

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

February 2014

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING 2014

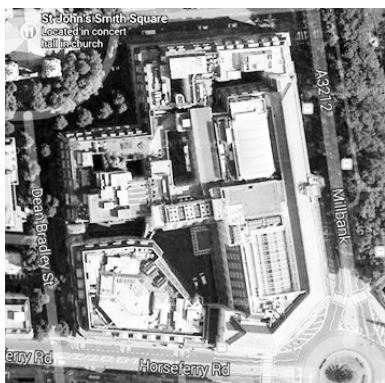
The 2014 Annual General Meeting will take place from 6pm on Thursday 12 June in the Lord Mayor's suite, Westminster City Hall. This year our annual lecture will be given by Ptolemy Dean who will tell us about the work he is doing in Westminster Abbey and its precincts. Ptolemy Dean and his firm of architects specialise in conservation work to historic buildings, additions to historic buildings and the design of new buildings in sensitive locations. In 2012 he became the 19th Surveyor of the Fabric at Westminster Abbey.

A second notification of the AGM together with an agenda and booking form will be sent out with the next Newsletter

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Enclosed with the Newsletter is a membership renewal form for 2014. If you no longer wish to be a member of the Society, do let us know so that we can take your name off our mailing list. If you do wish to remain a member don't forget to let us have your membership fee for 2014 of £15.

9 MILLBANK AND ERGON HOUSE



Bird's-eye view of Ergon House (lower left)
and 9 Millbank

The surging economic tide impelling the conversion of offices to domestic accommodation continues in Westminster with a proposal to develop no 9 Millbank and Ergon House, on the corner of Horseferry Road and Dean Bradley Street.

Both buildings have interesting histories. 9 Millbank (formerly the headquarters of ICI), and its mirror-image twin across Horseferry Road (now the spooky home of MI5), were built in 1929 and are both Grade II listed. Ergon House was also built in the 1920s, but as a large electrical supply substation. In the 1980s it was converted to offices. 9 Millbank has a stylish interior; Ergon House hasn't.

Current proposals are to refurbish and extend 9 Millbank at the rear, and to replace Ergon House with a new building. The chamfered corner feature of no 9 would be retained, and the new whole would have two internal landscaped courtyards. Ergon House's new block would have a cornice that respects the style of no 9, but above the

cornice would be two setback upper floors topped by a mansard-clad floor set back even further. The rebuilt Ergon house would also sport new bay windows (a provision somehow not wholly welcomed by MI5), and an upper level "public art feature."

The development is shown to provide 162 residential units of mixed sizes, of which 33 on the Dean Bradley Street frontage would be "affordable." The scheme has basement car parking for 128 vehicles accessed from Dean Bradley Street, a car-to-resident proportion well below what Westminster city Council usually requires. We are in favour of an even smaller provision. The developers would like to lease the frontage on Dean Bradley Street to a convenience store, which the Society welcomes.

PALACE OF WESTMINSTER EDUCATION CENTRE

We mentioned this scheme and our reservations about it in our September Newsletter. Now that we have seen illustrations we intend to object. The Education Centre design shows a green slope up to the roof when viewed from the south of Victoria Tower Gardens, but the building is all above ground. Despite the attempt at camouflage and the suggestion that the centre would be provisional and temporary, the scheme calls for a substantial subtraction from a London park with no compensatory addition elsewhere.

Coincidentally, the Westminster Society has been considering the existing townscape shortcomings in the whole precinct of Parliament.



Hence the 8-page supplement that is included with this newsletter. It identifies our dissatisfactions, suggests practical solutions, and tries to show that our own masterplan proposal could improve the UNESCO World Heritage Site (for such it is) to become fitter for purpose, more welcoming, and a lot better looking.

More of a teaser? In sum, our scheme aims for improved pedestrian usage allowing for clearer sightlines and more inviting approaches to historic buildings; a redesigned vehicular traffic plan that would reduce both pedestrian risk and the present overbearing security requirements; and supplements to green walkways suitable for the townscape. Please look it over and give us your views!

SAINSBURY REDUX

Late last year the English Planning Inspectorate published its decision on two appeals by Sainsbury against Westminster City Council's refusal of their application to open a Sainsbury's Local, as their smaller retail shops are known, at 10 Rochester Row. Both appeals were successful.

While Sainsbury considers the implications of that victory, they have submitted what to us seems a less welcome proposal to convert the former Pimlico Library in Rampayne Street to a Sainsbury's Local. Two years ago the library was relocated to the Pimlico Academy, and since then the Rampayne Street site has been on the market.

Sainsbury's new proposal is the most serious one that the City Council say they have received.

The fact that the site across the street from the Pimlico Underground station has heavy passing trade is undoubtedly in its commercial favour, but there are complicating factors: the former library is part of a listed building, there are potentially troublesome vehicular access issues, and it has an awkward layout for an open plan shop.



The former library, Rampayne Street

The proposal we have seen shows the retention of the current structure inside and out except for the northernmost window on the Tachbrook Street frontage, which would be converted to a delivery entrance. The ground floor would become the sales area, and the upper floor would house administration and inventory resupplies. The original intention was to locate the loading and unloading space immediately outside and just to the north of the delivery entrance, but the City Council have said there can be no loss of residents' parking spaces. As an alternative, Sainsbury are proposing to widen the pavement outside the southern part of the Tachbrook Street frontage to accommodate loading and unloading. This would involve the relocation of a public lavatory and local recycling bins—neither of which the City Council wants.

If the scheme were to go ahead, the plan for deliveries would be restricted to a transit-sized van before 7am for newspapers plus no more than four 10-meter vehicles during the rest of the day, each of which would fit within the proposed loading area and each on site for around 40 minutes. In the closely drawn residential surroundings a closing time of 10pm would be preferable to the 11pm that Sainsbury would like.

Although some theoretically postulated alternatives (e.g. an arts centre; a betting shop) are either unrealistic or uncongenial, there are several retail convenience stores nearby now, and many serious planning control difficulties about Sainsbury's. We supported Sainsbury on their Rochester Row application and appeal, but we have submitted an objection to the Tachbrook Street proposals.

VICTORIA STREET:
CHANGING FAST,
BUT CHANGING
WELL?

Not just the date has moved on since May 2009, when the Society was invited to contribute to the preparation of a planning brief for Victoria Street. The latest contemplated change came with the recent announcement that the Metropolitan Police are going to leave New Scotland Yard, their current headquarters along Victoria Street extending back into Broadway. It has been police premises since the mid-'60s when their important and distinguished building (modern; slabby) was built by former Skidmore Owings and Merrill architect Max Gordon. The Met Police are slimming down administratively and moving to the Embankment into an undistinguished quasi-classical 1935-1940 job known as the Curtis Green building. Unlisted but deemed "of special merit," Curtis Green will be refurbished to a design by Allford Hall Monaghan Morris and renamed Scotland Yard, as of old. Characteristically, press notice of all this has given the most space to the fact that the silly revolving sign will be retained.



Dreary hostile vehicle mitigation barrier alongside New Scotland Yard, Victoria Street

What mainly concerns us is what will happen to the ex-New Scotland Yard building and its local surroundings. Due to the Met's occupancy, the ground floor on much of Victoria Street's northwest side has lacked retail premises for many years, substantially killing any enthusiasm people might have about walking along that dead stretch (and not coincidentally, contributing to an unfair lack of appreciation for Max Gordon's fine building).

We contacted the City Council to find out how they see the future of the site, given the rolling programme of changes already taking place along Victoria Street. Somewhat reassuringly and not surprisingly, the council's Head of Strategic Planning and Transportation has replied that their vision for Victoria Street is to see it realise its potential as a top commercial and residential area and a major visitor destination. They expect the future use of the New Scotland Yard site to include retail shops on the ground floor that would increase local activity to about the same extent as the western end of Victoria Street. It would be refreshing if they also called for some ground floor setbacks that could be landscaped and made open for free public use.

MORE OFFICES
INTO FLATS:
GREAT PETER ST.

An application has been submitted to change Gaywood House, 29 Great Peter Street—at the corner of Gayfere Street-- from offices to residential accommodation. Its weakly Georgian quasi-domestic looks helps it to seem already halfway there.



The building within the Smith Square Conservation Area dates from the 1920s, and it is another unlisted work deemed to be "of merit." Externally, the only proposed changes are the replacement of windows, a restyled ground floor façade on Great Peter Street, and a reversion to the original roof which was lowered slightly during a 1980s refurbishment. There would be 14 residential units created ranging from studios to three-bedroom apartments, and there would be no car parking. The developers propose making a Section 106 contribution to the affordable housing fund. ("Section 106 agreements" are intended to help finance supportive urban infrastructure.)

KEEP THE OFFICES,
ADD SOME FLATS:
PARNELL HOUSE

An office block that developers wish to upgrade is Parnell House, an unremarkable building between Wilton Road and Vauxhall Bridge Road and between the Apollo Theatre and Neathouse Place. It's now home to offices on the upper floors, with a public house and other commercial uses on the ground floor. The proposal is to increase the commercial space on the ground floor, refurbish the existing floors above as offices, and above that to house 14 residential units ranging from 1 to 3 bedrooms in size. There would necessarily be major changes to the facades. The building is now largely vacant, but the public house has a long lease and is unaffected.



The Wilton Road side

The current Vauxhall Bridge Road entrance would provide the entrance to the new residential units on floors 7 to 9, which would be stepped back from the main façades and from the interface with the

theatre. These would add about 2½ storeys to the overall building height. Twelve basement car parking spaces would be provided along with cycle parking. In our opinion the proposed façade treatments would liven up an uninspiring building and improve the streetscape adjacent to Victoria Station. A contribution would be made to the affordable housing fund in lieu of affordable accommodation.

COMING: A
KOREAN WAR
MEMORIAL

In principle the Westminster Society strongly agrees with the idea of memorialising those dear to us who died in catastrophes at home or in far-flung places; likewise for the great people of other lands; and likewise, of course, for doing honour to the valiant ones who served for us, including having separate shrines—why not?—for the forces of every service, for women, and for war animals. (What about for conscientious objectors? Or for valiant whistleblowers? But we jest.) So we find it less than comfortable to have to complain when presented with a done deal on the latest thudding monument to the worthy.

Our difficulties usually occur because the appearance of public memorials aren't normal town planning questions, to be settled by normal planning applications subject to normal comments from private citizens, amenity societies and the like. The memorial route starts with friends and relatives raising money for a monument, then cleverly bagging the virtuous support of someone impressive such as a royal sponsor or Joanna Lumley. Keen councillors on planning committees are ready with consents by the time that two or three newspapers have fallen in behind, and footling objections from *Feinschmecker* like us are no match for the onslaught of masses of stone and bronze onto whatever public site was first thought of.

In similar terms (this time the cost was a gift from corporate donors in South Korea), the Korean War Memorial will soon be a prominent feature of Victoria Embankment Gardens, following the groundbreaking ceremony held there last November in the presence

President Park Geun-hye,
the Duke of Cambridge, and a
model of the Korean War Memorial



of President Park Guen-hye of South Korea and the Duke of Cambridge. So the comments solicited from us will have no influence on the monument's design and location, but here they are anyway.

For a war memorial the concept is so anodyne that it paradoxically causes offence—presumably unintended—by seeming thoroughly lacking in feeling. A 5.5 meter tall truncated prism of Portland stone stands behind a supersized bronze figure of the EverySoldier in winter kit (by Philip Jackson, sculptor of last year's Bomber Command monument), his giant-toy look emphasised by stone brackets that seem there to keep the toy from falling over. EverySoldier looks sadly downwards at an inscription below his feet. The prism forms a billboard with engraved words that say above the soldier THE KOREAN WAR, and below that, 1950–1953. On its sides are engraved Union Jacks, looking like parcel labels.



The cool Imperial Camel Corps
monument

We don't know who ratified the design (not the Korean government, we suspect), or chose the site, where the work will join company with a more modestly sized chap in a pith helmet atop a camel who memorialises the Imperial Camel Corps, 1916-1917-1918.

We hope the Camel Corps figure won't have the Korean War Memorial in his bronze line of sight, because it is set to be a monumental disgrace. But thanks for asking us. Work on the memorial will be completed by the end of summer.

LAND SECURITIES' METTLE: CASTLE LANE

Land Securities is the largest commercial property company in the UK, owning and managing nearly 2½ million square meters (26 million square feet) of property. Their head office is on our patch at no 5 The Strand, WC2. They have always been communicative with us and flatteringly interested in the Westminster Society's opinions. We like them; we usually agree with their principles and with most of their commercial objectives and we wish them well. In fact it's our hunch that Land Securities could be, should be, a corporate body whose works invite special admiration and even national pride, like Apple. But up to now that hasn't happened. Why not?

Profound answers are too complicated to try to find outside a thorough dissection of the apple pie, so we'll refrain for the time being. But they must have a lot to do with the architects they hire, and in particular, how they brief them.

Land Securities choose pretty good architects, and commendably, not necessarily the biggest ones. So our suspicions about why the Landies often miss have currently shifted onto themselves—to some lack of the ineffable leadership ability usually described, feebly, as coming from being a good client (cf. Courtenay Blackmore of Lloyd's of London; Dickon Robinson of the Peabody Trust; to mention two famous "good clients"). The example for today is 6 Castle Lane.

Land Securities' Castle Lane development will occur on the site of a redundant Westminster Kingsway College building that extends back



to Wilfrid Street. Drawings filed show its replacement with a clustered form embracing 29 market (i.e. not “affordable”) apartments and three townhouses, 19 parking spaces (including four electric charging points) and cycle parking. The new structure is an honest and assured design with well worked-out plans, mostly simple modern elevations and no excessive mass, but some featured elements are disappointing.



In an unsuccessful effort to make the building more interesting (“I don’t want to be interesting. I want to be good,” said Mies van der Rohe in one of his delicious dicta), some windows on the Castle Lane frontage near Pine Apple Court, the beer garden of The Colonies pub, feature bulging ribbons of glass that aren’t good. They are bay windows created by means of an unnecessary formal invention, displaying clumsy intersections when one is adjacent to another. We’re just saying it shouldn’t take the reaction of planners, local residents or pests like us to raise such matters if the Landies had the mojo or mettle that really good clients need. (To be continued.)

YET MORE OFFICES INTO FLATS: QUEEN ANNE’S GATE

Another proposed conversion of offices into market-priced residential accommodation has arisen for the site where 1-3 Queen Anne’s Gate, 12 to 14 Carteret Street and 9 to 11 and 12 to 15 Dartmouth Street are clustered. The current buildings on the site are a characteristic London mixture of the interesting and the bland, the old and the new, each with varying standards of design. Most of the proposed development would take place behind the retained better-designed façades. There would be a modest height increase of about a meter. With plenty of English Heritage requirements to overcome—and we have no reason to be critical—the achievement overall would be an expensively knitted-together domestic development that enfolds 28 family-sized residential units with car and cycle parking.

The developers say they have approached one or two Registered Social Landlords (that is, housing associations) about funding off-site social housing. Developer-funded streetscape improvements also appear to be on the agenda.

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