

Extract from the minutes of the Policy Panel meeting of 23 September 2020

66. Heritage Interpretation – Summary of Previous Work and Suggestions for the Future

Owen Howell, Democratic Services Officer, read a statement contributed by Alderman Henry Spyvee. Mr Spyvee endorsed the report by Philip Wise, Heritage Manager, and encouraged members to seek ways in which Colchester's Heritage could be better marketed and information provided, citing the example of work done by the Friends of Colchester Roman Wall to provide interpretation boards.

Philip Wise, Heritage Manager, presented the report and explained that the variety of heritage assets in the Borough required a strategic approach to be used. Colchester Castle had been central to the strategy since 2011, augmented by 28 different interpretation/information boards at different sites, installed by the Council and third parties. The work and research of third parties was described, including the Friends of Colchester Roman Wall and the Balkearne Tower Trust. Both had installed boards at their respective sites of interest.

The project to restore the Colchester Town subway murals was described.

The importance of digital methods of providing information was emphasised. Central to this was the 'Ancient Colchester' app, which was available for a range of operating systems and devices and was especially useful for widening the reach of the heritage team and reaching a more technologically literate audience. A noticeable increase in downloading and use of the app had been noted during the period of Covid-19 restrictions. Heritage Open Days in 2020 had been largely digital and 14 short films had been produced on a selection of the Borough's buildings.

Project work was described, including the 'Marking the Gates' trail, and that currently being undertaken at the Butt Road Roman Church and St Botolph's Churchyard. The St Botolph's project has benefitted from work by the Civic Society, which has been successful in obtaining grants from external organisations.

Owing to the lack of above-ground sights, the Roman Circus in particular was in need of information boards and information online. Some work had now been done to reconstruct the starting gates by the Colchester Archaeological Trust.

The Hilly Fields area in west Colchester was described, with its ability to be accessed on foot via the Colchester Orbital West route. The interpretation panels here urgently need replacing. The Iron-Age heritage of Lexden Park and the Lexden Tumulus was highlighted. There were, as yet, no interpretation boards at this site.

In central Colchester, a board was in place for Holy Trinity Church, although this did not mention the presence of the grave of Captain Thomas Pinto, a veteran of the Battle of Trafalgar. St. Giles Church boasted a rich medieval and Civil War history but was less well known and would be of interest to residents living in the new housing on the former Colchester Garrison site. Lastly St Michael and All Angels, Mile End is also little known, but has the potential to make a major contribution to the heritage of the local area as a reminder of its medieval past.

Walking routes connecting heritage sites were described, including the Colchester Orbital and the Town to Port trail. The Council was working to find funding to refurbish the existing interpretation boards on the Town to Port trail. This and the other proposals for augmenting heritage signage would have resource implications and would require specialist expertise. Partnership working would be important, and the Council could also encourage third parties to provide information assets. Information would need to be produced in a range of ways and would need to include a digital offering.

The Panel noted the resource implications involved and Councillor Julie Young, Portfolio Holder for Culture and Performance and Deputy Leader of the Council, agreed that opportunities must be taken to promote the Borough's heritage and acknowledged that many visitors used their smartphones to navigate and identify sites of interest. It was important to note the limits on resources, but also to recognise the importance of providing a range of information options.

A range of options were already being discussed for the St Botolph's roundabout and the Deputy Leader praised the work of the Civic Society in helping to refurbish the underpass murals which pictured historic imagery. The Deputy Leader also praised Alderman Spyvee and the Friends of Colchester Roman Wall and went on to explain that funding sources were being sought for improvements to the Town to Port trail.

A Panel member noted that the report and presentation had been very-much focussed on the Town of Colchester, rather than the whole Borough, and queried whether historic figures such as Captain Thomas Pinto could be celebrated by having streets named after them. The member then listed a number of historic sites throughout the Borough, including the Bronze Age redhills at the Mersea Island Strood, signage in West Mersea by a local artist, the site of a Roman pharos [lighthouse] on Mersea Island, and Holy Trinity Church in Colchester, which would require money to restore but which could then serve a current use, such as to display heritage items and host exhibitions.

A further site was discussed, discovered in the 1930s under Hollytrees Meadow and first suspected to be a Temple of Mithras. The Heritage Manager explained that research had shown this to be a Roman water tank.

Another member supported the use of signs and boards to attract the attention of passers-by and requested that signage be used to provide information along Berechurch Dyke, explaining its Iron Age heritage and status as a scheduled monument. As this was on the Ministry of Defence estate, it was suggested that the Council works with the Ministry to supply information boards. This led to a discussion about the possibility of providing signage for the other dykes around Colchester, namely Gryme's Dyke and Lexden Dyke.

Caution was given by the Panel that there was a danger that only the Roman and Norman-era history would be advertised and that a disconnect might be seen, with heritage from other eras not being sufficiently promoted. A member also cautioned that the Ancient Colchester app did not seem to have been updated since 2017 and could do with additions to make it more comprehensive. The interpretation boards were seen as being good by the Panel member, but even with the app this did not give a comprehensive view of Colchester's history. It was recommended that the app might be used as a centralised place to provide a broader view of Colchester's heritage and cover other sites, such as Winsley House.

The Chairman agreed that a good digital presence was a necessity but noted that the app was produced and controlled by Peel Interactive and a cost would be involved with all updates and additions.

Councillor David King, Portfolio Holder for Business and Resources, spoke of his pride in the Borough and agreed that advertising its heritage assets was the right thing to do. This would help to increase visitor numbers and spending as well as spreading positive publicity. Past spending on signage and improving visitor experiences. There was some fragmentation of the promotion efforts carried out by different organisations, and the Portfolio Holder emphasised the need to find a way to coordinate marketing and information-providing activities. Tymperleys was given as an example of a heritage asset not currently on the tourist map, and the Portfolio Holder argued that there were many assets which were currently in the stewardship of the Council and would benefit from ways to display them, such as (potentially) being displayed in empty shop fronts. Although the Town Deal bid was not confirmed yet as being successful, one project within it is to improve connectivity, including better digital connectivity, information boards, signage and physical access routes. Cabinet had agreed that these should be investigated.

Lucie Breadman, Assistant Director (Communities), gave an update on the situation regarding Holy Trinity Church. A plan was in place and proceeding, in partnership with Community 360 and the Heritage Archaeology Fund. £10k had been authorised by Cabinet for an initial feasibility study, proceeding then to a bid for funding from the Town Fund. The Assistant Director also confirmed that the updating of the app would be costly, and that the app had been made as part of the Castle redevelopment project, hence explaining its focus.

The Panel suggested asking all councillors as to which heritage assets would benefit from information boards and requested whether there were currently any unallocated section 106 funds which could be available.

A Panel member also suggested that more information could be given on 'dark' history of Colchester [history covering crime, gruesome events and war etc]. This could include details of the Siege of Colchester during the Civil War. The Assistant Director (Communities) informed members that there was a good range of content on the Civil War within the Castle Museum and agreed that it was important to understand and promote the full range of heritage, working with communities and partner organisations.

Other areas of heritage suggested for focus and information provision included the King Edward Quay/historic port area, the Hythe to Rowhedge Walk and the Wivenhoe Trail.

The Deputy Leader voiced the Council's aim to encourage visitors, noted that the Covid-19 lockdown had caused a loss of income at the Castle and argued that income would be needed in order to ensure the ability to retain staff. There was also space to hold additional exhibitions in the Natural History Museum, where entry was free.

RECOMMENDED to CABINET that Cabinet:

- (a) Explores and improves partnership working to increase provision of heritage information boards and an improved Ancient Colchester app. Including the sites mentioned this evening and an improved app name, i.e. Historic Colchester.
- (b) Approves the Policy Panel to look at a wider approach to the way we market the Borough through heritage.
- (c) Seeks suggestions from all councillors as to areas of our heritage that they would like to see highlighted across the Borough.
- (d) Considers additional signage and information provision regarding sites noted this evening, namely: Audley Chapel, Berechurch Dyke, Gryme's Dyke, Lexden Dyke and Holy Trinity Church.