

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

January 2013

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Enclosed in this mailing is a membership renewal form for the forthcoming year. Please note the change to the Gift Aid declaration, which is in line with the latest instructions from HMRC.

2013 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The 2013 AGM will take place on Thursday 9 May in the Church Hall of St Peter's Eaton Place. Our speaker will be Sir Richard MacCormac. Sir Richard is responsible for the extension of BBC Broadcasting House and the creation of a new public space that frames the spire of All Souls', Langham Place. Those of you who came to the 2011 AGM will have seen Sir Richard receive one of the Society's biennial awards for this work. Further details about the AGM will be sent out with the April Newsletter.

BATTERSEA POWER STATION



Things are looking up for the Battersea Power Station site. Not only do the developers say they want to get on site quickly, but Transport for London, whose interest in the site has been conspicuous by its absence, has decided to take over the Transport and Works Act (TWA) application process to get the Northern Line extension under way. (The TWA lays down the system under which transport infrastructure projects of significant national importance can get off the ground outside the normal local planning process.) A government guarantee for a £1bn loan to enable the Mayor of London to fund the Northern Line extension was one of a series of infrastructure announcements announced in the chancellor's Autumn Statement at the start of December. The Treasury said the UK guarantee would allow the Mayor of London to borrow £1bn at a new preferential rate from the Public Works Loan Board to support the Northern Line extension. As we have said frequently in the past, the development of the Battersea Power Station site and the development of Nine Elms as a whole isn't viable without the extension.

COME, FRIENDLY
BOMBS

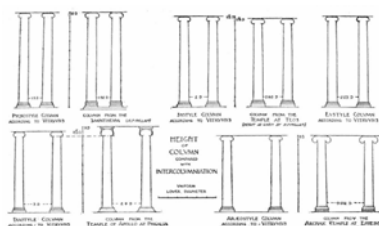


Hyde Park Corner is now overwhelmed with war memorials—the latest being the Bomber Command memorial, which has joined the WWI Machine Gun Corps memorial, the WWI Royal Artillery memorial, the WWII Australian war memorial, the WWII New Zealand war memorial and the WWII Commonwealth Memorial Gates—not to mention Decimus Burton’s unimpeachable Wellington Arch, surmounted by the gravity-challenging Angel of Peace Descending on the Quadriga of War (Adrian Jones, 1912). The new Bomber Command memorial, alongside the start of Piccadilly at the northwestern end of Green Park, is the largest of a gaspably uneven lot, and by far the worst.

Memorials in Westminster make an even bigger claim on our civic concerns than on our memorious feelings, since they are usually nominated privately and their approval clearly isn’t subject to normal considerations of suitability and decorum. The city’s planners received strong objections to the Bomber Command memorial from every amenity group we are aware of as well as from us, but the adverse comments didn’t impinge. While the effect of a lousy building is often mitigated by its context in the street and it may after all be replaced one day, a lousy monument—especially a large one, in a public park—will boldly stand forth to depress sojourners forever, unless Sir John Betjeman’s “friendly bombs” can be summoned up again (very appropriately in this case), and land some 23 miles east of Slough.

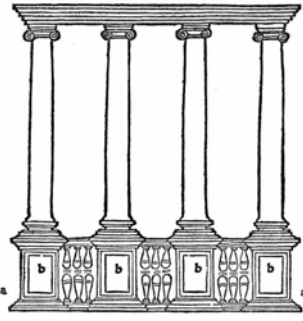
Before any memorial tries to tug on our feelings, the questions it should satisfy are (i) what does it commemorate? (ii) why is it here? (iii) what does it say? The Bomber Command memorial’s answer to (i) is on the primary inscription to “55,573 airmen... who served in RAF Bomber Command and lost their lives...” instead of, say, the 383,000 total UK military deaths, or the scores of thousands of civilians on both sides who were killed by aerial bombardment during the war (the latter are alluded to over the lintel, as an obvious afterthought). After 70 years, the idea of RAF losses as the righteous primary focus seems a neglectful category mistake, to put it mildly.

To (ii), the siting constitutes a major subtraction from a peaceful public park to achieve propinquitous inclusion in what’s become an allsorts Disneyland of warfare monuments. As for (iii), what its inscriptions very much say is to pay tribute to the “generous support” of the monument’s contributors, or “benefactors”: principally, the tax-sheltered Lord Ashcroft, the mobile phone tycoon John Caudwell, the Express newspaper owner Richard Desmond, the deceased Bee Gee Robin Gibb, and the conservative U.S. body the Heritage Foundation, currently led by a Tea Party favourite, the former Senator Jim DeMint. Moreover, the largest inscription should have been copy-edited so the carved stone lettering doesn’t unnecessarily begin “This memorial is dedicated to...”, like a disc jockey’s introduction to a dance tune. So none of the initial questions have satisfactory answers.



CLASSICAL
INTERCOLUMNIATION HAD
TO BE CLOSE, AS VITRUVIUS
DEMONSTRATED

Then there is the question of design—by Liam O’Connor, sometime teacher at the Prince of Wales’s Institute of Architecture. It is a painful neoclassical pastiche, with two bracketing ranges of doric columns—the intercolumnar spaces and entablature spans way too wide for



...AND IN CLASSICAL DESIGN PRINCIPLE, THE STYLOBATE SHOULD EXPRESS SUPPORT FOR EACH INDIVIDUAL COLUMN

stonework engineering and Vitruvian principles, and the stylobate a low wall without appropriate engaged column plinths—on either side of a doric pavilion which has a similarly uncanonical, mingy balustrade on top that's too lacy and weak to form a worthy skyline. But all that is just poor architectural grammar (which even Albert Speer usually got right). The fundamental objection is that, instead of seeking an expressive and allusive memorious language for part of the 20th century's greatest catastrophe, the meant-to-be-classy classicism is historically gratuitous and says nothing.

Within the pavilion is a very large figurative bronze sculpture of a seven-man bomber crew, which, while naturalistically conventional, would be unobjectionable if it had been made life-size rather than gigantic, and given a reasonable site on its own without its egregious architecture and undignified inscriptions. Come, friendly bombs!

LEICESTER SQUARE REVISITED

On the other hand, the 18-month renewal of Leicester Square has been done with appropriateness and expertise. It was brought about after intensive consultation with a large number of commercial and amenity groups, and on the basis of numerous alternative proposals. In the end all the main gains of the recent past (such as the pedestrianisation) have remained unchanged.



The central green and its trees have been retained. The main changes have been the major replacement of all the previous granite paving from the mid-'80s, which had been inadequately bedded and had deteriorated, with new medium gray granite slabs over concrete and crushed stone bedding that should withstand the loads of service vehicles; the surrounding of the central green with a massive ribbon of light-coloured granite as benching, dramatically emphasised with continuous lighting below that should also discourage littering; snazzily designed new polished stainless steel balustrades and gates to the central area; sophisticated lighting masts. The useful discount theatre ticket building remains (and its badly integrated signage, unfortunately), but now well defined, with plate glass balustrades and a change of levels to keep ticket queues from overflowing. All of the above was completed just before the Olympics. The effect on Leicester Square's usage is already apparent, as large crowds of families and prams now seem to have supplanted the pitchmen and panhandlers.



W.S. (GANGNAM STYLE), WESTMINSTER ABBEY

Still undergoing restoration are the Grade II listed Shakespeare statue (a replica of Scheemaker's original memorial in Westminster Abbey—which remarkably shows, as we now realise, the great man anticipating a gangnam style step), and its marble fountain, but they are due to be completed in Spring 2013 with improved water works. We are enthusiastic about them and about the simpler new planting design of the flowerbeds. A grooving flash mob may already be rehearsing.

OFFICES BECOMING APARTMENTS

PORTLAND HOUSE



There is no significant demand for large offices in central London but a lot of demand for residential accommodation, especially among the middle classes and “wealth creators” in the “BRIC economies.” So says Jim O’Neill, Chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management who coined the term BRIC (a grouping acronym referring to Brazil, Russia, India and China). London, says O’Neill, has some very clear basic advantages to offer: its time zone, English the international language, its legal system, and its openness in terms of markets and labour force. It’s the natural global city of our day according to O’Neill, and within London, Westminster is the natural place to come.

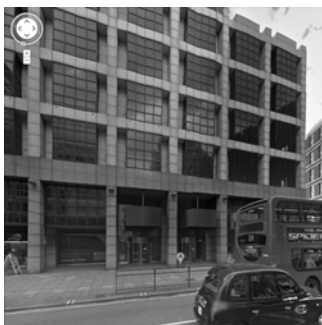
Let’s look around for examples. As demolition work begins in earnest on a part of London once referred to as Victoria Transport Interchange 1, and now called the Victoria Circle, Land Securities have launched a consultation exercise to gauge public reaction to their proposals to refurbish Portland House. Originally the headquarters of Blue Circle Cement, Portland House—far from Victoria’s best loved building—was completed in 1963, with a nod in its plan shape to Milan’s Pirelli Tower. Land Securities believe it no longer meets the needs of modern office tenants and have come to the conclusion that refurbishment as domestic accommodation would be cheaper, easier to maintain with its present bulk and height in planning terms, and more energy-conservative than demolition and rebuilding.

If proposals by architect David Chipperfield are approved, the building will be stripped back to its core, and two offset blocks of different heights will curve around it. All the accommodation will be for sale at market prices. A total of 206 units is proposed, mostly 2 and 3-bedroom flats, all of which will have balconies. As the footprint of the building will be changed the canopies over Cardinal Place will be reduced in size and thus provide less cover for pedestrians, something we are not happy about. We were, however, pleased to see that the proposals included measures for mitigating the wind funnel effects experienced by pedestrians in Cardinal Place.

73-75 STRAND

Elsewhere, the government is selling significant amounts of office space in London and much is being converted for residential use, such as 73-75 Strand, on the corner of John Adam Street, which was formerly civil service accommodation.

55-57 VICTORIA STREET



Along Victoria Street at the corner of Strutton Ground, with a NatWest bank at its base, there is 55-57 Victoria Street, a building created with squared modules that looks quite different from the office blocks in the western half of the street. A proposal has been approved to reclad the building (unfortunately), reconfiguring the interior to provide 54 residential units ranging from studios to 4-bedroom apartments. The step-down feature at the Strutton Ground end will go and be replaced by a tower of 2-3 floors to create what is said to be “a focal point” from the western end of Victoria Street. The ground floor arcade will also go (as it has for the British Land building next door), but the extended ground floor will remain for retail uses and professional services. We

have heard that the developers would be happy to see a supermarket move in.

Some of us like the building as it is, but we were aware that the current fixed glazing could not be retained if residential units replaced the offices on the upper floors. Others were disappointed that the arcade was allowed to be removed. When the arcade at the British Land building was removed "to deter rough sleepers," we objected, but it would make little sense to retain one for 55-57 now that the neighbouring one is no more.

67 TUFTON STREET



EPR Architects have submitted proposals for the reconfiguration of 67 Tufton Street, north of the Horseferry Road. For many years this was the site of a Post Office. The building was then bought for use by the Cabinet Office, which has since left. The developers plan to create a "stone corner feature" where the public entrance to the Post Office stood at the junction of Tufton Street and Romney Street, and create a new main entrance that would be Disability Discrimination Act-compliant in Tufton Street. The roof would be extended upwards to the same height as the current lift overruns and on the lower, Romney Street, elevation a couple of terraces would be created. The completed reconfiguration will result in a building with a mixture of 1, 2 and 3-bedroom units, 27 in total, most of which would be double aspect. There will be no on-site affordable units.

OFFICES BECOMING BOUTIQUE HOTEL

Anything but offices? Perhaps, when the floor plans aren't ample enough for what's deemed rentable in modern offices. We were recently given details of a proposal to convert offices with ground floor retail units to a "boutique" hotel, and viewed proposed layouts and furnishings. Proposed for a building adjacent to the Duke of York's theatre in St Martin's Lane, the completed project would provide 170 bedrooms of which 10% would be suitable for physically disabled guests. It would have no bar nor restaurant, and a limited breakfast facility. External changes to the building would be minimal. The result would be aimed at business people staying singly for one or two nights, an important segment of hotel customers who require well-designed small rooms with high quality fixtures and fittings, minimal services and competitive prices.

IN AND OUT: NOWT

The former Naval and Military Club in Piccadilly, popularly known as the In and Out because of the large capital letters in black alongside its two gates, seems about to revert to its original use as a palatial mansion (a double one this time). The present grade I listed building was built for Charles Wyndham, the 2nd Earl of Egremont, in about

1750 by the architect Matthew Brettingham. Egremont House changed hands several times until 1829 when it was bought by Prince Adolphus, Duke of Cambridge, and took the name Cambridge House. 31 years later Prime Minister Lord Palmerston bought it and lived there for 20 years until he died in 1865.



"IN" (LEFT) AND "OUT"
(RIGHT)

The complete site includes not only 94 Piccadilly but also 95, 90-93, 42 Half Moon Street and 12 White Horse Street. The In and Out club moved to St James's Square in 1999, and after the subsequent years of vacant neglect, the Piccadilly building is now in a sorry state. Previous renovation proposals were to turn it into a hotel. The new owners, said to be the property billionaire brothers Simon and David Reuben, are planning a purely residential development of two new single-residence houses. The one at 94 Piccadilly alone would have 48 rooms, of which 11 would be bedrooms, with the master bedroom suite occupying most of the 7,846 sq ft first floor. The second house would consist of no 95 Piccadilly plus a little of 94 with an entrance in White Horse Street. In addition there would be six apartments in Half Moon Street. A problem for the developers is that before work can begin to create the new houses and apartments a vast sum would have to be spent simply to make the site safe to work on.

A planning application has been submitted to Westminster City Council but has not yet been made available for consultation. The intention is to achieve planning consent early in 2013 with a three-year period of work on site thereafter. We reckon it will take longer, but will probably welcome the adaptive re-use once we see the plans.

WATERLOO PLACE BY GASLIGHT

The Crown Estate has recently submitted a number of planning applications centred on the junction of Pall Mall and Waterloo Place to install gas lamps (the improvement of the 1890s that lit streets by means of town gas, impregnated fabric mantles and candoluminescence), and decorative gas flambeaux. The gaslit neighbourhood would in that way recreate what this part of Westminster looked like at night when most of the buildings were new. We offered the Society's support for the installations.

GRATUITOUS STREET ADVERTISING: LEAVE IT OUT

Westminster City Council has recently submitted several planning applications seeking agreement to erect commercial advertising on street furniture. We do not normally object to temporary advertising programs promoting public attractions such as the London Film Festival, winter events in Leicester Square or the Jermyn Street Christmas lights, but we objected to this extension of the principle that would mount new advertising along public walkways. The Council's permissiveness about ads posted on telephone boxes is bad enough.

THE
GOVERNMENT'S
PROPOSED
RELAXATION OF
DEVELOPMENT
CONTROLS

In mid-2012 the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) announced plans to relax planning rules for at least a three-year period that would, in effect, allow home owners and businesses to build larger extensions to their properties without the need for planning permission.

The response from the London Forum, a charitable body representing about 130 community groups in London, was almost entirely negative. The London Forum concluded that the proposed changes would make existing rights more complicated, causing confusion, uncertainty and concern. They would be "impossible to monitor if no planning consent is required." They would slow down development and cost more money because they would "result in lawyers asking for certificates of lawful development" for risk-averse clients. They would bring the planning system into disrepute by failing to control adverse impact on neighbours. Moreover, they wouldn't necessarily save money or time. In sum, the London Forum considered that all of the proposals were inappropriate for planning in London.

We don't disagree. But prior to the London Forum's quite recent comments we had already responded to the DCLG's individual consultation with us. The position we took was based on our pessimistic view that their plans wouldn't be stopped, though they might be ameliorated. So among the particular points we made were the following:

- We took some comfort in the exclusion from the proposals of buildings in conservation areas, and our UNESCO World Heritage site, the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey. We would also expect listed buildings not in conservation areas to be excluded.
- Rear extensions and conservatories form a large part of the large number of planning applications on which our views are sought by Westminster City Council. In many cases the rear extensions are also upward extensions, relating to expansions at the first floor level and above. We said that we would regard any liberalisation of controls that would eliminate examination of these developments to be unwelcome.
- The DCLG should clearly state that proposals for increases in building height would not be considered under the mooted relaxed planning rules, and would remain subject to reviews no less critical than the current arrangements.
- The consultation document indicates that business premises (shops, financial and professional services, industrial buildings) could be subject to different planning rule relaxations than residential properties. We said we saw no reason for that.
- Though our policy is in favour of limiting daytime car use in Westminster, we are mindful that easy conversion of garages to

residential use would have the unintended effect of increasing on-street parking, losing resident spaces and causing greater parking search congestion. We said that garage-to-residential conversions should not be subject to relaxed development controls.

- We rejected liberalising development controls concerning masts for microwave relays of broadband installations. We feel it is essential that local planning authorities retain the power to ensure installations are fitted with regard to public safety and consideration of the proximity of listed buildings, and are finished in a manner that relates to existing street furniture norms.

LATE FLASH

The DCLG published their response to the public consultation on 27 December. (In what's been purported to be the cynical government estimation for such things, that was obviously a pretty good day to hide bad news.) Full details are still to emerge, but, leaving aside the consultations about agricultural land, the main decisions can be characterised as follows:

Removing the national requirement to provide details of layout and scale at outline planning consent stage, but retain indications of access points: the government has decided to take these proposals forward.

Reviewing the content of Design and Access Statements in outline planning consent applications: the government will go ahead and "simplify" the existing requirements.

Placing limits on the power of local authorities to require information with planning applications by stipulating that such requests must be "genuinely related to planning": the government confirms that it will be doing this, whatever those words will be construed to mean.

ROOM 443, 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