

Origins of the Bishop's Waltham Society

On the Society's 30th Anniversary, Trevor Harvey, who was co-founder and the first Chairman of the Bishop's Waltham Society, wrote about the formation of the Society.

"The years leading up to the formation of the Bishop's Waltham Society in 1986 had not been good for those interested in preserving and enhancing our local environment.

Church House had been demolished. A capacious property bordering Bank Street, its Georgian facade concealed a much earlier interior. It had been the former headquarters of Gunner and Company, the last provincial private bank in the United Kingdom to print its own bank notes. As well as being in the Bishop's Waltham Conservation Area, it was listed in Hampshire County Council's *Hampshire Treasures* as a building whose "destruction would represent a serious loss to our heritage". Yet none of the above appeared to amount to much. With scarcely a voice raised in its defence, Church House was demolished to make way for the Roman Row development that now occupies its site.

It seemed that the word had gone around that Bishop's Waltham was up for grabs. Next to be proposed for the chop was Southbrook House at the corner of Brook Street and the Lower Lane car park. Although somewhat disguised, Southbrook was a large, mainly original timber-framed house of c.1600 AD. Despite being another Hampshire Treasure, and in the Conservation Area, it seemed likely to suffer a similar fate to Church House. In this case its demolition was to make way for a Co-op Supermarket. However, residents now were rather better prepared and, at the end of 1984, I succeeded in getting Southbrook House emergency grade 2 listed by the Department of the Environment. This new designation did not, per se, save the house, but certainly had the effect of slowing things down. Ultimately, of course the building was sensitively converted to offices.

Next, the historic and environmentally important North Pond was under threat. Two applications for a lorry park had been refused. With a Winchester City Council protective policy statement imminent, in June 1985 the owners (James Duke & Co.) took matters into their own hands and felled scores of trees including mature standards. This high-handed action caused outrage among many residents, and the late Chris Smith told the Southern Evening Echo "This is an act of sheer vandalism". Following local pressure, led by Chris Smith, Winchester City Council issued an emergency Tree Preservation Order to protect the remaining trees.



The cutting from the Southern Evening Echo on 21st June 1985

Shortly afterwards, I received an invitation to attend a meeting of the Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust to raise awareness of the plight of Southbrook House. To my amazement, I discovered that I was not alone. Speaker after speaker raised concerns about their own locality. But they were not acting (as I was) in an individual capacity. They carried much more clout, being officers of the Portsmouth Society, or the Gosport Society, or the Fareham Society...

Upon making enquiries, I discovered that these conservation groups were all local amenity societies. They were registered charities and affiliated to the Civic Trust, which existed in part to coordinate the work of such societies nationwide. (The Trust ceased to exist in 2009, and Civic Voice has subsequently been established to fulfil a similar role.)

On returning from the meeting, I mentioned this to a number of those who had been involved in the various campaigns, including Judith Fairhurst. I advocated the formation of a Bishop's Waltham Society. I then contacted the Civic Trust, the Charity Commissioners, and local Societies for advice on how to proceed.

At the end of the summer of 1985, during a chance meeting with Judith Fairhurst, she asked me if I had given any further thought to the founding of an amenity society for Bishops Waltham. Arising from this conversation, a preliminary meeting was convened to seek support for the formation of the Bishop's Waltham Society. A small group of those who had shown concern over the recent environmental and planning matters formed the core of the meeting, and one or two other invitations were issued. This meeting took place on Thursday 17 October 1985. Those present, apart from me, were Judith Fairhurst, the late John Bosworth, the late Chris Smith, Eric Cole, Greg Gregory, John and Pam Hayter, Alan Inder, and the late Averil Leesmith.

At the meeting, I gave a brief account of the reasons for convening the meeting. Dean Clark, of the Portsmouth Society, gave a presentation and led a discussion on the role of a local amenity society, based on his own experience. The meeting resolved that the proposed Bishop's Waltham Society could fulfil a useful role in the community, and that sufficient support would be forthcoming to justify its launch at an augural meeting, which took place on Thursday 16 January 1986. At this meeting the Society formally came into existence.

And the rest is the next 30 years ..."