

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER

URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

January 2011

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Enclosed in this mailing is a membership renewal form for the forthcoming year. If you pay your annual subscription by BACS transfer or by direct debit, rather than by cheque it would help us keep track of where we are with membership renewals if you returned the form appropriately completed. Alternatively send an email with your payment details to olwen_rowlands@hotmail.com.

A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

The Society's AGM will take place on Thursday 5 May in the Mayoral suite at City Hall. Full details will be sent to you in the April Newsletter.

WESTMINSTER SOCIETY AWARDS 2011

The Westminster Society plans to stage a presentation to winners of the Society's biennial awards at the AGM in May. In our awards we honour accomplishments in excellent new architecture as other award giving bodies such as the RIBA and the Financial Times do. Unlike them, we also make awards for renovated architecture and urban design. In all three categories the distinctive qualities that the Westminster Society especially wishes to direct to public attention are significant achievements that heighten and refresh Westminster's public realm.

Over the past two years some outstanding new buildings and renovated buildings, large and small, have been produced in Westminster, and perhaps also a few contributions to urban design. Would you like to nominate something for a 2011 Westminster Society Award? If so, send your nomination to Nathan Silver, 19 Regency Street, London SW1P 4BY, or to ns@nathansilver.com.

THE OLD BAILEY, REDUX

The tour of the Old Bailey on 23 November 2010 was heavily over-subscribed, so we have booked a repeat visit for Tuesday 22 November 2011. You will not be able to apply to go on this tour until you receive the autumn 2011 visits programme. If you were previously

disappointed or if you want to visit now, we recommend that you book pronto as no more than 12 people can be accommodated on the tour.

THE SOCIETY'S NEW OFFICE

We are pleased and relieved to say that the society will shortly be moving into a new office in Regent Street. (Not Regency Street—REGENT STREET.) We were awarded use of the office after submitting a successful application to Regent Street Office and Home, a beneficial organisation that provides affordable office spaces for a limited number of not-for-profit community groups in an around the Regent Street area.

REDESIGN IN LEICESTER SQUARE

A considerable redesign of the so-called public realm of Leicester Square—that's the area in and around the central gardens—has been agreed by the Westminster City Council. It will include new granite paving, new planting, new public seating, new railings and gates, a new water feature, decorative lighting, and replacement entrances and vent stacks for the underground toilets. While the redevelopment work is taking place the four listed busts will be temporarily removed. (The busts are of William Hogarth and Sir Joshua Reynolds, who were residents of the Square, Sir Isaac Newton who lived in St Martin's Street, and John Hunter who founded the country's first Anatomy Museum in the Square in 1785.) There will be a modest increase in the planted area, and the unnecessary perimeter railings around the central garden will be replaced by a sinuous band of granite on which people can sit. The four paths crossing the garden will be widened and repaved, as will the surrounding areas.

We agreed with the City Council's description of the Square's look as cluttered, which decidedly aggravates overcrowding at the most sociable times, and we strongly supported most proposals designed to revive the pretty tired-looking tourist area. However we did have some reservations: while acknowledging that the proposed new entrances to the underground toilets are an improvement, we were disappointed that there is no step-free access for wheelchair users as there is on the north terrace of Trafalgar Square. We were also disappointed to learn that plaques featuring personalities and Commonwealth capital cities are being removed from the paving without apparent replacement. Similarly, cycle stands are being removed and not replaced, which should be reconsidered if we want to encourage more cycle use and fewer cars in London, as we jolly well do.

2012: BEACH VOLLEYBALL ON HORSE GUARDS PARADE! —OH REALLY?

The 2012 Olympic Games will not be confined to the site on the Lower Lea Valley in Newham known as the Olympic Park. One of the events, beach volleyball, will take place on the Horse Guards parade ground. (Why not call it "horse volleyball" in the circumstances?)

When we were asked to consider the proposal, we liked the imposing rah-rah look of the temporary spectator stands that would be erected. But we wondered why members of the public not attending the games had to be excluded not just from Horse Guards Parade but also from the Mall, part of Horse Guards Road, and both sets of WCs in the park.

When we got sight of the planning application it appeared that the proposals also included closing Marlborough Road for a lengthy period, something we strongly objected to along with the exclusion zones.

UNTIL 2012:
A TOWERING
COUNTDOWN
CLOCK IN
TRAFALGAR
SQUARE (TO VIE
WITH NELSON)

A proposal to site an Olympic Games and Paralympic Games countdown clock, sponsored by Omega, in Trafalgar Square on the west side of the steps leading down from the National Gallery has been given the go-ahead by Westminster City Council. The clock will be on a structure 21 ft tall and clad in brushed stainless steel panelling. From March this year one side will count down the 500 days til the start of the Olympics, while the other side will do the same for the Paralympics. Only two bodies raised objections to the towering clock/advertisement, and one of them was the Westminster Society. Its dominating height would have been less annoying had the overall design been more muted and sensitive. As it is, the clock will be an overbearing presence in Trafalgar Square for over 19 months.

JOHNSON HOUSE,
CUNDY STREET

Proposals are going ahead to develop former police accommodation in Cundy Street and Semley Place and provide 72 flats in two blocks of up to eight storeys. The developers have, at the Society's suggestion, included a small number of 4-bedroom units and reduced the height of one block to six storeys. The Society's main areas of concern were the use of stone cladding on the building facing Ebury Square - we felt it would require a good maintenance regime to avoid discoloration - and the central access route between Semley Place and Cundy Street. We feel both ends should be protected by demountable bollards that would allow access to emergency services while preventing casual access by taxis. We also suggested that replacement trees be planted, and an S106 contribution* be made in the form of carriageway widening on the western side of Ebury Square.

We explained in the August Newsletter that developers who get planning permission to build houses and apartments in Westminster containing 10 or more housing units are required to include a fixed proportion of "affordable" homes on the sites they develop. When the site is small the number of affordable units required can amount to no more than two or three, and it can be difficult to attract a registered social landlord. The developer then has the option of giving Westminster City Council money in lieu of the affordable homes. There will be no affordable homes in this development, and a financial contribution to Westminster City Council will be made in lieu.

*Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 relates to money paid by developers to local planning authorities in order to offset the costs associated with development. For example, if 100 new houses were built, there would be effects on local schools and roads that the local authority would have to deal with. In that situation there might be a Section 106 agreement as part of the granting of planning permission, where the developer agrees to contribute towards the provision of new schools. In the present example we are suggesting that the developer makes a contribution by enhancing the carriageway.

ENTRANCE TO
THE CHURCHILL
WAR ROOMS

The Director of the Churchill War Rooms is keen to improve the entrance to the museum, at the foot of Clive Steps at the end of King Charles Street in Horse Guards Road. The present arrangements are supposed to recall wartime conditions, with a sandbagged entrance leading to a rabbit warren of passages and rooms. The proposals would include replacing the existing roof to the entrance with a new bronze roof and extended canopy cover for people queuing to enter. New glazed inner doors and bronze outer ones would also be installed, along with new signage on the pavement. We welcomed these proposals, but suggested (in the spirit of S106) that a thorough cleaning of the grimy balustrade above the entrance would be welcome. Thinking more widely about access to the museum, we concluded that King Charles Street, the main route to the museum from Whitehall, was a bleak prospect that would benefit from some planting and perhaps trees. By failing to make the access more welcoming the government could be blamed for discouraging visits to the Churchill War Room by neglect. We also thought there should be disabled access to the War Rooms from Whitehall.

CHELSEA
BARRACKS SITE

After several unexplained but easily guessed-about delays (many fingers in the pie?), a planning application has been submitted in respect of the new proposals for the Chelsea Barracks Site. It is thought that the consultation period will last until the 25th February. Westminster City Council will then try to take the application to the Major Development Committee in April 2011.

The application, known as an Outline Hybrid type, is an intermediate category that provides a little more detail than an Outline Application. It includes the envelopes of buildings, their site footprints, and a tolerance margin around them where buildings might or might not impinge. What we have in respect of the Chelsea Barracks site is virtually a Full Application, but one where the actual detailed architecture of buildings isn't part of the application. Helpful?

There will be an exhibition of the Planning Application at the Community Hub at 59 Pimlico Road on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 3-7pm and on Saturdays from 10am-1pm between 4 January and 25 February 2011. There is also an easy-to-navigate website: go to www.chelseabarracks.net/planning/application.php.

123 ASHDOWN
HOUSE

A range of external alterations are proposed for Ashdown House, 123 Victoria Street, including alterations to shopfronts in Victoria Street and Howick Place, alterations to the Victoria Street office entrance, and the creation of a new office entrance for the south wing of the building. New glazing will be installed in all windows and part of the colonnade facing the Piazza will be filled in. The Society supports these proposals. Additional entrances should make it easier to let the building to multiple tenants, and improvements to shop fronts will do much to relieve the uninspiring appearance of the building on both sides at ground floor level.

7 AND 8
ST JAMES'S
SQUARE

We first reported on proposals for no. 7 and no. 8 St James's Square in August 2008. Recently we attended a third meeting with developers to discuss new schemes for these two sites. As before, no. 7, designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, will be refurbished as a single family dwelling, but whereas earlier schemes planned to redevelop no. 8 as large lateral apartments, the current proposal is for it to be demolished and redeveloped for office use. We made some suggestions for improving the proposal, and shall be interested to see whether or not these have been incorporated when the planning applications appears.

UPDATING
BAZALGETTE:
THE THAMES
TIDEWAY TUNNEL

When the Great Stink of 1858 was snuffed it was by the great Joseph Bazalgette, who responded with the creation of a network of sewers for central London. Of course dear Bazzy was working in a city of about two million people, and for over a century his improvements were effective, but with the population of Greater London in 2011 expected to exceed 7.8 million, the system is overdue for enlargement. The Bazalgette network collects both rain water and sewage and permits both to overflow into the Thames when the sewers reach their capacity. This prevents raw sewage flowing back into people's homes. But nowadays such overflows occur about once a week, and around 39 million tonnes of untreated sewage goes into the river annually.

The solution proposed by Thames Water is to construct a new sewer the width of three London buses that will run deep—sometimes 75 metres below—the Thames. The Tideway Tunnel, as it is to be called, will collect the water and sewage that currently is discharged into the river and divert it to treatment centres to the east of London. In addition to building the new sewer tunnel, Thames Water also need to create work sites at which it can be connected to the existing sewer outfalls. In Westminster this will be on the Victoria Embankment to the south of Hungerford Bridge. Thames Water will also create a blunt promontory with some landscaping extending into the river. This will house a drop shaft underground and a 10 metre ventilation shaft above. We felt that the ventilation shaft would be intrusive, and wished to be reassured that new stinks will not offend people using the Jubilee Bridge to cross the river.

DERBY GATE

When we responded earlier to proposals to enhance Derby Gate (a short street between Whitehall and Victoria Embankment), York stone was to be used for paving. Updated proposals to use inferior materials for cost-cutting purposes are in our view completely unacceptable in an area adjacent to a World Heritage Site.

DEVELOPMENT
OF THE FORMER
BURBERRY HQ
IN HAYMARKET

This Grade II* building has been unused for over two years. Burberry's flagship store is now on the corner of Brompton Road and Knightsbridge, where the Scotch House used to be, and their headquarters is in Horseferry House at the southern end of Horseferry Road. The proposal is to convert the former shop and offices to a

hotel, to add another floor, and to demolish construction at the rear including the stage door of the Comedy Theatre. We shall be contacting the developer pre-application to get fuller details.

WESTMINSTER ABBNEY'S 2020 VISION

Westminster Abbey's "2020 Vision" had four main elements: to develop No 1 Dean's Yard as an Education Centre, to provide a café for visitors in the mediaeval cellarium, to create a museum for visitors in the triforium, and to erect a kind of corona above the crossing in time for the 60th anniversary of the Queen's coronation in June 2013. The new Education Centre has now been completed, and the Abbey staff, who had previously made use of the cellarium, now have accommodation in the basement of the new Centre.

The plan for the cellarium is to use all five bays to create an 85-cover café. This would be designed to reflect the monastic heritage of the space with a kitchen and servery area on one level. On the roof of the misericorde (a place where monks who had been bled or required indulgence in respect of diet on account of age or health had their meals), which is sited between the cellarium and the former refectory, there will be a new 60-cover restaurant in a zinc and glass structure offering a good view of Victoria Tower. All levels would be connected by a lift as well as stairs.

Creating a café and restaurant will mean that the coffee stall in the North Cloister can be removed. The route for visitors to the Abbey will be changed so that they pass the entrance to the cellarium café instead of turning north at the junction of the South and West Cloisters to re-enter the Abbey and exit via the West Door. We think these proposals will help protect the historic fabric of the Abbey and provide welcome facilities for visitors.

VISITING THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER

Guided tours of the Palace of Westminster have been available during the summer recess for several years, but now tours are available on Saturdays throughout the year. The ticket office for booking a tour in person is adjacent to the Jewel Tower opposite the Victoria Tower. For online booking, go to www.ticketmaster.co.uk.

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