THE THORNEY ISLAND SOCIETY

Friends of St James's Park and The Green Park

Sharing and protecting the heritage of old Westminster village

NEWSLETTER

Autumn/Winter 2025

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Clockwise from top:
The Smith Square entrance to Nobel House;
The Blue Bridge in St James's Park, to be replaced by the QEII memorial;
TTIS Archives and visitors to the Open House Festival;
The Abbey seen above the 1 Victoria Street building site.

In our **40th anniversary year** it is a delight to share our newsletter with you. The Committee continues to focus on the core pillars of the Society and ensure that it both meets and exceeds the objectives we all endorse. In this 40th year, we are especially grateful to everyone who has played a part in making The Thorney Island Society such a success. Thanks go to both past and present members, especially those who have been active on the committee or through events over the years.

As this is such a special year, we are delighted by the amount of extra events that were put in place. The Events team, led by **Hari Kitching,** has set a new bar! This edition includes photos from our 40th Anniversary summer party, as both a permanent reminder of such a successful event, but also as a demonstration of how The Thorney Island Society has captured the hearts of those who live and work in the area and continue to support it.

Since our last newsletter we have campaigned on a number of issues. As members will be aware, the Holocaust Memorial and Learning Centre in Victoria Tower Gardens remains a constant, and we are so grateful to all members' support for the Save Victoria Tower Gardens Campaign.

We continue to focus on the Post Offices and the changes proposed, and we have flagged the latest opportunities for members to have their say on Post Offices in our recent e-newsletter.

We are pleased to see that the Public Spaces Protection Order is nearly in place in the Victoria area, which looks set to be extended across the full amenity area. Correspondence from residents has clearly demonstrated the emotion with which many are seeing the ever-changing landscape across the area and the challenges it brings.

The Cabinet Office has recently notified us that the proposals for the **Queen Elizabeth II Memorial** in St James's Park will now move to the local planning application and consultation stages. As a recognised amenity society for the area, we will continue to be involved in this process.

For the first time in many years we will also undertake a high-profile **membership drive** across the area to attract new members, which will be followed by a series of action days in the coming six months. If you would like to get involved, please do get in touch.

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the upcoming Referendum on the **Victoria Neighbourhood Plan**. As Vice-Chair of the Forum I, along with others, have been working on this Plan for the last four years. It establishes a long term vision for Victoria and contains policies that will direct planning decisions into the future. It includes topics ranging from Conservation Areas to street lighting, the greening of Victoria Street, anti-social behaviour, empty buildings and homelessness. The adoption of the plan would also bring an increase in the Community Infrastructure Levy awarded to our area.

The plan can be found at
www.yourvictoria.co.uk
where details (including the date) of the Referendum will be published once finalised.

Can you help the Society? Would you like to get more involved?

We are an active society, much of which you will see through our events; however, a lot of work goes on behind the scenes which needs your support. Our committee members enjoy working to ensure the Society continues to function and grow - if you would like to get involved and become part of the team please contact the Chair, Glenn Murphy via chair@thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk.

We are currently primarily seeking those who can support the following activities:

Events co-ordination leadership
Events co-ordination support
Planning oversight/review
Treasurer support and/or leadership
IT support
General administration/project support

It may be that you have other skills that could benefit the Society. If so, please feel free to contact the Chair directly so that it can be discussed further.

In Memoriam: Anthony Harrow
1939-2025

Anthony, who sadly died in April this year, served as an efficient Membership Secretary for The Thorney Island Society before and during the 2010s. This was one of many charities he supported from his home in Cranleigh in Surrey, following many years as an administrator in Universities and Libraries.

Victoria Street must be one of the most boring streets in Central London, lined as it is with standard-issue office blocks, currently being replaced by a new generation of standard-issue office blocks. We have recently seen the west end of the street 'smartened up' with the zig-zag building and others, either side of City Hall, the lone survivor from the first round. These new buildings entailed the replacement of a useful row of local shops by less useful ones. At the east end of the street, No. 1 Victoria Street is being demolished and we are temporarily enjoying a lovely view of the Abbey revealed over the scaffolding. Once the building work starts the view will quickly disappear, such is the speed of office construction nowadays. Opposite, the developers of 10-20 Victoria Street are consulting on a replacement building. The images so far revealed indicate that the proposed office block will be very like the zig-zag building. Vic Keegan has researched the history of this site and has made an interesting suggestion on the next page.

Elsewhere, in **Smith Square**, there is concern about a 650-room hotel development within the ex-office building, Nobel House. Neighbouring residents fear that the number of visitors coming and going with their wheely suitcases will spoil the tranquillity of this mainly Georgian neighbourhood, which is already suffering from the reconstruction of 7 Millbank and an increase in traffic caused by the change in the junction at Lambeth Bridge and Millbank. Amid all this, St John's, now renamed 'Smith Square Hall' and housing 'Sinfonia Smith Square', is raising money to fund urgent restoration and enhancement of the venue, for both audience and performers. This fine building has been eclipsed in recent years by new concert halls, and they are seeking financial support to bring it up to modern standards of comfort. Do visit their website: www.sinfoniasmithsq.org.uk.

On the residential front there are several schemes taking advantage of the presumption in favour of extending buildings vertically by two floors. In **Chadwick Street** the application was refused because of the lack of affordable units. Nearby, a relatively modest scheme is proposed for Romney House in **Marsham Street** and another, so far less developed, scheme is under discussion for **Monck Street**.

On a brighter note, **Tate Britain** has put in an application for a very interesting new garden either side of the Main Entrance, which will enhance visits for everyone (see image below).

This was the Westminster Palace Hotel at the start of Victoria Street, by the junction with Tothill Street. When it was built in 1860 it was a luxury hotel with the country's **first hydraulic lifts**. Almost immediately the Government took over 140 rooms to house the newly created India Office, which meant that the Indian Empire was ruled from this hotel for a time.

Today most of the block, from Dean Farrar Street to the Iranian owned building at the start of Victoria Street, is covered by offices in the throes of redevelopment, but during the centuries before the construction of Victoria Street, was better known for earlier uses, such as the Abbey's **almonry**, which distributed alms to the poor. We also know that, towards the Abbey end of this development, William Caxton set up the country's **first printing press** in 1476. In his 1868 *Curiosities of London*, John Timbs said that Caxton's house was "immediately adjoining the spot now occupied by the principal entrance to the Westminster Palace Hotel" - in other words in the middle of the picture above.

There is still some doubt about this because the exact location of the two main tenements that Caxton leased are not specified in contemporary documents, but his printing works was undoubtedly somewhere under where the hotel used to be. It is known that the Westminster Palace Hotel installed a statue of Caxton to remind itself of its heritage. No-one knows what happened to it subsequently. Westminster Council or the developers could do worse than commission a new one in honour of one of its most influential sons.

On a bright spring morning earlier this year, the quiet communal courtyard between the **Landseer** and **Leighton** blocks of the historic Millbank Estate stirred to life. Built between 1897 and 1902 on the site of the former Millbank Prison, the estate is a striking example of late-Victorian social housing, designed to provide light, air, and dignity to working families. Its red-brick façades, brick paver walkways, and Arts and Crafts detailing make it a Grade II-listed gem, cherished for both its architecture and its sense of community.

Residents, volunteers, and expert gardeners from **The Royal Parks** gathered with shovels and compost, working shoulder-to-shoulder to nurture a much-loved communal space. By day's end, more than 200 shrubs, herbs, and perennials had been planted, worn-out pots were swept away, and smart new planters replaced them - breathing fresh cohesion and warmth into the courtyard.

This transformation was made possible thanks to a grant from the **Westminster Greening Fund**, part of the annual *Greening Westminster* programme[1]. Designed to boost green infrastructure and public open spaces across the borough, Greening Westminster is rooted in a vision of equitable access to high-quality green spaces - spaces that improve both environment and well-being.

1. www.westminster.gov.uk/place-shaping/greening-westminster

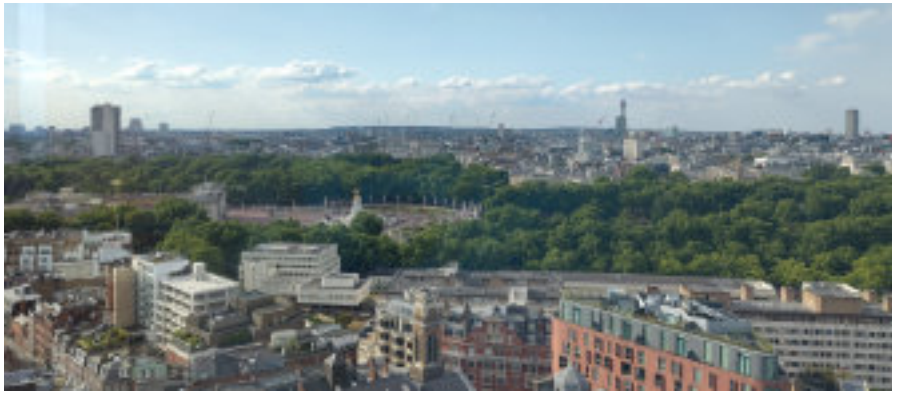
Grassroots groups, resident associations, schools, and business improvement districts can all apply, with support and guidance offered through the process.

The planting day was not only a community effort but also a rare chance to benefit from top horticultural expertise. The team from the Royal Parks included none other than the **Head Gardener of Richmond Park**, who, alongside his colleagues, gave up his time to advise residents, lead planting, and share specialist knowledge. Their contribution went beyond advice: the Royal Parks gardeners rolled up their sleeves to work directly alongside residents and supplied peat-free compost, a gesture of generous collaboration that residents acknowledged with thanks to **Andrew Scattergood (CEO)** and **Matthew Pottage (Head of Horticulture and Landscape Strategy)** of the Royal Parks.

Being in Westminster's Vincent Square Ward - officially recognised as nature-deficient - this courtyard greening was more than an aesthetic upgrade. It aimed to restore biodiversity, bring pollinators back to the estate, and promote climate resilience in an urban setting. The choice of pollinator-friendly, hardy plants means the space will support wildlife while standing up to the challenges of climate change.

For those living here, the impact has been immediate - the courtyard is now a sanctuary with a renewed sense of pride. More than just a garden, this rejuvenated space is a symbol of collaboration and optimism: proof that even in central London, historic courtyards can bloom again when neighbours and institutions come together!

The Royal Parks team (opposite) and the results (above)



We held our 40th anniversary party on 1 July, in the **Lord Mayor's Parlour.** It was a very convivial evening: as well as the pleasure of enjoying the stupendous views of London, we had the pleasure of listening to a string trio from Sinfonia Smith Square and enjoying good food and drink. The Lord Mayor himself attended and enjoyed handing over the files he had preserved from his part in the successful campaign to save the Library in Great Smith Street (see photo above right) - the campaign that launched our Society.

Photos by Agapi Fylaktou and Sir Peter Bottomley

What's in a name?

In recent issues of the Newsletter, Lucy Peck has sparked the interest of members by exploring the background of street names in the Thorney Island area. Among the many streets that have been renamed, a few were identified where the names may have been changed to escape their association with dubious local reputations.

Not so for Monck Street, at the north end known in the eighteenth century as **Whetster's** or **Whister's Ground**, probably after its owner, a local businessman: what we might now call a property developer. The Ground was the site of a market garden, poplar trees and a tea garden. When the south end was extended to Horseferry Road in the nineteenth century, the extension was named **Holland Street** after a rector of the parish. The parish Vestry owned land in Holland Street and, when the parishes of St Margaret's Westminster and St John's Smith Square became part of the County of London in 1889, the whole thoroughfare was renamed Monck Street at the request of the Past Overseers' Society in memory of one of their members, Henry Monck.

The Past Overseers' Society originated as a group of former Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor for the parish of St Margaret's, Westminster. Monck, a Barber-Surgeon of Boreman's Court (now the site of the Treasury) was chair of the Society in 1713, when he presented a horn tobacco box, purchased for four pence at the Charlton Horn Fair in Plumstead. The box (filled with tobacco) was for the use of members at their meetings. In 1720, the year of Monck's death, the original box was in need of repair. The then Overseers repaired it by adding a silver rim on the lid with an inscription recording Monck's gift for posterity.

A tradition was established of adding further engraved inscriptions to Monck's tobacco box. At regular intervals, new objects were commissioned or donated. Some were designed so that the older ones sat within the new ones like a Russian doll. Contemporary events – of parochial, national, or international importance – were commemorated on each new embellishment. At the end of the nineteenth century, an article entitled **'The Biggest Tobacco-Box in the World'** was published in the *Strand Magazine*, describing the ceremony surrounding the box at a time when its international significance was being recognised.

In 2013 the Past Overseers' Society celebrated the box's tricentennial. The full collection of tobacco boxes, dating from the original horn box donated in 1713, is today displayed on the 19th floor of the offices of Westminster City Council in Victoria Street (see below).

The silver collection, reproduced by kind permission of The Past Overseers' Society

What's behind a name?

Just a century after Henry Monck's gift launched the tobacco box tradition, and before its renaming, a momentous event transfigured Monck Street, thereby determining its dubious reputation for generations to come.

In 1812 the Prince Regent on behalf of King George III granted a charter for twenty-one years to the **Gas Light and Coke Company** to supply gas in the Cities of London and Westminster, the Borough of Southwark and the adjacent precincts and suburbs. The first operational public gasworks in the world, concerned chiefly with the production of gas for lighting purposes, was sited within what is today the rectangle bordered by Monck, Great Peter and Marsham Streets, and Horseferry Road. Gas was produced by extracting it from coal, which had to be transferred from river barges to the gasworks by horse and cart; waste was removed in the same way.

On Christmas Day in 1814, despite resistance from local lamplighters, the general lighting of London with coal gas began. At one time, over 20 gasholders existed on the site, spilling over to the west of Monck Street. With the opening of the Beckton gasworks in 1870 and the amalgamation of several other London companies by Greater London City Council, Westminster gasworks was first reduced to peak load only status. The reorganisation of the mains and distribution systems led to final closure in 1875. When the site was cleared in 1883, two new gasholders were built on the block. They continued to mark the skyline until they were demolished in 1937, leaving two deep circular pits.

More than two centuries after the first gas lights came to Westminster, 270 of the capital's 1,300 surviving gas lamps are today located in Westminster. But traffic in Monck Street is being severely disrupted while the pipes that carried gas around London and beyond are being replaced.

Artist's impression by MacDonald Gill, reproduced by kind permission of Westminster Archives

In addition to its role in the renaming of Monck Street, the Vestry influenced the development of the area in later years. Having purchased a plot of land on the south-western side of what was then Holland Street before its renaming, in 1894 the Vestry

erected a depot containing horses, stables and a theatre.

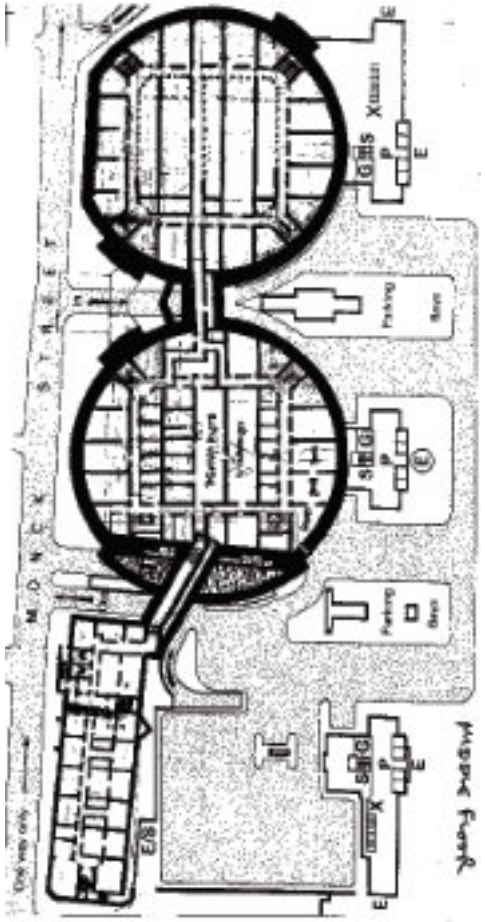
More than a century later, after many years of public debate, the Vestry Depot was under consideration as a potential site for the **Westminster Public Library**. Then located in Great Smith Street, this was an early free public library, established in London under the 1850 Public Libraries Act. When it was eventually closed in 1997 the building itself was preserved thanks in part to the efforts of The Thorney Island Society. It is now the Cinnamon Club. Westminster Council turned down a proposal to relocate the library to Monck Street, and also rejected an alternative, a refuge for the homeless. In 1995/96, the Vestry Depot was approved as the site for the first block of residential flats in Monck Street, known today as Vestry Court.

What's beneath a name?

After the demolition of the gasholders in the 1930s, the gas company had made plans for the construction of new headquarters on the site of the former gasworks. But with the outbreak of World War II the government requisitioned the site for the construction of bomb-proof accommodation for the **Air Ministry**.

Each of the two Rotundas consisted of three storeys, with one and a half floors above ground and the same below. In the early 1940s, the cylinders were transformed into a network of underground chambers linked to the Whitehall Cable Tunnels, which is believed to have extended to the Citadel at the south end of Monck Street. The pits of the former gasholders were converted into heavily reinforced underground bunkers, designed to house a series of shelters capable of withstanding nuclear war.

By late 1940, the Rotundas and the Citadel had become the new reserve Cabinet War Rooms, capable of providing alternative government accommodation to what would later be known as the Churchill



Plan of the Rotundas, available by kind permission of Roger Morgan

War Rooms in Whitehall. The extensive underground network of war rooms and communications chambers at the end of the Whitehall Cable Tunnel continued to play an active role in national security during and following the Cold War years.

In the 1980s/90s, the south Rotunda took on a more publicly visible role as the home for the **Civil Service sports and social club** offering cricket nets, a boxing ring, snooker, karate, judo, theatre/cinema, table tennis, rifle range, disco and numerous bars. These facilities remained in use until the 1990s when the decision was taken to redevelop the site.

What's above a name?

Attention was distracted from the underground network of tunnels and chambers below the site of the former gasworks in the 1960s by the construction of the Department of the Environment or the **Marsham Towers**. Initially, the intention had been to remove the Rotundas. Since the complete demolition of the former gasholders proved too costly, the towers were built above them. The design, published in 1963, placed three twenty-storey 200-foot high tower blocks parallel north to south on top of a three-storey podium slab raised on stilts incorporating the Rotundas in the base.

When completed in 1971, the Marsham Towers were proclaimed as the largest single office building project in London (subsequently overtaken by Canary Wharf). They provided 450,000 square feet of office space for 3,600 civil servants. The skyline was disfigured by what the public, press, government ministers and civil servants who worked in them nicknamed 'the three ugly sisters'.

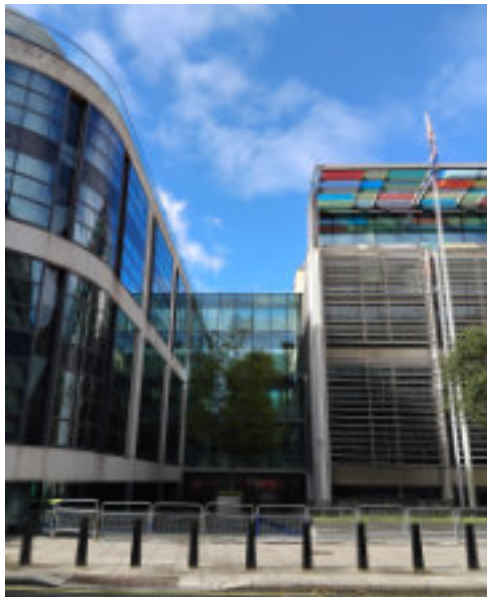
Covert underground activities were pursued beneath Monck Street throughout World War II and the Cold War years, while the Marsham Towers dominated the Westminster skyline. The fortunes of Monck Street, inextricably linked above and below ground level, again came under discussion in the 1990s.

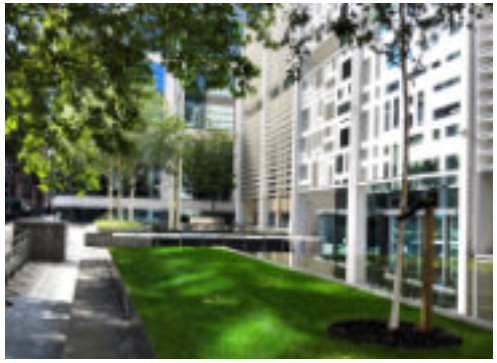
The government of the day decided in early 1992, after only 23 years of use, to demolish the towers to make way for a new complex of government buildings for the Home Office. The remains of the underground chambers were also to be demolished, despite a hard-fought campaign by the then Head of the Civil Service, Robin Butler, to preserve the sports and social club. Unlike the Churchill War Rooms, which had been opened to the public in 1984, no plans were made to give public access to what had been a vital communications hub during the war years and beyond.

By 2005 the Home Office building at 2 Marsham Street and the residential and commercial block the length of Monck Street filled the site in a scheme designed to 'breathe life back into an area which has suffered badly from blight'. Twenty years on, when the residential blocks are again threatened with blight, residents in Monck Street might be excused for asking whether the name of their street should be changed to avoid the risk of it being associated with what is once more fast becoming a dubious local reputation.

Masterplanning and urban design go hand-in-hand. They play an important part in achieving positive outcomes when regenerating or creating spaces and can have an impact on places and people. In the 1990s the Home Office was considering the refurbishment of its London properties, but decided on a new build development on a single site. The 1960s headquarters of the Department of the Environment, on Marsham Street in the City of Westminster, consisted of three 20-storey concrete blocks known as the Marsham Towers, which were considered the UK's ugliest building. Their demolition (2002-2003) made way for the redevelopment of the site. **Terry Farrell & Partners** was the masterplanner as well as the architect commissioned to design the new Home Office Headquarters (2002-2005). The monolithic Marsham Towers were replaced with six smaller blocks. The total gross floor area of one million sq ft was split between 800,000 sq ft office accommodation, and 200,000 sq ft of housing in three seven-storey blocks providing 140 apartments situated behind the Home Office complex.

The Home Office building is comprised of three separate five- to seven-storey office blocks interlinked by bridges between the first and fourth floors. The 800,000 sq ft building provides office space for 3,500 civil servants and 200 employees. It is a Private Finance Initiative Project of £311 million built by the French construction company Bouygues. The hybrid construction utilised was a combination of in-situ and precast concrete structural elements that made it possible to deliver the new building in just two years. Under the bridges, passageways running at right angles to Marsham Street and Monck Street provide permeability. Private but visible pocket parks serve as focal points. Combining an office complex with





public spaces and street frontages makes accessibility possible thus implementing the masterplan's main objective, reinstating the area's historic street pattern near the Palace of Westminster, and reconnecting neighbourhoods that had been separated by the Marsham Towers.

Artworks by British artist **Liam Gillick** (b.1964), such as the screen composed of white aluminium panels arranged in a square above the main entrance of the central block, are incorporated in the building, as well as the glass canopy of coloured acrylic film bonded between layers of glass installed in metal frames on the roof. The central block is set back to create an open public space with formal landscaping and water elements. On the facade fixed polyester powder-coated extruded aluminium louvres control solar gain. The two corner blocks have facades of dark glazing panels framed by narrow bands of limestone. All blocks have atria that allow daylight into the open plan layout, reducing the need for artificial lighting. The building was completed in 2005, achieving BREEAM excellence for sustainability. It also won LEAF (2005), MIPIM (2006) and RIBA (2006) awards.

Terry Farrell, who died recently, was born in England (1938) and is one of the great British architect-planners. In 1965 he entered into a partnership with Nicholas Grimshaw. In 1980 he established Terry Farrell and Partners, now recognised as Farrells, with offices in London, Shanghai and Hong Kong. He has completed many award-winning buildings and masterplans in the UK and abroad. In addition to the Home Office Headquarters, in London these include the MI6 Headquarters, Charing Cross Station, and masterplans such as the Paddington Basin and the Greenwich Peninsula. Terry Farrell received a CBE in 1996, was knighted in 2001, and in 2017 he was awarded the Royal Town Planning Institute's Gold Medal in recognition of his outstanding achievements as one of the world's most influential architects, planners and urban designers.

All photos © Agapi Fylaktou

Tue 23rd Sep, 3 pm	Visit – The Muniments Room and Library Westminster Abbey, Deans Yd, SW1P 3PA
Wed 1st Oct, 6:30 pm	Talk - Historic Street Name Plates – Thorney Island and Beyond The Onion Garden, Seaforth Place, SW1E 6AB
Sat 4th Oct, 10:30 am	"Threads of Elegance" Conservation Workshop Westminster City Archives, 10 St Ann's Street, SW1P 2DF
Sat 4th Oct, 11:00 am	Talk - The Lone Skyscraper by Vincent Square, Hide Tower, Regency Street, SW1P 4AA
Tue 7th Oct, 2:00 pm	Silver Sunday Talk at The Cinnamon Club, The Old Westminster Library, 30–32 Great Smith Street, SW1P 3BU
Sat 11th Oct 10am - 1pm	Drop in Session at TTIS Archives, 10 Old Pye Street, SW1P 2DG
Sat 25th Oct, 2:00 pm	Talk - A Journey Through Tate Britain's History, Tate Britain, Millbank, SW1P 4RG
Tue 4th Nov, 6:30 pm	The Thorney Island Society's 39th AGM and Talk by Dr Jane Sidell, 55 Broadway, SW1H 0BB
Sat 8th Nov 10am - 1pm	Drop in Session at TTIS Archives, 10 Old Pye Street, SW1P 2DG
Wed 12th Nov, 2:00 pm	Visit- Dress Codes Exhibition, Kensington Palace, W8 4PX
Thur 13th Nov, 6:30pm – 8:30pm	Talk – The Story of the Henry Monck Tobacco Box and the Silver Collection, City Hall, 64 Victoria Street, SW1E 6QP
Thu 20th Nov, 10:30 am	"Threads of Elegance" Conservation Workshop Westminster City Archives, 10 St Ann's Street, SW1P 2DF
Fri 21st Nov, 6:30 pm	Talk - Grey Coats at War: Schoolgirls and Alumnae in the 1940s The Grey Coat Hospital, Greycoat Place, SW1P 2DY
Tue 2nd Dec, 6.30 pm	TTIS Christmas Party The Wellington Hotel by Blue Orchid, 71 Vincent Square, SW1P 2PA
Thur 4th Dec 3pm - 5pm	Talk - William Sancho – Life, Work, and Influence on Thorney Island, Houses of Parliament, SW1A 0AA

Bookings and registration can be made through Eventbrite: *https://tinyurl.com/eventbrite-TTIS*
Or please contact us at *events@thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk /* 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 v i llage'. It organises talks, visits and social events. It reviews planning applications and maintains a local archive. There are currently nearly 400 members, and we would welcome more. A membership form can be found on our website: thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk. Registered Charity No. 1000751

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this newsletter and at the Society's events are those of the writers and speakers and do not necessarily reflect the stance of The Thorney Island Society.

To comment on this Newsletter or propose a story for the next edition: info@thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk. For more regular updates, follow us on X @ThorneyIslandSo and on Instagram @thethorneyislandsociety