



# stamford civic society

Stamford

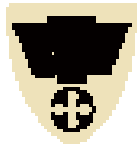
*first conservation town*

1967 - 2007

celebrating 40 years

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stamford civic society



# introduction

Stamford was designated as Britain's first Conservation Town in 1967 in recognition of the outstanding value of its built environment. Five years earlier, in 1962, a group of local people formed Stamford Civic Society with the aim of ensuring that what has been special about this place for hundreds of years should not be lost in the great sweep of post-war building and the inexorable growth of road traffic that was changing towns and cities throughout the country.

Three hundred years ago, Celia Fiennes said "*Stamford is as fine a built town of stone as may be seen*". Over the following 100 years, medieval Stamford was transformed into a Georgian town and, apart from the churches and the street pattern, there was scarcely a building she would have recognized. Yet another 150 years on, John Betjeman was able to agree with her when he described it as "*England's most attractive town*". W G Hoskins, historian and author of *The Making of the English Landscape*, said "*If there is a more beautiful town in the whole of England, I have yet to see it*". Can it be kept that way and yet remain a vibrant, living community that moves with the times?

Conservation status has not halted development and change in Stamford. Rather, it has encouraged people - and, sometimes, obliged them - to recognise what is special about the buildings and spaces that form the town and to take special care with them when they want to adapt or improve them for life, commerce or work in the 21st century.

There is the transformation of Red Lion Square and Sheepmarket with grants from Lincolnshire County Council, South Kesteven District Council, Welland Sub-Regional Partnership as well as support from the Commission on Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), English Heritage, The Arts Council and the English Tourist Board.



Stamford has an international reputation as one of the most historic and interesting towns in the country. In 1977 a survey of the town was undertaken by the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments. Since it became the first conservation town, around 8,000 others have followed our lead.

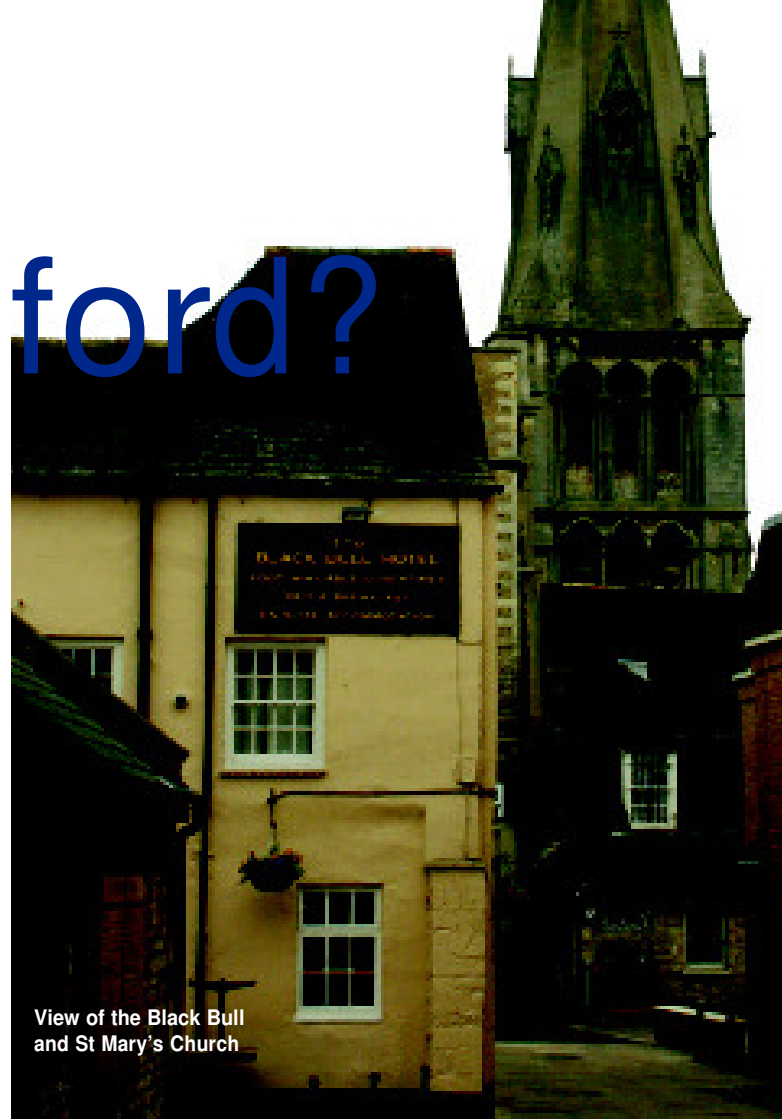
This booklet has been produced to mark a significant anniversary and to record the consistent commitment of Stamford Civic Society in promoting good urban design and management.

# why stamford?

*Of all the small towns in England, why was Stamford chosen as the first conservation area? Our chairman, John Plumb, has the answer.*

Stamford is fortunate in its location: the A1 links it north to south. The town sits astride the Jurassic limestone belt running from Dorset to north Yorkshire. Some of England's finest quarries for building stone were, and are still on its doorstep – Barnack, King's Cliffe, Clipsham and Ketton, not forgetting Collyweston where slates were quarried to roof Oxford and Cambridge colleges and the Westminster Parliament buildings as well as numerous other properties, grand or otherwise.

Like other towns, by the 1960s, the impact of the car on the built environment and on the need for car parks, together with the desire for larger retail outlets, was impacting on Stamford even though the building of the A1 by-pass took the north-south traffic largely out of the town in 1961. But the changing nature of retailing through the disappearance of family businesses, the loss of people living in the town centre and the announcement of the considerable expansion of nearby Peterborough, were threats both perceived and real.



View of the Black Bull  
and St Mary's Church

From its inception in 1889, the Kesteven County Council provided such services as education for the town but it was also the strategic planning authority. In the latter respect it was an enlightened authority that understood the threat posed to market towns. In 1963, the deputy planning officer, Dr K R Fennell (a man who should have a statue or at least a plaque in Stamford) produced a report entitled *The Preservation of Buildings of Special Architectural and Historical Interest in Central Stamford*. In this he pointed out that half of the listed buildings in the old county of Lincolnshire were, in fact, in Stamford. Preventing demolition and maintaining them in good order should be a matter of not just local concern but of national concern. The old regime of *listing* individual buildings had been established in 1950.

He called for an assessment of the powers available under existing planning legislation to prevent unsympathetic alterations or offensive advertising on facades, provide financial assistance towards repair costs and encourage the occupation of empty upper storeys. He believed that if these powers proved to be inadequate, the government should be lobbied to strengthen them. He also thought that the environmental factors which impacted on those buildings needed to be considered.

Dr Fennell's report identified five key areas of the town centre, not all similar in character, and posed the question whether there should or

could be an overall policy to protect the essential character of these parts of the town. Or did the traditional 'ad hoc' of individual planning changes prevail? His Council agreed the matter was urgent and that discussions should be entered into with the Ministry of Housing and Local Government in London.



**Walkers Bookshop**

You may remember some of the worst aspects of the changes nationally to the urban scene during the 1960s: large blocks of flats; roads driven through historic parts of towns; and the demolition of important historic buildings. Nationally, there was a general outcry and this was helpful to Stamford as it caused both councillors and politicians to question what was happening. Dr Fennell prepared a report for his Kesteven County Council in 1966 entitled *Stamford – Buildings of Special Architectural and Historic Interest*.

This modest title belies the fact that this was the most important document written about Stamford in recent years and will be seen in centuries to come as ranking with the Town Charter of 1461. Dr Fennell pointed out that legislation going through Parliament would be the basis of a new Civic Amenities Act dealing with many of the issues identified in his previous report and also taking into account national reports dealing with the impact of traffic in towns. Stamford was also to have an updated town plan at this time and Dr Fennell saw this could only be done effectively in the context of an overall policy for its important buildings and their settings. His main recommendations were to establish an overall heritage area, embracing all the properties within the boundaries of the old medieval walls together with those flanking High Street, St Martin's. This included all properties, whether or not listed, to preserve the character of the whole area.

The work and policies enshrined in these two reports were timely as the government of the day wanted to undertake four pilot studies of historic towns to define heritage protection areas. They had in mind Bath, York, Chichester and King's Lynn, not the smaller Stamford. But all the preparatory work had been done in Stamford and so Dr Fennell commended it to the Ministry as a pilot study for the new policy. Not surprisingly, as less cost would be incurred, the Ministry jumped at the idea and central Stamford was designated as the first conservation area in England in 1967.

*(based on an article first written for Lincolnshire Life in February 2007)*



# formation of the civic society

*Stephen Hart is a founder-member of the Civic Society and continues to sit on the Committee. He remembers the early days.*

Stamford Civic Society was formed on 12 October 1962. At that time, Stamford was a Borough Council and as such was a planning authority within the then Kesteven County Council with headquarters at Sleaford.

In those days there was very little public consultation by local planning authorities on planning applications and it was largely this and the absence of enlightened architectural expertise at the Borough that prompted the Society's formation with the aims of promoting good design, environmental education and commenting on planning proposals.

It was originally decided to have a general committee consisting of representatives from every amenity organization in the town. In practice this did not work and a hard core of environmentally inclined enthusiasts (as it is today) became the Executive Committee. Initially, the Society was not popular with the Council who regarded it as trespassing on its territory, but now, forty-five years later, in a more consultative environment, a cooperative relationship exists between the Society and the Local Authority.

Since the Society's foundation, the Committee has met almost every month to examine and comment to the Local Authority on development proposals and applications affecting Listed Buildings within the town. As well as commenting on plans, other matters relating to the town environment are considered and over the years the Society has been involved in discussions on many such issues.



**Stephen Hart** B Arch, RIBA

Stephen Hart has served on the Committee of Stamford Civic Society since its inception 45 years ago. His family has lived in Stamford since the Battle of Waterloo and this, coupled with his professional expertise, has made him a valued and important contributor to the work of the Society. Since his retirement, Stephen has become an expert in the flint architecture of East Anglia and has published three books – *The Round Church Towers of England*, *Flint Architecture of East Anglia* and *Flint Flushwork: a medieval masonry art*.

# civic society chairmen (1962-2007)

Over the past 45 years the Society has had seven chairmen.

- Basil Deed:** Headmaster of Stamford School
- Eric (Jack) Till:** former GP and local historian
- John Smith:** Curator of Stamford Museum
- Bill Packer:** Housemaster of Ancaster House at Stamford School
- Gladys Bland:** Headmistress of Stamford High School
- David Heeley:** Architectural interior designer
- John Plumb:** Local historian and former Director of Community Services in Nottinghamshire



Browne's Hospital gardens

# civic society awards

In 2000, the Civic Society decided to acknowledge the high standards of design and craftsmanship that were present in the town. Awards have been given for various achievements including the design and building of Lady Romaine Court, refurbishment of 40 St Mary's Street (Jaeger), the restoration of Barn Hill House and gardens, repairs to the lead work of St John's Church roof and the gardens of Browne's Hospital.



Lady Romaine Court



# major concerns

*The Society has never been afraid of taking up a cause if there was a likelihood of it damaging Stamford. Some we won, some we lost.*

One matter of great local significance was Local Government Re-organisation in 1973. Stamford Borough was a small island surrounded by four rural district councils in four different counties: South Kesteven R.D. to the East, Ketton R.D. to the North and West, Oundle & Thrapston R.D. to the South and Barnack R.D. to the South-East.

The Society favoured a scheme in which Stamford retained its borough status as the centre of an enlarged area embracing the surrounding villages that naturally looked to Stamford as their town. For example, many of the surrounding rural districts (the offices of Ketton and Barnack R.D.s) were already in Stamford. But although many inter-council meetings were held, no agreement could be reached, each battling for their own interests, and so the present arrangement was imposed by the Boundary Commission and the town lost its Borough status. This impinged severely on planning decisions.



**Stamford Railway Station**

Over the past 45 years, the voice of the Society has been heard on issues including the east/west bypass, pedestrianising of the High Street and Ironmonger Street, the heavy lorry ban, the Shopfront Design Guide, and bringing back into use the upper floors of town-centre properties. It was directly involved with improving the fabric and site of St Leonard's Priory and the conservation of the arches from the great hall of Stamford's medieval castle on Castle Dyke. Informative interpretation boards have been placed at St Leonard's Priory and outside St Peter's Gate and these are the first of a planned series to enhance understanding of the town's important heritage.

It has also sought to influence for the better major developments such as the housing at Phillips Court off Water Street, Warrenne Keep and Bath Row and more recently Blashfields Place in Wharf Road and the re-development of the Bath Row area behind St Mary's Hill and St Mary's Street, improving the exterior of St Leonard's Priory and the medieval door and arches of Leet Hall in Castle Dyke.

The Society was also responsible for several reports affecting the town, including *Stamford and the Car*, and worked with South Kesteven District Council on making Northfields a conservation area.

The Society failed to prevent the demolition of the Albert Hall and the erection of an inappropriate modern building, the mosaic fascia of

Westgate House (now much improved by the M&S redevelopment), the development of houses in front of the railway station so that the view of the town, cherished by many, was obliterated for ever. It failed to stop the demolition of Northfields House, or Blackfriar's House with the Victorian summer pavilion in the garden. Often there have been no great triumphs but many compromises.



**St Leonard's Priory**

Other issues on which the Society continues to battle includes the effect of salt crystals on walls, graffiti in the town, repairs necessary to various buildings, awareness of historic features in property undergoing refurbishment, signage that is inappropriate, noise and rubbish.

# being a civic society member

If you care about Stamford then you should become a member. As well as the important planning issues that affect everyone living and working in the town, there is a range of activities throughout the year that should appeal to most people.

**Spring and Autumn lectures** - Mainly covering town planning, conservation and preservation but with other eclectic subjects, usually historical and architectural with a connection with Stamford.

**St Leonard's Priory** - Members of the Society banded together and physically removed years of overgrown vegetation inside and outside the building. Then we had a party there to celebrate! We still help care for it and use it for special events.

**Summer Guided tours and village walks** - These prove very popular and are often oversubscribed. Some of the places visited are Exton, Ketton, Oundle, Easton-on-the-Hill, Market Harborough.

**Open Gardens** - In 2005, some of the residents of Barn Hill opened their gardens to members. This was the first time such an event had taken place and was much appreciated.

The Society welcomes all new members especially those who want to be involved with our work and can offer expert knowledge and skills.

Information boards are in St John's church and are kept up to date with news of the Society.



The river looking towards Albert Bridge

# become a member of the Stamford Civic Society

Send your name, address and telephone number to:

**The Membership Secretary, Stamford Civic Society,  
PO Box 205, Stamford, Lincolnshire PE9 4YS**

Membership fee is currently £7.50 per person per annum. Do let us know your particular interests and if you have specialist skills or knowledge.

## **Present Committee 2006-2007**

John Plumb (Chairman), Judith Spelman (Vice-Chairman), Janet Sears (Secretary), Ros Nicol (Membership Secretary), Gwyneth Gibbs, Martin Grimes, (Treasurer), Richard Barry, Philippa Barney, Derrick Fawsitt, Simon Harris, Stephen Hart, Giles Hopkinson, Graddon Rowlands, Suzy Sharp, Pam Sharp, Christine Stanier, Peter Stevens, Ross Thain.

The Committee also calls upon professional architects and structural engineers for help and advice when necessary.

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Compiled by Judith Spelman and Ken McKay with important contributions from Stephen Hart and Giles Hopkinson.

Photography: Judith Spelman



Designed and Printed by APL 01273 566177



St John's Church Door