Free admission
Booking essential
Lunch, tea/coffee £5

For further details contact:

Jan Flanagan
217, Marlborough Road
Swindon SN3 1NN
Tel: 01793 523048

STOP March

9 April

11.00 a.m.

Organised by the group Swindon Together on Planning

Another STOP March has been arranged so that the people of Swindon and the surrounding communities can express their concerns over the current planning and development situation in Swindon. Assembling at the GWR Park, Faringdon Road, Swindon at 11:00am for an 11:20am departure, protesters will march through the town centre from a symbolic remaining Swindon green space to the Civic Offices, the seat of local power in Swindon. The route will be through the Railway Village, past the Mechanics' Institution, up Bridge Street and then Regent Street and across into Euclid Street for a rally and speeches at 12:00 midday.

This event will be held the week before Swindon Borough Council and Wiltshire County Council have to respond to the Draft Sub-Regional Spatial Strategy, a week before the Coate session at the Local Plan Inquiry and the month before a probable General Election.

Full details on STOP, the march, the current Swindon planning situation and the background to the protest can be found at www.Swindon-STOP.org.uk.

What's Oncontinued

David Marquand

– on the hollowing-out of citizenship!

Monday 9 May at 7pm

Sponsored by the Swindon Civic Trust and Swindon Festival of Literature :

Community Crossroads, Old Railway Museum, Faringdon Road
Tel: 01793 466454 £4(£3)

For details and other Swindon Festival of Literature events see main article.

Walk at Coate Water

Sunday 5 June at 3.00 p.m.

Coate Water Guided Walk by the Richard Jefferies Society.

Meet in the Car Park and end at the Richard Jefferies Museum where the video "Jefferies Land" will be shown.

New Membership Year

Starts 01 April 2005

Subscription renewals are now due and the rate for the new year will remain at £5 (or £2 for the unwaged). Great value we hope you will agree, especially with the quarterly newsletter and access to information on our website.

Membership also entitles you to vote at our AGM which will be held on Monday, 5 Sept at 7.00 p.m. at the Community Crossroads (Former Railway Museum).

Civic Societies all over the country have extensive memberships, particularly those who have been established for over 30 years. Our own membership has increased this year and we are pleased to report that we are finishing our third financial year with a total of 71 members.

Giftaid

A big thank you to the taxpayers who filled in Giftaid Forms. The Trust has recently received a refund of £84 from the Inland Revenue.

Standing Orders

We are gradually receiving more standing order forms. It would be most helpful if more of you chose this option when renewing your subscription. Once completed, the form should be posted to us. A record is kept by the Trust that you are paying by Standing Order and the form is forwarded on to your bank.

Membership Campaign

It is not only the subscription that is important to us. We need more people to register as members. Your support in principle can help others to make a difference, and a strong membership can help in our role as a campaigning organisation.

Renewal

Finally, why not find a pen and DO IT NOW? Complete and post the forms at the back of this newsletter. If we could receive all renewals by end of April, we can concentrate our efforts on attracting new members.

Standing Order Form

Details of Your Bank:

To: The Manager

Bank:

Address:

Post Code:

Account Name:

Account Number:Sort Code:

Your Details:

Name:

Address:

Post Code:

E Mail:

Date:

Signature:..... Date:

Instructions to bank:

Please pay to:

The Co-operative Bank plc
Stockport, Business Direct
PO Box 250
Skelmersdale
Lancashire WN8 6WT

For the account of:

Swindon Civic Trust
Account: 65126518
Sort Code: 08 92 99

The sum of £ Date of first payment:

(Insert tomorrow's date or 1 April 2006 if you have paid your subscriptions for the year 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006)

And thereafter annually on 1 April until further notice

NB: You can cancel a standing order at any time by writing to your bank or building society. Please also send a copy of your letter to us.

Please post this form to Swindon Civic Trust at Community Crossroads (former railway museum), Faringdon Road, Swindon SN1 5BJ

New Members

All Members receive mailings and may vote at General Meetings. Membership is renewable on 31 March each Year.

"I wish to support the Swindon Civic Trust" Registered Charity No. 1095031:

Signature:

Name:

Address:.....
.....

Postcode:

Telephone:

E Mail:

I enclose (delete those inapplicable):

- £5 for Annual Membership
- £2 for Unwaged Annual Membership
- £ donation

I am a new member/renewing member
(delete as applicable)

Please make cheques payable to:

Swindon Civic Trust

Community Crossroads
(former railway museum)

Faringdon Road

Swindon SN1 5BJ

Tel/Fax: 01793 520592

E Mail:

membership@swindoncivictrust.co.uk

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Gift Aid Declaration

The Swindon Civic Trust is a registered charity and if you are a tax payer you can help us by signing the declaration below. This will allow us to claim tax back from the Government on the membership and any donation you have paid (28p in the pound).

Name:

Address:

Post Code:

I want the Swindon Civic Trust, registered charity 1095031, to treat the annual membership fee and all donations I make from the date of this declaration until I notify you otherwise, as a gift aid donation.

Signed:

Dated:

Next Edition

The next edition of the newsletter will be issued in June 2005 and the deadline for submissions is 14 June 2005. You can send these to the Community Crossroads at the address above or e-mail them for the attention of Rob Brailsford at info@swindoncivictrust.org.uk

We would be pleased to hear your comments on the Newsletter or from anyone who wishes to contribute to the debate over the future of Swindon.