

Keeping our Region Special

East of England Civic Societies & East of England RSA

Saturday 10th October 2009 at the Green Quay in King's Lynn



The day began at 10am with registration and coffee. **Peter Landshoff**, Chair of the East of England Civic Societies then introduced himself and welcomed the 60 attendees.

He then introduced **Sally Smith** of the King's Lynn Civic Society who welcomed everyone to the town and said she hoped they would enjoy the day. Peter also thanked Gladys Jones for her help in organising the day.

AGM

The first item was the **AGM of East of England Civic Societies**, the draft minutes of which can be found on the EECS Website.

Civic Societies Initiative



This was followed by the Chairman introducing **Tony Burton**, the Director of the new **Civic Societies Initiative** (CSI see www.civicsocietyinitiative.org.uk). Tony began by explaining that it had been a surprise to all when the Civic Trust had gone into administration at Easter. British Civic Societies had their roots in the eighteenth century and there were now over 1000 Societies and over 250,000 people were members. The Civic Society Initiative had been set up to support and give these a national voice.

While Civic Societies are individual they do have much in common, in particular they have pride in their 'place' and are community-based and campaigning. However, they encompass a huge range of approaches and views.

In recent years a lack of deference has become more widespread and trust and faith in institutions and others has reduced. People are becoming more demanding and more concerned with 'quality of life', they expect more of their organisations. The 'politics of localism' is also becoming more important with Government placing greater emphasis on 'consultation' and 'community'. There are also a growing range of campaigning organisations, many of which are single-issue and internet based; examples given were www.fixmystreet.com and www.tinsley-towers.org.uk. We also see the rise of PR firms selling advice to developers in how to win over local communities, e.g. Curtin & Co.

The CSI has its own website and has carried out surveys, Tony has attended many meetings but they have limited resources. Its future would be discussed at a national meeting in Blackpool in November.

The CSI estimates that 96% of Civic Societies have a 'planning watchdog' role and many take a 'pride in their locale' he then gave examples of various campaigns:

- The reduction in street clutter and signage campaigns in Oxford/Stamford.
- The campaign to protect the 'Bowstring Bridge' by Leicester Civic Society.
- Grimsby Civic Society's community consultation on the future of the 'Ice Factory'.

All these show pride in their area and Civic Societies throughout the UK celebrate their area with blue plaques, town trails, local history publications etc.

But Tony also said that while there were some negative perceptions of Civic Societies, such as they were 'ageing' and 'out-of-touch', there were more positives such as they were 'concerned', 'caring' and 'knowledgeable'. The Civic Society movement must help to shape the future by more campaigning,

particularly by working with schools. They must have a clearer purpose, be more 'collective' and place greater emphasis on 'networking'. They must also be more independent of Government particularly financially: The Civic Trust had relied too much on funding from the state, which had directly led to its demise.

Tony said that the CSI had to be better and more in touch with the grassroots. There was a desire for a new national body to campaign and lobby whilst supporting local Civic Societies. There needs to be a discussion on how the movement works together. Tony said he thought it should be more locally active but connected through networking, the CSI would provide a national voice but needed support and funding.

Tony said it was up to Civic Societies which level at which to 'cluster', whilst this could be at a regional level the government was currently in the process of removing the Regional Assembly tier of local government and so it may now be more appropriate for less rigid 'clusters' of Civic Societies to form at different levels.

The Civic Trust used to rely on grants and benefactors but in the future the Civic Societies must 'stump up' for the future of a national voice.



Tony then took **questions**.

- Q) **What is the timescale to decide the future of the CSI?**
- A) A report will be made after the Blackpool meeting in November and this will be consulted on early next year. It was hoped that a national body could be established by Easter. The CSI had funding only until May 2010.
- Q) **Isn't a national organisation better than a regional one for providing training and awards?**
- A) The Civic Trust Awards were now done by a private individual, Tony felt training was not popular with most and that it was more important to provide support to Societies through networking.
- Q) **Shouldn't we retrieve 'Heritage Open Days' from English Heritage (EH)?**
- A) Future Heritage Open Days must include those not run by EH, though we must thank EH for taking this over for this year.
- Q) **Disenchantment with CT had led to a withdrawal of funding by Civic Societies shouldn't the CSI be much more responsive than CT if it is to get donations?**
- A) The CSI will rely on Civic Societies for funding but needs funding to be responsive. This is a chicken & egg situation so initially there will have to be a 'leap of faith' by Civic Societies.
- Q) **The Civic Trust provided very little help and support, would the CSI provide legal advice and access to project funding?**
- A) The CSI must help Societies access funds and would issue Bulletins to advertise what is available. They must also offer practical support and advice but must be wary of duplicating the work of others and point people to the right direction for their needs. Many problems faced will have already been faced by others.
- Q) **Shouldn't the CSI remain small and concentrate on networking effectively and provide examples of expertise?**
- A) Yes, the CSI must remain 'light-footed'.

Q) **How do we involve more young people?**

A) Civic Societies need to consider using young people differently with more of an emphasis on active participation rather than Committees.

Q) **Isn't there a need for access to on-line training from other organisations such as Friends of the Earth?**

A) Yes, this a major source of help.

Q) **Isn't the quality of many Planning staff a major problem and likely to get worse with Local Authorities being squeezed financially?**

A) Planning is so important and should be an aspirational job, as it is good when done well. People must connect with local planning and demand better.

Q) **What was the main cause of the Civic Trust's demise.**

A) The loss of the government's 'Green Flag' contract.

The Wash Barrier Project



After a break for Coffee the meeting resumed. Peter Landshoff welcomed the next two speakers who were **Peter Dawe (CEO, Wash Tidal Barrier Corporation www.washbarrier.org/barrier3.html)** and **Steve Rowland (Regional Public Affairs Manager, RSPB www.rspb-westnorfolk.org/washbarrage.htm)** for a discussion of the **'The Wash Barrier Project'**.

Peter Dawe began by saying that he had spent 3 years researching and he had written a book 'The New Noah' containing his thoughts on the facts that GDP, sources of fossil fuel and food production

were reducing worldwide. That 'things were grim' and climate change made things worse.

We had 3 choices which are:

1 to 'Party While We Can',

2 to 'Reduce Use', but he had concluded that human nature and politicians means this wouldn't work, or

3 to 'Prepare For The Worst'.

He lives in Ely which was once an island and likely to be so again soon as sea defences are negligible and sea levels are rising. We could raise sea defences or let land go and retreat, but in the Fens this would be to Cambridge 30 miles away. The government has forecast that the sea is forecast to rise 60cm by 2100 and two years ago a storm surge nearly led to inundation in the fens. To raise the coastal sea defences, to protect the 300,000 hectares of fen agricultural land, would require 200kms of new sea defences. However, a Barrier across the Wash between the high points of Hunstanton and Skegness could do this and generate 2 Gigawatts of power, the equivalent of one and a half nuclear power stations, and so be self-financing. The Wash is under threat and changing, floods would mean the Fens would become saline and that habitats and wildlife would be lost as well as 25% of the UK's agricultural land. The challenge was to build a barrier before a flood occurred.

Steve Rowland responded. He had spent his whole life around the east coast estuaries and came to a different conclusion. The Wash drains the Fens and is part of the 'estuaries network'. There is a huge range of opposition to a barrier including the RSPB and the Wildlife Trusts plus there are numerous SSSI sites, National Nature Reserve designations as well as EU Habitats Directives. He felt we were discussing a potential World Heritage Site which over 300k birds use, many after arriving exhausted from the Arctic, Russia and Greenland to feed on the mud flats – these cannot move. The Government

was not in favor of more and more sea defences and neither was the Environment Agency which had created a Shoreline Management Plan. The salt marshes act as a natural buffer and trap silts and were 'a living coastal defence' that absorbed pollutants and also had a high economic value due to fishing. The planning system won't allow such a barrier as a compensatory 70k Hectares elsewhere would be required to mitigate the plans. We need a sustainable Wash and cannot lose these habitats

We should reinstate salt marsh, as had been done at Titchwell, and restore wetlands, as has been done as Wallasea. Where barriers have been created, like the one proposed, they have caused environmental problems; such as at Saemangeum in South Korea.

How can we expect the developing world to act sustainably if we don't lead by example?

We must value biodiversity and protect habitats, and we must work with the environment and protect it.

Peter Dawe responded by saying that the barrier was necessary to protect the environment and that it would still be tidal. The RSPB was not engaging at all on this and were opposed to any barriers, except their own. He said that he could be wrong and that hydrological studies were required on how the area would be in 50 years time.

There was then a **question and answer** session:

Q) What will the barrier's depth be and what would it be constructed from?

A) PD - It would be 40m at centre which was good for turbines. The construction material would be geotextiles, like giant sandbags, which are good at withstanding storms but are easily removed. If any rock were used it would come from Scandinavia.

SR – The wildlife would be damaged by a Barrier, it is a Pandora's Box of problems and is not required yet. This is also the opinion of Environment Agency experts.

Q) What will the Barrier look like?

A) PD – the tide will still go in and out, but water flows will change.

Q) Coastal drift impact must be assessed –isn't the plan too simplistic?

A) PD – yes, aware of these issues but it would cost to assess these. The fens were too important to lose.

Q) Couldn't both sides be satisfied by a Thames-style Barrier?

A) SD – Why not stick with the Shoreline Management Plan drawn up by the EA?

Q) Won't it simply flood elsewhere?

A) PD – a hydrological study was required.

Q) How close is this to happening?

A) PD – Not close at all, though a Government study on tidal resources was due shortly.

Q) Won't turbines simply silt up?

A) PD – a study would have to look at this, though the electricity is just a bi-product of saving the fens.

Peter Landshoff thanked the speakers and, while acknowledging that there was still much to examine on the issue, asked for an indicative show of hands:

The **vote** showed a majority of the audience supported the scheme in principle.

True's Yard – the old fishing community museum



After a break for a Buffet Lunch we were introduced to the **Chairman of the Trustees**, of the **True's Yard – the old fishing community museum**, **Dr. Paul Richards** he told us of Kings Lynn's 1000 year fishing history which used to be deep-sea fishing and was now inshore. He said that we may have noticed the continental influence in the large size of the main square and this was due to the fact that Lynn had been a Hanseatic Port. The town had two markets since 1752 due to the restricted times the main square could sell fish. The composer Vaughan-

Williams had taken 31 songs from the local fisher-folk and the area they had lived in used to have a lot of fisher-yards but, in 1935 demolition had begun of these houses with the residents being moved to Council homes. In 1958 this process began in the north-end of the town as the Town Council wanted wider streets for the lorries visiting the Dockyards. Many old buildings and their yards were lost at this time.

It was thought that all the fisher-yards had been lost but then it was noticed that one had survived as a Grocer's yard. When the Grocer retired it was bought by the Civic Society and saved, they then bought the Pub next door to use as an Education Centre. Last year they had also bought the Tattooist's the other side and discovered a well preserved and rare herring-curing house at the back. These have all been listed by English Heritage. The Museum was now developing a local Sound Archive as part of this exciting and ongoing project.

The attendees then visited the Museum and other King's Lynn buildings of interest in the company of the local Town Guides.



We thank the **King's Lynn Civic Society** for their hospitality and organising the wonderful and informative afternoon walk-about.

