



Friends of St James's Park
and The Green Park

Sharing and protecting the heritage of old
Westminster village

NEWSLETTER

Spring/Summer 2020

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Clockwise from top: Earnest discussion after Victor's talk (p.5); Jen Jakobsen's display outside the Blewcoat School (p.7); work under way in Christchurch Gardens (p.5).



www.thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk

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At work on flowers in the beautiful Blewcoat School

Antiquarian books, cocktails&canapés, talks about trees, lunch with catering students and other Thorney Island visits are brought together in our 35th anniversary year. We've included completely different experiences and you can read about the first of them: Master Florist Jens Jakobsen's workshop at the Blewcoat School, Caxton Street on page 7.

When June Stubbs and Ann Carlton started the campaign to save Westminster Library, they won't have been thinking forward to 2020. However, we can look back with admiration on their pioneering pressure to save and secure the local heritage and the poster they produced at the time has pride of place in The Thorney Island Archives.

This year, in recognition of the founding of the society, we are holding a series of short talks in the archives. Two have already taken place, 'Christchurch Gardens' and 'Ignatius Sancho', and you can read about

them on page 5. The third 'St James's Park - a history through trees', scheduled for 21st July, is mentioned on page 6.

The past meets the future at the heart of Thorney Island as the innovative Illuminated River project gets underway, to light central London bridges along the River Thames linking Albert Bridge and Tower Bridge along 4.5 nautical miles. Our stretch of the river covers Westminster and Lambeth Bridges and we have been consulted on the proposals and the ways in which the historic fabric and character of each bridge will be enhanced by the LED colour displays of the artwork. We will be following the scheme over the next couple of years and posting updates on the website.

Many life members who were amongst June's earliest recruits still support our work and we hope to see many of you at the T@35 Summer Party in St. James's Park on 23rd June. **All bookings via Eventbrite or mail – see back page.** ●



The future lighting of Westminster Bridge under the Illuminated River project



Richmond House - the rear façade, which is threatened with demolition.

The building picks up and replicates the brick and stone striations on the Norman Shaw building on the right.



Two important planning applications rumble on: first, the **Holocaust Memorial in Victoria Tower Gardens**. This has been called-in by the Secretary of State for MHCLG, which happens also to be the applicant! We are assured that the Minister who makes the final decision will 'have nothing whatsoever to do with the promotion or progression of the Application' so that he/she can make the decision 'in an entirely lawful manner'. We doubt this: because the Government has expressed a desire for this project to go ahead, through its Manifesto and numerous statements by the Prime Minister downwards, it seems to our lawyers that the Planning Inspector's decision should be final and not a mere recommendation to a Minister, who will obviously be fully aware of what the Government's policy is. There is a new way of contributing to the campaign: <https://www.crowd-justice.com/case/save-victoria-tower-gardens/>

The second application is for the **Parliamentary Northern Estate**. The main issue is the destruction of all parts of Richmond House, apart from the Whitehall façade. There is a considerable body of opinion that this would be an

outrage and an absurd expense for a use that is only needed for about six years.

A big new development is brewing on Victoria Street. The owners of **Southside**, the building that houses the former Army and Navy Stores (now House of Fraser) consider that it is reaching the end of its life and they have started consulting local groups and the general public on their development proposals. Watch out for future exhibitions. So far few ideas have been presented, although the expectation is that the developers will be going for a new building with more floors than the existing building. The Cathedral Area Residents Group gave three very clear suggestions:

- It should complement the exceptional heritage of the neighbourhood
- No structural demolition - repurpose the existing building's structure
- No increase in building height.

It is time that the environment is considered more when existing buildings are redeveloped; demolition and rebuilding should be the last option considered. ●



The South Westminster Community Choir performing at the Christmas party.

The Christmas Party was a great success, very much due to the contribution by the South Westminster Community Choir, who kept us well entertained. Their band brought back vivid memories to one of our members, Elizabeth Blackman, who was able to tell the musicians about her recollections of Count Basie, who she knew when she was living in the Bahamas. She became very good friends with the Count and his wife and she became involved in their favourite charity "The Count Basie Heart Ball", in aid of Bahamian children with heart problems. Their one and only child had suffered with heart problems combined with learning difficulties. The ball was a very glittering affair and the Count would fly in his entire orchestra for the event. Ella Fitzgerald and Sara Vaughan were top of the bill; they were frequent guests of the Basie's. Frank Sinatra would also come along, but he decided to 'leave the singing to the girls'!

Elizabeth recalled that the Count was a very shy unassuming gentleman, whilst his wife Cathy was full of life - always the life and soul of the party. Cathy was a dancer in Harlem and young Basie at the time was her piano player. She always joked that she was responsible for the Count's success, adding that the 'woman who rocks the cradle rules the world' - or words to that effect! The Basies were a delightful couple who Elizabeth absolutely adored, cherishing and treasuring their memory. ●



The audience at Victor's archives talk - see right



Plan of the new layout of Christchurch Gardens

It was exciting to launch our series of 'Short talks' in the archives. The space is limited so there is only room for a small audience, but this resulted in lively general discussion on both occasions. The first talk, in January, was by David Beamont of the Victoria BID, who told us about the work that is currently under way at Christchurch Gardens, and gave us a history of the gardens, which date back to the 17th century when they were a burial ground for St Margaret's Westminster. Christchurch itself was built in the 19th century but was badly bombed during the war. The landscaping work is quite radical, with new paths, a number of trees removed to improve the light and flowering shrubs and trees planted in new beds. There will also be a number of benches; no doubt it will become a very popular lunch-spot.

The second talk, in February, was by Committee member and local historian Victor Keegan, who gave a fascinating talk

about Ignatius Sancho, the polymath African who was buried in Christchurch gardens in 1780. He was born on a slave ship, but was brought up in England, where he was taken under the wing of the Duke of Montague and educated. He had many important acquaintances and was a prolific letter writer to politicians, newspapers and renowned thinkers and authors of the day. He urged them to talk and write about the abhorrent slave trade. He also wrote poems, plays and music. It was clear that this extraordinary man had a unique life in London at a dangerous time, at the height of the slave trade, when he could have been press-ganged, kidnapped or deported at any time. Clearly highly regarded, his portrait was painted by Thomas Gainsborough in 1768.

There will will two more Short Talks in the Archives this year and we look forward to Greg Packman's "St James's Park - A History through Trees" on 21st July ●



Ignatius Sancho, painted by Thomas Gainsborough



Mike Turner, Assistant Park Manager, and Sue planting the Tulip Tree (left) and Sir Harry Studholme, toasting it (right).



Celebrating tree-planting is always a special occasion. On the 9th December last year The Forestry Commission celebrated their Centenary and invited Thorney Island Society committee member Victor Keegan and The Thorney Island Chair Sue Ball to attend. Victor chairs the Safer Parks Panel (for Saint James's and The Green Park).

A small group met in the early morning in freezing temperatures and under a bright sunny sky. Sir Harry Studholme, Chair of the Forestry Commission, planted a tulip tree to commemorate the first trees planted by the Commission at Eggesford in Devon, in 1919. Following tradition, Sir Harry toasted the tree with a libation of Scottish whisky. He left shortly afterwards to catch the train to Devon to plant another tree at Eggesford.

Sir Harry led The Forestry Commission for seven years and is succeeded by Sir William Worsley who steps down as the

Government's Tree Champion. Across the UK people are campaigning to save the trees in their communities, as we are trying to do in Victoria Tower Gardens. Quotes from Sir Harry and Sir William could not be more topical:

"Not only do trees in urban areas help improve wellbeing, but they also offer benefits in many other ways, like helping tackle climate change and mitigating flood risks."

"Trees, woods and forests are so important to us – improving our landscapes, helping capture carbon, improving our wellbeing."

For more on trees, register to hear our favourite arboriculturist, Greg Packham, talk on the "St James's Park - A History through Trees" in the archives on 21st July (free) and our summer birthday party in the park on 23rd June (£25). ●



A small group of Members were lucky enough to attend Jens Jakobsen's floristry workshop at the Blewcoat School in Caxton Street. Held in the beautiful, high ceilinged, 300 year old schoolroom, sadly recently vacated by Ian Stuart's wedding dress shop, we had lots of space and the all important mirrors.

Jens, the master florist, was full of tips on selection, preparation, proportion and longevity and spoke lovingly of his passion for flowers. He taught us the basics of making a hand-tied arrangement. After preparing the stems and practicing "Left over, right under. Left over, right under", we created a spiral with sprigs of budding birch twigs. We went round and round, stem by stem, adding roses, tulips, crocosmia, gypsophila, carnations, gerberas, a fennel flower, an arum and other lilies plus the less familiar kangaroo paw and cancrinia. We all had the same selection to work with but it was surprising how individual our finished arrangements were. Jens kept a close eye on our creations, suggesting we look at their reflections in the mirrors and shocking us when he said "No! Its not funeral, its a celebration - start again!" - A master teacher too! ●

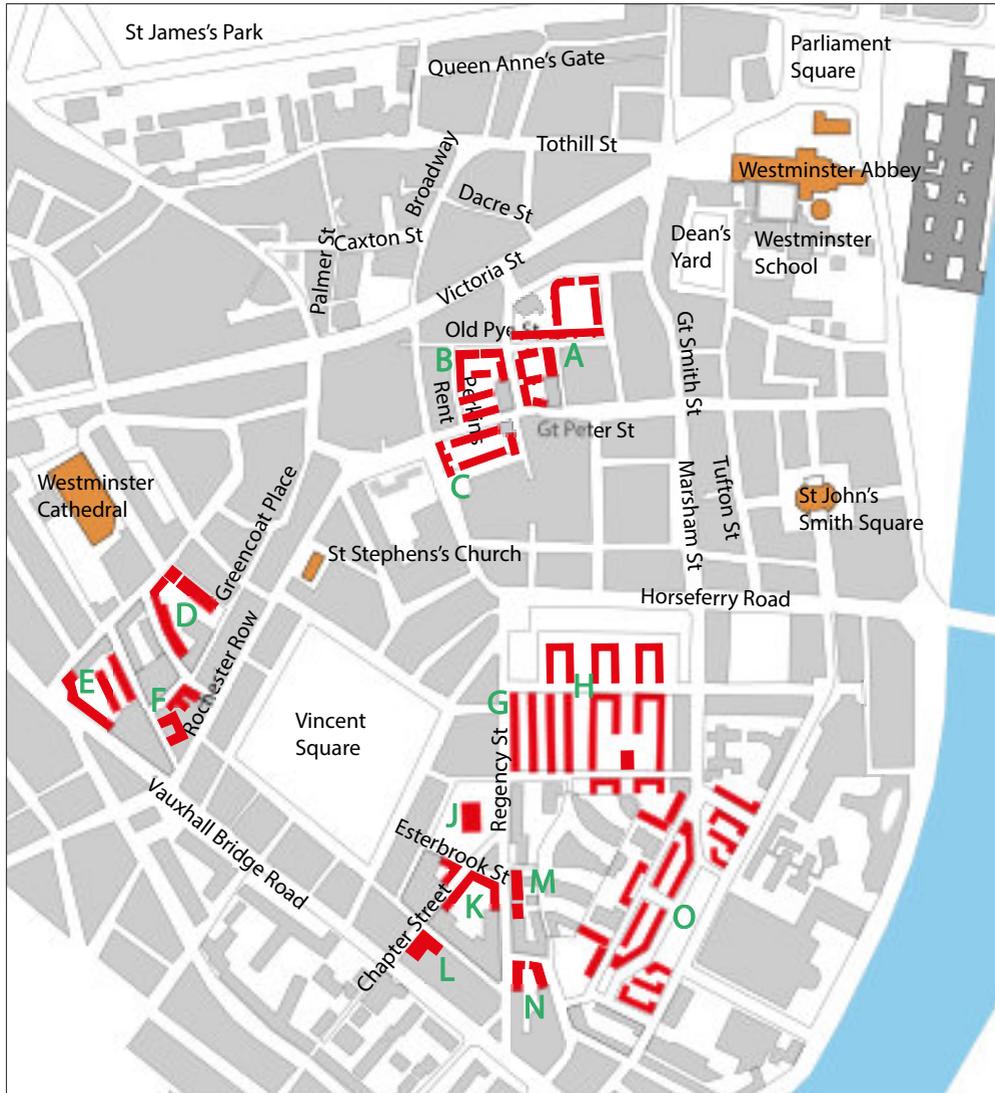
Jens's future in the basement of the Blewcoat School is uncertain until a new tenant is found for the schoolroom. We hope that they will be happy to share with Jens as his fairy garden is such a big asset to the local area. For the time being, The National Trust have allowed him to stay.

Jens has transformed the outside area around the building into an ornamental garden with a heart and soul. Treasured in the community and appreciated by passers-by and, I heard first hand, by the taxi drivers on the rank! You cannot fail to be uplifted and charmed by what he has made. It must be the most beautiful flower shop in London and we look forward to watching his interpretation of the changing seasons ahead.

A self pronounced Viking, Danish born Jens is happy and at home in 'almost tropical' London. He clearly loves the Blewcoat School and is enhancing and looking after it in a wonderful way. Please pass by to see for yourself and look at his other fabulous creations on his website jensjakobsen.co.uk If you have any ideas for a new tenant for the schoolroom, we will put them to The National Trust.



Jen's fascinating garden outside Blewcoat School

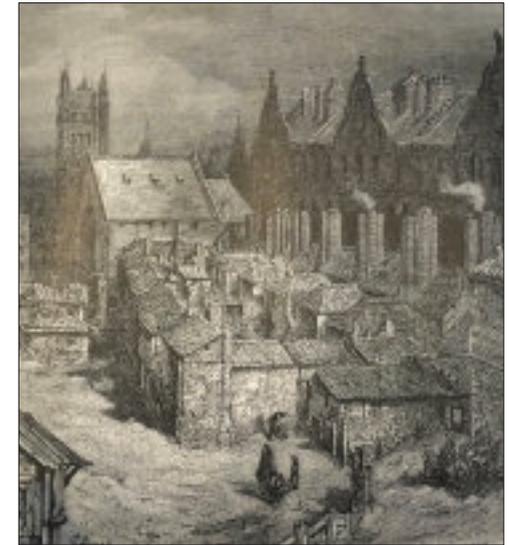


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|---------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| A Peabody, Abbey Orchard | F Buckingham Chambers & Admiral House | K Peabody, Esterbrook St |
| B Rochester Buildings | G Regency Dwellings | L 17 Chapter St |
| C Peabody, Horseferry Rd | H Grosvenor Estate | M Gladstone Ct & Peel House |
| D Coburg Court | J Hide Tower | N Causton St |
| E Peabody, Vauxhall Br Rd | | O Millbank Estate |

Our part of Westminster contains a number of very interesting housing schemes, aimed at addressing serious overcrowding in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Over-crowding and poverty had been overwhelming British cities for a long time and numerous people agonised over the problem, but it was decades before policy-makers would admit that the root cause of poor housing was poverty, rather than that poverty was the result of dissolute and disorderly lives. In fact appalling living conditions were leading to crimes of desperation, and 'immoral living' was the outcome of families being crammed into small spaces, often shared with neighbours not of their choosing. Apart from the scarcity and expense of land the reasons for overcrowding were low wages, high rents, and the necessity for working people to live near their place of work.

Before this realisation the focus was on slum clearance. One way in which slums were cleared was through road and railway building by the Metropolitan Board of Works (established in 1855). Often the routes were chosen specifically to remove slums; even before the Board was founded part of the notorious Devil's Acre was demolished for the building of Victoria Street. The Board was only obliged to rehouse evictees after legislation was passed in 1872, and only a small proportion of those affected qualified because of the ubiquitous sub-letting of rooms or even parts of rooms.

At first there was a widespread aversion to the idea that the Government should get involved in the supply of working-class



The Devil's Acre, from an illustration by Gustave Doré, dated 1872. Rochester Buildings, on the right, were already built.

dwellings and some timidity was shown by the local authorities (then parish-based Vestries) over the clearing of slums. Perhaps understandably because even the squalidest shelter was better than none at all. An early attempt to solve the problem was through the Labouring Classes Lodging House Act of 1851, introduced by Lord Shaftesbury, which empowered Vestries to buy land and build housing, but this was generally ignored. The fact was that members of Vestries were often slum landlords themselves and moreover there was a strong feeling that rate-payers' wallets had to be protected. Subsequent legislation of various sorts tried to make more land and money available for housing. The first extensive builders of 'social housing' were companies set up to provide 'model dwellings' on a semi-commercial basis. Land



Rochester Buildings (now owned by the Peabody Trust)



The Peabody Abbey Orchard Estate

was provided at a discount from clearances and companies could borrow from the Government at an interest rate of 4%. Philanthropy also played a role: Members of the public could invest in Model Dwelling companies and get a 5% return – not in fact much lower than the returns available from non-philanthropic investments available at the time.

One of the earliest model dwelling builders was the Peabody Donation Fund (now Peabody Trust), founded in 1862 with a massive gift of £150,000 from George

Peabody, an America banker settled in London, who went into partnership with JP Morgan. The success of their bank is well known and enabled Peabody to follow up his original donation with others. Peabody's very first building was in Spitalfields, and the architect for that building also designed Rochester Buildings, on Old Pye Street, for another philanthropist, William Gibbs. The Spitalfields building had the same charming gables on the roofline. Gibbs's widow gave the building to the Peabody Donation Fund when he died. Peabody built extensively in Westminster, the first five blocks in 1868, beside the Blewcoat School in Buckingham Gate. By the 1920s those buildings were considered too hemmed in by neighbouring buildings; they were emptied and subsequently demolished. The other, later, Peabody buildings survive: the large Abbey Orchard Estate consisted of fifteen blocks, with five or six floors, bay windows, London Stock brickwork and a relative absence of decorative flourishes. They were criticized at the time for being barrack-like, but that did not prevent applicants for flats in a newly constructed block rioting, in their



Peabody additions to Rochester Buildings on Great Peter Street

desperation for tenancies. Because of the generous endowments, the Peabody flats were cheaper than those built by other model dwelling companies, which caused some resentment among these 'rivals'. One such was the Improved Industrial Dwellings Company, which built a block on Francis Street in 1875 (now called Coburg Close).

The sites were necessarily developed at a high density, which was questioned by those at the time who thought that the health problems of over-crowded slums would inevitably be replicated in the new model dwellings. In fact the sanitary facilities of the new flats and the control on tenancies meant that the death rate in the new blocks was far lower than the average across the city. In the 1890s, incidentally, mansion flats for the wealthy were being built at far higher densities (think of the gap between the mansion blocks in Morpeth Terrace and Carlisle Place!), with very little open space around the buildings – far less than allowed around model dwellings.

By the 1880s the model dwelling companies were still managing to house only a very small proportion of the working-class population, few of who could anyway afford the rents. Because of slum clearance overcrowding had become even worse. The appalling conditions for so many people was finally brought to the public's attention by the publication of a short anonymous work, 'The Bitter Cry of Outcaste London' (1883 or 4), which led to a Royal Commission on housing and initiated Charles Booth's huge survey of social classes in London, completed in 1889. One of the findings from the survey was that 45.9% of the population in the area around the Abbey were living in



Coburg Close, built by the Improved Industrial Dwellings' Company - as described in an inscription on the side wall

overcrowded conditions. By this time the Board of Works had been replaced by the LCC and the new body managed to get legislation passed in Parliament to consolidate all previous Housing Acts, theoretically to allow local authorities to 'house' people, rather than simply 'rehouse' evictees of slum clearance. But this still did not result in many actual local government building projects. Cost was an obstacle and it was not considered right that rate-payers should foot any part of the bill.

The gradual change in this attitude, and the building of the great early housing estates such a Millbank will be described in the next Newsletter. ●



- Saturday 4th April, 2pm: Visit to St Stephen's Church, Rochester Row
- Wednesday 6th May, 12.30pm: Visit & lunch at Westminster/Kingsway College, Vincent Square
- Tuesday 2nd June, 3pm: Visit to RUSI (Royal United Services Institute), 61 Whitehall
- Tuesday 23rd June, 6.30pm - 8pm T@35 Celebrations - Summer Party, Benugo's, St James's Park Café
- Saturday 4th July, 2pm: 'Caring for the Poor on Thorney Island' - walk with Michael Marriot
- Tuesday 14th July, 2pm: The InCREDIBLE RHS Collections, Lindley Library, 80 Vincent Sq
- Tuesday 21st July, 6.30pm: 'St James's Park - A History through Trees' - talk by Greg Packham, in the Archives
- Tuesday 8th September, 10.15am: Shepherd's Bindery & Antiquarian Books Talk, 76 Rochester Row
- Saturday 19th September, 2pm: 'In celebration of Thorney Island' - walk with Victor Keegan
- Tuesday 29th September, 12 noon: Guards Museum & Band Recital in Guards' Chapel, Birdcage Walk
Bookings to be made directly to us for this visit, NOT via Eventbrite
- Monday 5th October, 7.30pm: T@35 Cocktails and Canapés at The Cinnamon Club, Gt Smith St
- Tuesday 10th November, 6.30pm: AGM and Talk, Blue Orchid Rochester Hotel, Vincent Square
- Monday 7th December, 6.30pm: Christmas Party, Carols & Raffle Draw, Blue Orchid Wellington Hotel

Visit bookings can be made through Eventbrite:

www.Eventbrite.co.uk/o/the-thorney-island-society-10626269821

Or alternatively, please contact us at info@thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk

or 10 Old Pye Street, London, SW1P 2DG

The Thorney Island Society is a voluntary amenity and civic society, which was founded in 1985. It is concerned with the welfare of the physical environment of the area sometimes referred to as 'Westminster Village'. It organises visits, reviews planning applications, and maintains a local archive. There are currently more than 350 members, and we would welcome more. A membership form can be found on our website: www.thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk. Registered Charity No. 1000751

Disclaimer: While The Thorney Island Society is concerned that the views expressed in articles are relevant and honestly held by the contributor, the opinions stated by individuals may not necessarily be held by The Thorney Island Society Executive, which is not in a position to vouch for their accuracy.

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