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 2024

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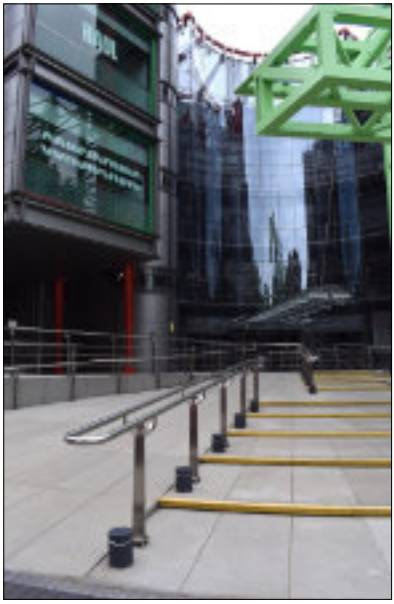


Above: Part of the 'moat' around the Millbank Penitentiary, now an urban garden (see pages 3 & 10)
Left: The Channel 4 building (see page 6)
Below: The Onion Garden (see pages 3 & 4)

We are only as strong as our members, and so I'd like to start by thanking all our members for continuing to support us. The Committee is buoyed by the backing of both our active members and those who attend our events; we are incredibly grateful for your continued support. It is always a matter of delight for me personally to see such active engagement in the Society. Whether it is by making a contribution or by enthusiastic attendance at events, it demonstrates a Society in action!

Since our last newsletter we have continued to provide a wide range of events to our members and friends. These are very well received and their success is due to the extraordinary efforts of our Events Team led by Hari Kitching. Please continue to engage in our events, which are focussed in 2025 on 40 years of The Thorney Island Society.

In July, Lucy Peck and I were delighted to meet Rachel Blake, our new MP for the Cities of London and Westminster. We met her in our Archives, only a few days after the General Election. We took the opportunity to outline our role as an amenity society, a source of historical knowledge and also as a campaigning organisation. As you would expect, we discussed the important matter of the proposed Memorial and Learning Centre in Victoria Tower Gardens and its expected impact. Rachel made very clear her enthusiasm for local history and urbanism. Since the meeting, she has formalised a regular meeting of all the amenity societies in the parliamentary constituency, to share progress and insights, which we fully intend to be part of.

In November we will be holding our AGM at 55 Broadway. This is always an excellent opportunity for all our current members to engage with the Society. We will be nominating members to the Committee and formal roles in the Society, so if you have an interest in getting involved please feel free to contact me at chair@thethorneyislandsociety.org.uk. We need support in areas such as events, secretarial, membership, website administration and special projects. Those actively interested in planning matters are also very welcome to get in touch.

The AGM will be followed by a talk by Edmund Bird, Heritage Manager at Transport for London on 'The Architectural History of the Underground', including a special feature on 55 Broadway.

I hope you enjoy our newsletter, which consists of many excellent submissions from both our committee members and members. Thank you again for your continued membership and support.

In our highly urban environment it is particularly exciting to come across little areas of green in unlikely spots. The varied planting in diverse pots in the Millbank Estate, such as between Stubbs and Turner Houses (below), is one example of what can be done in a residential neighbourhood. The Onion Garden is more of a surprise, in a left-over-corner behind Westminster City Hall (bottom).

The new Government has, like other Governments before it, vowed to reform the planning system, in order to make development, especially that involving housing, easier and quicker to carry out. It is unlikely that any future legislation will have very much effect on the Thorney Island area, where restrictions on changes to listed buildings and conservation areas will remain, even though the National Planning Policy Framework drops the demand for highly subjective 'beauty' in new developments!

Recently there have been comparatively few new planning applications. A recent important application for **1 Victoria Street** was approved by the planning committee surprisingly quickly. This major application, with 390 documents to consider, was difficult to comprehend fully, but we now know that the entire superstructure is to be demolished, contrary to what was originally described to us, because of the belated discovery that the original concrete frame was decaying. We hope the same change of plan does not afflict the hotel development at **61-71 Victoria Street**, on the corner of Strutton Ground, which is still under consideration. This would have a new façade on a partially retained structural frame. Planning policy now favours the maximum retention of structures because of the adverse environmental effect of demolition and rebuilding.

Further west, at **171 Victoria Street**, the owners of the building occupied by John Lewis will be applying for planning permission to make some internal upgrades, one of which will be to introduce the now almost mandatory terrace space for office workers. The new interior will also involve changes to the main entrance and the creation of new entrances on the Cathedral Piazza. We have been informed about these changes, and we expect that a planning application will be made in the future.

Tucked away behind City Hall and, we hope, known to many of our members, is the **Onion Garden** (see previous page), which has been further enhanced with the building of a new, more permanent, café building, recently granted planning permission, after an application that was enthusiastically supported by the Society and its members. Another development that recently got planning permission is **17-19 Rochester Row**, an upgrade to an existing office building.

Another application, for a five-year extension of temporary planning permission, was made for the **Parliamentary Education Centre** in Victoria Tower Gardens (VTG). This building was designed to minimise its visual impact on the gardens and the Palace of Westminster. Nonetheless it does impinge, mostly in the way it blocks the view of the south façade of the Palace, the effect getting more pronounced as one approaches the building. It has now been given planning permission for a further five and a half years, but with a recommendation that the Parliamentary authorities start looking for, and planning for, alternative accommodation.

The main entrance to 171 Victoria Street, likely to be replaced

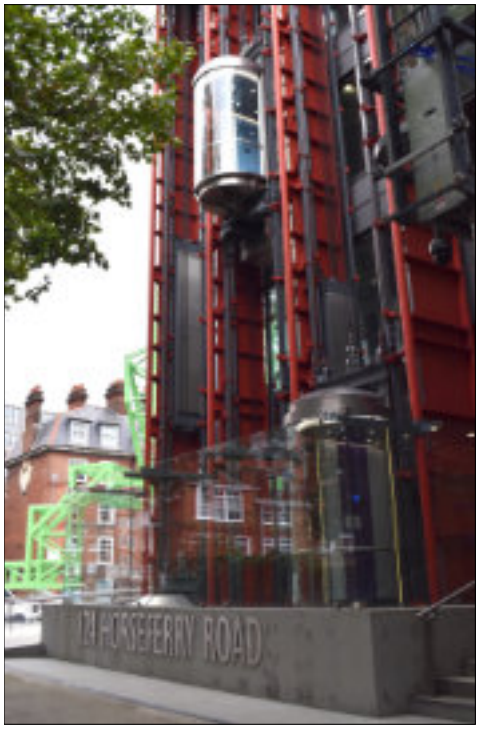
There is little new to report on the **Holocaust Memorial**, also in VTG: The Bill to remove the constraint of the 1900 Act, which prohibits construction in the gardens, is still making its slow way through Parliament. It is currently in the House of Lords, where there was an impressive debate at the first reading, in which a large majority of the speakers made cogent arguments against the Bill, expressing a wide range of reasoned objections. Nonetheless, when it came to a vote 49 voted against the Bill while 99 voted in favour, few of whom can have listened to the speeches. If any amendments are agreed in that House then it would have to return to the House of Commons. If not it will get the Royal Assent, after which we expect there to be another planning application. It was stated by the then Shadow Minster, Matthew Pennycook (now a Minister in MHCLG), at the Third Reading debate in the Commons, that a normal planning process would follow the repeal of the 1900 Act. We think that there should be another planning application because of policy changes introduced since the quashing of the earlier permission.

The Parliamentary Education Centre, obscuring the view of the lower level of the Palace of Westminster

Coroner's Court (left)

The extension to the Coroner's Court in Horseferry Road is nearly finished. The Thorney Island Society objected to the scheme because we did not feel that it was a good fit with the existing building. The joint between the two buildings is clumsy and, in particular, the blank north-facing wall is forbidding. It is quite clear that we were correct in our objections: a window on that blank façade would have made the building so much more approachable.

The London Headquarters of Channel 4 is a High-Tech building and one of the youngest listed at Grade II in England. Built in 1990-1994 by the architectural practice Richard Rogers Partnership, the building was awarded the 1995 RIBA National Award and the 1995 Royal Fine Art Commission Award. It is described as "an elegant work of the High-Tech movement" by Historic England. High-Tech architecture was born out of the ideals of the 1920s modernist movement, utilising new materials as well as technological advances in building design. The development of advanced engineering and construction methods increased rapidly after the



Second World War. The availability of materials such as steel, concrete and glass influenced building design and encouraged architects to experiment with innovative construction methods such as prefabrication and modularity.

High-Tech architecture rose into prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. Its birth was heralded by architects including Norman Foster, Michael Hopkins, Renzo Piano, and Richard Rogers, who is also known for Lloyd's of London (1978-1986) and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (1971-1977), among many other buildings in the UK and abroad. The Richard Rogers Partnership was commissioned by Channel 4 Television to design a building complex of 15,000 square metres to include offices, a studio, broadcasting suites, a landscaped garden and an underground car park. The building is located in the City of Westminster. It demonstrates High-Tech principles such as externally expressed structural elements, exposed services, modularity, prefabrication, and the use of materials such as steel, aluminium and glass.

The site's shape, prominent corner location, and Channel 4's requirements influenced the building form and layout. The building has two wings of office space, which are four storeys, planned in an L-shape and flanked by two towers. The space between the towers, a stepped piazza with ramps, connects the street to the main entrance, defined by an inward curved glass curtain wall which is suspended from above. This full height atrium forms an open space inside the entrance with views of the ground floor reception and restaurant as well as of the landscaped garden and offices. Inside the atrium there are concrete walkways at every floor connecting the two wings. Looking at the building from the piazza, the left tower is formed by four box-like units accommodating conference rooms, while the right tower displays externally exposed services and lifts.

The cladding of the building is powder-grey aluminium. Orange-red coated steel portal frames support the left tower's box-like units. The ground floor is recessed, exposing the circular concrete columns that support the building throughout. Glazing provides transparency and lightness. Solar gain is reduced by the use of exterior aluminium mesh screens. Internally, light levels are controlled by blinds. A glass canopy signals the building's main entrance and is suspended over a glass bridge, which spans the circular roof-light of the round-shaped cinema lobby located below it. Transparency, inclusivity and accessibility were important goals, achieved by elements such as glazing which is used extensively for increased external and internal views, induction loops for improved hearing and communication, ramps and walkways for easy access, connectivity and circulation.

Richard Rogers (1933-2021) was one of the founders of High-Tech architecture as well as one of the great British-Italian contemporary architects. He won major awards which included the RIBA Royal Gold Medal in 1985 and the Pritzker Prize in 2007. He was knighted in 1991 and in 1996 was granted the title of Lord Rogers of Riverside. Between 2000 and 2008 he was the main advisor on architecture and urbanism to Ken Livingstone, the mayor of London.

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In the north of the area a number of streets are named after the schools and almshouses (known as hospitals - **Greycoat** and **Greencoat**) that were established in the area to cater for the needs of the impoverished local population living in the squalid courts and lanes that were being gradually replaced when this late nineteenth century OS map was produced.

As elsewhere, there has been a considerable amount of renaming of streets, perhaps to drop associations with dubious local reputations. **Monck Street**, previously known as Whetster's Ground and Holland Street, was named after after an eighteenth century benefactor to the parish. The same applies to **Arneway Street**, once Allington Street, named after Thomas Arneway (d. 1603), who left a substantial amount of money to be lent to business people, a charity that still exists in a modest way.

A number of streets were named after Deans or Headmasters attached to the Abbey (Dr **Carey**, Dr **Page** and the Rev William **Rutherford**) or Canons (**Causton**, **Cureton**, **Douglas** and **Fynes**-Clinton). **Chapter Street** refers to the Abbey's personnel more generally.

Regency Street (Regent's on the map) was laid out during the Regency period, when Vauxhall Bridge was built (then called Regent's Bridge).

It would appear that the name of **Maunsel Street** was changed from the uncharismatic New Street in the early 1900s. A John Mansel (or Maunsel) was Chancellor to Henry III and amassed a large number of parishes, including land in Westminster, where he had a house 'at Totehill'.

The name **Rochester Row** dates from at least the mid-eighteenth century and existed as a tree-lined avenue, the road to Chelsea, in 1682. For a time Bishops of Rochester were given the job of Dean of Westminster, in order to secure a London residence. It is possible that **Medway Street** was named after the river on which Rochester stands.

Vincent Square was laid out on Tothill Fields, an area slightly higher than the surrounding marshy land. The name Tothill occurs early in documents, originally as an open space where 'appeals by combat' took place, although it was also known for the growth of parsley. Pest houses for victims of the plague were built here, safely away from other habitations. Previously used for recreation, in 1810 the Headmaster of Westminster School, Dean Vincent, had ten acres of Tothill Fields enclosed by a bank and ditch to form the Westminster School playing fields, now known as Vincent Square.

The area south of Vincent Square and the site of the Millbank Penitentiary were developed in the mid-nineteenth century on land under control of the Commissioner of Woods and Forests, at that time Lord **Bessborough**, whose family name was **Ponsonby**.

The names selected for the new streets that replaced the Millbank Penitentiary (see over for more on this) - the open space with gasometers shown on the map - are named after individuals with less prominent connection with the area: **Erasmus**, an important influence on the English Reformation; **Atterbury**, a Jacobite Dean of Westminster; and poet **Herrick**, for a time resident in Westminster.

The background to the establishment of the Millbank Penitentiary was the realisation that capital punishment, transportation or punitive imprisonment did not offer long-term benefit to society. In the late eighteenth century John Howard's investigations, reports, and campaign against existing prison conditions initiated prison reform. Among other remedies, reformers proposed a combination of solitary confinement, religion and labour, although solitary confinement fell out of favour as a reformative tool.

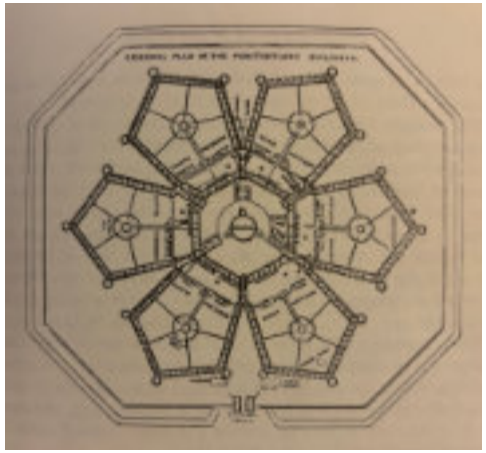
Among the best known prison reformers was Jeremy Bentham. His ideas were largely liberal, though some, such as allowing visitors in to view the prisoners as a spectacle, were doubtful. An advanced idea was that prisons should be run almost as a business, but with rewards to the supervisors for non-recidivism in place of the existing private prison system in which gaolers got their income from supplying the prisoners with the necessities (and sometimes luxuries) of life. In buying land in Tothill Fields, Bentham went some way towards carrying out his ideas, although he never got any further than this purchase.

There being no national system of prisons, it was proposed that a new prison be built, based on the ideas of Howard and Jeremy Bentham among others, and conceived as one of several national prisons in the country. A distinguished and liberal-minded committee of management was appointed and many sites were considered but Bentham's Thames-side site was eventually chosen in 1812.

The site had been a swamp where snipe were said to have been shot. Not far off were a few charitable foundations such as the Greencoat and Greycoat schools, and some gentlemen's houses to the north, on the riverbank.

A competition was held for the design of the building, but it then passed through several hands before being taken on by architect Robert Smirke. It was a poor site because of the marshy ground, which made establishing load-bearing foundations difficult. It was necessary to pile down to sound gravel at a considerable depth. Progress was slow because of the troublesome foundations but, despite the inevitable increase in costs, it was completed in 1821. Arthur Griffiths (Deputy Governor in the 1870s and 80s, who wrote a history of the prison) observed that they had 'proceeded in a liberal open-handed fashion, as gentlemen do who are dealing with money supplied from a liberal purse'.

The construction was by stages, partly carried out by the prisoners themselves, cell by cell like a bee-hive, into which they then moved (although the very first inmates were 36 women, who arrived in 1816). Despite the new thinking about prisons emanating from The Howard League and like-minded reformers as to the treatment of prisoners, the built structure was



Left: Plan of the prison as built
Above: An early 20th century OS map showing the line of the erstwhile outer walls
Below: The burial ground of the prison

based more on the efficacy of the 'passive chains and huge senseless stones' of medieval prisons than the 'warders of flesh and blood' preferred by Griffiths.

The whole prison was surrounded by a wall and a moat. In the centre was the chapel, surrounded by a three-storey hexagon with six three-storey pentagons surrounding it, giving enough accommodation for 1000 prisoners. The building was bewildering to navigate, because of the lack of visibility between the identical wings. An unusually high level of intestinal disease among the prisoners caused the moat to be filled in and 'decaying filth and vegetable matter' that surrounded the prison walls to be cleared away.

The regime of partial solitary confinement, even if ameliorated by association at certain times such as church attendance and work, proved too harsh and was thought to have led to cases of insanity. It had also failed in its prime task of reformation and in 1834 the prison became a mere depot for assessing prisoners and passing them on elsewhere. It became the central prison for all sentenced to transportation, which could be done conveniently from its Thames-side location. From mid-century penal servitude at one of the other new national prisons replaced transportation.

Millbank became a local prison in 1883 and closed in 1890 (despite the blank on the OS map!). The Tate Gallery was opened only seven years later, in 1897, work on the Millbank Estate starting in the same year. The Military hospitals followed, opening in 1905 and 1907.

Tue 15th October, 2.00 pm	Silver Sunday Talk at The Cinnamon Club - 'The Hidden History between Parliament Square and Trafalgar Square'
Tue 22nd October, 6.30 pm	Talk - 'Life and Work of Ann Sancho, the first known Black female publisher in Georgian London' @ The Onion Garden, 5 Seaforth Place
Thur 24th October, 1.30 pm	History tour of Westminster School - Members Only Event
Tue 5th November, 6.30 pm	TTIS 38th AGM, with a talk by Edmund Bird, Heritage Advisor at Transport for London, 55 Broadway
Thur 21st November, 4.30 pm	Talk on European Parliament at Europe House - Members Only Event
Mon 2nd December, 6.30 pm	TTIS Christmas Party - Lords Lounge Bar & Pavilion Restaurant, Wellington Hotel
Thur 23rd January, 6.30pm	Talk - 'Thorney Problems for Sherlock Holmes' @ The Onion Garden, 5 Seaforth Place
Thur 13th March, 6.30 pm	Talk - 'Elsie Day and the Women of the Grey Coat Hospital'
Sat 15th March, 6.45 pm	Purcell Club Musical Tour in Westminster Abbey

Bookings and registration can be made through Eventbrite: *https://tinyurl.com/eventbrite-TTIS*
Or please contact us at *info@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 300 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