

Southern Comfort 2006 Summary Report

The Portsmouth Society hosted Southern Comfort, the Annual Regional Conference of Civic Amenity societies at Portsmouth Guildhall on 14th October. Sixty one delegates from eighteen societies, from all over south-east England, attended together with the Chairman of Civic Trust SE and a representative of CPRE.

Celia Clark, Chair of the Portsmouth Society

After a formal opening by the Lord Mayor, our Chair Dr Celia Clark welcomed the delegates. As a founder-member, she recalled that the Portsmouth Society was formed in 1973 and in the same year was represented at the inaugural meeting of Southern Comfort in Chichester. Since that date the Society had been actively pursuing the protection of the built environment from the ravages of unconstrained developments that are not prevented by city planners and the Development Control Committee. Because of the inadequate resources and lack of design expertise of our unitary authority, we have had to battle to preserve elements of our history and our heritage and to demand new designs that properly reflect the dignity of our city. In the wider context we have strongly supported regional efforts to safeguard our region from the overwhelming engulfment, without due regard to supporting infrastructure, threatened by the South East Plan. On the positive side we have initiated annual Design Awards which identify new structures and embellishments that merit publicity and acclaim. Most notably these have included the iconic Spinnaker Tower.

Paul Grover – Solent Centre for Architecture + Design

The keynote address of What an Architectural Centre can do for You! was enthusiastically delivered by Paul Grover, Chief executive of the Solent Centre for Architecture and Design. His presentation vividly illustrated how his and other similar centres funded by CABE and SEEDA provide Design Advocacy to professionals and the public. They are also dedicated to communicating with the wider public to assist them to understand and to contribute towards appreciation of, and the design of their communities. The architects visit schools, to involve teachers and children, and hold exhibitions to encourage people to investigate the history of their cities (Old Portsmouth and the Historic Dockyard offer many opportunities and the restoration of Wymering Manor provides even more history). They also institute National Architecture Weeks to seek public participation. He cited our Bus Tour of the locations of the Design Awards as being an excellent example. For further inspiration he described a City Vision Centre involving three-dimensional and virtual modelling to stimulate the public to visualise improvements to their city.

The first discussion session chaired by Dr Roger James, our secretary, with Celia Clark and Paul Grover on the panel, was directed towards the latter's presentation. All speakers expressed appreciation of his topic. He confirmed several experiences with local authorities recognising that consultation at street level with the people contributed to successful urban developments; it was important that urban design should not be marred by individual building styles; more work needs to be done on sustainability; this needs to be related to costs; start with the public and the broad view, not with abstract

principles. Considerable interest was expressed in Paul's description of the City Vision and there was general agreement that as well as an 'Architecture Centre' each city should have a City Masterplan to aid a Citizens' Forum. In referring to the value of guided walks he added that interesting issues could be collated on the Centre's web site (using 'Google map-technology) with a link to individual societies.

Open Forum – South East Plan ...

After a coffee break, Michael Carden, Vice-President of the City of Winchester Trust joined the panel for the second session which discussed questions pre-submitted by attending societies. The chair invited summaries of responses already made to the SE Plan: Winchester reported seeking protection for historic sites whilst Portchester had made extensive comments about transport; Guildford considered that the report was light weight and failed to address detail or costs; they questioned whether their extensive comments would receive proper attention. In response to the question of how should the societies have responded, it was noted that it was up to individual local societies; the Civic Trust could only respond to national issues. Fareham advocated a group approach and cited SHUV (the South Hampshire Unallocated Voices) comprised of 30 organisations formed to counteract the aspirations of PUSH (the Partnership for Urban South Hampshire). Other questions and discussion achieved a consensus that the report concentrated too much upon the provision of extra housing without proper attention to the supporting infrastructure and the impact upon the environment

Michael Carden, Vice-President of the City of Winchester Trust

In his concluding speech, Michael Carden paid tribute to the continued success of Southern Comfort, since its inception in Chichester some 33 years ago, and congratulated Paul Grover upon the practical assistance offered by the Architecture Centre and his vision of the future. He highlighted the difficulties delivering the message from the Societies to local and more particularly to national government. He suggested that the subject of the next Southern Comfort should be: "How can we get the government to make the planning system better?".

As a footnote, Brian Horsley, chair of Civic Trust SE expressed the regional perspective and added comments about the need for the Civic Trust to campaign more vigorously to protect the quality of life.

Afternoon programme

After an optional buffet lunch, the delegates were invited to attend one or other of the Guided Walks either to The Historic Dockyard or to Gunwharf Quays. The former, led by Celia Clark assisted by her husband Dean, was attended by 25 delegates and included the range of historic buildings and boathouses in the dockyard and sight of HMS Warrior and HMS Victory. The latter, led by Roger James assisted by Charles Burns, was attended by 20 delegates, and enabled sight of the restored buildings on the former naval mine and torpedo depot, including the Vulcan building and the Custom House. It concluded with a visit to the new and highly praised shopping area with the opportunity of an optional visit to the Spinnaker Tower

And finally ...

In conclusion, Southern Comfort enabled delegates from a number of societies to meet with each other and to discuss the questions that were important to them. It was quite evident that in many cases societies had to battle to preserve the quality of historic buildings and to achieve corresponding quality with new designs within the urban infrastructure. There was difficulty in getting their message across both to their local authority and to the echelons of national government. The resolution of this difficulty should be the subject of the next Southern Comfort.

We look forward to attending Southern Comfort 2007 – wherever it may be!

Bob Adderley