

DAVID GOODMAN'S ADDRESS OF 1 OCTOBER 1973

An occasion which inspired the Chichester Society's creation

Chichester is one of the most beautiful and best preserved of England's historic cities. With this concept most of us here lived fairly happily for some years after the war. We saw changes of course. We saw destruction in the name of progress and much featureless building in and around the city. But it was a time when new houses were desperately needed, expanding commerce was making irresistible demands on property, modern transport was exposing the inadequacies of our road systems.

So we did not protest too bitterly when the little red boxes appeared on the outskirts; when a few old shops made way for the supermarkets, when a charming old facade was given a sharp face-lift, plate glass, plastic and all. Neither were we panic-stricken by the road improvements or those proposed. After all, this was the era of the Festival of Britain; one of greater confidence than today in the shaping of our environment. Words like 'population, transport, fuel, pollution, land, property' were not evocative of imminent disaster. They were not yet coupled automatically with 'explosion, crisis, menace, speculation'. They were often linked with problems of course, but on the whole we accepted the need for some change and had reasonable faith in the democratic safeguards we have evolved in this country since the pre-war building debacle.

Besides, our own City Council had the courage and foresight to commission the leading authority of the day, Dr Thomas Sharp, to study the city in depth and give detailed advice for its future development (mark this word 'development'; I shall return to it later). At the time there had already been some serious erosion and some pretty ghastly new building, but much remained intact, and Dr Sharp's report certainly supported the concept with which I began.

Alas, the situation today is vastly different. The winds of change have blown ill indeed and Chichester is reeling. Many parts of its corporate body have received ugly wounds from the buffeting, and although it is not for me to go into details nor apportion specific blame, I am prompted to refer to Mr Bernard Price's own crushing metaphor when he spoke of 'a cancerous growth from which most bodies would have long since died'. (I apologise if the quote is only approximate). He was speaking, I believe, about one particular area of the City, but his metaphor would serve admirably for a great many others. It says much for the vitality of the old design that even now enough remains for us here to want to fight for its survival.

How has this sorry state of affairs come about? Clearly the causes are manifold and by and large are not peculiar to Chichester alone. There are others here more competent than I to discuss them (I hope they will, for there can be no proper treatment without full knowledge of the disease). But I would like to comment on one certain major cause which is especially relevant to Chichester and to other historic towns and cities.

Even Dr Sharp was sympathetic to the idea of 'development'. Indeed his report centres around the tactful blending of old and new. He saw Chichester as a living organism, capable of limited growth, adjusting steadily (if warily) to modern needs for its future health. He saw (and we shared this view) a continuing process of adaptation, from ancient past to foreseeable future; not a museum, petrified in its earlier glory. He proposed new squares and avenues, new ring roads just outside the City walls, linked by spurs to outer arteries. He saw well-sited housing estates to accommodate growth, replacements of decaying buildings by new ones in a tempered modern idiom. In two

words, 'intelligent development'. He could hardly have thought otherwise then. It was certainly no part of his brief to say "No! Stop! Leave well alone. Re-build only by restoring the old, stone by stone (or rather brick by brick). Ignore the motor car, the bus, the lorry; Forget expansion, forget modern commerce and industry. If change is inevitable, start somewhere else, far enough to leave Chichester inviolate." Though a highly sensitive and able town planning consultant he was not a clairvoyant. He could not foresee the gross inadequacies inherent in our political and social machinery; nor the insidious pressures which were to bring chaos to the best laid schemes. Then, the times were not completely 'out of joint'. It was possible to believe that with goodwill, proper control and imaginative building we could, as in the past, do very well for ourselves and for our descendants. The very fact that he was commissioned to do this job spoke well of the intentions of those in authority.

But I believe now that there is in any case a real fallacy in the argument. There comes a point in the life of any town when it can no longer adequately, serve contemporary needs. It must then change radically, or be destroyed, or decay by neglect, or be preserved and, if you like, set aside for our enjoyment.

There are plenty of examples. Chichester was thus largely re-created in the 18th century when the English showed a special genius for town planning and inspired domestic architecture. And for nearly 200 years, while Chichester's function as a small market and Cathedral city remained fairly constant, it served us very well indeed. Today the links with traditional function are fragile and are breaking up rapidly. It is not much use nibbling at the problem - letting a few more cars pass through each year, widening a few roads, modernising a few streets. Chichester is not what it was. From a quiet centre for a rural community, dominated by the Cathedral Close and the merchant families, it has become a powerful seat of local government, a seething seasonal tourist attraction, the nucleus of an outdoor playground (notably its creeks and harbours), a complex of offices, commercial and professional, a home for light industry, a centre for education, a refuge on rainy days for coastal holidaymakers, a shopping centre for a swollen catchment area containing hundreds of week-end cottage owners among others. It is strained to breaking point, and the traffic grows daily worse. It is indeed a living place, but strangulation is just around the corner.

As I have said, it is no use nibbling at the problem. It is all very well for the latest distinguished authority, Sir Colin Buchanan, to speak of (I quote) "cherishing all the features, from buildings to atmosphere, which give a historic town its value, whilst ensuring at the same time that the town does not become a museum piece." This is nice, tidy rhetoric. But what of the realities? How many fine buildings have already gone, and are still going? How many beautiful gardens (a cherished feature of Chichester for centuries) have disappeared or are now being eroded? What value is most of the historic centre apart from the Cathedral and the Cross? Do we cherish the new Post Office extensions, the Southgate desert, the Northgate underpass and dual carriageway, the new Somerstown? And for atmosphere try Chichester on any summer Saturday morning. I prefer-the peace and quiet of a museum.

This brings me to the fallacy which has conditioned so much informed opinion. It is this. That by civilised planning, rationalisation and logistics, you can keep an historic city agreeably abreast with the times. On two counts this is a false concept. First, there seems little hope that high standards are either likely or possible in the present conditions. This is not to say that they are not available, or that the time may not come again when taste and judgment parallel the 18th century. But the evidence is overwhelming all over Britain and, indeed the world, that imagination and talent are

suppressed by expediency and economy acting in a cultural quagmire. Good patronage begets good work. We all get what we deserve in the long run.

But the central problem is that no old town can cater fully and efficiently for new modes of living without serious, and finally mortal, mutation. If you move into an old house of charm and character, you sensibly install modern comforts - central heating no doubt, mains drainage, electricity, a damp course, bathroom, modern kitchen equipment. But if you put in huge picture windows, split-level living quarters, garage extensions, a swimming pool on the front lawn, and generally leave only a few details standing (a few facing bricks perhaps) you are a vandal, your motives for buying the old place are deeply suspect, and you would have done far better by yourself and your neighbours to start from scratch elsewhere with concrete and glass. So it is with Chichester. Do what is essential for basic comfort, jealously preserving the fabric, leaving the character (and this means the details too) intact, and start elsewhere with your jet-age amenities. Don't attempt hopeless compromises.

Thus, if my argument is correct, we are left with a simple proposition. What is done is done, though some restoration might still be possible - at a price! But for the immediate future let us slam the brakes on - hard! Let us attempt to stop all further change until it is demonstrably clear that it is for the better. Let us, for pity's sake, cease to re-mould Chichester under the shadow of the motor car and the supermarket. If this helps to create a museum, so be it. In any case, would this today mean a lingering death? Of course not. I have recently visited my favourite Italian city, Siena. Heaven knows, the Italians have no better reputation than us for their development schemes, their average new domestic architecture, their urban sprawls. But old cities are often hardly touched. Yet they do not die. Siena today is a lovely, lively city though scarcely a stone within its old boundaries has been destroyed.

As for the motor vehicle, it now seems likely that within the next decade or two it will cease to exist through undernourishment. Then we shall have to think of some alternative means of travel - or walk. And Chichester will have a nice ring road for promenaders, or perhaps cyclists or even horsemen!

So what is to be done? I fully recognise that Chichester's record compares favourably with those of the majority of English towns and cities. Her councillors have not permitted wholesale destruction on a scale comparable with, say, Bath. A devoted minority has worked hard in and outside the Council offices, often against seemingly hopeless odds. There have been notable successes too. A high proportion here tonight are already actively concerned in one or other of the societies which exist to protect our threatened environment, and I am sure that their representatives will talk about their work later. But is there enough concerted action? Do the individual groups work always in the most effective directions? Are they perhaps too concerned with sectional interests? Are they prepared for bitter opposition? I do not know. I am here to find out, for as a comparative latecomer to the scene of civic protest I know a good deal less of these matters than many of you here.

I am considerably more sure of myself when I say that the time has come for some pretty drastic action, if living in Chichester is to have any special quality at all: And of course it goes beyond this. We who live here carry a responsibility to the rest of the country, and equally we must take fully into account the major problems of our society if we are going to be effective locally. To paraphrase Nurse Cavell, 'Parochialism is not enough'.

I would like to see, and to work for, a pressure group capable of powerful action at any level, and with a positive programme of conservation to which all individual problems can be quickly related. I would like all other amenity groups to be in constant working partnership with the parent body, so that it can intervene effectively (and even dramatically) when the smaller group is embattled and needs help. Conversely, the invaluable information gained by the field workers would be always available to the parent body. Ideally, of course, this pressure group should be at least partly composed of representatives from the various local societies. Co-ordination is the key.

It is equally important that far more popular support should be encouraged. Now, I believe, is a psychologically good moment for several reasons, not least the present wholesale excavations. I do not believe that exclusivity, whether intentional or not, can in the long run achieve very much. The Theatre would not have been built from the support of the few only. The leadership may have been small in number but the ten bobs were prolific. Therefore publicity 'must be sought and a popular image projected'.

Once established (or powerfully reinforced should it in fact already exist) the group must work closely at a national level with any similar groups up and down the country. I know that some such machinery exists, but is it strong enough or is it perhaps waiting for a city like Chichester to lead the way? It would not be the first time would it?

The new Ministry has declared its support in principle for pressure groups, and there is, of course, the independent Civic Trust. I would like to see both these sources fully exploited, especially financially, but essentially the group must surely have complete autonomy and freedom of action. It cannot be circumscribed by the procedures of others. It will at times find itself severely opposed to official and semi-official bodies. This, I would say, is inevitable but not mutually destructive.

I would like to see the Group harness every available talent, particularly in the fields of civil and common law, architecture, design, archaeology, letters, journalism and education. Without expertise at the highest level, protest may be still-born. Having thrashed out a constitution and a programme, it must fully publicise these as well as itself, so that the public image is that of a popular movement rather than of a Masonic Lodge. The local newspapers must be made close allies from the start.

I would like to see the Group find ways of attracting substantial funds. You cannot get far with thirty bob in the kitty. Then it should use part of these funds for a programme of education both directed to the citizens of Chichester and to their children. It is likely that the Director of Education would be sympathetic towards any help he can get, especially on the wider aspects of environmental problems.

I would like it to become perfectly clear to the average citizen of Chichester who has a serious environmental complaint, or indeed a constructive idea, to whom he or she should turn first for advice or help. At present no such clarity exists. This is not to say that the traditional channels no longer serve any purpose. Of course not. The M.P. can still raise a question in the House, the Councillor can take up a cause. So can a solicitor, or an editor, etcetera. But a first approach to the Group could do so much to guide or elucidate, even if the Group were not always prepared to act.

Now I am fully aware that Chichester's own Civic Society is the natural choice for such a group. It is there (indeed, I see it is here!). It carries the city's name; it has prestige; it has a long background of work towards some of the objectives I have outlined. Furthermore, I did not come this evening

with the aim of founding, or helping to found a new organisation. I came to put forward a point of view and to listen to others because, like many of you, I am desperately worried about Chichester's future, if indeed it has one! However, the fact that Chichester is about to lose its status, under the new Act, makes it all the more urgent that the citizens should find a collective voice, powerful enough to protect its interests; and I therefore ask the Civic Society if it truly feels able to broaden its scope, toughen its sinews and generally prepare for battle in a manner which may be alien to its constitution or background. This, assuming that it agrees with the bones of my argument.

Can it achieve a truly popular appeal?

Can it tackle the major controversial issues as well as purely localised ones?

Can it become professional in its approach to publicity, legal problems, education, field action and the like? Has it indeed the time to do so, or is it by its nature limited to monthly meetings?

Can it in fact spearhead a movement rather than a club?

Would it prefer to continue in its present form, while giving maximum support to some central organisation in which it is represented?

I trust that the answers to these and other questions will now be heard.
