



BRISTOL
CIVIC SOCIETY
**ANNUAL
REPORT**
2021



an independent force for a **better Bristol**



Bristol Civic Society Annual Report 2021

What is the Civic Society for?

Our charitable objectives are clear: the Society shall promote and encourage the following objects, by charitable means but not otherwise:

- a. To stimulate public interest in, and care for, the beauty, history, character and future of the City of Bristol and its surroundings.
- b. To encourage high standards of architecture and town planning; the preservation of the best of the remaining features of the historic past of Bristol and its surroundings as well as the best of the existing features of public amenity and interest; the incorporation and blending of such features in present and future developments; the improvement of existing and the creation of new features of public amenity and interest.
- c. To pursue these ends by means of meetings, exhibitions, lectures, publications, other forms of instruction and schemes of a charitable nature.

Within this broad canvas we do what members want us to do. We are all volunteers, and we tend to do what interests and energises us.

The Challenges of 2021

The Society rose to the challenge posed by the pandemic with a stellar events programme. *Better Bristol* was also highly regarded – as always! And we continued with our regular electronic communications and excellent website.

We were very active in influencing major developments - nearly 50 proposals.

Our membership is increasing and finances are stable.

Thanks to all who support BCS through membership. And all who are active in the Society.

We are always keen to welcome new members in all our activities. And to welcome new ideas/proposals for action, especially if they come with willing volunteers!

Membership

Our membership has steadily risen, perhaps driven by the quality of our events programme during the past two years. We have just reached 600 members.

	Jan 2020	Jan 2021	Jan 2022
(1) All memberships – Active	461	480	541
(2) Joint Second members - Active	28	31	38
(3) Joint membership - Active	102	105	106
Total membership (1-2+3)	535	554	609

Major Sites Group (MSG)

The Society only gets involved with ‘majors’, defined as more than 10 houses/over 1000 m². We set up the MSG in 2008.

MSG met 12 times in 2021. The Group has 12 regular members, with a range of backgrounds - actuary, teacher, town planners, engineer ...

We meet with developers and consultants. Often online and always visit sites. We see planning applications and pre-application proposals, sometimes on a confidential basis. Very good system in Bristol.

We make comments, challenge proposals, suggest improvements. A lot of work. Do we make a difference? How do we measure success?

In 2021 we looked at 49 major proposals.

Long running involvement with St Mary Le Port. Initially supportive of redevelopment but have concerns regarding height. Early in 2022, following its approval by Bristol City Council Planning Committee, we requested ‘call in’ by the Secretary of State.

We now have the saga of Waterfront Place. Not at all happy with this proposal, a current planning application.

We report on our work on our website, which is a great source of up to date information about developments in Bristol.

Transport and Place-making Group (TPG)

2021 was the first year of TPG’s operation, after some years’ gap without a transport group.

Met 9 times in 2021, 10 regular members, range of backgrounds – law academic, senior civil servants, engineer, council officer, surveyor... A mix of interests across the world of transport and place-making.

We respond to policy and scheme proposals from the Council and the West of England Combined Authority (WECA). In 2021 we looked at 5 proposals.

We keep up with central/local government policies and plans. It has been important, particularly in the first year of the group, to pool the group's knowledge base to help inform its future work.

We report on our work on our website.

Ashton Court Mansion

Long involvement of the Society. Recently held public meetings in 2017 and 2019. Attended 'visioning' sessions with the Prince's Foundation in summer 2021 but no feedback and no update since then. Mansion closed since end 2017. What should we do next?

Western Harbour

We contributed to the latest 'visioning' exercise in 2021, and are involved in the Western Harbour Advisory Group and Cumberland Basin Stakeholder Group.

Events

A bumper year. The events team delivered 14 talks on zoom; one in-person event (White City). Externally there were 4 visits, to Ashton Court Mansion (twice), its Deer Park and St Michaels. There were two Society events (a summer social at the Observatory and the Design Awards at St George's) and 27 walks (Clifton's Plaques, New Cut, Shirehampton). Also, seven batches of intriguing Bristol-related archive film clips were emailed out to members, and proved popular.

The online talks proved very popular covering a wide range of subjects:

- *Designing for the Arts, Egypt on Avon, Bristol Maps, Underfall Yard, Western Harbour, Bristol Aerospace, 'Brunel's Liner', Trams, 20-minute Neighbourhood,*
- *Local architects: Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, Alec French, Shankari Raj*
- *Current development proposals: Bristol Zoo, Waterside Place, St Mary le Port*

Design Awards

Three awards were made (details are on the website):

- **Brandon Yard**

One of the final developments on Bristol's Harbourside, Brandon Yard has repurposed the Grade II listed buildings from the Canon's Marsh Gasworks as well as providing a new block which complements the heritage buildings.

- **The Observatory**

The Clifton Observatory is one of the most prominent buildings in Bristol, sitting high on the clifftops of the Avon Gorge next to the Suspension Bridge. From this unique vantage point, the Observatory provides far reaching views of Bristol; now, sensitively restored, it is a welcoming visitor attraction for tourists and locals alike.

- **The Vincent**

The Vincent involved the conversion of Queen Victoria House (Redland Hill) and the introduction of two new residential blocks into its grounds to provide independent living retirement homes.

The award panel considered the building to be a well-designed, sensitive architectural addition to the local area of Redland that complemented the restored Queen Victoria House.

Blue Plaques

Mid-way through the year, the Panel increased in size from four to seven members. We facilitated six plaques in the past twelve months; half were instigated in that time, while the processes for the other half had begun two or three years ago. We rejected two applications as being too weak to justify commemoration and we currently have nine applications at various stages of progress.

So, a good result and lots in the pipeline.

Challenges for the future

The Society faces a range of challenges.

- Within Bristol the scale and pace of development continues to amaze and to make it difficult to keep pace. Developers often appear to dictate what happens. We need to understand and promulgate how to plan for more homes without destroying the character and attractiveness of the city.
- There is certainly a need for homes but why so high? Tall buildings are very controversial – Castle View, Redcliff Quarter, Bedminster Green, Soapworks...and more in the pipeline.
- And Bristol has the ongoing saga of tackling its traffic congestion, with plans for Clean Air Zone, metrobuses, rapid transit, parking...
- More specifically the Floating Harbour – challenges of place making, the impact of new development – Baltic Wharf, Waterfront Place, Wapping Wharf...
- Western Harbour – roads, houses, flood defences...how to plan in an acceptable way. What to do with the 1960s road scheme!! Then a somewhat bizarre Vision exercise which omitted talk of any key issues.
- When the Society agitated for the renovation of St Michael on the Mount Without, this initiative attracted much interest. With Ashton Court Mansion it has proved challenging to retain member enthusiasm in the light of continuing inaction by the City Council and The Prince's Foundation. It will soon be 5 years since the Mansion closed for regular events, and over 60 years since the City Council took ownership of the mansion!

In the longer term we need to focus on the Society itself.

- What might the Society look like in 5, in 10 years' time? Has this sort of organisation had its day? How should we react to the changes in communication and the use of social media? Is a digital transformation one option?
- And the ongoing debate of how the Society might move from being reactive to proposals to being much more proactive. What might that mean in practice?

In summary we must continue doing interesting things and being relevant both to the City and to our Members.

Simon Birch
Chair of Bristol Civic Society