

THE
MONTPELIER
AND
CLIFTON HILL

ASSOCIATION
NEWSLETTER

No. 13 July 2012



**St Michael's
150th birthday
Bankrupt builders
Ice rink 'shambles'**

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The AGM voting results

THE MCHA has expanded its area to include the medieval church of St Nicholas and its churchyard after members at the Annual General Meeting voted unanimously to adopt a new constitution.

The MCHA's 41st Annual General Meeting was held on a blustery night at St Michael's to the accompaniment of rattling stained glass windows. Members voted unanimously to approve the new constitution, by 30 votes to nil. There were no abstentions.

The new constitution is based on the Charity Commission's model constitution for charities of our size and it replaces the old constitution, which dates from the days before there was even a conservation area.

The most important change is in the definition of the MCHA's area. Under the old constitution our eastern boundary was Dyke Road. Now we include those parts of the conservation area that lie to the east of Dyke Road, notably the churchyard and part of Church Street as well as Wykeham Terrace.

There is also a significant change in the wording of our objectives. Under the old constitution we were only concerned with planning developments in our area—although in practice we frequently stretched a point. The new constitution makes it plain that the MCHA is concerned with any proposal that affects our area, and not just those that are physically within the area.

In the elections for the committee all those standing were elected unopposed. The only change on the committee is that Lori Pinkerton-Rolet has had to stand down because of the pressure of work. She is replaced by Michael Fisher, who lives in Wykeham Terrace—houses that are now



Re-elected: chairman Jim Gowans

formally part of our area. He is secretary of the Wykeham Terrace Residents' Association and on the Regency Society's committee.

After the business of the AGM was completed, local historian Janet Pennington gave a lively talk about medieval Sussex pubs. Taverns, we were told, were only found in towns, while the down-market alehouses had a distinctly dodgy reputation, often doubling as brothels.

But even the upmarket inns, which catered for wealthy travellers on horseback, were not exactly enticing. Landlords only provided slippers and a nightcap. The sheets were damp. And it was normal to sleep with a total stranger wearing only a nightcap.

Your companion for the night was an unknown quantity, she said, and contemporary guides advised travellers to keep their swords handy. And on top of that you could expect to share your bed not only with a total stranger but also with hundreds of fleas and bedbugs.

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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**, **Michael Fisher**, **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.

Ice rink vote ‘shambles

The council’s constitutional conundrum

OBJECTORS to the plans to build a high-rise hotel on the old ice-rink site are consulting lawyers after the planning committee first voted to reject the ice rink plans and then voted to approve them at its meeting on 27 June.

The council’s new constitution, which was only approved on 17 May, states that the same issue cannot be voted on twice in six months. In this case the council voted twice on the same issue in 16 minutes.

“We have never heard of anything like this,” said a member of Planning Aid, the Royal Town Planning Institute’s advice service. He advised objectors to take urgent legal advice.

The council’s planning officers had recommended approving the plan, despite more than 140 objections from individuals and all the main representative local groups, largely because of its impact on the listed buildings in Wykeham Terrace and the medieval parish church of St Nicholas and its churchyard.

Councillors raised several other concerns about the plans during the meeting. Councillors also said they were concerned about the loss of the ice rink and thought that some community use should stay on the site. It also emerged that the council and the developers had yet to agree a suitable traffic plan for servicing the hotel via Queen Square, which is the only access road.

The ice rink site is still owned by the council and has only been sold to Stonehurst Estates, the company that wants to develop the hotel, subject to planning permission.

Francis Tonks, who lives in Wykeham Terrace and is a long-



High-rise horror would loom over Wykeham Terrace

standing member of the MCHA, spoke at the meeting emphasising the impact that the development would have on Wykeham Terrace and the churchyard.

He was supported by Councillor Lizzie Deane, who represents St Peters and North Laine. She pointed out that one of the key aims of the new National Planning Policy Framework, which was only published in March, was to involve the community in planning decisions.

In the debate, councillor Les Hamilton recalled a previous planning decision in his constituency, when an application had been turned down because of its effect on a listed building, even though it could not be seen from any public highway. He

argued that the impact of this scheme on the surrounding listed buildings was far greater and should also be turned down.

The first vote was tied five-all and the hotel plan was rejected on the chairman’s casting vote by 6 votes to 5. There was then a short adjournment while the planning committee chair, Christopher Hawtree, councillor Les Hamilton and a couple of officers retired to a back room to draw up the reasons for rejecting the plan. This should have been a formality.

They came back with three reasons. First the impact of the scheme on neighbouring listed buildings. Secondly, overlooking and loss of light for Wykeham Terrace and thirdly the loss of historic views from the churchyard. There were objections to the third reason, on the grounds that it had not been mentioned in the debate. So the committee was asked to vote on just the first two

reasons. Councillors voted 7 to 5 to reject these reasons. The officers then suggested that the committee voted again on whether to approve the planning application and this time they voted 7 to 5 to approve it.

The reason for the difference in numbers was that two councillors who abstained on the first vote changed their minds and voted to approve the plans.

For a planning committee to reject and approve the same plan at the same meeting seems to be unprecedented. The preliminary legal advice is that the first vote was the substantive decision and not the third. After the third vote one councillor said: “This is a shambles”. It was hard to disagree.

Happy birthday St Michael's

Our only grade-1 listed building needs your support

SAINT Michael and All Angels, in Victoria Road, celebrates the 150th anniversary of its consecration and service to the local community on Michaelmas Day, Saturday, 29 September, *writes Jane Osler.*

The grade-1 listed church has been described by Sir Roy Strong, the Patron of The Friends of St Michael's, as 'one of England's grandest Victorian churches' and 'a pre-Raphaelite jewel'. Simon Jenkins, in *England's Thousand Best Churches*, places it within the country's foremost one-hundred and the first of all the churches of Sussex.

St Michael's combines two churches in one building. The oldest by George Bodley, was his first complete urban church. It was finished in 1862. The second church, by William Burges, opened in 1895. Situated at the west end of the Bodley church is what has been described by a leading expert in 19th-century stained glass as the finest collection of pre-Raphaelite stained glass in the country, and thus in the world.

This collection of stained glass has work by some of the most eminent artists in the pre-Raphaelite movement, including William Morris, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, Ford Madox Brown and Philip Webb.

A ceiling by Philip Webb, reredos and metal screens by Romaine Walker and carved stonework designed by Burges are among the outstanding features of the church. There are also the wonderful walnut misericords, including such gems as one frog shaving another and a grasshopper riding a snail.

Sometimes known locally as the 'cathedral of the backstreets', the proportions of the nave are based on those of Amiens Cathedral and Westminster Abbey. The red brick exterior belies its internal splendour, and despite its great height and width it can be easily missed in its



George Bodley's original church (left) and the later addition (right)

immediate environment. It's only at a distance, when out at sea or coming down the Ditchling Road, that the church's dominance of the Brighton skyline can be fully appreciated.

In the first half of the 19th century, the area outside the church would be barely recognisable to us today. It was called Temple Field and was a rough bare piece of open ground with a pond in one corner at the Vernon Terrace end of where Denmark Terrace now stands.

In the opposite corner was an unfinished house, abandoned because legal problems prevented it being completed, which was later demolished to make way for the

church. The whole Seven Dials area was then sparsely developed and marked the northern edge of the town.

Father Charles Beanlands, who had served as an assistant curate under the legendary Father Arthur Wagner at St Paul's in West Street, was presented with the ecclesiastical district of Montpelier. With the financial support of two sisters, Miss Mary Windle and Miss Sarah Windle, Beanlands commissioned George Bodley, whom he had known when at St Paul's, to build the first St Michael's church.

Beanlands was known for his artistic and discriminating taste and he enriched the church with many



Stained glass designers: The Three Ladies at the Sepulchre (above) is by William Morris; The Flight into Egypt (below) is by Edward Burne-Jones and The Pelican of Piety by Philip Webb.

beautiful things that can be seen today. Worship at St Michael's has always sought to engage the senses as well as heart and mind.

Beanlands was an Anglo-Catholic and the services at St Michael's were soon noted for their beauty, dignity, fine music and advanced ritualism. The church has and still uses some of the first vestments worn in the Church of England since the Reformation.

The Brighton Gazette of 1874 records that at St Michael's there were church guilds and associations, and a care of the poor and needy by district visitors and the clergy. Following in the same tradition, for the past 25 years volunteers from St Michael's have run 'Community Cooked Breakfasts' every Saturday morning. These are for the whole community and provide a good value meal for a modest charge. Vouchers for these breakfasts are also given to First Base and Clocktower Sanctuary for those who otherwise might not have a cooked meal that day.

A parish church exists to serve its local community, first for spiritual need by means of a fitting and often beautiful, even awe-inspiring, place in

which to worship, but also as a space where local people can meet.

Sir Roy Strong said that churches should return to the medieval concept of the parish church as the hub of the community, where the naves are used for other purposes when not needed for worship, and this is a message St Michael's has heeded.

It hosts many musical events during the Brighton Festival Fringe and Montpellier, Clifton and Powis Festival, as well as under the auspices of 'Music at St Michael's', and talks, meetings, school visits, and dinners are held in the church—and even the MCHA's annual general meeting.

The Friends of St Michael's, relaunched in 2010, aims to contribute to the preservation of the many wonderful works of art contained in Saint Michael and All Angels church, and to promote the use of the building for cultural and community events.

The Friends organise talks, social evenings and events, such as the annual dinner and ladies lunch held in the nave of the church, to help raise much needed funds to conserve the church's many treasures.

The Parochial Church Council, invaluable supported by The Friends, is currently seeking to restore the stonework surrounding the great collection of pre-Raphaelite stained glass at the west end of the Bodley church which is in need of urgent repair. This precious glass often rattles in the wind and there is great



concern about its safety. Being a national treasure, we hope funds can soon be raised so that work can begin. Any contributions will be most gratefully received.

Repointing the brick work walls of the Lady Chapel, where there is further magnificent glass by Morris, Burne-Jones and Webb, and the restoration of the bell, are projects we would like to begin soon, too.

St Michael's will celebrate its 150th birthday with a Mass of Thanksgiving on Saturday 29 September at 12 noon. Other events are also planned. These include a wedding dress and flower exhibitions, concerts, a St Paul's School art exhibition, guided tours, and a special Choral Evensong to commemorate the 350th anniversary of the Book of Common Prayer. Couples are also invited to renew marriage vows and others to renew their baptismal promises.

We hope that many in the local community will feel they are warmly invited to join-in as we celebrate not only 150th years of an outstandingly beautiful church but of its service to the neighbourhood and beyond.

For more information about the 150th celebrations please visit www.saintmichaelsbrighton.org or phone the Parish Office on 01273-727362.

Further Information about the activities of the Friends of Saint Michael's can be found on www.friendsofsaintmichaels.co.uk

Planning round-up

Bankrupt builders

KILLBY and Gayford, the firm that won the contract to convert the north block of Mitre House into a hotel went bankrupt in April, barely a month after they had started work. Work is not expected to start again until August.

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

According to Montague Property Management, the Beckenham-based firm that manages Mitre House, new builders are being hired to finish the work. The management company expects the new contracts for the building work to be finalised soon and for work to start again next month.

Killby and Gayford was one of the biggest and oldest construction companies in the country. It specialised in carrying out work on historic buildings and had carried out the renovation of Downing Street in



Ghostly site: work has stopped on the conversion of Mitre House

2008. Local residents had been impressed by the care Killby and Gayford had taken at Mitre House to avoid unnecessary disruption.

The company is now in the hands of administrators and virtually all its staff have been laid off. Mitre House is surrounded by grey hoardings and scaffolding but the

site office is firmly padlocked. The only sign of life on the ghost-site is the dental practice in Hampton Place, which will continue to stay open during the building works.

A spokesman for Montague Property Management says that security has been stepped up while the site is idle.

Power to the people?

AT the end of March the government published its new National Planning Policy Framework, designed to empower "local people to shape their surroundings". The avowed aim of the framework is to support localism and to give communities a greater say in planning decisions.

In his introduction to the planning framework, planning minister Greg Clark says "in recent years, planning has tended to exclude, rather than to include, people and communities... In part, people have been put off from getting involved because planning policy itself has become so elaborate and forbidding – the preserve of specialists, rather than people in communities."

The planning framework says local councils should aim "to involve

all sections of the community in the development of Local Plans and in planning decisions."

The planning framework says that local authorities should set out a "positive strategy" for the conservation and enjoyment of the historic environment. "As heritage assets are irreplaceable, any harm or loss should require clear and convincing justification. Substantial harm to or loss of a grade II listed building, park or garden should be exceptional."

The framework also points out that the significance of a heritage asset can be harmed by development that affects its setting.

Quite what all this means for our historic conservation area is far from clear. The key objective of the new planning framework is to promote

"sustainable development" and the government says there should be a presumption in favour of "sustainable development".

The definition of these key buzzwords is rather woolly. It seems to mean any development that creates jobs and economic growth, improves biodiversity, replaces poor design with good design and improves the way people live, work and travel.

So will the presumption of sustainable development be at the expense of our conservation area and the views of the community?

"Our aim is to have a system that applicants and members of communities can be confident will give a reliable, swift and fair outcome," says Clark. But in part that depends on the contents of the new city plan that the council is working on.

A sign of the times

Heritage is the unique selling point for the Royal Alex

REPLICA street signs and street lamps could become a feature of Taylor Wimpey's new development at the Royal Alex. The developer is converting the much-loved main hospital building into flats and building a number of new blocks in the hospital grounds.

The MCHA had a preliminary meeting with Taylor Wimpey in May to discuss the possibility of replica street signs and lamps. As a result of that meeting the MCHA obtained initial quotes for replicas, based on the 1930s street lamps in nearby Powis Square and Clifton Terrace, to establish the feasibility of replica street furniture. Our local councillors have also said that they support the idea in principle.

The concept of replica street furniture fits neatly with Taylor Wimpey's marketing strategy for the site. The first flats at the Royal Alexandra Quarter—the name the developer gives to the site—went on sale in May after Taylor Wimpey opened its new marketing suite.

The sales brochure emphasises the heritage. "At the Royal Alexandra Quarter, you're not merely buying a new home, living here makes you feel that you are part of the city's architectural heritage."

And some of the marketing blurb could have been written by the MCHA (although it wasn't). "The conversion of the former Royal Alexandra Hospital in Clifton Hill involves a painstaking and dedicated restoration of the historic Victorian facade. The importance of retaining the special character of a city like Brighton cannot be underestimated."

Despite the depressed state of the housing market the company says it has been flooded by enquiries for flats in the converted main building, even though they won't be ready until at least the end of 2014.

Once the main building has been converted the MCHA intends to apply to English Heritage to have it listed. And a high-quality conversion



The Lainson building stands tall behind the temporary marketing suite

will substantially improve the chances of it being listed.

The postal addresses of the new blocks will be named after the old hospital wards and the converted main hospital building will be called the Lainson Building, after its architect Thomas Lainson.

The redevelopment is being built in stages. The new build blocks on Clifton Hill will be the first to be finished and Taylor Wimpey says it has already sold 11 of these flats, before the foundations have been

finished. Buyers should be able to move in by Christmas 2013.

The conversion of the main block will be the final stage. Taylor Wimpey is expected to make a further planning application in the next couple of months, to create extra space for the top floor flats in the eaves of the roof.

And on completion the buyers are being given a free copy of Steve Myall's book on the Victorian development of the Montpelier, Clifton and Powis estates.

Pictures from the party

Despite the drizzle a good time was had by all

THE ever-present danger of drizzle didn't prevent a good turn-out for the MCHA's annual summer party, held at Pauline Messum's lovely house and garden in Clifton Road.

The pink cava flowed, the band played and partygoers tucked into some tasty nibbles. Spotted among the throng were councillors Ania and Jason Kitcat, who is now leader of the council, Malcolm Dawes, the Brighton Society chairman, Mary McKean who chairs the Regency Society and Tony Bailey, the new chair of the Clifton Montpelier Powis Community Alliance.



Nominations wanted for the conservation awards

FOR MORE than twenty years the Montpelier and Clifton Hill Association's conservation awards have been driving up the standard of developments in the conservation area. This year's award winners will be announced at our autumn meeting and in the November issue of the MCHA newsletter.

The committee would like to invite nominations for this year's awards. Almost any development is eligible for consideration. The only criterion is that the work has enhanced the conservation area. It does not even have to be building work. Among this year's nominations

are the creation of a wildlife haven—including a spectacular display of springtime bluebells and a summer meadow—in St Nick's churchyard.

If you have other suggestions then please nominate them. We want to hear from you.

The deadline for nominations is 14 October and the committee will select the winners from a shortlist drawn up by Gabi Tubbs, who organises the awards.

The winner will receive a commemorative plate. The MCHA recently managed to regain possession of its blue plates so that normal service can now be resumed.



Beat this: last year's winner