

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE NORWICH SOCIETY

Saving Bishop Bridge



As part of their schemes to modernise Norwich after the First World War, the City authorities proposed to replace this medieval bridge with a wider one to accommodate increased motor traffic. In 1923 a group of architects and archaeologists successfully protected it by having it listed by the national Ministry of Works. They also instigated preservation orders on other historic structures including the Cathedral and buildings in its Close, the Castle, the Guildhall and many more. Out of this concern to preserve the best of the past The Norwich Society was formed. It aimed to ensure that in the admirable post-war drive for slum clearance, road widening, and other improvement of the city, historically and architecturally significant structures were not swept away unnecessarily.

Saving Elm Hill

Most of the buildings in Elm Hill date from 1507-1520, rebuilt after a major fire in the city. By the 1930s they had deteriorated badly. The City owned many and, as part of its continuing slum clearance programme, announced its intention to pull them down and replace them with light industrial facilities. Recognising that they were a valuable set of timber-framed buildings in a city losing such buildings fast, The Norwich Society led a campaign of resistance and Elm Hill was saved. Ultimately the buildings were substantially rehabilitated and the district is now a picturesque mixture of private dwellings, offices, shops, restaurants and cafes - beautiful, peaceful and thriving.



Saving The Assembly House



Similarly, a private proposal in the 1950s to demolish the Assembly House on Theatre Street, although listed, was resisted by the Society. Originally a College of Secular Canons, then the town house of a wealthy family, then, in the 18th century, the Assembly Rooms (for leisure and entertainment) it had become the Norwich High School for Girls. The trust which owned it sought to fund the move of the school to other premises out of the centre by demolishing it and selling the site to a developer. It was in fact listed but it sought to persuade the ministry to delist it. The Norwich Society successfully opposed the move and saved the building which has now returned to being a valuable resource for the artistic and cultural life of the city.

Saving Tombland

Tombland, near the Cathedral, has always been a popular resource for the people of Norwich. Never the location of tombs, it started out, before the Norman invaders built Castle and Cathedral, as the Saxon market-place. In 1951, as part of post-war reconstruction, the City Corporation proposed to build permanent structures in the square for the remaining market stall holders. Realising that this would inhibit popular use of the space The Norwich Society joined forces with others to resist the proposal and were successful. Now the square is an elegant and popular district for restaurants, bars and café-society.



Win some – lose some – the Magdalen Street flyover

The Society has not won all its campaigns, however. The original mediaeval street system in Norwich was not built for cars and buses. After World War Two, the increase in motor traffic and population, coupled with the opportunity for redevelopment after the bomb-damage the city had suffered, stimulated the planners in the city authorities to promote new roads as part of the necessary redevelopment. Another round of demolition would ensue. A new dual carriageway inner ring road was planned which included a large concrete fly-over bridge to take traffic across Magdalen Street. Realising what a blight it would cause, and what an eye-sore it would be in what was essentially a medieval street The Norwich Society opposed the project. This time it lost the battle – but a comparison of the two views of Magdalen Street shows who was right, aesthetically.



Magdalen Street, 1960



Magdalen Street today, 2007



Shaping the future

The Society is not only about preserving the past. It is equally concerned to shape the future by promoting and rewarding good design in new architecture and planning. To this end, for example, every two years it offers its congratulations to those developments which it considers will ensure that Norwich remains a “fine city” in its 2007 New Buildings Design Awards

It has also published a map and guide to *The New Architecture of Central Norwich*.

The new Norwich Union Antrium to the left is typical of the innovative new designs encouraged by the Norwich Society.