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Opinions expressed by contributors are not necessarily those of The Civic Society.

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## CONTENTS

Chairman's Report .....	3
AGM .....	10
Street Naming .....	10
Membership .....	11
Room with a view .....	11
A different room with a view .....	12
Council history in gold leaf .....	12
Update from last newsletter .....	14
A tale of a Christmas Carol.....	15
Greater Anglia.....	15
Looking up in Colchester.....	17
Commemorating Colchester Barracks .....	17
Heritage Open Day .....	18
Reflection of the General Election results .....	19
Other Colchester buildings and a Special Offer .....	19
Remembrance Day 2024.....	20
Unveiling of Historic War Memorial.....	20
Coffee Mornings report .....	22
Town Deal/Levelling up .....	23
ABRO site - urgent report.....	24
And it's goodnight from him .....	25
Reports of Social Events.....	25
Social Programme 2024.....	30

Back Cover: Berechurch Hall

## CHAIR'S REPORT FOR 2023-2024

The past 12 months have continued to show that the Colchester Civic Society is a valuable contributor to the matters that are important to the city of Colchester, often going under the radar and occasionally bringing unfair, negative attention the Society.

I spoke last year about the Civic Society's work to encourage an exciting Masterplan for the town (now city) centre. This was an idea raised by Colchester Civic Society around 2 years ago. Unfortunately, despite much work by the Civic Society to alert the Council to the shortcomings of the current Masterplan, it has not been reconsidered, or reassessed. It sits there as a beacon of city centre progression for the next one hundred years!



Another issue the Society has been involved in over the past year was the quite amazing saga of the UPVC windows installed at 4 St Botolph's Street. This has worrying implications for how the historic fabric of the city centre is looked after in the future. In essence, it seems that if you are instructed by the Council's planning committee to adhere to a previous instruction you simply submit a retrospective planning application and even if this is refused by the planning committee then just submit another. Keep doing this until you get your way. Now this may cause people to chuckle, but it is extremely worrying. I ask you all, how strong is the current local planning documentation that is expected to protect the local historic fabric of our city? A final point to note is that the windows have yet to be painted...

The proposed implementation of cycle lanes has also taxed the minds of members of the Civic Society. As part of a Government initiative, three cycle lanes were proposed to link the west and east of the city centre. This should not be confused with the existing national cycle lanes that successfully achieve such links already. However, the new proposals would be more visible and, rather than share space with pedestrians, would require reduction in both road and pedestrian space. The Civic Society, as you will all be aware, is a broad church and there were supporters and opponents to all three schemes. The approach the Society took was to try and highlight clear areas of difficulty for each of the schemes. Of course, other groups appeared to oppose, or support. The upshot is that the proposal for Crouch St West was halted with a review to take place, although I am unaware that anything has been brought forward yet. The East Hill proposal, which includes 'floating bus stops', is due to go ahead, but I am unaware when work will start. Worryingly, there has recently been widespread press coverage that floating bus stops were considered to be dangerous. This included a call from the Royal National Institute of Blind People that visually impaired people risked stepping into the path of cyclists, something raised by the Civic Society as part of the East Hill consultation. The middle section, from Headgate to the High Street, has been delivered. As it opened fairly recently, it is unclear how successful this is proving to be. A question that might be asked is what the total cost of these works will be and what will/has happened to the funding which has not been used to deliver part of the original project.

An extensive response was provided by the Society on the St Botolph's roundabout proposal. This is another example of the cross section of opinion within the Society. Even I was a little surprised at the support for the current arrangements within the Society and outside, the argument being that those responsible for the upkeep had ignored their responsibility and this has led to the current dilapidated state that we see today, which then becomes an argument to completely overhaul the roundabout. I fully accept that the current roundabout does not work particularly well for people with disabilities, visual impairment - or cyclists. But it does suggest that insufficient consultation

was undertaken, and let's be clear, changes to this roundabout have been mooted for more than a decade! Recently, we were asked for some help on the murals and where they might be kept in safe keeping during the works. The Society have reminded the Councils that these murals must be retained in the area for historic purposes. We have also suggested, very firmly, that the conservators we used to restore the murals should be engaged again to remove and re-site them. We were recently approached by a lady from the Henry Moore Foundation who is currently writing a book about Henry Collins and Joyce Pallot, the designers of the murals here and in other locations in the city, so it clear that they play an important role in Colchester's history.

Continuing on the matter of the lack of maintenance or upkeep, I would like to touch on Holy Trinity churchyard, another project that has come out of the nemesis of Covid, which, it appears, was when this project was originally consulted upon. Apparently, the concerns raised by the Civic Society, that this will become a beacon of anti-social behaviour, have been dismissed by a number of councillors, and others, as simply ridiculous. Why? Because the current churchyard has been neglected and this proposed work will reinvigorate the place and be an outstanding tourist attraction! The churchyard has been neglected by the very people proposing to 'upgrade' it. Unfortunately, this lack of vision applies to a number of closed churchyards in the city centre. One wonders what Trinity churchyard might look like in ten years, or perhaps less.

Apologies that this report seems to be full of negativity, but I am trying to set out the kind of matters that members of your executive committee get themselves involved in and this takes up a good deal of time. This is not a complaint but I am merely pointing out the amount of work undertaken by those dedicated individuals. They should be loudly applauded for this selfless effort.

A recent piece of news has appeared from the Council which focusses on the city centre projects. This can be found on the following link [www.colchester.gov.uk/citycentre/](http://www.colchester.gov.uk/citycentre/). You will notice the opening page is headed 'Discover Our Vision', one which the Civic Society would not necessarily agree entirely with.

Members of the Society have been invited to, and attended, briefings by City Council Officers throughout the year, giving updates on the Town Deal and Levelling Up Funds. These updates are very useful for members and I would encourage them to take advantage of these events. I would like to express our thanks to council officers for giving up their valuable time to attend these events. It is much appreciated.

This evening you will be treated to a presentation about the One Square Mile project currently taking place at St John's Green primary school. As I mentioned last year, this is a really good project and the Civic Society have been proud to support it from the very beginning. Ann Turner took a



group of teachers on a guided tour of the area to help them with important information to relay back to the children. Jo attended the birthday party which she enjoyed enormously.

I advised members about a meeting a few executive committee members had with a Cambridge based architect on a proposal they were putting together to submit to Colchester Council planning for the former Odeon site. It was encouraging to see that their planning application was approved by the council. We await further updates with excitement.

Members will have noticed the work currently underway at St. Nicholas Square, which seems to be taking a long time. The Society still have concerns about how this might look when completed, as there are ownership arrangements that we believe will not allow the full square to be pedestrianised.

The Society have continued to liaise with The Jumbo Project and they are keen to hear the views of our resident experts, John Burton and Bob Mercer. This is not to diminish the experts that are part of that project. We all look forward to the day when the project completes and this iconic building can properly grace the Colchester skyline again and attract visitors to be amazed at the Victorian engineering hidden within. In the meantime, the Society will be happy to contribute where necessary.

I have mentioned the executive members, as a group, already, but I would like to expand a little at this point.

**Ann Turner:** who has contributed so much to the Society and continues to do so as Membership Secretary and Vice Chair. I would like to suggest to the executive committee that Ann is offered a Vice President role as soon as the position of Chair has been resolved and she is able to step aside. Heritage Open Days is something that Ann relishes being involved in and I would like to thank Society members who helped steward the Roman Theatre in the Dutch Quarter, and the Audley Chapel at Berechurch during last year's event.



**Bob Mercer:** continues to ensure that comment is provided for the many planning applications that require his expert input. Recently Bob has come under a little bit of pressure from keyboard surfers that inhabit the comments section of the online Gazette. The individuals hide behind anonymous names and personas and should be treated with that in mind. Should they wish to attend a Civic Society coffee morning, they might learn something. Keep up the good work Bob. Bob also liaised with council planners on the proposed Marriot Hotel proposal at the Old Post Office. It is unclear at this stage what the position of this application might be, as approval for a similar hotel proposal at the old Odeon site has been given. The Society are occasionally asked to comment on other matters aside from planning applications. Last year Bob was tasked with reviewing a mineral extraction report submitted to the council by Tarmac, setting out their plans for mineral and aggregate at Stanway. No mean task indeed.

**John Collett:** continues to liaise with other partners and gets involved in litter picks throughout the city. Footpaths have taken much of John's time and as you can imagine this is definitely a long-term job. In fact, the 'Footpath to Nowhere' is still being looked at despite missing out on the planning gain from the nearby development.

John has been trying for a while to coordinate various groups to undertake a winter/spring clean throughout the city centre. It came to full fruition this year, with vast amounts of litter and fly



tipping, normally hidden by vegetation, being collected. And a huge initiative took place in St Botolph's Priory where, during seven sessions of really hard work by Society members, residents and the Council, the area was cleared of rubbish and vegetation, trees lopped and small repairs undertaken. What a fabulous achievement! The Society has undertaken two Great British Spring Clean sessions and has given support to neighbourhood action days, again working with other partners. John's hard work in coordinating all this brilliant work has just resulted in the award of a certificate of appreciation to the Society from Keep Britain Tidy year. Well done John.

**Paul Weston:** as always Paul keeps the finances of the Society under control. Thanks so much Paul. Paul has advised the executive committee that he will be standing down from his role in 2025.

**Peter Evans:** continues to keep an eye on public transport matters, but, as you will be aware, this remains a difficult remit as it seems the local council has no idea what is happening with this important 'public' service. Peter has more success with his work on the Civic Society newsletter, and I think we can all agree that is a huge success, especially the recent 60th anniversary edition. Peter does always try to make members aware of upcoming events via e-mail but we appreciate this isn't something that all members have access to. Street naming is also quite testing, but not quite as much as buses. Historically, this remit went quite smoothly, with the odd hiccup, however the recent communication about street names for the Essex County Hospital site, where the Society suggested some names of influential people who had been associated with the former hospital has been partially 'ignored' and it seems that we may well end up with Treatment Road, Vita Way and Wellness Walk - oh dear. Peter finally got the naming of a road in memory of former Mayor, Joyce Brooks, over the finish line. She had been the only former Mayor not commemorated, so well done, Peter. This road is also in her former ward, so it was worth the wait. One final thing on street naming, the Society have been asked by the council to help them check their own records, and those of the Library, on how streets got their names and what the historic link, if any, is.

**Sheila Anderton:** not only our eyes and ears reporting to the council all sorts of issues throughout the city; graffiti, broken pavers, unkempt vegetation... the list goes on and she normally ensures matters are addressed quite quickly with help from the Council's Neighbourhood Teams. However, one that took a little longer was the replacement slab(s) to the front of Fenwick, but by sticking to the task this work has now been completed using the correct stone. But also, Sheila is the eyes and ears for the executive committee, ensuring minutes are kept for each meeting. Thank you, Sheila. You will all be aware that Sheila has a particular 'thing' about plastic ties that appear on lampposts and other fixed posts. These usually advise of planning applications, transport regulation orders and the like. They rarely get removed once the information is no longer needed. Well, the running total of ties collected to date and sent for recycling is 8,560! Sheila also organises the annual poppy knit and last year 160 poppies were knitted and sold by the Royal British Legion. We thank our volunteer knitters and crocheters.



**John Salmon:** I know synonymous with lampposts, but John works hard to provide feedback on those highway projects, through his coordinating role with the Highways Sub Group I was talking about earlier. If that was not keeping him busy enough he ensures the website is kept up to date too.

**John Burton:** our President, who is chairing this evening's meeting. John plays a very active day to day role too. John has engaged with partners on all those difficult projects covered earlier in this report and in addition works tirelessly on matters concerning the ongoing proposals at the former garrison, on which he has worked closely with Society member, Paul Knappett, on some exciting proposals.

**Michael Fitt:** The Society's secretary and has agreed to be somewhat more hands-on whilst the executive committee has a review of workloads. This will be very helpful and is much appreciated, thank you Michael.

**Glyn Barritt:** Glyn joined the executive committee during the last year and has become a respected member, bringing some valuable experience. I expect that Glyn's involvement will be incredibly useful as the committee make some important decisions during the next year, indeed the upcoming Heritage Open Days is an area where Glyn will be taking over from Ann.

**Jo Edwards:** who as I have said previously, really is the beating heart of the Civic Society. Jo is involved in pretty much everything the Society is involved in (whether she wants to be or not!). Coffee mornings are a popular event run by the Society, usually attracting around 30 people each time. Some meetings welcome speakers on various topics, but recently the City Centre Police team have agreed to attend two meetings a year and this is very much appreciated. Other speakers have included Simon Taylor who spoke about city centre signage and city council officers who have taken the opportunity to consult us about Clean Air projects. One such project, Walking with Words, encourages students and others to walk between the University and the city centre. Jane Thompson from Colchester Council asked for our views. The project has now come to fruition and we have been given the charming booklet that accompanies it.

Jo has arranged a series of visits post Covid, however demand has been difficult on some occasions. Recognising that this is a problem for a number of local societies, she has contacted them to suggest some joint outings. It's early days but there has been a very promising reaction. Many of the trips have used the Community 360 minibus and we are happy to support this local charity. Jo and others have liaised with the council on preserving the colour scheme once synonymous with the Dutch Quarter. It has been agreed and written into the deeds of one house that the colour scheme should be retained going forward. There is space on the garden wall of this house for an interpretation board to explain both this colour scheme and the wider history of the Dutch Quarter, something that the Council would welcome, and the Society is in the early stages of a fundraising campaign to pay for it. Trees are another series of projects that Jo has inherited and I am pleased to say that a tree dedicated to former Mayor, Alderman, Civic Society Chair and Vice President, Ken Cooke was planted at Kings Meadow in the Spring. Sadly, the London Plane planted by the Society beside Southway House, near the corner of Headgate and Southway to commemorate Jean Lamb, who was our Newsletter Editor for many years, was so badly damaged in a storm during the Winter that it had to be felled. We will plant a replacement in the Autumn.

**Ged Dickinson:** is a lesser known participant of the Civic Society who continues to ensure the Civic Society is loud on X and Facebook. The Society now has 1,118 followers on X, a great achievement Ged, keep up the good work. Can I just add I am enjoying the recent pictures of lone traffic cones. I would also like to thank Ged for his work, with us, on the revised Constitution, which you have all seen, and will (hopefully) be approving this evening.

**Pamela Bradley** has taken over the more recent new plaques work, sorting out the Catherine



Marsh plaque which is on the Co-Op Bank in High Street. The long-awaited Lock Hospital plaque will be unveiled the week after the AGM. The Civic Society has given advice on plaques in Wivenhoe and Dedham.

Member **Julia Havis** mentioned that the Colchester Arts Society mentioned, at a Coffee Morning, that their trail for children at

Brightlingsea Church had been completed and they were looking for another project. The Civic Society have not created a Plaque Trail for the Castle Park as this was to be a project for the Rangers, but this seemed to be an 'offer' too good to miss. We took them up on it! Pamela, who is also an Arts Society Committee member, with help from Richard Arnopp, who maintains our online Plaque Trails and Civic Society member David Hibberd, who is also Chair of the Friends of Castle Park, worked with the Arts Society to produce a brilliant trail, incorporating some plaques but also buildings of interest. It's amazing what collaborative working can achieve.



*Unveiling of Lock Hospital blue plaque*

A quick thank you to **Adrian Rushton** who is always ready to take photos of various events that the Civic Society organises.

The Civic Society was so pleased to be represented at an event at the Town Hall arranged by Society member, David York, to celebrate the life of Jonathan Penrose, born in Colchester and 10 times British champion and chess Grandmaster. The event was attended by members of his family. Jonathan's parents were the joint secretaries of the original Colchester Civic Society which began in the early 1930s but closed at the outbreak of the war. Later that afternoon, the overhang Penrose Chess Park at the Mercury Theatre was opened. If you pop into the Mercury I believe they will provide chess sets to play on the tables adjacent to the city wall.

East Bridge has been a long-term project for the Society and has seen off a few Essex County Councillors, but finally that horrible barrier fence has gone and been replaced by rather better bollards. We would like to give our thanks to Cllr Lee Scott for his help on this matter, even though he had moved to a new portfolio when the work was complete.



Members will have been disappointed to read about the situation at Middle Mill and the collapsed weir. I fear this will be another matter that drags on for some time. The Society will continue to track progress.

The Society was one of a number of local charitable organisations to receive a bequest from **Andrew Millar**. This has been put on deposit and the interest will help sustain



the Society's work. We are looking at how we might recognise the bequest in Andrew's memory.

On the subject of donations, the executive committee agreed a contribution to **Sir Bob Russell's** Twinkle Twinkle Little Star statue in the High Street. It is quite amazing what a popular attraction this has become in a short space of time! Well done Bob.



**Civic Voice** which acts an umbrella organisation for the country's Civic Societies finally resolved its financial issues. You may recall that a former finance officer had defrauded the organisation of a large amount of their funds and they had to drastically reduce both the number of employees and the amount of work they could undertake. The funds have been returned and this has meant they have been able to save Civic Voice and they are now rebuilding. The lobbying of Parliament and their newsletter of events about societies work up and down the country is invaluable.



It was a great pleasure to see Rosemary Jewers unveil an interpretation board at the site of the Roman Circus last autumn. This was something Rosemary had wanted to happen as a memory to her late husband, Tony. He had spent many hours watching various excavations in the area.

At the time of writing the anonymous post box has returned to Lexden Road, I believe it is still wrapped in its cummerbund but will need some new paint work before it is unveiled!

It has been fantastic to welcome new members to the Civic Society, but we must remember that several members have left us during the year. For those who have not renewed their membership we would like to think they will return at some point (especially if they start to miss the fabulous

newsletter), to those who have passed on we thank them for being involved and bid them a fond farewell.

Almost there, just a couple messages of thanks. The neighbourhood team who have really stepped up with their help in connection with so many of the projects I have highlighted above and huge thanks, once again, to Greyfriars who host this event and many other events held by the Civic Society.

A few words about me. I reported last year that my role was one of support, with a very small 's', I also work full time. I have to admit the last year has been enjoyable, but mainly due to the incredible support of others. With external demands continuing I took the difficult decision to step down from the chair role and I know how this has added pressure to executive committee colleagues. I really have to step away for a while, which is not to say I will not keep tabs on goings on and hopefully will return to the committee at some stage in the future.

Wishing you all the best for the year ahead.

*Howard Davies*

Chair, Colchester Civic Society 2023-24

## ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The business of AGM concluded by accepting Howard's resignation as Chair and from the Executive committee. Jo Edwards agreed to serve as acting Chair until a permanent successor can be found. Glyn Barritt and Roger Dennis were elected to the Executive Committee.

Once the meeting concluded we were treated to an update on the 'One Square Mile' project which celebrates the founding of St John Green's School and is supported by a Heritage Lottery Grant, with assistance from their advisors Laura Davison and Clare Driver pictured below. Over the past 2 years the history of the area by speaking to relative and residents of the area has been explored and recorded. It is most impressive that much of this work has been done by pupils themselves and it is clear that this is an opportunity that few primary school pupils will have had. How lucky they have been.



*Peter Evans*

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## STREET NAMING - JOYCE BROOKS CLOSE

We had been hoping to mark the naming of a Street after our late Mayor, Mrs Joyce Brooks with a ceremony. The Close had already been built off Butt Road, opposite Constantine and Hamilton Roads, with a postcode of CO3 3FP, and occupied. The properties are owned and managed by the Peabody Trust. Originally, Mrs Brooks' service as Mayor had been marked by a block of sheltered homes, but this had been demolished.

Mrs Brooks' son lives in Australia and it proved difficult to find any relatives that could be invited to any ceremony. However, it was arranged that Alderman Mrs Mary Fairhead would represent the family but we were unable to set up a ceremony before Mrs Fairhead sadly died. The Peabody Trust had been happy to attend but did not reply the email. It seemed, unfortunately, that the moment had passed. Nevertheless, our aim of having streets named after every mayor has been maintained and soon a road will be named after Mayor Janet Fulford in Mile End.



*Peter Evans*

## MEMBERSHIP

We welcome the following new members; Lyn Barton, Steven Ford and James Jeagar, all of Colchester

### Austin James Baines (1936-2024)



We were sorry to hear of the death of Austin who was a long standing member of the society, and together with his late wife Elisabeth, had held most of the major offices of the Society. They had a retired a few years go and were made vice-presidents of the society in 2021.

Austin was born in Kenilworth and as a youngster enjoyed playing in the castle ruins. He saw a lot of big names at nearby Stratford-on-Avon. At University, he studied Geography and it was there he met Elisabeth. After a time in Uganda, where their sons were born, the family soon settled in Wivenhoe, Austin working at the University Library.

Much involved in local matters, such as the Nottage Institute, Austin served 3 terms as Mayor of Wivenhoe. His tall, spare figure was regularly seen at the our meetings, and those of many other group, including Friends of Museums, WEA, Friends of Castle Park and others.. He will be much missed.

*Peter Evans*



## ROOM WITH A VIEW

At the beginning of November, a notice appeared on the traffic island at the top of Queen St saying that the road would be closed from 8am to 4pm for 13 days later in the month. There was no explanation for the closure. It occurred to me that the end of November was not a very sensible time of year to close a major road in the city centre. The Priory Street Car Park is already packed each day with Christmas shoppers. I think twice about going out as I can't re-park my car without a long wait for a space. Eventually, another notice appeared at the bottom of East Hill advising that the road ahead was closed. But that, I think, was it. The morning of the 18th November brought total chaos. Some drivers simply didn't spot the rather insignificant sign at the bottom of East Hill as it was obscured by the traffic in front of them. Others emerged from Priory Street and Roman Road, where there was absolutely no signage, and drove up East Hill, only to find they had nowhere to go. They started to U turn and come back down the hill. Some, trying to access Priory Street to drop off children at school or park their cars in the car park, realised that they would have to turn into the street from East Hill. Unfortunately, they met traffic coming out. Nobody could move. The road is too narrow for two cars to pass each other and both Priory Street and East Hill had nose to tail traffic so reversing was not an option. Tempers frayed. Boy oh boy, did they fray!

It wasn't long before some delivery drivers coming from High Street realised that they could save themselves quite a lot of time by cutting through Priory Street to get to St Botolph's rather than going down as far as Brook Street. They were joined by lorry drivers who had missed the sign at the bottom of the hill. They thundered, at some speed, east - west through Priory Street. It was inevitable that delivery vehicles coming from drop offs in High Street and Wyre Street would do what they normally do, turn into Queen Street, beyond the blockage, and thence into Priory Street. Two sizeable lorries met nose to nose outside my house where the road is at its narrowest.

Neither driver would give way! With vehicles behind them, preventing them from reversing, I could understand their problem. Their language was not for the easily offended! The blocked road caused utter mayhem. Buses rerouted, traffic at a standstill across the city centre, people totally confused. Sir Bob, coming to the Civic Society's Town Deal Briefing that evening, caught a bus at Middleborough which took 40 minutes to get to the city centre. Yes, stopping all traffic in Queen Street to allow builders to work safely on the badly damaged front of the Brewhouse was probably sensible but why, oh why, did nobody put up roadworks signs to say that the traffic flow in Priory Street was temporarily reversed? Why were there so few warning signs? Why was there so little warning for bus users? And why was the road closure sign at Queen Street corner wrong?

The road was closed at night, too. The builders apparently found an unexpected problem which meant a delay. The road was rapidly cleared and life returned to normal. But they will be back after Christmas. One can only hope that ECC Highways have learnt a lesson and will put accurate signs up in all the right places, both in advance and also before work starts on the actual day. Will they? I doubt it!

*Jo Edwards*

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## **A DIFFERENT ROOM WITH A VIEW**

My dentist is on North Hill - most of my dental treatment has been on North Hill -but the practice has just moved to larger, newly refurbished premises, which is Grade II listed. Whilst 'I sat in the old dentist's chair, and stared up his nose in despair' as Pam Ayres said, the dentist tilted the chair, and suddenly there was a new view of tiled roofs, rising above the frosted dentist's windows on the east side of North Hill.. I was at school on North Hill and passed up and down it many times, but never before I have seen this view.

Actually the dentist was young and I did not have to stare up his nose in despair. Pam Ayres' poem always comes to mind when I find myself having dental treatment.

*Peter Evans*

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## **COUNCIL HISTORY IN GOLD LEAF**

### **Anniversary of reorganisation of local councils 1974**

Better late than never in this case, 50 years late!

I blame myself for this oversight, but I am not alone and many others over the past five decades are also guilty. It was simply the case that nobody thought about it. Until this year, when I realised that very few people are aware of the background as to how the 'new' Borough (City since 2022) came about.

There was nothing on display in the Town Hall to tell people. There is now in gold leaf lettering, an explanation on an oak panel in the ornate setting of the Council Chamber.

This year is the 50th anniversary of Local Government Re-organisation in 1974 which saw the mergers of hundreds of councils throughout England. Fifty years ago the historic Borough of Colchester merged with three other local councils to create the new Borough on the boundaries which exist today.





The historic Borough, dating back to at least the 12th century, merged with around 30 villages served by Lexden and Winstree Rural District Council (the names of two Saxon Hundreds) and the Urban District Councils at Wivenhoe and West Mersea.

Our neighbour to the east, Tendring District Council, was formed by the merger of five local councils. Same number for Braintree District Council to the west.

In addition to the gold leaf lettering giving details of the creation of the enlarged Borough, the panel also lists the names of the Leaders of the Council from when that position commenced. This did not exist for the first two years, but then introduced informally by Conservatives the late David Holt (1976-78) and then Alec Sexton (1978-82) with the position formally established by the Council in 1979.

He was followed by Conservative Councillors the late Bernard West (1982-86) and the late Eric James (1986-1987) with myself taking over as Leader of the Council in 1987 firstly for the SDP-Liberal Alliance (Social Democratic Party and Liberal Party) and then from 1988 as the Liberal Democratic Party after the two parties merged.

Fellow Lib-Dem Steve Cawley served as Leader of the Council for seven years, from 1991 to 1998, and then Lib-Dem Colin Sykes for two years followed by Lib-Dem Bill Frame in 2000.

It was my idea to have the above history of the Council and its Leaders up to 2000 recorded for posterity in gold leaf on an oak panel in the Council Chamber. Its installation coincides with the Council's 50th anniversary, with gold leaf appropriate for a golden anniversary.

This has been done at no cost to the Council. Surviving former Leaders of the Council from the last century jointly funded the work.

The panel at the back of the Chamber is next to one giving in gold leaf the names of those who have served as High Steward, which is next to one giving the names of those individuals and Army regiments awarded the Freedom of the Borough.

Another new panel elsewhere in the Chamber, which I promoted separately, records the date when Colchester became a City officially 5th September 2022, the last city to be created by the late Queen Elizabeth II three days before her death.

Names of Leaders of the Council since 2000 are listed on a framed parchment elsewhere in the Council Chamber, put there a couple of years ago. It looks out of place.

Surviving Leaders from the 20th century felt that their names should not be airbrushed from the record in the Council Chamber. Further, we agreed that the history of how the current Council was created 50 years ago should be displayed in a style identical to the other panels in keeping with the ornate setting of the Council Chamber. Thus gold leaf lettering on an oak panel next to two other panels featuring High Stewards and those honoured with the Freedom of the Borough.

The cost of the gold lettering has been funded by the surviving Leaders from the last century Alec Sexton, myself, Steve Cawley, Colin Sykes and Bill Frame.

I admit what prompted me pursuing matters is because we were collectively a bit miffed that the framed parchment of Leaders of the Council, from 2000, had excluded those who had served as Leader prior to then. We have now corrected that slight, and equally important have done so in a manner in keeping with the ornate appearance of the Council Chamber along with recording in an historic context the background to the creation of the Council on its current boundaries 50 years ago.

It was when considering correcting the erroneous exclusion of Leaders of the Council up to 2000 that I suggested the opportunity should be taken to give an explanation as to how the current Council came into existence. Also, to give the date when Colchester became a City.

There are now very people left from when local government was re-organised half-a-century ago. I am guessing that very few of today's Councillors are aware of how the Council on which they serve came into existence. Thanks to the action taken by five former Leaders of the Council, it is now recorded for posterity in the Council Chamber.

*Sir Bob Russell,*  
High Steward of Colchester

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## **UPDATE FROM LAST NEWSLETTER**

In the last edition, we reproduced details of the members from the first Society meeting 60 years ago and asked if members could provide any more details. We received an email from Henry Spyvee, still a member but living in deepest Guildford. There are still blanks in the list, so further data is still welcome.

*Dear Peter*

*I was glancing at the 60th Edition of the Civic Society Magazine and noticed a small error.*

*On page 60 Mr Brown (known as 'Bomber' to his pupils) is described as 'Head of History' at the Grammar School. In fact his field was classics, possibly Head. He and others got me through 'O' level Latin which I speak fluently. I did not study Greek but know he taught it. I was aware of his history talks and think my father attended at least one. Head of History in my time was Mr. Hall (Hiram). He was a keen archaeologist and, apart from his other dig, made discoveries in School grounds in Lexden Road and Queens Road.*

*I do not expect a correction, merely an eye open for repeat of this minor error.*

*Best wishes,*

*Henry*

## THE TALE OF A CHRISTMAS CAROL

For several years now, Anthony Roberts, Manager of the Colchester Arts Centre, has been performing Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol, with musical performed by Jamie Cunliffe (his stepson). Anthony does this in anything up to 40 locations each year around Colchester, all from memory and all for charity. This must raise a substantial sum each year.

Speaking for myself, I have seen Anthony perform A Christmas Carol at the Arts Centre and in the Mayor's parlour, as well, during the Covid crisis streamed from Anthony's front room. I am looking forward to this year in the Castle, where his performance is in aid of Headway Essex, a local charity that the Museum Service has worked with before.

It is also being performed for the first time in St Leonard's at the Hythe and in the MacGregor Hall, Frinton. Like Dickens himself, Anthony is undertaking a major tour. Dickens appeared in the Old Colchester Theatre Royal in 1861.

*Peter Evans*

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## GREATER ANGLIA

I reckon that when I worked in London I made over 5000 journeys each way from Colchester to London in the mornings and back in the evenings. The main problem was that capacity was inadequate: I sometimes had to stand all the journey, and sought ways to avoid doing so: at one stage I was getting the 6:30 train. The railway now is, thankfully, much better than in those days. Here is a potted history of how it got where it is today.

In the 1990s British Rail was privatised by John Major's government. It replaced BR with three types of private-sector companies: regional train operators that ran the trains, rolling stock companies that provided the trains, and Railtrack that looked after the tracks.

The government granted franchises to the train operating companies, who bore the risk that their revenue from fares wouldn't cover their costs. They paid leasing charges to the rolling stock companies and access fees to Railtrack.

The industry had been nationalised in 1948 and BR had successfully increased passenger numbers but needed considerable subsidies from the public purse. The government hoped that the railway operating companies would continue the former but not the latter. They mostly succeeded in increasing passenger numbers but failed more miserably than BR in the reducing subsidies.

Right from the beginning Railtrack was poorly managed and not properly overseen by its regulator. Things came to a head in 2000 when a train fractured a rail at Hatfield, causing a fatal accident.

A official enquiry revealed that Railtrack had been aware that the rail was cracked but had failed to take corrective action. Cracked rails were so widespread that 1800 emergency speed restrictions were imposed. The government closed down Railtrack and transferred its responsibilities to a new public body: Network Rail.

In the course of time some railway operating companies surrendered franchises because they were unprofitable, and the government cancelled others that were failing to provide the required service. By 2020 there were 20 train operating companies, but only ten remained in the private sector. The other ten are managed by public bodies such as the Department of Transport, the Scottish and Welsh governments, and Transport for London.

The Covid lockdown caused a massive reduction in the revenues of the train operating companies.

In 2020 the government cancelled all the franchises and replaced them with direct contracts to provide services, effectively transferring the commercial risks from the train operating companies to the government.

In 2021 the then government said that it would abandon the tripartite organisation of the passenger railway, and create an overarching body called Great British Railways.

The new government has said that it will implement their predecessor's plan at greater pace, with train operating companies being nationalised as and when their current contracts expire.

The train operating company covering East Anglia is Greater Anglia. It used to be owned by the state railway of the Netherlands, but it is now owned by a consortium of a UK transport company and the Japanese industrial company Mitsui.

GA is the best-performing train operating company: its revenue exceeds its expenses and so it is paying the difference to the Treasury – the only train operating company to do so.

It was affected by national strikes, but has an otherwise good service record. In the last few years it has renewed all its rolling stock. There are now no locomotive-pulled trains: the trains are propelled by underfloor motors driving individual carriages which make the ride smoother. Wheelchair users do not need a ramp because the train floors are level with the platform.

GA will be transferred to state ownership in September 2026. Just before then it will open a new main-line station at Beaulieu Park, four miles east of Chelmsford. Fewer passengers will use Chelmsford station, and there will be less traffic congestion in the city centre.

Coinciding with this, GA is going to recast its timetable to improve its services and attract more passengers.

Four of the five trains an hour between Colchester and Liverpool Street call at Stratford, where they connect with the new Elizabeth Line. This is now the busiest railway line in the country, and as a result Transport for London is covering its operating costs.

GA runs two trains an hour between London and Norwich, and one each as far as Ipswich, Clacton and Colchester Town. The Town station also has two other trains between there and Colchester North, and one to all stations to Walton on the Naze. The last is the busiest: most passengers use Colchester Town to travel to or from the small towns and villages between Colchester and Walton or (by changing at Thorpe le Soken) Clacton.

The line between North and Town stations is lightly used. This is partly because the headways are irregular: there is a 35 minute gap from Town to North so that at some times it is quicker to walk.

The two fast trains from Liverpool Street to Colchester North both now connect with trains from there to Town. In the opposite direction there is a connection from Town with one of the fast trains from North to Liverpool Street, but not with the other one. An extra train at about 17 minutes past the hour would provide this connection and plug the 35 minute gap mentioned above. This would reduce travel times for Colchester people.

All the train services in Tendring are hourly: between London and Clacton, Colchester and Walton, and Manningtree and Harwich. Tendring Transport Users' Group is campaigning for them all to be increased to two an hour.

Clacton is a deprived area and its nearest large place is Colchester. An improved rail link would encourage residents in Clacton to shop and even get jobs in Colchester. It would also make it easier for them to attend appointments at Colchester Hospital. I would expect some of the people who use buses from Clacton to Colchester would switch to the railway. Buses between Clacton



and Osborne Street take 58 minutes. Trains between Clacton and Colchester Town would take 29 minutes.

I suggest that the Civic Society should support both an additional hourly service between Clacton and Colchester Town and a better service between the North and Town stations.

*Roger Dennis*

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## LOOKING UP IN COLCHESTER

Enclosed with this newsletter is a copy of 'Looking up in Colchester', a set of unusual views of Colchester, encouraging us all to look more closely at our town. Also, it celebrates 60 years of Colchester Civic Society. It has been prepared by Richard Arnopp who took the photographs, along with Adrian Rushton.

Further copies are available from me.

*Peter Evans*

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## COMMEMORATING COLCHESTER BARRACKS

I think back to the day, not so long ago, when I was contacted by the extraordinary Paul Knappett who wanted to meet to discuss an idea with us. Intrigued, John Burton, Bob Mercer and I duly met Paul just outside the perimeter of Roman Circus House. Paul, oozing enthusiasm, explained that he wanted to commemorate the Le Cateau Barracks and, particularly, the Officers' Mess (later the Sergeants' Mess) and the men who left the barracks to fight at the Battle of Le Cateau in WW1. What a wonderful idea!

Poor Paul. Life would have been so much simpler for him if he'd just gone ahead and not consulted us, but he did, and by the end of that meeting, his idea of a single structure packed with information had been turned into something completely different. Recognising that less is more, I suggested putting two blue plaques on the Mess, making the memorial itself simpler. Simpler? John then spoke about tactile 'maps' suitable for the blind and far easier for children to understand. Paul was very taken with that suggestion. It put the cost up hugely but he remained undaunted. The reception



following the unveiling of the two plaques was the perfect occasion to launch the memorial appeal. Paul kept us fully up to speed with both his fundraising efforts and with the design and manufacture of the memorial. Working with his wife, Paula, and a small team of truly amazing and dedicated people, it was not long before Paul was able to announce a further gathering, this time to unveil the stunning memorial. The ceremony was held on the 26th August, exactly 110 years after the Battle of Le Cateau.



Paul is one of those rare people who make things happen. His energy and determination are off the scale. He is already looking at innovative ways of commemorating other parts of the old Garrison so watch this space. We are so proud that both he and Paula are members of Colchester Civic Society.

If you haven't already seen the memorial, it stands on a tiny piece of spare land between Roman Circus House and the Sergeants' Mess, now beautifully converted into housing. Do visit it if you possibly can.

*Jo Edwards*

photo credit *Adrian Rushton*

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## HERITAGE OPEN DAYS

Once again, this excellent idea continues to interest residents and visitors alike, and allows us to visit other towns and cities. In Colchester, attractions were available from Copford to Mersea to Wivenhoe, and for the first time the East Anglian Railway Museum.

Civic Society members have been involved as stewards for example at the Roman Theatre in Maidenburgh and at the Audley Chapel at Berechurch for many years. I have stewarded at the Audley Chapel, Berechurch, formerly St Margaret's Church. Two of the visitors turned out to be the last couple to be married at St Margaret's Church before it was deconsecrated in 1975.



*Views of and from  
St Botolph's Church*

Also open was St Botolph's Church. Built in 1838, the design inside reflects the Norman columns of the remains of St Botolph's Priory next door. Richard Arnopp visited with his camera.



I visited the Brew House at 7 Queen Street, which joined the scheme for the first time this year. Whilst this not a large property, it is perhaps Colchester's oldest timber framed building, dating back to the 14th century. Over the proceeding 700 years it has obviously had some work done but it still remains dominated by timber partitions. The proud manager says that any replacements are from recycled materials and it looks very authentic downstairs, and indeed on the stairs. He admits that the bar itself is marble and recycled from Butlins in Clacton. Repairs are necessary to the building which was hit by a bus in 2023 which will cause traffic delays.



That day, 7th September, was rather strange as it was Invasion Colchester day as well. As HOD fans moved between sites, space had to be made to allow passage for dinosaurs, Disney

characters, refugees from Star Wars, soldiers in various military costumes and, apparently, Daleks! I must admit I had no idea who some of these characters were but the costumes were often magnificent and in some cases, so was the brass nerve displayed by the participants!



The City was very, very busy.

*Peter Evans*

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE GENERAL ELECTION RESULT



With Pam Cox winning Colchester for Labour, this puts Colchester amongst a rare group of constituencies across the country to have been represented by a Member of Parliament from three different political parties in less than ten years! It is the first in Essex, and the first in East Anglia in such a short space of time although over a longer period this has happened in both Cambridge and Norwich.

I was Liberal Democrat MP for Colchester until the Spring of 2015; Will Quince was the Conservative MP until this year; and Pam Cox is now Labour MP for Colchester. The last three MPs for Colchester were all Councillors when they were elected. Prior to me being elected MP in 1997 (while serving as Liberal Democrat Councillor for New Town Ward) no Colchester Councillor had been elected MP. I was followed in 2015 by Conservative Councillor Will Quince who represented Prettygate Ward; and now Labour Councillor Pam Cox (New Town and Christ

Church Ward) has been elected MP.

*Sir Bob Russell*

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## OTHER COLCHESTER BUILDINGS AND A SPECIAL OFFER

If you are going to the bus station or Colchester Town Railway Station, you might notice some interesting artwork on the windows of the building on St Botolph's Corner. I am not sure who is responsible but it brightens up a dull area. The Town Station has some artwork from local schools, which seems to be a theme for the smaller local stations.



I understand that the upper floor of Jumbo has been the site for poetry reading by Anthony Roberts, with music by Orlando Jopling, cellist. This was arranged by the Roman River Festival and North Essex Heritage. I do wish that there was a photograph of how the cello was taken up the stairs|

A few years ago, the Society produced a book entitled *Historic High Street*. If you do not have a copy, the remaining stock has been reduced to £2 each plus postage.£2.10. Please contact Jo Edwards if you would like a copy.

*Peter Evans*

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## REMEMBRANCE DAY 2024

Members will recall that last year, Society members contributed a large number of hand knitted poppies to the British Legion Poppy Appeal. This year it was 210 that were contributed.



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## UNVEILING OF RESTORED HISTORIC WAR MEMORIAL



If it had not been for the dedication and determination of Kevin Starling there would not now be a War Memorial in Shrub End!

On Friday 8th November 2024, ahead of Remembrance Sunday, a service was held to unveil the conserved and restored War Memorial, which had stood there for just over 100 years, next to the graveyard of All Saints' Church and opposite The Leather Bottle public house.

It had been erected in memory of the 17 men of this part of Colchester who lost their lives in The Great War (the First World War 1914-18). At that time Shrub End was

a hamlet, with fields where now we have the Shrub End and Prettygate housing estates, either side of the road out of Colchester towards Tiptree and Maldon. The loss of 17 men was a large number from such a small population at that time. Names of any Fallen from Shrub End in the Second World War (1939-45) are not listed on the marble tablet.

Kevin or Kev as he was known to some was not going to allow the War Memorial to be lost to his beloved Shrub End which he had once served as



a Colchester Councillor and where he had lived for 45 years of his 47 years marriage to Sue..who supported and encouraged him throughout his efforts to save this important feature in the evolving history of what is now a southern suburb of Colchester.

The Memorial had deteriorated to a poor condition, visually unattractive by the obvious decline and in due course deemed to be a dangerous structure requiring fencing to be erected around it. Although Listed, as are all war memorials, that would not have saved it from demolition.

No-one seemed to have ownership or responsibility for the War Memorial or on the land where it was located. Not daunted by this, Kevin proceeded with extensive research and secured planning permission for the conservation/restoration. He was successful in his approach to The War Memorials Trust for financial assistance. He and Sue organised fund-raising in the name of Shrub End Residents' Association which he founded. A consultant was appointed.

Around three years ago Kevin contacted me, and asked if I could help. I was happy to do so. We formed a Group to support his endeavours. The membership comprised myself and Kevin, the Bishop of Colchester, the three City Councillors for Shrub End Ward, a Church Warden from All Saints' Church Shrub End, the Secretary of the Colchester Branch of The Royal British Legion, and a representative from Colchester Garrison.

Things were progressing, but there was a significant financial shortfall. Then, in January this year, Kevin died. He was aged 68. The Group was determined to continue Kevin's efforts. Our prayers were answered, as it were, when Colchester City Council unanimously agreed to cover the shortfall. With this good news, contractors were appointed..and in late summer Punch Construction Limited commenced work under the direction of consultants The Morton Partnership with assistance from Adamson Conservation. Liaising on behalf of the Shrub End War Memorial Group was my good friend Trevor Bellis.

The unveiling ceremony (removing a Union Flag, a large one borrowed from the Town Hall) was done by his wife Sue, son Kirk and granddaughter Kimberley.

Around 70 people attended the ceremony including pupils from three local schools: Gosbecks, Icen Academy and Paxman Academy. Also present were local Councillors and members of The Royal British Legion. Commander of Colchester Garrison, Lt Col Ed Rankin, laid a wreath. Sue Starling lay a red rose in memory of Kevin.

The Bishop of Colchester, the Rt Rev Roger Morris, led the prayers and blessed the restored War Memorial.

The Act of Remembrance was read by Mrs Jackie Mason, Secretary of the Colchester Branch of The Royal British Legion, with those present responding with 'We will remember them' at the end. Bugle calls for Last Post and Reveille were played by Mr Mark Thompson from the City of Colchester Brass Band. Standard Bearer Mr Ken Antoniou was present with the Standard of The Colchester Branch of The Royal British Legion. I did the welcome and the conclusion, to bring the 15 minutes service to an end. I wore my Knight's Badge and the High Steward of Colchester's Badge.

We then adjourned to the room at the rear of All Saints' Church where church members had kindly laid on a buffet. Sue Starling, Kirk and Kimberley cut a commemorative iced cake featuring the front of the service programme with a Poppy border.

Funds for the work had been raised by Mr and Mrs Starling, with significant financial contributions from The War Memorials Trust and Colchester City Council. Other donations included Essex County Council (from Councillor Dave Harris' locality budget); the Co-op/Asda Garage,

Shrub End Road (customer donations); Ancient Briton public house (customer donations); 34th Colchester Scouts; Paxman Academy; Icenii Academy; residents of Shrub End; three Colchester Masonic Lodges; James Cracknell (who ran in the London Marathon); and donations in Kevin's memory.

The side columns, the top and the stone wreath from the original War Memorial were conserved, with new concrete blocks. The original marble with the names of the Fallen has been retained.

The cost of the conservation and restoration of the War Memorial was around £40,000. The Group still has work to do – phase two, improving the setting of the War Memorial including a 'Tommy fence' along the pavement edge which was something Kevin was keen to have.

I conclude with words to match those which started this article: Without Kevin Starling, Shrub End would have lost its War Memorial.

*Sir Bob Russell*, Convenor, Shrub End War Memorial Group

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## COFFEE MORNINGS REPORT

Our popular coffee mornings are held on the first Tuesday of each month, allowing members to raise concerning issues for CCS to provide feedback and on to raise matters of interest to members. Some of these matters feature in the 'Eyes and Ears' reports as well. These are some of the highlights from the sessions held between July and October.

**Dead Trees in parklets in High Street** the Colchester BID has been asked to remove these but nothing has happened. The Leader of the Council has also asked

**Access to Castle Park** there have been problems when the gates have closed and no explanation given. The Friends of Castle Park are taking this up.

**Street drinking and begging** Beacon House is working on this. Currently there are few rough sleepers (there have been some deaths from drugs). Drinkers have returned to St Botolph's Priory as the funding for security patrols have ceased.

Regular 6 monthly Police update on this occasion the Community team represented the Police Town team.

**Does Mill, East Bay** this has long been a concern of CCS. Work now starting.

**Signage** Destination Colchester are actively pursuing improved signage in the City Centre with the City Council.

**City Centre pavements** some of the HS2 funding is to be used for repairs by the government.

**Roman Circus Project** architect Francis Terry attended the October session to explain his vision for the reconstruction of the starting gates at Roman Circus. He is looking to see if his proposal meets with general approval. The crowded meeting was attended by Pam Cox, our MP, several councillors including the Heritage Portfolio holder, representatives from Colchester Archaeological Trust and NEEBPT, as well as many members.

*See pictures on the next page.*



## **TOWN DEAL/ LEVELLING UP MEETINGS**

Members continue to be invited to meetings about the Councils plan's to use funds provided under the Town Centre Deal and other major projects. The latest was on 19th November, when we were given an update on the plan to create a route from Colchester Town Railway Station platform directly through the Britannia Car Park, St Botolphs and the Priory Grounds. Priory Street Car Park and through the Roman Wall. This last aspect came as a surprise to some attendees, even when we were assured that this would be through Victorian brickwork rather than actual original Roman masonry. Other issues were raised about access from Colchester Town Station down a slope for disabled people.

As the traffic in town that day was appallingly affected by the closure of Queen Street, making it difficult for some to attend, information will be given at the January Coffee Morning.

## THE ABRO SITE - URGENT PLANNING ISSUE

The Civic Society, along with others, had a three minute slot at the recent Planning Committee meeting to give reasons for refusing the plans for the development of the ABRO site. The Planning Committee paused the decision as they required their Officers to give them firm grounds for refusal. The meeting reassembled a week later and refusal was given. As we write this we do not know if the applicant will appeal but we have to prepare for that. As a Society, we are particularly disturbed that the late Alistair Day's Master Plan for the site was ignored on many counts, including reducing the amount of social housing being provided by the developer.



Paul Knappett, a member of the Society, along with our new MP, Pam Cox and Sir Bob Russell, worked together to have important buildings on the site listed. For example, a rare Horse Infirmary could be inspected once access was made available to a previously secure site, and that is now listed by the Secretary of State as architecturally and historically important. We can, as a Society, push for the Alistair's Master Plan to be a basis for the ABRO development as it was accepted by the Council as a condition relating to the sale of the site. However, we all accept that covid has impacted on the use of City Centre land and the City is changing its economic model. Shopping on a large scale is disappearing to out of town sites or the internet. Colchester will rely more and more on its historic aspects to draw in visitors, and thus wealth, to the City. So a group has been formed to see if we can add to the attractions we already have in the City, by enhancing the Roman Circus.



The group, thanks to the amazing generosity to the City by Francis Terry, architect, has some well developed ideas on how to enhance the Circus as an asset by strongly relating it to the ABRO site. The group hope to have a worked up scheme available if an Inspector turns down an appeal. The scheme may be more financial viable for the developer. We are at a very early stage. The Civic Society, along with other relevant bodies, does have a voice in the small Circus Group, who will draw in others when needed. So we are involved in a two pronged attack on the ABRO site, supporting our Planning Committee and getting prepared for an alternative should an opportunity arise.

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*John Burton*

President of Colchester Civic Society, on behalf of the "ABRO" group



## AND IT'S GOOD NIGHT FROM HIM

This will be my last newsletter as editor as I am passing the editorship over to my colleague on the Executive Committee, Glyn Barritt, who I am sure will cope admirably. She is Chair of the Colchester Tourist Guides, so knows a lot about the town. I hope to continue to contribute articles as necessary. I will still be very much involved, as I am taking on the role of Hon. Treasurer as the excellent Paul Weston is retiring after many years in the role.

It seems appropriate to end with the end of the saga of the missing Royal Mail Pillar Box, removed in October 2020 from Mersea Road, near the Grapes Public House. I regarded this as my personal mail box, as it was on my direct route into town. It was also popular with parents as it was close to the school crossing and many people complained, including Robert Mercer, on behalf of the CCS and Sir Bob Russell. Royal Mail would not replace it.

However, it was not a standard Pillar box but an 'anonymous' one, as the usual initials of the relevant sovereign QV, EVIII, KGV, KGVII, are not shown. These are rare and Colchester only ever had 4. Still Royal Mail did relent and agreed to install the anonymous elsewhere, originally in High Street, but this proved too complicated due to underground services. It has finally returned to service as a replacement in Lexden Road, corner of Ashley Gardens. You can check the other Colchester post boxes on the CCS website and a report prepared by Robert Mercer.



When I started the Civic Society was a number of double sided A4 sheets, stabled at the top left corner, without illustrations. The last edition contained many colour plates to celebrate our 60th anniversary. It seems a good time to pass the job on. Thanks to our printer Kathy at Design Sweet, Jo Edwards and the Executive Committee for their help over the last 12 years or so. Thanks for reading and all best wishes to Glyn.

*Peter Evans*

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## REPORTS OF SOCIAL EVENTS

### Excursion to Nymans, West Sussex, 17th July 2024



Thus was the Society's first real, fully fledged coach excursion since 2019, arranged in conjunction with some other local groups. However, it was business as usual as travel was via Kings Coaches, with our regular driver, Tim. It was also my first full excursion since 2017 and I think many of us were out of practice but the day was a success with the weather just what we would have ordered -warm, sunny but not too hot.

The house was from 1890 to 1953 owned by the German Messel family, of Jewish descent who established the huge woodland estate and gardens of 328 acres, including gardens (Grade II\* listed), a lake and an attractive family home. The family included Oliver Messel, the stage and costume designer, and Antony Armstrong-Jones (Earl of Snowden and husband of Princess Margaret) whose mother was a Messel, granddaughter of Ludwig Messel, the founder.

Only part of the house is habitable following a serious fire in 1947, leaving part of it, a preserved ruin. The rest of the house itself has a massive collection of gardening books, including a 1932 edition of *Country Life*, featuring the estate. At this time, the magazine did not have the colourful cover, familiar from dentist surgeries. One of the few non-gardening books was about Pugin and thus the other Messel interest art and design. The family do retain homes at Nymans after transfer to the National Trust but most of the house is open to the public.

The family have retained a role in maintenance and design of the Nymans Estate and in 1987, after the Great Storm that destroyed over 500 trees, this fell to Alistair Buchanan, who had only just succeeded his cousin Anne Messel (Countess of Rosse) as the Director of Nymans. He and his team re-established the woodlands, actually improving the views over the weald - which are stunning - as well as renewing the gardens.



They are all peaceful and relaxing. There is a Pinetum, an Arboretum walk, a lake, summer borders (in really good form) and all sorts of gardens, starting with Rose, Wall, Wild and Knot. I am terrible identifying trees but I spotted a Redwood!

Of course there were cafes, guided tours and a shop. I wasn't the only one taking plants home with me to remind me of a peaceful corner of Sussex.

*Peter Evans*

### **Tour of St James the Great Church East Hill 28th July 2024**

We were welcomed by the incumbent Father Michael McCluskey, plus the churchwardens, the Director Music and David Beattie, one of our members, who had suggested the event. Just as St Peter's dominates North Hill, St James' towers over the eastern approach to the City centre. St James is certainly the lightest of our churches whether still in its original use or converted to other purposes. Its very position makes this the case and it has splendid Early English windows, full of glass and light. There is some very attractive stained glass, but much more clear.

The very site of the church makes it at risk to the elements. The east window in the lady chapel looks fine from the outside but the stone and indeed the lead of the windows are in need of repair. Amazingly, the parish has been able to raise £105,000 of the £120,000 cost of this essential work.

It is not the only restoration project the church has undertaken. The painting of the Adoration of the Shepherds above the altar has suffered from damp but has been conserved recently. (See a previous newsletter). The Altar presents an impressive display with candlesticks and an especially designed and woven silk altar cloth, beneath the Adoration of the Shepherds.

The current parish of St James now includes the parish of St Paul, whose church in Belle Vue Road was demolished over 30 years ago. Former town centre parishes of All Saints, St Nicholas and St



Runwald also once featured in the name of the parish, and the Church benefited from various items 'bequeathed' by the former parishes. We were shown the beautiful Roll of Honour from WW1 from St Paul's. The Director of Music and organist, explained how the organ from St Nicholas is now in use at St James. He also explained how it had been some altered to extend the range of the music that can be played, and he gave us a demonstration.

David Beattie gave us the history of the building since it was founded in the 12th Century. He showed us the memorial to Arthur Winsley (dates) who founded the largest of Colchester's Almshouse charities. It is indeed magnificent and it is a shame that former minister Nantes tried to hide it behind an altar, but was refused permission by the diocese.

Father McCluskey assured me that the painted stone angels, supporting the roof were genuine, but was not sure who painted them he has personally inspected them using an electricians tower. He also told us that the board recording the incumbents of St James and is decorated by the coats of arms of the 5 dioceses that the church has been part of London, St Albans, Rochester, Southwark and since 1913 Chelmsford.

*Peter Evans*

### **Walking Tour of Cavalry and Artillery Barracks with Paul Knappett 12th September 2024**

We met for coffee at Roman Circus and Paul gave us an introduction on the history of the barracks in Colchester. This is linked with the redevelopment of the site and whilst we were walking round, we saw some of the team from firms concerned, and Paul was due to meet them as our walk ended.



Saved - Campaigners stand in front of the 'War Horse Hospital' site after it was successfully listed Grade II (Image: Pam Cox)

Shortly before this, some good news concerning the site had been announced. Within the Cavalry Barracks, it had been confirmed that the Horse Infirmary, a rare survivor of army life, was 'saved'. Paul had been working with CCS, local councillors, including Pam Cox, our new member of Parliament and many others.

Paul is much respected for the depth of his knowledge of the area and it is easy to see why. It is down to him that there is a monument recording the entire site, which maps out in scale the buildings of the Victorian Barracks. There are Braille notes on the base and considerable thought has gone into the planning. The base of the monument is modelled on the chimneys of nearby buildings. As ever, looking at Victorian constructions, you are impressed with the style, detail and quality that has gone into the work, even if the inhabitants were not intended to be officers. Paul showed us where 'luxury flats' have been created from sergeants quarters.



*Paul Knappett at the unveiling of the monument*

Not all the buildings have been converted to housing, there are offices and a pharmacy. Some buildings still have to find a use and there seems to be a desire from the developers to create really attractive homes, retaining original features. Paul was pleased to tell us that some special buildings the horse hospital, for example- have gained protection and there are hopes for more. With Paul, it is easy to see soldiers in full Victorian uniform walking, or marching, from cavalry barracks to parade ground.

*Peter Evans*

### **Walking Tour of Colchester Town Centre 6th October 2024**

Our tour this year by Glyn Barritt, who is now the Chair of Colchester Guides. We all think we know our City but it only takes a walk with an experienced guide like Glyn to make us think again.

It was not a warm autumn afternoon and the group, reduced by colds, met Glyn by the Castle Park gates. Glyn made us look again at the War Memorial, which is actually a cenotaph, as it does not list any of those commemorated. These are recorded in a canister which was buried in the foundations. It was originally commemorating just the Great War, but amended to include other conflicts.

Glyn also pointed out the arms of Viscount Cowdray, formerly Weetman Pearson, M P for Colchester 1892-1910, and Lord High Steward of Colchester until his death in 1931. Lord Cowdray lost a son in the Great war and his father bought the site of the Memorial and paid for the construction. The coat of arms illustrates this. He went abroad to Mexico, where he undertook underwater exploration and actually made his fortune by striking oil.

There was almost an underlying theme as we started by looking at the damaged All Saint's Natural History Museum and would be passing the Castle, repairs needed to the water damaged west side, and ended up opposite the Town Hall, where repairs to the Moot Hall are underway. At this stage, we looked at Holly Trees where thorough on-going repairs are nearing completion, which Glyn told us was built on the site of a Tudor house called Simnels.

Along the way to the Town Hall, I found many pieces of information that were new to me. By the plinth commemorating the site of deaths of Sir Charles Lucas and Sir George Lisle, Glyn pointed out the door that they left the Castle by and the remains of the stairs that they used. I used to pass this site regularly after school can it be 50 years ago (yes it can, and the rest) without noticing.

Glyn showed us the inside of the Roman Theatre and exactly where we were on the model. The audience were placed on the slope of the hill so that the sun would not be in their eyes. The painted backdrop to other buildings of the Roman town reminded me that ordinary Romans lived in flats rather than villas. She pointed out the corner of the back wall of the theatre on the corner of St Helen's Chapel, which I had not noticed previously.

As we reached St Martin's Church, Glyn told us that there has been a major restoration project inside removing the black paint applied to the walls by the Colchester Theatre Group 60 years back and other features of the interior walls. The Church is now in the care of the Greek Orthodox church. I would like to see inside.

Oh and our Castle is the biggest Norman Castle in Europe and the pond near the East front of the Castle, named for Wetzlar, was originally built in the shape of Roman baths. Thanks for this, Glyn.

*Peter Evans*

### **Tour of Mercury Theatre, 26th October 2024**

The Civic Society was a sponsor for the project to expand and improve the theatre. Ten years ago, I represented the Society at the launch of the campaign in 2015 at the terrace of the House of Lords by the then Culture Minister Matt Hancock. The theatre moved to a tent on the Abbeyfield for the pantomime and some productions as the works were undertaken. Once fully reopened, we had a tour to see the improvements, which included lifts, more ladies toilets, improved facilities for disabled visitors, a massive workshop, a totally new costume department and lettable offices, work stations and meeting rooms. What has happened since then?

Having said that the tour was pantomime themed, and we were forbidden to take photos of the set or the costumes as we saw them in preparation. Nearly 4000 little lights have been affixed to the set, a 'Slosh' truck has been created so that the traditional messy 'Slosh' scene with custard pies etc. can be carried on the mobile stage without drenching the main stage. There was also a selection of amazing costumes and wigs for the dame. It was an aim that the theatre should create sets and costumes and sell them on they do, especially panto costumes!

This is a good income stream. Also, I was surprised to find that the proposal to provide office facilities for hire has been a considerable success, as I was doubtful, with extra space opening the next week. Apparently, new users of this service have to be warned about bad language - from the Mercury staff who can get passionate about their work. I was pleased to see that the Mercury office is muddled, just the way offices were when I was working.

We saw the prompt corner from where each play is controlled. We were told that good quality touring weekly plays were scarce in the pandemic, so it is excellent that the Mercury is still a producing theatre. We were proudly told that although panto



*Paint splattered ladder from the scenery dock*

rehearsals would only start the following Monday 71% of seats were already sold. Oh yes they were!

Everybody in our group, the youngest 11 years old, felt able to ask Carol Rayner, our guide and the head of communications, a question which was promptly answered. Giving tours also produces money for the theatre, so why not book one for yourself. You will be surprised.

*Peter Evans*

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## **SOCIAL PROGRAMME 2025**

It is little too early to publish the Programme for the coming year. Some venues haven't opened their diaries for next year yet and others haven't decided on prices. However, I have an interesting and varied selection of visits and events in mind and will let you have details as soon as I possibly can. These will come to you by email if we have an email address for you. Otherwise by post. Please contact me if you don't receive anything by mid February. My phone number is 07771626561 and my email address is josiemedwards@hotmail.com.

However, there is one really important message that I hope you have already received but I will now repeat. Our Coffee Morning Discussions are moving from the first Tuesday in the month to the first Thursday and the start time is changing, too, from 10am to 9.30am. This change is being made at the request of GreyFriars, who host our meetings. They and I apologise for any inconvenience. Herewith the Coffee Morning dates for 2025:

- Thursday 2nd January 2025
- Thursday 6th February 2025
- Thursday 6th March 2025
- Thursday 3rd April 2025
- Thursday 1st May 2025
- Thursday 5th June 2025
- Thursday 3rd July 2025
- Thursday 7th August 2025
- Thursday 4th September 2025
- Thursday 2nd October 2025
- Thursday 6th November 2025
- Thursday 4th December 2025

We are also intending to replace the London Plane tree we planted some years ago on the corner of Southway and Headgate, outside Southway House, in memory of Jean Lamb, who was our Newsletter Editor for many years. The tree was the victim of a freak gust of wind and very sadly had to be felled. The replacement tree has been bought and we will have a small ceremonial planting in a few weeks time. If you would like to attend, please contact me asap and I will let you know when I have a date.

*Jo Edwards*

## The objects of the Civic Society are to:

- a) Encourage high standards of architecture and town planning in the Borough of Colchester
- b) Stimulate public interest in and care for the beauty, history and character of the area of the town of Colchester and its surroundings
- c) Encourage the preservation, development and improvement of features of general public amenity and of public interest
- d) Pursue these ends by means of meetings, exhibitions, lectures, publications, others forms of instruction and publicity and the promotion of schemes of a charitable nature
- e) Co-operate with other local, regional and national organisations in the pursuit of the same objects on a broader geographical basis.

### CURRENT OFFICERS

PRESIDENT	<b>John Burton</b> MBE
VICE PRESIDENTS	<b>Right Reverend Roger Morris</b> , Bishop of Colchester <b>John Egan, Rosemary Jewers, Brian Roach, Henry Spyvee</b>
ACTING CHAIR AND PROGRAMME ORGANISER	<b>Jo Edwards</b> , 43 Priory Street, Colchester CO1 2QB 07771 626561                      josiemedwards@hotmail.com
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EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE	
OTHER ELECTED MEMBERS	<b>Sheila Anderton</b> <b>Glyn Barritt</b> <b>John Collett</b> <b>Roger Dennis</b> <b>Robert Mercer</b> <b>John Salmon</b>
CO-OPTED MEMBER	<b>Ken Walker</b>

