

THE MANCHESTER CIVIC SOCIETY

STEVE LITTLE

The Manchester Civic Society was launched at the Town Hall in November 1995 in answer to a demand for a group that was concerned with the interests of the city in the round. Manchester was one of the few major cities that did not have a civic society, its founders came from a number of different groups and networks but importantly drew in other interested people. It was decided to organise round a newspaper and the November launch included the celebration of the first edition of the Society's Manchester Forum, now in its 10th edition. One of the aims of the society was to become the focus of debate about the future of the city we live and work in and visit. The society's social life of visits, talks, get-togethers and the odd social are seen as secondary to that aim of debate and the development of informed opinion. The society has never said that it has the answer but would like to be part of an answer.

One of the aims of the society stated on the enrolment form is "to encourage debate and promote civic pride". This latter idea could be seen as all things to all people and this is what it is meant to be. For some the pride is having a 24 hour city, for others a place they can bring their family and friends to, a great place to shop, to be entertained, to work, to eat — there are many reasons to have pride in the town. One of the common denominators of many of the members is a pride in the built environment and the society has readily adopted the slogan of 'good enough for Manchester'. It is this area of the buildings of Manchester, mainly those of the city centre, upon which the society has tended to concentrate its efforts in the first few years of its life, as the city undergoes major changes. In this time the group has become a force in the debate about which way the city should go.

The major achievement of the society has been the quarterly publication of the paper, the Manchester Forum, its articles have ranged from a review of Manchester's remaining industrial sites, a defence of its pubs, celebrations of conserved and refurbished buildings, visions of the future, histories of faces and places, a view of some of the best in new architecture and even an article on optical fibres. We have been asked to learn to love the Arndale Centre, look again at Piccadilly Plaza, we have been taken through the City Council's design guide and had a rough guide to the Northern Quarter. Many have written for the paper, there is room for many more to write.

The society has been associated with a number of campaigns: Rosehill in Northenden; the Hathersage Baths; Holly Royde in Didsbury and helped in the setting up of a Trust to ensure a future for Elizabeth Gaskell's House on Plymouth Grove. In the city centre the campaigns have included: Shambles Square; the Great Northern Railway Warehouse; Kennedy Street and the Free Trade Hall. This latter project was probably the highest profile campaign that the society has been involved in, as one of the major backers of the Friends of the Free Trade Hall, the efforts of which led to the Public Inquiry on the reuse of the Hall. These campaigns have led to the members and other campaigners being called 'middle-class tossers'! and 'wishing to turn the city centre into a museum'. Nothing can be further from the truth, the desire is to see the town a vibrant, changing and challenging place to be. We believe that we do not always need to pull down the buildings

we love for what is sometimes a matter of short-term profit.

There is little doubt that Manchester has one of the greatest — if not the greatest — collections of 19th century buildings in Britain. But no city stands still. However, most people admit that the visions of the '30s and '40s which culminated in the 1945 Plan would have reduced the city to something we would not recognise today, and probably not like, in the radical redevelopment advocated. The Town Hall would have gone, the Albert Memorial reduced to 'hard-core', all of the buildings of Worthington, Waterhouse, Heathcote and Lane swept away. In 1950 this may have been a bright new dawn but 30 years later would we be thanking those 'forward looking' planners when the dawn is no longer so bright? We are now pulling down the buildings of the '30s, '50s and '60s as old fashioned, ugly and of no use — not always correctly.

But no city stands still and the Civic Society has coined the slogan, 'the best of the old and the best of the new'. To this end the society held a competition this year, the first of annual awards for the best in Manchester. The refurbished Bank of England on King Street won the 'Shop Window' award, the yacht-like Trinity Bridge the 'Renaissance Manchester' award, the Victorian City Award went to 201 Deansgate for the best new building respecting the traditions of the Victorian City. The nomination for the renaissance award was open not only to structures but also people and anyone can nominate someone or something that has driven the city forward. The awards were a great event, next year they will be even better.

The visits the society has made have reached the heights and depths, the clock tower of the Town Hall at one point and the tunnels of the GPO at another. In between a pub crawl or two. (On one of these, visiting some of the pubs which have held a license from before 1790, members standing on Jacksons Row listening to a history of the area had to step aside to allow a taxi with 'plate No. 1' go by, this plate's origins going back to the beginnings of the hackney carriage trade in the town.) There has been a 'Manchester Man' walk, a walk around 'Rock and Roll Manchester' and visits to the Airport, Todmorden and Leeds.

The society is not organised round a lecture programme but there have been talks ranging from the graveyards of the city centre to the idea of an 'urban village' via design in Manchester and have included the topic of hot air ballooning. However the group is proud of the launch of a series of debates on topics of interest to Mancunians. The Civic Society sponsored a televised debate on the re-development of the city centre following the bomb of June 1995. Since that very high profile event there have been four other public debates. Car parks, the Free Trade Hall, Ancoats and a visions of the future have all been discussed in open forum.

The Civic Society is a young growing group and welcomes all who have an interest in Manchester. There are plenty of activities to enjoy but it has a serious intent — the society wants to instigate debate on issues concerning people, places and spaces — and conservation. For further information contact, **Manchester Civic Society, PO Box 436, Manchester, M60 2AS.**