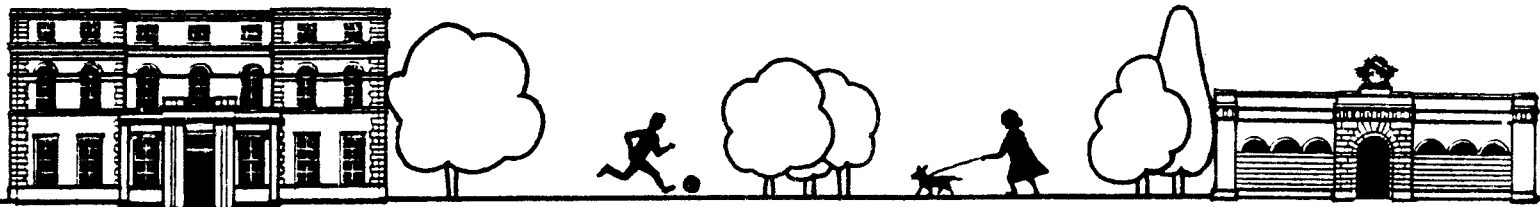


FRIENDS of GUNNERSBURY PARK & MUSEUM

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NEWSLETTER



The Story So Far...

The following is an account of our negotiations with the Gunnersbury Park Joint Committee since April 1982.

Newsletter No.7 contained the full report of the GPJC's Working Party Report, which had taken one year to prepare.

We discussed it at our AGM in April and concluded that the one idea in it worth pursuing was the proposal to use the Small Mansion as a hotel/restaurant. The question was - could this generate funds to help restore the Orangery?

On 18th July Doug Stone, Ken Hawkes and James Wisdom visited the Civic Centre to meet four councillors and eleven council officers to discuss this Working Party Report.

Our first question was: What work has been done on their proposal to convert the Small Mansion into a hotel/restaurant? None, apparently. It was described as an "off the top of the head, back of an envelope idea". This was a rather surprising reply so we tried the idea again. At the AGM we had discussed various combinations of provision: restaurant, banqueting, reception, conference - surely some such mixture in such a beautiful building would go some of the way towards rebuilding the ruins? At this the full might of the administrative machine then moved into action to say that this idea was simply terrible - "car parking", "have to take counsel's opinion", "it would have to be an 'exclusive' restaurant", "it would take a building out of public use", "it would barely pay for itself", "park security", "relocating the Training Consortium", "it might compete with the banqueting service provided at the Hounslow Civic Centre" - so that was the end of the one reasonably good idea proposed by those same officers in the Working Party Report.

Why did this idea get such a negative and ill-considered reaction? The answer lies in the scheme originated by Hounslow Chief Executive, Roger Jefferies (currently seconded to the DOE) with Hounslow's Director of Arts and Recreation, Bernard Connolly (now in the equivalent post in Edinburgh). Mr. Jefferies' belief was that West London needed an art gallery and that the Small Mansion was the best place for it. In the last few years in London the world of arts administration (in which Mr. Jefferies is well known) has developed a new idea - namely that buildings for the arts can be paid for by property developers eager to build offices. In West London the two most prominent such schemes are the Brentford Arts Centre and the Riverside Studios. So Mr. Connolly went to work on the details - where the spotlights should go, how the security could be improved - and with a bit of luck grants might flow in from the Arts Council, the Greater London Arts Association, the GLC, etc. But if not, then in the last resort the Dimsdale Development Co. (which is building the Brentford Arts Centre) would convert the stables into offices - in the new language "a mixed development". Surely the Friends were not such Philistines that they would object to an art gallery? Especially if we call it a "Museum Art Gallery Exhibition Centre"?

Our reply to this was the following: Where is there evidence of a "need" for an art gallery? It was not identified like that in Hounslow's Leisure Strategy Plan, which included the proposal to use Boston Manor House (with its large stable block) for this purpose. The new Brentford Arts Centre will have display space, as will Ealing's new Central Library. Also Ealing has been given the magnificent Hull-Grundy Bequest for display in Walpole Park - they are unlikely to shell out for another art gallery at the same time. At present, with the Boardroom and the Temple, the Museum has the capacity to display paintings and sculpture - it just cannot afford the extra attendants! However, our main concern was for the effect of this proposal on the future of the Museum which is under-funded and under-staffed. It is disgrace-

ful that a museum with such potential and with such enormous obligations should be run on a shoestring. If there is money floating about it should be spent on strengthening and extending the museum service, not diverted into ill-considered alternatives.

More words flowed under the bridge but the only other matter of substance was the proposal to hold an architect/developer competition for the whole of the Park. We were told that this would have to involve the conversion of some building(s) into offices, so we said that the Friends were not interested in it. We were amazed at the persistence of the desire to establish offices in the Park - even Dimsdale's dreadful plans, with their banal reflective glass walls, were produced at the meeting - they are still part of the "working papers".

By the end of the meeting it was clear that the only scheme with any capacity to generate funds was the use of the Small Mansion as a restaurant/banqueting service and we left thinking that the officers would give this "back of an envelope" idea further consideration and report back to the Gunnersbury Park Joint Committee. Within weeks we learnt that they had refused to do even this and that the difficulties they had listed at the meeting had become, without any further thought, insuperable obstacles. And that is how they appeared in the report to the September GPJC meeting.

Dates for your Diary

On Saturday 26th November we will be taking a table at the Southfields Community Association's first Anniversary Fair, Steele Road, W.4. at 2.00. Donations of books or bric-a-brac would be welcome - to Eva Swann, please (993 2692). It was at this hall that we raised £88 at a Jumble Sale on 29th October.

On Sunday 27th November we are holding a 'Christmas Cracker' in the Temple in the Park, from 1.30 to 4.00. This will be a Bazaar with cakes, jam, new children's books, Xmas paper and cards, fairisle sweaters and fun knits, jewellery, bottle gardens etc. The 15p entrance includes a raffle.

On Sunday January 8th - a Christmas Party in the Kitchens, starting at 2.00 with short talks on aspects of the Victorian Christmas, with drinks, mince pies, fun and news from the December meeting of the GP Joint Committee.....

On Saturday January 14th - work resumes on the Kitchens - every weekend (afternoons) - volunteers welcome!

On Wednesday 18th January at 8 p.m. at the Queen's Hall, Ealing Town Hall (admission 50p) Caroline Davidson, who is at present co-ordinating the restoration of the 17th century kitchens at Ham House, will be giving a lecture to the Ealing National Trust entitled 'The History Of Housework'.

A general appeal for bits of ribbon, lace and material - Charlotte (30 Speldhurst Road, W.4.) turns them into mice and other small animals!

"Ealing Walkabout"

The leaflet enclosed with this Newsletter publicises an attractive new local history book by one of our members, Kate McEwan. By using the form you not only get a discount but also make a donation to the Friends' funds - but you must order it as soon as possible.

The Orangery

Do you have a good idea for how to use the Orangery? During the summer Anne Stead has been investigating if it would be possible to use the Community Project scheme financed by the Manpower Services Commission to assist in the restoration of the building. The MSC would pay a certain sum for labour and materials, but we would have to raise a considerable amount to complete the project. Just how much is the problem Doug Stone is trying to solve, with a small working party of architects, civil engineers etc. But the central fact is that we need to find a good use for the building to make the whole exercise worthwhile. Here is a list of the suggestions so far: tea shop/restaurant, plant display/sales area, a covered sitting-out area without the glass walls, a reading room, an aviary (still the current GPJC preferred solution), a butterfly house, a music centre, an exhibition space, a theatre or a gymnasium/health centre. Most of these ideas, attractive though they are, have serious drawbacks to them. Can you come up with a better alternative?

The Museum

The large attendance at the 4 'open weekends' this summer (2401) plus weekday parties, particularly from schools, has already shown the value of so much hard work in restoring the main kitchen alone. Visitors showed considerable interest in how the open range and other systems worked; several also shared their own specialist knowledge or experience of work in service to help us answer certain queries.

Many recent visitors and Friends have given items for display in the kitchens but the Museum still needs lots of copper pans and jelly moulds, a complete set of plates for the dresser, kitchen chairs and furniture for the maid's room. As a result of a visit to Tring Park (built by Lionel Rothschild of Gunnersbury and now a girls' dancing school) the Trustees have offered a large early refrigerated cupboard which will arrive soon. Tring still has a vast kitchen complete with range, bakery and other service rooms.

The next stage of restoration will be the scullery, where the Museum's laundry collection is to be displayed, the maid's room, the larder, where the Tring fridge will have to go, and the outer kitchen will also soon be cleared for restoration.

We have gained offers of extra help but volunteers, especially fairly regular helpers, are still needed. Anyone good at woodwork would be particularly useful. Work starts at weekends from January 14th 1984 at 2pm.

In July and August next year the Museum will be putting on an exhibition about the Gunnersbury Rothschilds. It will look at the life and work of this famous banking family, their first country house at Gunnersbury and some of the other country houses belonging to this branch of the family and their influence on the local community. Ann Balfour Paul would welcome information from anyone who may remember or have had connections with the family when they lived locally or from anyone who lives in property on ex-Rothschild land.

Recent Acquisitions

A display of items which have recently been added to the museum's collections, including kitchen equipment, until the end of January 1984.

Houses for History

A small travelling photographic exhibition on museums in historic buildings in the Greater London area, until the end of November.

Antiquary to Archaeologist: Recording West London's Past

An exhibition tracing the development of archaeology from the mediaeval period, when antiquities were collected as curiosities, to highly specialised scientific approach of today. 6th April to 3rd June 1984.

The Gunnersbury Park Joint Committee

By the beginning of August it was clear that the officers' report to the September GPJC meeting would reject any proposals for "restaurant" use of the Small Mansion, despite the fact that it was their own suggestion. Was it as daft an idea as they now said it was? We needed expert advice on this so we approached the Chairman of the Hotel and Catering Consultants' Association, Mr. John Belfield-Smith (of Greene, Belfield-Smith & Co., Kingsway).

We put to him the spectrum of proposals - hotel, restaurant, banqueting, receptions, conferences; was there an idea in this worth pursuing or was it simply impractical? After visiting the Small Mansion and discussing it with various colleagues he was able to give the following initial replies: Yes, it is worth pursuing; it is a suitable building in an attractive setting; it would require internal redecoration but not substantial alteration; there is a growing market in West London for small weekday conferences; an 'exclusive' (i.e., high priced) restaurant would probably be unsuccessful in this situation - however, a good quality, middle of the road restaurant would be very appropriate; anyone taking a licence to operate it would probably try a mixture of services at first but would expect to be able to tap the market for wedding receptions, formal dinners and weekday conferences as well as providing a restaurant (we discounted all consideration of an hotel as the upstairs rooms are occupied by Park staff); if the GPJC had the capital to set it up and operate it themselves they would obviously do a lot better than if they had to attract an investor; and it might be possible initially to operate entirely within the empty rooms and therefore be unnecessary to relocate the West London Training Consortium immediately.

(continued overleaf)



Do you remember our fete in 1982? We raised approximately £450 and we offered it to John Stockdale, the Park Superintendent, for 'park improvements'. He wanted noticeboards and a map showing all the facilities and amenities in the Park and these have now been installed.

The picture (courtesy of the Brentford, Chiswick & Isleworth Times) shows the "handing over". From left to right: Cllr. B. Williams (L.B. Hounslow), Anne Stead, Eva Swann, John Catterall, Joan Catterall and James Wisdom.

Our fete this year was bigger and better and raised over £1,000. The burden of the work (and of the jumble sales, bazaars and stalls at fairs etc.) is carried by Joan and Eva who, together with all their helpers, deserve our thanks.

Suggestions now, please, on how to spend it!

We did not ask him to estimate the profitability of such a venture (that would have involved an expensive feasibility study and we were still at an early stage) but he suggested that one approach would be to offer the idea to various catering companies and to see if they were interested - of course, their first move would be to conduct a feasibility study. This would be a difficult operation for the Friends as the building is not "ours" to offer around and as the Council officers have such objections to the scheme. However, we were hoping that the September GPJC meeting would move things forward.

Despite having in front of them (a) the Working Party Report, (b) the minutes of the Civic Centre meeting and (c) a letter from the Friends making our opinions as clear as possible, the Councillors on September 16th hardly referred to any of that material. Instead they (a) bemoaned the fact that the Friends had failed to find the £750,000 they thought was necessary and (b) decided to make an appeal for money to the GLC. The other major fact which they totally overlooked is that their architects had at last prepared rough costings for the repair and renovation of the buildings. That figure has now dropped from £750,000 to £172,000! At a stroke they have saved themselves over half a million pounds and brought the repair of some of the buildings well within their annual expenditure figures - "only" £30,000 to arrest the decay in the Orangery, for example.

The position at the moment is this: we all await the result of the appeal to the GLC with interest since it could finance the restoration of the Orangery and the conversion of the Small Mansion into an art gallery. We will learn this at the December GPJC meeting. Meanwhile if the GPJC needs to raise money from the commercial development of one of the Park's buildings then there is still plenty of mileage in the use of the Small Mansion in the ways we have described.

The Editor regrets... that due to his incompetence he excluded Stephen Mark from the list of Committee Members elected at the AGM.

If any member wishes to include anything in the Newsletter, or wishes to comment on anything in the Newsletter, please contact James Wisdom, 25, Hartington Road, W.4., 994 4231