

## History of Frome Civic Society (written in 2004)

Frome Civic Society was established about thirty years ago (in April 1970) by a group of townspeople who were concerned over the clearance and redevelopment of one of the largest and earliest areas of industrial housing in England; known as the Trinity housing area. It was built on a grid plan on a hill just outside Frome between 1665 and 1725 to accommodate workers in the woollen mills.

As a result of a vigorous campaign, about half of the area was saved from the bulldozers and eventually refurbished. It is today a desirable area of small terrace houses.

Frome Civic Society fought for many years for the preservation of Rook Lane Chapel, a grade I listed Congregational chapel, and last year (2003), the Chapel was finally restored by a local firm of architects who designed a modern extension at the rear, and who now occupy the extension and the gallery, while the Rook Lane Arts Trust has use of the ground floor for the community.

With 373 listed buildings, Frome has more historic buildings than any other town in Somerset and in recent years many of these have benefited from grants through a succession of programmes, including Town Scheme (1988-96), Conservation Area Partnership (1996-99), Townscape Heritage Initiative (1999-2002) and Heritage Economic Regeneration Scheme (2002-2005).

In 1994-5, the Society, together with Mendip District Council, called in the Civic Trust Regeneration Unit who carried out an environmental audit of the town, and identified a range of actions for the future. Many of these have now been accomplished, but some significant ones still remain to be achieved. Among these include the regeneration of 34 acres of semi derelict factory buildings, known as Saxonvale, immediately adjoining the town centre. Since 1995, the District Council has been endeavouring to re-plan the area, but has met with complications because of the fragmented land ownership.

Within the last year, the Council and the South West Regional Development Authority have commissioned planning consultants, Gillespie's, to prepare a Planning Brief for the area. This has now been published, and proposes an imaginative strategy for regenerating the area. It includes a mix of shops, flats, houses, workplaces, and a riverside park, all knitted together with a network of streets and squares. The accompanying Design Codes set out expectations of high quality development, but there may be resistance from landowners to deliver this quality.

About five years ago (c 1999), the Civic Society took the decision to merge with the Frome Society for Local Study, so membership of one organisation, now automatically includes membership of the other. Recently, we have redesigned and reprinted our membership leaflet. and will hold meetings to discuss and track the Saxonvale proposals.

On day to day matters, members of the Society, meet every three weeks to examine planning applications and send comments to the Town and District Councils. It also organises the annual Heritage Open Days in Frome, which this year will occur on Sunday afternoon 12 September between 2-5pm.

On 5 June the Society is making a reciprocal visit to the Stroud Civic Society, who visited Frome two years ago, to see how Stroud is coping with regenerating the town.

We are optimistic for the future. The recent survey of Market Towns by the Campaign to protect rural England (CPRE) ranked Frome third out of 120 market towns, based on retaining individuality and distinctiveness, sensitive planning and new development, architecture, sense of history, thriving shops and businesses and community spirit.

John Peverley 2004