

CHESTER IN CONCERT

MINUTES OF MEETING OF CHESTER MUSIC FORUM SATURDAY 31st JANUARY 2009 AT BISHOP LLOYD'S PALACE

PRESENT (apologies if this list is incomplete - please let us know of any omissions)

Jim Latham	Music Forum & Chester in Concert (convenor)
Roger Gibson	Music in Chester & Chester Philharmonic Orchestra
Geoff Clifton	Chester Performs
Andrew Bentley	Chester Performs
Peter Bingham	Chester Civic Trust
Richard Short	Cheshire West & Chester Council
Tim Wheeler	University of Chester
Sara Mogul	West Cheshire College
Maggie Evans	Hammond School
David Pickering	Chester Renaissance
John Makinson	Chester Zoo
Arlene Bloomberg	Chester in Concert
Maureen Boulton	Chester in Concert
Wendy Sutton	Chester in Concert
Nick Fry	
Jean Storrer	Chester City Council
Andrew Roberts	Tip Top Productions
Ian Jones	Tip Top Productions
Pauline Thompson	Alexander's
John Herson	Chester Music Society
Stan Smith	Chester Music Society
Cheryl Hunt	Chester Folk Festival
Audrey Lees	St Johns
Brian Westcott	Chester Musicals
Tim Owens	Chester Musicals
Tracy Lyn	Chester Festivals
a representative	City of Chester Brass Band
a representative	Chester Ladies Choir
Mike Heathcote	City of Chester Male Voice Choir

APOLOGIES

Stephen Langtree	Chester in Concert, Civic Trust & Art in Chester
Barry Kelly	Visit Chester & Cheshire
Peter Swingler	Tip Top Productions
Rita Walters	Chester Renaissance
Christine Russell MP	
Lord Lynden Harrison	
Emily Brogden	Chester Festivals

WELCOME

Jim Latham welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that it was hosted by Chester Music Forum jointly with its umbrella body - Chester in Concert and the Civic Trust.

Members of the Music Forum fall into 2 groups:

1. Venues and arts facilitators eg Cheshire West & Chester Council, Chester City Council, Chester Performs, Chester Cathedral, Racecourse etc.
2. Users of venues eg orchestras, operatic societies, choirs etc.

Part 1 A New Performing Arts Centre for Chester

A. The Present Position

Jim Latham explained that the Northgate Development was now not scheduled to start until 2012 at the earliest and that we would have a new Local Authority (Cheshire West and Chester) from April 1st 2009.

B. Opportunity for Re-assessment

- (1) **When:** Jim proposed that we should try to get a Performing Arts Centre before 2012 and independently of the Northgate developers (ING).
Geoff Clifton (Chester Performs) said that a PAC from ING would not be before 2017/18. He stated that Chester Performs supports that idea of a separate independent PAC but pointed out that even that route would still take 5-6 years. In the short term we should investigate: cost of reopening the Gateway Theatre (a study is already in hand); other temporary spaces; improvements to the Cathedral; facilities at the Racecourse etc. He said better consultation between groups is needed and we must all work together and keep programming events.
- (2) **Where:** Jim proposed that the building must be in the City Centre within 2 mins. Of the Town Hall. Plans were tabled of this area. A large part of the Northgate site is still owned by the council i.e. the area to the rear of the library including the present bus exchange
- (3) **What:** The building could be simpler than the original design and concentrate on theatre and music, with other aspects being catered for by the adjacent Town Hall, Cathedral, Odeon etc.
- (4) **Finance:** This was discussed later - see Part IV.

Part II Interim Measures

A. Existing Buildings

1. Gateway Theatre

Jim said that Christine Russell had visited the building recently and thought it was in surprisingly good condition.

Andrew Roberts (Tip Top) reported that they had been using the studio for nearly 2 years although they are not permitted to use the main auditorium without professional technicians. They want to continue using the studio and other organisations are also now using it. They have a rolling 12-month lease on the whole building and use the main hall for storage.

Jim asked who would control the building if it were re-opened and Andrew replied that Tip Top want to remain an amateur company but would work with a professional body.

2. Odeon Cinema

Tim Wheeler (University of Chester) stated that they had been interested in acquiring the Odeon for 2 years for a large (700-750 seat) lecture theatre plus community use. They would need to re-examine the costs of acquiring, modifying and running it but were still very interested.

Jim said that so far no planning application for altering it had been received and he felt that the planning committee should oppose removal of the upper circle. Jim reported that Christine Russell had told him that film use would be supported by Government funding only if there was more than 1 screen, and that Stephen Langtree felt the cinema was crucial to the City.

Pauline Thompson (Alexander's) asked who now owned it and Jim replied that it was a company called Brook Leisure but it is hoped that they will sell it if they cannot get their plans passed.

Peter Bingham (Chester Civic Trust) stated that they would definitely support the return of the cinema to the City and they felt that the owners have been trying to pressurise the Council.

Stan Smith (Chester Music Society) asked why it was sold and Peter replied that no-one really knows but the Odeon company was shrinking and it was a valuable site to sell. He felt that Brook Leisure expected the Council to approve a change of use.

Andrew Bentley (Chester Performs) said they had run a very successful film festival last year using other venues in the City. He felt that there should be a screen showing larger commercial films as well as the smaller 'art house' material. However, it would need bars, café etc to survive unless there was partnership with another body eg the University.

3. Chester Cathedral

Although not in a position to speak formally on behalf of Chester Cathedral, Nick Fry said that some modest improvements were felt to be desirable, including a more flexible staging layout as well as general upgrading of lighting, heating, draft exclusion and the sound system. However, such improvements would require grant aid. Jim Latham suggested that this group should support any application by the Cathedral. It was pointed out that although the Cathedral hosts many events throughout the year, inherent costs mean that there are financial challenges in holding these events.

John Herson (Chester Music Society) said that use of the Cathedral as a music venue was always a compromise as this was not its prime use and they had had many complaints from audiences. Users need to be consulted about improvements. There are acoustic problems due to the location of the stage.

Jim pointed out that all the necessary improvements could be achieved relatively cheaply.

Andrew Bentley said the Cathedral was a very useful venue but it needs to make people feel more comfortable. There are conflict issues with its main use but the acoustics are better than most others.

Roger Gibson (Chester Philharmonic Orchestra) said they had no wish to move but would like a better stage and lighting.

4. Town Hall

Jim said that following the major external renovations, the interior was to be redecorated. The building could be used more but improvements are needed. The stage could be altered without harming the structure; the Court Room could be used as bar, reception area etc.; some raked seating was needed and a better green room. It could seat 364 with raked seating. Estimates for this work have already been done.

Stan Smith (Chester Music Society) said they had stopped using it for concerts and had moved to St Mary's Centre which was much better, although the piano is not as good.

Andrew Bentley said Chester Performs are currently raising funds to improve the piano. The Town Hall was important for community use and a temporary addition could easily be added at the front of the present stage

Roger Gibson said that the Tuesday lunchtime concerts had moved to the Wesley Centre in St Johns Street but audiences had declined due to lack of bus access.

5. Other Venues

(i) Hammond School

Maggie Evans said that Leicester University ran a very popular cinema in the city centre. She said that the Hammond School now have a 400+ seat theatre and they are keen for it be used. However, it is used by the school for 2 large classrooms and for performances and rehearsals so availability is limited. Also, they have some more building work starting soon which will reduce their car parking space and the school must cover its costs, so charges need to be quite high.

Jim asked if a new PAC would be of use to them and Maggie said that classical dance needed specific surfaces although these could be installed temporarily. She felt it was essential that a new theatre in Chester be big enough - at least 750 seats.

Andrew Bentley said that the original PAC design did accommodate dance with a large stage area and wing space.

(ii) West Cheshire College

Sara Mogul said that they currently rent venues in Ellesmere Port but are building a 500+ seat theatre with other spaces. She said there is a great shortage of employment locally for their students and she would be looking at a new PAC in Chester to ease this situation.

(iii) Kingsway High School

Tim Wheeler said the University had a modest (100+ seat) venue available here.

(iv) Chester Zoo

John Makinson said that the new plans for the zoo would have a beneficial effect on Chester but that we need co-operation between all organisations to encourage people to stay in the city - not just visit the zoo and leave.

Jim said it would help if the Tourist Information Office sold tickets for everything.

(v) Racecourse

David Pickering (Chester Renaissance) said that Chester Festivals were exploring the possibility of opening a box office in the city centre and were looking at using the Little Roodee to expand car parking. He said that Chester Renaissance was now moving forward and that we need definite targets. A decision about the PAC should be made within 6 months.

(vi) Amphitheatre

Arlene Bloomberg (Friends of Chester in Concert) said they had organised many events in venues like the Town Hall, MBNA etc, plus a very successful 2-day event in the amphitheatre. She felt that we should explore a semi-permanent temporary structure at the amphitheatre.

(vii) Chester Festivals

Roger Gibson (Chester Philharmonic Orchestra) reported that Chester Festivals had been under staffed for a few months but that a new director was starting on 16th February and they would be re-assessing their stance

Geoff Clifton said that Chester Performs was working closely with Chester Festivals.

Richard Short (Cheshire West and Chester) stated that their funding would continue for the coming financial year but would then be reviewed.

David Pickering (Chester Renaissance) reported that they had recently launched a new festival - Chester the Giant City

Part III - Finance

Richard Short (Cheshire West & Chester) said the new council needs to look at all the options a.s.a.p. however, it doesn't come into being until April 1st and, for the first few months, would need to concentrate on essential services. Everything suggested would require some council funding, however they are required to save £30m during the first year so there would be little spare money available. Some commitments had already been made eg for the EPIC centre in Ellesmere Port. There was little likelihood of selling any assets due to the current financial situation. Cheshire West & Chester need to support a larger area, not just Chester, though they accept that culture and the arts are important and Chester is the 'brand' for the whole area. After 6 months they might be able to look at new developments. He felt that they must keep culture working in Chester as it connects with every other activity - education, sport, health etc.

Jim said we should use the coming year to plan carefully what to do when money is available. It was necessary to look at the whole picture of art and culture in the City, but this group must focus on the needs of the Performing Arts. We urgently need information about Gateway renovation costs and temporary buildings. The next meeting should concentrate on providers and consultation to secure a broad level of agreement.

Ian Jones (Tip Top) asked when the Gateway study would take place.

Andrew Bentley replied that Chester Performs had commissioned this and consultant should be arriving within the next week.

Ian said that Tip Top have already done a full costing for the Gateway and could have it running within a year.

Brian Westcott (Chester Operatic Society) said that use of the Gateway was the best option. Chester Chronicle had been running a campaign and he himself had collected over 200 signatures.

Part IV - General Topics

Andrew Bentley agreed with Jim that there was no point in recommending a way forward without complete agreement and we must liaise with the Council. He felt it may be that more than 1 venue was the solution. We need to get investment into Chester from organisations like NWDA and the Government as much less was now coming here since the Gateway closed. Any temporary space must be 'inspiring' to attract funding and we should take full advantage of our built heritage and good open spaces.

John Makinson (Chester Zoo) said that we need to include heritage, culture, the promotion of the Cathedral etc. into any funding applications. He felt that there was conflict between the long term and short term aims. A time limit of 2 years should be set for making a decision whether to go for a new PAC or not. We should define our vision and set a time limit.

Jim replied that we should focus on the PAC option and work towards that

Roger Gibson said we need some cheap temporary measures a.s.a.p. and asked where the Gateway money had gone.

Jim said that Chester Performs and Chester Festivals had received some and will continue to do so for the next 12 months but maybe not after that.

Wendy Sutton (Chester in Concert) asked what was Chester Performs budget.

Andrew Bentley replied that, previously, the Gateway had received £395K from the City Council, £60K from the County Council and £375 from the Arts Council. This year, Chester Performs had received £120K from the City, £40K from the County and £120K from the Arts Council. Chester Festivals had received £90K from the City.

Peter Bingham (Civic Trust) said that as residents, we tend to just accept the loss of venues and we must make the local authority know what we want.

Arlene Bloomberg said that we've had this vision for 20 years now and must see it come to fruition.

Part V Conclusions

Jim summarised the conclusions as follows:

- We must not wait for ING to provide our Performing Arts Centre

- It must be in the city centre

- It must fit in with other facilities

By a show of hands all these objectives were unanimously agreed by the meeting.

From here we must:

- Agree a design and position within 1 year (the area behind the library, linking with the Town Hall and the Odeon being Jim's preferred option)

- Get in before commercial interests

- Hold another meeting in about 6 weeks.

Roger suggested we put the minutes of the meeting on the Music in Chester website.

Date of Next Meeting To be advised - probably mid March