

## **Meeting 3 of LArCH Group (Lynn Arts, Culture and Heritage)**

**Tuesday 1st May 2018 7.00 at the Undercroft, Thoresby College**

**Present:** *Ivor Rowlands (Chair) Veronica Sekules (Groundwork Gallery) Sally Turff (Ward Forum) Martin Little, Chris Fox (Kings Lynn Players) Esther Boehm (WNAA) Darren Taylor (KL BID), Kathy Cossins (Greyfriars Arts Space) Anne Roberts (WNAA, Greyfriars Art Space, Minutes), Nick Balaam (KL Preservation Trust), Amanda Arterton (Kings Lynn G&S Society)*

### **Apologies received from :**

*Adrian Parker, Lesley Bambridge*

**Ivor gave an outline of developments since the committee last met a year ago.** Since the failure of the Council's Heritage Lottery bid, Chris, Ivor and Veronica met with Elizabeth Nockolds in May 2017, but she made it clear that the Council was not prepared to engage in any further dialogue other than with their own consultants.

The Guildhall project sits under the scrutiny of the Council's Regeneration Panel. Chris Bamfield was due to report on progress in October 2017, but this was omitted from the agenda and deferred to January 2018. Ivor queried this at the time with Peter Gidney, Chair of the Panel, but no explanation was forthcoming. However, the January meeting was held in closed session. Ivor queried this with Peter Gidney and requested that a separate meeting or briefing be given, but his was refused. A press release then announced the formation of the "Informal Working Group". Ivor was among those invited to speak to the group for 15 minutes. No discussion or feedback took place apart from thanks for attending. The IWG was due to report back on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. This was again in closed session, although Ivor, and Jill Bennett from BBC Radio Norfolk went to the meeting anyway as a means of expressing their concern. Since then Ivor has contacted Sir Henry Bellingham and had an hour's meeting with him. Subsequently Sir Henry contacted Chris Bamfield, Elizabeth Nockolds, Peter Gidney and Avril Wright. As a result, Peter Gidney has agreed to meet with Ivor on Wednesday May 2<sup>nd</sup>.

### **History of the Guildhall Lease.**

The St George's Art Trust was formed in 1951 and took on the first lease from the National Trust. At some unknown point afterwards, the lease was taken over by St George's Guildhall Limited. In 1992, relatively recently, SGGL were unable to fulfil their obligations and the lease was only then taken over by the Borough Council.

The Guildhall is currently omitted from the National trust's handbook. However, with their new CEO, the National trust want to have a greater presence in urban areas, to help those living in, or preserving historic buildings. Would they therefore look again at the council's repairing lease? They could also assist with marketing, retail and catering.

Sally reported that NT members come to visit the guildhall and are frequently dismayed at the state of the interior. It was also suggested that Sir Henry Bellingham might be the person to approach the NT if the Council is unwilling

It was felt that the Council, misguidedly, holds the LArCH committee responsible for the failure of their bid. Although Kings Lynn's bid was for £2.4 million, Sir Henry had pointed out to Ivor that this was a comparatively modest amount – Hastings has received 14 million for the regeneration of their pier. A bid for two million has already been successful for the Town Hall and Saturday Market.

The Council's Regeneration panel will now leave the issue of the Guildhall with the IWG. They will also need the backing of the community if any future bid is to succeed. It was agreed that we need to convince the Council that we genuinely wish to help. However, Nick Balaam commented that the jargon and lack of substance in the newly-issued Cultural Prospectus document makes it difficult to deal with the Council group on a serious basis and that this was a poor document from a professionally paid group. Whereas the Council are focused on minimising costs, our agenda is based on maximising benefit.

**Use of the Galleries and other Buildings.** These are currently unaffordable for most local artists. Hence two local artists, who have previously shown successfully in the Shakespeare Barn, are currently preparing a Festival Fringe exhibition in the rooms above the slot machine arcade) Esther asked if exhibiting rates are negotiable – Ivor suggested that everything is negotiable, and it was shameful that the artist are not seriously in dialogue with the Festival, Alive and the Council so come to an arrangement. It was felt that a group negotiation might take a long time. The Council has been negotiating with the WNAA to hold workshops in the galleries as part of Heritage Open Day. Kathy also spoke of the impending loss of Greyfriars Art Space in Kings Lynn which currently offers workshops and affordable exhibition space for artists. Finding an alternative space would be prohibitively expensive. The future of the proposed Heritage Building course is still uncertain. The White Barn is under discussion as a possible cinema. No publicity about artists' exhibitions in the galleries is given by either Alive Leisure, Visit West Norfolk or the Festival, despite all of the organisations having a direct interest in promoting successful use of the galleries. The Corn Exchange could also do more by emailing interested exhibition goers.

**Comparison with the Wells Arts Centre bid,** which was not written by the Council. The Wells Arts Centre Trust already owned the Maltings and now have an impressive complex including a cinema, Galleries, and café.

**An Alternative proposal.** It was suggested that King's Lynn could focus on Shakespeare's links with the town. Andrew Jarvis of Chenchwarton, who has excellent theatre connections, has put together a proposal for a Shakespeare festival, which could include a theatre school in the Shakespeare Barn.

**Looking forward:** it was also felt that it would be better and less threatening to the Council for an intermediary to introduce alternative plans and ideas to the Council. Well-known names put forward included Prince Charles, Dr. Hugo Palm, the Getty Foundation or wealthy pharmaceutical companies in Cambridge. Martin reported that there are over 500 charitable trusts who might be approached for help.

It was also felt that the appointment of a young, bright administrator with a sound knowledge of the arts is needed to head up any future bid.

**Ivor's meeting with Peter Gidney.** Ivor will ask him to share the thinking of the informal working group and aim to persuade him of the advantages of appointing a dedicated Administrator.

Chris Fox and the whole meeting thanked Ivor for all his hard work and perseverance with this difficult issue. The meeting closed at 9.00 p.m.

**Part of Ivor's Email report on his meeting with Peter Gidney is included below:**

*"Peter was attentive and interested in what I had to say and made quite a number of notes throughout our 80 minute meeting. He clearly shared some of our enthusiasm for creating a more ambitious plan for the Guildhall and is aware and supportive of the historical significance of the building and the role it has played as an Arts Centre in recent years. He readily admits that the image of the town is not good and referred to the "CEO's wife syndrome", whereby successive CEOs of prospective companies that have considered re-locating to King's Lynn have been put off when visiting with their wife/family and discovered that they would not want to live here. Peter understands the positive impact that a regenerated and thriving Guildhall / Arts Centre, at the heart of a vibrant cultural scene, could have on the town.*

*On the other hand:*

*Peter said that the role of the Regeneration Panel (and other committees) was merely to scrutinise the executive and not to initiate anything. He gave the strong impression that most of the borough Councillors were powerless to affect anything and that all decisions were made by the cabinet (comprising only 7 Councillors, plus 6 officers). Peter had very little knowledge of the recent activities around the Guildhall and the demise of KLACTION. He hadn't read the HLF bid nor the rejection letter and seemed unaware of the contents of either. He was seemingly unaware of the National Trust lease arrangements or the recent changes at the head of that organisation and its new policy proposals. The Informal Working Group had emerged from the ranks of these "powerless" Councillors and they were all surprised to then find that a cabinet member (Elizabeth Nockolds) was sitting in on all of their meetings. The implication being that the IWG would be intimidated and/or controlled by this. He was very supportive of Avril's enthusiasm in leading the IWG but seemed surprised that external "participants" were not allowed to be involved in a 2-way dialogue. He gave me the distinct impression that he was deeply frustrated by the way the council works."*

**Ivor will now write to Ray Harding**

Anne Roberts

4<sup>th</sup> May 2018