

THE
MONTPELIER

AND

CLIFTON HILL

ASSOCIATION

NEWSLETTER

No 9 spring 2011



Royal Alex victory
New ice rink plans
***plus* planning round-up**

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No sooner have we saved the Royal Alex than another battle looms. This time it is the old ice rink site in Queen Square.

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Updating our constitution

OUR constitution is nearly 38 years old and beginning to show its age. We have been promising to update it for several years. Finally we have got round to it. And not a moment too soon.

The new plans for the old ice rink site (see back page) to the south of St Nicholas's Church could be just as controversial as the Royal Alex. If there is a public inquiry into these plans the MCHA would be effectively barred by the current constitution from making an effective contribution.

The constitution was drawn up before there was a conservation area. Currently the eastern boundary of the MCHA area is Dyke Road. Several parts of the official Montpelier and Clifton Hill conservation area lie east of Dyke Road, notably St Nick's church and Wykeham Terrace.

Furthermore our current constitution stipulates that the association is only concerned with promoting high standards of planning and architecture in the

MCHA area. The committee wants to ease these restrictions so that our area includes not only the original 1973 area but also the whole of the conservation area. The change would mean that St Nick's and Wykeham terrace are officially part of "our" area. The changes will also allow us to challenge developments, such as the ice rink, that affect our area. Currently we are hamstrung, because we can only comment on sites inside our area.

There are also a number of other changes designed to update the constitution. Members will have received notices of a special general meeting to make these changes.

Mike Robins

MIKE Robins, who was an MCHA committee member and one of the city's best known tour guides, died in January. He was 64. Mike was a committee member from 2005 to 2009. There will be an appreciation of his work in the forthcoming summer newsletter.

The MCHA's cool Yule party

MORE than 100 members attended the MCHA's hugely successful free Christmas party, which was held in St Nicholas's church. The party was treated to songs by Father Robert Chavner, accompanied by Anne Campbell on piano. Anne and Sue on saxophone gave some traditional Christmas carols a modern lustre while Jo Mortimer brought along the Brighton Vox Community choir to round off the evening's entertainment with some seasonal carols.



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The MCHA executive committee consists of **Mick Hamer**, Chairman, **Chris Jackson**, Honorary Treasurer, **Jim Gowans**, Honorary Secretary, **Alan Legg**, Membership Secretary, **Richard Killick**, newsletter editor, **Gabi Tubbs**, conservation awards, **Graham Towers**, planning group, **Ian Thorburn** and **Lori Pinkerton-Rolet**. The position of vice chairman is vacant. The co-opted members are **Carol Dyhouse**, **Corinne Attwood** and **Pauline Messum**.

The Alex is safe at last

Council's unanimous vote saves the Royal Alex

ON 23rd February the council's planning committee voted unanimously to approve Taylor Wimpey's plan to convert the main hospital building. It was the culmination of the association's long campaign to save the Alex.

In October Taylor Wimpey submitted two planning applications. One was for the complete demolition of everything on the site. The other one featured the conversion of the main hospital building.

The association printed about 2000 leaflets. Together with our colleagues in the West Hill Community Association we distributed the leaflets to households in our conservation areas. The leaflets urged people to object to the demolition option and support the conversion option. A further 6000 leaflets were distributed throughout the city thanks to *Regency* magazine.

The objections to the demolition option began to flood in. In all the council received more than 180 objections. The council published the planners' report on the two options on 14th February. The planners recommended refusing the demolition option and approving conversion.

On 22nd February, the day before the planning committee meeting, Taylor Wimpey bowed to the inevitable and withdrew the demolition option. So conversion was the only option on the table. The future of the Alex was getting more secure by the minute.

The conversion option had attracted an unusually high level of support, with more than 50 people writing in to back conversion. The main conservation groups in the city all supported the conversion, as did the Victorian Society and English Heritage. But there were two dozen local objections.

About half of the objections were concerned about the impact of the new blocks of flats behind the main building on houses in Clifton Hill. Taylor Wimpey made concessions to reduce the height of the blocks backing on to Clifton Hill.

About half a dozen people objected to the demolition of other buildings on the site, notably the Victorian villa on Dyke Road. And another half a dozen objections were



Terracotta detail on the south facade

concerned about the lack of a GP surgery in the conversion. These objections were backed by a petition signed by 435 people and 90 identical letters.

Speaking on behalf of the Brighton Society, Hove Civic Society, the Regency Society, the Regency Square Area Society and the West Hill Community Association as well as the MCHA Mick Hamer told the planning committee that while they regretted the loss of the Victorian villa, they were impressed with the sensitive restoration of the Royal Alex facade, to the way it looked a century ago.

"This underlines the building's important historic heritage," he said, pointing out that the concrete balconies, which were originally built as open-air TB wards, would now become open-air balconies for luxury flats. "We've been working closely with both the council and the developers, particularly over the past nine months. It's been a long journey for all of us," he said.

"Compromise is inevitable and realistically this is as good as it gets."

Councillor Jason Kitcat, who was speaking on behalf of local councillors in both Regency Ward and St Peters and North Laine, said the scheme was "a bit of a curate's egg". But he said Taylor Wimpey had been responsive to local concerns. "It's been a long hard slog. Nobody wants to see this site vacant for longer or the buildings decaying further."

"I feel that Jason and Mick have stolen my thunder a little bit," said David Brown of Taylor Wimpey. "I probably shouldn't be thanking them in front of everyone, but we have had numerous very constructive conversations with both Jason and Mick."

"This is what we are paid to do," said Councillor Averil Older. "But the members of the civic societies are all volunteers, all excellent and without them goodness knows what state we'd be in in this city. So I'd like to pay tribute to the civic societies, but mainly the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association."

"Very well said," added Lynda Hyde, the committee chairman. By now the result was a foregone conclusion. And 12 raised arms signalled that the Alex had been saved.

How the Alex was won

The inside story of our five-year campaign

FOR THE past two-and-a-half years saving the Alex has been the MCHA's flagship campaign. But to be honest the association stumbled almost blindly into this campaign.

In early 2006 the MCHA, with support from the council, carried out a survey of public opinion, which found that 96 per cent of people wanted to save at least the main building. The MCHA and other local groups set up a steering group to try and save the building.

The council turned down Taylor Wimpey's first planning application in 2008, which gave us all a false sense of security. We were blissfully unaware that council officers had done a deal with Taylor Wimpey to demolish everything on the site two years before, in September 2006.

Then came Taylor Wimpey's second planning application to demolish the Alex and build 149 flats on the site. This time the officers recommended that it should be approved, in line with the the 2006 deal.

We cast around for ways to fight this recommendation and came up with the government's planning guidance. This said that councils should not agree to demolition "simply because redevelopment is economically more attractive to the developer than repair and re-use of a historic building". The same sentiments were echoed in the council's own local plan.

On 2nd December 2008 we gave these arguments a dry run at the council's Conservation Advisory Group. The officers seemed bemused, as though they had not expected the MCHA to read planning guidance.

The next day, at the crucial planning committee meeting on 3rd December, Graham Towers spoke to oppose the recommendation. Graham, who is a qualified architect and planner, told the committee about the guidance, which had been played down in the committee report.

The committee members, like the general public, also wanted to save the buildings. The planning guidance was the ammunition they needed. They voted to overturn the officers' recommendation and members spoke at some length about how lovely the buildings were and how they should be saved.

Taylor Wimpey appealed and a public inquiry opened in May 2009 in the council chamber at Brighton Town Hall. The MCHA mounted a major challenge to Taylor Wimpey's appeal, with a team of four witnesses. Although the council was nominally opposing Taylor Wimpey's appeal we were dismayed to discover on the

opening morning of the inquiry that council officers had signed an agreement with Taylor Wimpey accepting "the principle of demolition" of all the buildings on the site. This was exactly the opposite of what the planning committee had decided on 3rd December.

In order to justify the case for demolition the council and Taylor Wimpey came up with a conversion scheme that would provide only 55 flats. This was plainly not economic. We argued that this conversion scheme was designed to fail and that there were other ways of converting the building. Both Graham Towers and Alan Phillips, a prize-winning architect, outlined alternative schemes for converting the old buildings.

The inspector, John Papworth, agreed with us. He rejected the appeal saying that other ways of converting the building should be investigated. It was a famous victory. We spent £70. Taylor Wimpey's bill was more than £70,000.

At a special planning committee meeting in June 2009 the councillors told officers that they had certainly not agreed to the principle of demolition. They wanted to save the Alex.

Following this meeting the council decided to produce a proper planning brief for the site. Two new officers, Jo Thompson and Gill Thompson, who hadn't been involved in the previous applications, were drafted in to help prepare the brief. When the association met the council in August it seemed that the brief was intended to produce sensible conversion options. We asked the council to hire a specialist conservation architect to help prepare

the brief. We suggested Jack Warshaw, who had given expert evidence for the council at the public inquiry and was therefore familiar with the site. The council said it would consider this.

By October it became apparent that the public consultation for the brief was being slanted to justify demolition. There were four conversion options and one demolition option. But the demolition option was the only one that was viable.

Once again the association's leafleteers were out in force, pounding the streets and delivering leaflets to more than 1500 local people. The public response was gratifying, with 93 per cent of people saying they wanted to keep the main building and about two thirds saying they wanted to keep all five period buildings on the site.

But the council officers still seemed intent on demolition. We wrote to Lynda Hyde, the planning committee chairman, asking her to hire Jack Warshaw.





Back came the reply: "the officers say he is too expensive". So we rang up Jack Warshaw and negotiated a special cheap deal, because he was already familiar with the site. Back we went to Lynda Hyde and this time the officers' resistance crumbled.

When Jack Warshaw delivered his report in January 2010 he came up with a completely different plan, which kept and restored both the main building and the Victorian villa on Dyke Road. He said once restored both of these buildings could be listed.

The planning brief reflected this new report. The central plank of the brief was keeping the main building, although it sacrificed the Victorian villa. The MCHA made a last-ditch attempt to save the villa. We failed. The environment cabinet approved the brief in March 2010.

In the meantime Taylor Wimpey was already working on a planning application. At a site visit in early 2010 we suggested a meeting to see if we could find some common ground. We thought it might be worth talking, but the company seemed reluctant.

In early August 2010 Graham Towers wrote to Peter Redfern, the chief executive of Taylor Wimpey pointing out that we had been the main third party at the public inquiry and asking for a meeting. The next day he had a phone call from Taylor Wimpey. We'd love to meet you, they said. And a week later we had a meeting with Taylor Wimpey.

At the same time Taylor Wimpey publicly exhibited its proposals for the Royal Alex. There were two schemes. One was the demolition option which razed all the buildings on the site and ignored the planning brief. But it did have a GP surgery and 40 per cent affordable housing. The other was the conversion option, which tried to follow the planning brief but had no affordable housing and no GP surgery. The planning committee was very unlikely to approve either of these schemes.

There were five people at that crucial meeting at Hove Town Hall, which was held in a committee room that Jo Thompson had organised for us. David Brown represented Taylor Wimpey, there was Malcolm Dawes of the Brighton Society, Graham Towers and Mick Hamer from the association and Hazel McKay, an eminent independent planner who has been advising us.

We told David Brown that the demolition option didn't stand a cat in hell's chance and that he would have to modify the conversion option if it was to stand a chance of success. And we said that we had common ground: neither of us wanted another public inquiry. Graham suggested ways of getting affordable housing into the conversion scheme. David Brown said there had been a "sea change" in Taylor Wimpey's thinking and it was now serious about conversion. He also said he only wished that he could have such constructive discussions with the council.

David Brown listened carefully and over the next couple of months the association became an alternative conduit for contacts, passing messages from one party to the other. Taylor Wimpey put in two planning applications in October. Which scheme was the company serious about? The clue was in the changes. The demolition plan was virtually unaltered. The conversion scheme now had 15 per cent affordable housing.

Gradually the MCHA and Taylor Wimpey came to trust each other. It was a slow process. We had been on opposite sides only a year before. We explored whether we could get a surgery into the conversion option. Graham Towers identified six affordable flats that could be used for a surgery. In the end space wasn't the problem. The finances were. If the conversion was to be economic, including a surgery meant there would be no affordable housing at all. This was a price that no one was prepared to pay.

Council clamps down on boards

Ban on estate agents' boards is slow to bite

THE city council, with the help of the MCHA, is clamping down on rogue estate agents who are still erecting boards in the city's central conservation areas.

There has already been a drop in the number of estate agents' boards and some streets are board-free. The MCHA has been carrying out a survey of boards. The final results show a drop of about 50 per cent in the number of boards in the conservation area.

Estate agents' boards were banned throughout the city's central conservation areas from 20th September 2010. Although each individual board is only temporary their presence in most streets is permanent because some houses in the street are always for sale or for rent.

In streets with a high proportion of flats, such as St Michael's Place, the proliferation of estate agents' boards can blight the whole neighbourhood.

Only a few streets in the Old Town and Regency Square are not covered by the ban, which covers new estate agent's boards advertising houses and flats for sale. Much of the area between Seafield Road in Hove and Sussex Square in Brighton is covered by the ban. New boards are banned on all residential properties throughout the Montpelier and Clifton Hill conservation area.

Estate agents boards can legally stay if they were put up before 20th September 2010, but they have to be removed after the property has been sold.

This transition period is messy and difficult to police. Because of the impact of the recession on the housing market, many houses are on the market for much longer than usual. And many of the estate agents' boards are quite legitimate because they date from before the ban.

However some estate agents seem to be rather hazy about the nature of the ban and its extent. In February a new "for sale" board went up in Victoria Street. The MCHA contacted the council's enforcement team and the board vanished 24 hours later.

But not all cases are quite so clear cut. It is often difficult to be sure when a board was first put up. And in the event of any dispute, the council's enforcement team needs to have unequivocal evidence that a board dates from after the ban before it can take action.

So the council has teamed up with the MCHA to carry out a survey of boards in our conservation area. The aim of this survey is to establish which houses have boards and which ones do not. Association members have been pounding the pavements and noting the numbers of any house with a board, together with the estate agent details and the type of board—whether it is for sale or for rent.

The council announced this new clamp down in a press release in February, which quoted the MCHA. We



In decline: fresh slump in estate agents' boards

are also taking photos of streets and sharing the results of our findings with the council. We are also encouraging other groups to carry out similar surveys.

The aim of these surveys is to establish a baseline, so that we can easily identify any new boards that spring up and that will help enforcement officers tackle areas where boards are still appearing.

"Residents are concerned about these boards and the controls we have had in place in a number of the city's historic squares have done much to enhance the appearance of these locations," says Councillor Geoffrey Theobald, the council's cabinet member for environment. "Since Christmas, enforcement officers have successfully negotiated the removal of almost 50 boards. With support from members of the public and estate agents we are confident that we can ensure that the vast majority will be removed."

The council also wants estate agents to remove their older boards. "We are also asking estate agents to assist the council by voluntarily removing boards erected before 20th September," says Councillor Theobald.

Planning round-up

Mitre House conditions protect local residents

Revellers silenced

PLANS to convert the north block of Mitre House into a 3-star hotel were approved by the planning committee on 3rd November. But the committee imposed a strict condition on the scheme, which bans the use of the Hampton Street door except in an emergency.

The owners of Mitre House had wanted to use the Hampton Street door as a secondary entrance for hotel guests returning after a night on the town. The association was concerned that night-time noise from returning revellers would disturb people living in Spring Street, Hampton Street and Hampton Place.

The owners can now add a single-storey mansard roof to the north block, which extends along the south side of Hampton Street. The council planners had recommended approving the plan so this was always going to be a difficult uphill battle.

Richard Killick, who is an MCHA committee member, spoke on behalf of a number of local residents in Spring Street, Hampton Street and Hampton Place as well as the Clifton Montpelier Powis Community Alliance and the MCHA. He asked the committee to reject the hotel plan because of the disturbance it would cause local residents, but also asked them to limit the use of the Hampton Street door if they decided to approve the plans.

The committee did decide to approve the plan but decided to ban the Hampton Street door from being used by guests, except in an emergency, which is some consolation for local neighbours.

A second planning application for Mitre House, which would add a sixth extra storey to the Spring Street frontage had still to be decided as we go to press.



French church

THE culture secretary has turned down the MCHA's attempt to have the French protestant church listed. The old church is in the city's Regency Square conservation area, tucked away behind the seafront in a mews that partly serves the adjacent Metropole Hotel.

The church closed in 2008 and is now a private house. We asked English Heritage to list the building because of its cultural significance.

The French Protestant Church of Brighton is the only purpose-built Huguenot church in Britain outside London. The London Huguenot church is on the north side of Soho Square. The Brighton church predates the one in Soho Square by six years.

The Brighton church was built in 1887 to serve the 2,000-strong French-speaking community, many of whom were protestants. This Francophone community is an important part of the city's heritage. This was not just a community of rich folk, but a cross section of

classes, ranging from French governesses to hotel staff and domestic servants.

Part of the inspiration for this modest building programme came from the celebrations surrounding the 200th anniversary of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, in which the Confederate Churches of the Huguenots of London, Canterbury and Brighton played a prominent part. The Huguenot Churches of Holland and local supporters helped to raise the money needed to build the church. The red-brick church was designed by the local architect John G. Gibbins (1843-1932), who had offices in both Brighton and London. Gibbins was a prolific designer of public buildings and the church was designed in a simple style for a small congregation.

Although the bulk of the MCHA case for listing the church was based on its historic and cultural significance, in line with English Heritage's guidance, the culture secretary ruled that the church's architectural quality wasn't good enough to be worth listing. The association decided not to appeal against this ruling.

Conservation awards

NOMINATIONS are invited for the MCHA's annual conservation awards. The awards are given to residents who have made an outstanding contribution to conservation of their properties, through the use of excellent architects and first-rate workers.

Last year's winner was the amazing transformation of 7 Clifton Hill and among the runners up were the restoration of iron balconies in Norfolk Square. The awards will be presented at this year's garden party which will be held on 9th July at the Brighton and Hove High School.

High-rise hotel for ice rink site

A six-storey hotel that could overlook St Nick's



PLANS to build a six-storey hotel on the old ice rink site at the top of Queen Square have been unveiled by developers Stonehurst Estates. The 60-room hotel has been designed by Conran and Partners, which has Brighton offices in Queens Road.

The height of the new building would make it a dominating presence on the south side of St Nicholas's churchyard. The hotel would be two storeys higher than the ridge of the existing buildings. The church and its churchyard are a Grade II star listed building. Wykeham Terrace, immediately to the west of the ice rink site is also listed. The hotel, which is 5 metres from the back of the terrace's small gardens, would have a major impact on the terrace.

Some idea of the impact that this building could have can be gleaned from the architects' illustration. The tree at the right of the illustration is the same as the one in the photograph, next to the crenulations of Wykeham Terrace.

The architects held a public exhibition of their plans earlier this month at St Paul's School. The MCHA is concerned about the impact that this proposal will have on the conservation area. Members who were unable to get to the exhibition should tell the architects what they think now. There is likely to be a planning application later this year.



Local artist captures the Royal Alex

IN THE dark days of 2009 when the future of the Royal Alex still hung in the balance, the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association commissioned local artist Clare Harms to produce a drawing of the main hospital building southern facade, *writes Jim Gowans.*

Copies of her drawing have been used to decorate the bottom of glass paperweights presented as a token of appreciation to the association members who put so much work into our successful campaign to save the Alex.

Corinne Attwood, Carol Dyhouse Mick Hamer and Graham Towers were presented with their gifts at the 2010 annual general meeting, which was held at Brighton and Hove High School. Brian Brooks, who retired as vice chairman last year, was also given a paperweight at the Christmas party in recognition of his forty years of service to the association.

Whether these paperweights will be heavy enough to cope with the huge piles of paper created by the Royal Alex campaign remains to be seen.

Clare Harms has her own space in JAG Open Studios on Madeira Drive, where you can pop in and see her work. More examples of her work can be found on the web at www.clareharms.co.uk

