



Environmental Audit 2007/8

Taking the Long View



Introduction

In previous years the Norwich Society Environment Committee's annual Environmental Audits have concentrated on *areas* like Anglia Square and its immediate environs (2006) or St Stephen's and Castle Meadow (2005). This time we decided to look at a single *issue*, the preservation of historic views of our ancient and City. Many such views are in danger of being slowly changed for

the worse either by neglect or by a series of unconsidered planting, planning and building decisions.

In recent years classic views of Norwich from *outside*, from the heights of Mousehold, have been relentlessly hidden by the steady growth of self-seeded trees. The Norwich Society has been campaigning on this for many years, and as we write action is being taken to improve matters. Within the City, however, equally classic streetlines are in

danger of being spoiled by thoughtless development and planting. Above street level, some buildings are sprouting metal and concrete growths on top which threaten to ruin what remains of Norwich's famous towered skyline.

We would like to persuade concerned citizens and planners to take a step back and look at our streets and rooflines *in perspective*, to take a long look at where we are going. Questions we would like them to consider include: whether all tree planting is a good in itself; what should be done to tidy up central rooflines; and what should be done to make the best of the vistas along Norwich's ancient street pattern.

Method

We decided to walk through selected parts of the City looking for good and bad examples illustrating our more general concerns this year. We divided ourselves into two parties: one group to travel through the heart of Norwich from the Grapes Hill end of St Giles towards the Market Place, then along Gentleman's Walk via Rampant Horse Street to Westlegate. The second group, which aimed to look at more distant views, began at the Castle Mound, walked along Red Lion Street and up Westlegate to look down from the heights of Ber Street over the River and beyond, then descended to travel the length of King Street.

Context

Norwich has great bones – a powerful landscape structure and

topography. The crooked arm of the River Wensum which contains and defines the City flows between the heights of Mousehold Heath and the Ber Street escarpment before leaving the City towards the flood plain where it joins the Yare. Grapes Hill, Gas Hill and Bracondale give the lie to Noel Coward's cheap, metrocentric sneer about the flatness of Norfolk. The site where the Saxons began their settlement of Nor Wic was a very hilly place indeed, a fact much more noticeable before successive centuries of settlement filled in the deep gullies of fast-flowing streams like the Dalymond, the Muspole and the Great Cockey.

The City's street patterns still follow the line of some of those ancient streams, now culverted and lost below ground: Back of the Inns and Little London Street, for instance, follow the line of the Great Cockey. As buildings rose a combination of free-flowing water, hilly ground and open spaces like the market places, produced a series of natural vistas along streetlines interlaced with glimpses of Norwich's great landmark buildings.

These great verticals are of course the Castle, the Cathedral and the City Hall, closely followed as eye-catchers by the thirty two surviving mediaeval churches (particularly those on high points like St Giles and St Peter Mancroft), the Guildhall, St Andrew's Hall, St John's Roman Catholic Cathedral, and so on. Nor Wic's hilly bones are now clothed by a wonderful legacy of streets culminating in focal points where iconic buildings stand.

This did not escape the early geographers, who took their view of Norwich from its adjacent heights. William Cunningham's *Cosmographical Glasse* of 1559 is the earliest British town prospect, and a series of prints followed, culminating in Kirkpatrick's and Buck's Eighteenth-Century *Prospects of Norwich from the North-East*.



[1] 1558 William Cunningham

Apart from towering buildings and revealing streetlines, these early prospects show a third element in the historic Cityscape - trees and gardens. Land available for pleasure and planting within the great sweep of the City Walls was such that in 1623 one writer described Norwich as “A City in a Wood, or a Wood in a City”¹ - a description taken up by local authors so much that “A City in a Garden” became a common phrase. John Evelyn wrote of “the flower-gardens, which all the inhabitants excell of in this City”.

This is our heritage. The longest views from the Eastern heights above the City to the horizon take in the

¹ A.Neville, *A Description of the Famous Citie of Norwich* (London 1623).

countryside beyond: bring down your gaze and you see a generally lowrise built skyline, punctuated by towers and spires; below this, the historic street lines reveal great buildings set in the midst of *cultivated* trees and gardens. How does our present reality compare?

Mousehold

We are happy to report a result. Possibly *two* results in fact.

The state of **Ketts Heights**, the mini-park and viewpoint above and to the South of Kett's Hill has been worrying this committee and local action groups for many years. In particular the steady growth of scrub and self-seeded trees had been allowed to ruin the great prospect of the City from the tower of St John de Sepulchre in the South via the twin bulks of Norwich Union and the Castle to the City Hall and the two Cathedrals . Its grand sweep is spoilt only by the **Norfolk Tower**, yet another failed attempt (like the Westlegate Tower) to force a highrise building into a low to medium-rise roofscape.



Our last site visit (26/11/07) revealed that proper pruning in recent months has returned the “Wow Factor” to Kett's Heights. Our vista has returned. We can only recommend that those who love Norwich now take the few short steps up

from Kett's Hill to take in the breathtaking view that has been revealed after far too long. The site was almost litter-free, but brambles were encroaching on and almost blocking some of the paths.



The Mousehold Conservators with the support of the Norwich Society have recently (November 2007) written to the City Council to complain again about the condition of the view from the **Mottram Memorial** viewpoint on **St James's Hill**. We have a particular interest here - the memorial to our former Secretary Ralph Mottram (1883-1971) was funded from an appeal by the Society and the Octagon Unitarian Chapel.

This is (in theory) an even more majestic panorama than that from Kett's Heights, the eye travelling from the Southern end of the Ber Street escarpment across the City centre to the hills to the North of the Wensum Valley. Again, self-seeded trees and scrub have been allowed in a few decades to make completely unrecognisable the view recorded in the bas-relief by David Holgate mounted on top of the memorial.

The City Council have said that work to be done soon "should meet the Norwich Society's aspirations". We welcome this, and would simply point out that (as with Kett's Heights), neglect has allowed a situation to develop where only radical coppicing, pruning, and perhaps clearance of trees that have been allowed to mature will restore the classic vista so loved by artists and citizens over the centuries. We will monitor the situation.

Castle Mound to King Street



The **Castle Mound** continues to be a disgrace. In the two years since we first pointed this out (Environmental Audit 2005), nothing has been done. Rabbit infestation, neglect and the signs of slippage continue to deface one of England's great historic monuments. We are told that money has been allocated to shore up the Mound, but nothing is promised for replanting and the continued maintenance it needs so badly. The Society will continue to lobby the City Council.



The shabby, boarded-up lift from Castle Gardens completes the picture. Over-elaborate in the first place, the expensive individually-made glass panels at the upper level make it a natural target for vandals. Perhaps the lift-head could be modified using standardised vandal-proof materials. In the same area the Victorian gardens between the bridge and the Shire Hall are also much on show and require attention and reinstatement.

Passing by the Bell Hotel we noted its excellent exterior state of repair (the ancient interior of this great coaching inn was tragically destroyed some decades ago) and looked up **Timber Hill**, the first of our historic streetlines.



This is one of the best combinations of old and new in Norwich, with historic rooflines carefully and sensitively continued by the Castle Mall development. Looking *down* the hill towards Red Lion Street, we noted how well the gateway tower above the White Lion Street entrance to the Mall fits into the roofscape.



From the best to the worst - **Westlegate** is still after many decades the City's biggest object lesson in how *not* to plan new development in an historic environment. Out-of-scale, badly-proportioned and (to add insult to injury) long derelict, the **Westlegate Tower** dwarfs the thatched Barking Dicky building and All Saints church next door. We understand it may eventually be reduced in height and refurbished, but demolition would be preferable.



It is noticeable that every attempt by post-war architects and developers to bring high-rise towers to Norwich has ended in ignominious failure. The council blocks on **Rouen Road** and **Vauxhall Street** and the **Norfolk Tower** sit just as uneasily in our cityscape as Westlegate Tower. Undeterred by this, each new generation seems to want to have a go. Planning permission has recently been given to high-rise development on the old **Laurence Scott** site, and the new **Anglia Square** proposals at the heart of the Northern City Centre Area Action Plan include a tower much higher even than the eyesore Sovereign House they will replace. Do we really want a block of flats to challenge the Cathedral as a visual focal point in the heart of the City?



Ironically, at the bottom of Westlegate is an arresting example of how excessively *low* buildings can have as bad an effect as ones that are too high. The single-storey shed that houses the first shop round the corner in Red Lion Street brings a series of excellent nineteenth-century buildings to a

shuddering halt.

On the South side of Westlegate the clutter of pipework, air-conditioning units and service shafts on top of shops and offices has been sensitively disguised with cladding, but turn the corner into **All Saints Green** and the eye is irresistibly drawn past the sympathetic lines of the old Bonds building to the clutter of aerials, sheds and dishes on the top of the **Norfolk Tower**, to the South and several streets away.



This particular building stands out like a sore thumb, and not just because of the heap of additions on top. Its angular projection above the Ber Street roofline ruins the great South-North sweep of our recently-revealed views from Mousehold. Undistinguished modern towers like this detract from the classic verticals of Norwich's quartet of great monuments - again, the two Cathedrals, the City Hall and the Castle.

With redevelopment in the air (on the Lind site near Finkelgate, for instance) we would ask planners to keep the great importance of that **Ber Street** ridge in mind. Recent relatively low-rise development at Warminger Court has done this, and we liked the way it sat



on the corner of Thorn Lane surrounded by gardens and trees.

Good planting also surrounded the 1970s council building in **Paradise Place** below the ridgeline - very different from the cramped nearby recent private development in Kings Quarter further down, where the main objective is the maximum number of units per hectare. The view across to the heights of Telegraph Hill and Mousehold is of course, spectacular, though the gasholder is very shabby. As a working piece of handsome industrial archaeology it could perhaps be repainted in such a way as to bring out its intricate and pleasing structure.



Going down **St Julian's Alley** we noted how the idiosyncratic rooflines of the new build to the left had added to the character of the neighbourhood, but in **King Street** we were distressed by the sad state of the



shop building next to Dragon Hall and of historic Howard House on the corner of **Mountergate** (at last subject to enforcement proceedings by City Hall).



We understand that the high state of dereliction in the immediate vicinity of Dragon Hall, now one of the City's mediaeval jewels, is at least partly caused by the continuing uncertainty surrounding the St Anne's Wharf development. Bring it on!

Upper St Giles to Westlegate

This route took us through the heart of Norwich's historic street pattern, where (apart from Westlegate) the building heights and rooflines have regard for their neighbours and integrate themselves into the organic whole of the City. Two problems seemed to dominate: roof clutter and the way that the natural growth of some insensitively planted trees is slowly blocking out classic, indeed nationally famous, views along our route.

The footbridge across the top of **Grapes Hill** gives a fine view to the North across the Wensum Valley to rising ground at New Catton and Mile Cross, as well as unsuspected views between houses of the tower of St Giles Church and the City Hall (only one of many surprising keyhole vistas to be glimpsed throughout the centre).



Looking South, however, past the soaring grey bulk of St John's, is the **Vauxhall Tower**, a graceless eyesore festooned with aerials and other roof clutter. Air conditioning, lift towers and so on may be necessary for modern high-rise blocks, but they can be

sensitively clad. We would ask the City Council to consider this here, as well as on its other high-rise buildings. Such aerial litter would be unthinkable on top of, for instance, the City Hall. Why should it be accepted on other skyline buildings?



Down at street level **Upper St Giles** is dominated by St John's, framed perfectly between the Georgian houses marooned on the side of the Grapes Hill cutting. But are *three* trees necessary at the end of the street? Will they not block that view as they grow?



We turned East past St Giles Church, perched on the highest point of the City and itself one of our great verticals seen from miles around. Here, in the triangular bed on the corner of **St Giles and Bethel Street**, there was another example of tree planting which may block a traditional view, down Lower St Giles and up Bethel Street, as the plants mature.



It may seem obvious, but trees tend to get bigger after they are planted. Like the Christmas puppy they may grow into a quite unsuspected size or nature. Quite rightly, there is a general antipathy to the destruction of a mature tree, and our system of tree preservation orders has arisen as a response to this. But we would argue that just as Norwich is a City in a Garden, a good gardener will lay out his grounds with regard to the long-term effects of planting and in such a way as to retain and enhance existing vistas. The point is surely that in any city, trees enhance the built environment *but do not obscure it*. Ours is a managed landscape, in which trees serve architecture - and with *such* architecture to celebrate, Norwich must be careful how it manages its trees.

Looking down St Giles toward the City Hall, along the road from St Giles churchyard, with its well-managed and much-photographed



wisteria, there is an excellent example of careless tree planting. Perfectly framed, at the end of the street, are no less than three of the City's great buildings - the **Guildhall, the Castle and the City Hall**. Yet in summer they are completely hidden by a birch tree planted at the back of the City Hall. How much thought was given to the siting of that sapling a decade or so ago?



Down at the bottom of the **Market Place** is an even more depressing example of misplanting. The view from the **Castle Meadow** and the Mound down **Davey Place** to the multi-coloured stalls below the City Hall is a classic.



Yet in autumn 2007 a plane tree sapling was placed on **Gentlemen's Walk** which will shortly block that much-loved vista, if not for ever, then for many decades.

The mature plane trees along the Walk are of course one of the sights of Norwich, giving grateful shade in summer and beautifully bark-textured in winter. Yet even here some long-retired City Council officer may have failed to take the long view. The view from **Jarrold's corner** across the marketplace to St Peter Mancroft familiar from old photographs has completely disappeared. These splendid trees must of course be allowed their natural lifespan, yet when the time comes to remove them as they get old and dangerous, perhaps a rather less liberal planting scheme might allow some of the old views to return.



The *reverse* view across the **Market Place** from **St Peter's** reveals a different problem. The **Jarrold's** building on the corner of London Street and Exchange Street is one of the great Norwich architect George Skipper's masterpieces, a glorious wedding-cake of a building. But its roof is now a muddle of pipework, air-conditioning units and liftshafts. We would hope that at the very least some sympathetic cladding could be erected. It would not be the building as Skipper envisaged it, but at least it would smooth over a big blot on one of our most important roofscapes.

Moving along Gentleman's Walk we noticed the disappearance of another classic vista, that of St Peter Mancroft from the bottom of Davey Place. And at the bottom of the **Haymarket**, there is again an example of slightly over-enthusiastic planting. The trees outside Top Shop bring the vista along the Walk to an abrupt halt, and obscure the view of two more iconic Norwich Buildings - **St Peter Mancroft** and the **Forum** - to the West. Like any other plants trees need *managing*, whether by pruning or pollarding, and those here could benefit from some thinning. We finished by

turning the corner to **Westlegate**, and thoughts here have been included in the comments above.

We would wish to emphasise again that we are emphatically pro-tree. Trees in the right place are wonderful, and without its greenery Norwich would be a grey place indeed. We simply point out the effect of unconsidered planting judgements over time, and, in the case of Mousehold, the problems that arise when self-seeded trees are allowed to block lines of sight.

Summary

Norwich's key historic monuments give the City its unique identity. Glimpses from the river of the Cathedral towering at the end of an alley, or the Castle frowning down at the Market along Davey Place, are precious punctuation marks. The hilly topography

our of our cityscape is unique among Britain's ancient settlements, and the survival of one vista after another through a cohesive mediaeval street pattern despite the best efforts of developers and Hitler's bombers is something of a miracle.

To preserve and maintain that miracle we would ask the City Council to take greater care the planting and maintenance of trees in our historic streets and on the heights overlooking them. We would also ask the owners of existing properties and the developers of new buildings to take greater care over maintaining and de-cluttering rooflines. Step back, look up and take the long view! It can only make Norwich an even finer City.

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