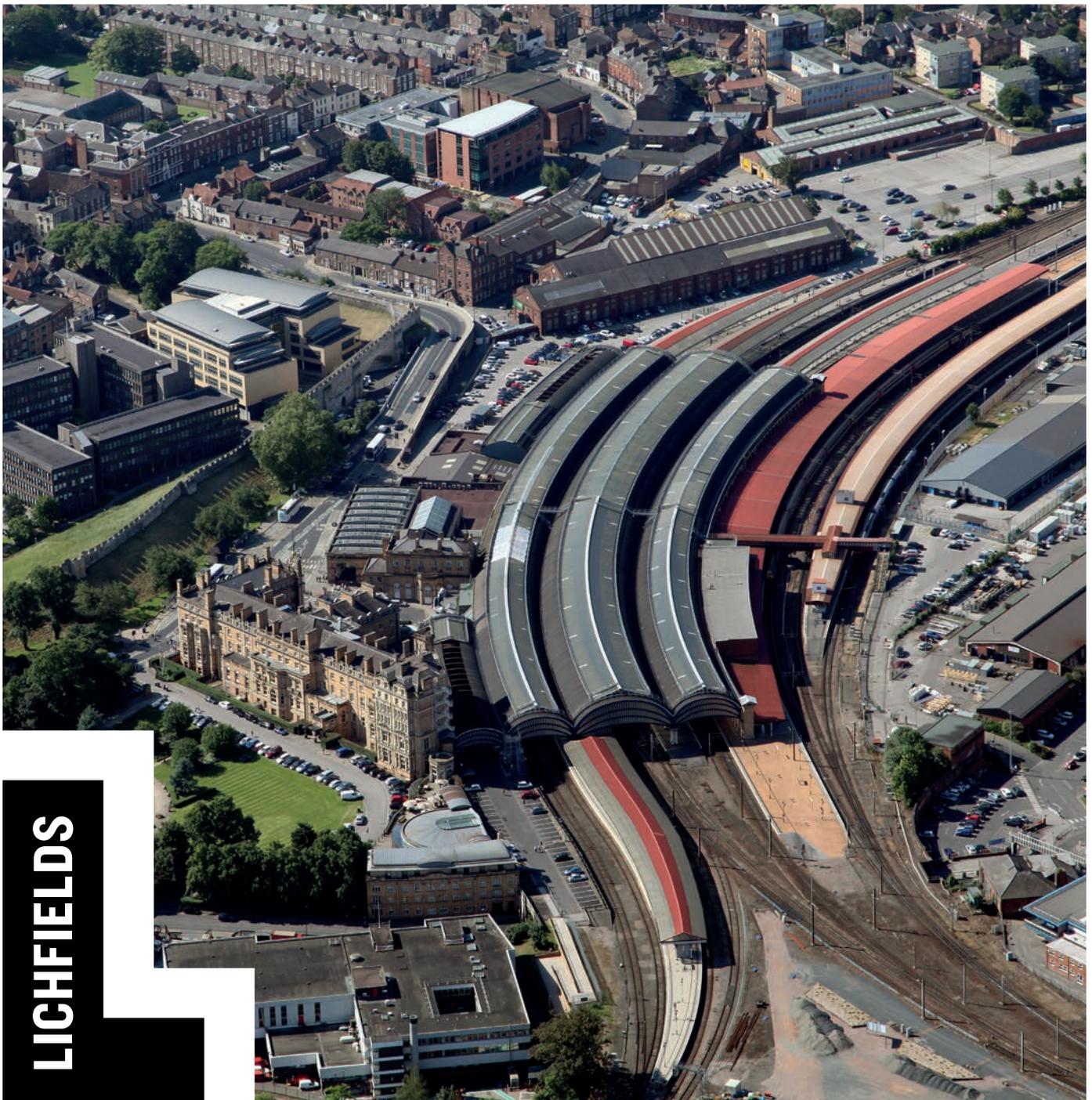


INSIGHT
SEPTEMBER 2017

50 years of Heritage Planning

York: reflections on a study
in conservation



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Executive summary

Fifty years ago the Civic Amenities Act introduced Conservation Areas into England's planning system. It was one outcome of an unparalleled concern for the survival of historic towns and saw town planners bring their skills to bear on heritage concerns.

By the mid-1960s many historic towns and cities were struggling; the post-War drive for modernity had starved them of investment, they were being strangled by enormous traffic growth and, frequently were seen as curious relics rather than as places with a future. Coinciding with the launch of Conservation Areas in 1967, York was the subject of a comprehensive study into its conservation needs. By involving planners such as Prof Nathaniel Lichfield, solutions were proposed to the interlinked issues of landuse, traffic, industrial blight and the economic wellbeing of historic areas. While the report showed a way forward for York (and other cities facing similar issues) it did not remove the threat and Prof Lichfield was instrumental in opposing the City Council's plans to carve an inner ring road through neighbourhoods now protected as conservation areas.



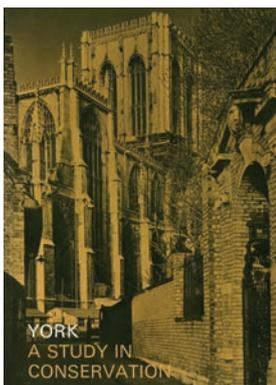
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O1 Introduction

In 1967 four historic cities in England (York, Chester, Bath and Chichester) were the subject of unprecedented conservation assessments. The York study, prepared under the aegis of the architect and town-planner Lord Esher, was published as ‘York: a Study in Conservation’ and has been hailed as “a benchmark in the study of sane conservation”.¹

The list of appendices gives an effective overview of the scope of the study: a gazetteer identifying the character of every street, studies of the life of the city, tourism, shopping, journey purposes and the economics of conservation in York. The acknowledgements ran to three pages recognising the contributions of academics, professionals, public sector bodies, volunteer groups, local businesses; a model of what we would now call stakeholder engagement.

Image below: Each of the four city conservation studies was published to show different approaches to managing historic towns



It is no coincidence that the York study was carried out in same year that saw the establishment of Conservation Areas (through the Civic Amenities Act, 1967). The York study was commissioned by the Ministry for Housing and Local Government, as part of the preparations for the introduction of conservation areas by demonstrating an effective approach to area conservation. Through the middle years of the 1960s, political momentum had been growing behind strengthening heritage protection, expanding its scope beyond individual buildings to areas and providing a balance to the thrust of post-war urban redevelopment. Following damage in the Second World War many towns required considerable reconstruction but the large-scale redevelopment of historic towns had gone further than replacing what was lost. It had been inspired by earlier ideas, the swagger of Edwardian grand projects and the shimmer of Modernism, which cleared all before them.

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¹Obituary to Viscount Esher, The Independent, www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/viscount-esher-38823.html

O2

The York study

The report into the conservation of the city's heritage focused on five objectives:

1. That the commercial heart of York should remain alive and able to compete on level terms with its neighbouring cities, new or old.
2. That the environment should be so improved by the elimination of decay, congestion and noise that the centre will become highly attractive as a place to live in for families, for students and single persons, and for the retired.
3. That land uses which conflict with these purposes should be progressively removed from the walled city.
4. That the historic character of York should be so enhanced and the best of its buildings of all ages so secured that they become economically self-conserving.
5. That within the walled city the erection of new buildings of anything but the highest architectural standard should cease.²

For a study whose focus was conservation, it is worth noting that only one of the objectives makes reference to the heritage of the city. This was a study which did more than look at the condition of buildings, it sought to understand how to make a historic city thrive. In a policy statement to accompany the Civic Amenities Act, the Ministry of Housing and Local Government had been explicit that "If it is to be effective, preservation policy must ... reckon with the long-term economics of conserving historic buildings and areas including the forces that contribute to their decline and, more positively, the conditions in which they are to live and prosper".³ It is therefore unsurprising that while the report makes specific recommendations for the sensitive redevelopment of particular areas and for the establishment of a Conservation Section within the planning authority, considerable attention is paid to the removal of noxious industry from the city walls and the management of traffic and parking. Both industry and traffic were seen as being particularly damaging to the quality of the environment within the city walls and needed to be tackled in order to provide the conditions in which York's heritage could prosper.

Image below: Patrick Pool. By the 1960s the historic core of York was struggling: uncontrolled traffic growth and the presence of noxious industries caused a flight of population and investment from the centre



Source: © The Press, York

² P.41, Lord Esher, York: a Study in Conservation, HMSO, 1968

³ P.33, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Preservation and Change, HMSO, 1967

03 The inner ring road

While the value of the study has been amply recognised, York City Council was lukewarm about its preparation and accepted its recommendations with a number of caveats. At the Council's insistence the brief for the study had been restricted to the walled city, at least partly because of the Council's long-held aim of constructing an inner ring road beyond the line of the walls. An inner-ring road encircling the medieval city had first been proposed in 1948 (the Adshead Plan) which would have seen a dual carriage way encircle the city separated from the walls by a 250 yard wide open belt of green space. The Esher report had not been supportive of this idea and this represented the most significant parting of opinion between Esher and York City Council. In 1971, after much debate, numerous studies and copious revisions, the Council submitted a formal application for the ring road as an amendment to the North Yorkshire Development Plan. The proposal consisted of a dual carriageway road which would cut the city with a wide sweep through the residential areas to the south and a high level viaduct over the Ouse on its western stretch.

The Council's route selection was guided by the consideration of traffic adequacy, cost of construction, cost of compensation, civic amenity (which included heritage impact), local amenity (the impact on those who live and work in the vicinity of the new road), the relationship with other development plans and the opportunities for future development. The preferred route certainly had some notable advantages over the other options in heritage terms. It avoided the destruction of some prominent listed buildings such as York Station or Scarcroft School as well as avoiding cutting through the Council's newly designated conservation area in front of Mickelgate Bar: by cutting a wider swathe through the south side of the city, the impact on the setting of Mickelgate Bar and the southern stretch of the city walls would be minimised.

However, it would still result in the destruction of two listed buildings and 351 residential properties as well as having an adverse impact on "large areas, including areas of high architectural quality, a hospital, a school and pleasant open spaces".⁴

Image below: The road proposed in 1971 was to be a dual carriageway with no pavements or frontages. It would carve through neighbourhoods requiring bridges or underpasses for pedestrians



Source: Based upon Ordnance Survey mapping © Crown Copyright reserved. Licence AL50684A

⁴ Decision letter from the Secretary of State for the Environment, 4 February 1975 quoted in Lichfield, N. and Proudlove, A., Conservation and Traffic, Ebor Press, 1976.

As might be expected there was resistance, which coalesced into a group calling itself York 2000. It approached one of the contributors to the Esher Report, Prof Nathaniel Lichfield, to analyse, and ultimately object to the road proposals. In the Esher report Lichfield, a planner, is credited with tackling the economics of conservation with a specific appendix addressing the subject. The planning approach he followed dealt directly with the economic realities of historic buildings, identifying five types of obsolescence: structural, functional, locational, environmental and economic (where the costs of addressing the first four cannot be recouped through greater occupational value – the conservation deficit). This had identified traffic and industry inside the city walls as being the key driver of environmental obsolescence, rendering “the use of a building unacceptable to its occupants in its current use, or, in the extreme case, any occupants for any use”.⁵

This was reflected in main report's first two chapters of proposals; those which specifically address land-use within the city walls and the control of traffic. The report's overall approach to tackling traffic was distinctly cautious about the inner ring-road, proposing a suite of more incremental changes: industrial goods traffic should be removed from the city by policies and programmes of relocating industry; private cars should be controlled through a series of new car parks and road restrictions; through traffic (primarily between Leeds and Scarborough) should be routed further from the historic core – assessing a suitable line was beyond the scope of the report but an outer ring road for York was already the subject of discussion.

Image below: The ring road was to cross Bootham, York's finest approach to the city gates, taking out a block of townhouses (all subsequently listed) to make way for a roundabout



⁵ P.239, Lord Esher, York: a Study in Conservation, HMSO, 1968

04 The public inquiry

For the public inquiry into the road scheme, Lichfield's approach was to challenge the basis of the Council's proposals largely because the resources available to York 2000 could not stretch to the development of a set of alternative proposals. He argued that the analysis underpinning the proposals was flawed, and that, while everyone was in agreement that York's traffic needed addressing, the proposals would not guarantee a solution. Specifically regarding heritage he noted that while the City Council had identified civic amenity as a criterion for consideration no principles were identified for assessing losses and gains in this regard. "Thus, the published evaluation relies solely on the subjective ranking of the schemes on the criteria, and on the statements of the Consultant's own views as to the relative importance of what the differences would have been, if they had been measured".⁶

The inquiry was held in 1972, the report was ready by July 1973 recommending that the ring road should be allowed to go ahead. On 4th February 1975 the decision came back from the Department of the Environment which rejected the findings of the inquiry: the Council had failed to justify its proposals for such a disruptive development to the satisfaction of the Secretary of State.

The following year, Lichfield with Alan Proudlove published 'Conservation and Traffic', a review of the case which they had presented and a set of proposals which could lead to a methodology for addressing traffic issues in historic towns. It is fair to say that to a modern reader there is a lot in the book about traffic but rather less about conservation. However, to see the title as a misnomer misses the point. By the late 1960s, the direct and indirect impacts of traffic had become THE key issue facing England's heritage. In the government's 1967 policy paper on conservation areas, Preservation and Change the control of traffic is the first issue to be addressed in the section titled Action in Conservation Areas, stating that "the reduction of motor traffic will be the first aim of conservation"⁷ Dealing with traffic addressed the conservation of historic towns at a fundamental level; without addressing the environmental and locational obsolescence that this caused meant that other conservation actions would be essentially futile. This issue alone, gave the role for addressing the heritage of York to town planners rather than the historians and architects who had been the key figures fighting for the interests of historic towns to date.

Images below: The ring road required total separation of the traffic and pedestrians. A large area in front of Walmgate Bar was to be cleared to allow for an intersection and pedestrian underpass



Source: Left image - © Joseph Rowntree Foundation

⁶ P.61, Lichfield, N. and Proudlove, A., Conservation and Traffic, Ebor Press, 1976

⁷ P.38, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Preservation and Change, HMSO, 1967

05 The picture today

Much has changed since the Esher report and the inquiry into the York ring road. Traffic is no longer seen as the greatest threat to the historic environment – partly due to the steps taken at this time and partly due to changes in patterns of traffic usage. York's outer ring road has removed much of the through traffic which was part of the problem in 1971 and many of the Esher report's recommendations regarding traffic restrictions and the relocation of industry were followed and proved effective. By the time of the decision by the Secretary of State in 1975, it would seem that even York City Council sensed that the tide was shifting; within months it had redefined its conservation areas, extending protection to cover almost half of the proposed line of the ring road (an extent of coverage which is similar to today). The listing resurvey of the 1980s added to the stock of listed buildings in York, increasing the number which would have been destroyed by the ring road. Society and attitudes have moved on to such an extent that, looking back almost half a century, it can be difficult to understand how anyone who cared for York could have supported the proposed inner ring-road.

However, Lichfield's recommendations were intended to be applicable to all historic towns: he was arguing for a more methodologically robust approach to impact assessment. The Esher report set out an approach to conservation which was informed primarily by the disciplines of town planning. The Civic Trust felt that the York study's "particular strength is the thorough, novel and realistic treatment of the economics of conservation contributed by Professor N Lichfield".⁸ Rather than looking at the issues facing a particular building the town planners addressed the issues which had an impact on the viability of the city. By applying the techniques of town planning to the assessment and quantification of heritage impact, they then set us on the path we now follow of assessments of heritage impact or townscape and visual impact. By giving a language to quantify, assess and discuss heritage in the planning context, it has emerged from the nebulous concept of civic amenity to be a key consideration in planning terms.

Image below: York still has an issue with traffic but congestion, and proposed solutions to it, are no longer the great threat to the city's heritage



⁸ P.4, Civic Trust Newsletter, No. 20, 20 October 1969

06 Conclusions

The development of conservation areas can be seen as the coming together of two lines of thinking: that “historic centres of many old towns have a quality of their own which transcends the value of the individual buildings they contain”⁹ and that “the fate of historic buildings is largely determined by the quality of their environment”.¹⁰ This required a different approach to conservation than that needed for individual buildings; the designation of conservation areas helped to highlight the issue while incorporating the consideration of heritage fully into the practice of town planning, as advocated by Nathaniel Lichfield, provided a mechanism for saving the character of England’s historic towns.

Fifty years later, much has changed but some things have stayed: Nathaniel Lichfield’s analysis in 1967 of the relationship between economic vitality and conservation remains just as relevant today. However, society’s concerns have evolved since the 1960s and today’s legislation and policies reflect this. The release of the National Planning Policy Framework and the merging of Conservation Area Consent into planning permission are both examples of the way in which heritage has become a core issue in the planning system. Lichfield’s has grown through the last five decades by being at the forefront of these changes and, as the importance of heritage has increased, so has our heritage team. This growing team continues Nathaniel Lichfield’s example of applying specialist expertise to tackle some of the fundamental issues facing historic buildings and towns. By doing so, we help our clients to deliver sustainable projects in some of the most sensitive locations across the UK.

Image below: The City of York has 35 Conservation Areas, 1,598 Listed Buildings, 22 Scheduled Monuments and 4 Registered Parks and Gardens. Any substantial development in a historic city such as this, needs to consider the impact on heritage



⁹ P.23, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Preservation and Change, HMSO, 1967

¹⁰ P.33, Ministry of Housing and Local Government, Preservation and Change, HMSO, 1967

Contacts

For further heritage consultancy enquiries:

Iain Rhind

Senior Director, Head of Heritage
iain.rhind@lichfields.uk
020 7837 4477

Nick Bridgland

Heritage Director
nick.bridgland@lichfields.uk
0113 397 1397

For general enquiries speak to your local office or visit our website.

Bristol

Andrew Cockett
andrew.cockett@lichfields.uk
0117 403 1980

Cardiff

Gareth Williams
gareth.williams@lichfields.uk
029 2043 5880

Edinburgh

Nicola Woodward
nicola.woodward@lichfields.uk
0131 285 0670

Leeds

Justin Gartland
justin.gartland@lichfields.uk
0113 397 1397

London

Neil Goldsmith
neil.goldsmith@lichfields.uk
020 7837 4477

Manchester

Simon Pemberton
simon.pemberton@lichfields.uk
0161 837 6130

Newcastle

Jonathan Wallace
jonathan.wallace@lichfields.uk
0191 261 5685

Thames Valley

Daniel Lampard
daniel.lampard@lichfields.uk
0118 334 1920

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