

PORTSMOUTH: CHANGING CITY

Portsmouth Society 28 February 2024

Slide 1

Cities, like all living things change continuously ...

Today I'm talking about Portsmouth's built and green environment, its buildings, green spaces and planning – and the Portsmouth Society's active long involvement as citizens in shaping its future

I'm not talking about the city's changing economics, employment, air quality, transport... but I will of course discuss how the city's edges are being reshaped in response to the Climate Emergency.

This is a personal view – from the perspective of living here for 54 years, and as a member of the Portsmouth Society since its founding in 1973...

I'm sure you will all have lots to say about the issues I'm raising. I'm looking forward to hearing your responses... but could you raise them at the end?

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As an **island city** with a slice of coastal mainland, as you'll all be very well aware, we're very directly affected by **the Climate Emergency**. Southsea beach has several times moved inland, flooding the Rock Gardens and covering the seafront road with sand. But it isn't just rising sea levels that threaten us – heavy rain floods not only the Common, but also the Great and Little Morasses – where Deane and I live.

Repeated repairs to the sea defences just did not work ... and **Nitrate Pollution in the Solent** held up new development for several years - until the Hants and IOW Wildlife Trust came up with a carbon offsetting scheme for developers to invest in to rewild fields in the IOW.

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Perhaps the **largest coastal engineering works in the country**, sections of the seafront are successively closed as the work moves on.

Southern Water installed an enormous drainage pipe which took a nose dive at Grand Parade, we hope avoiding local archaeology...

Key heritage – seafront shelters, historic lamp standards, war memorials were taken down and stored – **to be re-erected** when the works are completed – but not the **key shelter east of the Briny restaurant** – a particularly windy area where we definitely need a replacement.

Historic archaeology such as De Gomme's C17 bastion in front of Southsea Castle was discovered and incorporated into the design

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The **Southsea Seafront Campaign** asked that we should be offered a choice of **soft as well as hard landscaping**, but the Environment Agency decided that concrete walls and piles of Norwegian rock would do the job.

Raising the new sea wall a metre and a half all the way round the island began with Long Curtain Moat in Old Portsmouth – now finished.

But, personally, I'm disappointed by the **dullness of the landscaping**, the lack of any public art including interesting paving, the **miniscule planting** and just **two interpretation panels** set at a difficult angle and height to view... **Where's the promised public art?**

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The new white **sea wall at Tipner** is already turning grey, but the new **Linear Park** is very welcome, and so is the interpretation and raised seating so we can enjoy **Tipner Lake**. How **Ports Creek** and **Hilsea Lines** will be treated we haven't heard yet.

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I've been trying to find out what the Naval Base Commander's plans are to **defend the dockyard from rising sea levels**.

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It's a matter of great pride – and the city council deserves great praise – that the city owned **Ferry Port** is the greenest in the OK – in energy generation, seawater heat pump, grey water recycling, tackling air pollution via **on shore power generation for anchored ships**.

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For those of you who are new to the **Portsmouth Society**, I'd now like to introduce you to who we are – in the hope that you might decide to join us in what we do as local people to play our part in shaping the city.

We're a voluntary group, affiliated to civic societies' national body, **Civic Voice**... There are lots of similar groups nearby – in Gosport, Portchester, Fareham, Havant, Petersfield, Winchester, Chichester...

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In the 51 years we've been going, we've had successes in saving key buildings in the city from demolition, finding them new sustainable life, planting trees...

Our **book Maritime City** celebrated our 40th anniversary.

Sometimes the Society works with national conservation and heritage groups, to make the case against demolition – and for restoration and reuse.

I'll discuss historic buildings currently in jeopardy later on.

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Our early successes include saving the Theatre Royal and St. Agatha's Church from demolition at public enquiries, and celebrating our special early garden suburb: Thomas Owen's Southsea- as well as...

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Rivers Street Hall Somerstown – which won a SAVE award, St. Mary's House, the old workhouse, now housing the homeless again, Portsmouth & Southsea Station, St. Jude's Church, No.4 Boathouse – with SAVE and the Palace Cinema – now the Astoria night club.

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As you know, Portsmouth is very **short of green open space** – and most of it is round the edges of Portsea Island. We've played our part in enhancing what we have... Early on we counted all the street trees and helped local schools to green their grounds, developed the city's first wildlife garden, and Pauline Powell was Tree Warden Co-ordinator for many years.

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In 1975 our **Trees and Streets Committee** counted all the city's street trees, in preparation for the city to designate **Tree Preservation Orders**. Along the south side of Winston Churchill Avenue we developed the city's first Community Wildlife Garden, while there's a more formal landscaped space at the Omega Centre on the north side of the road. The Society was involved in **Greening School Grounds** in New Road, and gave Best Landscaping Awards to Adventure Playgrounds in Paulsgrove and Somerstown. **Pauline Powell, the city's first Tree Warden's Co-ordinator** planted a white mulberry tree in Milton Park.

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Design Awards. Since 1973, ten years after we founded, we've assessed what's been **newly built, reused, or conserved and new public landscaping for the Portsmouth Society's Design Awards** – with essential feedback from the users or residents – and awarding our plaques to the best ones. In 2023 the Lord Mayor awarded the Society its second Civic Award.

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Over the years, the **City Architects' Department** has deservedly won our **Best New Buildings Award** many times – for its **new schools**, and for its **council housing**. These blocks in Somerstown won a Best New Building award in 2022. The people who live in them give us very positive feedback

Slide 16

These are some of the new student hostels, schools and Francis Graves' award-winning house we've judged in previous years ... and a Commendation to St. Edmund's Roman Catholic School – a very green campus

Slide 17

Here are some of the new buildings we saw in 2022. We gave a **Best New Building Award** to the Premier Inn in Queen Street – just along from here ...

Slide 18 Reuse not Demolition

Now **it's important to save and reuse the embodied carbon in buildings that already exist**, for our **Restoration and Reuse Awards we also evaluate adaptive reuse**. Churches are a particular challenge as congregations dwindle... **St. Margaret's Community church** ingeniously inserted many new functions – a young people's bicycle repair shop, a clothing shop, a café – into the soaring spaces of the nave and side aisles.

Slide 19 Design Award 2024

The Portsmouth Society didn't have a Design Award in 2023, so here are some of the new buildings we could consider if there's an award this year. We need sponsors for the plaques. The judging process takes a lot of organising- and the winners' plaques are expensive! The university's Ravelin Sports Centre has already won prizes, but we've yet to see the new Wymering School.

Slide 20 Housing

New places to live are being provided in both newbuild blocks of flats and conversions, such as Brewery House in Somertown.

Slide 21 Health

There are new health buildings at Queen Alexandra Hospital too including a Rehabilitation Centre and Accident and Emergency block.

Slide 22 Re-used buildings/Conversions

Converted buildings for residential use include Kingston Prison – a challenge with the very small high windows, the institutional internal public spaces which don't disguise what it was, and large grey blocks of newbuild flats.

Slide 23 Maritime and Industrial heritage

There's been both progress and stagnation in the city's fine legacy of **Maritime and Industrial Buildings**. While the four historic ships, Boathouses 4, 5 and 7 in the Dockyard Heritage area once again attract thousands of visitors after two years of covid closure and financial jeopardy... there are still Buildings at Risk...

Slide 24 Buildings at Risk: Block Mills

Block Mills, the World's first Grade I steam powered factory developed by Marc Brunel, William Goodrich and other brilliant engineers to produce the thousands of pulley blocks for the navy's sailing ships sits **awaiting a new use inside the active dockyard**. There was a move to extend the boundary of the heritage area, but it was cancelled as Block Mills was deemed too close to operational areas...

Slide 25 Restoration Award

The MOD's Naval Base estates team deservedly won the Portsmouth Society's Best **Restoration Award in 2022** for the full restoration and repair of **No.1 the Parade** – built for the dockyard's principle officers and external repairs and landscaping of the rest of the terrace, much more remained to be done to repair the serious deterioration inside the other houses.

Slide 26 Navy Pay Office

The **Sustainable Conservation Trust** and the university's spinoff, Ankle Deep is let by the Naval Base Property Trust in the Dockyard Heritage Area – providing a home for much creative endeavour.

Slide 27 Old Naval Academy

But several of the Naval Base's most important buildings lie empty, derelict and deteriorating, including the Old Royal Naval Academy, which is on Historic England's At Risk Register since the naval officers moved out in 2006. Its problem is its location –next to the Naval Base Commander's HQ, Admiralty House – with consequent security fears...

Slide 28 No. 6 Dock

The oldest drydock in the Naval Base, in front of Block Mills has been imploding for some years: A scheduled monument, “Dock 6 is suffering from rotation, and mortar joints on the stonework treads on the north side have opened up; it is also vulnerable to water penetration action and the stonework is spalling.”

<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/heritage-at-risk/search-register/list-entry/48740>

while ...

Slide 29 Ropery

The historic **Grade II* Ropery**, once one of the longest buildings in the world, built to spin the navy’s ropes is empty, ‘eviscerated’ in the 1960s by taking out the internal floors and the attic. It’s suffering from dry rot. The pioneering iron framed and corrugated iron clad **Fire Station**, which once had a water tank on the roof in the face of constant threat of fire, needs conservation. **The problem is that the MOD is not funded for care of its buildings...**

Slide 30 Unused buildings in the dockyard

There are other empty unused buildings on both sides of the fence dividing the Dockyard Heritage Area from the active Naval Base, including the **Dockyard Naval Architecture School** adjacent to Boathouse 6, and **Boathouse 5** in the Heritage Area – one of the challenges for the Naval Base Property Trust which like all property owners faces **dramatic rises in energy costs.**

Slide 31 No. 6 Boathouse –

which housed a celebration dinner for its engineers when it opened, is mainly unused, since Action Stations moved out, and the **Royal Marines Museum’s** bid to move in failed. There’s now another **much larger bid for Lottery funding**, but if this succeeds it will put in jeopardy the **popular No. 6 Arthouse cinema** because the screen would have to be moved to accommodate the Royal Marines band.

Slide 32 Treadgolds

To turn to the city’s **civilian industrial heritage, here’s a success story:** the extraordinary time capsule of a nineteenth century ironmongers, Treadgolds in Bishop Street Portsea, the community garden, the large roofed area and office space have been restored with Lottery money by the John Pounds Foundation, and a decision is awaited on repairing the workshop area and foundry.

Slide 33 Eastney Pumping Station

The three **Eastney sewage pumping stations** that prevent the city from drowning in it are perhaps not as well-known as they might be. Ray Riley, the Society’s eminent industrial archaeologist member restored the gas engine in the 1970s.

Slide 34 Brunel’s first bridge

Portsmouth-born **Isambard Kingdom Brunel’s first surviving bridge** which spanned the Grand Union canal and the railway lines out of Paddington has languished, mostly out in the open in **English Heritage’s Fort Cumberland** for twenty years. Architect Deniz Beck designed two locations for it to stay in Portsmouth – at the head of the canal in Gunwharf and to plug

into the **King's Bastion in Old Portsmouth**, but we still don't know what English Heritage who own it intend to do with it.

Slide 35 Wymering Manor

To turn to historic buildings whose future is uncertain, Grade ii* **Wymering Manor** in Cosham, a Elizabethan Manor of 1582 has been on Historic England's Buildings at Risk Register for many years. There are detailed plans to restore it – estimated to cost about £5.9m – as a centre for its local community, but raising cash to match a lottery bid will not be easy in a town lacking in philanthropists...

Slide 36 Beneficial School Kent Street Portsea

Portsmouth has one of the earliest charity schools, the **Beneficial** dating from 1784 before elementary education was finally on offer to children after the 1870 Education Act. It's a **vibrant theatre and event space**, but its actor owner keeps trying to sell it for commercial use, despite the Groundlings Theatre, backed by the city and Historic England keeps being reused ownership, which would unlock the grants needed to repair it.

Slide 37 Omega Centre Somerstown

The **Omega Centre in Somerstown** too, faces an uncertain future, despite it being occupied by an eclectic mix of artists, boxers and children improving their literacy skills. It belongs to three councillors who form the Portsmouth City Council Elementary Education Foundation who have yet to respond to the Omega Centre Trust's bid to declare it an asset of community value.

It's not a listed building, but now I consider several that ought to have been - and others that are, but are still in a poor state...or demolished..

Slide 38 NatWest Bank Southsea

The imposing **NatWest bank** on the corner of Palmerston and Osborne Roads Southsea with its bronze entrance doors and city map and its joyful mermaid inside is empty, the map removed to the city museum and its future uncertain. When the bank closed, Jane Smith, the Portsmouth History Centre and I applied to Historic England to list it, but they refused to do so – in part because the city map has gone...

Slide 39 Solaglass Factory Hilsea

This interesting 1960s glass factory by a local architectural practice is also vulnerable to demolition.

We await Historic England's decision on whether to list it, particularly because of its tower showing off the factory's products.

There does seem to be a bias in Historic England against listing commercial or industrial property, which also put paid to the Tricorn which could have been adapted and reused...

Slide 40 News Centre Hilsea

For example the **News Centre Hilsea** – a huge building designed by local architect Edward Cogswell - where the News was edited, printed and distributed. Its **iconic curved front with its curved lake and concrete columns was a dramatic entry to Portsea Island**. I drafted an application for The Sustainable Conservation Trust to apply to English Heritage to List it with the help of the Twentieth Century Society to give us time to work out how First Bus who

own the site could **convert the giant print hall** behind used to print the Daily Mail and the Guardian until about two years ago into a **garage to house their electric buses**, but the council was panicked into granting permission. First Bus say they have saved 8 of the **William Mitchell concrete sculptures** – which were vital to our bid to list the building. They weigh 8-10 tons. They plan to send some of them to Bradford City of Culture for an exhibition about Mitchell – but **why can't at least one be left in Portsmouth** – perhaps in situ? [Craig Leake First Bus 23 February)

Slide 41 Neglected and derelict buildings

There are **neglected and derelict buildings** all over the city. The pub in Somers Road South has been gradually broken up for years. **Tipner's listed ammunition magazines** have been demanded and patched up by Pounds scrapyards for years. The city is in the process of buying the site as part of the Tipner development, as I'll explore later.

Slide 42 Conservation Areas – Milton Locks

Are Conservation Areas really worth designating? Since **Milton Locks** was first designated in the 1970s and the wooden lock gates were repaired, very little has been done.

The bridge and coastal footpath were renewed, the grass is mowed and seats have been installed, but **otherwise it's neglected**. The home for recovering alcoholics was built on the inner lock bed – but it's between two pubs ...

The Portsmouth Society planted a hedge along the footpath and added an interpretation board, which the Langstone Harbour Fishermen have kept in good repair.

Slide 43 Major Developments: Conservation Areas – Owen's Southsea

Now to turn to the major proposed developments.

Developers Nicholas James have applied for planning permission to convert nearly all the buildings on the **St. John's College** site into over 200 flats which they will retain and manage. **A key part of Owen's Southsea the city's most important conservation area, the challenge is to 'enhance' it.** Our 'Conservation Officer' Ben Cracknell merely commented on window design in the dull new blocks...

There are over 80 objections – and the Society's view is that it falls far short in design quality, particularly in the new buildings and conversion of the office block in Grove Road South.

What are conservation Areas for?? Yet, apparently Councillor Hugh Mason, chair of planning may well grant permission ...

Slide 44 St. James's Hospital

St. James's Hospital was built as a therapeutic landscape with its own farmland in 1979. The avenue to the main block has some of the oldest trees in the city, but some have just been felled – which suggests that **Tree Preservation Orders** too are too weak to offer much protection.

While much the northern part of the site has been **developed for housing** – and **more will be after the local campaign and city council sadly lost their appeal against** it - I'm proud to say that the open landscape facing Locksway Road was declared a '**Town Green**' after I read an article in the Evening Standard that it was possible to protect land from development if

public use could be proved over 40 years. The city looks after it – and replants trees when they get too old. It's hoped that the Chapel will be converted to a community centre.

Slide 45 Central Post Office and Civic Offices

When the RIBA is saying that **all existing buildings should stay and be reused, so their embodied carbon is not wasted**, what's going to happen to the **Central Post Office** and the **Civic Offices**?

Slide 46

Now to turn other big current planning issues: the Northern Quarter:

While it's **about time the Tricorn Centre site was built on for much needed housing –it's been empty for 20 years**, why does the council intend to pull down the northern end of Commercial Road, which is full of lively businesses and shops and some historic buildings?

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The Northern Quarter redevelopment of 2,300 homes was agreed last October...

Slide 48 Tipner West

The city council acquired **Tipner West** including the firing range and the ammunition magazines mentioned earlier with a view to reclaiming 21 acres of tidal mud flats from Portsmouth Harbour and building 5000 housing units accessed from a multistorey carpark and £9m bridge across the M275, but they ran into hefty opposition from the **Hampshire and IOW Wildlife Trust** who organised a popular petition against the proposal – not least as the harbour has several wildlife designations and disturbing the pollution in the mud would cause serious contamination.

The Society is represented on the **Tipner Heritage Forum** which has a very limited remit. Local people do use the foreshore as their open space, but how will the considerable pollution – from poison gas around the edges and from the lead bullets in the firing range be dealt with?

The council has spent millions promoting their housing scheme which still includes reclaiming 14 acres of seabed – without attracting any developers...

Slide 49 Rising City Scale

The city scale is rising, perhaps starting in **Gunwharf,,,**

Slide 50 Student Housing Towers

Then the many **student towers...** Did you know the private companies that built them **don't pay council tax**, yet they are making a great deal from letting to students...

Slide 51 Somers Orchard

The City Council is proposing a 32 storey block of private housing as part of **Somers Orchard**, a redevelopment of much council owned housing and the community centre. Consultation of the local people was exemplary... which is more than I can say of the University of Portsmouth's consultation on its Development plan last week... There's scepticism on whether the 32 storey tower – higher than anything yet built except the Spinnaker Tower –

will ever be built. It'll cast a long shadow over the replacement building in Winston Churchill Avenue.

Slide 52 University Development Plan

We had to apply online for a limited number of tickets and **the consultation only runs till March 2... University House, their hq will be demolished** and replaced by the much larger building shown in the two pictures on the left hand side – which one of us compared to a **radio set..** The **Langstone campus** wasn't mentioned – but we gather that the four storey buildings that have been empty for some time are now occupied again by students and their families, though the tower block remains empty. Other proposals were welcome – the **low rise law school in Victoria Park**, the removal of the inserted floor of the drill hall in the **Wiltshire Building**. I was very sorry to see the **Nuffield Centre** go. It will be replaced by laboratories. A multistorey carpark is proposed behind the Eldon Building.

There's also a proposal just in for office development on the **Matalan** site north of Portsmouth & Southsea Station. **“The public consultation includes a ‘stand’ in The Cascades shopping centre on March 1, between 12noon and 6pm, and March 2, between 10am and 4pm, where people can meet the team as well as give their feedback.”**

Slide 53 Aquind -

I haven't got time to discuss other issues – such as **Aquind's** very damaging and probably unnecessary pipeline proposal along the eastern shoreline – which is being fought against by the city council working with a doughty local campaign.

Slide 54 Roles for Civic Societies in renewal

Historic England gave an inspiring lecture last Thursday to members of Civic Voice, civic societies' central body last week, which emphasised the vital role societies like ours can plan in Local Partnerships.

I hope those of you who don't yet belong will be inspired to join. The Society offers a voice to local groups to contribute their experience and expertise to shaping the places where they live.

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Now, over to you!