



**Friends of St. James's
Park and The Green Park**

*Promoting interest and high standards in
planning, design and the environment*

NEWSLETTER

Spring 2015

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14 Great Peter Street
Office-to-Residential conversion.
No contribution to affordable housing on- or off-site.



Eggington House, Buckingham Gate
Office-to-Residential conversion.
No affordable housing on-site.



45 Great Peter Street
Office-to-Residential conversion.
Payment in lieu made for social housing.
None on-site.

www.thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk

@ThorneyIslandSo



Editorial & The Thorney Island Society News

Welcome to the Spring edition of The Thorney Island Society newsletter. Over the Winter our Planning Advisor, Lucy Peck, has commented on a range of planning applications, including the Westminster Abbey lift (see p.5), new cycle paths for The Green Park, and a number of office to residential conversions.

The gradual reduction in office space in this area is a subject of growing concern, for the business tenants having to relocate, the local shops and restaurants with declining lunchtime trade and now, even, Westminster Council, who are implementing measures to redress the balance. New homes should be welcome at a time when London is contending with a major housing shortage, but the apartments now being built in and around the Thorney Island area will, in so many cases, just be locked up and left. The risk of Westminster village becoming a ghost town is exacerbated by the seeming inability

of local or central government to ensure that developers provide affordable and social housing on site. Gradually, we will lose the diversity that makes this a vibrant and exciting place to live, work and visit. Whether, and how, developers' financial contributions are used to fund social housing, is difficult to assess. However, Westminster Council's recent purchase of houses in boroughs bordering London, suggests that it *is* being spent on social housing, albeit in ways that promote a kind of social apartheid.

Still, if all else fails, we'll have bridges and statues! March saw the unveiling of a statue of Gandhi, in Parliament Square, as well as the shortlist of designs for a handy new bridge from Pimlico to Nine Elms. Plans for the more controversial Garden Bridge were approved by Westminster Council in December, despite unanswered questions about cost, access and utility.

Clare Annamalai

Visits and walks update: As you will see on the last page of this newsletter, Pippa Parsons has once again put together a fantastic schedule of visits and walks. In a change to our previous policy, we have decided to open up some of these events to non-members, for a small extra charge. This is to help raise awareness of the Society and encourage new members to join. As a campaigning organisation, our strength and influence lie in the number and variety of members that we can claim to speak for. Whilst members will always get priority booking over non-members, we hope that this move will allow prospective new members to get a taste of the Society before they take the £15 plunge! If you know anyone with an interest in the Thorney Island area, or in London history more generally, then please do make them aware of the new season's programme.

Planning review panel: Volunteers with an architectural or planning background are needed, to form a panel to review important planning applications in our area of Westminster. This will involve viewing the applications on-line, as and when they occur, and deciding on the Society's response. We will also meet twice a year to review the Society's policy. Please email Lucy Peck at lucy.v.peck@gmail.com

Westminster City Council needs to do much more to listen and react to local opinion. At the moment it is caught between being beholden to the developer and being bullied by the developer, in that if the latter does not get their way the Council gets taken to court. The London planning system is of course in tatters, thanks to central government taking a bonfire to planning guidance since 1997, and a misguided belief that 'growth' must be at any cost to the physical environment. The developer is king and councils are completely unaccountable. Public opinion is now routinely ignored and I have seen this in action with the planning committees open to the public; an unhealthily small quorum makes major decisions, and written objections are not taken into account because the developer calls the shots and the Council wants to get its hands on Section 106 monies. For instance, in the recent decision to give the Buckingham Green redevelopment the go-ahead, not one committee member noticed that the new building will completely overwhelm the Grade I Listed Blew coat School. The adjacent 1970s development got the scale right, but all sense of proportion has now been lost, as can be seen in the canyon-like scale of what is going on in Victoria Street next to City Hall, and the positively monstrous scale of the 'Nova' development opposite Victoria station. Talk about Land Securities spawning a monster. This is Westminster not New York!

Blew coat School (1709) on the right;
No. 1 Brewer's Green, Buckingham Gate
(c. 1975-77), on left (not tower). If you
think the 1970s building overpowers its
Queen Anne neighbour, you have seen
nothing yet...



Public and expert conservation opinion is not in favour of demolishing good non-Listed buildings such as Ergon House on Horseferry Road or, just as shocking, the handsome 1929 Art Deco department store at Nos. 69-80 Oxford Street. Of course this is what the developer wants and the Council will invariably oblige, but one by one the character of Westminster is being harmfully eroded and replaced with International Style glass box blandness that can be found anywhere, from Hong Kong to Canary Wharf. It really is time for London boroughs to listen to what Londoners want and not just what the developer expects. And for the prospective Victoria Neighbourhood Forum to have to be 'about enabling development rather than restricting development', as well as being 'in line with council's strategic planning policies' suggests that this will be another control device of local government, rather than an effective foil to it. What is the point of a Neighbourhood Forum and the supposed planning sub-sub-powers that it might possess, if it cannot challenge the Council on a development that it deems unsuitable for the locality?

Oliver Bradbury

<https://www.westminster.gov.uk/information-neighbourhood-planning>



Homelessness & The Royal Parks AGM

At the end of February, the Office for National Statistics published its annual report on the extent of rough sleeping. This confirmed what London, and in particular Westminster residents, already know – that the problem is particularly acute here, and getting worse. It was estimated that in Autumn 2014, the time of the count, London had 742 rough sleepers, and Westminster 265; 36% of London’s rough sleepers, and 10% of those in the country as a whole, were here in Westminster. And while rough sleeping outside London increased by 7% on 2013, in London the increase was 37%.

The most common trigger for rough sleeping is the break-up of a relationship, but homelessness is often a symptom of more chronic problems like mental illness, drug or alcohol dependency or a difficult family background. The road out of rough sleeping can be particularly hard for single people, for whom local authorities have no statutory duty to provide accommodation. Westminster Council has a three year strategy for tackling rough sleeping, while the London Assembly published a report on the issue last Summer. Both focus on the need for well-coordinated support services, on the need to get people off the street as quickly as possible, (ideally before a second night out), and on the importance of preventative measures. The latter are particularly critical in Westminster, where the availability of high-quality homelessness services, and the existence of hotspots like the Cathedral Piazza, can attract rough sleepers from other boroughs.

The Passage, in Victoria, is one of Westminster Council’s partner organisations, and runs a large day centre for homeless and vulnerable people. Every day, outreach teams go out to assist new rough sleepers in moving away from the streets as quickly as possible, and to support more entrenched rough sleepers in making the difficult transition from the street. The charity also runs three homelessness prevention projects:

- An advice service to those who are in housing crisis, but not yet street homeless.
- “Before You Go”, an awareness campaign to tackle the increasing number of people from central and eastern Europe becoming homeless on the streets of the UK.
- “Home for Good”, which provides social support for resettled clients, to develop confidence and independence, and reduce the risk of future homelessness.

Members of the public can report cases of rough sleeping via StreetLink, so that agencies can quickly provide the support that’s needed: www.streetlink.co.uk or 0300 500 0914

Royal Parks AGM: The Royal Parks are on target to increase income by £1m this year, thanks to the success of ventures like Winter Wonderland, according to Linda Lennon, Chief Executive. She told the AGM of Friends of Hyde Park in March that their £13.3m government grant was being reduced by £1m and the Parks had to generate income to meet 69% of annual costs of around £35m. At the end of the AGM members were treated to a talk by John Curtis, the American businessman who has purchased the heavily loss-making Ventnor Botanic Garden on the Isle of Wight, and is now transforming it. He claims the frost-free gardens are the highest in the country, and enjoy a temperature five degrees higher than elsewhere.

Victor Keegan

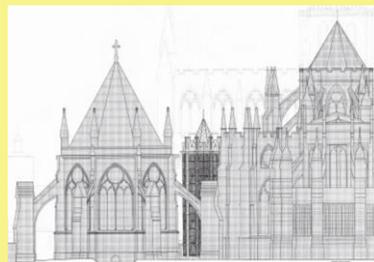
There has been a great deal in the press recently about the dramatic changes taking place in London, most of which affect our area of Westminster very directly. The most conspicuous change is probably to the skyline, as seen from our area looking out. The view across, up, and down the river is changing rapidly due to the number of very high buildings under construction or recently constructed, and it is reckoned that there are over two hundred in the pipeline, that have already received planning permission. Westminster has its own tall buildings (for instance Millbank Tower and Portland House in our area) but there is resistance to this new breed of super-tall blocks. Rosemarie MacQueen (until recently head of the Westminster City Council planning department) and Councillor Robert Davis (WCC Cabinet Member for the Built Environment) are both signatories to the Skyline Campaign (<http://www.skylinecampaign.org/skyline-statement.html>); we can only hope that this reflects future policy for Westminster.

The problem of office buildings being converted to, or rebuilt for, residential use, has been mentioned in previous Newsletters. The Council are increasingly worried by this and have proposed new policies, which are well argued and are designed to encourage the retention of buildings or sites in office use. For instance they are proposing that under the new Community Infrastructure Levy, which attempts to make the Section 106 agreements negotiated with developers less arbitrary, developers in our area will be charged £550 per square metre for residential, £250 for offices and £200 for hotels and retail. Through policy outlined in their Booklet 18, *Mixed Use and Office to Residential Conversion*, they are attempting to manipulate the market so that more offices are retained. Whether, when the decision is made, they will be able to resist the very rewarding financial benefits that accrue from luxury housing developments remains to be seen.

This massive residential development would be more palatable if it came with a meaningful increase in affordable or, better still, social housing. But the developers, with their teams of planning advisors, seem able to persuade the Council that desirable outcomes like on-site affordable housing are financially unviable, and instead make a sometimes modest payment 'in lieu'. Thus we gain more and more blocks of flats to be used as 'safe deposit boxes' by foreign owners, while those who wish to live here – using the shops, eating in the cafes, enjoying the theatres – are completely priced out.

Lucy Peck

Abbey lift building: The most interesting recent planning application in our area was for a new staircase and lift in the angle between Westminster Abbey and the Chapter House, to give access to a new exhibition space in the Triforium. The architects, Ptolemy Dean, showed the scheme to members of our Society recently, and the scheme met with much acclaim. It has now been granted planning permission and looks as if it will be an exciting and beautiful addition to the Abbey buildings.

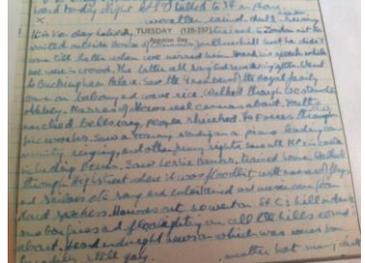


VE Day remembered & A musical tour of the Abbey

“My mother liked to be where the action was”, explains *Rosemary Fitch*. So on 8th May 1945, she and Rosemary jumped on a train from their home in Guildford, and came up to London to join the celebrations. Rosemary, whom many readers will know as a linchpin of The Thorney Island Society committee, was kind enough to share with us her lively diary entry for that day, 70 years ago.

8 May

It is VE Day holiday. Trained to London with Ma. Waited outside House of Commons for Churchill but he didn't come until later when we missed him. Heard his speech while were in the crowd. The crowd all sang God Save the King after. Went to Buckingham Palace and saw the 4 members of the Royal Family come on balcony and wave. Nice. Walked through Westminster Abbey. Masses of newsreel cameras about. Youths marched, bells rang, people shrieked. The Forces threw fireworks. Saw a tommy standing on a piano leading community singing and other funny sights. Saw all MPs in cars, including Bevin. Saw Leslie Banks. Trained home. Walked through [Guildford] High Street where it was floodlit, with masses of flags, and sailors, etc. sang and entertained and music came from loudspeakers. Went on St. Catherine's Hill in dark, saw bonfires and floodlighting on all the hills round about. Heard midnight news which was noises from Piccadilly, still gay.



© Daily Mail

Purcell tour: Assembled in the Cloisters, we began our tour with The Purcell Singers, a group of former choristers. We entered Westminster Abbey, which is normally closed at this time, through a side door and were struck by the quiet, beautiful enormity of the building. Starting in The Nave, we were told the story of the Abbey from its early days. We sat and stood at various points as we moved around; the quire stalls, the Cosmati pavement (complete with replica lino!), St Edward the Confessor's shrine, King Henry VII's Chapel and Poets Corner. In addition to well-delivered history and stories, we were treated to abridged works by Rachmaninoff, Palestrina, Purcell, Mendelssohn, and Gilbert & Sullivan. We finished back in The Nave to listen to one last piece of choir music around the Tomb of the Unknown Warrior, and then we heard the tumultuous 7000 pipe organ! It was a sublime experience, and we are all very grateful to Pippa Parsons for quietly sitting on the waiting list for two years, and for hosting drinks before the tour.

Juliet Shellbear

Pippa Parsons has arranged some fascinating visits for the rest of 2015. These are listed on page 8, and on www.thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk

Bee Collective is a small charity based in Victoria and headed by ecologist and Conservation officer, Caroline Birchell. I met Caroline at the charity's tiny, quirky workshop, which is incongruously located just beyond the plush reception area of a building owned by Grosvenor Estates.

Bee Collective exists to serve to the growing number of beekeepers in London, who often have no facilities for processing their own honey. Bee Collective takes the frames, extracts the honey, decants it into jars and labels it with the beekeeper's own label. In return, the charity takes a small cut in the form of honey, which it then sells on. The proceeds from this sale go towards projects aimed at improving the urban environment for bees, and particularly the forage available to them. 'Simple and repetitive' honey processing tasks are done by volunteers, who often describe it as therapeutic and almost meditative. They come individually or in groups, and it has even been used for informal workplace team-building. Bee Collective recently received a grant to support short-term and occasional volunteering by Londoners. This will pay for a second extraction machine, and will allow volunteers to process wax and make candles and lip balms through the winter. In 2013 they supported 12 beekeepers to process 140kg of honey. In 2014 this rose to 27 beekeepers and 420kg of honey. With 2 extractors they will be able to do even more.

Beekeeping is Victoria's new corporate hobby. Hives can be found on the roof of Grosvenor Estates in Belgravia, as well as Westminster Cathedral, John Lewis head office and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Beekeepers from these organisations were trained by Victoria BID, and will generally check their hives weekly during the March to October period, to ensure the bees have enough food and space, that the queen is well, and there is no disease. Caroline explains that "good beekeeping is about swarm control. Swarming is a natural reproductive act that can be triggered by inadequate space or food, or a damaged queen, but as a beekeeper your aim is to keep the bees at home!"

Along with the RSPB and other conservation organisations, Bee Collective is working on "Making a B-Line for London", which aims to create a corridor, running roughly north to south through London, in which businesses, land owners, councils and homeowners will work to increase pollinator habitats and links to existing pollinator hotspots. The B-Line runs along the eastern side of the borough of Westminster, just skimming the Thorney Island area, but there is still plenty that local residents can do to help:

- Volunteer to process honey, either individually or with friends.

Contact: caroline@bee-collective.co.uk

- In gardens, garden squares and window boxes, plant food for pollinators, and try to ensure that forage is available all through the summer season.
- Try to leave a small area of grass uncut.





Other information & Diary dates

Diary dates 2015

- 7th May:** Corridors of Power, Westminster & Whitehall walk (with wine) (M)
12th May: Bunhill Fields Burial Ground; Honourable Artillery Company open day (with barbecue)
13th May: Battersea Dogs and Cats Home
19th May: Wellington Arch
30th May: The Major General's Review
4th Jun: Apsley House
10th Jun: City of Westminster Archives (with tea) (M)
24th Jun: Chelsea College of Art & Design and Summer Degree Exhibition
9th Jul: Metropolitan Police Stables
14th Jul: The Lindley Library
15th Jul: The Thorney Island Society Summer Party
12th Aug: Westminster School (M)
18th Aug: Old Westminster at War, walk (with wine) (M)
2nd Sep: St James's Park Walk
8th Sep: Parliamentary Archives, Victoria Tower (M)
18th Nov: The Thorney Island Society AGM

To book visits, contact pippa.parsons@yahoo.co.uk
Certain visits are open to non-members as well as members.
Those which are exclusively for members and their guests are marked (M).



The Thorney Island Society is a voluntary amenity and civic society which came into being in 1985. It is concerned with the welfare of the physical environment of a widening area, sometimes referred to as the 'Westminster Village'. It organises visits and dinners, reviews planning applications and maintains a local archive. There are currently more than 400 members, and we would welcome even 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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If you would like to comment on this newsletter, or to propose a story for the next edition, please contact the Editor: clare_annamalai@hotmail.com or @ClareAnnamalai
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