

## **CHICHESTER'S HERITAGE AND LANDSCAPE CHARACTER**

Briefing paper in preparation for the Examination in Public of the CDC draft Local Plan 2014

### **Introduction**

Chichester District Council introduced its draft Chichester District Local Plan, now in the hands of the Government and to be tested at the Examination-in-Public in October 2014, with the following phrases:

*'Chichester is a very special place...visitors and residents alike benefit from the unique overtures (sic) of our District...the Local Plan seeks to protect this environment and builds on the successes we have experienced...the attractive qualities and features of our District are a magnet for people who wish to live, work and visit...it is these very features we want to protect which limit our opportunities to grow and develop...these features are an intrinsic element of our heritage and by protecting this legacy we are ensuring that it will be enjoyed by many generations to come'*

This paper by the Chichester Society sets out the efforts by elected representatives and citizens (since town planning controls were introduced in 1947) to retain the city of Chichester in its rural setting, as well as comments by observers over the years on the unique relationship between city and countryside.

It is hoped that those who will be speaking at the forthcoming Examination-in-Public may wish to draw on the material which follows.

### **1. Policy since the 1947 Planning Act**

West Sussex County Council was the planning authority under the 1947 Act, but various powers were delegated to Chichester City Council until 1974 when they were transferred to the newly created District Council. All plans created under these arrangements have defined the Chichester-Midhurst railway line/ Centurion Way as the western limit for development. This followed the advice of planning consultant Thomas Sharp who was commissioned by Chichester City Council to write a plan for the city which was published as 'Georgian City' in 1949.

Sharp noted that the City's population had increased by one-third between 1921 and 1947 but that physically the city had grown by almost twice its size. 'So far as the preservation of the city's character goes, it is physical size more than the number of people that matters. Another growth by a third as much population would do irreparable damage to the settling of the city if it were by way of straggling out into the surrounding country as recent growth has been, instead of by way of consolidating open areas that have been over-leapt. A small ancient centre surrounded by a sea of suburbs is but a pale and pitiful travesty of an English cathedral city.' Sharp proposed that there should be no development west of the Chichester-Midhurst railway line.

WSCC's statutory Chichester Town Map (as local plans were then termed) of the early 1960's zoned land east of the railway line (on either side of the B2178 St Paul's Road) for Residential Development. On the west side of St Paul's Road this was developed as Council housing north of Newlands Lane and on the east as the East Broyle estate, leaving generous tracts zoned as Public Open Space on both sides of St Paul's Road to protect the iconic view of the cathedral from the railway bridge and to provide a green gateway from the city to the countryside beyond the bridge. The agricultural land to the west of the railway was left unzoned, known as 'White Land' in the planners' parlance of the day, meaning 'existing uses to remain undisturbed.'

The Chichester District Local Plan of 1999 again set the railway line (by now Centurion Way) as the western limit to development (the boundary of the city's Settlement Policy Area) and identified the open land south of Newlands Lane as a Strategic Gap to prevent the coalescence of Chichester and Fishbourne as a clear visual break between the city and the village.

## **2. Boundary of the South Downs National Park.**

Following the Government's decision in 1999 to create a South Downs National Park, the Countryside Agency appointed landscape consultants to identify an appropriate boundary for the National Park. Their 'Area of Search' included the two Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (Sussex Downs and East Hampshire Downs) together with additional areas of high landscape quality. One such area was the wooded coastal plain between Chichester and West Ashling including Whitehouse Farm.

The South Downs Campaign (SDC) supported the inclusion of this area which became known as 'Area 17 - West of Chichester' and proposed that the Chichester-Lavant Strategic Gap and the Lower Lavant Valley be included within the National Park as well. A sub-group of the SDC comprising Lavant and Funtington parish councils, Chichester City Council, Summersdale Residents Association, Brandy Hole Copse Group and the Chichester Society, gave evidence at the first public inquiry held from 2003-5 presenting the case for the National Park boundary to be drawn up to the city's Settlement Policy Area boundary.

The Inquiry Inspector rejected this case on the grounds that although the area provided opportunities for quiet recreation (one of the purposes of a National Park) the landscape was neither visually connected to the chalk downland nor was it of nationally outstanding landscape quality to merit inclusion within the National Park. However, he accepted that the villages of downland character (Funtington, the Ashlings, West Stoke and Lavant) fully met the criteria, so these were included in the National Park.

The Inspector also rejected the non-chalk areas of the Western Weald (around Petersfield, Midhurst and Petworth) as it was not chalk downland, and this resulted in such a furore that the Inquiry was re-opened in 2008. The Countryside Agency redefined its criteria such that there was no requirement for a National Park to be of a single landscape character after all.

At the reopened Inquiry the Chichester Sub-group then presented a case for inclusion just of the area west of Chichester to West Ashling (including the whole of Whitehouse Farm but excluding the worked-out gravel pits around Huntersrace which the Inspector had said were not of landscape quality.)

In his report on the reopened Inquiry, the Inspector observed that whilst he had a higher regard for the intrinsic value of this area for its scenic quality than had the Countryside Agency, on balance he was not persuaded that he should reopen the issue at this late stage in the designation process for the National Park.

### 3. **Landscape and Visual Amenity Study 2005**

This study by Land Use Consultants for Chichester District Council was one of numerous studies for the emerging Chichester LDF (Local Development Framework as Local Plans were then termed.) The consultants' conclusions on the landscape sensitivity of those 'parcels of land' within the two greenfield Strategic Development Locations are summarised below:

#### 1) **West of Chichester SDL (Whitehouse Farm)- Local Plan Policy 16**

The area now identified in the draft Local Plan as the 'West of Chichester Major Strategic Development Location' comprises three 'parcels' of varying landscape character which were identified by the consultants as:

- Parcel 5, East Broyle arable farmland (two fields south of Brandy Hole Copse Local Nature Reserve)
- Parcel 6, Whitehouse Farm arable farmland north of Newlands Lane
- Parcel 20, Whitehouse Farm arable farmland south of Newlands Lane.

Landscape character sensibility: the study concluded that the landscape character for all three parcels was of Moderate Landscape Character Sensitivity, i.e. landscape parcels that represent a moderate constraint to built-development in terms of landscape character.

Sensitivity in relation to priority views: parcel 5 was considered to have a Low Sensitivity to Priority Views, i.e. to the views of the Cathedral from the two fields south of Brandy Hole Copse, and Parcel 6 a Moderate Sensitivity to the view of the Cathedral. Parcel 20 was felt to have Moderate/ High Sensitivity to the views not only of the Cathedral but also to the views from Centurion Way across the open countryside (the most important viewpoint being from just north of the bridge over Newlands Lane. The consultants comment that parcels with moderate or high sensitivity represent a severe constraint to built-development in terms of priority views.

Sensitivity in relation to the amenity for local viewers: under this heading, Parcel 6 was considered to have a Low Sensitivity for local viewers (presumably because few people traverse Whitehouse Farm north of Newlands Lane) whereas Parcels 5 and 20 were felt to have Low/Moderate Sensitivity (Moderate presumably as there is public or permissive access within and around these parcels.)

#### 2) **Westhampnett SDL (NE Chichester/Old Place Farm.) - Local Plan Policy 18**

The area identified in the draft Local Plan as Westhampnett Strategic Development Location comprises three landscape character parcels: Parcel 1 'Lavant valley arable floor' (the valley from Fordwater to Barnfield), Parcel 17 'Westhampnett West arable farmland' SE of Madgwick Lane) and Parcel 19 'Westhampnett North arable farmland (NW of Madgwick Lane.) The two housing sites proposed in the Council's Concept Statement lie within Parcel 1 (east of Winterbourne Road Summersdale) and Parcel 17 (the location of the current outline planning application for housing development between Madgwick Lane and Stane Street).

Landscape Character Sensibility: The study concluded that the landscape character of Parcel 1 (the valley itself east of Summersdale and Graylingwell) was of Moderate/High Landscape Sensitivity and that of Parcels 17 and 19 (SE and NW of Madgwick Lane) of Low/Moderate Sensitivity.

Sensitivity in relation to Priority Views: Parcels 1 (valley) and 19 (NW of Madgwick Lane) were considered to have Moderate/High

Sensitivity for Priority Views. These are the views from The Trundle and Seven Points car park and the views of the Cathedral spire and Graylingwell Tower from Madgwick Lane. Parcel 17 (SE of Madgwick Lane) had moderate Sensitivity.

Sensitivity in relation to the amenity for local viewers: Parcels 1 (valley) and 17 (SE of Madgwick Lane) were considered to have Low/ Moderate Sensitivity for Local Viewers, but Parcel 19 (NW of Madgwick lane) a slightly higher (Moderate) Sensitivity (presumably as this locations clearly visible to users of Madgwick Lane.)

#### 4. Chichester and its rural setting - Comments by observers over the years

Many of those who have written about Chichester have recognised the overriding importance of the scale of the city and its setting. Its long history and continuity have also been emphasised. **Arthur Oswald**, writing in 1947, suggested, *'No English city, with the possible exception of London, has such a long, unbroken history: certainly no English city has preserved both its original lay-out and its living entity over so many centuries'*.<sup>1</sup>

**John Betjeman** echoed this: *'Which is the most attractive Cathedral city in England? Considering how little, comparatively, it is mucked about by ugly outskirts and glaring shop fascias and modern industry, I would say Chichester. It is still conveniently small, this old city circled by silvery mediaeval walls and cut into quarters by the two Roman roads which intersect at that Tudor market cross. Its mediaeval buildings, the cathedral and the bell tower, St Mary's hospital and little city churches stand among handsome Georgian houses in warm Sussex brick and local stone. It is still a country town and you can look down narrow streets to trees and grass'*.<sup>2</sup>

Betjeman's emphasis on scale and townscape is echoed by many writers. For example, **Eric Gill**, who recorded, *'...I arrived in Chichester, on a bicycle, and I had never before seen anything like it... It had simply never occurred to me before that day that towns could have a shape and be, like my beloved locomotives, things with character and meaning. ...Chichester, the human city, the city of God, the place where life and work and things were all in one and in harmony. ...Here was something as human as home and as lovely as heaven'*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Oswald *Country Life* 10 January 1947

<sup>2</sup> John Betjeman *Spectator* 3 May 1957

<sup>3</sup> Eric Gill, *Autobiography*, 1897, from Timothy McCann, ed. *Restricted Grandeur: Impressions of Chichester 1586-1948* (Chichester, 1995).

The point about harmony made by Gill has impressed other writers. In **Geoffrey Lee's** view *'Chichester contains one of the finest and most harmoniously scaled group of streets and buildings still in existence within city walls in this country'*.<sup>4</sup>

Chichester, **Arthur Oswald** suggested, *'seems to me to possess nearly all the qualities that an English city should have – qualities that were once by no means rare but have only too often been frittered away in the last hundred years by uncontrolled development, negligence, thoughtlessness or mere stupidity. A cathedral city, a thriving market town, serving a wide district around it, the capital and administrative centre of West Sussex, Chichester has yet succeeded in keeping to a modest and manageable size, the ideal size, as we're beginning to see today. ... Chichester is full of contrasts, which add piquancy to its flavour; but perhaps its chief attraction is to be found in the feeling of harmony and the refreshing absence of jarring elements. .... What makes Chichester so harmonious and draws all its varied elements together is its plan, compact and coherent, but not congested.'*<sup>5</sup>

Speaking in 1974, broadcaster and local historian **Bernard Price** argued that : *'Chichester must remain a complete environment in its landscape, not some nondescript fungus with odd spots of preserved historical buildings. What we surely have to do, and do now, is to ensure that no more of the unique character, form, scale and position of this magnificent English city, is lost.'*<sup>6</sup>

One of the great admirers of Chichester, and a major influence on its post-war development, was **Dr Thomas Sharp**, and it is worth quoting him at length<sup>7</sup>. *'Our cathedral cities are still, and indeed more than ever, the most civilised of the places where we live. But of all cathedral cities, it is the smaller ones that have the characteristic quality in the greatest measure.*

*Lichfield and Wells remain with Chichester as the places that most maintain today the character that the description "cathedral-city" evokes'. (Pp.13-14)*

Of the years between about 1650 and 1850, Sharp writes *'English towns of that period were as handsome in that particular way as any towns that have ever been built. The English genius of those 200 years lay far more characteristically in the production of beauty in less formal effects, in the production of harmony in variety. And this quality, above all, is what the older parts of Chichester display - and display far more than probably any other place.... Chichester is the least spoiled example now remaining in England of a naturally grown as distinct from a deliberately planned renaissance town'. (Pp.16-17).*

*'In the extent of all this variety in harmony, pervading all its parts, disturbed so little by discordances, Chichester has no rival in England. ...The city has, for its size, an altogether unusual number of distinguished buildings. Here again, outside the special places like Oxford, Cambridge and Bath (which in any case are much bigger), the city has few rivals, and certainly none among the smaller towns. Chichester has happily maintained its special character ... in that subtle but extremely important quality called scale.'* (p.18)

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<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Lee, *Country Life*, 1 April 1976.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur Oswald, *Chichester City Guide*, 1953.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Price, speech in Chichester Cathedral, 17 June 1974

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Sharp, *Georgian City*, (Commissioned and adopted by Chichester City Council, 1949).

*'With all these qualities and characteristics Chichester is a very special city indeed. Most cities have, of course, their special characteristics, have their own particular genius of place. But Chichester's specialness is much more than that. This city probably holds more of the purity and true essence of its type than any now remaining in England. It is an important and irreplaceable part of the national heritage'. (p.20).*

*'Chichester has everything to gain and nothing to lose by safeguarding and enhancing its distinctive character. Chichester is a very special city; a city that is very specially favoured. All who are concerned in its future should realise the beauty that they have in their keeping...'* (p.51).

While the compactness, scale, and its variety in harmony all contribute, as Sharp says, to make Chichester a very special city, so too its setting magnifies its national importance. In the view of **Ian Nairn**, *'The story of the cathedral can start almost anywhere in South-West Sussex. Chichester from the Selsey peninsula is like Chartres from the Beauce: no other English Cathedral, not even Lincoln, exerts such a continuous presence on the flat surrounding countryside, and it is the continuity which is the important thing; the spire becomes as invariable and natural as the sky and sun. What Chichester has in addition, on any kind of clear day – and there are a lot of clear days in Sussex – is the gentle rising backcloth of the South Downs two or three miles away, so that God, man and nature always seem to be in equilibrium. And from anywhere on those slopes, behind Goodwood or on Bow Hill, the effect is unforgettable: plain like a sea, tipped with a glitter or shimmer which really is the sea, punctuated only by one slim spire. Nothing of the same height must ever be built near Chichester: spire and countryside form an equation or symbol experienced by millions of people every year, which cannot be given a value purely in terms of landscape or architecture'.<sup>8</sup>*

More recently, **Richard Williamson**, the distinguished naturalist, has written about the setting of the city.<sup>9</sup> Again, it is worth quoting him at length.

*'There are proposals to expand Chichester into suburbia on its western flank at Whitehouse Farm. Who am I to object? All I know is my 40 years of feeling, on escape from traffic, into that lung beyond the railway bridge. Countryside! So close to our cathedral spire, our Roman walls, our Georgian houses, our compact and friendly city, our history, our home!*

*Cross that bridge on Centurion Way and you are in the woods and fields, the coppice chestnuts of Fairyhill, the type of quintessential England that inspired Elgar and produced his Cello Concerto for the world at Brinkwell near Fittleworth.*

*The city is lovely, its surrounds are lovely. One sets the other like figures in a Gainsborough landscape. One of my treasured memories of more than 40 years ago is walking the road past Whitehouse Farm with Bernard Price - 'Mr Chichester' as he became known with his chronicles of times past and time present, his broadcasts and his books, his search for the perfections of this world.*

*He grieved for the spoiling of our historic buildings at the city cross, the obliteration of the meadows under what is now the industrial site on the south-west side. This for him had been as timeless as the haunts of Richard Jefferies.*

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<sup>8</sup> Ian Nairn and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Sussex* (Harmondsworth, 1965) p.128

<sup>9</sup> Richard Williamson, *Chichester Observer* 2 May 2013

*We crossed the bridge and came into the fields. There was a small pond on the right just before East Broyle Copse. We slipped through the hedge and walked towards it. A snipe rose and zig-zagged away up into the sky.*

*'Magic', said Bernard, 'And so close to the city! Where else can you get both so close together?' Later in the year we explored the copse again. Bluebells were out, nightingales were 'in full-throated ease'. 'A draught of the warm south' stole in from the harbour below. Keats had walked this way a century-and-a-half before, as we reminded each other, his presence felt.*

*Forty years on, another jewel dropped casually on to this quiet place. A butterfly so rare as to be almost unknown on our 'sceptred isle'. The Queen of Spain Fritillary arrived. She saw the fields and hedges, the sheltering trees and glades and left her own indelible memory for us to think about. This butterfly almost unknown to Britain had selected Chichester's close countryside to start a family. It was again a little hint of magic.*

*Do Cicestrians care about this green space? Just walk to the top of Kingley Vale and look south to the sea and the cathedral spire rising from its green surrounds, like Excalibur rising from the green waters of a lake.*

*It was described as 'the finest view in Britain' by Sir Arthur Tansley of the Royal Society. In 1947 he began the business of conservation for the nation and on into the world after seeing the view of Chichester set out below in its emerald land.*

*Cathedral cities are exceptional places everywhere, especially when set in the countryside. They are revered worldwide. Flowers, fields, and the rural ways set them apart. They must not be allowed to be choked to death.*

*This is too precious a place to sully'.*

### **Concluding remarks**

The two greenfield Strategic Development Locations adjacent to the City (Policy 16: West of Chichester SDL and Policy 18: Westhampnett SDL) are key to the Council's Preferred Approach to housing allocations. These are clearly developer-led and appear to be only supported by the volume house builders, the landowners and the District Council. No alternative scenarios to meet the housing figures determined for Chichester District have been presented for consultation - there is no 'Plan B.' The volume of objections to these two Local Plan policies indicates widespread alarm at their impact on Chichester's heritage and landscape character which has up to now been firmly protected by planning policies. Community participation in the Council's Concept Statement workshops and in the developers' master plan exercises does not indicate community acceptance of these Strategic Development Locations. However well designed the developments may be, they cannot fail to have a detrimental impact on the City's heritage and landscape character.

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1 August 2014.