

The Berwickshire Civic Society



The Hirsell, Coldstream

Newsletter No. 27

Autumn, 2006

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Lady Caroline Douglas-Home - Cornhill-on-Tweed	

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

I would like to begin my report by thanking the members of your Executive Committee for the time they have given to the Society over the past year. Without their contribution we would get nowhere, and in particular I would like to mention the support given to me the officers of the Society. Matthew Gibb was co-opted on to the committee in view of his interest in Greenlaw Town Hall.

The committee has met three times this year and amongst the items discussed I would like to draw your attention to the following:

The Role of the Society

Reviewing the Objects of the Society (printed at the back of this newsletter) the committee agreed that efforts should be made to increase the awareness of people living in Berwickshire of the extent of the historic County of Berwickshire, which of course is greater in extent than the successor District Council and the present day planning division of the Scottish Borders Council. The idea of having signs erected marking the old County boundary either in addition to or incorporated with the Scottish Borders signs is currently being explored with that council.

Should we be successful in establishing this principle – and it has already been adopted in other parts of Scotland – it will follow on that the Society should extend its activities outlined in the Objects to cover all the historic county, whereas at present our efforts are concentrated in the present planning area of Berwickshire. Most notably, Lauder would once again fall in our remit.

The committee also agreed that the Society's relationships with both the Community Councils and the Scottish Borders Council should be explored and strengthened, as well as with the Civic trust and our neighbours the Berwick Civic Society, as well as with the Berwickshire Naturalists. To this end I have arranged to present the Society's activities to a number of councils during the winter months.

Greenlaw Town Hall

The Town hall has again featured strongly on our agenda, but sadly no clear resolution of the problems associated with the preservation of this building has yet emerged. At the time of writing, the latest news was of its failure to make No 1 in the BBC's 'Restoration' series for Scottish participants. With the passing of another year, the building's deterioration is now clearly visible, particularly where the roof is concerned. The Society will continue to lend such support as it can to those trying to find a solution to its rescue.

Polwarth

Your Society made forceful representations to the Planning Committee concerning an application to build ten houses in the vicinity of the Polwarth Thorn. The application appeared to introduce an unacceptable lay-out of houses, which themselves were clearly too large in scale for what had been a restrained village street in the past. Furthermore it ignored the importance of the Thorn and its surrounding green. The application was refused, but the developer has now gone to appeal.

Polwarth Kirk

Concern had been expressed about the fate of the Kirk once it was learnt that the Redundant Churches Fund felt unable to take on this building, which is of significant historic significance. The exterior stonework is beginning to deteriorate, and the spire has already lost its crowned orange, the augmentation given to the coat of arms of the Kirk's builder, the first earl of Marchmont. Happily we understand that a private purchaser has acquired the building which will eventually be made available again for public use.

Whitehall, Chirnside

The further deterioration in the condition of this listed mansion house continues to cause the committee concern, but unless enforcement action is taken by the Scottish Borders Council, there is a real possibility that the building will soon be beyond saving.

Architectural Award

Your committee has discussed the idea of a Society Award to be presented for the most noteworthy newly built house, in terms of its structure, design and contribution to the future architectural heritage of Berwickshire. We hope that details will be finalised in time for a presentation at next year's AGM.

Keep Berwickshire Tidy

Once again committee members volunteered their services in judging community councils, all of whom had been encouraged to participate in clearing litter during April.

The winners of the 2006 campaign were:

- 1st St Abbs
- 2nd Greenlaw & Hume
- 3rd Gavinton, Fogo and Polwarth

The presentations will be made at the AGM at the Hirsell on October 18th.

This year, the judges noted once again the high standards achieved, and this without the usual help from teams from the Scottish Borders Council; their personnel were fully engaged in the introduction of the new re-cycling regime for waste collection. I would like to record our thanks to Ray Lindsay who collected £216 during the 2006 Border Marches, which he donated to the Keep Berwickshire Tidy campaign.

Annual General Meeting

The Society's AGM will be held at the Hirsell, Coldstream, by kind permission of the Earl and Countess of Home, on Wednesday, October 18th at 7pm for 7.30.

The Hirsell has for long been the principal seat of the earls of Home and Lord Home has kindly agreed to talk about the history of the house during the course of the evening. With the handover of Home Castle by the Society

last year to the Clan Home Association and its Hume Castle Preservation Trust, it is fitting that we should be able to meet this year in the house which replaced the castle as the family's prime residence.

Please take this as your invitation to the Annual General Meeting, to which I hope as many members (and their friends who may be potential members) will be able to attend.

Subscriptions

There are still a few members who have failed to change their bank's Standing Orders to the current amount of the annual subscription, which is £5.00. Please ensure that this is the amount you are paying, in order to lessen the burden on our Hon. Treasurer.

Members

The Society welcomes new members and indeed is in constant need of new blood. Please encourage anyone interested in the history and well-being of Berwickshire to join us. In particular we welcome volunteers to join the Executive Committee, some of whose members will be retiring this year. We hope to hold one or two more informal functions during the forthcoming year and your support will be welcomed.

The application form for membership is on the back page of this Newsletter.

Ian Maitland Hume
Chairman

ARCHITECTURAL ADVISOR'S REPORT

Over the course of the year the Society has been consulted by Scottish Borders Council on 132 applications for listed building consent and planning permission in conservation areas, including 10 applications for conversion of property to housing and 17 applications for new housing in conservation areas or the curtilage of listed buildings. This continues the trend of the last two years and Society members should maintain their vigilance in the face of this heavy pressure on the character and appearance of the built heritage of Berwickshire. The majority of applications did not provoke comments, but we objected to 34 proposals and offered constructive suggestions for a further 15. The information provided is often minimal and in 6 cases we notified the Council that the information submitted by the applicants was insufficient for any comment to be made.

I was recently asked to represent the Society at the site visit by the Reporter advising the Secretary of State on the appeal against the Council's refusal of planning permission for 10 new houses at Polwarth. The Society was among those who objected to this application, just as we had to the application for 59 houses in 2000 and 31 houses on the same site last year. Our objections centred on the setting of the Polwarth Thorn, which is listed on the Register of Historic Trees and also the subject of a Tree Preservation Order, as the historic central feature of Polwarth village green. Unfortunately none of the proposals so far have recognised this or responded appropriately to the significance of the village green in the context of this most historic of Berwickshire villages; while the design and layout of the proposed houses, the lack of local amenities and increased traffic also gave us considerable cause for concern. Unfortunately none of the other local objectors felt able to attend the site visit, and the appellant was able to make an impassioned case for continuing the building work that he has already started, so that the outcome is far from certain.

This example underlines the importance of new housing developments respecting our local heritage and to encourage this, the Society is proposing

to introduce design awards for successful new housing, so watch this space! We have also offered to assist the Council in compiling a design guide to help designers and builders produce designs that are in keeping with the local vernacular and do not further reduce the character of our area to the ubiquitous 'spec. developer suburban' that is the norm for the estates that are springing up around us.

Traditionally, Berwickshire is characterized by scattered farm settlements and villages with rows of simple one or one-and-a-half storey houses, without porches or bays, often built right up to the pavement. Two storey buildings are generally reserved for the main farm house, or towns. Walls are faced in the plentiful local sandstones, often harled, with minimal decoration found in the door cases, window margins and stone sills. Windows are vertical in format, timber sashes. Roofs are covered with the Scots or Welsh slate that replaced thatch and local stone slate in the 18th century, while a few more humble buildings still have red pantiles. Chimneys provide visual rhythm and interest to the roofs.

The Society is equally keen to encourage innovative modern design in appropriate situations as well as environmentally responsible design approaches.

Robin Kent

The Boundaries of Berwickshire

The boundaries of the ancient County of Berwickshire, or the Merse as it was often termed, remained largely unchanged over the centuries following the creation of the shire in the 12th century. The first clear depiction of the extent of the county is to be found in Blaeu's atlas published in 1654; this included a map of the Merse by Timothy Pont, probably drawn in the late 16th century, for he died soon after 1610. Because he dedicated a map of Lauderdale to the earl of Lauderdale, this part of the county doesn't feature in the map of the Merse. There followed a succession of maps drawn in the 18th century, including notably Armstrong's map of the 1771. The 19th century saw the publication J. Blackadder's map of 1821 and Black's of 1847, whilst Johnston's later in the century was the first to depict the railways.

In the atlases Berwickshire appeared as a county right up to its disappearance as an administrative unit of local government in the reorganisation of 1974. Thereafter, the new boundaries illustrated that parts of the old county had been lost to what was then termed the Berwickshire District Council, forming part of the Borders Region. The new district gained Monyut, but Lauder, Earlston and Lauderdale, together with Bernersyde and Mertoun had been lost to the new district of Ettrick and Lauderdale, whilst earlier tidying up in the southern part of the county allocated Nenthorn, to Roxburghshire. The Scottish Borders Council Berwickshire Planning Area is based on the former District Council boundary.

The following reproductions serve to illustrate these changes and to remind us of the full extent of the historic County as it existed up until 1974. It is to these boundaries that the Society will seek to exert what influence it has and it is from within these boundaries that we hope to recruit new members, most particularly in the West and South Western parts.



The Merse by Timothy Pont published in Blaeu's Atlas of 1654