MCHA Executive Committee Report 2018-19

Between 1st April 2018 and 31st March 2019 your committee has met seven times. At the AGM held at the end of May 2018 three trustees were elected and in July these trustees appointed Chris Jackson to serve again as a trustee and honorary treasurer. At the same time eight members, who had all previously served, were again co-opted. The maximum number of trustees allowed by the constitution is ten. The existing trustees are permitted to appoint further trustees if vacancies exist but have not sought to do so. Dr Graham Towers who has made a very valuable contribution as a trustee over many years did not stand for re-election. He was part of the team who saved the Lainson building of the former Royal Alexandra Hospital from demolition in 2009 having represented the MCHA position at a public enquiry. Dr Towers was also for a brief period chairman of the Conservation Advisory Group to the City Council and as an architect with experience of conserving and converting buildings to residential use was a source of excellent professional advice.

The committee submitted comments on the draft City Plan Part 2 during the consultation period which ended in September. The committee is particularly concerned by the threat to this (and other) conservation areas posed by high rise development which will harm the setting of and public views from within these areas and does not believe that the City Plan is at all reassuring in this respect. The i360 observation tower is an existing example of such harmful development, which being not just an eyesore, is now adding insult to injury by being the financial failure which was widely predicted. The major development on the site of the former Baptist church in Montpelier Place has been steadily built out since planning permission was granted in December 2017 and should be ready for occupation in 2019. The MCHA had supported the application, considering that the design scale and massing were appropriate for the conservation area and for its location near several listed buildings. The other major development overlooking the area and particularly St Nicholas churchyard is the former ice rink site where the apartment hotel is nearing completion. As feared, its height is an unneighbourly intrusion on the churchyard whilst it is also an unsightly backdrop to the roofscape of the listed Wykeham Terrace when viewed from Dyke Road. Similarly overlooking the area is Crown House, the former tax office and labour exchange in Upper North Street for which an additional storey was proposed. Fortunately the planning officers’ decision aligned with the MCHA opinion that this would cause further harm to the adjoining conservation area, Crown House itself being already a regrettable development. In the same building “prior approval” was sought for 149no. (very small) one bedroom flats. In recent years the law has allowed offices to be converted to residential use without the need for planning permission as such; so despite dozens of letters of objection the approval has been granted. There has however, been no sign of work being carried out to convert the six storey building.

Your chairman has had considerable correspondence with the City Council which it is hoped, will lead to more co-ordination between City Clean, the Highways Department and the planning and heritage officers. In the past we have seen how the Highways Department have wanted to chop down the elm tree at the Seven Dials Roundabout but more recently it has disfigured attractive early 20th century lamp posts, ruined pavements with tarmac, introduced ugly plastic street name signs and cluttered the area with pointless signage. Meanwhile City Clean has sited garishly coloured on-street bins next to listed buildings, placed yellow plastic open rubbish bins on the grass of Montpelier Crescent and located its dilapidated and overflowing waste bins immediately in front of the Grade 1 listed St Michael’s church! There are some signs that the City Council is listening: the open bins on Montpelier Crescent have been replaced by “hooded” bins of a more suitable colour and the colours of the re-cycling bins are to be toned down. The MCHA still maintains, however, that changing the colour of bins will not improve re-cycling rates and that more the frequent emptying of bins should be the priority. Protecting the area from the harm caused by unauthorised development and vandalism, particularly “tagging” with spray paint is an ongoing task and whilst the committee regularly submits reports to the authorities it urges all members to do likewise.

On a more cheerful note it can be reported that last summer saw the installation of floral hanging basket on the lamp posts of Vernon Terrace. This is a three year project to enhance this part of the conservation area which the MCHA has promoted, having made a successful bid to the Co-op Community Fund. It is also pleasing to see two new blue plaques in Victoria Road and Clifton Road commemorating suffragette Minnie Turner and Victorian wood engravers the Dalziel brothers respectively. Not to be confused with a blue plaque, the MCHA conservation blue plate for 2018 was awarded to the owners of 11 Montpelier Villas for the major rebuilding of the annexe to their 1840s house whilst properties in Clifton Road and Hampton Place were commended for their successful restorations.

In addition to campaigning for the protection of the area the committee has organised lectures to educate and stimulate interest and social gatherings to encourage members to meet and exchange ideas. The summer lecture was delivered by Paul Jordan formerly of Brighton and Hove Museums and this was followed in July by the garden party kindly hosted once again by Pauline Messum. It was a particular pleasure to have our former chairman Mick Hamer deliver the autumn lecture. It was based on his recently published book “A most deliberate swindle” which describes how electric buses had first operated in Brighton before the Great War and how a fraud caused the service to collapse. The Christmas Party was held in St Nicholas Church and its success was due in part to the two catering students from Greater Brighton Metropolitan College who were hired for the event.

Newsletters were published in the spring and autumn with 150no. copies printed on each occasion. The web site has remained untended and will need some technical updating but communication with members has been maintained with email using the Mail Chimp system for group mailings and by post where necessary. The MCHA representative to the Conservation Advisory Group (CAG) to the City Council has continued to be Jack Tyson with Corinne Attwood his substitute. Your chairman was re-elected joint chairman of the CAG and continues to sit on the City Council’s Planning Committee as a co-opted member. Membership subscriptions remain at the modest levels set more than ten years ago and for the time being no increases are envisaged.

Jim Gowans, Chairman, May 2019