

# Preservation Trust Triumph

## Cherville Street project complete



ROMSEY  
AND DISTRICT SOCIETY



Now that 45 - 67 Cherville Street has finally been restored and the homes are back in the ownership of private, highly delighted purchasers, it would be useful to recap the events leading up to their acquisition and renovation by the Buildings Trust.

The early 1960s was the era of planning blight. Many unoccupied buildings with potential for restoration were pulled down while the public were fed with euphemisms like "slum clearance", "improvement", "road widening" and "environmental enhancement" as a justification for this wholesale destruction. Nobody could argue that it was not necessary in some cases but on the whole good dwellings built in an era of superb craftsmanship were pulled down and replaced by anaemic boxes or left as undeveloped sites.

Cherville Street was almost lost in the same way when Romsey Borough Council compulsorily purchased the line in 1972 with intent to demolish. Shortly afterwards, the Department

of the Environment listed them Grade II, making demolition impossible without special permission. In the summer of 1974 the Romsey and District Society was formed in response to the growing worry among townspeople that our representatives were allowing, and frequently encouraging, the bulldozer mentality. The Society comprised bands of volunteers who in their spare time cleared footpaths and rivers, watched planning decisions, planted trees and organised lectures, meetings and social events.

In the case of buildings, however, more than interest and voluntary labour were necessary, and at the end of 1974 the Buildings Trust was established and registered as a Limited Company with charitable status, who could raise the money and provide the technical knowledge to buy, restore and sell properties which would have come down. It was quickly obvious that 45 - 67 Cherville Street was a very important line of buildings. They represent a succession of period styles - the street frontages range from early 18th century in No 65 to mid-Victorian in No 51,



but there are older structures hidden behind some of the brick façades. There is a variety of roof forms, mostly of clay tile, but with some slate, with hips, half hips and gables combining in the haphazard way which denotes gradual growth and change. Many features are characteristic of Hampshire building style in the 18th and 19th centuries - brick dentil courses at the eaves, projecting string courses, segmental window and door heads and flat arches of rubbed bricks.

In 1975 the new Test Valley Borough Council sought listed building consent to demolish. This was refused by a narrow majority. **One year later** the Policy and Resources Committee again deferred the decision pending more information. In June 1976 the Council offered to sell them for £80,000 (the capital cost of purchase plus rolled-up interest charges) but an independent valuation revealed them to be worth much less than that amount. For the next year negotiations took place for purchase by the Romsey Buildings Trust and by July 1977 we felt the negotiations were complete. Inexplicably, Test Valley went ahead with a Public Enquiry in August 1977 into their application to demolish. No explanation was ever given as to why they considered this necessary after the long negotiations. In November 1977 the

Inspector refused planning permission to demolish and severely criticised Test Valley Borough Council. The Public Enquiry had cost both the Council and the Trust a lot of money and the Inspector concluded that "the obvious course to adopt is to sell the houses to willing, enthusiastic purchasers - a Trust which I am satisfied are capable, experienced and prepared to undertake a proper restoration and rehabilitation scheme. This would be to the benefit of all concerned and in particular would safeguard a vital part of the historic fabric of Romsey".

In representing its case the Trust were helped by two factors: firstly, the recent completion of our first project - 64, 66 and 68 The Hundred - which allowed us to estimate realistically the cost of renovation required for Cherville Street, and secondly, the strong support and advice given to us by the Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust, which in itself was a newly-fledged body and without whose skill we would never have found our way through the minefield of Local Authority regulations.

After the Public Enquiry we received no further communication from Test Valley.

Through some other sources we discovered that another party had made an offer for the properties and despite our previous detailed involvement we were not invited to re-negotiate. We were never able to discover if this offer was bona fide or for what reason it was made. The Hampshire Trust took over negotiations on our behalf and by April 1978 our offer was accepted, subject to planning permission, and contracts were exchanged in December. Despite several last minute crises involving planning permission, work was started in the late summer of 1979. Test Valley agreed to defer our payment until we had sold the first house.

Remains of considerable archaeological significance were found behind the brick façades. In No 55, the north wall is entirely timber framed, representing a late 16th century two bay dwelling of two storeys, with a jettied or projecting first floor at the west gable. Within the building the dividing main frame survives with the original truss. Over the eastern bay the original rafters were used in the reconstruction of the roof.

The official completion was on 4 June 1984, and Councillor F Emery-Wallis of Hampshire County Council performed the ceremony, together with Dr Peter Johnson, Chairman of the Buildings Trust. It was ten years to the day after the inaugural meeting of the Society!

**John Sampson**

In the first stage Nos 45 to 51 were re-stored, together with the infill between Nos 51 and 55 (the site of an old Tudor Cottage which was demolished in the '60s). By 1982 Nos 57, 59 and 61 were completed, leaving No 63, the corner house, No 65, and No 67 at the north end to finish by summer 1984. These latter houses constituted an important archaeological challenge as they were the two that any visitor entering the town from the Stockbridge direction would not fail to notice. There was a severe outward bowing of the face wall of No 67 and despite seeking a structural solution to hold it in that position without further movement, our Architect, Mr John Trowbridge, decided that a partial rebuild would be the most practical course to take. It had been hoped to remove the paint from the brickwork and blend it with re-used bricks on the rebuilt section. Physical and chemical attempts at removing the paint in test areas, however, proved that the facing was too fragile and could never give a uniform blend, so the whole of that section was repainted in white.



A Romsey Councillor pointed out that the matter had been under discussion for 14 years and declared:  
*"I have volunteered to pull them down."*

# ANALYSIS

WHAT ARE THE LESSONS OF CHERVILLE STREET?

Lessons of history can often be helpful and the story of the ten year effort to save Cherville Street is no exception. If this article is a criticism of our planning procedures it is made not with malice nor with smugness, but with a real wish that some benefit may result from looking again at the haphazard way decisions were made. The following quotations illustrate this.

*"To me these buildings are just a ruin"*  
 Romsey District Councillor 1975

*"The Sub-Committee of the Romsey Town Council have recently submitted a Report airing their views on the Romsey Conservation Study, and among other recommendations have stated that the cottages in Cherville Street should be demolished."*

Part of letter to Romsey Advertiser 1975

*"Having renovated them they are not going to be anything like as nice as if we re-designed and put something which will last 60 years."*

Andover Councillor 1976

*"For some obscure reason people think these are places of beauty."*

Andover Councillor 1976

*"My view has always been that the people who got excited about the Cherville Street site have got excited about the wrong site at the wrong time."*

Romsey Town Councillor 1976

*"...But such are the pressures brought by the powerful and influential conservationist lobbies to achieve their ends. They will fight to conserve Romsey, block by block, street by street, to no end place. They are blinded to the efficient functioning of any of our public services....."*

Paragraph from Romsey Councillor's letter to Romsey Advertiser 1976

*"It is pathetic to think that we should be wasting time and money on buildings which to my untutored eye have little artistic value other than as archaeological slums."*

Andover Councillor 1977

The TVBC's decision to apply for Listed Buildings Consent to demolish was supported by the Romsey Town Council, but opposed by nine other bodies and Societies, including the County Council, Hampshire Field Club, Romsey and District Society, LTVAS, the Victorian Society and the Ancient Monuments Society.

Many Councillors made a great effort to support the Society's views, but their voices were drowned by others who seemed to fear that a charge on the rates outweighed the more positive aspects of conservation. This dilemma required a Public Enquiry to overturn the final opinion of the whole Council who had decided that 45-67 Cherville Street should be demolished.

For old buildings, the listing procedure is a guarantee that a Court of Appeal is available: but such is the change in attitude

among Councillors, and more particularly their Officers, that another acrimonious enquiry of Cherville Street proportions is unlikely. Consultation has improved and it no longer requires an 'eye of faith' to see that conservation is not only a highly responsible policy, but that it makes both



Before



After

good business sense and is generally popular with local people.

A councillor's job is never easy and local government is highly complex: more and more they will have to rely on wider sources of informed opinion and their main task must surely be to initiate and control overall policy and guidelines. Certainly, some of the comments made about the Trust's initial plan reveal such woolly thinking that it would be right always to question competence in other fields. In particular, matters of major principle and policy must never be submerged by the emotive issue of Rates, especially as the effects, seen in the perspective of time, are often so minimal and transient.



Before



After

It is one matter to supervise closely the management of Council controlled activities, such as street cleaning and parks, but quite another to use the same formula to make major environmental changes, whether in terms of buildings or green fields.

Cherville Street was probably a conservation watershed for Romsey, but the decision to reverse the declared 'Open Space Policy' for Halterworth in favour of building permission reveals the same lack of imagination and courage which saw so much of Romsey destroyed in the 60's and 70's. For such decisions, of course, there is rarely the additional protection afforded by a Public Enquiry.

Clearly, the Society still has work to do!

**Frank Akerman**