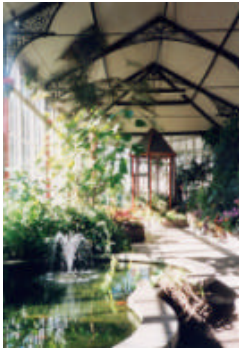


**"Focus on ... regeneration through public buildings and spaces"
Buxton 28/29th June 2004**



Pavilion Gardens

Delegates arriving on Wednesday evening were given a tour by **Andrew Aughton, Chief Executive of High Peak Theatre Trust**, of the newly renovated Opera House which has made a significant contribution to the regeneration of Buxton as a centre of culture. This was followed by a Civic Reception held in the adjacent Conservatory at the Pavilion Gardens hosted by **Councillor Derek Udale, Deputy Mayor of High Peak** and **Peter Sloman, Chief Exec of High Peak Borough Council**, who both welcomed EHTF and delegates to Buxton. Delegates then enjoyed an informal supper.

At the Palace Hotel, Chatsworth Room, on Thursday, **Councillor Allan Wells, Executive Member for Economic Regeneration at HPBC**, said that he hoped the day in Buxton would demonstrate that smaller towns (Buxton's population is just over 20,000) could find innovative solutions to problems. They were not, he said, returning to the past, but using historic assets to kick-start regeneration.

Buxton's long history of markets and its built heritage, notably the Spa, Crescent and former Devonshire Royal Hospital, combined with the innovative project in partnership with the University have "changed the balance – solutions are outweighing the problems", he said. Buxton is one of only two thermal spas in UK, and will soon have the only spa hotel. The projects are huge and have a long way to go, but he invited delegates to return in five years time to experience the transformation.

Ian Poole, Vice Chair of EHTF, thanked Cllr Wells and said that Buxton offered an ideal example – with its many public buildings and spaces – to demonstrate the importance of the Public Realm and its impact on everyone, which has been the theme of the recent work of EHTF.

Ian introduced **Julia Thrift, Director of CABE Space**, who had launched the EHTF publication "Focus on the Public Realm" at the 2003 Annual Conference in Bath.

Julia said that whilst CABE Space was currently the champion for parks and green spaces she was expecting to widen the remit in order to look at other public spaces. She gave a brief update on achievements so far and how CABE Space might support the work of EHTF and others working to improve the quality of public spaces.

It is often a case of 'perceptions vs reality' she said, and therefore there is a need to change the way people think about spaces. This in turn affects their decisions, for example whether to walk or drive to school or work, which then in turn affects the environment, or whether to base their business here or overseas, which has a profound effect on the economy.

She drew attention to the evidence in Buxton of a concerted effort to change its image, using places like the Pavilion Gardens as a unique opportunity – not seeing it as a problem to be overcome.

She recommended the recent publication "[The Value of Public Space](#)" which collected together facts and figures to demonstrate the benefits of good public space – to health, the economy,



Devonshire Royal Hospital



The Crescent

social cohesion and bio-diversity. These could be very helpful when making the case for investment in public spaces.

New research has also been commissioned, in order that well informed decisions can be made. Due to be published soon, is a new document "Is the grass greener?" in which eleven cities around the world have been studied. It was found that we are all facing the same problems:- lack of political support, year-on-year budget cuts, anti-social behaviour and lack of training and skills. However, innovative solutions have been found and sharing information like this is vital.

CABE Space also helps local authorities to prepare 'green space strategies'. To date, decisions about green spaces appear to have been made on rather an ad-hoc basis, whereas there is now evidence that a long term vision helps to bring in new money and enables the local authority to meet the varying needs of all members of a community. Sixty advisors have been recruited to work with local authorities to develop strategies, to train and advise and to encourage departments to work together. It is not only the 'parks department' which needs to be involved, but planners, educationalists and tourism and leisure specialists.

In order to create a strategy to meet the needs of the whole community we need to know who they are and what are their needs, and to ensure that those needs are delivered. Julia said that teenagers were often left out and this led to poor perceptions of places – groups 'hanging around' on waste ground etc. When engaged with, they often came up with good ideas. Another document "What would you do with this space?" will provide case studies which we might learn from.

Examining the 'perceptions' can be helpful too. A quote from the Victorian era expressed the very same sentiments as we hear today. The issue is one of managing people in public spaces and this can often be achieved through higher staffing levels with a high profile presence. Budget cuts have meant centralised staffing which removes the sense of ownership and recognition.

Research also looked at the quality of the environment and its effect on behaviour and concluded:

good design + good maintenance + staff presence = less anti-social behaviour.

Julia quoted Sue Nelson who found that "criminal acts, especially anti-social low level ones are often carried out because of the context of the local environment."

We must be realistic about budgets and staff levels but we must also realise, Julia said, that if we are to improve our public spaces it is going to cost more than we are spending currently. There is a need for both private investment and public funding, as well as voluntary effort, and the research she spoke of, Julia was sure would help to lever in funding.

Good public spaces could be a catalyst for regeneration and an opportunity to engage the community. The "Manifesto for Better Public Spaces" was included in delegates' conference packs and Julia urged everyone to give their support to this, which would also help to highlight the issues with politicians.

Finally, Julia said, although the last 20 years has seen us become richer, we are not *happier!* Successive governments have striven to make us richer, whereas the model in Denmark, where there is significant investment in the public realm, demonstrates the perception of happiness is much greater.

She concluded "Quality of the public realm is only one perception – but it gives a powerful feel for a place."

Julia then responded to several questions on the issues of engaging the school communities, the increased value of properties adjacent to green spaces and the case for contributions from the private sector to the spaces (eg: developers).

Les Coffey, Director of Policy & Regeneration at High Peak Borough Council, explained the need for a regeneration strategy in Buxton. He said that it was not only a 'tourist town' but had its roots in quarrying, agriculture and manufacturing. It was a low wage economy, and this has an influence on services and the support for services. Although Buxton had experienced rises and falls in its fortunes, it had recently suffered a "procession of decline" and a period of uncertainty. The restoration of the Opera House in 1978 had been the one "bright star" in recent years, and had marked it as a key building in the future of Buxton.

The purpose of the strategy was to bring sustainable investment and business activity to Buxton, and the Local Plan was used to manage the housing needs and to support infrastructure services. The presence of the University of Derby provided high quality jobs, an economic boost to tourism (through the tourism and hospitality courses) and, through the Health and Safety Laboratory, a national focus on Buxton.

Links with Peak District tourism were essential, and although it had been difficult, the Peak District 'brand' had been established. Many obstacles had to be overcome in order to deliver a good package to tourists, with agencies working together to match provision with needs and to establish a consistent model for Tourism Information Centres. The Peak District Sustainable Tourism Strategy, a multi-sector partnership, is working on several key initiatives.

Conservation-led regeneration is helping to make Buxton a more attractive place – not only the large buildings, but smaller ones all over the town, as well as improvements to the green spaces and the street-scene. Les considered that there is still a long way to go, in particular in relation to the retail area. The Market Place is a 'work in progress' and achieving high quality improvements is a costly business.

The main public realm improvements will be The Slopes, the Spring Gardens Pedestrian Priority Scheme, the Pavilion Gardens, the Opera House Forecourt and the Market Place.

Transport issues, Les said, were another factor. Buxton is poorly served by public transport (evidenced by the number of delegates arriving by train – 2!). The County Council is currently carrying out survey work on issues such as parking provision and park and ride. He asked "How would you treat the space in front of the Crescent?".

The Opera House is leading the culture in Buxton. Its magnificent refurbishment between 1999 and 2003 and year-round programme of events makes a significant contribution to the vibrancy of Buxton.

Buxton has limited capital resources, Les said, so much so that 'right to buy' receipts had been used in the past. Currently, funding partners include English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery Fund, East Midlands Development Agency, the Derby & Derbyshire Economic Partnership and others with some from the private sector.

Leadership, he stressed, was crucial. It had been especially in establishing the Peak District brand and the restoration of the Opera House. Strong leaders with a *vision* to drive projects through!

He also acknowledged that there had been elements of *luck*:

- The availability of the Devonshire Royal Hospital building and the expansion of the University, coinciding.
- The advantage gained from adversity – for example following the foot and mouth epidemic – it took a crisis for tourism to be dealt with seriously.
- The profile gained from the use of Buxton water at Wimbledon.

There is more to do, Les assured, but he felt very optimistic, and at least “we know where we are going”, he said.

After coffee, **Richard Tuffrey, Conservation Manager at High Peak Borough Council and member of the EHTF Executive Committee**, explained the details of the Buxton Spa and Crescent projects.

The three main buildings involved in the projects – the Crescent, the Natural Baths and the small Pump Room – signify the historic development of Buxton around its supply of natural mineral water. Richard explained the long involvement of the Dukes of Devonshire and the changing uses of the buildings over the years. The last therapeutic use made of the waters was in 1970 (under the NHS) and the buildings have been empty since 1972. After many twists and turns they were finally brought into public ownership via the Borough and County Councils, (with support from English Heritage, the National Memorial Fund and the Department of National Heritage) in 1996.

Various schemes were put forward but not until the appointment of the Trevor Osborne Property Group in 2003 has a viable project emerged. The project includes:

- an 87 bed hotel occupying the majority of the Crescent
- a natural thermal spa in the Natural Baths
- a visitor centre interpreting the towns spa heritage and giving access to the Assembly Rooms and a new Tourist Information Centre, both in the Crescent
- a function suite in the Assembly Rooms, linked to the hotel
- 8 small specialist retail units in the front ground floor of the Crescent
- a tea room in the Pump Room where it will be possible to ‘take the waters’; currently there is only an outdoor tap which still attracts a constant stream of people collecting the water – free of charge.

Bath and Buxton are the only venues in UK with thermal mineral waters, both of which were used in Roman times. With a resurgence of the vogue for natural therapies, an attractive range of treatments together with high quality hotel accommodation, will offer a unique opportunity to Buxton.

The project is being taken forward through a partnership made up of: High Peak BC, Derbyshire CC, the Building Preservation Trust, a Developer SPV, Danubius Hotel & Spa, retail units/restaurant operators and a sub-lease to HPBC for the TIC.

The gross cost of this major project will be in the region of £23m, the majority of which is from the private sector, but with contributions from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Regional Development Agency/SSP, Landfill Tax Credit Trusts and the Borough and County Councils.

Richard concluded with the key dates for the project which were 2005 to finalise bids, to let contracts and to start building, and 2007 for the completion of construction works.

Professor David Davies, Director at the University of Derby College, Buxton, said that as an educationalist he shared the vision for Buxton which included the development of a new Institute of Tourism and Hospitality. Amalgamation with the Further Education College brought together strengths in catering and hospitality and tourism management. The Devonshire Royal Hospital, he said, was a natural focus for Buxton as well as being a monument in its own right, and offered unique opportunity to the University and the town. After a huge investment of time and money (£15m) he was expecting to welcome the first students in September 2004.

Northwood House has also been acquired and will be refurbished as a hostel for the residential FE College. Other student and conference facilities will also be added on the site. The total of the new facilities will offer a new kind of education, bringing disciplines together and performing a very public function – there will be a ‘working’ hotel and restaurant.

David estimated the economic impact on Buxton to be £25m per year. There will be other impacts too - congestion possibly and on housing, although the student population will grow gradually. There will be direct investment in relation to tourism via the hotel, and the University will offer the only degree in Spa and Spa Management. The knowledge economy is significant and the exchange of information across Europe which will be engendered, will put Buxton in an advantageous position – “a University Town in the making!”

Bob Hall, Head of Leisure at HPBC, explained the Pavilion Gardens Restoration Project which began in 1997 and was approaching completion. In 1996 the gardens were registered as of “historic interest”, but under-investment gave a perception of neglect, therefore “something had to be done”. Adjacent Grade II listed buildings, its proximity to the swimming pool and the Crescent and DRH gave the Gardens further significance.

An ambitious vision was conceived to put the Gardens at the heart of the regeneration in Buxton and to make them “relevant for today and for a 100 years from now”.

The first steps were:

- to seek assistance - both professional and financial help
- to engage the Parklands Consortium to carry out a feasibility study
- to carry out historic landscapes and land use surveys
- to carry out public consultation – a double edged sword – but communication throughout the project has been very important

Consequent recommendations offered:

- challenging targets
- clarity to the vision
- a ‘blue print’ – which has been mostly achieved
- costing and phasing
- support for the Heritage Lottery Fund bid

Key areas for restoration were identified. These included: the lakes and water courses, paths, bridges, fencing and gates, urns, gardens, broadwalk and the lime circle. Modern needs had not previously been catered for – car parking, toilets, children’s play areas, kiosks, seating, signage and universal access – and had to be addressed.

Noting what Julia had said regarding staffing, Bob said that a Park Warden had been appointed, part funded by HLF, and he was hoping for a Green Flag award in the near future.

Phasing was a crucial part of the project, mainly due to its impact on local residents and users. In hindsight, Bob said, it might have been done differently. The area has been a ‘building site’ for a long time, which is not well received, although there is now a recognition in the community of the benefits of all the work that has been carried out.

He said it is difficult to measure whether the vision has been achieved but:-

- There are certainly many more people using the park
- It is a safer place than it was
- Feedback from visitors has been good
- Local businesses have expressed satisfaction
- For Buxton, it adds to the list of things to come for
- For High Peak the spin off has also been positive
- Will it be relevant for the next 100 years? Who knows!

Adam Lathbury, Urban Design Officer, Derbyshire County Council, explained the Market Place Enhancement Project which was a joint project between High Peak Borough Council and Derbyshire County Council. He demonstrated that the plot alignment had hardly altered since the early 19th century and there was a long history of the development of the market and the market square. However, it currently has the appearance of a car park. It is at the junction of three different road schemes and is dominated by cars, offering poor pedestrian facilities.

There is no co-ordination of street furniture and footways are cluttered, with lack of definition leading to illegal parking.

Adam took delegates along “the road to implementation”, which began with the engagement of Eddie Booth of The Conservation Studio by the HERS committee and a scheme being derived and consulted on. Funding became available from the English Heritage administered Aggregate Levy Sustainability Fund, which then enabled the levering in of other funding. A very short time-scale was attached to the funding sources but a scheme has been agreed.

The aim is to improve the quality of the environment and to resolve the needs of all the users by reducing the dominance of the car, increase pedestrian space, reflect the quality of the surrounding buildings, reinforce the character of the area – taking cues from historic precedent while catering for modern functional requirements, and to deliver quality materials and reduce street clutter.

Funding is currently only in place for Phase 1, but Adam said that one of the aims was to rationalise materials which would set a framework for future works – there would be no compromise on quality. Distinct areas would be defined by the use of setts and other materials, with simple, contemporary street furniture.

In conclusion, Adam answered the question of why such a scheme should be undertaken?

- To promote pride within the community
- To show commitment by both local authorities to investing in the area (there is a perception that there is a difference in investment in lower and higher Buxton)
- To secure and attract other investment in the area – eg: shop-fronts
- To secure a more attractive environment
- To break the cycle of deterioration and promote sustainability

After lunch delegates **toured the various project sites** with guides from the projects. Clad in high-visibility jackets and hard-hats they were able to appreciate the scale of the projects which had been taken on. The complexity of installing high-tech catering equipment, in compliance with health and safety laws, in a historic building like the RDH are monumental. The renovation of the exteriors is equally difficult. The discovery of art deco tiles in the old spa baths adds another dimension to that project too. The Pavilion Gardens, although not completed, already demonstrates that a high quality environment attracts people – it was full of people from all sectors of the community.

Refreshed with tea, delegates came together again for a brief discussion. Questions to a panel of the speakers included:

- Continuity of contractors and time scale for the Gardens project? Bob reiterated that in hindsight a shorter time span might have been better. This was an early experience of partnership working, in today's procurement environment it might have been done differently.
- Marketing strategies for the new facilities? VisitBritain is working on a 'package' to promote spas and Winchester was suggested as an example of good practice for Tourist Information Centres.
- Does the passion, enthusiasm and 'united front' seen today hide any tensions that there may have been? How did you deal with them? What is the 'secret ingredient'? There is an ethos of working together and of mutual support within and between the local authorities; it is vital to be open and honest and to *persevere* – the project has taken 12 years of Richard's life!
- Communications – how to keep it going? And do you actually listen? After initial public meetings there were not consultations at each phase but communication was facilitated through the partnerships and through the media – keeping people informed is key. It is more about communication than consultation – it is not always appropriate to give confidential information when considering tenders. A PR and information committee was formed to plan a strategy for communication – it is important.

Ian drew the conference to an end thanking everyone involved in making it possible. He said that he felt there was a great deal to be learned from the Buxton experience – which had been shared by just over sixty delegates – and he would therefore hope to communicate to a wider audience and intended to pursue an idea for 'publishing', in some format, the good practice and lessons which we might all learn from.

CW 9/7/04