

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

NEWSLETTER

January 2010

MEMBERSHIP RENEWALS

Enclosed in this mailing is a membership renewal form for the forthcoming year. If you pay your annual subscription by BACS transfer or by direct debit, rather than by cheque it would help us keep track of where we are with membership renewals if you returned the form appropriately completed.

DEVELOPMENTS ON THE STRAND

Marconi House Seven years ago the Society gave thumbs down to the proposed redevelopment of a site on the corner of the Strand and Aldwych that was then occupied by Citibank. The proposal was for a Norman Forster-designed five star hotel and luxury apartment scheme that replaced the bank but retained the facade of the adjacent Marconi House. Work on the revised redevelopment by the same architect started only recently, but in October it was announced that the investment firm behind the scheme had gone into administration. PricewaterhouseCoopers, as receiver, is selling the site for at least £110m and says it has already received more than 100 expressions of interest.

Arundel Great Court In Autumn 2008 we were pleased to back a scheme for redeveloping Arundel Great Court, a set of buildings that extends from the Strand, opposite Australia House, to Temple Place. (It included the Howard Hotel and was once occupied by Accenture.) In September that year Land Securities submitted a planning application for the site which was rejected by Westminster City Council, taking exception to "the bulk, height and design" of the building at the southern end of the block. However, in November 2009 Land Securities won an appeal against the city council's decision.

Abbey Life House, 190 Strand The Society is often invited to comment on developments before they reach the planning stage. Architects find this valuable as it gives them an opportunity to reconsider before submission if organisations such as ours are less than enthusiastic. Recently we were invited to hear about a scheme by the architect Hamiltons to redevelop a nondescript office block in an historic area of London.

The site, 190 Strand, is opposite St Clement Danes and close to the legal enclave known as the Temple. The new development would contain 200 residential units with one-to-one parking provision, a restaurant, and a combined cooling, heat and power unit in the basement. Substantial improvements to pedestrian access were proposed as well as some public art. Any affordable housing would be off-site (of course).

All in all, we concluded that this was a well-mannered project that would represent a considerable improvement to the townscape. A planning application will be lodged later on this year, with work scheduled to start on site in March 2010.

St Mary-le-Strand This very fine English baroque church by James Gibbs is in need of restoration. In May 2009 the church submitted a planning application for the scaffold shroud around the building to have one externally illuminated advertisement panel measuring 15m by 10m to the east elevation for a temporary period of two years. The rest of the shroud would have displayed a 1:1 image of the church. The income from the advertisement would have contributed considerably to the cost of the renovation. (This is an idea that has been adopted by at least two other churches in London recently: St Paul's, Hammersmith, whose advert-bearing scaffolding is unmissable if one travels on the Hammersmith flyover, and St Martin in the Fields.)

Sadly for St Mary, the application was refused. The main concern was whether or not the church's need to pay for repairs justified the detrimental impact of the advertising board on the listed church, the setting of the adjacent listed buildings, and on the character and appearance of the conservation area. English Heritage urged the council to refuse the application on grounds of its impact on the setting of listed buildings and the amenity of the conservation area.

The Planning Applications Sub-Committee feared that to grant consent for St Mary-le-Strand would make it difficult to resist proposals from non-charitable projects for the use of advertising shrouds, which could have a highly detrimental impact on the whole city. The Westminster Society thinks the benefits of restoring a James Gibb building makes St Mary a defensible special case, and would support an appeal or an amended application from the church group.

VISITING SOMERSET HOUSE

Somerset House is one of London's greatest buildings, and it's right on our doorstep. Built on the site of Edward Seymour's Tudor palace, it was designed by Sir William Chambers between 1776 and 1801 as public offices, principally for the Navy Board. (It's really the first office building, a new building type at the time.) Until the second half of the 1990s it was largely closed to the public. Then in 1997 an Act of Parliament set up the Somerset House Trust with a remit to conserve and develop Somerset House into a "major new visitor attraction for London, and a new centre for culture and the arts." The project was completed in 2000. Thanks to the architects, Dixon Jones, the central courtyard was transformed from a car park into a site for playful fountains in summer with a flexible performance space, and a skating rink in winter. Access to the dramatic River Terrace was opened up, with café tables to sit at.

It is possible to visit areas of Somerset House independently. Key features are the vestibule of the North Wing; the Edmond J Safra Fountain Court; the statue of King George III by John Bacon; and the Seaman's Hall in the South Wing, originally the entrance to the Navy Office and the River Terrace, which was built originally as private leisure space for those living and working at Somerset House.

Also worth seeing are the cantilevered Stamp Stairs rising through six floors in the Courtauld Institute Gallery, whose entrance is on the right of the entrance vestibule; the Nelson Stairs in the South Wing, named after Horatio's brother Maurice; and the old water gate which became redundant from the 1870s when Joseph Balzagette began building the Victoria Embankment.

It's possible to take a guided tour of Somerset House. On Saturdays tours start at 15 minutes past the hour between 12.15 and 15.15, and on Thursdays at 13.15 and 14.15.

OYSTER CARD CHANGES

Oyster pay-as-you-go cards will be accepted on all National Rail services within Greater London (zones 1-9) from January 2010. At the same time, one-day bus and tram passes were withdrawn from public sale. (Bus and tram tickets for periods of seven days or longer are still available.) Thames Clipper's scheduled river service now accepts pay-as-you-go Oyster cards for travel.

FREEDOM PASSES—A REMINDER

New Freedom Passes will be issued in the spring this year and should be applied for between January and February. A new passport-sized photograph will have to be provided along with the application. This will appear on the pass itself rather than on a separate photocard. Old cards will not be accepted on any public transport after 31 March 2010. After that date, the new pass will be valid for five years instead of two. The new passes will take up to 10 working days to provide, so don't leave it to the last minute to apply.

THE VICTORIA BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

A new Business Improvement District (BID) has been set up in Victoria and will be launched in April 2010. A BID is a geographically defined area within which businesses are asked to make a financial contribution. All the income generated is spent directly within the defined area solely on projects determined by the local business community. At present there are 78 BIDs in England, and three of these are in the City of Westminster. They are called, or run by: Paddington BID; Heart of London (in the Piccadilly Circus/Leicester Square area); and the New West End Company (covering Oxford Street, Bond Street and Regent Street).

The projects undertaken by the proposed Victoria BID will concentrate on five main things:

Safe and secure – improving security and monitoring low level crime and anti-social behaviour

Clean and green – improving signage and pedestrian routes through the area

An enhanced visitor destination – encouraging visitors to use more local facilities

Showcase Victoria – marketing and promotion of the area

A prosperous economy for all to share – increasing the footfall in the area especially at weekends.

For more information about this initiative, see the website at www.victoria-partnership.co.uk.

PERMITTED DEVELOPMENT RIGHTS

As a result of the introduction of Permitted Development Rights, since October 2008 it has become possible to make changes to one's house without needing to apply for planning permission. These rights derive from a general planning permission granted by Parliament and not a local authority. In conservation areas and other designated areas, permitted development rights are more restricted. Requirements are different also for listed buildings. The government has also extended permitted development rights for businesses. It wants a simpler process for shop front applications and automatic teller machines; it wants to extend permitted development rights to the installation of air conditioning units; and it proposes to allow about 50 square metres of permeable hard surfacing be laid to shops, office and institutions.

We were concerned when we heard about the installation of air conditioners on commercial premises, especially where they form part of mixed use premises. We think the relaxation of the controls on the installation of these units has implications in terms of noise and vibration for people living in the residential component. We wrote to the Director of Planning at the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) to let him know of our concerns and to suggest that formal planning consent should be required for air conditioning installations in these circumstances. We were also concerned that proposed alterations to shop fronts and installations of ATMs have to be considered by the local authority within 28 days, and after 28 days if no objection is forthcoming from the local planning authority, consent is deemed to have been granted. Such a time limit places an enormous burden on an authority such as Westminster with its heavy caseload of planning applications. We suggested that the permitted period for objection should be extended to 56 days.

CREATION OF THE INFRASTRUCTURE PLANNING COMMISSION

This autumn a newly created quango – the Infrastructure Planning Commission (IPC) - started work. It was brought into being by the 2008 Planning Act, said to be the most far-reaching legislation of its kind since the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947. The IPC was created following complaints from business about the length of time it took in the UK to get planning permission for major development projects compared with overseas competitors. The public enquiry into Terminal 5 at Heathrow, for example, took seven years. Fast-track planning is what the IPC is about. Much of the old planning system will remain in place, but decisions on major infrastructure projects like airport runways, major road schemes and new rail lines will be removed from local authorities and handed to the IPC.

The new system has several stages. First, an applicant seeking planning permission will be required to consult widely while the IPC appoints a commissioner to undertake an initial assessment. Then comes a six-month examination period that will include public hearings. The IPC then has three months to make a decision. The new act allows a six-week period in which objectors may make a legal challenge. This will forseeably mean an appeal to the high court for a judicial review.

We were concerned about the meaning of the term “major infrastructure project.” Clearly the development of an airport or a large power station would be a “major” project, but how would a new Thames Barrier be regarded? It would certainly be a major project from a London perspective, but would it be considered of sufficient significance to be dealt with by the IPC? We asked for guidance on this issue from the Director of Planning at DCLG.

THE CHELSEA BARRACKS SITE

Ten architectural and planning firms were invited in the autumn to submit master plan proposals for how they would deal with the Chelsea Barracks site. In December these were reduced to three:

Dixon Jones, responsible for work at the National Gallery, the Royal Opera House and Kings Place; **Kim Wilkie Associates** who designed the garden of the Victoria & Albert Museum; and **Squire and Partners**, who are responsible for a luxury apartment development near Trevor Square in Knightsbridge.

The design brief that the shortlisted master planners worked on included a requirement that they were to take into account the views of the community. In December the developers, Project Blue (Guernsey) Ltd. evaluated the schemes with a view to selecting the most appropriate approach for the site.

The Westminster Society will respond once we have access to the proposals that Project Blue will be sending to Westminster City Council. In the meantime, to make sure that local views and opinions are taken account of, two liaison groups are being set up: a Community Liaison Group and a Residents' Liaison Group. We're not sure of the distinction there (and of course, all the lip-service about consultation may turn out to be tokenism supreme), but a representative of the Society has been invited to join the Community Liaison Group.

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