

THE WESTMINSTER SOCIETY



NEWSLETTER

URBAN VITALITY AND CONGENIALITY

August 2010

WESTMINSTER SOCIETY AGM 2010

Once again our AGM was a great success! Well, it was. The venue, the Banqueting Room of 49 Millbank, was a new one for us and turned out to be an excellent choice. After the reception and a brief business meeting our speaker, Timothy Jones from English Heritage, gave a very interesting talk about the way London's clubs have altered and adapted their interiors and exteriors in recent years.

Over 40 Society members and guests attended. We are very grateful to those who responded to the invitation to attend by making a donation to Society funds, including some who were unable to attend the AGM themselves.

THE SOCIETY'S HONORARY SECRETARY

In the April newsletter we were pleased to announce that Antony Hurst had agreed to take over from Peter Handley as the Society's new honorary secretary. Shortly after, Antony discovered that he had serious health problems and sadly decided he had to resign. In the meantime Peter Handley has agreed to continue as acting honorary secretary until we find someone to replace him.

CHELSEA BARRACKS MASTERPLAN

A master plan for the Chelsea Barracks site has now been published. This features houses and garden squares as well as eight-storey apartment blocks along Chelsea Bridge Road. At this stage there is an indication of density (the chastened princes have required far less than before) and mass, but little detail on materials and scale. We like certain features—garden squares, for example—but hope the scheme won't remain this bland. It needs buildings and other features with focus and excitement. Well, it's only a master plan. It also seems to indicate restricted public access to the proposed green open spaces on the site, about which we shall be saying more. We are represented at the community liaison group meeting for this site, so we will be letting the developers know how we feel.

MEMORIAL FOR
BOMBER
COMMAND

There was an enormous number of comments both for and against the proposed memorial to Bomber Command. At the planning sub-committee in May the planning officers supported the principle of a memorial within Green Park but said the proposal itself caused substantial harm to the special character of the designated heritage asset of the park, principally as a result of its physical dominance of the parkland setting. They recommended that permission be refused, though a more modest proposal might be acceptable. However, planning permission for the original proposal was granted.

AFFORDABLE
HOUSING:
LOCATION AND
'MONEY IN LIEU'

Developers who get planning permission to build houses and apartments in Westminster containing 10 or more housing units are required to include a fixed proportion of "affordable" homes on the sites they develop. When the site is small the number of affordable units can amount to no more than two or three, and it can be difficult to attract a "registered social landlord." Registered social landlords, government-funded not-for-profit entities that provide affordable housing, include housing associations, trusts and cooperatives. The developer alternatively has the option of giving Westminster City Council money in lieu of the affordable homes.

The general council policy is that affordable homes should be provided on site, but when that's deemed not practical or viable, affordable housing may be provided offsite, but in the vicinity. Both policies have come into play on the Chelsea Barracks site with some affordable housing on site, and the remainder on the south side of Ebury Bridge Road adjacent to Grosvenor Waterside.

We contacted the Westminster cabinet members for housing to find out how the council defines "in the vicinity." We also asked what plans the council had for the £14.2 million as yet uncommitted, according to the draft Core Strategy of the Local Development Framework, in the Affordable Housing Fund.

The reply we received made it clear that there is now only £7.5 million in the AHF, and it offered no details about how the money would be spent other than its being made available to provide affordable homes. As for a definition of "in the vicinity," Cllr Phillipa Roe replied:

...it is the City Council's intention that it does not relate to a particular distance but is rather meant to indicate a site in the local area, and a reasonable approach will be taken to individual scheme circumstances.

LONDON CYCLE
HIRE SCHEME

The TfL's cycle-hire scheme went live at 6.00 am on 30 July. We had objected to the location of some docking stations on the grounds of road safety. We have since received one or two objections from local residents. We note the comment that the scheme's contemporary equipment seems out of synch with Cubitt-designed streets in Pimlico,

but stylistic concerns seem of little relevance against the potential benefits of the scheme in terms of a reduction in the use of cars and buses, and the immense utility of public access to waiting rental cycles in London. There won't be enough of them.

PLANNING BRIEF
FOR THE VICTORIA
AREA: WHERE'S
THE VISION?

The latest draft planning brief for the Victoria area was made public recently. We found it utterly anodyne. Who would argue with daring commitments such as these:

- Pedestrian movement around sites and within the transport interchange should be given the highest priority—this includes both the capacity and quality of the public realm.
- Proposed developments must take account of, and as far as possible address, the transport requirements at Victoria.
- Proposals must not harm the residential amenity of the Victoria area, and the integration of developments with the local community should be facilitated.
- New buildings in Victoria must be designed and built to the highest quality including in relation to energy efficiency, and the negative impact of construction activity should be ameliorated.
- The City of Westminster, TfL and the GLA will work together to support and develop the strategic and long term objectives for Victoria.

Well, on the whole we were pleased about familiar principles for architecture, design, building heights and an inclusion for the protection of “strategic viewing corridors,” but we would have welcomed something on the City Council’s vision for the area. It is to be championed as a new retail centre, an office nexus, “the place to live in central London,” and as a major transport hub. Of course it is.

BANNERS, MORE
BANNERS, EVEN
MORE BANNERS,
AND THEN A
LIGHT SHOW

Is anyone unaware that England is bidding to stage the 2018 World Cup? In the middle of June the Society was invited to comment on five separate planning applications for the display of 58 flags in Parliament Square and a total of 279 banners on Millbank, along Whitehall and Victoria Embankment, around Trafalgar Square and Parliament Square (the banners hanging from existing lampposts)—all to highlight the England bid. The flag-waving will run from 16 August to 5 September this year.

In addition we were asked to comment on a proposed lighting display for one night only from Victoria Tower Gardens onto Victoria Tower, also in support of the bid. We took the view that as the banners and flags were to last for three weeks only and the light show for three hours, it was unreasonable to object.

SUTTON HOUSE,
VICTORIA STREET

Sutton House, home to a pawnbroker opposite the Victoria Street entrance to the District Line, is part of the development site known to TfL as VTI2 (Victoria Transport Interchange 2). Before planning consent for development was granted we understood that English Heritage didn't consider Sutton House or any other building on the site worthy of listing, so it was facing demolition.

But once consent for the redevelopment had been granted, an application to spot-list Sutton House was submitted to English Heritage and approved. (Spot-listing protects buildings that may have been overlooked initially.) At first no one seemed to know who had requested the listing, but it turned out to have been the Twentieth Century Society, who took the view that the pawnbroker's shop and offices were well-preserved, the six-storey Art Deco façade is in brick with Portland stone dressings, the opulent shop windows are framed in bronze with Deco details, and internally all wood fittings are original. They added that while the building had merit in its own right, intact 1930s pawnbroker's shops were also extremely rare.

Almost immediately the developers asked for Listed Building Consent (LBC) to demolish Sutton House. Westminster City Council sought our views, and on balance we did not oppose the proposed demolition. However, following discussions between the developers and English Heritage, a revised LBC application has been submitted to partially demolish and partially dismantle Sutton House, with the existing façade and the interior finishes at basement and ground floor level retained for storage and installation on site or elsewhere. The developer has entered into a number of obligations with English Heritage with respect to Sutton House, and on that basis the Society hasn't objected to the revised LBC application.

WATERSTONE'S
FEELS THE
EFFECTS OF
CHANGES IN
BUYING HABITS

Waterstone's in Piccadilly occupies the old Simpson building. It's said to be the largest bookstore in the UK, and it is regarded by the company as their flagship store. But even flagships can become deserted, as has been happening with customers staying away and buying books on-line.

The company feels it can no longer justify the amount of retail space it has at its disposal in Piccadilly and has decided to seek other uses for its fourth floor. The Curzon chain was looking for a location for a new small art house cinema and Waterstone's fourth floor seemed ideal. The cinema would normally be open until midnight, but about once a month a midnight movie would be screened as well.

We had no objection to the change of use, but did comment that we hoped any interventions on the ground and fourth floors would be reversible and those customers leaving the cinema late in the evening would exit onto Piccadilly and not Jermyn Street.

Waterstone's already has a bar and seafood restaurant on the 5th floor.

EXCITING DEVELOPMENT AT THE LSE CAMPUS

We recently considered a planning application for a major redevelopment of part of the London School of Economics campus in Sheffield Street. The proposal is for the demolition of the St Philips Building, a former workhouse dating from 1903 (now a medical centre) and its replacement with a seven storey students' centre.

We thought the new design, which includes hard landscaping, exciting and well thought through. We have given the scheme our support and recommended that it be approved by the City Council.

INTRUSIVE SECURITY MEASURES

We have all become accustomed to new security measures that have tried to look like streetscape improvements in parts of Westminster, and in particular along Parliament Street and Whitehall. The city council recently sought the Society's views on some additional measures along the remaining part of Parliament Street, along Bridge Street and onto Victoria Embankment. They included some footway widening, junction improvements where Victoria Embankment meets Bridge Street, new paving, new street lighting and, inevitably, bollards. We had no objection to the majority of the proposals but one aspect did concern us: two gross steel beams purported to offer additional protection at the gates across Canon Row and Commissioner's Yard.

We felt that these beams were too crudely intrusive into the public realm and should either be redesigned, or be removed from the overall scheme.

A DATE FOR YOUR DIARY

The next Open House weekend will be on Saturday and Sunday 18 and 19 September. For more information: www.londonopenhouse.org.

RECENT DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS AND PLANNING APPLICATIONS

2-6 Moreton Street This proposal was for the demolition of an unprepossessing terrace of shops and accommodation next to the church of St James the Less, and their replacement with a building of four and five storeys containing 46 residential units, 38 of which will be intermediate affordable/key worker units, and eight of which will be private rental units. The developer, the Dolphin Square Charitable Foundation, was created with an endowment of £100m to provide homes for key workers in Victoria. The scheme's car parking provision has been kept to a minimum. £50,000 from the Foundation is to be spent restoring the church square, which the development will face. We welcomed this new housing application for an area of London where living space can only be obtained for high rents.

135 Grosvenor Road This is the site of a defunct restaurant you may remember, The Elephant on the River. The proposals are for the demolition of the basement, lower ground, upper ground and four upper floors, and replacement with a building of eight self-contained apartments and basement car parking for five vehicles. Mechanical plant and solar photo-voltaic cells will be at roof level. We consider the present proposal an improvement on an earlier one which was for 12 apartments in the same sized building, but at a meeting we recommended further thought to be given to improving the energy rating of the building from a very average 3 to 4, and suggested changing the arrangement of the photo-voltaic cells to reduce their impact on views across Grosvenor Road. The developer responded positively to these suggestions at the time, but disappointingly, they haven't been incorporated in the new planning application. There will be no affordable housing on this site.

Tideway Wharf More than 800 riverside homes are planned in five blocks for an area called Tideway Wharf in the future US embassy quarter of Nine Elms. We are delighted with the design, height and massing of the blocks, which are the work of Rogers, Stirk, Harbour + Partners. We also like the idea of a riverbus terminal on the jetty adjacent to the development. Our executive committee is still arguing about a proposed pedestrian bridge from the site across the Thames to St George's Square, Pimlico. Unnecessary, as some say, or terrific?

Proposed refurbishment of Ashdown House This granite-clad building is showing its age, the putative redevelopers are saying: the windows are defective, the building's services including the air conditioning are in poor condition and the roof leaks. The proposed work would replace the windows, install a new partly green roof, clean the granite, redo the shop fronts, and replace the heavy canopies on the retail units to the east with lighter, glazed canopies. In order make it easier to let the building to more than one tenant, new entrances would be created in Howick Place and on the piazza. The very dreary rear elevation will be given a makeover. The gloomy Victoria Street colonnade will get a new ceiling with better lighting. An S106 contribution (i.e. a planning gain) has been aimed at providing streetscape improvements to Wilcox Place.

Johnson House, Ebury Square This proposal is for the redevelopment by Berkeley Homes of some former police flats. The present 1950s eight-storey building with 60 housing units will be replaced by two blocks, one six storeys high and the other eight storeys, containing 72 units. We commented that the eight storey block facing Ebury square was perhaps one storey too high, but that apart, we felt that the scheme was a reasonable one. As Berkeley Homes is providing an additional 12 units of accommodation compared with what was there before, they are obliged to provide two units of affordable housing on the site. Since no social landlord will want to manage so few units, Berkeley will give the City Council money in lieu.

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