

Wilnecote has Architectural Gem right in its midst! **News could save beloved Wilnecote School buildings**

The Tamworth and District Civic Society (TDCS) has made an incredible breakthrough in its battle to save the Victorian buildings of the old Wilnecote Schools from demolition by Staffordshire County Council.

The Civic Society has been battling on behalf of residents and community group users of the buildings since it was re-launched last September. Staffordshire County Council drew up plans last year to sell the site to *Housing 21* to build some 50 social housing flats in place of the beloved landmark buildings - a move which caused widespread outrage amongst residents, and the community groups who used the site until evicted by the County Council, with allegations of secrecy, and lack of consultation and due process levelled against the County Council, and an official complaint lodged against the council by a user group hoping to purchase the site.

Now, TDCS has made a vital discovery that we believe changes the whole situation, and should stop the County Council dead in its tracks. For the schools were designed in 1877 by no less a person than Basil Champneys, one of the most famous, innovative, and celebrated architects in British history! His works across the country are cherished Listed Buildings.

Basil Champneys (1842-1935) designed various Oxford and Cambridge colleges, including Mansfield College, Oxford, and Newnham College, Cambridge. His best known work is the John Rylands Library in Manchester. His work at King's Lynn Grammar School in Norfolk has features reminiscent of ones he used earlier at Wilnecote. Champneys also designed a church in Tamworth - St. George's Church at Glascote (1880) - which is a Grade II Listed Building.

Wilnecote Schools provide an example of Champneys' early work, and were noted at the time as marking a break with the "Gothic mania" that had previously prevailed. They comprise a west wing (the Junior School) and detached east wing (the Infants) The buildings are externally striking and architecturally notable, featuring an attractive bell-turret and weather vane, and Dutch gables. At the time of its construction the large windows and internal arrangements for the health and convenience of pupils and teachers were praised. The ventilation system was described as "ingenious", with fresh air passing behind the open fireplaces to be warmed in chambers behind the grates, and foul air being extracted.

We all know that Wilnecote Schools are very fine buildings, well-designed and attractive. But now we know why. They were designed by one of the country's top architects! Also, his design was put in place incredibly well by the reputable Tamworth building firm of Watton and Sons. These buildings were meant to last.

We had become despondent because we have met with nothing but obfuscation, disinterest and delays from the borough and county councils. Our requests to Tamworth Borough Council to include the site in the Wilnecote Conservation Area (from which it was strangely excluded) and to have it added to the Local List of interesting buildings to afford it some status and protection, have hit brick walls. Well, now both councils will have to

sit-up and take notice! Tamworth and Wilnecote have an architectural gem in their midst that we should all be incredibly proud of, and TDCS will not sit idly by and let Staffordshire County Council rob Tamworth of yet more of its precious heritage, for its own financial gain.

The *Tamworth Herald* of 1878 records that the opening of the schools was celebrated with a tea and public meeting, "all the village being astir, and the residents turning out in holiday attire to render due éclat to the occasion". The chairman of the governors, George Skey, the noted brick, tile and terracotta manufacturer in the village, described the schools as "commodious, comfortable, appropriate, and nice". He stated that the schools would "stand as a monument to the character of Messrs Watton and Sons, as builders".

Amongst famous ex-pupils is footballing legend Harry Hibbs, who played in local teams and was famously goalkeeper for Birmingham City in the FA Cup Final of 1931. Think Beckahm, Rooney and Ronaldo in the context of the 1920s and 30s!

TDCS is supported in its campaign by the national body for Victorian and Edwardian buildings, The Victorian Society, which states: "our belief is that the historic school buildings are attractive, characterful and worthy of retention. Furthermore, they are – like many former school buildings – eminently capable of being repurposed."

The Victorian Society praise Wilnecote as "a well preserved and attractively detailed school designed by Basil Champneys, regarded as one of the most important and innovative architects of his generation. Wilnecote is a relatively early example of his output and contrasts notably with the various Gothic and Tudor revival designs that he generally favoured. In the striking Dutch gables to the central block it is possible to see echoes of his later work at King's Lynn Grammar School; and in the proportions, detailing and windows there is the air of the Queen Anne style of which Champneys became such a significant and exploratory proponent."

TDCS is pressing Staffordshire County Council to re-think its plans to date, and Tamworth Borough Council to takes steps to protect our heritage.



