

Register at the Friends' website: www.gunnersburyfriends.org

NEWSLETTER

CONSULTATION ON GUNNERSBURY'S FUTURE

At last the consultation document has been published, and circulated to every household within two miles of the Park. It is also on the web*. This may be one of the most important moments in the last 30 years of the saga of this estate. Please encourage your friends and neighbours to complete the questionnaire. What does it say? More importantly, what doesn't it say?

It appears to present options, but the significant fact is that there are no real choices. Jura Consultants have taken all the proposals, all the suggestions, all the ideas – both sensible and zany – and established that the only way to get the place back on its feet is to sell some parkland for housing. Their report, and much background detail, can be found on the Park web site**.

Their estimates of the costs – around £21m – are a measure of the disaster that has been wreaked upon the Park and the Museum from the decades of under-funding and inaction. This state of affairs is directly the responsibility of both Ealing and Hounslow Councils. What is missing is any recognition of that responsibility, or any long-term proposal for ensuring that this shambles does not continue. However, we should praise both Councils for at last tackling the issue. With local elections coming in May 2010 they may falter, but – who knows? – there may even be votes in sorting this out once and for all.

It is a measure of the strength of Jura's work that they have managed to find a workable proposal. Many of those closest to this saga feared that the only way out of the failure of joint ownership was by the sale of the whole estate.

Some aspects of their proposals are very strong. The grand rooms of the Large Mansion were designed for entertaining. The Museum has always found it hard to use them successfully. We know there is a high demand for function and conferences facilities and a restaurant. The proposals for the Museum are very exciting. It is one of the longest-established

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THE LONDON MELA, Sunday 16 August, 1.00 – 8.30pm

The Mela at Gunnersbury is an artistically-led celebration of the culture and creativity of South Asia and its diaspora; it has become an established annual event for the capital and is supported by the Mayor of London, BBC Radio Asian Network, Ealing and Hounslow Councils. Admission is free. This year it has seven zones to explore, offering Asian-influenced contemporary, classical and new music, DJs, dance, visual arts, comedy, exhibitions, a children's area, food stalls and a giant funfair – things to do for the whole afternoon.

The first London Mela took place at Gunnersbury in 2003, attracting 60,000 people, with more than 90,000 attending the following year. About a third of the audience comes from non-Asian communities, making it a truly inter-cultural family event with something for every generation of every community.

The London organisers are re-inventing the traditional South Asian mela; for example, it is one of the few melas in this country to commission new work, with funding from the Arts Council. It offers a platform for emerging British artists and brings traditional and classical art forms to a wider audience. There is more information on the Mela web-site at www.londonmela.org including details of a photographic competition.

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local museums in London and has been collecting for over 80 years. This fantastic asset, if properly displayed in the Small Mansion, could tell a great story of the people and the development of west London. Despite coming up with a stream of proposals for the use of the Stables over the years, the Friends know just how hard it has been to find a future for these buildings, because of their position in the park. A Museum store with the potential to open up the collections to all is a remarkably clever proposal.

The improvement of the landscape has been a high priority since the first HLF-funded scheme of the 1990s and the Conservation Management Plan has given us a fully researched basis for this work.

Especially significant would be the impact on the Park of allowing visitors through what is now the Pitch and Putt area, removing the bottle-neck between the pond and the playground and opening up the centre of the formal landscape for a much fuller enjoyment of the grounds.

The consultation has quite cleverly separated the Sports proposals from the rest. There is no question that Gunnersbury needs new changing rooms and a modern approach to providing facilities for sport and recreation. We no longer have 500 male footballers on a Sunday morning all trying to take a

shower at the same time. Work on these proposals should continue whatever happens elsewhere in the Park.

But the price of all this is very high. To walk along the proposed building land is to weave between some wonderful mature trees. With its self-sown saplings, the tree belt is a rich and thick perimeter defence for the Park.

The layout and buildings would have to be hugely imaginative to deserve a place in this park, and there are so many agencies which would expect to have their say (English Heritage, the Council for Architecture and the Built Environment, the Mayor of London and the two Councils – for starters) that we will probably end up with work that is a series of compromises rather than something that might, just, add beauty to the place.

What might happen now? One outcome might be that thousands of people get behind the proposals and say clearly that they cannot put up with the current state of the Park, its buildings and the Museum, that they want something better for themselves and their children, and they support the proposals, even at the expense of the loss of some land and some trees.

Another might be that the opposition to the loss of some land and some trees is very vocal and angry, and that thousands of people are persuaded to resist the proposals, even at the expense of the continuing decline of the rest of the estate.

A third (which is the one that has been happening in practice for the last 20-30 years) is that alternatives are proposed and the Councils call for further reports and new studies. There is the appearance of activity, but nothing really happens, no one takes the praise or the blame, the costings in the original reports start to decay, along with the buildings, the facilities and the landscape.

The Friends have been in existence since 1981 and in all that time these proposals are the best chance Gunnersbury has had to transform itself into the place it deserves to be. I would suggest we support the plans in principle, but tell the Councils that they have lost the moral authority to run the place in the future as they have in the past. We need a new approach to managing this Park. We cannot expect the next generation to have to go through this again.

James Wisdom

* www.tinyurl.com/gunnersbury

**http://www.hounslow.gov.uk/index/leisure_and_culture/local_history_and_heritage/gunnersbury.htm



DONATION FROM WAITROSE SUPERMARKET

We are delighted to report that the Chiswick Waitrose store has given £238 to boost the Friends' funds.

Each month three local charities are chosen by the store and shoppers "vote" for their favourite with tokens handed out with their change. The votes are then used to apportion the £1,000 which the store donates each month. On this occasion, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's Chiswick base received the biggest donation and Ballet Rambert came third.

The store manager presenting the cheque to our Chairman, James Wisdom

THE “STAKEHOLDERS” MEETINGS

Although the original idea was to form a group of people who represented societies and organisations, who could consult their members and represent their views, the stakeholder meetings have been open to anybody, and most of the opinions expressed at them have been personal.

It is clear to anyone who has read the Conservation Management Plan and the Options Appraisal that very few of the participants at these events have even bothered to take the time to read what are now the two key pieces of research and policy about Gunnersbury.

Much of the time is taken up having to listen to people who have shown no previous interest in the unfolding crisis at Gunnersbury but who are now angry about some aspect of the proposals.

This purpose of this article is to give those members of the Friends who have not attended any of these meetings an idea of what ideas are being expressed.

“The Rothschilds gave the Park to the people of the area, in perpetuity, and it cannot be touched”.

Unfortunately they did not – they sold it a full market price (much more valuable as the Great West Road was being built along its south side) to Ealing and Acton, who took out a loan from the Government, sold some parkland for housing in Popes Lane and Lionel Road, and paid back the loan.

“The proposals are too expensive to do all at once. It would be better to raise money for each building in turn”

That is what has been happening at least for the last 30 years, and it has not worked. We have lost the Dairy and the East Lodge, and the Stables are on the brink, the Potomac Tower is a ruin and the two Mansions are in a state of advanced decay. English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund have said they will only support a once-for-all total solution.

“The consultants have not done a proper job – there are other ways of raising money than selling land.”

Jura are one of the best and most respected heritage consultancy firms in the country. They brought a major commercial property advisory firm, CB Richard Ellis, into their team to conduct all the valuations work. This team has the confidence of both Councils, English Heritage and the HLF. They have extensive experience of finding ways to finance heritage projects and if there were viable alternatives they would have offered them. One of the most important elements in their report is how they revealed that – if we want to maintain public access to the buildings – none of the other schemes on offer would succeed.

“The buildings are OK, this is a lot of fuss about nothing, the park is fine as it is, all that is required is maintenance”

Almost every building in the Park is on the English Heritage “Buildings at Risk” register. The condition of the two mansions has deteriorated so much that the Councils will have to spend many millions to get them into a fit state even to give them away.

“Let Nature take its course – let the buildings fall and leave the landscape to become a wilderness.”

The whole of the Gunnersbury Estate is a man-made landscape, created either for beauty or for income (sometimes both). Is this current generation of citizens so unable to govern ourselves that we cannot even act together to keep a Park in good order?

“We should sell Carville Hall Park North for building land and leave Gunnersbury as it is.”

This is not a very good argument from people who had previously objected to building on park land in principle, and a very poor way to stay on good terms with neighbours.

As Gunnersbury is jointly owned by Ealing and Hounslow, it would be inequitable if Ealing was not also expected to find a patch of land it could build on.

Part of the historic problem is that Ealing bought Gunnersbury (then one-fifth of Brentford) partly to prevent Brentford using it for council housing or other developments in the 1920s.

Since then, every time Ealing wanted to cut back, Hounslow has had to match the cut (and vice versa). Resolving today’s crisis by dumping it on the residents around Carville is especially unfair in the same year that Ealing Council has returned £6m to its voters as a cash gift.

James Wisdom

LONDON OPEN HOUSE

The Museum plans to open the Large Mansion, the Bath-house and the Temple at Gunnersbury on Sunday 20th September, on London Open House weekend. They are looking for volunteers to look after the Temple and hope Friends will be able to assist.

You would need to cover a two hour shift between 11am and 5pm on that day, keeping an eye on the building and handing out leaflets to visitors.

In return you will receive an Open House Volunteers' Badge, which you can collect in advance; this enables you to go to the front of the queue at other Open House venues that weekend. Contact Vanda Foster on 020 8992 1612 or email vanda.foster@laing.com

LEAD THEFTS

The lead has been stolen again from the ridges of the Bath-house. This is the third time in the last two years. It has been stolen despite being thickly covered in anti-climb paint.

The buildings have already suffered from lead being stolen from the roof of the Large Mansion twice and the Small Mansion three times.

ACTON HISTORY GROUP

At the 30 July Stakeholders' Meeting David Bayes of the Acton History Group announced that they had considered the Options Appraisal at their recent AGM and had voted strongly in favour of the proposals. They were particularly pleased about the opportunity it offered for properly developing the Museum Service for the future.

MUSEUM FLOODS

The structure of the Large Mansion is proving unable to cope with the heavy rainstorms that West London experienced in July. One down-pour caused water to flow down the walls of the Victorian Kitchens and the Housekeeper's Still Room and, worst of all, through the ceiling of the Brushing Room, the museum store where the Museum keeps the Victorian bicycles, including two rare penny-farthings, neon signs from the Great West Road factories, early perambulators and most of the collection of washing machines (Victorian to 1950s).

The Brushing Room has a flat roof and the gutters were blocked by leaves from the park. These were cleared and the Museum thought it was safe, but near the end of July there was another storm and water poured through the ceiling and through the electric lights. As there are few staff left in the Museum and as there were only three people in the building at the time, the Museum was closed and everyone set to with mops and buckets. Half the collections in the Brushing Room had to be dragged into the Victorian Kitchens, the nearest dry place available. At the moment there is nowhere else for them to go, so the Victorian Kitchens will be closed to the public for the foreseeable future.

This is the third major flood in the museum stores in the last year, not counting the regular leaks they have in the archaeology stores in the cellars, the staff kitchens (once a Rothschild's dressing room) and the cleaners' room (once the room used by the Rothschild's housekeeper). Much of the collection is now covered in plastic sheeting, but some items have been moved to (supposedly) new dry areas and still got wet again. The deterioration of the Large Mansion is having a disastrous effect on Ealing's and Hounslow's local history collections.

Some of those who attended the Stakeholders' Meeting on 30th July to discuss the Consultation document seemed to think that the size of the restoration project was excessive and that it was perfectly possible simply to restore one building at a time over the next 20 years. This would then not require the drastic step of raising funds by selling land. The reality is that both Mansions are in a terrible state. The piecemeal approach has been going on for the last 20 years, and we are now living with the consequences.

FRIENDS of GUNNERSBURY PARK & MUSEUM

Thank you to everyone who renewed promptly on 1 April and welcome to new members who have joined recently!

If you are already a Friend, do encourage someone else to join. The subscription, at £5, is very modest - a bigger membership means a better income and a stronger voice.

Send your cheque, made out to the Friends of Gunnersbury Park & Museum, to **The Membership Secretary, Friends of Gunnersbury Park & Museum, 39 Lionel Road, Brentford TW8 9QZ.**

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We welcome contributions to the Newsletter; the next issue will be compiled in October 2009

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