

Wandsworth Society

February 2008

In this newsletter - should more and more low flying planes and more and more high-rise buildings be allowed to dominate our town centre?
And we mourn the passing of the Museum.

Tall storeys – how high should we aspire?

As far as we are aware, nowhere in the Borough's UDP plan, or the new LDF documents, is reference made to plans in the future for Wandsworth involving 39-storey buildings. Very tall buildings by their nature are prominent, pronounced but, in the right hands, can be sensational. They have always been associated with "downtown" areas of cities – Manhattan probably being the most famous example. Arguably, we have Canary Wharf as a "downtown" area of high rise, marking the home of a series of global banks. These are about 50 storeys high. We need to ask ourselves, however, whether such buildings are suitable in Victorian and Edwardian city suburbs where the scale and context of buildings are on a dramatically different human scale. Certainly, we should ask ourselves whether they are suitable for housing.

At our last Society meeting, we were informed that, outside Sheffield and Glasgow, Wandsworth has, with 102 blocks, the highest concentration of buildings above 10 storeys in height for public housing. We should recall that, when tall buildings were first proposed for living in by the many rather than the few – Le Corbusier's Cité radieuse being probably the leading example – they were envisaged as a means of counteracting urban sprawl by concentrating development in a single large building or series of such buildings. The benefit to cities was to be the release of land at ground level to form swathes of open space or parks and piazzas in conventional cities. The post-war leaders in town planning created their own vision; it can be seen locally at the Livingston Estate north of Clapham Junction where homes were concentrated in high densities within the high rise buildings which released land on the site to form York Gardens – an urban park serving the estate and wider area. At the vast, and partially listed, Alton Estate, there are, for example, the five famous Le Corbusier-styled blocks, each containing 75 two-storey family homes. Raised on piloti, their form released the acres of surrounding mature parkland and open fields as fine, landscaped public open space, which is still visited by people from all over the world, such is its international importance in town planning. Within the context of an existing city centre, Paternoster Square in the cramped City of London saw land released as a piazza at the foot of two point blocks.

The reaction of families being housed in this type of building was such that, by the mid 1970s, they were no longer being built. The gradual demise of tall housing blocks in the public sector was followed by low-rise, high-density housing developments

of which there are many examples. Developments of this kind rose to a maximum of 5/6 storeys and were generally built around public courtyards and squares to form a dense urban fabric, replicating traditional patterns, with families accommodated much closer to the ground.

The tall blocks and high density housing schemes were the direct consequence of a "housing crisis" in the 50s and 60s. We are once again facing another such crisis, and Councils such as Wandsworth are set high housing targets to achieve over a set number of years, the current one being for a further 7500 new homes to be provided within the next five years. If this target is coupled with rising land prices, especially for inner London "brownfield" sites, and the greed of developers, which is reflected in their briefs to their architects, the pattern is set for ultra-high densities of development in which the established principles of town planning will be shredded. Indeed, we are now seeing site development plans being tabled to Wandsworth Council in which high-rise, high-density tall buildings of up to 39 storeys are coupled with low-rise, high-density building complexes.

This new type of proposal, such as those for the Young's and the Clapham Junction Development sites, are grossly over density, and not only disregard the balances generally observed by either tall high-rise or low-rise, high-density, as discussed, but also appear to pay scant regard to other fundamental matters such as the increased demands on social infrastructure – on schools and surgeries for example; on public transport and roads; on utilities – the strain to be imposed on an elderly maze of sewers, power supplies and water.

We are now seeing the emergence of a planning system as a reactive force to developer-led, site-by-site developments rather than as a vehicle for future aspirations and joined-up thinking within a much broader context. This has been the thrust behind the Society's concerns for Wandsworth's town centre. This change of emphasis in town planning with the Council's connivance with developers at both Member and Officer level is of deep concern to us. Surely, on any rational argument, twin, 39-storey housing towers on a tiny site at Clapham Junction is quite inappropriate. Equally so are the twin towers proposed at Young's.

John Dawson

At 5.00 pm on Sunday 30th December 2007, Wandsworth Museum passed away after a long and valiant battle. Over the preceding weeks, hundreds of friends and supporters came to pay their respects and share in the Museum's final days.

Wandsworth Museum was born in Putney Library in 1986. The idea of establishing a local museum had been gathering support since the suggestion was put forward by a member of the Wandsworth Historical Society in the 1960s.

Wandsworth Borough Council agreed to make available three floors in Putney Library and appointed a professional museum development officer. The Chairman of Leisure & Amenity Services at this time was Councillor Edward Lister who gave the project his full support. The Museum was able to draw on the collections of the Wandsworth Historical Society and the Wandsworth Local History Library but these soon grew as residents presented local artefacts and purchases were made with grants and donations. Notable acquisitions included a fine Victorian painting of Putney embankment and the magnificent portrait of William Brodrick, Court Embroiderer to James 1st, purchased with a grant from the V&A.

The Museum's popularity rose rapidly with visitors increasing from 11,000 in 1988 to 20,000 by 1991, the year that the first Museum Education Officer was appointed. The Museum was so successful that the Council decided to move it to the larger Courthouse in central Wandsworth where it opened in 1996, attracting over 30,000 visitors annually by 2007.

As the Museum's reputation grew, other museums and historical organisations outside the Borough came forward, lending items of unique importance to Wandsworth. The resulting displays, combining the Museum's own collection and items on loan, covered a huge span of Wandsworth's past, from pre-historic artefacts to recent cultural and ethnic changes.

Most of the Museum's social history material was donated by local people and included domestic and personal items, costumes, wartime and military artefacts. Wandsworth's artistic heritage was represented by artists such as Miles de Montmorency and Edward Ashenden. The Olney

collection of 2,000 photographs was another local donation.

The Museum was particularly noted for housing over 300 watercolour paintings, recording local views from the late 18th century, the Wandle mills, River Thames, bridges, villages and large houses of the area as well as portraits and memorabilia of famous residents such as the "Dockers' Champion", the radical MP John Burns, the poet Edward Thomas and Saklatvala, the Indian MP for Battersea.

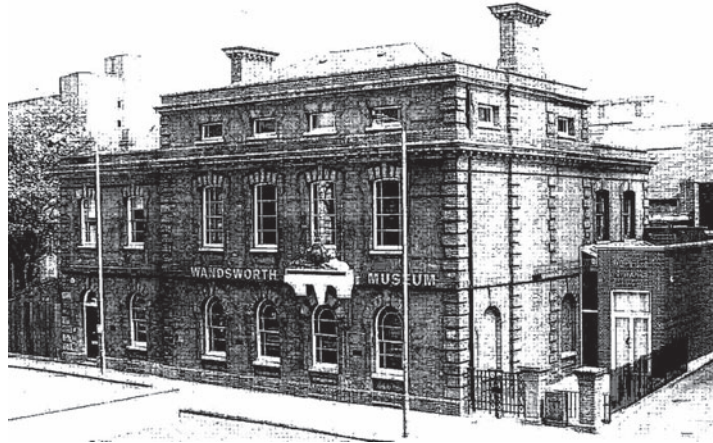
One of the most outstanding aspects of the Museum was its Education Service which offered object-based sessions on many local history topics, such as Roman Putney, Victorian Life and World War II, linked to the national curriculum and used by most primary and special schools in the Borough. In the year 2005/06 alone, 325 school visits were made to the Museum involving over 8,000 pupils. Special sessions focused on key individuals who had left their mark on Wandsworth, such as John Archer, Battersea's Black Mayor. These activities often made use of the Museum's Oral History collection - over 150 individual recorded memories, many about the personal experiences of residents during World War II.

Wandsworth Museum was also notable for pioneering outreach with handling sessions and illustrated talks at community centres, church groups, elderly day centres, stroke clubs and hospitals. Travelling exhibitions were organised that toured libraries around the Borough. The Museum's programme of community engagement included a project in Roehampton where young people worked on recording oral history with local residents. A partnership was put in place with South Thames College who used the Museum with students from all over the world to develop language skills.

Jenny Kershaw, Putney resident and Education Officer at the Museum of Fulham Palace, said:

"I am extremely sorry to see the demise of Wandsworth Museum. Both in my capacity as a fellow professional and as a local resident, I always found it to be of the highest calibre. Within the museum world it was always acknowledged to be a centre of excellence with a good and well attended schools service. The Museum gave quality to the Borough, reflecting

But – hopefully, not the final chapter



all the very diverse mix of communities. Without it there, the Borough loses its voice and sinks into mediocrity.”

As well as formal events, the Museum provided regular holiday activities combining history, music, arts & crafts accessible to people of all ages and backgrounds. Mrs Subha Iyer, a regular family visitor explained:

“My son, Siddarth, definitely learned a lot from the Museum over the last three years. He developed an interest in history and the craft workshops helped him to think creatively. He developed a ear for music from the soap opera workshop and the story-telling sessions encouraged him to read and act out stories.”

Another frequent visitor to the Museum, Lyn Clark, said:

“Already sorely missed are the light-hearted “Tea and Talk” sessions held for adults in the afternoon. We all learnt so much and enjoyed sharing snippets of our own knowledge and experiences; these were always very popular with WOFA (Wandsworth Over Fifties Activities) members.”

Over the years, the Museum ran a remarkable range of temporary exhibitions, showing items from the reserve collection and exploring new topics. Subjects included photography, Wartime in Wandsworth, transport, health, working lives, architecture, brewing and pubs, Asian Festivals, the Black presence in Wandsworth, 1930s & 1950s - all reflecting and communicating Wandsworth’s rich

history and cultural roots.

In 2006, Wandsworth Museum became one of the first London museums to be awarded the new national Museum Accreditation Standard from the Museums Libraries & Archives Council – an award that recognised the outstanding quality of its work in education and in outreach with all sectors of the community of Wandsworth. The award was the highest possible acknowledgement of the vibrant and irreplaceable role the Museum played in the Borough and its vital contribution to promoting a sense of inclusion and identity.

The Museum leaves behind 10,000 orphaned artefacts, a collection that embodies the collective memories and heritage of a community it served for twenty-one years.

Can the Hintzes and the new Museum Board produce a Phoenix to rise from the ashes? We all fervently hope so.

Submitted by:

The Balham Society, the Battersea Society, the Putney Society, the Friends of Wandsworth Museum, the Wandsworth Historical Society, the Wandsworth Society, the Wandsworth Museum Campaign Group

A flight too far ...



The public meeting in Putney to oppose plans for the Heathrow extension was well publicised and consequently packed, but it was definitely worth while hearing Justine Greening (Conservative MP for Putney) talk on figures, white papers and the main issues at stake.

Even though the meeting flyer announced "All day flights over Putney", it was obvious that for both Ms Greening and her audience, noise is no longer the main cause of debate; the issue uniting public feeling, and incidentally leading the 4 mayoral candidates to agree at least on one point, is that of the environment. Firstly, Ms Greening explained the 2 extension plans. The more imminent is the "mixed mode" clause – this means that while up until now landing and taking off have been alternated between the two runways available, mixed mode would allow both manoeuvres from both runways, and consequently the possibility to move more aircraft, all day. The second proposal is an extension the size of Gatwick around a new, third runway. In 2003, a White Paper accepted the idea of mixed mode "but only with the most stringent environmental tests". But, Ms Greening assured us, the air pollution levels acceptable for 2010 have already been reached: environmentally, Heathrow is already illegal. The second proposal looks even more environmentally damaging, with a probable 67 million more passengers leaving or arriving at Heathrow, with no explanation as to how public or private transport will move these passengers on the ground. More damningly, environmental data testing is done by BAA itself; Ms Greening explained that she had asked DEFRA about their role in the environmental testing and was told that they (this is the Department of the ENVIRONMENT) weren't involved. The plot thickens when one hears that all the minutes that Ms Greening requested of the relevant parliamentary discussion groups had the environmental data blanked out....

A major issue that worried all the speakers – Ms Greening as well as Edward Lister and John Stewart of the HACAN group – was the consultation document, issued to

sound out public opinion. Ms Greening prefaced her remarks on the document with an anecdote about the last public consultation on aircraft: the proposal for night flights. Though the consultation said that there was public support for these, after ploughing through many hundreds of letters from the public, Ms Greening's group were able to find only three correspondents in favour of night flights. The present consultation document, at 238 pages long, is both inaccessible and unavailable. This came about because the document was sent only to those homes which would experience a raised noise level of over 70 db. Pressure is being brought not only to increase the number of documents circulated but also to extend the consultation beyond its 27th February deadline.

So what are the alternatives? Ms Greening felt that 1/3 of all flights into and out of Heathrow could be done by fast train, and Mr Stewart re-iterated that Heathrow's main destination is Paris, i.e. just a Chunnel away. There was mention of a new airport in the Thames Estuary, as proposed 20 years ago, but this was not elaborated on. In fact, the questions from the audience were generally disappointing, degenerating into a political Labour versus Conservatives fight which missed the point that here was a packed church hall seemingly united in opinion.

If you haven't received the consultation document and would like one, the number to ring is: 0845 600 4170; otherwise available on

www.dft.gov.uk/heathrowconsultation

If you would like to write to oppose the plans: address letters to the
Ruth Kelly
Secretary of State for Transport
Great Minster House
76 Marsham Street London
SW1P 4DR.

Post script

This is the Newsletter of The Wandsworth Society, a registered charity no 263737. The Society is concerned with the quality of life and the environment in Wandsworth town centre, Wandsworth Common and adjacent areas. If you are not already a member and would like to join please contact the Membership Secretary Gill Gray, details on our web site

wandsworthsociety.org.uk

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