

Southern Comfort 2006
Welcome Speech by Dr Celia Clark, Chair of the Portsmouth Society

Welcome to you all! The Portsmouth Society is delighted to play host to our sister civic societies from near and far – Lewes, Oxford, Weymouth and Fareham. Southern Comfort is not limited to the SE region, because issues do not halt at arbitrary political boundaries...

We are honoured that the Lord Mayor, Councillor Fred Charlton is here to greet us, and are sorry that Alberta Stevens has been unable to join us from the Civic Trust. We believe that the Trust should be a campaigning organisation, pressing for legislative and administrative change which adds to the quality of life, acting as a conduit and mouthpiece for our local, regional and sometimes national concerns.

I'd particularly like to thank the Society's organising committee, led by Bob Adderley, for their excellent work planning today's event.

When I think of our long commitment to our communities, and particularly our work in campaigning to improve the quality of the environment we share with our fellow citizens, the phrase 'unsung heroes – and heroines' comes to mind. We've all been beavering away for twenty, thirty even forty years. We have become experts in all sorts of things – planning, transport, urban and rural regeneration, social enterprise, architectural and landscape design, local and national history, public relations...We don't always get a good press...but that doesn't stop us.

The Portsmouth Society was founded in 1973 – the same year as the Chichester Society – in response to the immense damage 'comprehensive redevelopment' was doing to our cities. We can all identify buildings that wouldn't be there if it wasn't for our efforts, old buildings given new life, parks and open spaces cherished, sparkling new buildings, local history that has not been forgotten.... But our work – and it is work – doesn't get any easier. If anything, urban areas are changing and evolving faster now than ever before, and we must be even quicker on our feet if we are to respond to them, as we try to make sure changes are for the better.

As you know very well, the town planning system is in a state of flux. How are we to ensure that there isn't a democratic deficit in the government's attempts to speed up the planning process? We work on the microscale as well as the macro scale. In Portsmouth we are very conscious of the lack of design expertise in the planning staff, which leads to dull and even ugly buildings being recommended to the development control committee – and granted permission. There is so much dispiriting building – for example for housing associations – going on. We very much value our democratic right to address the committee, but recently it's been made very much harder for members of the public to come and see planning applications. True, these are available on line, but large plans are difficult to make out on a computer screen. But of course, the huge majority of decisions are taken by the planning officers.

The City of Winchester Society is concerned about town cramming, 'garden grabbing' – call it what you will – the replacement of large houses with gardens by high density blocks of flats – their developers spurred by the government's pressure to build more and more homes in the south east, designating such land as 'brownfields'.

Brian Horsley, Chair of Civic Trust South East will no doubt others will bring us up to date on the South East Plan, Regional Economic Strategy, regional transport strategy.

His particular interest is ensuring that enough affordable housing is included. Others in the region are concerned that quality of life issues – do not appear in these plans. Building on every available pocket of land and open spaces such as school playgrounds and parks must in the end be counter productive to our enjoyment of life. In the Portsmouth Society we question the coarse statement that Portsmouth is ‘punching below its weight’ in the retail sector. Can we please step off the continual competing escalator of more and more shops?

Winchester also asked the Civic Trust to consider promoting legislation to introduce a higher category of conservation area, since current controls are so weak. No doubt he will refer to that in his closing speech. In Portsmouth we are concerned that the city council’s care of our historic buildings and archaeology is so poor. Southsea Castle is shut for half the year; essential maintenance is not done which as any sensible householder knows is in the end counter productive as decay sets in and repair costs mount, museums are underfunded because they are not statutory, the city only buys in part-time temporary archaeological advice instead of fulfilling the statutory duty of investigation and recording, so priceless pieces of our earlier history are lost to developer’s augers...

Portsmouth does not have the long history of other settlements you represent, but a large part of its earnings from tourism rely on historic resources: Mary Rose, Victory and Warrior in the incomparable setting of the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century dockyard, Owen’s Southsea, Wymering Manor, Old Portsmouth, Portsea.... You’ll see some of this on this afternoon’s tours. In September, we began a campaign to inscribe Portsmouth Harbour as a World Heritage site, working with our neighbour societies and conservation in Gosport, Fareham, Portchester, and Winchester.

The Society’s role as catalyst is clear in this year’s campaign to ensure that Wymering Manor, the oldest manor in Hampshire - predating Portsmouth – with an Elizabethan timber frame – remained accessible to the public as it was as the Youth Hostel for 40 years, rather than being sold by the city to a private owner. We helped to form a new group, the Friends of Old Wymering, and they, the Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust and the new lessee, Ian Young persuaded the leader of the council that it should be carefully restored and become a ‘Heritage Hotel’ with regular events for local people to enjoy.

We also are keen that the modern canon – of new buildings - should be of the highest quality. Mirroring our parent body, the Society has had a Design Award since 1983. This year we decided to declare the Spinnaker Tower, Portsmouth’s new icon our Best New Building of 2006. Paul Grover, our speaker today, was one of the judges. As Director of the Solent Centre for Architecture and Design, he will now tell us: “What your Architecture Centre can do for you!”