

# THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

## NEWSLETTER

August 2009

### 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

On Tuesday 15  
September, with the  
kind permission of the  
Dean and Chapter of  
Westminster, we are  
holding a reception

in the presence of our Patron, HRH the Duke of Gloucester, in the Jerusalem Chamber at Westminster Abbey. The Jerusalem Chamber was the principal room of Cheyne gates, the medieval house of the Abbots of Westminster. It was added by Nicholas Litlington, Abbot of Westminster from 1362 to 1386.

In front of the fireplace in this chamber took place what is perhaps the best known event in the room's history: the death of King Henry IV. In 1413 the King was planning to go to the Holy Land, and when praying at St Edward's Shrine in the Abbey he was taken ill, apparently with a stroke. He was brought to the Abbot's house and laid by the fire where he recovered consciousness. King Henry asked where he was and was told 'Jerusalem'. At this point the King realized he was going to die because it had been prophesied that he would die in Jerusalem.

Before the reception the Society and its guests are invited to sit in the Choir for the service of Choral Evensong and after to have a guided tour of the Abbey.

Included with this newsletter is an application form to attend the anniversary celebration. Please return your application form **together with an envelope addressed to yourself (for the return of your ticket of admission)** and a cheque for £20 per person.

The form should be returned to the Chairman, Olwen Rowlands, 19 Regency Street, London SW1P 4BY by Thursday 10 September at the latest.

***It will not be possible to buy a ticket of admission on the door.***

## UPDATE ON THE MAYOR'S CYCLE HIRE SCHEME

In our April newsletter we told you about Boris Johnson's Central London cycle hire scheme.

This enables people on payment of a fee to pick up a bicycle at a docking station, use it and return it to any docking station. Transport for London is responsible for getting everything up and running by May 2010. Initially cycles will be available for hire within Travelcard Zone 1.

The idea behind the scheme is to encourage people to shift from gas-guzzling car use to sustainable and low emission cycling. The first deployment of bicycles will be available all day every day at 158 cycle docking stations throughout the City of Westminster. Relatively few of these are sited near Victoria Station because of the "major development plans in and around the station."

Docking stations will normally consist of a bay up to 2m wide and a payment terminal. Sites are normally being selected at places where part of the carriageway or footway can easily be

Westminster City Council has decided to determine planning applications for docking bays in batches. Of the 39 bays in the first batch, 24 were located in our part of the City. The Society has only objected to sites that presented potential difficulties for traffic or pedestrians or both. One such was outside numbers 3 and 4 Vincent Square, immediately adjacent to a blind corner and opposite the entrance to Westminster School's playing fields and a motorcycle parking bay. [??? do they really interfere with vision?]

The Society supports the cycle hire scheme and the programme of complementary measures, including contra-flow cycle lanes.

## CHANGES TO BUS ROUTES IN THE PICCADILLY CIRCUS AREA

For some years, southbound buses on routes 14, 19 and 38 heading towards Hyde Park Corner have had to make a detour around Great Windmill Street and Jermyn Street.

Recently Westminster City Council has been seeking views on the creation of two contra-flow southbound bus lanes. One is in Shaftesbury Avenue between Great Windmill Street and Piccadilly Circus, and the other is across Piccadilly Circus itself, more or less alongside Eros. [reducing the pedestrianisation?]

The effect of these changes will be that buses gain access to the Piccadilly bus lane without the current detour, saving a fair amount of time for passengers.

Those of us who have got used to the current scheme will have to keep our wits about us as we cross Piccadilly Circus in future.

## THE FUTURE OF VICTORIA STREET

In May the Society sent a paper to the Head of the City Planning Group setting out our views on the current state of Victoria Street and how we would like to see it developing in the future.

The key points we made were:

- o The eastern part of the street feels unfriendly and dead. Any future planning brief should require retail and restaurant uses in all developments here. We regard office-only use of any new building along the street as unacceptable;
- o we would like to see well-designed new soft landscaping introduced as a humanising refinement to the long linear dullness of office blocks;
- o in scale and design, we believe a difference should be maintained between the density and appearance of the Victoria Transport Interchange, and the wider area;
- o we think the Victoria Street carriageway should be narrowed. Tree planting, either in a central strip or on the pavement, should be considered;
- o we think the street deserves a more varied design approach. It isn't enough for a stone and concrete canyon to be replaced by a canyon of sheets of glass;
- o if taller buildings come under consideration, it is essential that gathering spaces are created to sit in the sunshine and to enjoy a lunchtime break. There could be spaces for events—even a farmers' market with its colour and the natural richness of seasonal produce;
- o the majority of the office-based blocks in the street turn their backs on the intense residential development that surrounds them. Future developments should always have open paths between blocks for the convenience and amenity of residents and other pedestrians;
- o Westminster Cathedral piazza needs particular consideration. We would like to see lively uses such as small kiosk cafés, a florist and a newspaper stand here. This should be a part of Victoria where people slow down, and a place of reflection for all.

## CHELSEA BARRACKS: THE END OF MAYHEM FOR NOW

Just as Richard Rogers's proposals for the Chelsea Barracks site were about to be considered by

Westminster City Council Planning Committee, the developers, Quatari Diar, withdrew them from the planning process.

Covering their position, Cllr Robert Davis, Deputy Leader of the City Council and Cabinet Member for Built Environment stated that in their opinion The Prince of Wales, contrary to Lord Rogers's comments, did not derail the democratic planning

process but actually encouraged a healthy debate. ‘Our democratically elected planning committee, which is the accountable body for these decisions, would have considered all views without fear or favour.’ His statement went on to say, ‘In due course the local community will be invited for their views on new proposals and the developers have already indicated they wish to involve them from the outset.’

We understand that a lot of Lord Rogers’s staff lost their jobs. The Chelsea Barracks site will undoubtedly remain in limbo for a while.

## IRRITATING YELLOW BOLLARDS

You couldn’t have missed the new yellow bollards with helpful traffic-go-this-way arrows that have sprouted up in our part of Westminster.

We are all in favour of cars going in the right direction, but the yellow things have become a blizzard of flappy elements across the urban scene that look about as great as windswept newspapers. We feel these very visible bollards are unnecessary, or at best aren’t appropriate for a local authority with a large number of conservation areas within its boundaries. An alternative design, looped and coloured silver and blue, has been used by Kensington and Chelsea and by the City of London.

We contacted Martin Low, City Council Director of Transportation, about this. He said that the new bollards need no electrical supply, reducing energy costs, and they don’t have to be cleaned. The looped bollards are used in parts of Whitehall and around Trafalgar Square, and may be installed in other locations. Apparently the City Council is discussing this with English Heritage.

We’re not convinced. The bollard used in Kensington and Chelsea is just as green—and why is English Heritage involved? We shall be having a meeting with Martin Low in the autumn.

## WESTMINSTER ABBEY LOOKS INTO THE FUTURE

Over the next four years the Dean and Chapter of Westminster have plans for the Abbey and its precincts.

They want to create an education centre at No 1 Dean’s Yard and move facilities for staff into the basement of this building. This would liberate space in the old Abbey Cellarium (on the right as one enters the archway leading to the Great Cloister) for a cafe/restaurant for tourists.

Enhanced access to the triforium is also planned. At present the only way into this space is through a small scruffy door which few visitors even notice, just below the bust of Ben Jonson in Poet’s Corner. It leads to a narrow circular stair built into the thickness

of the wall. The view is amazing down into the shrine and to the tomb of Henry III ( who rebuilt the entire abbey in the 13th century in the fashionable new Gothic style), and along the length of the choir and nave to the great west door and the tomb of the unknown soldier.

The Dean and Chapter are also ready to reopen the old debate about whether or not the Abbey is 'finished'. They ask: 'Should a new 20<sup>th</sup> century feature, such as a corona, be added to the roof of the Abbey above the lantern to honour and celebrate the place of coronation?'

There is an exhibition about the Abbey's 'Vision for the 21<sup>st</sup> century' in the Chapter House. Entry is free and visitors are encouraged to provide comments. The exhibition can also be viewed online at [www.westminsterabbey.org](http://www.westminsterabbey.org) and feedback given electronically.

## THE U. S. EMBASSY'S PROPOSED MOVE TO NINE ELMS LANE

The US State Department has submitted an outline planning application for the site of the new US Embassy building

just off Nine Elms Lane, directly opposite St George's Square. The height of the new building will no lower than 56 metres and no higher than 97 metres. To see the effect the building would have on views across the Thames from Pimlico, log onto [www.newuswembassy-london.co.uk](http://www.newuswembassy-london.co.uk) . We have let LB Wandsworth—the site is just within their borough boundary—know that we are concerned about the height of the new structure.

Four highly regarded US architectural firms are competing to provide designs for the new embassy. The winner will be decided in January 2010.

## A NEW DESIGN FOR BATTERSEA POWER STATION

Rafael Viñoly has completely redesigned his proposals for the Battersea Power Station site.

Gone are the 300m glass chimney and atrium, both of which were contested by the mayor before he introduced a new 'Views Management Framework'. The new plans were on display at the Power Station site for three days at the start of June. The iconic Gilbert Scott building retains its dominance in the scheme. The height of surrounding buildings will be no higher than the shoulders of the old power station and the four chimneys are to be retained in the latest proposals following evidence that they can be safely restored. To see what the developer and the owner of the site are proposals visit [www.battersea-powerstation.com](http://www.battersea-powerstation.com).

The Society has not yet been given an opportunity to comment on the new proposals.

## DEVELOPMENT OF A POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR THE SOCIETY

We are in the early stages of developing a policy framework for the Society.

At present, we comment on most planning applications for our area of the City. We feel that an exclusively mole's eye view may reduce the impact of what we have to say. It certainly means that for the most part we are just reacting to whatever comes our way. The creation of a policy framework (and then, of course, our own favoured policies) should give much more weight to our involvement in the planning process and make our responses understood as positioned and coherent. The framework document will set out the types of issues and policies we feel we should comment on and those we will not involve ourselves in. It will also identify campaigning issues that we feel must support. And in future we want to make sure our contributions to planning debates get much more publicity, which is the best way to get them to carry weight!

The forthcoming draft of the framework will be included in a newsletter and invite your comments.

