

# Colchester on a roll

The development of Colchester's plans as a major visitor destination have not been derailed by recession. The new contemporary art gallery – firstsite – opened in September 2011 and regeneration continues around heritage and the university. To crown this, Colchester has applied for city status under a scheme to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 2012. **David McCaskey** and **Karen Turnbull** review the last two years of activities and further plans which support and bring towards fruition the ambition expressed.

**I**N OUR LAST article 'Colchester, a Developing Visitor Destination' we concluded with a very upbeat statement:

*Colchester is on the cusp of something great. There are few destinations, especially in the East of England, which can claim to have such potential. Tourism and visitor services are being developed and improved through clear strategies that demonstrate Colchester's ambition and intention to sustain and grow visitors actively, to retain its current visitor base and capitalise on its aptitude and ambition to be a prestigious regional centre, creating a place which can compete effectively for inward investment and enhancing its regional, national and international standing.<sup>1</sup>*

Once upon a time it was a city as the first capital of Roman Britain—'Colonia Claudius'—but lost this status when Britain had effectively ceased to be part of the Roman Empire after 410 AD.

## firstsite

firstsite's spectacular new building, designed by internationally acclaimed Rafael Viñoly Architects was opened on Sunday 25 September. Spread over 3,200m<sup>2</sup> by the original Roman wall of Colchester, the new building is a venue for contemporary visual arts with purpose-built gallery spaces for international exhibitions, a display case to showcase elements of the University of Essex's internationally important collection of Latin American art and extensive learning

spaces for workshops. Firstsite is projected contribute a 18 percent increase in the value of tourism to Colchester Borough.<sup>2</sup>

firstsite's inaugural exhibition is inspired by Colchester's history as Britain's first city—CAMV-LODVNVM. The town's ancient name, described the settlement as the 'fortress of Camulos' (the Celtic god of war), originally established by the Trinovantes tribe c.2,000 years ago. This Iron Age fortress became the seat of power under the rule of king Cunobelin, mythologised as William Shakespeare's Cymbeline. It became the site of a Roman legionary fortress and in 49AD the first capital of Roman Britain, Colonia Claudius Victricensis, was established here.

firstsite's new building is carefully constructed to reflect its surroundings, sitting gently on undisturbed Roman remains, with its hand-rolled gold exterior reflecting its surroundings. Its situation on ancient ground, amongst modern and historic architecture is the starting point for an exhibition that considers how history is recovered, represented and re-enacted and how art and archaeology invite us to think about everyday, functional objects as sources of information or symbols of our cultures, past and present.

Amongst the 19 artists represented at this inaugural exhibition is work by Ai Weiwei, Barbara Hepworth, Henry Moore, Grayson Perry, J M W Turner and Andy Warhol; along with new work commissioned by contemporary artists: Michael Eichwald, Aleksandra Mir, Karin Ruggaber and Dahn Vo.

Rafael Viñoly's firstsite building has a 190-seat auditorium which is ideal for film screening, lectures and events and the building is open every day into the evening, free to all. At its heart is the newly restored Berryfield Roman mosaic which dates from around AD200; unearthed in 1923; the mosaic formed part of the floor of a Roman townhouse.

(Colchester BC)



As Michelle Cotton writes in the exhibition programme

*It is said that Colchester is still sore over Chelmsford developing into the county town of Essex from 1215 onwards. Yet the absence of a cathedral here has not deterred the borough's MP Bob Russell, from contending... that 'Colchester is still a city'.*

*Colchester may not have a cathedral but it now has a new secular temple. It is built on ancient grounds that once hosted an annual medieval fair each October on the feast day of St Denis, (Denys or Dionysius)—the origin of Colchester's Oyster Feast. This autumn we will reach for our amulets, those ancient symbols of fecundity, and toast oysters to anoint the grand opening of this new building on the Berryfield's rich and fertile land.*

It's off to a great start; against the project statement, attendances are up, bookings are up and memberships are rapidly growing. The opening day went on to be busier and busier with more than 3,000 people visiting firstsite in just six hours to see the inaugural exhibition, get involved with creative family activities on the D-shaped lawn, sample lunch in the new café restaurant MUSA, sun themselves on the terrace, and browse the shop for gifts and souvenirs before preparations took place for a celebratory music event.<sup>3</sup> firstsite's Facebook site and Twitter were alive with positive comments from locals and visitors alike.

The evening event was a musical collaboration called Colchester Round by four very different groups of Colchester musicians: Colchester's The Band of the

Parachute Regiment, heavy metal outfit Sanctorum, mediaeval shawm band Colchester Waits and world music ensemble Quire performed a combination of 14 songs in their own musical style, resulting in a new set of versions that take an unexpected direction. Three sold-out performances enjoyed a rapturous reception.

firstsite's first week has seen daily visitor averages of 1,500 and an upsurge in bookings for its conference and meeting spaces. One of the world's leading art critics, Andrew Graham-Dixon, visited firstsite for the BBC *Culture Show*; his review was very positive about both the architecture and the inaugural displays, 'a striking idiosyncratic building' and he enjoyed the many and varied exhibits.<sup>4</sup>

## Regeneration

firstsite is the impetus for making the St Botolph's area a desirable proposition for investors and for the regeneration of Colchester town centre. Over the course of this regeneration, £500m is to be invested through nine concurrent improvement schemes to make an already successful town centre an even better place to live work and visit.<sup>5</sup>

This will bring among other facilities:

- three new hotels to the town centre. They include a national brand budget hotel with retail on its ground floor, a boutique hotel on the Greyfriars site and an up-market restaurant with rooms at East Hill House.<sup>6</sup>

- a new creative quarter including a creative business centre underpin the St Botolph's Quarter development
- £500,000 has already been secured from EEDA to transform the old police station into a creative business incubation centre providing a magnet for the imaginative and inventive enterprises from workshops to digital media.

Creative jobs are a growth sector already, one in six businesses in Colchester work in this sector i.e. one in 14 people, the anticipated growth here is estimated to provide over 80 new jobs.<sup>7</sup>

Much work is being carried out to ensure that the town provides clean and safe places and spaces and in cooperation with a range of other organisations to ensure that Colchester after dark continues to be welcoming and secure.

This regeneration activity will also see an estimate additional 500,000 visitor trips a year, stimulating more jobs and spend in the visitor economy which is currently worth £216m; this is an increase from £197m in 2007.<sup>8</sup>

### Colchester Castle secures redisplay funding

The Heritage Lottery Fund has awarded £3.5m towards a £4.2m redevelopment of Colchester Castle. For project manager Tom Hodgson,

*now we are able to put all our planning into practice and create exciting new displays that do justice to Colchester's nationally important heritage, its outstanding collections and the amazing building in which they are housed.*

For the Heritage Lottery Fund East of England's head of heritage, Robyn Llewellyn

*This project is a fantastic opportunity to transform Colchester Castle into a 21st-century-heritage attraction which will allow both visitors and 'natives' their heritage for generations to come.*

### A new generation research park at the University

The university's vision is to create a new generation research park, the Knowledge Gateway, next to the campus, where research, innovation and business can flourish, to establish Colchester as an internationally renowned centre for education, jobs and great lifestyle.

The Knowledge Gateway will include an office village known as 'Parkside', with business units able to accommodate all sizes of companies, plus a hotel and various leisure and retail facilities. The infrastructure works on the site are due for completion in 2011, and the first phase of office units is scheduled to be available from mid-2012.

The Knowledge Gateway will be anchored by the university's Institute for Democracy and Conflict Resolution (known as the 'IDCR'), which will be housed in a building designed by the Essex alumnus, Daniel Libeskind. The IDCR will work with a wide range of national and international organisations and draw on the expertise in both social and physical sciences developed over the last 45 years at the university. It will allow Essex to play a leading, independent role in forging and maintaining sustainable democracies, working to prevent and resolve conflicts. The IDCR will act as a portal, through which various organisations, companies and governments can collaborate to help support and stabilise new nations.

While the building of the Knowledge Gateway proceeds at a pace, the university has announced the impending launch of an exciting new development within the Colchester Campus—the creation of the 'Collaboration Hub'. This is a specially designated area on-campus which will offer a variety of business services and support, targeting small enterprises wishing to work more closely with the university.

### High speed broadband comes to Colchester

Colchester Borough Council established in July a digital strategy to provide superfast broadband, both wireless and fixed, throughout the borough to make Colchester the best-connected place in Essex and the East of England. Preferred suppliers are helping to deliver each of the three key initiatives that make up the strategy. This partnership between three established names in the industry will provide total coverage across the borough, delivering the council's aim of addressing the market failure of poor urban mobile connectivity and very low suburban and rural internet access speeds.

The proposals include providing significantly higher speed broadband connectivity (typically 40–50Mbps) and 4th generation wireless (20Mbps) to visitors,

Of special interest to *The Hospitality Review* is the development of the University of Essex's neglected Wivenhoe Hall (Thomas Hopper 1846–57) as a practical training hotel for hotel managers and executives of the future. The university – not previously active in hospitality management – has spotted the gap as competitors roll their facilities into business schools. A partnership with Edge foundation and Kaplan, the first students for the two-year degrees with start in January 2012.

<http://www.edgehotelschool.ac.uk>



residents and businesses throughout the borough. Colchester itself will become the first 'high speed digital wireless town' in the UK, giving the borough a competitive edge, particularly over the next five years. It will support employment in many sectors already well represented in the borough including retail, tourism and creative industries which are 'bandwidth hungry'.

Significant improvements will be seen by the many people who currently experience digital exclusion and the accompanying economic disadvantages in urban and rural areas which have poor digital connectivity at present.<sup>9</sup> As well as benefiting from more efficient and effective digital access, residents, business and visitors will also see the cost of using these services reduce and access to a range of emerging technologies, such as health telecare, improve.

Up to £15 million of commercial investment in Colchester is expected. Better use will be made of the Council's town centre CCTV network, using the ducting and street furniture to deploy new communications fibre and wireless solutions, helping deliver best value from existing assets. The content and services delivered over this urban infrastructure will then be rolled out to suburban areas, business parks and rural communities over a combination of wireless and fibre technologies, Councillor Nick Barlow, commented:

*Providing users with low cost digital access will also bring other benefits for Colchester by helping create safer communities and reducing the need to travel. The regular income for the Council through both giving the delivery partners access to some of the*

*Council's assets to enable installation and the potential for a share of profits from online sponsorship will benefit the wider community by helping to avoid further potential service cuts.*

## Treasures from China at Colchester Castle Museum 2012

This exciting exhibition will showcase seventy of the treasures in Nanjing Museum, the second largest museum in China. It will explore the rise of Imperial China from the earliest Stone Age tombs to the time of the last Emperor and take us on a journey across 8,000 years of Chinese history. Stunning objects include a 2,000-year-old, life-size jade suit from the tombs of the Han Dynasty rulers, an exquisite gold cicada sitting on a jade leaf worn by a Ming Princess nearly 600 years ago and the luxury items and ornaments that adorned the palace of the last of the Imperial families as the tumult of the twentieth century changed China for ever.

Alongside this rich history will be a celebration of Chinese crafts and the enduring appeal of animals in Chinese culture. A delicate jade mouse will join an 8,000 year old pottery pig and three wise monkeys immortalised on a lacquer plate amongst a host of other creatures who will delight and fascinate family audiences.

The exhibition is being co-curated by ten children from the Gilbert School who are drawing on the experience of their own once-in-a-lifetime trip to China to

share this unique window into Chinese culture with the many visitors who will take part in the cultural festival to celebrate London 2012.

The exhibition will open on Saturday 30th June 2012 and close on January 7th 2013. In 2013 Colchester and Ipswich Museums will be sending their own treasures to Nanjing Museum to share with communities there and to celebrate the spirit of international partnership.

## Colchester applies for city status

The Cabinet Office has recently announced that there will be an opportunity for local authorities to apply for civic honours to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in 2012. Colchester has applied for city status twice before: in 1999 as part of the Millennium celebrations and again in 2001 as part of the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebrations in 2002. In its history Colchester was once a city, of course. As 'Colonia Claudia' Colchester was the first Capital of Roman Britain, but lost this status after AD410 when Britain had effectively ceased to be part of the Roman Empire.

Destination Colchester, a community lead organisation group dedicated to celebrating Colchester, championed a bid for Colchester to apply for city status which was endorsed by Colchester Borough Council. The decision will be announced early in 2012.

## Conclusion

There is some uncertainty about the effect of the closure of regional tourism bodies which is beginning to make itself felt as the Government's localism agenda takes hold. What this means for destinations around the country is still unclear in terms of funding. It is likely that the onus will increasingly fall on tourism businesses and Local Economic Partnerships; where, as in Colchester, tourism is a major driver of economic growth, we know that this challenge can and will be met.

We believe that we have, yet again, demonstrated Colchester's economic resilience and propose that it can look forward, in an equally upbeat manner, to continuing to capture its potential as a developing visitor destination that meets the needs of its locals and visitors, enhancing the quality of life for each in a sustainable manner.



KAREN TURNBULL has worked in economic development and tourism for Colchester Borough Council for 18 years having previously worked in marketing in the private sector. She is responsible for developing Colchester and the surrounding area as a visitor destination and working with tourism operators to improve services for visitors once they arrive.



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## References

- 1 David McCaskey and Karen Turnbull 'Colchester, a Developing Visitor Destination' *The Hospitality Review* 11 (2) April 2009
- 2 A projection of the economic impact of tourism on the Borough of Colchester; Cambridge Model commissioned annually since 1993
- 3 See <http://www.firstsite.uk.net/page/144/Camulodunum/262>
- 4 BBC *Culture show* (Friday 30 September)
- 5 See [www.bettertowncentre.com](http://www.bettertowncentre.com)
- 6 The need for further hotel beds was identified in the 2007 *Market Demand Appraisal & Sequential Site Assessment for Hotels in Colchester* by Humberts Leisure (updated 2009)
- 7 Annual Business Enquiry ONS/SIC
- 8 These are trips not people—people make multiple trips. (Cambridge Model projection),
- 9 A national survey conducted in October 2010 by the consumer site [www.broadband-expert.co.uk](http://www.broadband-expert.co.uk) found that the average download speed in the Borough was 4.2Mbps, the eighth slowest in the UK. In some rural areas of the borough, which are home to 33% of residents and 25% of businesses, current broadband speeds are 0.5–2Mbps. The Rural Broadband proposals will increase this to a minimum 25Mbps.