

Before you, Cecil ! !

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ACCORDING to Beryl Downing, Property correspondent of the "Independent on Sunday" Magazine (Sunday Feb 23rd 1992) in her article "When People Power Can See Off an Eyesore", "We are at last becoming a nation of protesters . . . in conservation societies and pressure groups . . . and not before time, because too many local councils are riding rough-shod over our urban landscapes . . ." In evidence she cites the Walton (on Thames) Society of 1975 which in 1980 won a council seat and in 1985 three more "which helped to control the balance of power in a hung council" and which prevented a multi-storey car park in a public park and saved listed buildings.

Whether or not conservation societies should themselves run for council seats rather than influencing existing councillors (and officers) is in itself debateable but if Ms Downing thinks that conservation societies and pressure groups started in 1975 she is rather spectacularly uninformed. Passing lightly over such relatively recent developments as the Peasants' Revolt in the 13th, Jack Cade's rebellion in the 14th, the Pilgrimage of Grace and Rising of the Northern Earls in the 16th, the Civil War in the 17th and the numberless political and economic riots of the 18th and the Luddites, Blanketeers, Chartists *et al* of the nineteenth centuries, she has also environmental-wise, missed the writings of John Ruskin, William Morris, Ebenezer Howard *et al*, not to mention the even more relevant foundations of the Commons Preservation Society in 1865, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877, the National Trust in 1895, the (separate) Clean Air and Garden City Associations in 1899, the Men of the Trees in 1922, the Council for the Protection of Rural England in 1926 and the Georgian Group of 1937. All these (and many more), and this year's Diamond Jubilee of the mass trespass on Kinder Scout in 1932 for Ramblers' Rights of Way, suggest that we have long had protest in our bones, if not in our genes.

The Walton Society was relatively slow off the mark. As early as 1698 a London suburban society "for the reformation of manners" successfully campaigned for the closure of "several music houses which had degenerated into notorious nurseries of lewdness and debauchery" and less than a century later Abinger (Surrey) locals prevented the building of an explosives factory in the parish. The Sidvale (Sidmouth) Association, which provided a footbridge over a river, dates from 1846 and 1975, the Walton Society's birthyear, saw the centenary of the Cockburn (Edinburgh) Association. When Dover's first conservation society was founded in 1964 the Kent Federation of Amenity Societies was already coming into existence. The Civic Trust itself dates from 1957 and now registers over a thousand societies.

No harm done, however, and all publicity is good and useful, for which many thanks. Even for those of us who have been protesting (constructively, of course!) for more than a quarter of a century it is useful to have Ms Downing's "Campaigners' Checklist":

- 72 # Build up as big a membership as possible.
 # Keep it informed by issuing progress reports.
 # Establish committees to deal with planning, transport, social activities.
 # Co-opt specialists.
 # Create a group of activists and divide your area into sections, each with a co-ordinator to deliver newsletters and act as go-between for the membership and the executive.
 # Keep the subscription low so that anyone can afford it. Top up with fund-raising events.
 # Don't mix a pressure group with a club. You won't have time to do the real work.
 # Get the support of outside groups such as the Civic Trust, the Victorian Society, whatever is relevant.
 # Use local celebrities.
 # Keep up the pressure in the local papers and radio network.
 # Watch planning applications carefully and be quick off the mark to oppose them.

In general these are the things we all do, as well as lobbying the decision makers at every level, holding public meetings and making awards, *etc.* Ms Downing's checklist however, is, I suggest, very questionable on the point "Don't mix a pressure group with a club".

If as big a membership as possible is necessary in order to impress Ministers, M.P.s, County, District and Parish Officers and Councillors, *etc. etc.* then a pressure group must indeed be mixed with a club. A Social Programme is even more important than a newsletter. They are, indeed, mutually supportive, the one as educational, with professionally guided tours to other towns and sites, illustrated lectures on architecture, archaeology, the countryside, the economic history of the area in question, *etc.*, as the other. Public meetings to explore particular issues, for the presentation of Awards and for Members Meetings, not to mention the odd Xmas Feast or Garden Party or Quiz are also invaluable for fund-raising, notably helping to keep subscriptions low. These are club functions which raise and sustain morale and promote the indispensable community spirit.

As I myself, Chairman of both Dover's first and second (successor) amenity society very well know, the absence of a social programme may be fateful to the existence of a conservation society in relatively quiet times. A crisis may precipitate an *ad hoc* group to fight a single cause. Kent positively pullulated them, first for the Channel Tunnel and, even more, for the High Speed Rail Link, and valuable services they gave and are giving. Continuity of existence and accumulated experience including acquaintance with potential adversaries in government and elsewhere) however, are invaluable and this is what clubs (the origins of political parties), are for. They need constant rejuvenation but continuity in the organisation and traditions of protest and pressure groups is vital. New boys can learn a lot and save a lot of time by consulting them.

I am indebted to Arthur Percival, MBE, D LITT, FSA, of the Civic Trust for supplementary historical information.