

Alec Hartley had a long career in journalism, working in newspapers and on television, writes KEIRON PIM. Now he puts the same skills to use in safeguarding Norwich's heritage, which he believes is currently under threat.

IT IS "A FINE OLD CITY, TRULY... VIEW IT FROM WHATEVER SIDE YOU WILL", but some views of Norwich are looking distinctly more fine than others at present.

As the city's history comes under the spotlight during the current Heritage Open Days, that famous old phrase by George Borrow is less true than it has been at many times since he wrote *Lavengro* in 1851. At present the Guildhall is wrapped in scaffolding, the Castle mound is suffering from slippage, the Memorial Gardens are a mess, and Elm Hill is being blighted by heavy traffic and vandalism.

One body that repeatedly brings these issues to light is the Norwich Society, and under the chairmanship of Alec Hartley it has continued fighting to maintain the city's appearance. We met earlier this week for a coffee at the Forum, part of his favourite area in the city: "You have two of our finest medieval buildings in the Guildhall and St Peter Mancroft, and there's the market, and two great modern buildings – Norwich's best 20th century building in City Hall and the Forum itself."

It is an area that encapsulates Norwich's unrivalled architectural span, from medieval to modern, and it also acts as a showcase for the city.

"A place like Norwich is going to live or die by whether you can attract investment, new money, new jobs," he says. "So the city centre is on show all the time. It's like it's on a permanent job interview. For a job interview you put on your best suit, don't you?"

Closest to Alec's heart is the Guildhall. He has studied its history and knows it well, inside and out, from its Victorian alterations to the 16th century graffiti in the undercroft, dating from its time as a prison. The scaffolding currently enveloping it is there to support work on the clock tower, which Norwich City Council hopes to resolve soon.

"The state of the Guildhall at the moment gives a general air of depression and it hits right at the heart of one of our main things, which is our tourist industry," said Alec.

"So we realise that the city council are in a difficult position, but it does arise from the fact that funds weren't ring-fenced in the past to look after the historic buildings that the city owns. The Guildhall is the largest and best medieval city building outside London.

"It's larger than any other guildhall in any other major medieval cities. It's standing testament to how important and rich Norwich was at the time."

The city council is currently facing a funding crisis, and Labour leader Steve Morphew agrees that the money has not been put aside in the past. When we put Alec's comments to him, he said: "I think Alec knows and the city well knows we inherited in 2006 a pretty dire financial position and we have been struggling to put together the right sums of money to do these jobs ever since 2006.

"Then the recession came along just as soon as things started to look up. We have never been in a position to put that sort of money aside. I was only talking about the Guildhall very recently and we are hoping to have some sort of solution for that in the near future. But unless money becomes available for these projects we can't make any promises."

Another present worry for Alec and the Norwich Society is an area that has been an intermittent concern since the society's early days. It was founded in 1923 to counter proposals that would have seen Bishop Bridge replaced with a wider one that could accommodate motor traffic and later that decade came another post-war plan designed to overhaul certain crumbling quarters of Norwich.

"Talking generally we as a society were set up to preserve some of the most historic parts of Norwich," Alec explains. "Bishop Bridge and Elm Hill were the two things back in the 1920s. We saved Bishop Bridge and saved Elm Hill twice."

Now the society is worried again about Elm Hill, the ancient cobbled street with its array of 16th century merchants' houses. There are no proposals to demolish it and replace it with a swimming pool, as there were in the 1920s when it had decayed into a slum area, but it remains under threat. This is partly from vandalism - as recently reported the shops and The Strangers Club have suffered smashed windows - but more from the constant rumble of heavy traffic.

"Football kills vandalism, but I think that's a temporary problem," says Alec. "Together with the Friends of Elm Hill, one of the most important things we are doing is to develop the possibilities of Elm Hill being made into a foot-street - that is, to pedestrianise it, although that word provokes strong reactions.

“Norwich pioneered the development of foot-streets with London Street and our proposal would be to stop heavy goods vehicles from going down, from the Briton’s Arms downwards. You would need to retain access to the Monastery car park.

“We hear stories from Blue Badge guides of people having to leap out of the way of lorries on to those very narrow pavements.”

The society is also pressing for more to be done about the state of the Castle mound, which Alec describes as “a disgrace”. The trouble started, he says, when the Castle Mall was built in 1993. Next month reconstruction work is scheduled, but the society is not convinced it will go far enough.

“At the time of the Castle Mall development they shaved a bit off the mound, taking away some of the topsoil, and took away walkways which were supposed to be replaced but never were. No footfall means that rabbits moved in, and it became honeycombed with rabbit warrens. At the same time they stopped maintaining the surface and the only time it’s mowed now is just before the Lord Mayor’s procession, so that the fireworks don’t set it on fire.

“We want to see it planted up again and also we want to see the Victorian Garden between the Shirehall and the bridge restored, along the lines of the city’s Plantation garden. You have an ancient monument in the middle of Norwich decaying in front of everyone and it’s like the elephant in the room – no one has noticed it apart from us.”

The society’s role is not just to act as a watchdog and highlight problems that it believes need rectifying – recent examples of which include halting the plans for a 14-storey building in the proposed Anglia Square reconstruction, and moving a large, unsightly metal duct that had been misplaced on the old Barclays Bank during its redevelopment into the Open youth venue. It also works constructively with other partners around the city to work on new ways of developing parts of the city. A current example is its proposal for a Wensum River Parkway. The river flows through the heart of Norwich, but plays far less of a role in people’s lives than it once did, and the society wants to put that right.

Working with bodies such as the city council and Norfolk County Council, and the Norwich Heritage Economic and Regeneration Trust (Heart), it is working to re-establish the river as somewhere accessible for residents and tourists.

“The river is the city’s hidden jewel, no one pays attention to it. The city council has done a very good job developing the walkways either side. When you think of how Cambridge and York use their rivers, when did you last see a tourist rowing about along our river? We don’t use it in the right way.

“We want green spaces going through the city. We want it to run from New Mills to Whitlingham.

Towards the end of the year we want to hold a stakeholders’ conference for all interested parties.”

Alec was elected as the society’s vice-chairman in April 2008, expecting to serve the traditional two-year spell in that post before ascending to chairman. However the then-chairman, Tim Townshend, was taken ill and Alec swiftly took over in September of last year, “which was something of a shock as I thought I would have two years to work my way in and discover where the bodies were buried!”

Now aged 65, he retired after being made redundant by Anglia Television six years ago, which brought to an end a long career in journalism that took him around the country and eventually brought him back to his home city. Alec’s father, Eric Hartley, worked for city manufacturing firm Boulton and Paul and became the Lord Mayor of Norwich in 1980. Alec attended City of Norwich School and read English at Cambridge University, then went on to work at regional newspapers in the North before getting a job at The Guardian’s Manchester office. He progressed to the London office, worked as an investigative reporter – a highlight was exposing blacklisting of left-wingers by the industrialist body the Economic League – and in time he rose to become assistant news editor. By the early 1980s Alec was looking to move into broadcasting and found a job with Thames Television.

“Then we decided to come back home, because both myself and my wife Kathleen come from Norwich,” he says. He spent 18 years at the regional broadcaster, working as a producer of programmes such as About Anglia and latterly as business and political editor. Their daughters Emma and Victoria have followed Alec into journalism, despite his warnings about the precarious nature of the industry: Victoria as a freelance business and personal finance writer, Emma as style guide editor at the Telegraph.

Since leaving Anglia he has been able to devote an increasing amount of his time to the Norwich Society, and doing so fulfils something of the same motivation that made him want to become a journalist.

“It’s about finding out what is happening and reporting on them, with an eye to making a difference,” he says.

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