



## THORNABY-ON-TEES - TOWN HALL RESTORATION REPORT

As members and all Thornaby residents are no doubt aware, some time ago Thornaby Town Council (TTC) won the case against Stockton Borough Council's (SBC's) attempt to evict TTC from Thornaby Town Hall and sell the building to a private developer. This after a study into future use and ownership of the building by the North East Civic Trust – commissioned by SBC - had advised that the Grade 2 listed Town Hall held significant heritage value to the Thornaby Community and should stay in public ownership. Of course members will recall the community outrage when SBC decided to ignore its own study and a campaign began for the building to be transferred to what most people in Thornaby fervently believed were the rightful owners; the Thornaby community.

Early champions of the cause for taking back ownership of the iconic Grade 2 listed building and restoring it to its former glory were people like Eileen and Ken Craggs, the Remembering Thornaby Group, Allison Trainer, Mick Eddy, and so many others sadly no longer with us. And of course current members of TTC were part of that campaign and fully supported by the Thornaby Community who were outraged that a building held almost sacred had been allowed to fall into such disrepair by SBC who singularly failed in its statutory duty to maintain a listed building.

Again, as members know, that following the successful court case, it was unanimously decided by TTC to make an approach to SBC with a proposal to purchase the building for the same price as that offered by the private developers. TTC reasoned that our money was as good as that of anyone else – though in an ideal world, SBC, who had inherited the building as a successor council following local government reorganisation, should have lived up to their claim of respecting local heritage and simply handed over the building to the community it was built for. And that is still a bone of contention.

After lengthy talks with SBC to iron out legalities, the sale was agreed and Thornaby Town Hall came back into ownership of Thornaby people for £100K that TTC borrowed at low interest from the Public Loans Board. Once in possession however, members were acutely conscious that it would take a substantial amount of additional cash to restore the building to its former magnificence after years of neglect. So, a wing and a prayer bid was put together – largely by charitable expertise - and submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund that thankfully proved successful in 2015. TTC was awarded over £800K by HLF with the Town Council topping up the pot to total approximately £1m.

However, at an early stage it became clear to all of us at TTC that we would be struggling to realise full restoration with a bid that in hindsight was not ambitious enough. Abandonment of statutory duty to maintain a Grade 2 listed building had led to extensive damage to the building – much of which was discovered when scaffold was raised internally and externally as work progressed. The heating system was also dilapidated and needed replacing, drains had collapsed, and the building was also disability non-compliant despite laws being in place for many years for access to be equalised. And so as time passed and work proved painstakingly slow, costs ballooned exponentially and as we neared completion it became apparent that allocated funds were running out. And so a meeting was arranged with HLF to explain the parlous situation.

Unfortunately, the meeting ended in disappointment. We discovered that monies it was assumed that could be drawn down to cover contingency (emerging works, unforeseen cost and also inflation – i.e. estimated by the Project Manager to be in the region of £250K - £300K) would not be forthcoming and therefore TTC found itself left with a partially restored building that already looks really impressive, but frustratingly is in need of additional cash to complete works.

*J. Wainwright*

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We know that we have community support to complete restoration and Thornaby people recognise that ultimately they will be exclusive owners of a valuable heritage asset that no single person or organisation will be able to play fast and loose with in the future. A building that is symbolic of Thornaby's history, distinct identity and priceless heritage. Therefore, TTC agreed that another approach to the Public Loans Board for £300K needed to complete what we started nearly five years ago. Basically we will simply be asking residents of Thornaby to invest in their own building. TTC would point out that it is not a vanity gamble involving many £millions, nor will we be pouring countless £millions into private coffers.

But of course we recognise that a loan must be repaid and recommendation to council (subsequently agreed) was that repayment is to be made from the precept that over the years the town council has been very responsible with (in real terms merely keeping pace with inflation) and is consistently singled out for praise in contrast to similar councils whose profligacy has drawn severe criticism. TTC is proud of its record of spending on the community rather than unnecessary administration and our audits are predictably exemplary thanks to our excellent Town Clerk who is always striving to bring down costs at every opportunity. That attitude and approach will not change.

And so we agreed at an earlier finance meeting to raise the precept by 9.6% this year – still low in real terms considering below inflation raises in previous years - to enable us to be in a secure position to pay back the newly requested loan. The very fact that we have come so far and overcome so much in terms of restoration of a beautiful building only to hit a relatively small funding shortfall is disheartening to say the least, but the end reward is evident – i.e. a building worth probably worth over £2m – though priceless in terms of value to the community who consider it our spiritual centre piece.

In conclusion, members are agreed that it makes no sense to baulk at what is the final hurdle. Yes, it will mean a few pennies on the average bills of residents of Thornaby (estimated at approximately 12p per month), but not to complete the work would be a betrayal of a pledge made many years ago to our people to preserve and protect our built and natural heritage. Put in perspective, what we are doing is good value in the sense that for an investment of approximately £450K of public money, an iconic asset will ultimately be owned once again by the Thornaby community that it was purpose built for when Thornaby on Tees was incorporated as a Municipal Borough by Royal Charter in 1892.

Report to the Council by Steve Walmsley – Chair of Thornaby Town Council  
Dated 28<sup>th</sup> January 2020

*Steve Walmsley*      6 - 2 - 2020