

THE
MONTPELIER
AND
CLIFTON HILL

ASSOCIATION
NEWSLETTER
No. 12 March 2012



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Photographic credits:

Cover: Stephanie Pain, pages 2, 3, and 5 (bottom). The James Gray Collection/The Regency Society page 5 (top). Stephanie Pain pages 6, 7 and 8.

Correction:

The winners of our conservation awards were Jon Sharpe and Angela Oliver, not John. Apologies.

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Look back with pride

FORTY-THREE years ago Valerie Kingman and Peter Rose organised a highly effective campaign to prevent two tower blocks being built in Montpelier Terrace, on the site of what is now Heather Court.

We can all be grateful that their campaign was a success and that the developers were not allowed to build that eyesore in our area.

But the organisers of the campaign also had the foresight to see that our area needed a permanent group to press the case for conservation—and so they founded the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association, a local group to defend the local area.

Over the years the wisdom of our founders has paid off. In the 1980s the MCHA saw off the “Breeze into Brighton” road plans, which would have seen a motorway-style road ploughing through the conservation area on the way to the seafront.

More recently in 2007 the MCHA helped local residents to defeat plans to create a new tower block on the southern frontier of our conservation area by adding two storeys to the height of Mitre House. Mitre House is now being converted into a hotel with only a very modest mansard roof being added to the lower parts of the northern block.

The Royal Alex has been the association's flagship campaign for the past four years. First, the MCHA persuaded the planning committee to reject the plan to demolish the main building. Taylor Wimpey appealed. The MCHA won the subsequent four-day public inquiry.

We then opened a dialogue with Taylor Wimpey. Compromise was inevitable. But we convinced the company that it should keep the main building, as Graham Towers explained earlier this year on the



Royal Alex eyesore gets the chop

BBC Television programme *Britain's Empty Homes*.

With the plans to build a high-rise hotel on the ice rink site we have almost come full circle. The MCHA drew on the experience developed in the Mitre House and Royal Alex campaigns to give practical support to local residents, and particularly those in Wykeham Terrace. We won the first round of this campaign and we are now in a good position to challenge any future application.

Our campaign to rid the area of estate agents boards is paying dividends and the MCHA is now also talking to the council about introducing replica original street signs. And we continue to have an active social programme with more than 80 people attending our Christmas party.

This is a solid record of achievement. But sadly the threats to our beautiful area never quite disappear and we need your support now, just as we did in 1969. So call a friend—or a neighbour—and ask them to join us.

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The MCHA executive committee consists of **Jim Gowans**, Chairman, **Mick Hamer**, vice-chair, **Chris Jackson**, Honorary Treasurer, **Corinne Attwood**, Honorary Secretary, **Alan Legg**, Membership Secretary, **Pauline Messum**, **Lori Pinkerton-Rolet**, **Ian Thorburn**, **Graham Towers**, planning group and **Gabi Tubbs**, conservation awards. The co-opted members are **Carol Dyhouse**, **David King** and **Jane Osler**.

MEMBERSHIP SUBSCRIPTIONS: Single membership is £10 and couples £15, corporate £30.

Royal Alexandra quarter

Demolition work finishes on the Royal Alex

IN THE next couple of months Taylor Wimpey will submit a fresh planning application for the Royal Alex. But this is one that the MCHA hopes to be able to support.

Following a series of structural tests on the the much-loved main building, Taylor Wimpey now intends to develop the building's roofspace. The most likely plan is to create a mezzanine floor for the the top floor flats extending them into the eaves. This won't create any extra housing units but it will make the top-floor flats much larger.

Ever since the first planning application on this site the MCHA has been arguing that extra floor space could be found in the conversion by extending into the roof. So in principle this is a plan that we should be able to welcome.

Demolition work finished on the Royal Alex site at the end of



A sad loss: the Victorian villa on Dyke Road

February. The Victorian villa, and the other turn-of-the-century buildings have all been reduced to rubble and removed. The main building, which was the focus of the MCHA's campaign to save the Alex, remains. It is now shrouded by sheeting and the 1920s wing on Dyke Road has been removed as the first step to restoring the building to its former glory.

Work on constructing a temporary marketing suite with show flats is progressing apace and Taylor Wimpey has dubbed the new development the Royal Alexandra Quarter as part of its marketing strategy. Taylor Wimpey plans to name the new blocks after the old hospital wards. The main building will be called the Lainson Building, after Thomas Lainson the local architect who designed it.

Taylor Wimpey is now holding regular meetings with the local residents who are most closely affected by the works. And the company is also scheduled to have a

meeting with the MCHA later this month (March).

The meeting will discuss not only the new plans for developing into the eaves of the main building but also we want to explore the practicality of having replica street lamps and street signs on the site.

From the company's point of view replica cast iron and tile street signs would be a relatively cheap way of supporting the marketing strategy of giving the new blocks the old hospital ward names. Any signing will partly depend on the postal addresses issued by the Royal Mail.

There are three clusters of original 1920s street lights in our area, all on the eastern side close to the Royal Alexandra Quarter. One is in Powis Square, there is a second in Clifton Terrace and a third in St Nick's churchyard (see bottom left).

One of the difficulties with old street lights is that they do not provide enough illumination on busy main roads. But while this rules out replica street lamps on Dyke Road they are practical on smaller streets and would certainly be suitable for internal lighting on the Royal Alex site and even on Clifton Hill.

The original street lights in our area were made for the Brighton, Lancing and Eastbourne Electricity Company. It is still possible to buy replicas of the original design that meet modern electrical standards

The use of replica street lights on the Royal Alex site would help to provide a visual link between the modern blocks and the rest of the conservation area and help to kick start the MCHA's campaign for original street lights by creating a fourth cluster.



Could the Alex have replica lights?

How things began

The MCHA's founders recall our very first planning battle

WHEN Valerie Kingman and Peter Rose found out about plans to build two tower blocks on the site of the Arnold House Hotel in Montpelier Terrace they were appalled.

The odds were stacked against the local residents, *writes Mick Hamer*. Back in 1969 planning applications were not advertised. People were not consulted and the ethos was that the planners knew best. Brighton did not have any conservation areas and although Montpelier Lodge was listed, its twin Arnold House was not. In normal circumstances the council would simply rubber-stamp the application.

But Valerie Kingman and Peter Rose, who both lived in Montpelier Villas, were made of sterner stuff. They organised a hasty petition against the development, which was signed by two hundred local residents. The local Regency ward councillor Poppy (Constance) Nettleton presented the petition to Brighton Council on 25th September.

At the time conservation areas were a relatively new concept. In 1967 Parliament had passed the Civic Amenities Act, a private members' bill promoted by Duncan Sandys. This act gave councils the power to establish conservation areas. Then as now, the distinctive feature of a conservation area is that buildings cannot be demolished without planning permission.

The organisers of the petition told the *Brighton and Hove Gazette* that the council was "dragging its feet" in using the legislation to create conservation areas, which could have prevented Arnold House from being demolished. They told the paper that the council's delay "means that the uniquely beautiful areas of Brighton are left very vulnerable".

The petition did the trick. The developers had wanted to build six or seven-storey blocks on the site, which would have been out of scale with the surrounding buildings and robbed many people of their sea



The letter that started it all appeared in the *Brighton and Hove Gazette* on 17th October 1969

views. Two weeks later the town clerk wrote to the petition's organisers saying that the council would not allow anything higher than three or four storeys on the site.

"We were struck by the defeatist attitude of people when we went round collecting signatures," says Peter Rose, who still lives in Montpelier Villas. People repeatedly told us: "It's not worth the bother. They never take any notice of us."

Valerie Kingman and Peter Rose decided to build on their success and set up a local group to protect the area. They wrote to the local papers asking people who were interested and lived in the area to get in touch with a view to setting up "some more permanent form of local association."

The letter was published in all three local papers, *The Brighton and Hove Gazette*, *The Evening Argus* (with the headline "Come join the

tower haters group") as well as the *Brighton and Hove Herald*.

The letter could not have been better timed. The day before the letter was published in the *Gazette*, the Historic Buildings Council—a forerunner of English Heritage—slammed Brighton Corporation for its chronic failure to protect the historic heart of Brighton by drawing up a "town scheme". Although the Historic Buildings Council had been urging action on Brighton since 1960 it was so far from the political agenda that when asked about it by the *Evening Argus* the chairman of Brighton's historic building sub-committee said: "Town scheme. What town scheme? I don't know what they're talking about."

The prevailing mood did not favour conservation. The chairman of the planning committee added: "Some projects are impractical, would hold up useful development and be a burden on the rates."

"The result of our letter was an extraordinary outpouring of public feeling," says Peter Rose. A few weeks later more than a hundred people turned up at the Norfolk Hotel (now the Mercure Brighton) on the sea front for a public meeting, which was chaired by John Orpen, a local solicitor and then chairman of the Regency Society. The meeting agreed to set up a steering group and in 1970 that became the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association.

The MCHA, under its first chairman Frank Edmonds, quickly became a powerful and effective voice for conservation. Despite several requests to expand the association's area to cover other parts of the city, the MCHA resisted these pleas. Its original letter to the papers specified a triangular area that was bounded by the Hove boundary to the west, and Dyke Road to the east. "Why such a small area? The triangle we identified was like a small village in a town, it was an identifiable community," says Peter Rose.

Instead of expanding its area the MCHA encouraged other areas to set up their own local conservation societies and Valerie's husband, John Kingman, chaired an umbrella grouping of local groups.

"I remember when we were setting up the Preston and Old Patcham Society in 1973," says Selma Montfort, who is now secretary of the Brighton Society, "one of the committee members of the MCHA came to advise us on how to set up the society and how to lobby effectively."

Our founders took two other key decisions. First, they decided that the MCHA should have a social side, a tradition that still continues. And secondly they decided the MCHA should become a charity, which it did in August 1974.

In the early 1970s the political mood swung away from the ruthless modernism of the 1960s and began to favour conservation. Brighton designated its first batch of conservation areas in 1970, followed by a second batch in 1973, which included the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Conservation Area.

When the MCHA was first set up there were only 90 listed buildings in its area. But in 1971 the council carried out a major review of historic buildings in the area, which resulted in more than 200 new listings. This all came a bit late for Arnold House. This wasn't the first time that the hotel had been threatened with demolition. Back in 1959 the council had threatened to compulsorily purchase the hotel in order to build a school. The plans came to nothing.

But this time there was no reprieve. Demolition began in May 1971. But Heather Court, the block of flats that replaced it, is far smaller than it might have been. So the next time you're passing, take a good look at this rather nondescript block. If it wasn't for the MCHA's founders it could have been twice as tall.



Arnold House (above centre) and Montpelier Lodge (right) were originally twins. Montpelier Lodge was listed in 1952, but Arnold House was not, because its facade had been spoilt by poor Victorian alterations. Henry Willet, whose porcelain collection is in the Brighton Museum, lived in Arnold House until 1903. Since 1928 the two houses had been run as a hotel, offering cheap and cheerful weeks by the sea. "From six guineas to 11 guineas per week, per person...the brightest, best-value, entertainment-packed holiday in Britain...Send for our jollity programme," ran the advertising blurb. The hotel's heyday was in the 1930s. In those days 300 guests would pass through its doors every week. After Arnold House was demolished in 1971 the hotel continued to operate from Montpelier Lodge until the owner, Hazel Lickfold, retired in the late 1980s.



Planning round-up

Back door bolted

PLANS to convert the north block of Mitre House into a hotel were approved by the council in February. But local residents persuaded the planning committee to impose vital conditions that will curb noise and traffic in nearby streets.

Mitre House is the run-down block on the north side of Western Road, which houses Sainsbury's. The block extends from Spring Street in the east, to Hampton Place in the west and Hampton Street to the north.

Conversion of the north block of Mitre House into a hotel was approved by the planning committee in November 2010, with the condition that hotel's back door in Hampton Street could only be used in an emergency to prevent rowdy hen and stag parties disturbing local residents in the middle of the night.

But in 2011 the developers filed a new planning application, creating new entrances in Spring Street and Hampton Street, in an apparent attempt to circumvent the 2010 condition. Returning revellers would have been able to use the rear doors



Quiet nights: hotel guests will not be able to use Hampton Street

in the early hours of the morning creating noise and extra traffic. The committee agreed to reimpose the same condition and also to insist that all hotel deliveries will be made on Western Road.

This marks a largely successful end to the Mitre House saga. In 2007 the owners put in a planning application to add two storeys to both the north block of Mitre House

and the southern block on Western Road. Mitre House is already the tallest building in Western Road. The extra storeys would have destroyed many of the conservation area's seaviews.

The council threw out these plans after receiving 176 objections, largely as a result of a MCHA-financed leaflet which was distributed to 2,000 households.

One success follows another

IN little more than 18 months the conservation area has gone from being blighted by estate agents' boards to having just one board left.

The council introduced a ban on estate agents' boards throughout the conservation area and over much of the city centre in September 2010. Before the ban took effect there were more than 60 "for sale", "to let" and "for rent" boards in the area.

At first observance of the ban was rather patchy. In February 2011 a new board went up in Victoria Street, but it came down within 24 hours after the MCHA told the council about it.

Part of the problem was boards erected before September were legal and the council needed unequivocal proof before it could prosecute. So the MCHA teamed up with the

council to carry out a survey of existing boards in the conservation area in early 2011.

The survey established that the number of boards in the area had dropped half in the six months since the ban. But getting rid of the other half has taken far longer.

Last year Jim Gowans, MCHA chairman, wrote to local estate agents asking them to consider taking down voluntarily. Several estate agents wrote to us as a result, saying how much the ban had improved the look of the city's conservation areas.

Now only one board remains in our area: outside 12 Montpelier Terrace. Once a board was a cheap advert for an estate agent, now it advertises the fact that a property is hard to sell.



Last board standing

Ice rink plans frozen out

Local opposition forces high-rise hotel rethink

PLANS to build a high-rise hotel on the old ice rink site in Queen Square have been withdrawn after more than 200 people objected. The planning committee had been due to consider the plans at its meeting on 1st February. But the developers withdrew the scheme just days before the committee meeting.

Developers Stonehurst Estates told *The Argus* that the plans had been withdrawn because of “a technicality”. But the planners had been widely expected to reject the plan, partly because of the sheer weight of local objections. The MCHA understands that when the council suggested that the height of the building could be reduced the developers were inflexible.

Developers often use the tactic of withdrawing plans in order to avoid having a refusal on their record. By withdrawing the planning application the developers forfeit the planning fee of £16,865.

Stonehurst Estates wanted to build an upmarket six-storey hotel on the site of the old ice rink at the top of Queen Square. The scheme was designed by the Brighton office of architects Conran and Partners.

The ice rink site is owned by the council and the purchase of the site, for an undisclosed sum, seems to be conditional on a successful planning application.

The MCHA objected because of the impact on St Nick's and the churchyard and on Wykeham Terrace. All the main local groups voiced objections to the plans, including the Clifton Montpelier, Powis Community Alliance, St Nicholas Church Parochial Church Council, St Nicholas Green Spaces Association and the Wykeham Terrace Residents' Association. Among the other objectors were local councillors Lizzie Deane and Pete West as well as the Brighton Society and the Regency Society.

Most of the objections were concerned about the height. The six-



The hotel would have overshadowed St Nick's historic graveyard

storey building would have been roughly the same height as the roof of the multi-storey office block in Queen Square. The sheer scale of the building would have dominated both the southern part of St Nicholas's churchyard and the back of Wykeham Terrace. Both the churchyard and Wykeham Terrace are listed and together they mark the south-east boundary of the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Conservation Area.

With practical help from the MCHA, the Wykeham Terrace Residents' Association financed and distributed a thousand copies of a leaflet outlining the impact of the plans on the surrounding area. The final tally of objectors topped 200.

The council's planning guidance, which was published in March 2009, and is largely a restatement of the current planning rules, said that four storeys was likely to be the maximum height of any development on the ice rink site.

The hotel plan ignored most of the council's planning rules, including the tall buildings policy. The council defines a tall building as being higher than 18 metres. The hotel plans exceeded 18 metres. The

tall building policy says: “In general new tall buildings in Brighton and Hove should not be within conservation areas, nor should they visually impinge on the setting of/or important views of listed buildings or conservation areas.”

The churchyard and the associated green spaces “provide a valuable open space on the site overlooking Brighton town centre”, according to the council's conservation area character statement

Many locals were also concerned that the hotel would attract rowdy guests. The developers said it would be an upmarket hotel. But the marketing for the sister hotel in Manchester says: “Our packages are perfect for corporate celebrations & events, girly weekends away & hen/stag parties, & offer groups of any size, excellent value for money.”

Given how close the hotel balconies were to homes in Queen Square and Wykeham Terrace the potential for late-night party noise was considerable.

So it's round one to the residents and it's back to the drawing board for the developers. But it is unlikely that this is the end of the story. Watch this space.

Cesspits and cisterns

Life in the days before running water

MOST of the houses in our area were built before there was running water or mains drainage. So water was kept in cisterns and sewage was dumped in cesspits. Even today people occasionally uncover a cistern or a cesspit when digging the garden.

Trevor Povey, who was speaking to an MCHA meeting in February at Brighton Girls' High School regaled members with stories of chamber pots and bourdaloues, water carriers and the shadowy night soil men and how Montpelier and Clifton Hill was eventually connected to the mains.

Georgian Brighton was an insanitary town. The main river ran over the Steine and there were watercress beds at the bottom of St James' Street. But people dug their cesspits in the chalk, polluting the local water supply and causing regular outbreaks of cholera.

Part of the stimulus for developing around Clifton Hill was to escape the stench of the town centre. The prevailing westerly winds sweeping up the English Channel carried the stink east, so the rich escaped by moving west.

But it was several decades before these houses were connected to the mains. And in the days before people had any understanding of the need for high standards of hygiene even the upmarket townhouses in Powis Square had an open cesspit, which would have been emptied when necessary by the night soil men.

Trevor Povey showed the drainage plans for a house in Powis Square. The plans, which probably date from the 1870s, when the house was connected to the sewage system, show a cesspit and toilet at the rear directly underneath the kitchen and scullery windows.

"It scarcely bears thinking about," says Ann Smith, who lives in Powis Square. "You would have to have the windows open in the summer because of the heat. And all those bluebottles...It would have been disgusting."



Even the upmarket houses in Powis Square had insanitary cesspits

These arrangements help to explain the popularity of chamber pots and bourdaloues. A bourdaloue was a chamber pot specially designed for women and named after Louis Bourdaloue, a 17th-century French preacher, whose sermons were so notoriously long winded that they taxed even the strongest bladders.

Water carriers were part of everyday life. The richer houses might send their servants down to the main public well in North Street to carry the water back in buckets, two buckets hanging from either end of a yoke, which was carried over the shoulders. Or it might be delivered by a water carrier—essentially a barrel on a cart pulled by a donkey.

The quality of this water supply was poor, said Trevor Povey, which helped to explain the popularity of beer. Indeed it was only once good quality mains water became available in late Victorian times that the temperance movement was able to gain ground.

Brighton's first mains supply began in 1834. It was provided by the Brighton Hove and Preston Waterworks Company from a well in Lewes Road.

But only a handful of wealthy householders could afford to be connected. The mains were made from hollowed out trunks of elms and the supply only lasted for two hours a day. And the pressure of the supply was so low that only a trickle of water came out of the tap.

It wasn't until 1853 that the Brighton Hove and Preston Constant Water Service Company started up, with the revolutionary concept of supplying mains water for 24 hours a day. The two companies merged the next year, which caused some of the elm mains to blow because the hollow tree trunks couldn't cope with the higher pressure.

But it was only after the council took over the water supply in 1872 that most houses in the town were to be connected to the mains. And even in the early years of the 20th century it was still a good selling point for houses to claim that "gas and water are laid on".

So if you do come across a hole in your garden how do you tell if it was a cistern or a cesspit? The answer, said Trevor Povey, is that if the brickwork is rendered it was a cistern. If it is not, it was a cesspit.