

Jack Searle's Address to the Dundee Civic Trust 50th Anniversary Dinner

**Best Western Woodlands Hotel, Broughty Ferry
4 May 2023**

We are here tonight to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Dundee Civic Trust.

When in 1963 I first came to Dundee I certainly thought the City was a very interesting place, even though Dundee at that time was still a grey city. Many of the buildings were built in the grey local Leoch stone, while the police boxes were grey painted iron structures which looked as though they were rented from a German Panzer division.

However, the City's setting was simply spectacular and it had a wealth of Victorian buildings in a curious juxtaposition of great mansions, enormous textile mills, stone tenements and impressive public buildings. But it also had a lot of very substandard housing.

In the 1960s the City Council decided to deal with this problem by embarking upon an extensive programme of comprehensive redevelopment, which was a euphemism for total clearance.

At first there was great public support for this approach. However, during this process many buildings of historic interest were demolished; and some people became concerned about the total clearance approach to redevelopment where the good was removed with the bad.

Among these were Charlotte Lythe and Tony Cooke, two members of the Abertay Historical Society, and Bruce Walker of the Dundee Institute of Architects. As a result of their endeavours, on 6th February 1973 Dundee Civic Trust came into existence as a body created to lobby for the preservation of the architectural heritage of the city.

But by the time of the Trust's first Annual Report in 1974 it had become clear that the Trust was not only interested in the preservation of the City's architectural history; but also in preserving the quality of its natural environment as evidenced by its opposition to greenfield housing at the Gows estate at the west end of the city.

Although the Trust was very active in the late 70s and the 80s, by the 1990s as the City Council began to lay less accent upon total clearance and more on the managed improvement of substandard areas, the Trust's level of involvement in local matters declined – as did its membership.

It was during that period that I became a member of the Trust when I was recruited by Andrew Nicoll.

My first experience of the workings of the Trust was in 1996, when I attended a sparsely attended monthly meeting in a lecture room at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art presided over by the Vice Chairman, Dennis Naulty.

At end of the formal business of the meeting, Dennis said that they had learnt that Denis Bethell, one of the committee, was leaving the country to take up residence in France. In view of all his sterling work for the Trust it had been decided that a presentation should be made to him. Dennis Naulty then asked the Secretary, who, at the time who was called believe it or not, Bunny Warren, to make the presentation.

Bunny came forward with what turned out to be a pretty massive hardback volume on the Antiquities of Ancient Egypt and presented this to Denis Bethell who had been standing with a somewhat mystified expression on his face, and who then said, "I think there must be some misunderstanding as I not going to live abroad. I am only going to France for a fortnight's holiday."

In the late 90s, as younger members came on to the Committee, the Trust became reinvigorated, increasing its membership, updating and rewriting its Constitution and successfully establishing itself as a registered charity; while at the same time increasing its activities on all fronts and persuading the actor Brian Cox to become the Patron of the Trust.

The Trust has always taken a positive approach in all that it does. So while it has resisted bad developments it has also praised and supported proposals which would improve the physical environment. Sometimes the Trust has been successful, sometimes not, but its consistent approach has been to aim at the best outcome for Dundee.

A good example of the Trust's efforts to stop bad development proposals was the Trust's persuasion of the Council's Planning committee to go against the advice of its own planning officials and to refuse the building of a hotel on a landscaped area alongside Riverside Drive.

The developers appealed the refusal. At the subsequent Public Inquiry the Trust led the West End Community Council and a group of local objectors and the application was refused. This was a good example of the Trust's efforts to work with local communities.

The Trust has also regularly contributed to the consultations which are a formal part of the preparation by the City Council, of Local Plans and commented on the preparation of planning briefs for major development sites.

The Trust has also carried out its own projects. When the Trust decided that a record needed to be made of the remaining mediaeval closes and vennels in the city centre it commissioned Andrew Nicoll to make an architectural study of these ancient byways. This resulted in the erection of by the Trust of memorial plaques in the principal closes.

In order to encourage good building design the Trust decided in 1976 to create the Civic Trust Awards which would be given to buildings which made a significant contribution to the built environment of Dundee.

Since the first Award went to Bonspiel Gardens in 1978 the Trust has made Awards to a wide range of buildings too numerous to list here. But you will be pleased to know that the next copy of *City Scene* will focus on the Awards which have been made over the years.

Another part of the Trust's activities is its aim to widen awareness and understanding of the past, present, and future, of the built environment of the City.

Firstly, from the very start, the Trust organised a regular programme of talks and lectures on subjects as varied as the History of Public Open Spaces in the City, the design of Edwardian mansions, Public Transport in Dundee and the growth of the Hilltown. These have been complimented by visits to places of interest: some in Dundee, such as the Verdant Works and the Universities; some outside the City such as the Antonine Wall and Hospitalfield in Arbroath.

Secondly, to keep its members informed the Trust sent out by post to members a Newsletter. This was originally one page of text without illustrations, and produced on a manual typewriter, and concentrated very much on the activities of the Trust.

As time went by the Newsletter was improved and enlarged and produced on computer. In 2010 the Trust upped its game and decided to change the Newsletter to what has now become the Newsflash which is a well-illustrated wide ranging production distributed to all our members by a combination of email and post.

Alongside the Newsflash in 2011 the Trust began to produce an annual magazine which you know as *City Scene*: a high quality production with a varied range of articles. At first the content of the Newsletters and *City Scene* was a bit introspective but as time has gone by they have become more outlooking and are much more focused on the widening of public knowledge of the City.

Lastly and very significantly an excellent website, accessible to all, has been created to make the public more aware of the Trust and the activities it carries out.

The Future

Well that is the past 50 years and we are still going, and stronger than we have ever been. What about the future? Well as a doddering old codger I am not really qualified to prognosticate about anything; but I would like to pass on one thought about the future of the Trust.

The Trust has on occasion identified the need for projects which would improve the quality of Dundee's built environment. Probably the most significant of these was the preservation and upgrading of the bridge over the Dighty at East Linlathen which is probably the oldest iron bridge of its kind in Scotland and seemed likely to be lost if no action was taken.

To cut a long story short, despite the fact that the Trust had no significant funds available to carry out the project themselves, by working in conjunction with the Institute of Civil Engineers, the City Council and the developers of nearby land, the bridge was repaired and refurbished.

I think that it is really important is that the Trust should have a project related to the history of the city to focus upon and one which would be relevant to the young.

My choice would be the establishment of the National Museum of Comics and Graphic Entertainment. Yes I know that some work has been done on this, but the Trust should be the champion of such a project which should be located on the Dundee Waterfront.

During my life I have become involved with a number of committees in voluntary organisations. I can unequivocally assure you that the committee of the Trust is easily the best I have come across. The members of the committee I have been lucky to work with have been blessed by intelligence, competence, commitment, and a readiness to take on tasks when required. You just can't have it better than that.

I would now like to propose a toast to the Trust and all its members past and present who all have one thing in common. To quote Paul Simon: "The thought that things could be better is woven into our hearts and our brains."

I give you Dundee Civic Trust: past, present, and future.