

Ipswich Building Preservation Trust – Summer Newsletter 2017 – from Bob Allen

On Tuesday 21st March we welcomed members of the East Anglian Heritage Trust Network to Ipswich for the first time in several years for the scheduled six-monthly meeting. Members of the network agree to host the event in turn and we have enjoyed the hospitality of Upminster Windmill Trust, Colchester, Bury St Edmunds, Kings Lynn, and Great Yarmouth Building Preservation Trusts in recent years. Each visit has included a formal meeting to hear about the current projects from around the region and to enjoy inputs from national heritage organisations. Recent meetings have also included opportunities to visit current projects and to view historic buildings in the company of local experts.

We were fortunate to be able to use the splendidly restored St Mary at the Quay – ‘Quay Place’ as our venue for the meeting. We welcomed representatives from ten trusts from the region; in addition we heard from speakers representing English Heritage, The Heritage Trust Network, and The Architectural Heritage Fund. We were also well supported by local bodies including the Ipswich Society. The Ipswich Historic Churches Trust, and the Ipswich Archaeological Trust together with members of IBPT itself.

Among the new members reporting on their conservation work we heard from Robin Neilson who is working to restore and re-open The George, at Wickham Market. The George Community Pub (Wickham Market) Limited, a community benefit society, has been set up to acquire and reconstruct The George Pub which was, before it was severely damaged by fire in 2013, the last operating pub for a community of some 2,500 people. The George is Grade II listed, lies within a Conservation Area and is on the Suffolk Buildings at Risk register. It is, since January 2017, listed as an Asset of Community Value. This work is typical of a number of local initiatives across the country to rescue village facilities which in recent years have faced closure after sterling service to past generations.

We also heard of the long drawn out legal struggle in Colchester to save Birch Church – a substantial and iconic Victorian building with a suitable and assured future use. Here the Church of England itself seems to advocate demolition and be hell-bent on thwarting those who seek to preserve the building – a bizarre story.

From Great Yarmouth we heard that the derelict Victorian Church we visited last year is now the subject of an imaginative restoration project involving professionals working alongside volunteers to create facilities which will enhance the local area substantially, as well as developing the conservation and historic craft skills of local apprentices.

At Upminster work is now underway on the main structure of the windmill with completion due in summer 2018. The cap and sails were removed during 2016 for refurbishment by Dutch millwright, Willem Dijkstra. Restoration of the internal machinery to full working order will be undertaken by volunteers in facilities provided as part of the project. The new visitor centre is now built and is being fitted for its dual use as an education and training centre.

Altogether the reports included a diversity of projects involving the Jumbo water tower in Colchester, Bury St Edmunds Railway Station, Langham Dome, Bentley Hall Barn, and our own Freehold Land Society Project. Heritage certainly makes a vibrant and significant contribution to the East Anglian scene.

We were fortunate to have with us Councillor Carole Jones, the Development Portfolio holder for Ipswich Borough Council and their nominated 'Heritage Champion'. Carole works through the Planning Department, Conservation Officers and Support Organisations, including the Borough's Conservation Design Panel. She described the work that has been undertaken locally, including the adoption of a Local List SPD [Supplementary Planning Document] – that means we have a weapon on our planning armoury that helps us protect valued local buildings against unsympathetic applications, the extension of Conservation Areas and the recent work to identify the significant characteristics of the various regions of Ipswich – the Urban Characterisation Study. Carole emphasised the mutual benefits of the relationship between the Ipswich Borough Council and local heritage bodies. She also responded positively to the inputs from national speakers who encouraged local authorities to use the powers granted to them to address buildings at risk: she emphasised how important it is for all local elected members to be aware of the powers and to recognise the opportunities just as much as the potential costs of intervention.

At the end of the morning session delegates heard a brief account of the restoration of Quay Place and had the opportunity of viewing the work first hand. After lunch Mike Smith, John Field, John Norman and Robin Gaylard were among the excellent guides who took our visitors around the waterfront to view the developments around the wet dock. Mike and Robin had plotted a route which included the panoramic view from the island site. The weather responded with bright sunshine and blue skies and altogether we felt that the Trust had presented a vision of our town which might in some quarters help to promote Ipswich as an excellent destination and a hub for a region with unparalleled delights to savour.