Huddersfield: A University Town

In the first of the 2015 Yorkshire Practice Seminar programme we were presented with Huddersfield: A University Town. From an initial plethora of statistics it became immediately clear what a significant impact that the University of Huddersfield has had on the economy of the town over many years.

The University’s Director of Estates and Facilities, Colin Blair set out the impact of the higher education sector on the UK economy, and on Huddersfield in particular, in the following manner. 156 UK universities provide:

- £60bn property portfolio nationwide
- £2.5bn annual capital expenditure
- £0.5 billion per annum on maintenance and upgrades
- Huddersfield University contributes £300m to the local economy
- With 2,000 staff and 22,000 students
- University has invested £100m capital expenditure over the past 10 years
- Huddersfield University plans to spend £200m over the next 10 years

These impressive statistics underpin the University’s ambitions. It is the first university to gain royal patronage in the past 120 years; it has significant international business reach. This includes an on-site 3M Corporation innovation centre, direct links to Siemens and Boeing. With the innovation centre there is a two-way flow between major international corporations and SMEs. Both Sir George Buckley, (3M Corporation) and Paul Greenwood, (US head of Nestlé) along with Sir Patrick Stewart, Huddersfield University’s Vice Chancellor provides strong leadership and ambassadorial roles, directly linking the University to international markets.

Over the next 5 years University plans to expand into its Western campus to provide 35,000 m² to add significantly to the “student experience. The development plans to provide new law, music and humanities faculties. This will enable space to be freed up within existing campus buildings for internal refurbishment and expansion.

Huddersfield University is the proud owners of 8 listed buildings: the Ramsden Building, built as the Technical School and Mechanics’ Institution in 1884, St. Paul’s Church, a Commissioners’ Church of 1829, The Milton Congregational Church of 1885, Firth Street Mills of 1866, Larchfield Mills of 1866, a canal warehouse of 1776, a second, rather later canal warehouse, and a bath house of 1955. The University also owns the site of the long-demolished but formerly listed Zetland Mills. Outside Oxford or Cambridge, the University is probably amongst the leading academic custodians of listed buildings.

It is the impact of the University on the historic character of Huddersfield to which the second part of the seminar turned.

Kirklees Council’s lead on Conservation and Design, Nigel Hunston gave the seminar a broad sweep of the historic assets of Huddersfield. These include 4500 listed buildings, 460 of which are in the town centre, with 59 conservation areas, 29 Grade 2 listed buildings at
risk and three Grade 2*buildings at risk. He explained sometimes that such a large and demanding historic estate “could be a bit of a nightmare!”

Nigel was frank about the positive relationship that he and his officers enjoyed with University of Huddersfield and he set out a few “watchwords” that describe this relationship. Indeed, he explained they had much wider implications than with just one client.

- Historic buildings add to the richness and diversity of character of Huddersfield;
- whilst development issues surrounding them are often “more difficult” to resolve, successfully completed it is those buildings that are remembered by both students and visitors alike;
- with the acceptance of the need for student housing it is how new uses are integrated with older buildings that provide some of the greatest challenges;
- historic buildings (and their owners) must be adaptable and flexible to accommodate change;
- when dealing with historic assets, both developers and officers need to be open and pragmatic, where collaboration is a key word;
- a clue to the future is contained within the NPPF where “optimum viable use” gives some of the best guidance on how to accommodate new uses into an historic estate.

St Georges Square, Huddersfield. Dominated by the railway station, described by Pevsner as “one of the best early railway stations in England”, St George’s Square an almost perfect example of early urban planning. It has been described as the best urban townscape outside Grainger Town in Newcastle. If one wants a prime example of excellent rehabilitation of classical Victorian buildings, one need go no further than Huddersfield.

The seminar was organised and ably chaired by Stan Driver, formerly of Kirklees Council and current Hon. Treasurer of RTPI Yorkshire.

**Bob Wolfe, RTPI Yorkshire Hon. Secretary**

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