

Stoneygate Conservation Area Society AGM

Annual Report 2015-16

1. Newsletters issued in August, December and April

This year's newsletters were produced by our established partnership of Nick Knight and Nita Foale with valuable contributions from committee members (notably Caroline Cook and Neil Crutchley) and member Janet Bliss. Gordon Hamylton continues to organise deliveries to local addresses, ably assisted by Aubrey Stevenson, Lisa Williams, Andy Bent, Janet Bliss, Bill and Jan Walker and other committee members. A small number of more distant members receive their newsletters by post. Back issues of Newsletters continue to be available to browse/download from the SCAS website. We welcome comments and are always happy to discuss ideas for articles on Stoneygate's social history, your own house history or your family links with the area. We'd also love to see your old photographs. Please e-mail Nick (nicholas_knight@btinternet.com) or leave a message via the website.

2. Website and social media

The handover between Nick Knight and Tim Savage has taken longer than planned so for the time being Tim has kindly agreed to keep the SCAS website (www.stoneygateconservation.org) ticking over. Unfortunately this has meant that the weekly update of conservation area planning applications has been temporarily suspended but we hope to resume it before too long - or transfer it to our Twitter account.

Nick has finally grasped the rudiments of Twitter and is now 'tweeting' regularly on our behalf (www.twitter.com/StoneygateCASoc), interacting with many groups and individuals who share our interests and concerns, locally, nationally and (surprisingly) internationally. Twitter is an amazingly effective way of bringing yourself to the attention of others, discovering new people and finding out what they are doing. It really is a bit like joining a conversation and if done politely (rather than just for self-promotion), it can have surprising results. We now have over 500 'followers' and have even engaged with the odd friendly luminary such as 'Times' football writer Henry Winter and TV historian Suzannah Lipscomb.

Our Facebook page (www.facebook.com/StoneygateConservationAreaSociety) has been of less obvious value and until we can think of a use for it, it has been temporarily suspended.

3. The Year's Events

Carolyn Holmes at the SCAS AGM

Our guest speaker at the AGM was Carolyn Holmes, Country Parks and Environment Manager at Brocks Hills Country Park, Oadby. Carolyn's enthusiasm and passion was infectious. She explained the many and varied tasks that her job entails and gave us a fascinating insight into the way that managed green spaces such as Brocks Hill can enrich life in our community; particularly in helping young people to develop a greater appreciation and understanding of the natural world.

Members' Coach Trips

Following the outstanding success of last year's coach trip (the first in over twenty years), this year committee member Arthur Stafford organised two outings. Our May trip to the Crich Tramway Village and Lea Gardens near Matlock was very popular and while the Spring rain made the stroll around the recreated Victorian streets a wetter experience than expected, it didn't impair our enjoyment of the National Tramway Museum's fascinating collection of tramcars (including the last surviving Leicester tram). It also added a freshness to the rhododendron walks at Lea Gardens whose excellent teashop lived up to its reputation.

Our September coach trip to the Museum of Royal Worcester Porcelain and the Picton Garden near Malvern was less well attended but the weather was glorious; warm and sunny. Jane Evans' talk on the various Royal Worcester styles and the history of the factory, its staff and customers was fascinating and we discovered that the National Plant Collection of autumn-flowering asters was only one of the Picton Garden's attractions which also included a range of alpines, herbaceous perennials, shrubs and trees, all laid out in a pleasant walk. The meandering drive up into the Malvern Hills and the stunning views were an added bonus.

Guided walks with Richard Gill and Neil Crutchley

May's guided walk was titled 'West of New Walk' and Richard and Neil led us around the area bordered by New Walk, De Montfort Street, Regent Road and Granville Road. For a while in the later Victorian period this was *the* place to live – and it is easy to see why. Leicester's leading architects designed homes for well-known local families such as the Corahs, Lennards, Squires, Gimsons, Lorrimers, Pickards and Adderleys and three (Joseph Goddard, R.J. Goodacre and Charles Kempson) also lived there themselves.

September's guided walk attracted an unusually large turnout. This time Richard and Neil took us for a short stroll around Morland Avenue, a residential Edwardian development just south of the conservation area boundary which is known for the delightful arts and crafts architecture of Stockdale Harrison & Sons. Like other nearby areas east of London Road, this distinctive high-quality housing still has no statutory heritage protection; something which continues to baffle us all.

4. Planning

Welcome developments completed during the year

We are delighted to have seen the elegant semi-detached townhouse at **12 Stoneygate Road** sympathetically restored from flats into a family home. This follows similar work already completed at **16 Stoneygate Road** and has been done to the same high standard. We are also pleased that the McCarthy & Stone development at **22 Knighton Park Road** has finally been completed. M&S and their architects kindly invited us to comment on their proposals and it was very encouraging to see our views reflected in the final design.

Applications

We check the City Council's weekly list of planning applications and examine all those within the conservation area or close to it. 2015-16 saw 131 applications, 62 relating to trees and 8 seeking to discharge conditions attached to planning permissions. We commented on 15, two of which went to appeal after being refused. Decisions are awaited for both.

Part of the garden belonging to 'Woodville', **14 Knighton Park Road** was sold at auction during the summer. We have enthusiastically supported the new owners' plans to build an innovative and sustainable home with a striking modern design rather than implement the existing consent for two conventional semi-detached houses. In our view the new house is a much better complement to its distinctive neighbours which include Ernest Gimson's Grade 2 listed 'White House'.

We strongly objected to applications at

15 Elms Road

A second retrospective application for an unauthorised rear extension only partially addressed issues identified by the planning committee. Approval would have made permanent the adverse impact on the neighbouring Grade 2 star listed building 'Inglewood'.

Gables Hotel, 368 London Road

The proposed use of part of the ground floor as a supermarket leased to the Co-op would have led to highway safety issues, increased parking pressures on nearby streets and would have set a worrying new precedent for the commercialisation of the 'London Road corridor'.

79 Knighton Drive, Land adjacent

Building on the remaining garden of 'White Cottage' would be an overdevelopment of this very prominent and sensitive site. It would have a significantly negative impact on the streetscene, resulting in the loss of an important conservation area landmark and the potential loss of two mature chestnut trees

17 Knighton Road

Changing the use of a detached garage to a residential unit would not be appropriate in this location and would almost certainly lead to further adverse impacts on the streetscene

1 Sandown Road

The replacement of the existing garage with an unsympathetic and poorly-designed infill house would have an overwhelmingly negative impact on neighbouring properties and streetscene

14a Woodland Avenue

A retrospective application for very large masonry gateposts and large 'stockade-type' vehicle and pedestrian gates is completely at odds with the guidance provided by the Character Appraisal. The scale and design of the proposals and choice of materials for the posts (rendered blockwork) is not remotely appropriate to the area.

We objected or sought amendments to applications at

Land adjacent to 7 Burlington Road – further enlargement of a 4-bed house that was originally approved as a ‘chalet bungalow’

2 Knighton Park Road – replacement of a garage with a single-storey building housing a self-contained flat

21 St Johns Road – replacement of metal Crittall-style front windows with uPVC

Trees

We are pleased that there have been no seriously controversial incidents involving trees this year although we are concerned that several days of high winds led to a number of ‘emergency’ applications to fell mature trees (one of which has still to appear on the Planning Department’s database).

We were disappointed that, when a diseased mature street tree was felled in Stoneygate Road, neighbours only learned what was happening after making several frustrating ‘phone calls to the Council. Residents are the Council’s ‘eyes and ears’ on the street and we have been repeatedly told by senior officers that help from the local community is welcomed. If this is true, we would expect them to be treated as valued partners. Surely a simple notice could have been posted to immediate neighbours before work began?

Enforcement & planning breaches

We are philosophical enough to know that there will always be opportunistic developers looking to take advantage of the conservation area’s benefits while sidestepping its constraints and that non-compliance will never disappear entirely. Nonetheless, there are increasing signs that owners and investors with a genuine commitment to the area are gradually buying into the ‘conservation area ethos’.

Cases at **the Gables Hotel** and **15 Elms Road** that have been ongoing for several years both seem to be nearing resolution. Unauthorised glazing at the new houses at **52a and 52b Knighton Drive** was promptly replaced by something more appropriate and closer to what had been allowed. After we contacted the Compliance & Monitoring Team, an unauthorised front boundary fence at **73 Clarendon Park Road** (part of a welcome refurbishment) was replaced by something not only more appropriate but actually more attractive than the original.

There are remaining challenges. The hard landscaping of front gardens and the unsympathetic treatment of front boundaries continues to be an issue; particularly the removal of trees and hedges and their replacement with ‘stockade-type’ metal railings and gates or cheap ‘n cheerful fence panelling. We have also been disappointed that no progress has yet been made to control unsympathetic and intrusive commercial signage in the conservation area. Two or three property & lettings companies are particularly flagrant offenders and, since they show no willingness to remove signs voluntarily, we wonder why enforcement action has not already been taken.

Glazing

The double-glazing of traditional timber-framed windows is a perennial issue and we have been very impressed by the care taken by SCAS members to ensure that improvements to their thermal efficiency do not adversely affect house or street. One member has commissioned a bespoke sliding sash window combining float and rolled glass panes to preserve the traditional reflective quality of his Edwardian glazing. Another has provided the necessary ventilation to a new bathroom by commissioning a bespoke top-opening window which faithfully reproduces the appearance of the previous fixed window. These examples of best practice are very encouraging. Such high-quality joinery is not cheap but experience shows that in a conservation area like Stoneygate it is usually a worthwhile investment.

5. Partnership and community involvement

Through SCAS Chair, David Oldershaw, we maintain our support for the annual ‘Art House’ and ‘Art Beat’ events. David’s enthusiasm and energy and the collective efforts of volunteers Jenny, Diane, Lucy, Janet, Aileen, Gill, Bill, Sue, Caroline and Dee meant that the SCAS stand at this year’s ‘Art House’ took 29 subscriptions and attracted 17 new members.

We remain an active member of the Leicester Heritage Partnership and continue to maintain good working relationships with other like-minded groups in the city, particularly the Leicester Civic Society and the Leicester Group of the Victorian Society.

Knighton Neighbourhood Forum

Over the last year a small but highly motivated group has been working to create a representative body to provide community input into local authority decision-making for an area covering most of South and some of West Knighton. The Knighton Neighbourhood Forum is now properly constituted and has official rights of representation granted under the 2011 Localism Act. The elected committee's first job - apart from maintaining momentum - is to draw up a Neighbourhood Plan identifying priorities on subjects including the local economy, neighbourhood facilities, transport & roads, open spaces, sports & leisure, planning & housing growth, waste & recycling and climate change & flooding.

We are full of admiration for this initiative and, judging by the attendance at meetings, so are many Knighton residents. Only a small section of the Stoneygate Conservation Area falls within the Forum's sphere of influence but we look forward to working with them on heritage, conservation and other matters of mutual concern. We are both committed to ensuring that, where new homes are built, they make a distinctive and positive contribution to the area and do not threaten the existing balance between buildings, trees, gardens and open spaces.

6. Committee News

We have, with great regret, accepted Caroline Cook's resignation from the SCAS Committee. Changes to her personal circumstances made Caroline's continued involvement increasingly difficult and she has finally decided to bow to the inevitable. Caroline has been a valued committee member for over twenty years and we are sure that you will join us in thanking her for her many and varied contributions. She intends to remain a member and we very much hope that we will still see her from time to time at SCAS events.

The committee is always looking for new talent and we would warmly welcome anyone who thinks they might be able to contribute - particularly anyone interested in helping the planning team. Please talk to a committee member after the meeting or contact us by phone or via the website.

Membership has continued to rise and we ended the year with 217 member households. Thank you all.