

take part

Millgate Conservation Society

Review (11th November 2010)

This review was provided as part of the East Midlands Take Part dissemination process.
The review was provided by the East Midlands Take Part Champions, the Workers' Educational Association East Midlands and the University of Lincoln.





Introduction

Millgate is an historic area of Newark with many listed buildings and is also a conservation area. In 1977 the street of Millgate was going to be partly demolished due to planned road widening, largely due to an increase in traffic. The outrage people felt at the time led to a pressure group being formed to protect the area as many residents felt strongly on this issue - Millgate Conservation Society was born.

The group wanted to protect Millgate and lobbied to have a by-pass built around the town instead. Their goal was achieved and the group continued to manage conservation issues in the neighbourhood and advise residents on how to look after their listed buildings. In the mid-1990s, British Waterways attempted to get planning permission for a large housing development on Millgate. Again the group became active, membership swelled to a hundred as local people came together to ensure the development did not go ahead. Fifteen years later, the group is still there lobbying on these and similar issues as they arise which demonstrates the group's resolve and passion.

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A. Review and Evaluation

The purpose of the Take Part review and evaluation was to enable the participating groups to review and evaluate their progress over the last year and to generate a report reflecting this. The report can be used by the group to contribute to its external evaluation for the year. Take Part in the East Midlands was also using the review to generate information about the skills and attributes of community organisers/active citizens.

Successes & Sustainability

Recently, Millgate Conservation Society has been in discussions with the Chief Planner at the local authority and has built a good working relationship with him. He is not local to the area, so members of the group have been able to show him around Millgate and explain local issues to him.

In close proximity to the Millgate area, there have been a couple of planning issues that the group have had to speak out against in the last 6-8 months. One was the proposal to demolish some houses in the area of Pelham Street in Newark, and the group clashed on this issue with another local group, the Newark Civic Trust. The latter group argued that the houses on Pelham Street were 'an eyesore' and supported the development proposal, whereas Millgate believed they were a viable component in the area's historic environment. Another such issue was the demolition of the old bus depot which existed close to Millgate. This is now being developed, but, as group member David Marcombe commented: 'it was just as important to Newark's heritage as many of the other buildings and was a classic piece of architecture in its own right – where else can you see a building of its kind dating from the 1930s in the area?'

Yet another example of the matters raised is the old 'Crossing House' on Farndon Road; the plans to demolish it and develop the area met with huge opposition and led to a lot of lobbying within the community. The Local Authority eventually turned down the demolition application. One issue that Millgate Conservation Society has been focussing on recently is the inclusion of more elderly residents from the community. As David explained *'the elderly residents want to make a difference and be involved but they don't know how to go about it. We have been advising them on this and helping integrate them into what we do'*.

Sue Pickles added *'yes, there are no quick responses, no quick projects, things take time – it's a long game'*. And this is reflected in the proposed development of the 'White House', a listed building owned by Thomas Earp, a local MP, which British Waterways were trying to develop but the building has now been purchased by the local marina and they have plans to restore it.

A final project they have been working on involves working in collaboration with the Local History Society in order to put up a number of Heritage Plaques in dedication to some of Newark's historically prominent residents. For example, David is keen to commemorate the house in Newark where Arthur Thistlewood lived. Thistlewood is famous for his part in the Cato Street Conspiracy, a failed attempt to assassinate members of parliament in 1820, for which he was hanged. According to David, Thistlewood spent some of his early life in Newark working as an apprentice to a local apothecary. This project shows that the group strive to improve knowledge of and educate others about many aspects of Millgate's, and Newark's, historic environment.



Strengths and Limitations: what could have gone better?

Millgate Conservation Society continue to carry on in light of the current cuts. It may not seem that this would affect a conservation group run entirely by volunteers, but interestingly they pointed out that it is the 'knock-on' effects of the cuts that have caused issues for them. Recently, as part of the Local Authority cuts, the Conservation Officer at Newark & Sherwood District Council took early retirement and there are no plans to replace him. This has created a 'lack of continuity' and has been damaging to the group's relationship with the council; their voluntary group can only fill the gap in some ways and it means they are no longer kept abreast with current developments and issues from within the council.

Another point is that the group believe they face 'constant education battles' and that it is often a struggle to make builders and, sometimes, new residents understand issues around conservation. David believes that *'drip by drip the character of the community and area is being eroded'*.

Something that has raised concerns with the group and residents alike lately is the spate of neo-Nazi style graffiti that has been painted on buildings and houses. A number of swastikas has been noted on the houses of foreign residents, the doctor's surgery, the walls of Newark Castle and other local buildings. The episode found media attention both locally (Newark Advertiser) and regionally (BBC News East Midlands) and created bad publicity and ill-feeling for the area of Millgate and Newark generally. As Anita pointed out, Millgate is a multi-cultural area with at least 8 different nationalities including French, Moroccan, American and British.

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B. Active Citizenship

Active Citizenship

'Caring for your area. Speaking up for qualities that you value' (Sue Pickles). David was more sceptical – *'for a long time I was convinced it merely reflected those in society who "traditionally" did things, you know Neighbourhood Watch and all that'. But now I am coming round to the idea more and more'*.

Big Society

Generally, the group finds it hard to understand – 'what does it represent' they asked?' David added *'I mean, there is a "society", sure, but what is "Big Society"?''*

Getting Involved

'Connecting and communicating with other, likeminded people' said Anita Cutts. Sue added that the whole idea around getting involved in your community and 'Big Society' often has a negative effect. Recently, Millgate Conservation Society were offered the local Community Centre by the council on the premise that the group would essentially run and manage the centre and maintain its upkeep, but would use it as a base for their group, etc. However, the group, although on the lookout for an office, declined as they said it would be too difficult to run. The group felt that there are a lot of issues involved and it would pose too many problems for them.



C. Reflection

One of the issues they wanted to talk about under this final section was the issue of how they go about their funding. They are, largely, not funded (by means of grants, etc) and instead raise revenues by charging membership – which David complained residents were not always supportive of. He said sometimes people begrudge paying it but want to be involved in the group, something which he found hard to understand, after all *'It's only £5 per year for membership!'*. This perhaps shows people do often want to be involved but are less prepared to do this than others. They also accept donations – one local business recently donated £500 to the group – and have been given funds by Nottinghamshire County Council under their Local Improvement Scheme for some of their bigger projects. Finally, they put on talks for their group, which also raises money.

David made the point that in the current climate *'... we need to think more about spending money, not just raising it'*. He suggested that they are not short of funds but that often the group are too cautious and continue collecting money without spending it.

Despite all their good work and good intentions, the group are often seen by some locals as 'the Conservation Police'. As Sue asks *'how do you get around this?'*. They are obviously all passionate in what they do, but what, I asked them, made (and still makes) you do it? *'Initially it was a sharing of interests. Here we had a group of likeminded residents who all had similar values – an appreciation of the environment and the community. When we first started the local council was promoting the idea of getting the community to appreciate this. We thought "hang on, maybe we can work together"'. So we moved on from there. There is also a social aspect to the group too – we enjoy getting together and discussing and debating issues that we all feel strongly about, issues that are relevant to us as a community. It didn't take long for us all to realise we all had certain skills and areas of knowledge that when put together collectively made us a successful group'* explained Sue.

David added that for him personally he had been involved in these issues for most of his working career; he retired 18 months ago from the University of Nottingham where he taught Local and Regional History at MA level. In his position, he often covered conservation and local history topics, topics that were and still are close to his heart.

Sue was very active in the Civic Trust in Newark (with whom she is still actively involved) particularly in their campaign many years ago to try and prevent a new library being built adjacent to Newark Castle – an involvement that helped her considerably when she became part of the Millgate group. She also said how she has always enjoyed being involved in active campaigning and organising events.

For Anita, we have another angle, as equally important to Millgate's story as the others'. Anita moved to Newark from the city of Nottingham several years ago and found she shared the concepts and values of the group so became a member. She only got involved on a small-scale initially, but saw this involvement grow over the years and is now the group's chairperson.

Sue finished the interview with the following comment: *'Some people are retiring and introverted – society copes with that...other people, however, have a fundamental need to be involved'*.

Those people are groups like Millgate.

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*Anita Cutts, Sue Pickles and David Marcombe
from the Millgate Conservation Society were interviewed at Newark Museum on Millgate
by Helen Bates and Matt Beresford on Thursday 11th November.*