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 2026

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Right: A programme from the Porcullis Theatre, discovered in the Thorney Island Society Archives (see p. 6-7)
Below: The well-known Regency Café, with the decrepit extension for which the owners are seeking planning permission (see p.5)

It is always a delight to share our newsletter with you. As a Society, we successfully bring social events, historical talks, campaigning, and preservation of our area all under one umbrella, to celebrate the best that the historical heart of Westminster has to offer. We are only as strong as our members, and I'd like to start by thanking you all for your continued support.

Our New Look Archives

I am delighted to follow up the last update on our Archives refurbishment, highlighting the excellent work undertaken to reinvigorate the Archives. This was led by committee member Julia Stepanian. We have added additional features since then, such as improved seating, picture rails and book categorisation, diligently delivered by many members of the committee. Julia played the lead role, supported by many members of the committee. We have also introduced a members' book loan scheme for those undertaking research. For further details please ask any committee member.

Events don't get better than a Downing Street visit

I was delighted to join two other members of the Society to visit 10 Downing Street. This kind opportunity arose through the goodwill and appreciation of Rachel Blake MP, the local Member of Parliament for the Cities of London and Westminster. Unfortunately, only a very few members were able to attend following a very short notice invitation - such an opportunity does not arise very often for an MP to provide such special access, and I was delighted that Rachel Blake reached out to The Thorney Island Society in the first instance. The occasion was an absolute delight for all who were able to attend on the day.

Campaigning and Advocacy

Since our last newsletter, we have remained active on several fronts. We were delighted to respond vigorously to the planning application for Nobel House. Planning committee members supported our position and the application was declined. We supported the planning application for the Queen Elizabeth II Memorial in St James's Park and were delighted that the planning committee accepted our views. The proposed Holocaust Memorial Learning Centre in Victoria Tower Gardens is currently under consideration with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. We have submitted a robust planning application response to the Environmental Statement and other areas. We have also publicly called for the inquiry to be reopened and to be held in an open and transparent manner. We continue to monitor the impact of anti-social behaviour on Victoria Street and support the implementation of the Public Spaces Protection Order. We are keen for more robustness to be evident in enforcement too. Page 4 has an update on our ongoing focus on Strutton Ground. We are active in many other areas, sometimes too numerous to mention. Please do keep an eye on the website and also the newsletters for additional information on key issues.

Join Our Team: Call for Volunteers

To build on our momentum, we are looking to add further support to our vibrant committee. We have open opportunities for members who would like to play a more active role in the Society:

Events Support: This role is invaluable to help ensure we continue to provide well-organised events for our members. We welcome those who want to find their feet in this area, as well as those who may already be well versed in planning events, such as our successful summer party, shown below.

Talks and Submissions: We are looking for individuals to help run our historical talks or contribute to the excellent submissions found in our newsletter.

Twice-yearly Newsletter and regular e-newsletter preparation.

Planning and Administration: Those interested in planning matters, administrative support, or website administration are also very welcome to get in touch.

If you have an interest in getting involved, please feel free to contact me: chair@thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk.

Photo © Agapi Fylaktou

A Positive Step Forward for Strutton Ground
by Glenn Murphy

Strutton Ground has always been a vital location in our neighbourhood, bridging the bustling commercial energy of Victoria Street and our cherished residential communities. Historically it was near the heart of The Devil's Acre, famously chronicled by Charles Dickens. Our community has worked tirelessly over the decades to evolve this space into a vibrant, mixed-use haven.

Following the proud milestone of our society's fortieth anniversary, it is wonderful to reflect on our continued legacy of protecting local heritage and, following on from our last article, I am pleased to share a highly encouraging update regarding the recent Westminster City Council marketplace consultation. In August we submitted a comprehensive response on your behalf, advocating for a visionary, long-term approach rather than short-term tactical fixes. Building upon the foundational principles of the Victoria Neighbourhood Plan, we are supporting but also acting as a critical friend to the council's proposed Differentiated Market Network Model. This innovative framework aims to carefully curate the market, transitioning from a hot-food dominated weekday rush to include a Saturday Discovery Market featuring fresh produce, artisan makers, crafts, and floristry. It will need your help to make it a success and to move away from the heavy hot food bias, so please shop local when it lands!

We are also pushing for robust, enforceable environmental protections to resolve the daily grease spills and waste issues that have unfortunately stained our beautiful York Stone footways. To ensure our streets remain usable, safe, and uncluttered, we have requested strict 2.55-metre height restrictions for trader vehicles and physical forecourt enclosures to vastly improve natural light and evening safety. Furthermore, we are championing vital infrastructure upgrades, including feature lighting, expanded CCTV coverage, and a much-needed transition to electric power to replace hazardous gas cylinders. We also would love to see a Digital Heritage Trail to attract visitors beyond the lunch rush, celebrating our area's unique character and inviting people to halt and explore.

These expected outcomes reflect a careful balance of conservation and commercial viability. However, the journey does not end here, and we must ensure the historical challenges of the past remain firmly in the history books. It is vital that you continue to make your voices heard. Please share your views on these proposals and let us know what other civic or environmental improvements you would like to see in our neighbourhood. Together, we will push for the best outcomes. We will continue to focus on Strutton Ground in the next newsletter.

Above: Strutton Ground in the afternoon, after the market has left
Right: The hot food market in full swing

Planning and Nobel House

THE THORNEY ISLAND SOCIETY

There have been few new applications of interest since our last newsletter. A small development, but one that produced considerable local feeling, is the application by the **Regency Café** to turn the scruffy building behind the café, fronting on to Page Street, into a takeaway which would be open long after the café closes. We objected on the basis of the proposed late closing hours, which would disturb the many local residents.

Mentioned in the Spring Newsletter was the recent planning application involving the conversion of **Nobel House** from an office building to a hotel. This is a building facing onto Smith Square as well as Millbank and it was controversial because it would have had over 600 rooms, many of which were the apparently popular space-saving 'cocoons' or pods, with a bed and shower plus the facility to eliminate all sound and light from the tiny rooms. Some of them saved even more space by having double bunk beds – a few sleeping eight people in each room! There was great concern among local residents that the hotel clients would be young back-packers and the surrounding streets would be used for consuming takeaway meals and generally hanging about. There might be some truth in this idea and anxiety was to some extent alleviated by the plan to make the guests use the Millbank entrance, with the Smith Square entrance reserved for staff. Although the danger had receded with the refusal of planning permission by the Council it is now known that the developers have appealed, having left it till the last possible moment.

Nobel House was part of a vast complex of offices built on Millbank in the late 1920s to house the headquarters of Imperial Chemical Industries (ICI). In 1987 the building was divided to create Norwest House, which became ultra-luxury flats, prosaically re-named '9 Millbank' and Nobel House, a comparatively narrow-fronted building stretching back to the decorative façade on Smith Square. There are two atria within, formerly providing daylight to offices within the deep plot, but making the building inappropriate for modern office use. Thames House, on the other side of Horseferry Road is even bigger - will this face similar planning problems if MI5 decided to move out?

Thames House and 9 Millbank

One of the options under consideration by the Council for relocating the Great Smith Street Westminster Public Library and neighbouring Community Centre (former Baths and Wash House) in the 1980s was to develop a new leisure complex in Monck Street. Land Securities proposed to relocate the Library to the site of the 'redundant' Vestry Depôt originally erected in 1894, shortly after the Great Smith Street Library. The *Westminster & Pimlico News* reported in February 1986 that the Council was organising exhibitions at the Library and Community Centre displaying a relocation proposal. The journalist described Monck Street as 'an ideal site for the new complex', replacing both 'the derelict baths and laundry' and the Library, which was deemed to be 'too old and cramped' to provide the services required. In addition to the 'leisure development', the plan was to provide thirty one-bedroom flats for elderly people with their own communal facilities and warden's flat.

The Council abandoned the proposal, meaning that Monck Street narrowly missed not only becoming the location of the public library, but also the opportunity to become a cultural centre with its own theatre. The materials in The Thorney Island Society's filing cabinets reveal both the intense debates about the future of the public library and of the Vestry Depôt.

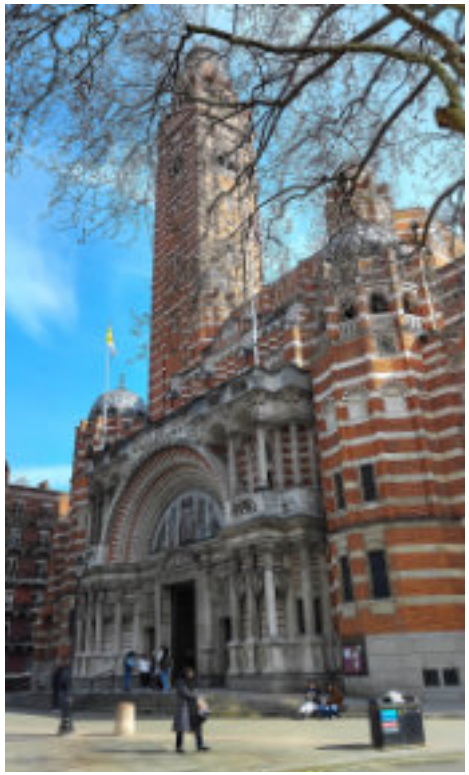
A document in the filing cabinet, annotated by Society co-founder June Stubbs in her own inimitable handwriting in blue ink, recounts the story of the 'Horse Master's House, Stabling Yard and Portcullis Theatre, Monck Street, S.W.1'. The accompanying images are from a collection of photographs taken by David Trace in 1984, now held at both the Society's archives and Westminster City Archives. Stubbs's report also tells us that, in c.1984–85:

> The later theatre has the Portcullis crest and was in regular and very popular use. It is recalled that Diana Dors was a regular performer. Tickets were 3d. in 1952. In 1962 tickets were 2/6 and 3/6 when the Westminster City Council's Officers' Club and the Westminster Players were active. Finally the Abbey Community Players held productions there, and there is also a programme of 1972 in the Westminster Archives.

Three programmes were found in our Westminster Theatre Collection. One of them bears the Portcullis crest which has not been spotted elsewhere (see cover).

In her footnote, Stubbs mentions attempts by the Society to re-site two inscriptions from the Depôt when it was replaced by the Vestry Court residential development. She found one inscription and 'a piece of carving' in the garden. The foundation stone and two of the carved supporting stones from the horses' trough have recently been rediscovered.

Above: Monck Street stables, with the DoE (Ugly Sister) behind it
Far left: The rather grim entrance to the Portcullis Theatre
Left: The Theatre interior
Right: The recently discovered Foundation Stone

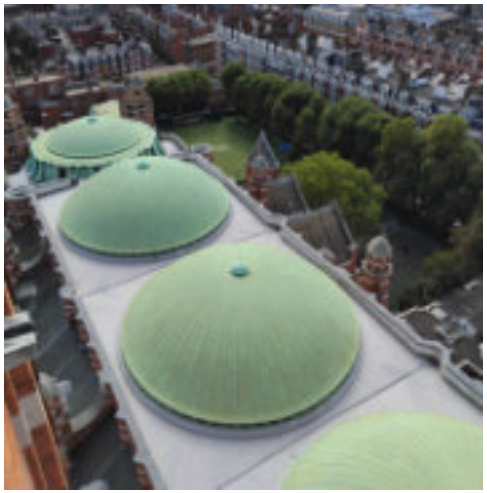


Sacred architecture and art aim to express reverence and connect with the divine. Ecclesiastical buildings combine structural elements such as domes and works of art such as mosaics, reflecting the relationship between spirituality and design. From ancient Greek and Roman temples to the Byzantine style of Eastern Orthodox churches, sacred architecture and art developed over time through creative innovations and religious traditions. Following the Edict of Milan in 313, issued under the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, Christians were allowed to worship freely. In 330, Constantine expanded and renamed the ancient Greek city of Byzantium as Constantinople, making it the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, later known as the Byzantine Empire. This provided the setting for the development of Byzantine architecture, which inherited elements of the Roman basilica while developing its own distinctive features, such as large or multiple domes and intricate mosaics. The 19th century ushered in a renewed interest in Byzantine architecture, contributing to the emergence of the Neo-Byzantine style, which adapted its architectural forms and features. It spread across Europe and was adopted for major construction projects, especially ecclesiastical buildings such as Westminster Cathedral.

Cardinal Herbert Vaughan (1832-1903), Archbishop of Westminster from 1892 to 1903, commissioned in 1894 the English architect John Francis Bentley to design the Roman Catholic cathedral. Bentley travelled to Italy in response to the Cardinal's brief for a church with a spacious interior capable of accommodating a large congregation, taking inspiration from the Roman basilicas adopted by early Christians. Among the churches he visited was the 6th-century Basilica of San Vitale in Ravenna, a significant example of early Byzantine architecture and art. Built mainly of brick, the basilica features a central dome and spectacular mosaics. Another was the Byzantine-inspired 11th-century Basilica of Saint Mark in Venice, characterised by its five major domes and shimmering interior. Bentley had planned to visit Haghia Sophia (Divine Wisdom) in Constantinople but was unable to do so. From its completion in 537 until 1453, Haghia Sophia was the world's largest church and remains a masterpiece of architecture. Designed by the Greek architects Anthemius of Tralles and Isidorus of Miletus, it was constructed in five years (532-537) and is distinguished by its large central dome.

Upon returning to London, Bentley drew on the architectural precedents he had studied, including W. R. Lethaby and Harold Swainson's 1894 book *The Church of Sancta Sophia Constantinople - A Study in Byzantine Building* (Macmillan & Co.), when developing his designs. He sought to incorporate and reinterpret the architectural qualities of these precedents. The interior was designed to allow the decorative scheme to be completed gradually, enabling the Cathedral to open eight years after the project began. The chapels, windows, marbles and mosaics will be the subject of another article.

Westminster Cathedral, formally titled the Metropolitan Cathedral of the Most Precious Blood, is the mother church of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, and the seat of the Archbishop of Westminster. The Cathedral is a building listed at Grade I in England. Located in the eponymous Conservation area in the City of Westminster, it is the largest Roman Catholic church in England. Built on its present site after the Diocese of Westminster acquired the land in the late 1880s, it was constructed from 1895 to 1903 and is architecturally distinct from the Anglican churches of Westminster Abbey (Gothic) and St Paul's Cathedral (Baroque). Westminster Cathedral is an impressive polychromatic building, with a square campanile (bell tower) and four domes reaching 35.7m in height, clad in copper weathered to a green patina. The building uses a load-bearing brick masonry system supporting concrete vaults and domes. It is almost 110m long and 47.5m wide. Its enormous scale and approximately 86.5m high campanile dominate its surroundings. The piazza in front of the Cathedral serves as both a public and civic space.



The external façades are constructed of red brick and Portland stone. The Cathedral is also characterised by its polygonal towers, decorative stonework, windows, arcading, and elaborate NW façade, which features the building's principal entrance emphasised by the projecting central bay. Above the doors, a mosaic depicting Christ as the central figure occupies the tympanum. Sculpted medallions are positioned between the columns flanking the entrance. The upper level has a series of decorative arches. Polygonal towers flank two-storey wings that extend to either

side. The campanile, polygonal towers and smaller structures have cupolas. The side elevations feature Diocletian and paired round-arched windows. Rising above the roof, the domes run in sequence along the Cathedral's longitudinal axis.

The design of the Cathedral is defined by an interplay between its individual elements and the building as a whole. Each space complements the next, guiding the congregation through a gradual transition from the exterior world to the sacred interior. Early Byzantine churches used both longitudinal and centralised plans. Westminster Cathedral follows a longitudinal

plan, creating an axial spatial progression from the nave towards the Sanctuary. The main piers and transverse arches divide the nave into three square bays. The building's load-bearing walls and piers, together with the large concrete domes, shape its architectural character through massing, spatial sequence, materiality, and structural system. The interior makes extensive use of marble, with variations in colour and veining. The lower sections are clad in marble, while the unfinished upper sections will feature mosaics, as Bentley intended.

Upon entering the narthex (vestibule), the longitudinal nave, flanked by aisles and defined by monolithic marble columns, arches and piers, provides an unobstructed view towards the Sanctuary, which houses the granite High Altar. Galleries extend above the aisles and are supported by monolithic marble columns. The aisles lead to side chapels adorned with polychrome marbles and intricate mosaics. Bentley died before the mosaics work began, resulting to date in a variety of Byzantine-influenced and other styles. The aisles extend into the transepts, providing access to the Lady Chapel, the Blessed Sacrament Chapel, and other spaces. Beyond the nave lie the Sanctuary, followed by the apsidal choir, with the sacristy at the rear. The crypt lies beneath the choir at the SE end of the Cathedral, while the Baptistery is situated at the NW end, adjacent to the narthex.

Positioned above the High Altar, the baldacchino, a marble canopy designed by Bentley, is supported by eight vibrant yellow monolithic marble columns. The Great Rood, a carved wooden cross, also designed by him, is suspended between the

Sanctuary and the nave depicting Christ's Crucifixion on one side and Our Lady of Sorrows on the reverse. Together they form the main visual focus of the Cathedral. Bentley also drew inspiration from Haghia Sophia's large central dome, supported by pendentives (structural elements that transfer the dome's loads). He adapted this concept through four shallow saucer domes, constructed of concrete and brick, with three arranged over successive bays of the nave and the fourth over the Sanctuary. In both buildings, pendentives facilitate the transition from the square bays to the circular bases of the domes, creating a continuous relationship between the supporting structure and domed forms. This demonstrates how Bentley reinterpreted Byzantine spatial and structural principles while applying late 19th-century mass-concrete construction.

John Francis Bentley (1839-1902) was born in England. Between 1858 and 1861 he studied under the architect Henry Clutton. In 1862 he converted to Catholicism and established his own practice in London. Commissions included ecclesiastical furniture and interiors, altars and churches. Bentley's knowledge as an ecclesiologist was exceptional. His work demonstrates a love of colour and attention to detail. The Cathedral's complex interplay of architecture and art, form and function, light and darkness, worldly and heavenly, theology and symbolism, is achieved through the careful integration of structural and architectural elements without compromising its religious integrity. Collectively, these qualities create a Neo-Byzantine masterpiece. In 1902, Bentley was awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects, but he did not live to receive it. Westminster Cathedral was the result of the collaboration of many individuals. It was the vision of a cardinal who died shortly before its completion in 1903 and of an architect who devoted himself to its realisation almost until the day he died.

All photos © Agapi Fylaktou

Tue 6th October 2 - 4 pm	Silver Sunday Talk – Forgotten Gems Either Side of the Thames Cinnamon Club, The Old Westminster Library, 30-32 Great Smith Street, SW1A 3BU
Sat 24th October 11am - 12 pm	Talk: New Revelations about Petty France TTIS Archives, 10 Old Pye Street, SW1P 2DG
Tues 10th November 6.30 - 8.30 pm	The Thorney Island Society's 40th AGM – Guest Speaker: Mark Wasilewski LVO, Park Manager, St James's Park and The Green Park The Wellington, 71 Vincent Square, SW1P 2PA
Sat 14th November 11am -1pm	Talk: Victoria in Wartime – The Blitz Years Westminster Archives, 10 St Ann's Street, SW1P 2DF
Sat 21st November 11 am - 12 pm	Talk: The Unique Story of Poets' Corner in Westminster Abbey – and the Women Who Didn't Make It TTIS Archives, 10 Old Pye Street, SW1P 2DG
Sat 5th December 6.30 - 9.30 pm	TTIS Christmas Party The Wellington, 71 Vincent Square, SW1P 2PA
Sat 9th January 11 am -12 pm	Talk: Along the Thames from Blackfriars to London Bridge TTIS Archives, 10 Old Pye Street, SW1P 2DG
Thurs 28th January 11.30 am - 2.30 pm	Behind the Scenes at Sinfonia Smith Square – Tour, Concert, Tea & Cake Sinfonia Smith Square, Smith Square, SW1P 3HA
Sat 6th February 11 am - 12 pm	Talk: The Real Gems of London TTIS Archives, 10 Old Pye Street, SW1P 2DG

Bookings and registration can be made through Eventbrite: *https://tinyurl.com/eventbrite-TTIS*

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 talks, visits and social events. It reviews planning applications and maintains a local archive. There are currently over 400 members, and we would welcome more. A membership form can be found on our website: thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk.

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