
off the fence

David Lock (with apologies) finds a book that makes you laugh out loud – and is based on the justified belief that planners still have vocational commitment and enthusiasm within them

planning in crisis in grotton (again)



This report is to confirm there was value for money in attendance at the tenth Planning in Crisis conference held at Grotton in September.¹ The first was held at Grotton in 1350, after the Black Death had destroyed the evidence base for the Household Forecasts and the Deposit Draft *Corre Strategie* had to be withdrawn before examination on the rack. The 1539 conference had been picketed by monks made homeless by the Dissolution of the Monasteries. The 1667 event featured a display of fire safety in the home sponsored by a London bakery but, of more direct relevance to planners, also saw Frank Lloyd Wren unveil his plan for the rebuilding of London around a Gherkin (a plan which took 400 years to complete and duly won the RTPI Award for implementation).

Other conferences were convened at landmark moments for the nation, culminating in 1979, when the motivation was crisis in Grotton itself. Information was given² that the Metropolitan County of Grotton's planners 'had no idea what they were doing. Yes they were making plans, deciding applications, reclaiming derelict land, mapping out a brighter future for the county and so forth – but why? Who were the stakeholders? Where was the front-loading? Where, in short, was the empirical architecture...?'

The main conclusions from that international conference of 1979 were illuminating:

- Temporary permission should on no account be given for demolitions.
- If intending to travel to a conference by train, always check that the destination is connected to the rail network.
- Bletcherly is twinned with the Dordogne town of L'Oreal – and they're not worth it.

The effects of the 1979 conference report³ upon the Thatcher Government, elected that very year, were to be profound. Having asked Michael Heseltine to make a bonfire of planners and lock

their ashes in a filing cabinet (or something along those lines), the Iron Maiden was shocked to see deprived people setting fire to their own neighbourhoods as they experimented with the new localism. No doubt impressed by the Grotton report's 'keep calm and carry on' could-do (if asked properly) attitude, the Tories re-invented planning with bells on. A tsunami of Urban Development Corporations, a wash of promises to protect the Green Belt, swags of public money for management consultants, and tax breaks in Enterprise Zones for fat cats were unleashed on a knackered nation. For several years very poor people were moved around from tower block to condominium, some even to nice family houses with gardens, before being moved back to new tower blocks that had been built because Richard Rogers and the CPRE said it was the best way to live unless you were them.

Those attending the 2010 conference enjoyed the coincidence of circumstance. Maybe the Coalition Government would similarly become an enthusiast for management consultants, fat cats, and planning? The need for change was evident because RTPI Planning Awards increasingly had to be given for things in which planners had a marginal role at most (a feature obscured by very loud music at the awards ceremony). There had also been speeches to local people about sticking their bottoms up, to developers urging the bribing of objectors to stay silent, and to elected politicians to embrace new power and responsibility with Jam for Six Years Starting Tomorrow to pay for it.

Delegates learned of the County of Grotton and the five districts of which it is comprised of, where not much had happened since their heyday (which was in 1898, the day before the first copies of Ebenezer Howard's *To-morrow* arrived at the Dunromin branch of WH Smiths and workers walked out of the factories to start building a garden city somewhere – anywhere really).

The conference heard that customer-oriented front-line services must be monitored to avoid the problem in Golden Delicious District, where callers hear a recorded message saying 'all our operatives are engaged on other calls'. After workshop discussions, it was agreed that a friendlier blocking message would be needed, as insisting that everyone must use e-mail and only answer the

questions put to them had not yet deterred telephone callers.

It was demonstrated that the Government Office did not know much about the development plan system, having had to send its planners to help Mr Pickles in London because people there had stopped talking to him.

It is disappointing to report that HRH Prince of Wales felt unable to attend and speak on the subject of criticising things by Lord Rogers behind the scenes. This was perhaps because his Foundation had commercial consultancy assignments to complete, and a bid to consider for CABE's £6 million budget ('anything they can do we could do, err, cheaper').

The conference, and its fully illustrated and tiresomely documented report,⁴ leaves us all better prepared for the onslaught of change we are now experiencing. We are not surprised – the outcome of the election had swung on *Open Source Planning*, which had shown us the abyss that awaited – but the rudeness of the criticism from Secretary of State Eric Pickles has been a bit of a shock. We are also beginning to appreciate that his illegal manoeuvres in trying to abolish regional planning without an impact assessment prepared by a consultant were because he has few planners around him to tell him where the levers and buttons of planning are really to be found. If there are any.

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This book of fictional places, fictional planners, and a fictional series of conferences will make you laugh out loud. It rests upon the justified belief that all planners still have, deep within them, a vocational commitment to, and burning enthusiasm for, planning. Something drove us to study planning. Something drives us to cope with the bigotry,

bureaucracy and hostility that is sometimes deployed against us. Something drives us to pay exorbitant membership fees to the RTPI when TCPA fees are only £48 and equally tax-allowable.

But the humanity exhibited in this book is a humanity that we should hold tightly – we seek to improve the conditions of mankind and the planet we occupy. We are engaged in a wholesome endeavour, and in Grotton we have a mirror at which we can laugh loudly. An excellent present for a worried planner! Steve Ankers, David Kaiserman and Chris Shepley should be Listed, or Scheduled, or both.

● **David Lock CBE** came out as planner in 1970 and has been practising ever since. He hopes to be allowed to do it for real in time to catch the next re-organisation of planning. He has the 1979 Grotton Roadshow song 'Stand by Your Plan' on his iPod. Really he does. 'Sometimes its hard to be a planner, dumty dumty dum...'

Notes

- 1 It will be recalled that the typical local planning authority budget for conferences this year is £437 plus the tops off six family packs of Shreddies. The sum is small because staff attending conferences now have to take out a loan to be repaid once their salaries exceed £20,000 per annum, as well as through a 'CPD tax' that will appear as 'Payroll Giving' on salary slips
- 2 D. Sulkie: *Spatial Dispersion of Interconnection Clusters within a Fuzzy Environment: A Case Study from Grimethwaite*. 1981, 1988 and 1992. 'Unpublished and unreadable to be honest'
- 3 S. Ankers, D. Kaiserman and C. Shepley: *The Grotton Papers*. RTPI, 1979, out of print and slightly foxed
- 4 Steve Ankers, David Kaiserman and Chris Shepley: *Grotton Revisited... Planning in Crisis?* Routledge, for the RTPI, 2010. ISBN 978-0-415-54647-8, £19.99

