

Building Preservation Trusts in the Eastern Region

UK Association of BPTs (UK-APT)

East Anglian Regional Meeting – September 2014

The meeting was held in the Grand Jury Room of Belcher's splendid Town Hall which dominates Colchester High Street. We were the guests of the North East Essex Building Preservation Trust, courtesy of David Balcombe and Simon Hall. Alan Coday was in the chair. It was the first meeting of the Association for some years, and there was a very positive feeling that we should strive to meet more regularly (twice a year if possible) to strengthen the ties between us and to discuss our common concerns. It was agreed that if feasible the meetings should be hosted by local trusts. Several offers were made to host meetings during 2015, including at Upminster Windmill in the spring, and at Bury St Edmunds in the autumn. Great Yarmouth was also proposed as a later venue.

There were many challenging issues discussed, including the implications of the re-organisation of English Heritage, and the changing form and functions of trusts. Very few now operate with a revolving fund such as ours. Many operate as single project bodies, and some effectively become property developers. Here there can be issues of quality control. Some trusts have become involved in schemes to train workers in conservation skills and mentoring for best practice, and others are providing an advice service including areas such as managing risk and business planning.

Ian Rice of the Architectural Heritage Fund spoke about the challenges facing this body from April 2015, and the uncertainty surrounding funding after that date. The Princes Regeneration Trust is closely involved and the new remit for the AHF extends their sphere of influence to any charity or non-profit making organisation. At this stage the policy of diversification raises many unanswerable questions.

John Popham of the Bury St Edmunds Town Trust explained the links they have forged with the West Suffolk College to extend opportunities for training and education in many aspects of building conservation. The scheme has been running for two years. It includes morning college sessions with afternoon site visits. Five scholarships are offered in trades related to conservation. Some 50 volunteer lecturers have been involved in sharing their expertise with the 18 students currently enrolled. The project has been assisted by generous sponsorship from (among others) local estate agents and auctioneers. John argued that there is a serious decline in these skills nationally as workers trained in traditional techniques and materials retire. We still have some 5.5 million pre-1919 buildings in the UK and it is estimated that some 87,000 prospective employees could find work in this sector.

Libby Kirkly-Taylor the Conservation Officer of Colchester spoke of the crisis in local government provision. Roughly one third of conservation officers across the UK have not been replaced and in Essex the service is struggling to respond to the numbers of buildings at risk. Libby reported very positively, however, about the partnership between the local borough council and the local BPT, and gave an encouraging report of the work to save Teulon's 1849 church at Birch.

Other trusts reported the difficulties they are facing and the need to recruit fresh blood. Dennis Coombes, however, described the restoration work to Upminster Windmill - built 1803 and last working in 1934 – here a Heritage Lottery Grant of £1.4 million was secured together with generous support from the local council. Malcolm Crowder described another very successful scheme by the North Norfolk Historic Buildings Trust which refurbished the derelict military concrete Langham Dome as a state of the art visitor centre; in the first three months since its opening it attracted 2000 visitors. This scheme won the prestigious Graham Allen Award for Constuction & Design. Further promising work was undertaken in Norwich and Great Yarmouth, centres which respectively have a long tradition of successful conservation and are well placed to attract significant funding.

The day finished with a very informative tour of Colchester town centre, including discussion of the future for ‘Jumbo’ the elephantine water tower, and a very welcome scheme to refurbish major neglected listed buildings as hotel accommodation at the top of East Hill, adjacent to Colchester’s refurbished castle.

Bob Allen