

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

January 2012

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 save administration time. In any case it would help us keep track of where we are with membership renewals if you returned the form appropriately completed.

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY WEBSITE

Over the past few months we have been updating our website. We have now added details of the 2011 AGM and our biennial awards. The current visits programme and booking forms will soon be there too, together with the current newsletter.

PLANNING FEES

Planning fees have been in the news recently. The planning system is supposed to be self-financing, with applicants being charged a fee that is meant to cover the costs incurred by a planning authority when considering an application. The fees are set nationally by government, meaning that in an authority like Westminster City Council which deals with many complex proposals, the Planning Directorate's fees do not cover the service. This is of particular concern at a time of financial stringency. Some changes to the fee system were recently proposed by the government that would have allowed Westminster City Council to raise its fees by modest amounts.

We wrote to the Secretary of State for Community and Local Government expressing our support for the fee increases. After a wait of about three months we received a brief response from a junior minister that said, "Reform of the planning application fees is still under consideration by ministers. As soon as we are able we will inform local authorities and other of the next steps in progressing this work."

The council say that if they are compelled to operate under the present system the number of planning officers will have to be radically reduced, which will undermine the service. We have been told that some developers are happy to contribute more. We think extra costs shouldn't be incurred by everyone. Do you agree?

PLANNING
REFORM

The government is proposing a relaxation in planning regulations that will introduce a presumption in favour of "sustainable" (definition required) developments. The government wants to simplify Britain's complex planning system and claims that the changes are necessary to encourage house building. Some opponents say the plans weaken the protection of the green belt and could lead to more urban sprawl. Our main concern was how such amended planning regulations would affect our part of Westminster, which has within its boundaries a large number of conservation areas. We wrote to the Deputy Leader to ask. We shall let you know how he replied.

PARLIAMENT'S
"DESIGNED
HOSTILE VEHICLE
MITIGATION
BARRIERS"

That's what they are called by security experts. SW1 has seen various DHVMBs in recent years, none great-looking: concrete and tempered glass around New Scotland Yard; stone-faced concrete along Whitehall; steel bollards bolted to subsurface beams around the Home Office and on two sides of Portcullis House. (Not to mention the fortifications in W1 around the U S Embassy in Grosvenor Square.) The worst of the lot are the prefabricated black-finished steel and concrete "Corus Bi-Steel Quick-Link Lite" DHVMBs on Bridge Street and Abingdon Street plopped around the Palace of Westminster. The Parliamentary Estate Directorate has confirmed that the thick black chest-high things, installed in a hurry in response to some identified threat, are temporary, but they will still be there during the Olympics and Paralympics. Lack of public money is a mendacious excuse for the perpetuation of units that can't be cheap to lease, take up a lot of public space, and are supreme visual eyesores. We will exert pressure to get a well-designed solution in place as soon as possible.

HAS
WESTMINSTER
GOT A WORLD
HERITAGE SITE?

On the Brangelina model, you could call the heart of Westminster SuParlAbbey. OK, we won't—though that's at least a descriptively more functional designation for the area including the Supreme Court, the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey than the flaccid "Westminster Heritage site." Well, the abovementioned Parliamentary Estate Directorate has initiated another study for reintegrating the above so-called, and for a start trying to restore some of the direct links that once existed between the Palace of Westminster and the Abbey. Recently we were invited to hear the views of the architects and traffic engineers appointed to consider various options for the site. We were delighted to learn that they included proposals for making Parliament Square fully accessible to the public. Under consideration is the

rationalising of ticket sales for the Abbey and the Palace of Westminster. This in itself is not of major interest to us, but we were impressed by related proposals for visitor centres and cafés in alternative locations. All is at an early stage, and if realised the plan would be carried out step by step. We expect Mayor Johnson to continue to oppose the sovereign idea of closing the stream of vehicular traffic between the Abbey and Parliament Square, which would create the necessary pedestrian site for a proper Campidoglio (cf. Michelangelo's exquisite piazza for the political centre of Rome).

There is another outlying embarrassment over the future of what's also called the Westminster "World" Heritage Site. UNESCO, responsible for that even grander designation, is said to be unhappy about the cross-river view of the 43-storey Doon Street residential tower which is proposed for a site beyond the IBM building on the South Bank. UNESCO visited London in December and will comment by June. Will headlines say "World Heritage Site in Danger" and "Westminster Faces Doon" on account of a literally far-fetched I-spy-tall-building grumble?

RIVERWALK
HOUSE, WE
HARDLY
KNEW YE

A further office building apparently soon to meet an untimely demise (cf. Queenstown Road's Marco Polo building, cited last issue) is the 13-storey Riverwalk House, 157-161 Millbank on the river side, built in 1965. Not a bad building—there's no debilitating aura of a tired Postmodernistic style this time. The replacement will be two new residential buildings of 17 and 7 storeys on a podium. At ground floor level there will be retail accommodation for a restaurant and art gallery, and the basement will house car parking. A new stair and lift will connect the river walk to Vauxhall Bridge. The planning application justifies the taller building's height as providing a gateway to Westminster, if a one-sided gateway can be imagined. (Who writes these things?) The proposed landscaping is an improvement on the mainly bituminous ex-parking lot now in existence. The new site design ought to be better still.

42-43 PALL MALL

Economic forces continue to favour the conversion of office accommodation into residential accommodation. We prefer to see buildings of quality conserved, even if the use must change and physical modifications would be required. Recent good examples include 36-38 Queen Anne's Gate, former headquarters of the National Trust, gone back to being a large private house; and the conversion of a Lutyens building (itself once a refurb) at 7 St James's Square. Something similar is now about to happen at 42-43 Pall Mall, where both properties will be redeveloped behind the retained façade of number 42. The basement and part of the ground floor will be used as a shop and gallery, and the upper floors for four large residential units. We like the mixed-use proposal for this site, but not the feeble facsimile façade shown for number 43.

FORMER
LAND REGISTRY
BUILDING

When Her Majesty's Land Registry became the responsibility of the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills last year, the head office moved to Croydon, and the imposing Edwardian building at number 32 Lincoln's Inn Fields (a few doors down from the former site of G F Handel's Lincoln's Inn Theatre, celebrated in musical history) became redundant. Now the former Land Registry building will become a useful academic and administrative building for the London School of Economics, which lies close. We salute the LSE's munificent amount of benefaction that has allowed the purchase, however partly reliant it may have been on money provided by Gaddafi *films*.

BALUSTRADES AT
THE GROSVENOR
THISTLE HOTEL

The delightful-looking Victorian era Grosvenor Thistle Hotel next to Victoria Station has an ornate wrought iron balustrade at second floor level that runs the length of the façade. As part of current refurbishment, an application was made to install another balustrade at the first floor level to resemble the upper one. We were picky about the application. First, the new balustrade was of insufficient width; second, far from being a resemblance, the proposed balustrade wasn't worthy of its location. The owners took partial note of our views. The new balustrade is still too narrow, but it does sufficiently echo the one on the second floor.

ABELL AND
CLELAND HOUSES

We first commented on proposals for Abell and Cleland Houses in May 2011. (Abell House is on the corner of John Islip Street and Page Street. Cleland House is a little way down John Islip Street, opposite the Hilton Doubletree—formerly Mint—formerly City Inn—hotel.) We objected to the unacceptable level of affordable housing (only 28%), to 1:1 parking provision in a central location with good transport links, to the lack of attention to energy conservation, and finally to an indecisive treatment of the facades that evinces neither a sense of response to their location nor a convincing departure.

Following our comments on the initial planning application the developer made some minor amendments and submitted a second application. However, our main concerns were not addressed; indeed, the percentage of affordable accommodation fell from 28% to 24%. So we had no option but to register a formal objection to the proposals. At the start of November the Planning Committee decided to defer a decision.

HORSEFERRY
ROAD
MAGISTRATES'
COURT

The Horseferry Road Magistrates' Court heard its last case on 22 September. Despite there being two existing planning consents for redevelopment of the building (stylistically, one historical pastiche and one contemporary design), Barratt, the developer, has instructed a new team of architects. Their new design will have a single central entrance from Horseferry Road more or less opposite the northwest gate to St John's Gardens.

The whole building would be for residential use, having 136 market-value units and basement car parking. The previously negotiated affordable-value element of this development is substantially complete in Seymour Place, W1. We have asked the developers to give us a presentation of their proposals, so we should be able to tell you more in our next newsletter.

THE BATTERSEA CAN OF WORMS

That's four worms standing to attention, since we refer to the perennially impending permanent conservation scheme for the devoutly worshipped former power station. Are we approaching the day when orthodox devotion needs to end, or was that some time ago? Just saying, as the kids say.

At the end of November it was reported that Chelsea Football Club had appointed Mike Hussey, former head of Land Securities London Division, to work with architects Kohn Pedersen Fox on the relocation of the club to a site adjacent to Battersea Power Station. According to nameless persons that the Times identified as "property experts," the relocation of the football ground would somehow secure the future of the power station, which has been empty for about 20 years and roofless for a good part of that. It is currently owned by the presumably unironically named Real Estate Opportunities plc of St Helier, which itself is largely owned by the Treasury Holdings Group of Ireland, because REO plc had £300 million of debt. No sooner had Mayor Johnson and Chancellor Osborne visited Nine Elms at the end of November to publicise the creation of a business enterprise zone adjacent to the power station and the extension of the Northern Line from Kennington, than it was announced that the lenders of the £300 million had called in the debts and Real Estate Opportunities had gone into administration. We note that REO plc shares are now worth 0.225p. The Treasury Holdings Group's corporate diary shows that Extraordinary General Meetings are scheduled. How's that investment worked out for the Times's property experts?

More seriously: the opportunity cost of site development at the Battersea Can of Worms has now reached such silly levels with such dubious chances of reasonable recoupment that the old power station's Holy Listedness ought to be reconsidered. Even if it is financeable, is a new football stadium sited there just because it is the best possible money spinner really the appropriate use for that prime piece of London real estate?

50 ST JAMES'S STREET

Returning to atmospheres still supportive of life, we endorse a proposal to develop 50 St James's Street to create a private members' club, a boutique hotel, a lounge bar/library and a private members' terrace at roof level. We think this scheme is a good example of how an important and sound building can be reconfigured with reasonable external and internal changes to provide a range of new uses. We

believe that developers should normally be required to provide access for disabled people as set out in the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995, but in this case we accept with regret that fully compliant DDA access isn't possible.

SUPER SEWER

We last mentioned the proposed new Super Sewer under the Thames in our January 2011 newsletter. Since then the £3.6 billion project has received criticism from those who object both to the cost and the disruptive construction sites required. The London boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham commissioned a report that claims that a much shorter and cheaper tunnel ending at Battersea rather than Beckton would be just as effective. It's not clear how a short tunnel would deal with toxic overflows downstream in our part of the Thames. Moreover, claims that noxious smells would be detected at ground level around the tall ventilation shafts to be constructed at intervals are incorrect, we are informed.

KINGSGATE HOUSE AND GARDENS

In our last two newsletters we mentioned the proposed redevelopment of Kingsgate House, just west of City Hall in Victoria Street. To recap once again: two new buildings will be constructed on the site. The west building will provide office accommodation and the east residential accommodation. Both will have shops at ground-floor level. A new open space was proposed, leading from between the two buildings to a new entrance to Westminster City School. Both schemes have been approved. However, Transport for London is not willing to discuss the provision of a new entrance to Westminster City School that would extend over the underground railway lines to the rear.

PROPOSED NEW SAINSBURY'S IN ROCHESTER ROW

A new Sainsbury's is being proposed for a site in Rochester Row diagonally opposite the catering school of Westminster Kingsway College. There was initial concern from city council planners about the new supermarket having a 24-hour alcohol licence, but it seems a 24-hour operation was never intended; it is proposed the new store will be open no later than 11.00 pm. To minimise disturbance, deliveries would be phased in small truckloads that debouch to the rear of the building in Greencoat Place. New consultations are to take place, and a planning application will be submitted shortly.

ROOM 2443, THE LINEN HALL,
162-168 REGENT STREET,
LONDON W1B 5TE

PATRON: HRH THE DUKE OF
GLOUCESTER KG GCVO
PRESIDENT: THE DEAN OF WESTMINSTER
CHAIRMAN: OLWEN ROWLANDS

REGISTERED CHARITY NO. 235400