

# THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

## NEWSLETTER

March 2015

### WESTMINSTER SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING



Dickon Robinson

The 2015 Annual General Meeting will take place in the Mayoral suite at City Hall, 64 Victoria Street, SW1 on 11 June. This year we shall be presenting our biennial awards. Our speaker will be Dickon Robinson.

Nathan Silver writes: Who he? An architect, Dickon lived in Soho when we first met in about 1970. Dickon investigated the then underutilised concept of housing associations, and with his notion and my £50, we formed the Soho Housing Association. At first run sucessively by our wives (but eschewing nepotism), the SHA achieved some conservation-minded local social housing refurb. The rest of the world began to hear about Dickon when he was a housing director for Camden. It heard better when he became development director of Peabody Trust, where for many years he commissioned talented young architects to produce classy affordable housing, showing us all how it ought to be done. Today Dickon is an independent advisor on architecture, housing, property development, sustainability and urbanism to organisations in the government and the voluntary and private sectors. Or as he should really be considered, an exceptional superstar of the affordable housing movement. Please turn up!

### MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

A membership renewal form for 2015 is included with the Newsletter. The cost of individual annual membership remains unchanged at £15. If you no longer wish to be a member of the Society, let us know and we will remove your name from the membership list.

### KA-BOOM! MORE FIGURATIVE SCULPTURE



...plopped into Parliament Square, of course—the burgeoning home of Britain's version of the Terracotta Army. Unlike China's imposing example, our figures in Parliament Square are in mixed media (bronze, stone); of mixed artistic accomplishment (Churchill ★★★★, Mandela ★); with sometimes odd site-specific relevance (Lincoln, Mandela, Jan Smuts); and mixed scales, from life-size to XXXL. The new figure of Mahatma Gandhi by Philip Jackson, one concedes, is a quite accomplished work (and pretty big: 1.5 x life size). It appears in Parliament Square as a diplomatic gesture following a visit to India by George Osborne and William Hague, not unlike the diplomatic gesture that led to the Korean War Memorial, a far less impressive work by the same sculptor in Victoria Embankment Gardens (see the WestSoc newsletter of Feb 14). Our objection here is just this: while all of

Parliament Square remains un-masterplanned, at least its monumental site planning should be a design issue of the first importance that is carried out by a standing committee advised by brilliant architects, rather than so feebly curated that it produces the effect of a room holding a child's miscellaneous doll collection.

## WESTMINSTER ABBEY'S TRIFORIUM



The triforium is the architectural name for the gallery above the nave aisles of Westminster Abbey, just below the clerestory windows. Within each structural bay it has two pointed arches facing into the nave. Its original design intention was probably architectonic—to give scale by contrast to the larger and wider bays below—rather than functional, to serve as a viewing gallery, since there is no sign it ever had easy access. It has long been used just as a working space. Now Ptolemy Dean, the current Surveyor of the Fabric for Westminster Abbey, has a scheme to provide public access and turn the triforium into a linear museum, along with giving it a valuable new use as a viewing gallery for ceremonies.

Ptolemy Dean's design shows a new semi-free-standing access tower outside the Abbey but linked from the inside, polygonal in plan, housing a lift and stairs. It would nestle somewhat coyly behind a Gilbert Scott buttress that braces the 13<sup>th</sup> century chapter house (likewise polygonal in plan) in Poets' Corner Yard. The lift would provide disabled access, and the lift landing and stairs would be connected to the triforium with a short bridge. The external treatment of the tower that we were shown perhaps over-tactfully reflects its gothic and neo-gothic environment, but on the other hand it doesn't need to be a modern statement. It should upset nobody: certainly not The Westminster Society.

The placing of the new triforium access tower—the most important addition to the Abbey since Hawksmoor's western façade towers of 1745—means that the public lavatories in Poets' Corner Yard would be moved to the site of the Song School, near the entrance to the Cellarium restaurant. An as yet undecided planning application was submitted in October 2014. (See City of Westminster, application 14/10310/FULL.)

## TRANSPORT FOR LONDON'S HOME



An application has been submitted to change from office to private residential use 55 Broadway, the Grade I listed building formerly the headquarters of London Underground, designed by Charles Holden and completed in 1927. The building has three elements – 55 Broadway itself, 100 Petty France, and the Wing-Over Station building between the ticket hall of St James's Park Underground station and the Palmer Street entrance. But the retail setup is awkward; security arrangements now prevent the grand entrance being open to the public; and Transport for London now has other premises.

The intention is to provide 90 housing units to be sold at market price in the main block. The unlisted 100 Petty France will be demolished,

and a new route from Petty France to Broadway along St Ermin's Hill will be opened. Residential parking will be provided at ground and first floor level of the Wing-Over Station, and 35 affordable housing units would be built in the six floors of a new Wing-Over building above the car park. New pavilions said to be "indiscernible" from the original building would be built on the 10th floor of no 55. Existing carriageways would be narrowed and pavements widened to make room for café exterior tables and chairs along the Broadway frontage.

In our view the scheme has merit. Our main reservation is that no provision for step-free disabled access from the ground floor entrance hall to the underground station platforms has been made part of the proposal. At present all Transport for London will say is that this remains a work in progress. (See City of Westminster 55 Broadway application, 14/10496/FULL.)

RETAIL USAGE: WE'RE  
VIGILANT



In our last Newsletter we reported on the conversion of Great Minster House at 76 Marsham Street, SW1, from office to residential accommodation (see the near-completed job above). The previous BMW car showroom using the entire ground floor retail space has relocated, and application has been made for two separate retail units, one for A1 (most likely supermarket) use, the other for either A1 or A2 (finance and professional services) use. We expected that deliveries to the supermarket would be via an interior private road that also serves the extant North Wing of Great Minster House fronting onto Horseferry Road, itself the subject of a development application. So we've asked if that could be safely assumed. If not, using the Marsham Street frontage for deliveries could be controversial for neighbours.

As to the retail units themselves, we said we preferred one A1 unit. If A2 use was allowed for half it could become a betting office, of which Horseferry Road already has two. (See C of W 14/07702/FULL.)

## FIXED-ODDS BETTING TERMINALS: WE'RE EVEN MORE VIGILANT



Following our objections above to the retail proposals for Great Minster House we decided to busy our bodies further about our concern over betting offices, so we wrote to the Times. It occurred to us that if a retail unit has an existing Class A2 (finance and professional services) permission, nothing more than a change of shopfront is required in order to turn a dental practice or a solicitor's office into a betting shop. What especially worries us is the introduction of new fixed-odds betting terminals (FOBT), which facilitate the loss of large sums of money in a short period of time—commonly on games of roulette. FOBTs can be introduced into betting shops without any required planning consents. We're certain that betting shops with FOBTs need stricter regulation. In our view the Use Classes Order should be amended to remove betting shops and any other gambling premises from Class A2 to a class of their own, so that proliferation could at least be subject to wider consideration—not least in respect of their value to the community.

## GOODBYE NEW SCOTLAND YARD. HELLO, WHAT?



Well, we know about one not very attractive prospect for New Scotland Yard: Graham King, Westminster's Head of Strategic Planning and Transportation, is thinking about the conversion of its soon-to-be-vacant offices wholly or partly into flats.

That would be a great pity. Victoria Street's modernist cynosure was built in 1967 to the design of Skidmore Owings & Merrill-seasoned Max Gordon (the "Architect for Art," according to the title of Nicholas Serota's book on Gordon). Gordon's linked parallel slabs were highly praised by Nikolaus Pevsner, who called the building "memorable" and "excellent." And so it still is, if you compare its crisp, measured surfaces against anything near it, built then or lately. Unfortunately its crisp, measured surfaces would be the first to go if the building was to become residential.

We think New Scotland Yard should be conserved, refurbished, and valued as one of London's greatest examples of office building typology. As an historic achievement, it measures up well to the best office buildings of New York and Chicago. It is still capable of meeting functional office requirements today since it has "an exceptionally widely spaced concrete frame" (Pevsner again).

Admittedly the lowest couple of floors are entirely another matter, since the building's institutional police usage effectively turned its surrounding pavements into strips of Death Valley.

The best prospective use would be, up above, a lively mixture of many kinds of office tenants in occupancy—professional suites, service agencies, technology startups. Down below, the building should have a completely overhauled base with covered pedestrian walkways as well as retail shops; perhaps even some protected retailers who run desirable non-chain stores and get their rents kept low.

Our advice is that Council planners should recognise the strong architectural design value of what we've got, and make the most of it.

135 Grosvenor Road, formerly the Elephant on the River:  
Planning consent for this site was granted in 2010, but elements of the consented scheme were either of doubtful quality or in one of two instances unbuildable. Revisions have now been made to the original scheme that we think are a considerable improvement. There will be "a public art feature" on the elevation facing St George's Square, and the building will be slightly taller to improve floor-to-ceiling heights in eight apartments. These will have 12 car parking spaces via a car stacking system. On-site affordable housing is said to be unfeasible, so a contribution will be made to the affordable housing fund.

The Sir Simon Milton University Technical College:  
Provisionally to be named after the former Westminster City Council leader who died young, proposals are emerging for the creation of a University Technical College—a type of secondary school led by a sponsor university—on the site of the former Adult Education Centre at the junction of Ebury Bridge, Warwick Way and Sutherland Street. Stage one would be the construction of the four-storey technical college building and about 55-60 residential units, bringing the development to 14 storeys with some car parking. Stage two would be a further residential scheme with 50-55 units. The proposals are complicated by land ownership issues: the stage one site is owned by the council, but the stage two site is Network Rail land and currently houses major operational infrastructure.

The college premises would include an assembly hall (also available for community use) as well as technical workshops, study areas and the like. The 14-storey building would be prominent, but in comparison with the tallest building on the Abbots Manor Estate and elements in the recently consented redevelopment of the Ebury Bridge Estate, not out of keeping. The parking provision would be less than Westminster's normal 1:1 requirement, but with good accessibility to public transport that should not be a problem.

King's College Strand Campus (14/12215/FULL):  
Well-advanced planning proposals have been submitted that are calculated to help King's College cope with their need for ever more accommodation, involving demolition, new construction, and some changes to retained buildings.



The demolition includes a stair tower at the western end of the Strand Building, the four old shop and residential units west of that (which we have objections to), and the ground and mezzanine floor of the Strand Building itself. The new-build would include a new academic building on the site of the four demolished shops, which are said to be "no longer usable on account of floor heights and access issues," and an extension to the rear of the Strand Building. The façade of a listed building just next to Somerset House would be retained with the rest of it replaced. It is also proposed to open up the entrance to the college from Victoria Embankment, an idea that we like—it would help relieve the dearth of pedestrian life on that part of the riverside.

### Grenadier House (14/09089/FULL):

Plans to create sheltered housing for wealthy pensioners submitted by Pegasus Life, specialists in the provision of upmarket retirement homes, have been given the go-ahead by the City Council, and we have supported it since there are scant grounds for objection. The C2 planning classification is for providing residential accommodation to people in need of care, without obligation for any of it to be made affordable.

The development entails the demolition of Grenadier House in Horseferry Road across from Channel 4, an office block only built in the late '80s. A total of 36 units of self-contained, assisted living accommodation would be provided. Communal facilities would include a kitchen-café, storage areas, a "wellness centre and spa," guest accommodation, staff accommodation and staff offices. The design will have two linked buildings of six storeys each with the two upper floors set back. There will be an internal courtyard, roof terraces, basement storage, and 36 car parking spaces with rear access from Greycoat Street.

### Carey Street New Court:

Plans were publicised some months ago for the redevelopment of a building called New Court at 49 Carey Street, WC2, that had been covered in scaffolding for years. Three different proposals were submitted and the most attractive included a diagonal street though the site with shops at ground floor level. However a recent presentation omitted the street and the shops. It seems that the proposal going ahead will be completely residential.

## LONDON SOCIETY TALK

### A NEW YORK SANDWICH SCHMEARER



Nathan Silver of our executive committee is giving a London Society talk at 6:30pm, Tuesday 19 May at the City Centre, Guildhall, 80 Basinghall Street EC2. All comers are welcome! See The London Society's website for tickets.

Titled THE WHOLE SCHMEAR—HOW CONSERVATION AND AFFORDABILITY CAN SURVIVE, Nathan's description says: "In a world where good cities have become phenomenal magnets because of their economic advantages, their cultural advantages of buildings and townscape are doomed to ever-more-profitable successive replacement, unless their denizens manage to preserve or conserve them. Here's how."

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