

# FRIENDS OF GUNNERSBURY PARK & MUSEUM

## NEWSLETTER

NO 115  
MARCH 2021



### **Welcome to this bumper edition of the Newsletter!**

Your Editor has been shielding so has been unable to visit Gunnersbury since March 2020 but members and friends have been reporting what is going on and we have worked hard to keep everyone up to date with regular posts on [gunnersburyfriends.org](http://gunnersburyfriends.org). As a few members don't use the internet we must apologise for keeping you waiting for news. A great deal has been happening at Gunnersbury, despite successive lockdowns, and a summary is reported now in these pages. Over the last year Gunnersbury has become an especially favoured spot for family walks and children's play, dog walking, jogging and admiring the gardens. Members of the small staff team who were not furloughed report that many are visitors who hadn't been to Gunnersbury before, which is very pleasing. The wire mesh HERAS fencing has been moved back by the playing fields to help social distancing and from Easter weekend boats are back on the Round Pond!

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### **SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE DUE 1 APRIL 2021**

Our Membership Secretary is grateful that so many Friends now pay their subscriptions by standing order. If you do not do so you will find a subscription form enclosed with this Newsletter. You can still renew by cheque but please do consider payment by standing order as it makes the administration very straightforward. Supporting the Friends ensures that we can provide funds for projects in the Museum and the Park. Sometimes this makes it possible to release a grant because our money is providing essential match funding. We can also contribute to the costs of specialist studies and strategic planning for Gunnersbury. Our other big role is in providing information, which we aim to do with regular updates on the website at [gunnersburyfriends.org](http://gunnersburyfriends.org).

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### **SMALL MANSION & STABLES**

The news that stabilisation work on these Listed Buildings has begun is very exciting. Visitors will be especially aware of activity at the Small Mansion because of the fencing. This is the first stage of a £3.4 million investment in consolidating the buildings to prevent further deterioration, and marks a huge milestone in the journey to bringing them into use once again. This especially matters to us – the Friends' organisation was founded in 1981 because local pressure had just stopped a deal by the local authority owners who intended to give the Stables to a property developer for a peppercorn rent. He planned an ugly office scheme, linking the two stable blocks with a bronzed glass box, but the Museum had been promised the Stables for its vehicles and large objects. More recent attempts to sell off the Small Mansion, primarily led by Ealing Council officers who favoured a residential scheme, did not succeed and, in any case, were rejected by Historic England. The Friends opposed this, first because public use would be lost for ever, but also because a base for the staff team would be needed during the regeneration works.

A grant of £90,000 from Highways England's Environment Designated Fund came in 2019 and paid for a detailed examination of the structures and an assessment of the costs of refurbishment by Rodney Melville & Partners (who did a beautiful job on the Large Mansion). A further grant of £280,000 came from Historic England to 'future-proof' further investment in the scheme. At the same time a feasibility study on future uses for the Small Mansion and Stables was undertaken by Jura Consultants, a study initiated by the Gunnersbury Development Trust, with grants from the Architectural Heritage Fund. They have worked with the Friends (who have contributed £5,000), as well as the CIC, Historic England and the two local authority owners, all of whom have helped with funding. In 2020 Highways England allocated an additional £250,000 towards the design cost for the initial repairs and Historic England has given a further £203,000. The next steps will involve finalising details to make possible major bids for capital grants, for submission once the biggest funders have moved on from focussing on emergency grants during the pandemic.

## REFRESHMENTS



Photo Philippa Dolphin

The demolition of the burnt-down Café is nearing completion – it had been expected to continue until mid April. While this has been happening the children's play-ground and the path alongside were closed. The CIC hopes the Café will re-open in 2022. We understand that the insurers expect a rebuild of the same scheme but it is possible that the carriages will find a new home in the Stables since the transport gallery beside the Café proved wholly unsuitable.

Meanwhile, members report that the pop-ups in the Park over the lockdown have been terrific. An invitation to new traders to bid defined the possibilities as 'refreshments, retail and outdoor trading opportunities, cultural events, visitor entertainment and festivals, weddings, conferences and other private hires' so it will be interesting to see who wins the contracts.

## THE PARK

Last September *London in Bloom* gave the Park a high Silver/Gilt Award. Their Award Panel commented on the excellent progress made over the previous 18 months.

The Panel indicated that a Gold Award was possible if Gunnersbury entered again in 2021 and showed such progress continuing. This is a tremendous achievement!

## DUCK POND MARKET

Following the success of this lively market last year, stalls will be back from 10am to 4pm on the 2nd & 4th Saturdays of the next few months: 10 & 24 April • 8 & 22 May • 12 & 26 June • 10 & 24 July and so on. Small local independent businesses will be selling crafts, arts, home wares and foodstuffs – excellent for gifts and tasty things to eat.

## GARDENING WORK AT GUNNERSBURY

The garden team's activities have attracted a lot of favourable comments from visitors during the lockdowns. Chris Ellis, Head Gardener, has been providing regular information, sometimes with short films, about work in progress, at <https://www.visitgunnersbury.org/news-blog/our-work>.

In November he reported that the basket beds had been severely tidied up and the ecological herbaceous border had been richly planted with bulbs (supported by the Friends' annual gift of £3,000). A low fence was woven from coppiced hazel twigs from Hampshire along this border beside the path from the play-ground to the Round Pond. Heavy pedestrian traffic here spilled over the edges of the paved route causing damage to the beds.

December work focussed on adding 48 white *Rosa Iceberg* bushes in the parterres of the Italian Garden and experimental planting of drought-tolerant varieties in the south-facing rockery at the west end of the Terrace. The Nature Trail volunteers planted 4,000 narcissus bulbs near the Potomac Lake and a huge lorry load of mulch arrived in January.

Along the west side of the Round Pond, inside the railings, new planting has included *miscanthus* and *cornus sanguinea*, with the aim of improving the wildlife habitat there.

And the waterfowl have been joined by 22 swans who arrive on the Round Pond every morning between 8 and 9am.





## GOVERNANCE

As part of Gunnersbury's regeneration the National Lottery Heritage Fund, which gave the largest grant, required a new form of governance to be adopted to avoid the difficulties caused in the past by joint ownership. The Project Board chose the model of a Community Interest Company (CIC) to manage the estate and, though the Friends had been a registered charity since 1982, established yet another charity, the Gunnersbury Museum & Park Development Trust (GDT) to raise funds.

We submitted detailed comments about these proposals at the time, as we were very concerned that just 2 directors of the CIC, one nominated by each council, would be able to over-ride decisions made by the rest of the Board. We felt this was just another version of the previous governance relationship which had not worked. Furthermore, we feared that it could hamper the recruitment of independent directors to bring specialist expertise to running the estate and the Museum. Successful transfers of local authority museums and parks elsewhere involved creating a parent charity, with an operational company covenanting surpluses to support it.

Charities and foundations to whom the GDT has submitted applications have found this form of governance confusing, mainly because they would be awarding funds to a charity which would not be directly implementing the projects exactly as they had promised.

A specialist consultant has been reviewing the position. His initial findings suggest that our original response was right and he is now developing a proposal for a new structure for approval by both councils.

## THE NEW SPORTS HUB

Though the Sports Hub building is completed, Ealing Council, which project managed the works, will continue to shoulder financial and legal responsibilities for the next two years because an independent survey and inspection ruled that the pitches were not fit for purpose. Re-seeding may be required so they may not be ready for use till 2022.

The contractor that will run the sport facilities is GLL, which trades as 'Better'. They were preparing to open to the public in January but Tier 4 restrictions thwarted that. See <https://www.better.org.uk/leisure-centre/london/gunnersbury-park/news> for monthly membership deals.

Their website indicates that the outdoor activities on offer from 29 March will include fitness classes and tennis. They ask participants to book online in advance, as numbers will be limited, and that users should change at home as changing rooms and shower access will be restricted.

They aim to open for indoor activities from 12 April and have listed details of what will be available including a 100-station Life Fitness equipped gym with views across the Park, a Fitness Class studio with both instructor-led and virtual classes offering the option of taking part outside timetabled sessions, a 5-court sports hall for handball, volleyball, basketball, futsal, football, and badminton, 8 floodlit tennis courts, 2 full-size artificial grass football pitches and, eventually, 9 grass football pitches, 3 cricket pitches and 1 rugby pitch.



Photo Philippa Dolphin



Photo better.org.uk

## MASTERPLANNING

The steering group working on the Small Mansion and Stables proposals over the last year or so became concerned that the current Master Plan for Gunnersbury, which covers the period until 2026, was very out of date due to the significant changes which had taken place since it was written. Historic England, represented on the group, generously funded the preparation of a revised Master Plan for the period up to 2040. We are delighted that work has been underway for several months.

The process is considering a range of issues needing to be managed over the next two decades. These include the need to improve and nurture the neglected areas of the Park, particularly around the Potomac Lake and the south-west entrance to the Park, the need to manage access

for vehicles, the layout of the paths and roads and finding a suitable use for the key site of the model farm in the middle of the Park (part survives but the former changing rooms there were burnt out) and so on. A lot of work and consultation is needed before decisions can be made but it is a very positive step.

## REMEMBERING COVID

Amy Dobson, Asst Curator, wrote on the CIC blog:

"We are reflecting on a year that has forced us all to change and adapt everyday life. At the Museum we want to record this unique period of the history of Ealing and Hounslow, collecting objects which represent local people's experience of the year."

She is looking for objects that

meet the collections policy and help record the local impact of the coronavirus. She suggests "things like a rainbow you made for your window, a note you received through the door from a neighbour offering support, or maybe your daily journal showing how life changed. Have you been sewing masks, taking photos or making videos to pass the time? Were there other objects that have been important to you during lockdown?" The Museum staff won't collect potential objects until the museum has re-opened and it is safe to do so. Meanwhile, if you have something you are interested in donating, please send details, with a photo if possible, to the team at [collections@visitgunnersbury.org](mailto:collections@visitgunnersbury.org). They will reply to your offers when it is practicable.

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## ERICA LUKE



Since October 2019 Erica Luke has been Volunteer and Visitor Experience Manager. Her predecessor in this role was Angharad Howell (known as Hari) with whom some Friends will have worked. The impact of the pandemic means her role has changed a little so for the time being she has shared some of the operational roles at Gunnersbury.

Erica grew up in Ealing. Following a degree in film production at the University of the Arts, she worked mainly in advertising for several years. Then she changed direction, studying for a horticultural qualification at Capel Manor College's Regents Park Centre, before working as a gardener. She also worked at an educational organisation with a mission to reconnect children to the natural world, running kids' camps and after-school clubs. After a period as assistant manager of a garden centre in Fulham she was attracted to apply for this post as it more closely matched her personal values. She was pleased and a little surprised to be appointed with such a quirky career!

Erica's role has involved running the volunteer programme – recruiting volunteers and supporting colleagues in the Learning, Park and Curatorial teams in the supervision of their volunteers. The last year, with the closure of the Museum for long periods, has affected what volunteers can do but some are working remotely, for example on cataloguing and research projects.

Her visitor experience role embraces both Park and Museum. It is very wide-ranging, from managing the retail offer, supervising the front-of-house staff team who oversee the Museum, to such areas of work as managing the flow of visitors and ensuring that Gunnersbury offers accessible and inclusive activities and services. She is now working with the curatorial team on an outdoor exhibition in the Park of photographs by Ealing Studios photographer Roy Gough.

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## 3rd BIG CONVERSATION

The CIC invited participants to consider Gunnersbury's future via Zoom in the context of the Masterplan. A summary of the CIC's report follows:

### Volunteering

- retain volunteers, keep the momentum
- promote volunteers' work, as some unaware of it
- less spare time on offer when return to work after lockdown?

### Communications

- disperse advertising of news and events across the Park

- continue sharing stories/videos from the Park and Museum online
- need faster/more open communication on issues of public interest

### Park

- more planting, especially meadow, with info on planting schemes
- continue garden blogs, add filmed tours
- improve fencing round the sports construction site/pitches
- more litter bins and seats further afield in the park

### Museum / Programming

- outdoor exhibitions could draw different people into the Museum
- link the Sports Hub to the site as a whole
- more interpretation around the Park on its history and horticulture

### Fundraising

- target different audiences, develop events where people get something in return
- musical evenings/open-air concerts, memory trees/benches, auctions

## THE BOWLS CLUB

We discovered the difficulties facing the Bowls Club (founded in 1931) at our 2019 AGM. For over 20 years Club members had maintained the green and Club house at their own expense, in lieu of paying rent to LB Hounslow. Having given up one green to make way for the Sports Hub building and been involved in preparing the Park's *Management and Maintenance Plan* for the regeneration scheme, they thought their future was secure and expected activity to expand once building work ended.

They were upset to discover that negotiations between their new chairman and the CIC were likely to lead to the Club's demise. He could not see any way in which their small membership could pay for the new repairing lease that was being proposed. It was unlikely that the Club would have time to plan a new future and recruit numerous new members to support its implementation.

It soon became clear that the CIC had a scheme in mind to hand the site over to Putt in the Park. This had been recommended by Chris Bunting, the Ealing Council officer who is that Borough's director on the CIC board. He happens to oversee Acton Park where the same firm has a comparable business. The CIC Chief Executive claims that it was desperate to have the income and that this was a much better use of the site.

Our lengthy comments, reported fully on [gunnersburyfriends.org](http://gunnersburyfriends.org), objected to both of the planning applications that were submitted in 2020 by Putt in the Park (not by the CIC). The applications sought approval to convert/extend the Club pavilion but did not mention the green as council officers deemed the change from bowls to putting remained within the same single planning category.

The first application was rejected primarily on the grounds that a key requirement of Hounslow Council's own policy was that every attempt had to be made to find an alternative use for a community asset of this kind, if it had not been used for over 18 months and no longer had a purpose, before marketing the site to find another user. No such search was undertaken before the second application and the planners again recommended rejection. On the evidence of the design of the firm's other operations we also felt that a tackily-designed putting attraction with artificial grass was not appropriate in a Listed Park, especially in this busy area of the Gunnersbury estate. Furthermore, looking at their other sites it appears that the business wants/needs a licensed bar in the Pavilion.

The January 2021 Hounslow Planning Committee was confused as to whether both putting and bowls could take place on the same site; when a councillor mentioned that the Gunnersbury Master Plan was being revised, as the minutes confirm, they deferred a decision until this work was finished. Bowls Club members had sought permission to maintain the green in case the application was rejected. The CIC refused.

Now the CIC is behaving as if this proposal is definitely going ahead, posting a piece here <https://www.visitgunnersbury.org/park/putt-in-the-park-at-gunnersbury/> and issuing leaflets asking people to register their interest. Putt in the Park has made a practice of trying to take over bowling green pavilions in other parks, for example in Colchester, but its recent bid to move onto Clapham Common was met with a vigorous local campaign and a refusal of planning permission.

An online meeting attended by Brentford ward councillors, representatives of the CIC, the Club, the Friends and Putt in the Park sought a compromise. David Bowler, for the CIC, claimed that since the proposal to do a deal with Putt in the Park came from one of the local authority directors on its board, there was no need to follow the process required

by the Hounslow policy to seek an alternative user.

The Club had proposed a re-design to enable them to share the site with the golf-themed operation and asked again for access to maintain and use the green during the coming season when it was likely to stand idle. David Bowler said it was not safe for them to work there as volunteers (though volunteers work all over the Park) and would not consider any suggestions made by the others present.

The Bowls Club submitted to Hounslow Council a petition, with over 600 names obtained in a very short time, asking for access. The petition, with a formal statement, was submitted to the Council meeting on 30 March. This did not resolve the matter of access.

The formal statement from Lead Member for Parks, Cllr Samia Chaudhary, states that 'Gunnersbury CIC, through a management agreement, manages the park on our behalf. These arrangements set out expectations for the maintenance and repair of assets at Gunnersbury, including the bowling green and associated facilities.' Also that she had asked for the CIC's maintenance plan for these facilities. 'The site has been surveyed and if the planning application is not successful the CIC will assess this survey and take appropriate remedial action.'

As we went to press we learnt of an outbreak of graffiti in the Park, some of which attacked David Bowler. The Bowls Club issued a statement expressing their horror and making clear that they wished to seek a resolution of their differences through civilised discussion and debate.

## SUEZ CANAL LINKS

Since the blockage of the Canal has been a major story in the news recently, readers may be surprised to know that in 1875 the London banking house of N M Rothschild & Sons advanced £4,000,000 so that the British Government could purchase Suez Canal shares. The Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli, was a close friend of Lionel de Rothschild and it is said that this loan was transacted as a gentleman's agreement, a technically unsecured loan for a sum worth over £550 million today. Were the negotiations held at Gunnersbury?

## FUTURE PROGRAMMES

Before the major regeneration programme, the Friends provided most of the public talks and walks at Gunnersbury, which had little funding and few staff. Large grants funded new staff to run a lively events programme after the regeneration so we stepped back.

Recently we have been exploring with Ellie Lewis-Nunes, the Heritage & Communities Manager for the Park and Museum, how we could develop some activities and events in partnership.

There is huge potential and we look forward to growing this new relationship.

## STOP PRESS!

The Culture Recovery Fund has awarded the CIC £365,000 in emergency funding to June 2021.

## NEWSLETTER 116

We will get back into a pattern of quarterly *Newsletters* from June. Contributions, images, news and ideas are always welcome. Send them to the Newsletter Editor, 25 Hartington Road W4 3TL or [info@gunnersburyfriends.org](mailto:info@gunnersburyfriends.org)

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[gunnersburyfriends.org](http://gunnersburyfriends.org) • [@gunnersbury1](mailto:@gunnersbury1) • [visitgunnersbury.org](http://visitgunnersbury.org) • [gunnersburytrust.wordpress.com](http://gunnersburytrust.wordpress.com)

## PROPERTY DEVELOPMENTS NEAR THE PARK

Work progresses on the new homes surrounding the Brentford F C Stadium in Lionel Road; we believe the master planning team is likely to recommend enhancing the neglected south-west entrance to the Park.

Transport for London has been given permission by LB Ealing for a series of residential towers along Bollo Lane, some of which will be visible from the Park. Having lost their appeal against refusal of planning permission the developers of The Curve, the 32 storey block on Chiswick Roundabout, have submitted new proposals for 22 storeys, also likely to be visible from the Terrace by the Mansions at Gunnersbury.

Most proposals for very large developments comment on the wonderful access to Gunnersbury Park's open spaces provided by their tiny flats, though they do not see the need to provide support to Gunnersbury for making their properties worth purchasing!

## AN ABSOLUTE PASSION: THE ROTHSCHILDS' ORCHID COLLECTIONS

**an on-line talk by Francesca Murray, 20 May 2021, 6.30pm**

**Book at <https://www.ticketsource.co.uk/booking/t-nrzzzp>**

Our speaker has researched the Rothschild family's passion for orchids at Gunnersbury, at Tring Park and at Exbury. The Rothschilds loved their gardens and many generations have indulged in the fashionable pastime of amassing collections of different plant species.

The story begins at Gunnersbury where Baroness Charlotte de Rothschild published her own catalogue of rare orchids from around the world. Cultivating these strange exotics in the Gunnersbury glasshouses was highly experimental and devoted head gardeners shared their findings between the family estates.

Nathaniel de Rothschild and his son – the famous zoologist Walter Rothschild – took up orchidology at Tring Park too. Charlotte's son, Leopold, presented George V with Gunnersbury orchids in a specially designed Fabergé vase for his Coronation.

Leopold's son, Lionel (1884-1942), developed his first garden at the age of 5, and took Gunnersbury orchids and rhododendrons with him to his new garden at Exbury, Hampshire, in 1919 where his experiments in the scientific field of orchid hybridisation resulted in a fine collection of 28,000 plants by WWII.

This astonishing story provides a glimpse of how the Rothschilds' investment in their Gunnersbury gardens paid off for the benefit of the wider gardening community and is not to be missed!

## MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS

Subscriptions are renewable on 1 April and cost £10, payable by Standing Order or by cheque. Subscriptions and donations attract Gift Aid and we are happy to discuss the possibility of legacies to support our work for the Park and Museum. Do encourage others to join as greater numbers make us stronger and increase our funds with which to make grants to the Park and Museum. The subscription form is on our website here: [gunnersburyfriends.org/friends/join-the-friends](http://gunnersburyfriends.org/friends/join-the-friends). You can contact the Membership Secretary at The Manor House, Ampney St Peter, Cirencester, Gloucestershire GL7 5SH