

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

December 2016

JUNE STUBBS, MBE



photo: Wese End Extra

In October we were saddened to learn that one of our longstanding members, June Stubbs, had died. She had been ill for some time and had moved into a nursing home in the New Forest to be near relatives.

June contributed much more to urban sustainability than her membership in the Westminster Society. In 1985 she was appalled to hear that Council Leader Shirley Porter was planning the sale for redevelopment of the oldest Westminster City Library in Great Smith Street—once the Mechanics' Institute, then the first free library in London when it was splendidly rehoused by architect F J Smith in 1891. June thereupon nobbled the likes of Lord Rees-Mogg, Lady (Pempe) Aitken and Owen Luder and founded The Thorney Island Society to campaign for its preservation.

She was only partially successful. The lovely old library was not demolished, but its high-ceilinged reading rooms, galleries and bookstack spaces were lost to honorary Mechanics and other friends of libraries when it was sold to become an expensive Indian restaurant. However, the Thorney Island Society carried on to join the Westminster Society as one of the amenity groups to be consulted by the city council about planning applications on a statutory basis; June herself was fittingly awarded an MBE in 2011 in recognition of her services to conservation. A magnificent cultural leader in our community, we'll always fondly recall June Stubbs' quick-stepping white boots flashing ahead of us at Thorney Island Society visits.

WHY DO FIREMEN WEAR RED BRACES?

To hold up their trousers, kids tell us. But what keeps up fire houses? I wish we knew. Following Mayor Boris Johnson's culling of the fire service in central London several years ago on the grounds that fires now happen half as often as in olden days—ignoring that it takes twice as long to get through traffic nowadays—the Westminster Fire Station in Greycoat Place has ceased to function. (The three stations now assigned to cover Westminster are in Paddington, Lambeth and Soho.) In June 2016 a planning proposal was submitted—see 16/05216/FULL on the council website—to renovate our former fire house in Greycoat Place so its four upper floors become six flats, and to turn the fire apparatus bays at ground floor level into a restaurant. The existing rear of the building would be demolished and replaced with a five



The Greycoat Place fire house

storey building to provide a further 11 flats with balconies. A single storey basement would be excavated below the underpinned structure to augment the retail use and provide adjunct residential space.

The Society approved the retention of the exterior of the building, but we weren't thrilled about other aspects of the scheme. Using the ground floor for a restaurant was acceptable, given suitable servicing arrangements, as was adapting the upper floors for residential accommodation, though parking spaces are not part of the application and on-street parking would be undesirable. Critically, however, we thought that the squeezed-in new extension proposed at the rear would induce claustrophobia for future residents who wouldn't even have fire poles for emergency psychic escape. We therefore opposed the current proposal on the grounds of serious overdevelopment.

WHITEHALL GOES FOR A TRUMP-LIKE HOTEL

*(right) 1898 Old War Office,
Whitehall, soon to be a Hinduja Group
grand hotel*

*(below) 1899 Old Post Office,
Washington DC, now the Trump
International Hotel*



Post Office designed in 1899 by Willoughby J Edbrooke, architect for the US Treasury Department. (There are physical resemblances as well. 1898-99 must have been the year of the Roman arch.)

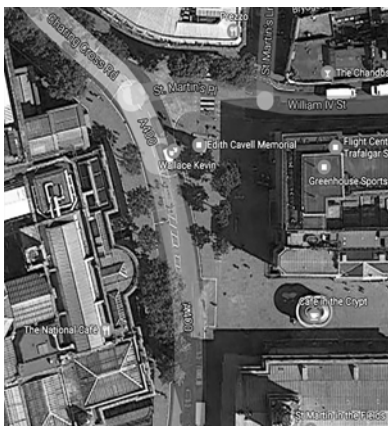
Following the auction last Spring of a 250-year lease to Westminster's Old War Office that was won by a bid of more than £350 million from the Indian Hinduja Group with Spanish partner Juan-Miguel Villar-Mir, an application has been submitted for its development as a five- or six-star 125-bedroom hotel and for 88 apartments.

The scheme—cf. 16/09548/FULL and 16/09549/FULL on the council website—sustains the full features of the expressively busy-looking Grade II* building, creating some major new interiors by enclosing

internal courtyards. Underground car parking will be accessed via a new entrance on the junction of Horse Guards Avenue and Whitehall Court. The building lies within the Whitehall Security Zone, so additional doors will be created on the east and north sides to allow access for guests and residents when exclusive events such as the State Opening of Parliament take place.

The Hinduja Group is mainly a property conglomerate that is closely held by the large Hinduja family. They are very wealthy, not unlike the Old Post Office-owning Trumps, but unlike them are outstandingly philanthropic. We are pleased that their scheme will create some amenable useage for the public, since Whitehall is almost entirely a governmental and ceremonial boulevard that will be stimulated by the sociable vitality of a grand hotel. Westminster's Old War Office may lack the lofty clock tower of the refurbished Trump International Hotel in Washington, but for spiffing elevated views our well-heeled tourists can whizz round the London Eye just across the river.

ANOTHER PROMISING HOTEL SITE



...lies across Charing Cross Road, if you look from the National Portrait Gallery past the Edith Cavell memorial towards its sunrise side ("Brussels//Dawn//October 12th 1915"). It's the office building at 7-8 St Martin's Place, for which the Hong Kong-based Butterfly hotel group is readying an application to convert it into a 136-room hotel to be known as The Butterfly on Trafalgar. It will be the first of their hotel group's in London.

The existing building, completed in 1962 in place of a row of Georgian houses, is conservatively good-looking, with stone panels in window bays on the façade. This proposal will refurbish the building and increase its public spaces at roof level to create a rooftop bar and restaurant with outlooks up Charing Cross Road and across Trafalgar Square. In our opinion the rooftop usage won't interfere with views by others of the spire of St Martin-in-the-Fields, as it will supplant the existing rooftop tanks and air conditioning compressor units that will be relocated elsewhere.



The Portland stone façade would be cleaned and the existing windows and shopfronts replaced. Retail provision would remain at ground floor level, including, if required, a late night Post Office. The Society has encouraged the developers' transport consultants to address the proposal's implications given the chronic traffic congestion on surrounding streets, but apart from those concerns we anticipate supporting the proposition when the application is duly submitted.

IT'S ONLY A PARK—BUILD ON IT

For the 60th annual London Film Festival (LFF) in October 2016, the City of Westminster allowed the erection of a temporary cinema in Victoria Embankment Gardens, the small riverside park just east of Charing Cross Station that features the historic Watergate built in 1626 to prove access to the Thames for the Duke of Buckingham, as well as the sculpture of John Stuart Mill and the Robert Burns memorial.

The unique selling proposition of the pop-up cinema was that it was a vital means of temporarily replacing the former heavily-booked LFF venue of the Odeon West End cinema in Leicester Square which was then undergoing demolition. (It will eventually be replaced in Leicester Square as a component of a new mixed-use building complex.)



The London Film Festival's temporary venue in Victoria Embankment Gardens (pre-built rendering)

It should be immediately said that the LFF Victoria Embankment Gardens cinema, where this editor saw four praiseworthy LFF films, was created and operated with great urban tact. It was sited on the central third of the park that had no interfering trees, and it was about as architecturally modest as a 760-seat auditorium with associated lobby, exterior toilets, and snack caravans could be. But it took six weeks for the demountable structure to be built and another two weeks to demount it afterwards, when the park had to be mostly closed—just to provide a great screen for the 12 days of the festival. Since the Mayor of London is a major sponsor of the LFF, and the City of Westminster where most of the cinemas lie derives most of the festival's economic benefits, the Society did not object to that one-off park attack. (And we might not object one more time for the LFF next year, if the new Odeon West End is still unavailable.)

All of which is to explain that what's now being proposed for Victoria Embankment Gardens is a very different deal. Udderbelly Limited, a commercial festival organiser and provider, has applied to erect a 650-seat theatre on the same site, but for nine months from February to October 2017 (overlapping the prep time for the LFF's dates next year, we note), with possible extensions in 2018 and 2019—see 16/07679/FULL on the council website. Udderbelly's first production on the site, by arrangement with Cameron Mackintosh, would be a revival of Clarke Peters' Louis Jordan homage, Five Guys named Moe.

We believe the council should refuse whatever money is on offer and reject this proposal. Parks aren't building sites for any cheerful ideas that come along. For that matter, they aren't disposable locations for even noble historical propositions (e.g. the proposal that Victoria Tower Gardens should be extinguished as parkland by making it a convenient site for a Holocaust memorial and museum). Parks must remain parks. The Society believes that Victoria Embankment Gardens is loaded with charm when it's not loaded with unnecessary buildings, and the proposed iteration is damagingly unnecessary.

THE ROYAL COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

An application has been submitted for the refurbishment and redevelopment of the home of the Royal College of Surgeons of England at 34 Lincoln's Inn Fields (see 16/09110/FULL on the planning website). The RCS accommodation consists of two interlinked buildings, Barry House built by Charles Barry in 1837 and the post-war Nuffield House. Barry House has accommodation for a number of learned societies associated with surgery, a library of considerable importance, and, above all, the Hunterian Museum of largely historical medical curiosities.



The current proposals relate to Barry House, most of the rear of which was destroyed by bombing in 1941. The RCS wishes to replace its postwar infill with a suitable contemporary structure that would allow the public areas, including a café and the museum, to be accessed from Portugal Street, and thereby separated from the mainly upper areas for administration, education and the learned societies. The impressive Lincoln's Inn Fields frontage—the Ionic portico (see above) was designed by Charles Dance the Younger for an earlier building and re-used by Barry—would be retained, with the forecourt re-landscaped and its disabled access improved.

The Society responded positively to these proposals; particularly the retention of the façade of Barry House and improvements to access.

31 ST JAMES'S SQUARE

We have seen an application submitted (16/09591/FULL) to refurbish Norfolk House, 31 St James's Square SW1Y 4JR, called by Pevsner "a routine neo-Georgian" building dating from 1938 with a rear extension of 1976. The L-shaped building—it also faces Charles II Street—can't be successfully renovated for use as modern offices because the ceiling heights are low and daylight is inadequate.

What is proposed is a stylistically similar building that retains some of the existing exterior, but can provide modern office interiors. New windows with fewer glazing bars would reflect the new floor structure, while two setback floors clad in gray metal would replace the existing two red brick uppermost levels. The Society had a few comments to make, but no objections to the planning proposal.

MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

Included in this mailing is a form for the renewal of membership to The Westminster Society for 2017.

SLEEPING ROUGH IN WESTMINSTER

The wonderful (and surprisingly bestselling) Thomas Piketty is the most famous of many economists whose recent research has shown—unsurprisingly—that homelessness is an outcome of the inequalities of contemporary capitalism. It seems plain that our society will only solve homelessness when it adopts economic measures that directly deal with inequality as it tips people into poverty.

Meanwhile, we defenders of vitality and congeniality must contend with some inconvenient studies showing that the rough-sleeping population isn't exactly the same as the homeless population. How come? The reason seems to be that many of the homeless today can manage to find some basic social support, while most rough sleepers are unable or unwilling to obey the accompanying rules and requirements. For those desperate and usually lonely people, the City of Westminster must everlastingly seem an attractive place to flop.

On our own urban beat, some current places attractive to rough-sleepers are the area around the National Gallery, and Craven Street off the Strand. So we decided to arrange a meeting with Councillor Nicola Aiken, the City Council's cabinet member for Public Protection, to learn what she thought about the issue and what the Society and the planning system could contribute to improving the lives of both rough sleepers and their unwelcoming neighbours.

Cllr Aiken told us that Westminster Council was currently spending £6 million annually on outreach teams and hostels. It meant that no one was forced to sleep rough in Westminster because they couldn't find a bed for the night. But many rough sleepers were reluctant to make use of hostels, and it took painstaking work by the outreach teams to persuade people to move off the streets. Cllr Aiken thinks there needs to be more design progress in new buildings to discourage rough sleeping while maintaining amenity, and more political progress in allocating resources and enforcing powers to deal with sexual traffickers.

She also believes that street begging aggravates the problem of rough sleeping. In Cllr Aitken's view, handouts make it harder for her outreach workers to encourage rough sleepers to take up an offer of a hostel place. She is very concerned about begging financing the latest wave of street drugs that have produced fatalities.

Cllr Aitken told us that local residents who wish to help rough sleepers can support The Connection at St Martin-in-the-Fields (connection-at-stmartins.org.uk), or The Passage at the St Vincent Centre in Carlisle Place, SW1 (passage.org.uk). The City Council recently published its draft strategy on rough sleeping which includes an overview of the situation in Westminster. See <https://openforum.westminster.gov.uk> to access both. Happy Christmas!

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