

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

JANUARY 2009

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Time to resubscribe!

Enclosed in this mailing is a membership renewal form for the forthcoming year. We are also including copies of our leaflet which you might like to use to recruit new members for the Society.

CHELSEA BARRACKS

Since we last wrote about the proposals for the Chelsea Barracks site a great deal has happened. The Candy brothers have sold their interest in the site while continuing to act as interior design

consultants. Meanwhile Qatari Diar, the principal investors, have revised their original proposals for the site to be broadly in line with a wish list of changes detailed by Westminster City Council.

According to these revised proposals, two of the luxury blocks and one section of the hotel have had their northern penthouse pavilions removed, and one of the luxury blocks and one of the affordable blocks have been reduced in length. The latter changes will significantly increase the area of the public park. The café proposed for the public park has gone—Westminster City Council was concerned about the disruption it would cause—but a café will be included in one of the blocks on Ebury Bridge Road. Four of the five blocks on Ebury Bridge Road have been reduced in height, and a new primary health care facility will be included on the ground floor of the fifth block. To get a clearer picture of the revised proposals, see information at <http://thechelseabarracks.co.uk/index.php#>.

The Executive Committee have not yet drafted the Society's response to the revised proposals.

BUILDING SITES

There are three stages in the construction of a new building: “watch it come down,” “hole in

the ground” and “watch it go up.” In this item, we consider a number of projects in our area—and just a bit beyond—that have been matters of interest to the Society over recent months. (If members want to take a look at these sites, the best vantage point may be the top deck of a London bus.)

In the *watch it come down* category, the most impressive is the Chelsea Barracks site on Chelsea Bridge Road, where almost everything has been flattened, apart from the Chapel and the two tower blocks. The Chapel is the subject of a proposed listing from English Heritage which is still awaiting a resolution.

At the easternmost end of old Westminster, work has been going on at Arundel Great Court to relocate an electrical substation as a preliminary to the wholesale redevelopment of the site, including the Howard Hotel on Temple Place. Just off Piccadilly Circus, work has started on the stripping out of “Quadrant 3”, better known perhaps as the former Regent Palace Hotel. Main demolition work is due to start soon. Significant interiors in the basement and about half of the facades are to be retained.

The former Middlesex Guildhall, future home of the UK Supreme Court, is losing its scaffolding. The builders have told us that the main works should be complete by March 2009 when the fitting-out of the interiors should start.

At the corner of Leicester Square, the site of the former Swiss Centre is literally a *hole in the ground*, with demolition now complete.

As to *watch it go up* projects: although it is not in Westminster, we have long taken a strong interest in the redevelopment of the County Hall island site on Westminster Bridge’s southern end roundabout. The primary structure is now complete and cladding is being installed. The building will become the new Park Plaza Westminster Bridge Hotel, which, together with the Park Plaza Hotel County Hall, will be developments contributing to the significant tourist magnetism of the area. In Vauxhall Bridge Road, the Westrovia residential development is steadily heading towards completion. At the junction of Wilton Road and Gillingham Street, the Wilton Plaza development, mainly for residential use, is well advanced. At the Victoria end of Wilton Road, a new development called “The Peak,” predominantly for office use, has most of its structure complete. This new building, which will feature an over-sailing roof, replaces the former Abford House and a neighbouring building.

Work is proceeding on the improvement of facilities at Westminster City School on Palace Street. This development is part of the “Building Schools for the Future” programme. Continuing along Victoria Street, the former Middlesex Guildhall which will become the home of the UK Supreme Court is losing its scaffolding. The builders have told us that the main works should be complete by March 2009 when the fitting-out of the interiors should start. The redevelopment of the former Citibank House and Marconi House at the corner of Aldwych and The Strand has some of its cladding installed, with the corner feature still some way to go before completion. Work continues at Grosvenor Waterside with Building B well on its way, and the two blocks that comprise Building C are practically complete.

Our final site doesn’t quite fit into our three-stage model since it’s all about refurbishing an existing building: Peel House in Regency Street, and its conversion to residential use. Currently it is totally shrouded in scaffolding.

HIGH-RISE BUILDINGS: UPDATE

The Three Ugly Sisters

Boris Johnson has changed his mind about a group of Allies and Morrison-designed high rise buildings near Waterloo Station that the

press has unfairly dubbed “The Three Ugly Sisters.” Originally the GLA thought the three buildings would impair views of the South Bank and would diminish the impact of the rest of the World Heritage Site.

However by October 2008, after the Minister, Hazel Blears, had called in the plans for her own determination, Mayor Johnson changed his mind and was “content to allow Lambeth Council to determine the case itself,” subject to any action that the Secretary of State might take, and was no longer wishing to direct refusal.

The applicant had provided additional information to demonstrate the visibility of the proposals from the Westminster World Heritage Site, showing that the merging between the proposal and the tower of Big Ben was visible in only a very few areas. Further studies purported to show that the impact on other views, including those from St. James’s Park and of County Hall and the Royal Festival Hall, would not be significant.

The developers still have to face a public inquiry after Communities Secretary Hazel Blears decided to examine the proposals in terms of their impact on historic views and sites.

The Walkie-Talkie

A series of minor design revisions by Rafael Viñoly Architects have been made to one of London's most famous proposed buildings, 20 Fenchurch Street, better known because of its shape as “the Walkie-Talkie.” Most of the changes are subtle and only become plain when the previous set of elevations is compared with the newer versions, so despite the changes we have decided to maintain our objection to this project, not least because the developers appear to have taken no account of the impact of the proposed building on views from Westminster Bridge, Somerset House terrace and the bridge in St James’s Park.

Battersea Power Station

In the August Newsletter we highlighted another Rafael Viñoly project, the proposed redevelopment of Battersea Power Station. A key feature was a cylindrical tower originally planned to be 1,000 feet tall. Following a large consultation exercise in which it was claimed 15,000 people took part, and in consideration of “the heritage lobby” (whoever they are), the developers have reduced the height of the proposed tower by 164 feet, reduced its diameter from 104ft to 82 feet, and have moved it 100 yards away from the power station. The amount of office space has also been reduced by half. The revised plans also include a primary school and a medical centre. A remaining problem is that the chimney-like cylinder would still be visible from the bridges around Westminster. According to a policy drawn up by Ken Livingstone, no building should be allowed to encroach upon the view west of the Houses of Parliament.

The developers, Treasury Holdings, say that if the cylindrical tower does not get approval, the entire scheme will have to be reviewed. The restoration of the crumbling power station would be threatened, as would Treasury’s contribution to the privately-funded, £400 million, 1.75-mile tube extension and station. If that is scrapped, the plan for the whole Nine Elms area, which includes the relocated US embassy from Grosvenor Square, could be thrown into question.

THE BIG NO. 4 IN HORSEFERRY ROAD

In 2006, the Society didn't object to an application by Channel 4 to erect a giant free-standing

version of its logo—a huge number 4—at the entrance to its headquarters in Horseferry Road, which was said to be in celebration of its 25th anniversary. Since then we have had second thoughts. We believe that the curved corner embrasure to Richard Rogers's building is belittled by the advertisement. So when asked by Channel 4 to support an extension of the planning application for a further five years, the Society declined.

PLANNING APPLICATIONS AND REDEVELOPMENTS

Victoria Transport Interchange, version 2

In our view, Land Securities' revised proposals for the site—bounded by Victoria Street, Buckingham Palace Road and Bressenden Place—are a considerable improvement on the earlier version, especially because affordable housing is now included in the scheme.

We now believe that the five elements of the scheme that rise up to 19 storeys are acceptable in this location. We raised no objections to the massing of the main prismatic elements of the scheme, despite the various buildings being rather close together. Land Securities say that there will be considerable increases in pedestrian space across the development, though as a tradeoff for some existing roadways.

We noted with approval that mechanical services will be incorporated within constituent buildings, and the clutter that is often seen on the roofs of buildings will be avoided. However, on design grounds, we withheld approval for the Bressenden Street proposals to house affordable housing and a public library.

While our response overall to these scheme was a partial objection, we felt that the proposals represented a welcome opportunity to bring about a real streetscape and other improvements for this strategically important site.

Wellington House, 67-73 Buckingham Gate, SW1

The application to redevelop this site is linked to the redevelopment of Selborne House in Victoria Street. The plan is to provide market accommodation here with between one and four bedrooms. (The affordable component will be at Wilton Plaza in Wilton Road.) The appearance of the proposed new building was not approved by all the committee, but was felt by most to be suitable for the area.

While raising no objection to this development, we made clear our concern about the demolition of a sound building less than 40 years old. We pointed out that it was not shown by the planning application that the option of reconfiguring the present structure had been sufficiently thought through. The decision to demolish rather than reconfigure will have been made by the owners on commercial grounds. In our view they should have given more consideration to sustaining what is there.

The Crown Estate's "Project Gateway"

This site consists of an island at the south east end of Piccadilly bordered by Piccadilly, Regent Street, Jermyn Street and Eagle Place, but doesn't include the premises of the Clydesdale Bank on the corner

of Piccadilly and Regent Street. The site houses a premises with a variety of uses—retail, a small hotel, restaurants, offices and residential.

The proposals would entail the demolition of most of the block with two exceptions: the building on the corner of Eagle Place and Piccadilly will be dismantled for future use, and 27 Regent Street will be redeveloped behind its Grade II listed facades. The mix of uses will be much as it is now, except that the hotel will go, and the number of flats will rise from three to 17.

In our view the development would represent a considerable improvement compared with what is on the site at present. Our only reservation was that the proposed Piccadilly elevation was rather uniform in comparison with what currently exists. When we receive the planning application for this site we expect to give a supportive response.

VICTORIA STREET AND ITS ENVIRONS

Back in June, Councillor Colin Barrow made it clear that one of his aims on becoming Leader of the City Council was to raise the standards of streets and public spaces in Westminster. Consideration by the Society's Executive of proposals by Land Securities—the Victoria Transport Interchange scheme version 2, and the redevelopment of Selborne House in Victoria Street,

as well as Wellington House in Buckingham Gate—prompted us to think about the wider issue of the future of Victoria Street and its immediate surroundings.

In recent decades development of the street has been undertaken on a site-by-site basis, in marked contrast to the approach adopted when the street was first created in the mid to late 19th century. As Nikolaus Pevsner put it (*Buildings of England*, volume 1, 1957):

“What was impressive about the buildings which went up... was chiefly their even height and scale—something new for London. ...The skyline was more or less the same for all the buildings, five or six storeys up.”

Hardly any of Victoria Street's original buildings remain, and what has replaced them is a mixture of designs and dimensions which together do not create a sense of inclusiveness. So we wrote to Councillor Barrow suggesting that something like a supplementary planning guidance document might be prepared covering the massing and appearance of buildings on the street, acceptable uses both on main frontages and on side streets, and traffic management and control including the creation of a human-scale environment.

In his reply Councillor Barrow told us that planning staff at City Hall are currently reviewing the planning brief for the Victoria area adopted in 2006 with a view to producing a new draft for public consultation in early-mid 2009. We shall therefore shortly be contacting the Planning and City Development department to see how the Society's views might be incorporated into the new draft.

LIBRARIES IN WESTMINSTER

Something else that concerned us

when we were considering Land Securities' new proposals for the Victoria Transport Interchange (VTI) was the future of public libraries in our part of Westminster. The revised scheme provides a new public library in Bressenden Place, but, as we learned, at the price of the

convenient St James's Library in City Hall, and the handsome and recently listed library in Buckingham Palace Road.

We wrote to Councillor Audrey Lewis, the Cabinet Member for Customers and Neighbourhoods, suggesting that the closure of two libraries and the concentration of the facilities in one centre would represent a considerable reduction in the level of service for residents in the area as well as visitors. We also pointed out that the residential population of the area is growing and that the current level of service might not meet future demand.

Councillor Lewis confirmed that if the new VTI proposals were accepted, both the St James's and Victoria libraries would close and be replaced by the new facility in Bressenden Place. She said that the new library would be fully accessible for disabled people (hardly a difficulty, and one that could be achieved at far lower cost in existing premises). Also, a new larger library will be opening in 2010 within the precincts of the rebuilt Pimlico School.

In our view, the new library is a poorly considered and unimaginatively designed unit to make up for another of Westminster's destructive disposals of historic libraries, following the one that sold off the glorious, purpose-built Great Smith Street Library which became an Indian restaurant. (We didn't care for Camden Council's turning Holborn Town Hall into a Chinese restaurant either.)

QUEEN ANNE'S GATE

Recently we considered a proposed redevelopment of an office block in Broadway that might have impacted on buildings in Queen Anne's Gate. It prompted our Honorary Secretary to write this piece about one of the loveliest streets in Westminster:

Queen Anne's Gate is a remarkable survival of 18th century town houses in the centre of London. These houses were originally built as family dwellings but after WWII most became offices. Now many of them are reverting to residential use.

Originally the street consisted of two closes—Queen Square on the west side and Park Street to the east—separated by a wall. In the late 19th century the wall was removed, and the two closes were renamed Queen Anne's Gate. A stone state of Queen Anne marks the site of the wall. The names of the two original streets are still visible on wall plates behind the queen's head.

The earliest buildings at the Queen Square end have canopies over the front door of finely carved wood with foliage enrichment and pendants, now painted white. On the north side, numbers 26-34 have four bays with small gardens at the rear overlooking St James's Park. Number 32 houses the National Trust. On the south side numbers 5-15 have mostly five bays, with number 15 taking the form of a corner house. All were built in the early 1700s and all are listed by English Heritage as Grade I. Over the windows are amusing grotesques, whose origins are a mystery, covering the keystones. Outside number 26 is a conical snuffer, used for extinguishing visitors' torches in the days before street lighting. There is also a fire insurance plaque.

In the former Park Street, the terraced houses belong to a development that started in 1770. Their window frames are recessed by at least four inches. This was a requirement of the Building Act of 1709 and was introduced to hinder the spread of fire. Numbers 5-13 were built on

land belonging to Christ's Hospital. (Below the old street names behind the queen's statue can be seen a plaque bearing the initials CH.) They were built to the highest standards with elegant interiors and were originally let on seven year leases. These leases prohibited the houses from being let to trades people such as butchers, tallow chandlers or pewterers. No 14 on the north side, designed by Samuel Wyatt in 1775, is much larger and richly fitted out. Numbers 16-24, also from 1775 are listed Grade 1. Numbers 6-12 built in 1837 were designed by James Elmes and are listed Grade II*. Number 2 is the UK office of the European Parliament.

After World War II, numbers 11-13 became the offices of the Architectural Press and were connected internally. The basement was converted into a public house called The Bride of Denmark—an oblique reference to Queen Anne's husband. The bar fittings were finally removed in 1998.

WESTMINSTER SOCIETY AWARDS 2009

A gratifying feature of our AGMs in odd years is the presentation of Westminster Society Awards (it's a biennial event).

Our awards honour excellence in new architecture, renovated architecture, and urban design. The Westminster Society especially wishes to direct public attention to significant achievements that heighten and refresh Westminster's public realm.

Over the past two years some outstanding new buildings and renovated buildings, large and small, have been produced in Westminster, and also a few contributions to vibrant urban design. (We occasionally recognise important achievements outside Westminster too.)

If you would like to nominate a likely contender for a 2009 Westminster Society Award, please send your nomination soon to Nathan Silver—by post to 19 Regency Street, London SW1P 4BY, or by email, to ns@nathansilver.com.

A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

The date of the Society's 50th AGM is Wednesday, 13 May 2009. We are delighted that the

Ritz Hotel has generously agreed to sponsor the meeting and the prior reception. The proceedings will be held in the extensively restored house that William Kent built at 22 Arlington Street, which now forms part of the hotel.

For views of the splendid and historically important interior, see www.theritzlondon.com/about/wkent.asp. Further information about the AGM will be sent out in April.