

Trafford Greenspace Strategy

– A Response and a contribution to the Wider Debate about Trafford’s Heritage.

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The document entitled *Greenspace Strategy* (pdf.), which I first read at the end of September 2009, is ostensibly a document about the importance of what Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council calls ‘greenspace’ for “sustainable communities and neighbourhoods” (p. 3). It itemises a range of currently fashionable words and phrases in its contents (p. 2) – ‘biodiversity’, ‘Climate Change and Sustainability’ (p. 2) among others - to suggest that this document is intended to reinforce the ‘green credentials’ of the Council. The document lists in statistical detail the parks and green spaces in the borough according to area and, on the surface (of their maps), it looks as if Trafford has a wealth of green space (pp. 41 – 66). Parts 2 and 3 deal with current and future ‘management of the greenspace’. We also gather that Trafford respects the historic built heritage of the borough

Now this is curious. Let us consider some of these claims. Trafford MBC’s record in the management of the green spaces and infrastructure (buildings and so on) within those green spaces has been, at best, neglectful, at worst disgraceful - a fundamental betrayal of trust that its citizens place in their elected representatives and paid senior executives. Trafford’s green credentials are hardly supported by the Planning Committee’s (18 September 2009) decision to approve plans for the development of a £600 million gas-powered power station at Carrington. It has already been criticised by Professor David MacKay of Cambridge University (Professor in the Physics Department) and Manchester’s Friends of the Earth (*Trafford Metro News*, 25 September 2009). It adds to the already proposed gas-fired power station further along Manchester Road at Carrington. Trafford becomes a major energy supplier using questionable resources. Among other things, the latest proposed plant would meet government criteria for new power stations because some of the energy would go towards meeting the needs of nearby *new* housing developments – which at present do not exist. So where will these new houses be built? – on ‘greenspace’. as this ‘green’ document admits (cf. below).

Trafford’s green credentials are further destroyed by the cynical manipulation of green space behind the ever-expanding and hideously designed South Trafford College, at Stamford Brook. From the outside what looks like a hurriedly built set of social housing was intended to be the most eco-friendly estate in Europe. In fact it leaks “like a sieve” (*The Telegraph*, 18 Feb. 2008, Charles Glover, Environment Editor and Leeds Metropolitan University’s advisors reports). More than that, however, the whole site is on what was listed greenbelt land entrusted on behalf of the people to the National Trust. A body too big for its own good, unable to manage what nationally is entrusted to it on behalf of the nation, it has resorted to the ploy of selling green fields, historically arable and dairy farmland, in ‘Trust’ locations so that council taxes could swell Trafford’s coffers and to enable deals with developers to ensure an infrastructure of ‘construction enterprise’.

As for showing respect for the ‘built heritage’ within the green spaces and parkland of Trafford, the record is dreadful. In spite of Trafford Council’s attempt to claim credit for gaining ‘listed’ status for the Sale Hotel, thus saving it from demolition by developers, it was local people who fought for, and saved, the building. Photo shoots with councillors always wanting ‘favourable’ publicity, flashing their conservation credentials, do not fool the electors. One has only to look at the appalling state of Watling Gate House in Newton Park, Timperley, to see a symbol of Trafford’s understanding of ‘conservation’ – ‘Let a listed building fall into absolute chaos in order to obtain a compulsory demolition order.’ £35,000 spent on security, we are told. Security that even a child can breach. For £4,500 at current prices they could have erected secure galvanised pallisade fencing using their own work force as labour nine feet high round the house and garden until a use was found for the building. They fool no one. In this case our belief in the duty of care that the council owes to the people they represent is badly shaken when one sees drug dealers, drug users, young children playing on a dangerous roof, flimsy fencing left to fall down and rest where it has been broken. The artefacts left to Altrincham now languish, hidden, in what was the Town Hall. Yet this council writes in its ‘Greenspace’ document about making “Better use of buildings in greenspace” (p. 20) – ‘Better use’? – Oh, yes, Watling Gate, you mean.

Trafford points to its ‘achievement’ at Sale Water Park as another example of its conservation credentials. Well, let us look at the facts. Sale Water Park is a new phenomenon, a gravel pit created out of the political desire from the 1960s onwards to build a huge motorway network around Manchester. The evidence exists a few yards from the ‘water park’ – a noisy, smelly carriageway for the endless procession of cars and lorries that pump out co2 on their way, mainly, to and from the airport and its commercial and domestic outlets. Yet, even if we accept it as a ‘water park’, compare it with Chorlton Water Park, managed by Manchester City Council – not by the satellite borough. Sale Water Park is a gravel pit filled with water, used by noisy ski-boats at weekends, surrounded by a cinder and broken tarmac track with poor refreshment facilities and just a semblance of respect for the natural environment. It is a poorly managed site. The Mersey Valley Authority has done far more than Trafford here in the ‘wetlands’ adjoining the Park and on the Mersey banks. Chorlton Water Park is a site of international importance for its flora, fauna and biological diversity, peaceful, beautiful, filled with wild life. Sale Water Park – a site of local embarrassment. Wildfowl have a poor life on this stretch of water.

In Sale Moor Trafford have met fierce resistance to their proposal to sell Warrener Street free car park, a lifeline for local shops and shoppers in the village. In line with Trafford MBC.’s policies in Altrincham, Urmston and Sale, they propose to offer the land to prospective ‘developers’ – yet again that word so favoured by Trafford MBC – for, no doubt, another supermarket to be built. And, of course, the developer then owns the land in front of the supermarket as has happened in Sale, Altrincham and elsewhere. Public assets are sold to private speculators. What happens to that land when they go down the path of ‘Woollies’?

The list is endless – the abandoned site around Stretford Town Hall built by John Rylands, the neglected Essoldo cinema opposite, the awful dual carriageway A56 that splits Stretford into two. And what happened to the old Longford Hall in Stretford? Why, of course, it was demolished in 1995. To cap it all – the one building saved in

Trafford, the jewel in their conservation crown, is, appropriately, the little loo near Tesco's in Sale. Not only is it saved; it is now increased in height and is a good example of what sympathetic change can do. Is it not a sorry state when the only building preserved and enhanced in Trafford is what was once the public lavatory? Is this another symbol for Trafford?

More profoundly, much more disturbingly for anyone in Trafford concerned about their quality of life in this region – and for whatever reason – is the underpinning framework that guides this so-called 'greenspace' document. Fundamentally the philosophy within their pages is governed by a megalomaniac vision of the whole region. "Trafford," the document trumpets, "is thriving, diverse, prosperous and culturally vibrant. A Borough at the Heart of the Manchester City Region, celebrated as the Enterprise capital of the North West ...". Once an official document starts to use capital letters for nouns and adjectives in the middle of a sentence you know at once it is both illiterate and without thought – a coded scream of its own desperate need to impress us. Now any GCSE English Language student knows the difference between fact and opinion; and if you live in Stretford, parts of the north end of Trafford, parts of Sale, Timperley and Altrincham, you know that is the language of delusion. The borough that gave Manchester the title of 'Gunchester', the borough still with that capability, the borough that neglects over half of the youth of the area by classifying them at eleven as failures, that does nothing to cater for young people, the borough that cannot see beyond a ten pound note.

The driving force of this document lies in Trafford's desire to promote Manchester as a regional capital – evidence for which is supported by a comment on p. 21:

"Trafford's Local Development Framework ...must also contribute to the delivery of the North West Spatial Strategy, which forms part of the development plan for all local authorities in the region, and support the vision of Greater Manchester becoming a world class city."

Here is the key to the whole document. It has nothing to do with 'Greenspace' – a great deal to do with the official belief that politically we are all 'green'. This is a document intended to confuse. The real plans are forthcoming from now on:

"Trafford Council is committed to providing approximately 12,000 new homes by 2026, to be concentrated in the urban areas in parts of Trafford such as the Regional Centre (Pomona Wharfside), the Inner Areas (Old Trafford) and South City Region (Altrincham, Carrington, Partington). This will place increased pressure on existing green spaces due to [grammatical illiteracy in the use of this phrase – my comment] an increased number of residents within their defined catchment areas...."

So there we have it. Draw a semi-circle from the Trafford Centre to west and south-west towards Altrincham, follow the Carrington to Partington link on either side of the road, include beyond it the remaining green space of Dunham hamlets, Altrincham Crematorium, to Oldfield Brow and John Leigh Park and that is what Trafford proposes – a huge development on the scale of the post World War I building of the Wythenshawe Estate. Not just housing, though: roads to connect to existing roads, to connect to motorways. They need routes to supermarkets – Why build a Waitrose on the edge of greenbelt? – because soon it won't be greenbelt. It will be filled with more

houses for people to go to Waitrose. Wythenshawe Estate covers 11 square miles. Converted to acres this equals 7040 acres. The 2000 acres of land which Trafford would require for its building programme would produce an estate between one third and one quarter the size of Wythenshawe Estate. Trafford has plans to destroy the whole area as we know it with a huge construction programme using green belt land..

One can see the next logical step – an extension through Hale Barns, Bowdon to the borders of Trafford by the M56 so that what Trafford has wanted for Manchester will be achieved – a huge ugly, built disaster to feed the airport. You can tell a Trafford ‘executive’ – they walk round in hard hats, fluorescent jackets and laugh madly. Forget regional identity, historic tradition, Domesday entries, market towns with unique traditions, historic boundaries – Trafford is nothing more than an industrial construction machine – ignoring people and historic identities just as happened during the Industrial Revolution only people and land are the commodity instead of cotton – They talk of ‘space’ and ‘spatial strategy’ as if that is all that is here – empty space devoid of existing people. Making the cash through trading people as commodities, merchandise. When Manchester destroyed the Bollin Valley to build its unnecessary second runway it simply revealed that the Nineteenth Century Victorian value system still thrives round here – crude, ugly and greed-driven.

The reason? Now that manufacturing in Britain has gone, now that we make nothing, we manipulate population, we increase the population in order to generate building and construction. Not for human need, but for commercial greed and political self-promotion. The leaders of Trafford Council see themselves as the architects of some kind of regional city on a London-type scale. After all did not some fantasist in the Council suggest that Railway Street and Stamford New Road in Altrincham would be like Kensington High Street in London after the council had finished making all those ‘bays’ that have created a sort of drunk’s driveway? Well, it is finished – a disaster for pedestrians and vehicles alike, a laughing stock for all who visit. But do not be fooled: they knew what they were doing. The plan is to pedestrianise that route. Altrincham’s main thoroughfare for traffic is, according to the Unitary Development Plan, via Tesco and Sainsbury – Manor Road. This is after all ‘South City’ – Americanese type jargon import (the Sports Arena region of Manchester is called ‘Eastlands’!) alongside the American style supermarket mentality.

Language is important: since when has a market town become overnight a ‘city’? Well, Trafford don’t want Altrincham to be a market town anymore: it is to be swallowed up in a huge building programme around it. With the shift from the historic commercial centre – Altrincham is already in terminal decline through local political decisions; it no longer has any cultural centre (once a thriving old market town of Cheshire with a splendid hall and library), they have created nothing but a town robbed of its soul. You cannot enter the old Town Hall without being challenged now by security – a well-know spacious empty landmark of a town that once *lived*. A bequest of a quiet garden at the Altrincham end of Barrington Road left for relaxation – the people had to fight to prevent that from being reduced to a car park for offices. By the way, Trafford are still trying to sell off the Talbot Road site – ‘far too costly to maintain’, they will tell you. No: they want a new symbolic architectural palace to their own sense of power – perhaps they could move into the ungainly ‘Hilton’ concrete and glass block at Knott Mill, Deansgate. and gaze into thousands of images of their own vacuous reflections. You see, the word ‘greenspace’ itself is the clue: the

document does not speak about ‘Dunham’, the arable and dairy farmland beyond Broadheath – it is green ‘space’ – a space to be filled. With what? – construction sites! It does not mention the real value of parks to communities: it talks of league tables, statistics, ‘management’ strategies.

So from what ‘Neverland’ have these agents of ‘development’ come? They most definitely never came from here. Whither are they going? Why are they here? When will they go away? Some sense of where the answers lie can be found in documents such as the *Culture in Trafford – Live Life Trafford: a Cultural Strategy for Trafford, 2004-2009/10* (pdf. www.cultureintrafford.org). It is a list of vague statements showing no engagement with any distinctive level of the diversity of life within the region; and such lazy writing and thinking creates a vacuum in which others can, behind the scenes, operate for their own ends. When we read that “this document has been produced through consultation and partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors and the local authority and those who are the main stakeholders and ambassadors for the cultural life of the Borough” (p. 2) we know immediately that we are reading jargon-laden waffle. Unsurprising: it has the signature of a councillor – and, believe it or not, a picture of the ‘colonnades’ in, of all places, that palace of commercial kitsch – the Trafford Centre! For all who do not yet realise, it isn’t St Peter’s Basilica in Rome, a Synagogue or Mosque, nor the Parthenon in Athens – it’s nothing more than a modern market. It’s only trying to fool us with the plastic, foam and concrete monstrosities – there are no mummified pharaohs in those tombs, just mummified brains that planned the whole thing.

Some years ago from the 1940s, in Crofton Avenue, Timperley, lived Benny Rothman who worked for human rights and in 1932 for walkers’ rights to roam the countryside free of intimidation. He did that on Kinder Scout. We now have to fight to save the countryside and built heritage on our own, and what was then his, doorstep so that generations yet to be born have the opportunity to enjoy the countryside around us. People need homes; yes, but will they want to be here when there is nothing left for them to enjoy?

Like all living democracies, our council is providing a period of consultation – during October 2009 – about a document which will shape a huge region of England in the North West for decades to come. One month of public consultation – three meetings. After that, no doubt, the council will take all views into account, won’t they? Well, actually, that’s not possible. For the next month, November, is when they intend to ‘adopt’ the document. Democracy? We elect our council to represent our views? Forget it! George Orwell warned us years ago. Not for nothing did he set *1984* in England.

This is the old imperial mentality turned in on itself. We can no longer draw straight lines on the map of Africa; now we draw straight and curvy lines on the map of Britain’s communities to fulfil the same old British materialism of outlook. The soul and ambitions of a nation are not created in power point or on a grid map: they exist in living beings and in what they come to nourish from the past and create now for the future *life* of the generations to come. In a few years time we can say to the children of today and tomorrow: “This is where the green fields of Dunham used to be, where the old market town of Altrincham used to be, where the Bollin Valley once saw children playing and laughing on summer days, where the thriving communities of

Urmston and Ashton-on-Mersey and Sale could be found. That grey band of road stretching to Manchester from Broadheath was once a canal where leisure craft, fishermen and women and children played. Where you see roads and houses and supermarkets for miles around – derelict, empty, covered in graffiti - there was once a lovely view. Don't worry: the Council have a plan.”