

# THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

## NEWSLETTER

September 2015

### THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

This year's AGM was held once again in the Mayoral Suite at City Hall. Our speaker was Dickon Robinson, an architect who thought up the idea for the Soho Housing Association, and who later became a laudable Director of Development for the Peabody Trust. His talk included the fascinating Peabody history in London. How many of us knew that some of the first housing it built took the form of gated communities with segregated baths on the top floor, or that the founder George Peabody started out as a U.S. merchant banker?



*Saw Swee Hock Student Centre*

2015 is a biennial awards year for the Society, so our thoughtfully deliberated awards were duly bestowed. The recipients we chose to honour and their certificate citations were as follows:

for Architecture:

Saw Swee Hock Student Centre, LSE, WC2

to The London School of Economics and Political Science, *clients*,  
and O'Donnell + Tuomey, *architects*

*citation:* HOW SHOULD A STUDENT CENTRE LOOK, AND PERFORM? THE ANSWERS ARE ASSURED AND DAZZLING IN THIS BRILLIANT CONTRIBUTION TO BOTH THE LSE CAMPUS AND ITS LONDON NEIGHBOURHOOD.

for Renovated Architecture:

The King's State Apartments, Kensington Palace, Kensington Gardens W8

to Historic Royal Palaces, *clients*, and Purcell, *architects*

*citation:* BOTH A ROYAL RESIDENCE AND A VISITOR DESTINATION AT THE EDGE OF WESTMINSTER, KENSINGTON PALACE NOW PROVIDES A SERIES OF FASCINATING AND INVENTIVE TUTORIALS FOR VISITORS WITH THE CAREFULLY RENOVATED AND PRESENTED RECONSIDERATION OF ITS HISTORIC ROOMS.

for Urban Design:

The Sherwood Street-Glasshouse Street pedestrianisation, W1

to Westminster Council, *clients*, and Atkins Consultants Ltd, *project team leaders*

*citation:* CREATING A FRESH CONTEXT FOR SHOPPING AND DINING IN ITS SETTING OF THE SHERWOOD-GLASSHOUSE CLUSTER OF PEDESTRIANISED STREETS, THE BROAD NEW PAVEMENT WALKWAYS ARE CLOSE TO PICCADILLY CIRCUS, EXACTLY WHERE NEEDED.

for Contribution to Urban Vitality, *ex aequo*:  
The Victoria Curzon Cinema, Victoria Street SW1  
to Curzon World, *clients*, and Afroditi Krassa, *cinema design*

**citation:** VICTORIA STREET WAITED MANY YEARS FOR THE LIVELINESS THAT ARRIVED WITH THIS ELEGANT CINEMA. THE MODERN INTERIORS ARE CLASSIC, AND FILM PROJECTIONS ON THE STREETFRONT GLASS CLEVERLY REACH OUT TO THE COMMUNITY SURROUNDINGS. AS MUCH AS IT WAS NEEDED, THE VICTORIA CURZON HAS NOW PROVEN HOW MUCH IT BELONGS.



*Ham Yard Hotel and Village*

for Contribution to Urban Vitality, *ex aequo*:  
Ham Yard Hotel and Village, Ham Yard W1  
to Firmedale Hotels plc, *clients*, and Woods Bagot, *architects*

**citation:** HAM YARD, A ONCE SHABBY URBAN BACKWATER BETWEEN SOHO AND REGENT STREET, HAS BEEN BRILLIANTLY REANIMATED WITH NEW APARTMENTS, RETAIL UNITS, AND A CHARMINGLY DESIGNED HOTEL, ALL CAREFULLY PLANNED TO PROVIDE ENJOYABLE OUTDOOR AS WELL AS INDOOR GATHERING PLACES.

## RAINBOW CORNER

The Westminster Society's aspirational maxim, URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY, appears as usual on our title page. As culture and its chattels evolve ever onwards it sometimes comes to pass that vitality and congeniality are left behind for a while, though they seldom become permanently lost luggage. (For example, prior to Ham Yard's "shabby urban backwater" days—to recall our words above—Ham Yard had been a central base for London's Mods, its 1950s rock-and-roll clubs no doubt converting some of them to Rockers.) The torches of urban vitality have burned flagrantly in Downtown Westminster, though sometimes fitfully.

We raise the subject because one of the public's most regrettable collective memory lapses about lost vitality concerns Rainbow Corner, at 23 Shaftesbury Avenue—London's once world-famous U.S. armed forces club, now just a site proposed for redevelopment for the third time since the mid-1950s. So here is a little history.





*The Shaftesbury Avenue entrance*

When it opened on 11 November 1942 after having been set up rent-free by the British government (its rental was calculated as Lend-Lease repayment), Rainbow Corner became the largest American Red Cross services club in Britain. Among the club's facilities were two cafeterias equipped to feed 7000 a day; the Rainbow Room café in which entertainment and dances were staged daily; the International Room, large enough to seat 1000 for daily stage shows or to accommodate 300 couples for dances; a game room that held billiard tables, ping pong tables, dartboards, pinball machines and juke boxes; a meeting room for any Forces group; snack bars in the Rainbow and International Rooms; a writing room, library, a mail and parcel room, two lounges, a barber shop, a tailor, and mending departments. Complimentary cinema and theatre tickets were available at Rainbow Corner, and 48 lendable bicycles named after the 48 states. While there wasn't any sleeping accommodation except a "Where Am I? Room" for the intoxicated, there was transportation to other Red Cross clubs that had it, and a club agency would book nearby hotel rooms for those on leave. Liquor was never served on the premises but the snack bars were open all night, and famously, the doors of the center were open 24/7/365 (or "never shut," as they used to say in those days).

Rainbow Corner's director was Albert Farber of Cleveland, Ohio. The formal opening was heralded by a transatlantic radio broadcast starring Vivien Leigh, Diana Wynyard and Miriam Jordan. The club was staffed by paid employees who worked in three shifts, plus about 450 volunteers, most of them seemingly English girls who were carefully vetted before becoming evening jitterbug companions. One frequent volunteer was Adele Astaire, Fred's sister and former stage partner, by then Lady Charles Cavendish. During the more than two and a half years that Rainbow Corner existed hundreds of American performing stars played there, including Glenn Miller who appeared with his orchestra four times, the last shortly before Miller's flight was lost over the Channel in December 1944.



*The ground floor cafeteria*

Though the club was especially intended for enlisted men, those freely admitted included all members of the American forces, members of Allied forces invited by GIs, and girls who were either guests of members or allowed to pass in by a severe American Red Cross matron in order to restrict the entry of numerous whores who plied the surrounding doorways, streets and nearby parks. In keeping with the shameful segregationist policies still practiced by the American armed forces during the war, Negro soldiers were directed to "separate but equal" provisions elsewhere.

The location of the club, on the northwest side of Shaftesbury Avenue with its main entrance on the avenue near Denman Street, incorporated an early former Lyons Corner House and the former Café Monico (known to the GIs as Monico's Restaurant), which had

a splendid vaulted dining interior that had earlier been damaged in the Blitz (see below). The terracotta-clad buildings had probably been erected in 1888-89 when Shaftesbury Avenue itself was built. They were all finally demolished in the 1950s.



The site was then used as a car park until 1977, when our Executive Committee member Nathan Silver was commissioned to design an all-materials-contributed, vermilion-painted temporary Jubilee Tourist Centre on the property for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Queen's reign. That was supplanted about three years later with the architects Powell and Moya's current office building, which is now again to be redeveloped.

As for Rainbow Corner, nothing appropriate marks its bygone urban vitality and congeniality. Why not a small museum in a room off the lobby of the building to come, or at least a commemorative plaque with enough space to tell its story?

## 84 ECCLESTON SQUARE



The Society has submitted a partial objection to proposals (see 15/04619/FULL on the Westminster planning website) to demolish 84 Eccleston Square, a bombsite office development whose mass was kept in keeping with nearby Cubitt buildings, on the corner of Gillingham Street and Belgrave Road. The proposed replacement would provide 99 residential units with ground floor retail uses, underground car and cycle parking, and landscaping. It would create three separate buildings: a corner block on Eccleston Square, another adjacent to the Passport Office in Belgrave Road and a third in Gillingham Street. We think the expression of the corner block as a new tower disrespects the virtually complete square.

The three blocks are not visually connected, nor are they linked internally above the ground floor. Without changing that, we think a better notion would be to relate the corner block to Eccleston Square either by retaining the present Cubitt-style

facades, or with a contemporary building design that accords in position and mass with the existing buildings in the square.

In blocks two and three we had reservations about creating ground-level arcades along quiet streets with hidden spaces to raise fears about safety for the timid and elderly. We also thought the main entrance lacked distinctive clarity. The site's redevelopment for residential use seemed appropriate in historical terms.

### THE EBURY BRIDGE CENTRE



Planning consent has been given for the redevelopment of the former Westminster Adult Education site in Sutherland Street (see 15/05733/FULL). It will become home to the Sir Simon Milton Westminster University Technical College (UTC) plus an eleven-storey residential block. The UTC will occupy from three to five upper storeys with a terrace at the 5<sup>th</sup> floor level. The residential element will have 47 flats, 23 car parking spaces and cycle parking. We supported the proposals, which improved on an earlier scheme. Our only reservation concerned the use of fair-faced concrete for the lowest level of the frontage facing Sutherland Street. It might attract the attention of Banksy if we were lucky; more likely just crude graffiti. So we've suggested that the material used there should be reconsidered.

### NEWSON'S YARD, PIMLICO ROAD

Grosvenor Britain and Ireland, the development company of the Duke of Westminster, has been showing us their proposals to develop Newson's Yard in the Pimlico Road. The key elements are:

- the retention and refurbishment of the timber yard structure;
- the creation of three new retail units within the timber yard;
- the refurbishment of shopfronts on Pimlico Road;
- a new contemporary building façade for 61 Pimlico Road (the timber yard itself), and
- three additional dwellings within 41-43 and 61 Pimlico Road.

We were pleased to agree to look at further modifications.

### MARLBOROUGH GATE



The Royal Parks wish to improve refreshment and lavatory facilities at St James's Park Marlborough Gate—the gateway across the Mall from Marlborough Road that leads to the Queen's Chapel and St James's Palace. An existing kiosk and lavatories beyond the gate would be supplanted by redesigned and re-equipped lavatories, and the provision of a new semicircular building to their south, partly lowered into the landscape, with a more inviting refreshment kiosk, stores, and lavatories for wheelchair users, all of that consolidated so it takes little or no more room than at present in the park. (See the Westminster planning website's 15/06472/FULL.)

The Society fully supports the proposals.



Now, on to three office-to-residential-use proposals! (Westminster developers don't need to be shown where the money is.)

### DENISON HOUSE, 292 VAUXHALL BRIDGE ROAD SW1

Denison House, formerly the headquarters of the Press Association in London, was built in the late 1980s, and like many office buildings of that era is said to be at the end of its useful life in terms of its mechanical and electrical systems. Perhaps; and we'll allow that the existing frontage presented onto Vauxhall Bridge Road is not inviting. The developers' proposal (see 15/05777/FULL) is not to demolish the building, but to strip it to its structural frame and remodel the interiors and the front and rear façades to create 26 apartments on the upper eight floors, with inset balconies and basement car and cycle parking. The ground and first floors would be used for retail facilities, restaurants and professional services.

Reasonable. However, we are concerned that no mention of affordable housing was made in the application. We're aware that it could be argued that this location is not an ideal one for on-site affordable housing. But in cases where on-site affordable housing isn't feasible, Westminster rightly expects either off-site provision or a contribution to the affordable housing fund. We have suggested that the applicants' attention be drawn to this killable omission in their proposal.

### 11 BELGRAVE ROAD SW1



*11 Belgrave Road as is*

The previous entity at 11 Belgrave Road was a church that took a direct hit from a V2 rocket. The unexceptional office block built in 1955 and currently extant, for many years home to the London site of the Civil Service College, has abided as a dull element within Pimlico's conservation areas. Proposals have now been submitted (see 15/07008/FULL) to convert the building to residential use and provide 85 units, including six "townhouses," of which 31 of them will be affordable. Both external facades will be reclad, the one in Belgrave Road in Portland stone, the other in Guildhouse Street in brick. Balconies and terraces will be installed, including broad terraces at first floor level. There will be 44 off-street car parking spaces and 131 cycle spaces, all accessible from Guildhouse Street to the rear. Solar panels will be installed on the roof. In fact, the proposal will shamelessly end up looking like the outcome of its process: an office-to-residential conversion.



In its proper place—for example, here—we have no objection to such redevelopment candor. We welcome the new accommodation and commend the re-use of its existing building frame. The design and new cladding are straightforward, and we appreciate the provision of an enclosed carpark in place of the open rear parking spaces that exist at present.

### 32-34 GREAT PETER STREET, SW1



This site is currently home to a small seven storey office building said to be struggling to find tenants. An application (15/07778/FULL) proposes demolition of the existing building and its replacement with a new slightly higher structure whose appearance is guided by its neighbours. The design of the exterior draws from local examples such as Westminster and Kingsway College in Vincent Square. It would be predominantly in brick and would feature details designed to accentuate the new building's relationship to the adjacent Peabody Trust buildings.

A total of six affordable housing units at lower levels are proposed with 21 market units at the upper levels, including a duplex penthouse set back from the Great Peter Street elevation. Nine basement car parking spaces will be provided. The entrances to both the affordable and market accommodation would be in St Ann's Lane and would be visually identical—thus, no obvious “poor door.” The developers state that all the residential units will be marketed only in the UK, which they obviously expect to be a matter for approbation.

### DEAN BRADLEY HOUSE



A proposal (see 15/07690/FULL) has been submitted to demolish and redevelop Dean Bradley House, a prewar unlisted office building with the notable feature of mirrored ground floor loggias and a twin arched entrance (see left), but described by the developers as inflexible and unsustainable: the ceiling heights are too low and the fenestration is unattractive. They add that “the grey-brown brick used on the facade is dull and out of keeping with the bright red brick used in the Conservation Area or the clean, sculptural lines of the grand Portland stone buildings on Millbank.”

Their new mixed-use building would provide retail space at ground floor level and office space on the first floor. The eight floors above would include 45 apartments of varying sizes, all with balconies. At basement level there would be parking spaces for 45 cars and for cycles. Affordable housing isn't included, but a substantial payment is on offer to Westminster's affordable housing fund.



If you haven't yet paid your membership subscription for 2015, may we remind you to do so? If you no longer wish to be a member of the Society, please let us know.

## WHY CAN'T LOCAL RESIDENTS SPEAK AT PLANNING MEETINGS?

At a recent AGM, a few members asked why local residents were not allowed to speak at Planning Committee meetings. Why not, indeed?

To find out, we wrote to Councillor Robert Davis, the Deputy Leader of Westminster City Council. By the time we received his reply a proposal to allow residents to speak at these meetings had been voted AGAINST at a full council meeting. Nevertheless, it is interesting to read Councillor Davis's reasons for not allowing contributions from residents.

The main thrust of his argument is that allowing local residents to speak, even if limited to, say, three minutes per person, and even if groups of residents were required to find one person to speak for them all, would make what can be lengthy meetings even longer. In addition he believed that if residents were allowed to speak, the applicants petitioning for planning consents and their professional representatives would also have to be allowed to speak, with any restrictions leading to discontent. Councillor Davis noted that there is no legal requirement to allow the public to speak at planning committees, and the practice is far from universal. From what he had heard about local authorities that did give residents their say at meetings, Cllr Davis had concluded that their decision-making had not been improved by hearing from the applicants and opponents.

We had suggested that time might be saved if statements of members' interests were circulated as hard copy rather than read out by councillors before meetings began, as happens now. Cllr Davis confirmed that a statement of councillors' interests was unavoidably "required by our democratic processes," and he therefore believed that if they only appeared in the paperwork, inevitably some of those in attendance would not read them and would not be made aware of members' interests.

So Westminster Council has chosen to remain one of those without an open forum on planning decisions. To illustrate our ongoing concern, in one of its recent planning approvals, an extract duct for a ground floor café that had been previously required was overlooked or ignored and forgotten in a subsequent amended application, while the affected adjacent residents could only watch the committee meeting's unconditional approval in frustration. Will that error be acknowledged and corrected, we wonder, or has the planning committee given itself permission to ignore such matters with impunity?

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