

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY

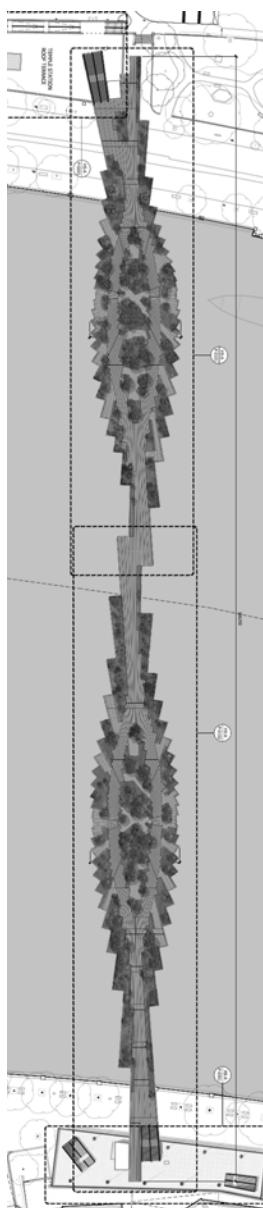


URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

October 2014

AN AIMLESS BRIDGE



Plan of proposed bridge—from
Temple Station, to a south landing
near London Television centre

Lambeth Council and Westminster City Council have been landed with an application for an aimless bridge across the Thames that connects the two riverbanks in prominently central but negligibly useful places. It would have a tree-studded park atop a massive structure. But unlike the transformative redesigns of former urban blights such as Paris's 4.7km Promenade Plantée of 1993, New York's dazzlingly attractive 2.33km High Line recently completed, and a linear garden for Chicago that is forthcoming—all of which have been planned and planted atop former elevated railway structures—the London plan is for a brand new cross-river footbridge. Even at this early stage its heavyweight cost estimate is £175m, which equals the social improvement value of about 20 new schools, 30 local libraries, or a new district hospital.

As Oliver Wainwright in *The Guardian* recently reminded us, there has long been “a kind of architectural madness” about improvements to the river Thames, including a classical palace on piers designed by John Soane in the 1770s, a pleasure bridge megastructure at Vauxhall in the 1960s, and the Royal Academy's Living Bridge scheme of 1996, including a somewhat similar planting job to the one currently proposed that was essentially “green garnish for a lucrative private development” (Wainwright).

The Westminster Society agrees that the Thames could use some new crossings; notably a main traffic carrier way downstream to vitalise southeast and east London, and one or two footbridges upstream, probably best connecting Vauxhall to Westminster and Battersea to Chelsea. One of the latter might even be a garden bridge in the manner of New York's High Line, with varied walkways, benches, and a beautiful landscape design of shrubs, ornamental grasses and ground cover—but not located where this one is needlessly proposed, and decidedly not an overgrowing wall of trees that will obstruct river views and require elephantine bridgework to support it.

When that proposal comes, we would favour an international competition to choose the best maker of an inspiring design, and a brief that seeks lightness and grace, which is the way that modern urban footbridges ought to be. Meanwhile, innovative landscapers, what about new hanging gardens and terraced green walls along the Thames's tidal embankments in the central London region?

BAFTA GETS CROWNED



Princes House

Anyone lucky enough to be guests of a member of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) gets to climb its nobly sized staircase—more Hollywood than heritage—up to the bar; then, for an advance screening, to the comfortably encouched cinema; then perhaps to the boldly decorated restaurant for—well, a burger, or a comparable refreshment in that genre. BAFTA's glamour is reflected more by its ample space and its photographs of great British film stars than by its actual nourishment facilities and decorative appointments. But if its premises have got a bit seedy, perhaps so have a good number of its now quite aged private club members. Which is just fine. They didn't need surroundings, they had faces!

Since 1976 BAFTA has occupied a major part of Princes House, the very pretty building at 190-196 Piccadilly which was designed in 1881-3 as The Royal Institute of Painters in Water Colours. On the outside of the second floor windowless wall where the galleries were (and now, as we recall, where the BAFTA screening auditorium is), there are eight round niches still bearing busts of mostly forgotten watercolour masters which sympathetic observers can mentally recast in favour perhaps of Alfred Hitchcock, Michael Powell, Kenneth Williams and Vivien Leigh. At pavement level Princes House has Princes Arcade, created in the 1930s as the last of such West End delights.

Anyway, all of the above was bought by The Crown Estate a few years ago, and that grand property institution is now bent on some discreet improvement to the BAFTA premises, the arcade, Jermyn Street offices and the former basement casino. There will be new unified shopfront designs, and part of the basement and ground floor will become a new branch of Jamie Oliver's barbecue steak joint Barbocoa. Keep those steaks tender, Jamie, many BAFTA members don't have the teeth of yesteryear!

SCOTLAND YARD III (CONTINUED)



The Curtis Green building, as seen looking northwest along Victoria Embankment

When we reported in the February Newsletter on the sale of the Victoria Street property where the Metropolitan Police has been since the mid-60s as New Scotland Yard—or perhaps we should call it Scotland Yard II, in retrospect—we mentioned the Met's forthcoming move to the Victoria Embankment. The circa 1935-40 quasi-classical Curtis Green building just east of the Norman Shaw building will become Scotland Yard III. Since then The Westminster Society has been invited to comment on the proposed alterations, but we didn't support them.

While the Curtis Green building hasn't much distinction (it is one of the few unlisted in the area), it has some urbanistic value in the position it holds because of its scale and decorum. The new proposal features a fully glazed pavilion projecting from the existing façade without any cunning or good judgement about the intervention, which looks ridiculous beneath seven storeys of neoclassical limestone. The proposed treatment of the rear façade seems even more incoherent, and the scattered windows in a new elevation to the south make Curtis Green's present boring formalism look good.

The application to make changes to the Curtis Green building has nevertheless been approved by the Westminster Planning Committee. The Society was told that its objections were "untenable." Our objections were tenable all right; obviously we didn't state them with sufficient persuasiveness. Or perhaps the problem is actually the quality of architectural thinking that the council has engaged for the purpose, despite having held an RIBA limited competition.

EGGINTON HOUSE, 25-28 BUCKINGHAM GATE



Home to Aunt Agatha or Aunt Dahlia?

This steel-framed office building dates from the 1920s. The façade along Buckingham Gate has the look of a place where one of Bertie Wooster's aunts might have lived, though not the crummier rear aspect. Its single-brick skin thickness is functionally incapable of meeting current thermal requirements, the building's steel frame is said to be in a poor state and the ceiling heights are low, so Egginton House as it presents itself isn't capable of adaptative re-use. An application has been made to demolish and replace it with 24 apartments and 14 car parking spaces over 12 storeys, nine above ground level. About 30% of the accommodation would be for families.

The new building would be marginally larger than what is there now, but with a greater setback at upper levels. The design includes elements that refer to brick-faced mansion blocks with bay windows and balconies. The main entrance would be in Portland stone.

Affordable housing, naturally, is not deemed practicable on this posh-o site, so the developers have commissioned a "viability report" dodge that could mean they will just be making a contribution to the Affordable Housing Fund. The Society isn't permitted to see viability reports. Nevertheless, we haven't opposed the redevelopment.

SAINSBURY REDUX, REDUX



The former library, Rampayne Street

Last autumn we objected to a proposal to convert the former Pimlico Library into a Sainsburys Local. (We reported about it in the February Newsletter.) We did so mainly on the grounds of access issues, and the need for major changes to the streetscape if the project were to be viable. The proposal was subsequently refused planning permission, roughly on the grounds we had mentioned. Sainsbury have since submitted an amended application, with changes to the position and management of the loading area. They now propose its separation from the pedestrian pavement, more clearly delineated as a loading area with bollards at each end. Delivery vehicles would be tasked with informing the store of their imminent arrival, which should mobilise staff and keep delivery periods as short as possible.

A main reason for our lack of support for the earlier application was Sainsbury's failure to explain exactly where the public lavatories at the eastern end of Tachbrook Street would be relocated. The current proposal is to move the lavatories, the phone box and the cycle racks around to suitable positions close by. The Society hasn't objected to the revised application, though we're still unconvinced that a convenience store on the site is a terrific idea.

STOCKLEY HOUSE, 130 WILTON ROAD

An application has been submitted for the redevelopment of Stockley House at the junction of Wilton Road and Hudson's Place. If accepted, the existing 1985 eight-storey office building will be demolished and replaced with a new 15-storey residential block "equivalent in height to a 10-storey office block." (Residents aren't 2/3rds the height of office workers, they just do without overhead ductwork.) It would contain 119 apartments with 60 car parking spaces and cycle parking. The replacement building would have emphatic horizontals that refer to Victoria Station—we guess that means its horizontal tracks. The apartments would have balconies, and in many cases planters. External windowsills would be topped with "replica railway lines." Bronze-colour aluminium panels adjacent to windows would similarly feature representations of various railway doodahs.



Stockley House;
right, Victoria Station;
the two are separated by Hudson's Place

An oppressive feature of the existing structure is the tunnel between Wilton Road and Bridge Place, shown above. To try to improve what seems to many pedestrians a hostile prospect, a light well would be created at the Hudson's Place end of the new building to get more daylight into Bridge Place. Some soft landscaping is proposed for Hudson's Place, which happens to be a private road owned by Network Rail and not within the jurisdiction of either Transport for London or Westminster City Council. The proposal includes a hint for Network Rail to reopen the recently refurbished former royal entrance to the station, and provide some adjacent retail space.

The mix of apartments in the new building would be 21 studios, 32 1-bed, 28 2-bed, 34 3-bed flats and four 4-bed duplexes, all market priced. The developers say they are seeking property on which they could build supportive off-site affordable housing. We felt the scheme was worthwhile, and suggested its approval by the City Council.

DEVELOPMENT NOISE AND CONGESTION

The Society has become concerned about the growing intensity of development activity in a number of locations in south Westminster. Some examples we have in mind are Old Queen Street, Queen Anne's Gate, Dartmouth Street and Carteret Street; Wilton Road, Vauxhall Bridge Road and Victoria Stations and its environs; Buckingham Gate; and Horseferry Road – Marsham Street (see below). You may well know of other parts of the city that have become equally noisy, and

where hoardings, scaffolding and temporary street closures have created development blight (or building blight if you prefer). Whatever it's called, it's a serious imposition on people's quiet use and enjoyment of the commonweal, however mindful we ought to be about not expecting omelets without the breaking of eggs.

Our concern was such that we wrote to Graham King, Head of Strategic Planning and Transportation for Westminster City Council. We suggested that an overview facility needs to be put in place that could keep a register of all significant development proposals, their timetables and their Construction Management Plans. If suitably presented graphically, kept up to date, and (let's say) put on a City of Westminster web page, it could function both as a timely warning to the public of nuisances soon to be put up with, and as a tool for Council use in doing its best to stagger future building permits where there is certain to be an overlap of demolition or construction activity at neighbouring sites that will lead to local pandemonium.

Come to think of it, why isn't there an interactive Westminster web page that, hour-by-hour, shows temporary road closures, probable demos, and similar otherwise unknowable vehicular impediments such as those annoying long-interval emergency traffic lights? Taxi drivers, delivery people, bike riders, Uber guys and even ordinary motorists would be ever so grateful.

STEEL HOUSE, TOTHILL STREET



An application to change the use of an office building, this pretty slick one not far from Parliament Square, to a state funded school has been given consent. When we were invited to comment on the proposal we realised that under Permitted Development legislation there was no need for planning permission to change the use of a building from offices to a school, but we felt we should have been told more about the catchment area of the school and the transport requirements of the pupils. The section of Tothill Street in which Steel House is situated has coach parking designation, and we wondered about problems when parents arrived to take children home. Would they be permitted to double-park, or would the coach bays be removed, and if so, where?

We asked for more information. It transpired that the school will be a 6th form academy. It is expected that pupils will be travelling on their own using public transport, so all seems reasonably well.

33 HORSEFERRY ROAD, GREAT MINSTER HOUSE

Get this: an application has been submitted to demolish Great Minster House, a recent, pretty massive edifice that runs a fair distance along Horsferry Road. It was built only in 1993, to suit the requirements of the Department of Transport (the department had a somewhat longer name then). The plan now is to replace it with apartments, of course. Which certainly provides food for thought about the transience of even very large office buildings, the burgeoning demand and value of high cost market flats on central sites, and no doubt also, the equanimity of our national government about ruthless departmental upheavals and



Great Minster House: right of dotted line, new planning application. Left of dotted line: currently undergoing conversion to flats. The arrow shows former pub now rebuilding as 10-storey residences



Satellite view of Great Minster House. Note full internal service road from Page Street to Horseferry Road

relocations. Did Great Minster's architects T P Bennett "future-proof" Great Minster? We'd bet that a future they never foresaw was its demolition only 21 years later. The original warranty on its built-up roofing probably hasn't run out yet.

And watch it, folks! Within the past few years in no more than about a 200 meter circle around Great Minster House, the former Westminster Hospital, Westminster Magistrates' Court, the Page Street pub (about to become 10 storeys of new residential units on a small footprint) and currently, the former east wing of Great Minster House have become or are becoming blocks of mansion flats. Crossrail has nothing on this local hot spot for development noise and congestion. So, will local schools, surgeries, restaurants and shopping be able to cope with the needs of the new residents? Not if they remain as at present.

The pitch in the new Great Minster House planning application says: "The existing building is not suitable for conversion to residential use. The orientation of the site combined with the depth of the plan and the continuous unbroken form would mean that 50% of all floor area would be north facing, and this is not considered acceptable for residential purposes. Furthermore, limitations of the structure do not allow for apartment layouts which comply with London Housing Design Guide standards, and the large floor to floor levels would limit the total floor area achievable. The site holds much greater potential as a new-build opportunity, and therefore it is proposed to demolish the existing buildings down to ground floor slab.

"Two new nine storey private residential buildings are proposed which are to share a central entrance and will provide 122 apartments. A third eight storey building at the west of the site will provide 38 affordable homes."

Bedrooms	Floor	Area (sq ft)	Area (sq m)	Price from	Availability
3	3	1847	171.6	£3,250,000	Available
2	3	928	86.2	£2,000,000	Available
2	3	950	88.3	£2,000,000	Available
2	3	928	86.2	£2,000,000	Available
1	3	638	59.3	£1,300,000	Available
1	3	616	57.3	£1,300,000	Available
1	3	616	57.3	£1,300,000	Available
1	3	545	50.7	£1,200,000	Available
0	3	581	54.0	£995,000	Available
2	4	850	79.0	£1,650,000	Available
2	4	948	88.1	£1,750,000	Available

Barratts' schedule of prices of available flats in the east wing of Great Minster House now being converted

The developers claim that for prestigious organisations currently seeking office accommodation, Victoria Street and its environs are the preferred locations. It is certainly plain that a lot of the existing site plan, now given over to a full high security internal service road to suit government requirements, can realise "much greater potential as a new-build opportunity," as was said. On the merits of its improved design and social spaces, and surprising within ourselves a little panic that's starting to grow about overprovision of high-priced accommodation, the Society gave this proposal our thumbs up.

2 MONCK STREET, ASHLEY HOUSE, AND 1 CHADWICK STREET



The proposed redevelopment of 2 Monck Street is stage 3 of a comprehensive scheme that includes 73/75 Great Peter Street, currently underway, and 1 Chadwick Street, which has now been approved following modifications. Ashley House was built in the 1980s and is currently used for office accommodation. Like many offices of a similar age it is past its best.

The Ashley House proposals would result in 51 apartments, 29% of them 3-bed units, with 27 car parking spaces and 102 residents' cycle spaces. At ground floor level there would be space for commercial enterprises, most likely offices rather than retail. There would be a number of dual-aspect apartments, some with balconies or winter gardens, and a green roof. Servicing would be from Monck Street as would access to car parking.

However, the developer also submitted an application that linked the Ashley House proposals with the Chadwick Street scheme. The combine proposal offered a larger number of affordable apartments, something that Society strongly supports, and better access arrangements. We will suggest, therefore, that the City Council should approve the combined scheme.

32 QUEEN ANNE'S GATE

Proposals are being developed to extend upwards a replica building in Queen Anne's Gate immediately adjacent to cockpit steps and at the same time change its use. The building was grade 1 listed in the late 1950s but demolished and rebuilt in the late 1970s because it had become structurally unsafe. The only original feature that survives in the present building is the grand staircase.

The building currently houses offices and residential accommodation. In 2013 consent was obtained to convert it to a single residential unit. Since then it has been acquired by an industrialist and philanthropist who wishes to use the ground and first floors as a home and the rest - including a new floor - as offices for his businesses.

The building is not as tall as adjacent houses in Queen Anne's Gate, so the proposal is to insert a new fourth floor and to elevate the present fourth floor to become a new fifth floor while retaining the present parapet and string course that would then match those of its neighbours.

21 DARTMOUTH STREET

Another application has been submitted for one of our area's development hotspots. The proposal is to change the use of 21 Dartmouth Street, currently housing offices, to create 47 apartments to be marketed to "settled, not transitory" residents, and provide parking spaces (fewer than one-to-one) accessed by a car lift with an entrance in Dartmouth Street. Flat roofs at upper floor levels would be used to provide balconies and there would be improvements to windows in the Lewisham Street elevation.

Affordable housing on-site is “not feasible,” but the Society accepts the developer’s plan to buy former right-to-buy housing elsewhere in Westminster in order to meet the affordable housing requirements – four units only - of this site. Changes at ground floor level in Dartmouth Street façade would improve the symmetry of the façade while at the same time providing access to the car lift, new doors and railings.

MEANWHILE, IN
AND AROUND
QUEEN ANNE'S
GATE...

UNDERCOVER
LOOS MAY COME IN
FROM THE COLD

In our February Newsletter we reported on proposals for a complex scheme of rebuilding and refurbishment in Queen Anne's Gate, Carteret Street and Dartmouth Street. This scheme has been deferred by the Planning Sub-Committee due to irresolution of the affordable housing issue, and because of unsuccessful Construction Management plans so far.

An application has been submitted to convert some unused public lavatories into a retail showroom. The loos are sited across the street from MI5 headquarters at the western end of Lambeth Bridge (Gasp! How long have they been there?) at the bottom of a few steps leading to a small park strip along the Thames. If their old purpose was really redundant their conservation and new use is a pretty good idea, as long as deliveries can be governed so vehicles won't be stopping on the roundabout.

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