

**IPSWICH BUILDING PRESERVATION TRUST AGM –  
14<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2017**

**Presentation by Fiona Cairns – Director of the Suffolk  
Preservation Society**

*A review by Bob Allen*

Our speaker this year presented us with a timely reminder of the importance of voluntary bodies in carrying forward the torch of conservation in times of austerity. Fiona began by describing some of her past career experiences as a Conservation Officer in initially in Kensington and later in Monmouthshire. In more recent years she has been active within the voluntary sector, at Pakenham Water Mill, before being appointed as Director of the SPS. She has a broad experience of conservation matters at a time when local government services have been savagely cut back, and few authorities are able to sustain the services that we still – to some extent - benefit from in our part of East Anglia.

Fiona delighted the audience by recalling the rescue of a notable tower house – Allt y Bela - near Usk. This building had been purchased by a local farmer in order to use the surrounding lands but the fifteenth century farmhouse with its splendid 1599 tower was abandoned to the wind and weather for three decades. Eventually conditions were so bad that compulsory purchase was successfully pursued, and a £1m restoration scheme was jointly funded by the AHF, Welsh Historic Monuments, and the Spitalfields Trust which, having restored all the available buildings in Spitalfields, was looking elsewhere for suitable schemes to fund. The story was well illustrated with slides including one of the threatening notices put up by the shotgun toting farmer to deter trespassers. It was a



heartening tale of collaboration between voluntary and public bodies resulting in a landmark conservation scheme.

We were inspired to hear that with the success at Usk in mind, building preservation trusts were able to be magicians – Fiona envisaged us all in the role of the Magus – making magic happen when all other hope was lost! We all felt a glow of congratulation at that point and our spirits were raised even higher to learn that the SPS itself had been launched at an inaugural meeting in Ipswich's own Ancient House, and that the Mayor of Ipswich, William Elliston, had been its first Chairman in 1929 - just the kind of leadership you might expect (and hope for) from the county town of Suffolk.

Fiona listed some of the achievements of the SPS, including works at such iconic estates as Heveningham, and Ickworth, and the establishment of a headquarters at Little Hall, Lavenham. With the loss of knowledge and expertise in the public sector, the SPS increasingly takes on an expanding brief in the scrutiny of major developments such as Ipswich Garden Suburb with 1100 houses, major schemes such as the Hold, and community asset schemes such as that to save 'The George' PH at Wickham Market. For these a team of volunteer experts support the work of the SPS and increasingly there is an educational and training aspect for other groups who might influence planning outcomes such as archaeologists and others concerned with urban design. Events are organised for SPS members, and photographic competitions help to create a campaigning energy to celebrate and protect the beauty of Suffolk.

Altogether Fiona's presentation touched on many significant issues and prompted a range of questions and comments from the audience. We were very grateful for her input to the AGM, and came away feeling inspired by what has been achieved, and with renewed energy to tackle the challenges of the future.