NEWS

Harrogate Heritage

Looking back at the heated debate over a tram line for Harrogate



Wilford and Howard's scheme for a Prospect Square Tram Station waiting room.

Malcolm Neesam
news@harrogateadvertiser.co.uk
@HgateAdvertiser

For almost 20 years, renowned historian Malcolm Neesam contributed weekly articles to the Harrogate Advertiser on the history and heritage of the town. In association with Harrogate Civic Society, we are proud to republish a selection from the series. Please note that the views expressed were those of Mr Neesam at the time of writing and do not necessarily reflect the current views either of the Advertiser or the civic society.

In April 1898 the attention of the public was drawn to an application by a private company of their intention to apply for powers to construct an electric tram line from Harrogate to Starbeck and Knaresborough.

In its editorial, this newspaper observed that "20 years ago the idea of a tramway would have been received with horror by the ratepayers of Harrogate, but... Harrogate has become such an extensive place in itself and the suburbs are becoming so populated that some further accommodation for the public is desirable... every effort should be made to avoid overhead wires...".

At their meeting in May 1898, the council considered a letter dated April 12, from solicitors representing client Andrews, asking them to give permission for the construction of a system of electric tramways within the borough.

The Mayor also reported on a meeting he had had with Mr Addyman, of Addyman and Evans, who wished to construct a light railway between Harrogate and Knaresborough.

After discussing both applications, the council resolved that it was "not desirable for this corporation to entertain any idea of the construction or working of a system of any tramway in or about the Borough of Harrogate".

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The council's reluctance to promote a tram system was because they believed trams would lower Harrogate's tone, which was very much moulded to please the aristocratic and wealthy visitors.

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Despite the council's reluctance, Addyman and Evans wrote to the council in June, regarding their Knaresborough and Harrogate Light Railway Company, set up to build a light railway along the main road from Harrogate to Knaresborough.

The majority of the council appear to have been horrified by the idea, but Alderman Fortune wanted to meet company representatives to hear what they had to say. After an acrimonious exchange, the Mayor declared the matter out of order.

In July, the council heard that Addyman and Evans were ready to show the council the electrical tramways and power house they had recently built in Leeds, but again the council took no action, merely noting that their letter had "been laid on the table".

However, the council appears to have had a change of heart by August 1902, as the Advertiser for August 16 noted that the Council Tram Committee had resolved: "That this committee deem it expedient that the council should next session seek powers by Bill in Parliament empowering them to provide electric tram ways in and for the district of Harrogate. Resolved also, that the Borough Surveyor and Borough Engineer prepare a draft scheme, and submit the same to the next meeting of this committee."

A good proportion of the public seem to have favored the introduction of a tram service, especially the working population. The opposition, however, was forming, and the Harrogate Traders Association strongly disliked the idea of trams in Harrogate.

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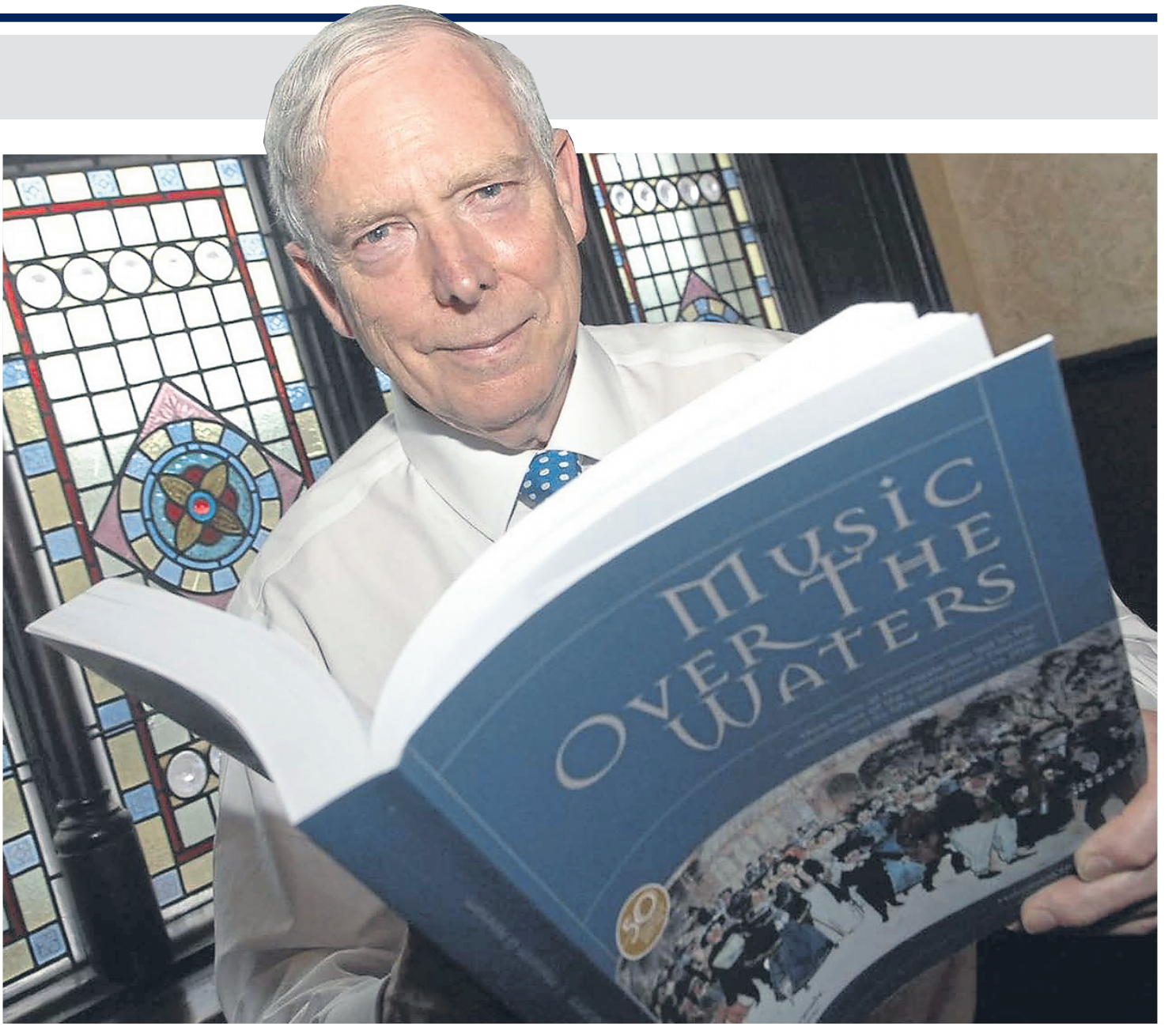
Despite this evidence of public opposition, the council went ahead with a decision to apply to Parliament themselves to obtain powers to lay down a tramway. Alderman Fortune explaining that it was not because the council wished to introduce trams themselves, but because they wished to prevent the private Tram Company from doing so.

By November, the Advertiser reported that "...Tramways in Harrogate are not needed, and the town is now in a position to oppose any application to Parliament to make them".

And that was the end of the matter.

At the height of the Harrogate Tram controversy, the Prospect Crescent drapers, Wilford and Howard, suggested that a central





Malcolm Neesam

tram station should be built outside their premises on the land then forming part of the gardens of the Prospect Hotel.

The building was to be constructed of solid stone, richly ornamented with columns and arches, and crowned with a statue of His Majesty King Edward VII. The interior would have a "florally-enriched" waiting room.

This week's photograph shows the Wilford and Howard scheme for Prospect Square with no fewer than eight trams running to such destinations as Oatlands and the county cricket match.

My thanks to Advertiser reader Mr JD Brook of Sleaford, Lincolnshire, for kindly sending me this drawing.

Personally, I am of the opinion that if the opposition of the 1902 tram scheme could have foreseen the chaos the private motor car has created in Harrogate, they would have reversed their opposition.

If you have any comments on this or any other aspect of Harrogate's history or heritage, please contact the civic society by email: history@harrogatecivicsociety.org



The debate over a tram line for Harrogate was a hot topic in 1902. Many residents supported the idea, others thought it would make Harrogate rather tawdry.