

# The Bury Society

The Newsletter of the Bury St. Edmunds Society  
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## NEWSLETTER ~ SPRING 2006

### MOVING THE MANOR HOUSE ON

Reg Sharpe

In the previous newsletter I tried to sketch the background of the Manor House from its conception as a museum to its then current crisis point. Its future was left hanging in the balance with the sword of justice, or Damocles, hanging dangerously close to its head.

Following a series of consultations, Borough Officers had published a Report which offered the Council three options: to close the Manor House; to close the Manor House, or to close the Manor House. The difference was what other action could, or should, be taken at the same time, but the ultimate fate of the Manor House would be the same. That would deal with the building, and result in a saving said to be £212,200 a year. But what of the collections? That would be easy too, because there were plans to spend up to £3,500,000 on a new building at West Stow, which could accommodate the archaeological gallery from Moyses's Hall, supposedly creating space at Moyses's for display of the timepieces, costumes and fine art from the Manor House. What could not be exhibited there would be packed away in store at West Stow, but it was also intended that bits and pieces could be placed in public buildings and business premises throughout the town.

The Report was greeted with massive objection from residents and visitors alike, much of it ventilated in the Press, but more confined to private correspondence with the Borough. Indeed, Simon Pott wrote to congratulate the Borough on the rare distinction of uniting everyone on this, but unfortunately, uniting them *against* the proposals! The Report had to clear three hurdles: the Policy Development Committee, the Cabinet and the full Council. The first recommended that Manor House should be closed in April and sold in October 2006; that much of its collections should be moved to Moyses's Hall, with the excess being transferred to the new building at West Stow. This was supported by the Cabinet, but the latter adapted the proposal to recommend that *"the Borough Council continues to engage with its funders, other partners and interested parties to ensure the successful delivery of a combined Museum and Heritage Service and to explore new ways of accessing the collections which would be beneficial to Council Tax payers"*. This was confirmed by the full Council on 13<sup>th</sup> December.

So the decision had been made. Redundancy notices were served on the staff and the door of Manor House was to be slammed shut on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2006, with whatever effect this might have on the heritage of one of the oldest, finest and proudest towns in the country.

Somebody had to take up the challenge, and it was my job, as Secretary of the Bury Society, to notify the Chief Executive that the Society was actively investigating the creation of a Trust to take over responsibility for the Manor House. This would involve the Society, the Guildhall Feoffment Trust, the Bury St. Edmunds Town Trust and possibly also the National Trust. It would include the Borough Council and the Town Council in its decision and involvement, together with other interested parties, including the Suffolk Preservation Society. In her reply, this was welcomed by Mrs.



The Manor House by Martin Lightfoot

Cadman.

The proposal was paralleled by an initiative of the Town Council, and on 18<sup>th</sup> January, the Town Mayor called a working party meeting. This appointed a steering group to consider whether a Trust could take over responsibility for the Manor House. Eight members were appointed to the steering group, being Mike Ames, Mrs. Jo Ellen Grzyb, Sir Reginald Harland, Martin Lightfoot (Chairman), Stefan Oliver, Anthony Platt, Simon Pott and John Taylor. This represented all the interests referred to previously, with the exception of the National Trust, but adding the Friends of the Manor House and Moyses's Hall Museums. All members had already been much involved and were highly qualified for the task. Its first meeting was held two days later.

The steering group is a preliminary to the setting-up of a Trust, and any intending Trust must be able to satisfy the Borough not only that it could deliver on the need to find new ways of accessing the collections which would be beneficial to Council Tax payers, but that this could be done despite the opinion of the Council and its consultants that such a result could only be achieved by closing the Manor House and distribution its collections as described above. It is clear that the Borough and the Trust must work closely together, but if the Trust were to be successful (as we all hope) this could be quite embarrassing for the Borough, which has spent a considerable sum of Council Tax money only to conclude that it could not.

At the time of writing, meetings between the steering group's representatives and Borough officers have been very sensible and practical. The door appears to be open for the Council to consider an alternative plan so long as this is seen to be sustainable, backed by a credible business plan, and that substantial savings can be demonstrated for the benefit of Council Tax payers. All these matters are currently being worked upon, and there seems to be much hope and goodwill between the parties. It is essential for them to continue to play ball together, but we cannot forget that it is the Borough's ball, and they can kick it out of play whenever they choose.