

HASTINGS & ST. LEONARDS SOCIETY
Promoting Our Heritage and Civic Pride

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Open Meeting (held by e-mail)
start date 12th March 2021

Introduction:

Hastings & St. Leonards Society has been unable to hold an Open Meeting since January 2020, due to the on-going coronavirus situation. The meetings are an important part of our work, as they provide an opportunity for groups and individuals to bring matters of heritage and civic concern into focus. We are therefore conducting an e-mail version of the Open Meeting. Some of the persons who have given presentations at our Open Meetings have been invited to provide brief updates on their topics. These are given in this e-mail, and members and other persons/groups on our mailing list are invited to put questions to the 'speakers'. Please send your questions to this e-mail address and we will forward for response. Deadline for questions is Monday 22nd March. Once we have answers to the questions, a 'Notes from Open Meeting' e-mail will then be circulated and posted on our website. We hope many of our members will participate in this meeting. (We had considered holding a 'virtual' open meeting using 'Zoom' facility or similar. However, we are aware that many members do not have access to this facility.)

Dr Deborah Madden (Chair, Hastings & St. Leonards Society)

Agenda and Contributions

1. Chris Lewcock: St. Leonards Church and related matters

Last year a call was made for project proposals from "the whole Borough" which might be included in a Hastings Town Deal investment plan. An idea was put forward by Hastings Urban Design Group (HUDG) for a "Science on Sea" centre focused on the redundant St Leonards Church and its forecourt, St Leonards Steps, and the half-built Undercliff site. This would put the Church to good use, create a community and visitor asset, whilst dealing with the problems of cliff stability and the unsightly Undercliff site. The idea was featured in Hastings in Focus:

['Science-on-Sea' – is Hastings brave enough to seize the opportunities its history and location provides? – Hastings In Focus](#)

"Science on Sea" got a lot of support, including from the Burtons' St Leonards Society and the Shipwreck Museum. Disappointingly no chance was given to groups outside the Board itself to present or discuss proposals. The HUDG proposal was then rejected as not being in Hastings Town Centre - which we knew! The Town Deal Board submitted [its] own investment plan to government at the end of January and a decision is due shortly. [The] submitted Plan can be found at the following link.

[Hastings_Town+Investment+Plan.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](#)

There may be other possibilities for taking the "Science on Sea" ideas forward. For example, the Chancellor has recently just announced a "Levelling Up Fund" which includes the possibility of projects looking at cultural infrastructure. It might also be possible to approach the Heritage Lottery Fund.

In the meantime the slope east of the Church and below the Burtons' graveyard has subsided and the Steps have been closed due to a possibly dangerous adjoining garden wall. The Chairman of the Burtons' St Leonards Society has been particularly engaged with the Borough Council and Chichester Diocese to try and get the subsidence issues dealt with.

The Twentieth Century Society tried unsuccessfully to get the Church upgraded from Grade 2 to Grade 2*. Nevertheless, English Heritage has now recognised the group value of the Church and the neighbouring Burtons' graveyard.

Hastings Council has put out for public consultation a draft new Local Plan, closing date 24 March. The existing Local Plan doesn't do justice to the importance and potential of Burtons' St Leonards, including the area around the Church. In my view Burtons' should be highlighted in the Plan as a heritage and visitor-led Focal Area. This will ensure that it will be given full weight for future

protection and investment. It is understood that Chris Joyce [vice-chair H & St. L Society and Burtons' St. L Society] is preparing a submission.*

Chris Lewcock

*Chair's note: HBC's Local Plan consultation details are included as additional item at the end of this e-mail meeting

2. Edward Gosnell: Holy Trinity Church

My response to the request for an update on the planned work on the interior and exterior at Holy Trinity Hastings (HTH):

Exterior

The cost of this work will probably be not much less than £1m. We have now employed someone, with experience of a similar project in Brighton, to manage the fundraising. Initial grant applications have been submitted.

Meanwhile, further erosion of the stone surrounding three of the Chancel windows is causing us such concern that we are about to have all three boarded up inside and out.

HTH is now on the Heritage at Risk Register.

We had hoped to receive some help from the Heritage Action Zone grant won for the area by Jess Steele [Heart of Hastings Community Land Trust] but, sadly, Historic England are saying places of worship are excluded – quite why I don't know.* Anyway, I understand there is the possibility of funding from this source for the much eroded/damaged fountain in Robertson Street which, I believe, stands on HTH land but is the responsibility of the Council.

Interior

Thanks to a very generous grant, the first phase of our restoration project is currently underway. The Tower entrance hall is being restored to its original state with the removal of the room inserted at first floor level in the early 20th century. New interior glass doors are to be inserted in that area to keep the building warmer and space for a new accessible loo has been created nearby. A new cafe area is being created in the South Aisle.

Edward Gosnell

*Chair's note: The Society asked Jess Steele why HTH could not be included in the Heritage Action Zone grant prior to our open meeting in January 2020. She provided the following correspondence:

I was told categorically by Historic England just before we submitted the bid that we could not give grants to places of worship (more than 6 services a year). I made quite a fuss about it, explaining:

This would be a great disadvantage to our proposed HAZ since two critically important historic buildings in our neighbourhood are churches that have diversified from places of worship into major social and cultural centres. [Holy Trinity](#) provides services to adults, children, youth and the most vulnerable and marginalised of society, with over 500 people coming through the doors each week, while His Place Church (the at risk former [United Reformed Church](#)) has the [Opus Theatre](#) and a [community cafe](#). Both of them have the potential to be major attractors within the High Street HAZ but need support to deal with basic issues (eg. toilet down two flights of stairs).

As historic buildings they are far more likely to be sustainable through this mixture of service provision and congregational support. Also, as a neighbourhood we want the congregation (which partly comes from more affluent villages around Hastings) to stick around (footfall, dwell time, visitor spend).

The response was to quote me the FAQs relating to High Street HAZs:

Can we fund works to Places of Worship through HSHAZ?

- HSHAZ cannot fund repair works to any buildings that are currently in active use as a place of worship, or those which are under the ownership of the Churches Conservation Trust.
- HSHAZ could fund a church in a high street area if it has been deconsecrated, and proposals for repair or conversion contribute to the overall HS HAZ scheme (e.g. through opening up for community space, cultural events, café, etc.).
- However, Places of Worship can still play an important part of local HSHAZ partnerships, especially in relation to the role they occupy in the local community.

So we adjusted the HAZ bid to include a 'Social Spaces Programme' which could provide grants to churches, pubs and other places people gather to enhance public enjoyment, increase footfall and dwell-time in the town centre. This programme has a total indicative budget of £280k and all grants would need to be matched. I would envisage that the maximum single grant might be £50k.

Jess Steele

An update on the Heritage Action Zone situation is item 5 on this Open Meeting Agenda

3. Nicky Roper: Update on the Robertson United Reformed Church At Risk situation

Fundraising: 2020–21

'His Place', the custodians of the building, have been hit hard due to Covid as the charity income basically stopped and therefore normal maintenance could not continue and remedial repairs not possible. His Place is a charity that puts every penny back into serving the community and restoring the building. We had 3 organisations with event bookings to which would have raised large sums of money for us. These will now be taking place end of 2021 and beginning of 2022. Opus Theatre who uses our building and give us 50% of there takings has not been able to run any shows and they have nothing booked till August 2021.

We are now relying on public giving, fundraising events and good will to raise the money required to be able to move forward with Heritage Grants that require match funding. Time is not on our side though. We have a crowd funding campaign starting at Easter. We have secured regular hires for when life returns which will increase the number of people attending and using the building. We have applied for Covid related grants but not been successful and the current Government grant we are not intitled to due to not being a rated building. The other issue we face is that Heritage Action Zone cannot provide funds to mend the building as there is a control in place preventing this due to the National Lottery previous listed places of worship grant being an option for churches. Now the National Lottery do not have this grant solely for churches we have to compete against people with money and organisations with much larger footfall. We are praying that we get the Cultural Recovery Heritage Grant as at least that would enable us to do small urgent repairs to keep building safe.

Building advice:

We have had conservation officers visit and various stone masonry professionals come to offer advice and considering this building has been on the At-Risk Register for over 14 years if our maths is correct, it is amazing that only a month ago we have someone who confirms once and for all what the problem is, which if it had been alerted to from day one our predecessors perhaps could have sorted the need. The issue is "The Robertson Street Side has got a concrete render on it and every window also has the concrete based covering over the inside of the windows also, therefore the sandstone is not breathing, and the water is causing the decay inside and out." Basically, in layman's terms we need to sand the full side of the building, and then re-cover with a lime-based render. The reason for the front windows and stonework damage has been caused due to the wind tunnel issue that has been made worse by the creative media centre, it is only in the last few months someone put a picture on Facebook showing the original church building and its neighbour. The building on the site of Creative Media Centre was never as tall as this building and therefore the funnel effect was never such an issue.

The new concern we now face is the increased drainage issues from the cafes / restaurants on Robertson Street that back onto the yard access area as in the

ground is crumbling due to drainage issues, we had to mend our drainage two years ago so are very aware that the chalk is at risk which is what were built on and these other buildings are. Daltons Carpets are the owners of the right of way and they are selling and moving out at the end of the month, we just hope that whoever has brought there building will be interested in helping to keep our foundations safe as we are attached to their building and the creative media centre as well as Racer computers and due to the shared walls and the issues on the chimneys on these other buildings we have to consider the impact that there maintenance needs has on us to. We so look forward to God providing the money we need as we tried to get an urgent repair grant from Historic England early in 2020 but they do not see the changes as unless you have a tour no photo shows the level of restoration required. It will be a great shame if this lovely Heritage area where to have a car park built in the middle of it should we not be supported to raise the funds required to save this gem of a building. All we know, it's not for the want of trying. Our organisations main work is community and not faith activities or church, and the discrimination we face because of this is our barrier. Once we win the fight and save this building, we will never be asking the public or government again for money as we will look after it and fund it ourselves as we had done till now and we will continue to serve this community through volunteer run support as we have also always done. Should anyone seriously wish to help us through collating the history which we are doing, or day to day maintenance, fundraising please get in touch and tours are available when allowed to people who genuinely wish to help us. We have had over the years a number of offers to buy the building or take over our café but we will not give in and the building can only be used as a church and community venue.

Nicky Roper

4. John Bownas (Town Centre/BID Manager): Improvement Plans for Town Centre

I am looking at a few small 'interventions' via Love Hastings Ltd [Business Improvement District Company]:

100x new hanging baskets

Improvements to the slope down from the station plaza to get rid of the informal path and replace it with steps plus some landscaping

Screening off the commercial bins in Havelock Road

Seating areas and planting in Robertson Street to get more outdoor dining and

Introduce traffic calming in the 'pedestrian' area

Also now in talks with the new owners of Debenhams with regards what their future plans might be...

John Bownas

5. Jess Steele: Heritage Action Zone (Town Centre area of 'Trinity Triangle')

See attached Annual Review for the Trinity Triangle Heritage Action Zone (HAZ).

Comment from Jess on the Review:

This shows that the programme is going really well. It has been held up by Historic England as one of the few High Street HAZs that has been able to get properly started and been delivering all year, against the odds, including supporting the start up of [Isolation Station Hastings](#). More information about the HAZ can be found [here](#), and a new dedicated website is coming soon. You can see the Heart of Hastings annual review [here](#) in the form of an interactive flipbook!

The Observer Building is also making great progress, although it's a bumpy ride! By September 2020 we achieved full planning permission and had raised £4.2 million in grants and loans, including £3.5M for the building works and the rest to pay off our expensive early loans. We went out to tender but impacts of Covid and Brexit meant that the tender prices were first delayed and then came back significantly higher than the cost plan. So we have been in a painful process of 'value engineering' that has brought the shortfall within a range we are confident we can fill. The contractor is mobilising right now and will shortly begin to restore the lower four floors, fix the roof and renovate the faience-tiled frontage. The programme is due to be complete by March 2022. We hope to be able to move straight into the second phase to complete the upper floors, but that depends on further fundraising.

Our ecosystem of interconnected organisations (Heart of Hastings CLT, White Rock Neighbourhood Ventures, Leisure & Learning, Jericho Road, Project Art Works, Hastings Building Services) has been working to create the Hastings Commons. We act efficiently together, using our diversity of resources, expertise, connections and organisational structure to achieve our shared mission.

The Hastings Commons is a physical place and an exciting vision, encompassing: a set of buildings in the White Rock neighbourhood, a group of organisations and our members, volunteers, and local friends with different ideas and approaches, but shared values and a commitment to cooperation.

The Hastings Commons will include countless spaces where people bump into each other, and develop collaborations, social networks and mutual support. This is all underpinned and secured for the long term through community ownership, capped rents, support for collaborative solidarity, and strong relationships between freeholders, tenants and community users.

Further attachment: Aerial map shows the current extent of the buildings of the Hastings Commons.

*Chair's note: Jess gave a very interesting presentation on the proposals for the Observer Building at our Open Meeting in January 2020, and it is great to hear that significant progress has been made towards achieving the ambitious plans. Information on the Observer Building can be found on the website: www.theobserverbuilding.org.uk

6. West Marina former bathing pool site and surrounding area:

We tried to contact our member Virginia Vilela to invite her to provide an update on the situation at the West Marina former bathing pool site, as Virginia has spoken on this topic at a couple of our Open Meetings. We have not received a contribution from her so far, but provide links where information relating to the matter can be found:

<https://www.weststleonards.org.uk/>

and

<https://www.westmarina.org/>

Additional Item: HBC Local Plan Consultation

We remind members that the deadline to submit comments is 24 March. Details of the consultation are as follows:

The new Draft Plan sets out a strategy to guide and shape development over the next 20 years up to 2039 and includes a development strategy along with Strategic Policies for managing development and identifying the types of uses planned for different parts of the town. It also includes Focus Area policies for different parts of the Borough where higher levels of development are anticipated and Development Policies covering design and measures required to mitigate potential impacts.

How to comment

You can find more information, view the draft Plan and comment online via HBC's website www.hastings.gov.uk/localplan

In the light of Covid-19 and in accordance with the Town and Country Planning (Local Planning) (England) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 the

consultation materials will not be displayed at Council offices or libraries in the interests of public safety.

For those who would like to get involved but are unable to access the internet HBC has set up a dedicated voicemail. If you or someone you know needs help viewing or commenting on the Local Plan, leave a message on 01424 451102 and HBC will get back to you.

All comments must be received by 24 March 2021.

Final Report:

Due to the comprehensive submissions for the majority of the topics on the Agenda for the Open Meeting, the only questions raised related to Item 4 (contributor, John Bownas). Two questions were very similar so we condensed into one as follows:

Has any strategy been agreed for changing the image/attraction of the town centre to increase the 'footfall' and usage of redundant premises, as store closures increase due to the trend for trading and buying via the internet? If not, is it intended to form a strategy in the near future, and what will the consultation process entail?

The other participant asks:

Given that Hastings town centre has some fine architecture, how does the conservation of this heritage figure in the BID plans?

(That last question does connect with the other two, in that there is general concern about what will become of the larger buildings as major retailers move out.)

John Bownas, the Business Improvement District (BID) manager, feels that the Local Authority's policy is most relevant here; so we direct anyone interested in these matters to refer to the following on HBC's website:

- i) Strategic Policy 4 (SP4): Business Development - Retail and Leisure Uses
- ii) Strategic Policy 6 (SP6): Enhancing the Historic Environment

Closing message from the Chair:

I thank all the contributors to the e-mail Open Meeting of the Hastings & St. Leonards Society. It is very pleasing to read of the progress that has been made since our last open meeting (January 2020) on the projects to renovate Holy Trinity Church and the former United Reformed Church in Hastings town centre;

also on the exciting Observer Building project and the new Heritage Action Zone for Trinity Triangle area of the town centre. The subsidence of the cliff below the Burtons' graveyard is a big worry, and we intend to put this topic on a future open meeting agenda, by when we hope there will be some better news to report.

The 'Science on Sea' proposal for the redundant St. Leonards Church (also under threat by cliff subsidence) in Chris Lewcock's contribution to the meeting is very interesting, and it is a shame the idea hasn't been able to progress. Perhaps this is something else to feature on an open meeting agenda? And let us hope it won't be too long before we can hold a physical version of the meeting again!

Dr. Deborah Madden

Notes compiled by Steven (secretary H & St. L Society), dated 29 March 2021