



# **ABERDEEN CIVIC SOCIETY**

Registered Charity Number **SC003089**

## **Newsletter No. 82: June 2013**

### **Coming Events**

**Wednesday 30th October 2013:** our annual Awards Ceremony. An illustrated presentation relating to the new buildings and conversions in Aberdeen and our Awards and Commendations as appropriate. All members and their guests are very welcome. In the Town & County Hall, Aberdeen Town House, at 7.30 for 8 pm.

### **Planning Matters**

**No. 19 Market Street:** the Rox Hotel's ground-floor pub. Proposal for a replacement projecting sign - no effect on the elegant neo-classical Listed façade of what was originally Archibald Simpson's Mechanics Institute of 1845, best viewed from the Green or Hadden Street.

**The Fitness Centre, Justice Mill Lane:** formerly the Odeon Cinema, by Tommy Scott Sutherland. Proposal for replacement of a sign on the main building at the rear, well clear of the Listed *art deco* frontage.

**No. 23 Rubislaw Terrace:** proposal for demolition of existing 2-storey extension and erection of a replacement, also 2-storeys, of similar size and materials. There are no amenity or other concerns.

**Aberdeen Grammar School:** proposal for installation of solar panels on the flat roof of the Science Wing to the left of the Listed main building of 1863.

**Midsocket Parish Church:** St Ninian's as was. Alterations and extension - a new staircase joining Kelly's original church with the later work at a lower level. It has been undertaken by James Roy, who has carried out the work sympathetically at this awkward linkage.

**Tullos Primary School:** installation of solar panels on the roof. These might be spotted from a distance with the use of binoculars, but even then should not be out of character with this *art deco* building of 1939.

## Editor's News And Comment

**Jamie Oliver's Restaurant** in the former E&M's building; the four floors above were to be converted into flats, but no progress has been made on this. The building has been made watertight but the developer - not Jamie Oliver - hasn't completed the development.

**Broad Street Plans:** should Broad Street not simply be a civic square, with no new buildings in it? Questions as to whether ACC can pedestrianise Union Street and Broad Street at the same time - and Schoolhill? At present, no fewer than ten bus routes go through Broad Street - where are they to go if Broad Street is pedestrianised?

**Art Gallery Extension:** no enthusiasm for the proposed top gallery, and much concern about the proposed removal of the central staircase. Could the required additional accommodation not be created in the Triple Kirks building? Or the former Student Union building at the corner of Upperkirkgate & Gallowgate? Or the Robert Gordon University Admin. building on Schoolhill?

**Bell's Hotel:** proposal for a huge & monstrous block behind - worse than the earlier proposal for a 'stepped' building, rising towards Justice Mill Lane.

**The Capitol:** the *Evening Express* of 24th May reports that the 1932 Compton cinema organ is to be removed, but with the intention that it should remain somewhere within Aberdeen. The current proposal is for a 7-storey office block set well back from Union Street. The present frontage is to be retained, but the rear of the former cinema is to be demolished with the removal of internal features including the Compton organ and its pipes.

**The Criterion Bar, Guild Street:** proposal to convert to a Sainsbury's supermarket. This used to be an iconic Aberdeen pub, occupying a prominent corner site opposite the railway and bus stations, and was an obvious port of call for many a weary traveller or football fan. It had an attractive Edwardian-style carved wood interior, apparently now largely destroyed. The pub had been closed these last two years pending another proposal, to convert to a Rice & Spice food store. Whether a Sainsbury's supermarket will be of greater utility or amenity than the long-established Criterion Bar remains to be seen. There are two bars nearby, Aitchie's Lounge and the Lorne Bar in Trinity Lane, behind the Tivoli Theatre, and of course the Carmelite Hotel.

**Tuesday 30th April 2013:** sunny but cold & windy. Parked the car at the Union Square mega-mall and walked up to M&S via the Green and Correction Wynd, Xmas gift voucher in pocket. This is one of the first fine, sunny days for weeks, but the Green is completely empty at 2.30 pm, with nobody going into or coming out of the various premises. Much the same absence of pedestrian footfall evident in Hadden Street. Through the tunnel under Union Street and up Correction Wynd - an agreeable medieval ambience in the vicinity of the Mither Kirk, but again not a soul - even a ghostly soul from the *Ghaist-raw* - to be seen. Along St Nicholas Lane, past the Prince of Wales, to M&S, which is advertising a sale, up to 70% off.

There is a glaring disconnect between M&S's TV advertising and in-store displays, invariably featuring slender, snake-hipped young people, and the reality of the small numbers of we mostly elderly customers trailing wearily around their overheated

menswear department looking for a pair of trousers that might conceivably fit the larger person. I settle for a pair of shoes I don't really need or want - got to offload the gift voucher somehow. The problem with having only elderly customers - especially elderly customers who don't buy anything much - is that we oldies will soon be gone, and where will M&S, not to mention the Conservative & Unionist Party, or Aberdeen Journals, be then?

The longer-term problem with the decline of M&S is that they have always been a mainstay and linchpin of the nation's High Streets - a destination store, in fact - and if there is less and less reason to go back there, then the High Street is even deader than we thought.

Walked back to the mega-mall via Correction Wynd and Carmelite Street. The rowan trees planted in enclosures alongside the Aberdeen Market in Hadden Street and in Carmelite Street and Rennie's Wynd seem to be taking hold and coming on OK, but the surrounding shrubs are being overwhelmed by faster-growing weeds. Container gardening is a very labour-intensive business, as I am sure we all know, and ACC may not have the manpower to do it properly.

**Wednesday 15th May 2013:** Mary Portas, self-styled Queen of Shops, is back on TV, now trying to work her dubious magic on the nation's High Streets. She is in the Kentish seaside resort of Margate, being whiny and self-pitying when local traders refuse to let her into their public meeting on the not unreasonable grounds that she had slandered the town on an earlier visit. Ms Portas had no real idea what to do about Margate and neither would I, Margate being the equivalent of a Lanarkshire mining town where the coal ran out decades ago. At one stage Mary P. is back in London, trying to persuade the throngs of mostly young people descending on Camden Market to spend their Saturday in Margate instead. The point unintentionally made here is that people come to Camden because it offers something they want - the antiques and vintage fashion market, the surrounding specialist shops, the pubs, cafés and bars, the whole scene and ambience. People travel from Margate to Camden to experience this. Nobody travels from Camden to Margate. One might as well try to persuade people to take their holidays in Albania.

The issue is partly one of scale. A large community can support all kinds of special-interest activities because even just 1% of the population of London, or even of Bristol or Edinburgh, is still a lot of people, with considerable combined spending-power; but 1% of the population of, say, Banchory is only about fifty people, and 1% of the population of a village might be about five people. Minority or special-interest activities which may well be viable business opportunities in a city or large town are unlikely to be so in a small town or village. A city will normally be able to support a university, possibly two universities, which are large employers in their own right and give rise to many spin-off activities. Villages, on the other hand, are all too often unable to support as much as a primary school, a pub, a fish & chip shop or Indian takeaway. This lack of business opportunities, jobs or choice of employer means that small village communities are of little interest or use to anyone who has to earn a living, and even middle-class retirees tend to shun depressed and run-down places like Margate. Last year I wasted a day in Ecclefechan, Dumfriesshire, which really did seem like the Village Of The Damned, even on a sunny weekday. If a community is to remain viable it simply has to have an economic base, of investment, enterprise and employment.

One of the most significant trends of our time is the gradual disappearance of secure and decently-remunerated jobs, such as allow people to lead an independent, adult existence, leave the parental home, get a place of their own and, in due course, finance the purchase of a house fit to raise a family in, and in a neighbourhood ditto. One might think of the hierarchy of staff who would be employed in a High Street bank back in the days of *Dad's Army*, as compared with the skeleton staff of a modern bank, of which there are in any case far fewer than there used to be. Similarly insurance offices and travel agents. Salesmanship seems to be a fast-shrinking area of employment; when do we interact with a salesman/woman nowadays, except perhaps when buying a car?

The recent council elections in England revealed a high degree of discontent in rural communities like Boston, King's Lynn and Wisbech to the effect that there are simply no decent jobs, or jobs that pay a living wage. The jobs there used to be on the land, in farming, have largely been mechanised out of existence. The point was made that locally the average wage has converged on the National Minimum Wage, i.e., about £6-7 per hour, while quite a few employers in practice contrive to pay less than the Minimum Wage. Employee benefits like pensions have been cut back and working conditions are deteriorating. People are caught by the twin pincers of falling wages and rising house prices - the average wage no longer finances the purchase of the average house, or indeed any house. Such council housing as existed was sold off in the 1980s and the tied cottages occupied by farm workers are long gone. Local discontent tends to target East European immigrants, but their impact is mixed. They compete for certain kinds of work and housing, possibly driving wages down and rents up, but some industries - fruit-picking, fruit & veg processing and hotels - would not survive without immigrant labour, and their children sustain enrolment in local schools, some of which would otherwise close. Immigration from Eastern Europe is probably one of the few dynamising elements of the Fenland economy, if the truth be told, and the same may also be true of much of Scotland.

**Tuesday 4th June 2013:** the BBC's *Springwatch* has highlighted the activities of the dolphins that congregate around the entrance to Aberdeen harbour. The first time I saw these creatures I was a bit concerned, since it is not normally a good sign when whales and dolphins come up-river, usually suggesting that they are lost and confused. Dolphins and whales would normally avoid such a noisy, heavily-trafficked locale such as the harbour entrance. The attraction for the Aberdeen dolphin pod is the confluence of fresh water coming down the River Dee and the salt water of the North Sea. Salmon, returning up-river to breed, can only access the river of their birth via the narrow harbour entrance, and are thus easy pickings for the waiting dolphins. The Aberdeen dolphins were described as "large, fat, talkative, loud and they repeat themselves". They have evolved as larger animals to cope with the cold North Sea, acquiring an extra layer of blubber in the process. They chatter a lot between themselves, loudly and repetitively, so as to be able to work as a team to trap the incoming salmon. In effect, the dolphins are having to shout to make themselves heard against the background of submarine noise generated by ships moving in and out of the harbour. They have become a significant visitor attraction at the Nigg car park and elsewhere.

*Contributed by Alex Mitchell.*