

NEWSLETTER

From the Editor

I must begin with an apology for the long gap between newsletters and offer our thanks to members for being so patient during this period. The Friends may not have been very visible recently but work has been going on behind the scenes. Progress on most fronts has, however, been very slow.

This is a good time to swing into action again, to update you on what has been happening and make sure you know about the forthcoming consultation meeting about the proposed conservation management plan.

THE CONSERVATION MANAGEMENT PLAN

There will be an exhibition on the Conservation Management Plan proposals in the entrance hall of Gunnersbury Park Museum, from Thursday 3 April to Friday 18 April. There will be opportunities to make comments and challenge or support the ideas.

The Plan will be “launched” in the Terrace Room of the Small Mansion between 6.30 and 8.30 on the evening of Wednesday 9 April, and the Friends of Gunnersbury Park and Museum are invited to this event.

The full document can be read on the web-site of its authors, Chris Blandford Associates, www.cba.uk.net/gunnersbury. It is a 93-page Plan, with maps, figures, illustrations and appendices as supporting documents. There have been a variety of reports written about aspects of Gunnersbury in recent years and the consultants had those to work with. They also surveyed, measured, researched and assessed everything for themselves, until they were able to describe reasonably accurately what we have and how important it is. This is summarised as:

It is a Grade II English Heritage Registered Park containing 21 Grade II* and Grade II English Heritage listed buildings, making it one of the top 30% of Registered Parks and Gardens within the country and containing some of the top 10% of historic buildings within England. This being said, some of the buildings within the Park are also designated as ‘at risk’, and English Heritage has named Gunnersbury Park as one of the top 12 ‘at risk’ properties in England, due to the large amount of investment needed urgently to stabilise and ultimately repair the buildings.*

They also propose a statement which they hope will become the “vision” of the estate, around which its various users can agree, and which can be used to decide how we make changes in the future:

A sustainable high quality park with varied uses, which serve the local community and the region whilst respecting, enhancing and interpreting its historic framework and fabric.

They have compiled a list of what they see as the major issues which face the estate today:

- *lack of clear management and maintenance structure*
- *limited and decreasing funding*
- *deterioration of built fabric and landscape, most prominently the buildings identified as being at risk*
- *poor visitor facilities, and*
- *declining use.*

And finally they have prepared a list of the action which needs to be taken as quickly as possible:

- *establish a clear management regime and structure to take Gunnersbury Park forward, including the appointment of a Political Champion*
- *adopt the Conservation Management Plan as formal guidance*
- *carry out works to buildings at risk, to stabilise their condition and commission feasibility studies for all buildings to determine a sustainable use*
- *commission a feasibility study on the location of Gunnersbury Park Museum*
- *complete the Sports Hub feasibility study*
- *finalise and adopt the Masterplan, and*
- *investigate alternative sources of public and private funding to implement the Conservation Management Plan and Masterplan.*

CAPEL MANOR COLLEGE at Gunnersbury

Garden Maintenance/Design

Should you need advice on your garden, or someone to maintain it, Capel's qualified students offer such work at a reasonable cost. To place a small ad on the jobs notice board, setting out what you require, phone 8993 6266.

Friends' Prize

Each year the Friends provide a prize of books to the student who contributed most to Gunnersbury during their time on the course. In 2007 this went to Roy McClymont who is now working on an estate in Devon. Our congratulations to him!

After 25 Years – is this the beginning of the end, or the end of the beginning?

James Wisdom, Chairman

This is an account of the progress which has been made since the Gunnersbury Park Joint Committee finally accepted in 2005 that it was unable successfully to manage the estate of Gunnersbury Park and Museum, that it could not find the funding to redress the deficit (in building repair and landscape upgrading) without support from external sources such as private funding or the Lottery, and that such funding would not be made available unless it devised a more appropriate management model with some guarantee of long-term success.

The document which brought the issue to a head was presented to the GPJC in September 2005: *A Way Forward*. The councillors rejected the options to continue as they were, or to allow one borough to buy out the other. They voted to do further work on the idea to “re-launch Gunnersbury Park as a social enterprise and hand the management and/or ownership of the estate to an independent trust” and to appoint a Director of Development to bring this about. The proposal was that this Director was to be managed by a board comprising one councillor from each borough, a representative from CABEsapce, one from English Heritage and two business representatives. The councillors' main concern was the possible loss of democratic control.

By December 2005 the councillors were considering a management board of three councillors from each borough, to ensure they had a majority over other possible members. By March 2006 they were getting cold feet over the whole thing, as the local elections were coming up, and so each borough deferred its support for the proposals. It was only in December 2006 that the Joint Committee finally agreed to propose to both Councils that it be wound up and replaced with a “streamlined” board of 6 members (three from each borough). So the last meeting of the Joint Committee was in April 2007. Joan Catterall and I, as observers from the Friends, were thanked for our service over the years.

The new board was announced in an L B Hounslow press release on 6 March 2007. It is called the Gunnersbury Park Regeneration Board and its members are Ealing Councillors Sumner and Dabrowska (Conservative) and Brookes (Labour) and Hounslow Councillors Samantha Davis (Chiswick Independent), Barwood (Conservative) and Harmer (Labour). It has invited Councillor Lee (Hounslow Conservative) to its meetings as an observer.

It decided to meet in private. No minutes are available to the public. The six councillors' record of attendance is not reported. It does not have a public schedule of meetings and we think it does not meet regularly. We are not sure if it has appointed a chair. It has the power to co-opt outsiders but has not done so, and no-one from English Heritage, CABEsapce or business has yet been invited to join the board. It has issued no press statements marking its progress.

As far as we can gather, it decided to meet in private because it has difficult decisions to make and because relations between the two councils were so fraught that further action in public may have done more damage than good. It is responsible for overseeing the management of the Park and Museum so would give permission for events such as the Mela. The last budget for Gunnersbury showed it was going to cost £671,000 for the year 2007/08. As the Board meets in private, neither its

decisions nor its budgets are subject to any form of public scrutiny. One of the reasons for delaying the publication of this newsletter has been that once the forum for public discussion about the Park was closed down there has been very little to report.

However, one piece of good news is that the officers supporting the Regeneration Board did advertise for the post of Development and Regeneration Manager, and have appointed Richard Gill. He already knows Gunnersbury and was previously the Chiswick House Gardens Development Manager (for L B Hounslow) so is familiar with the issues of working with historic landscapes. The major element of his job description is to develop a full plan for the estate, find the funds and then implement it. The other crucial element in the job description is “to research the most appropriate structure for Gunnersbury Park and to prepare for a handover to integrated management under the preferred new arrangements”. He began work on 29 February.

Before the Joint Committee was wound up, it commissioned Chris Blandford Associates to prepare a Conservation Management Plan. This is a major step forward. This sort of Plan is essential for many reasons, but in Gunnersbury’s case the Heritage Lottery Fund would not consider any further applications for grants without one. Such a plan is a statement of what exists and why it is significant, in historic building or landscape terms. It shows what is most valuable and what needs to be done to restore the park and its buildings. It enables managers to balance the heritage against sport, wildlife, peace and quiet, children’s play and all the other features which a modern park has to offer. It can reveal the things which have to be done soon, and the options which have to be considered when difficult decisions have to be taken.

The officers managing this project created a group of interested parties to guide the consultants. I was invited, as Chair of the Friends, to serve on that steering group, along with representatives from English Heritage and Ealing and Hounslow Councils, including Planning and Conservation officers and representatives from CIP (which manages Hounslow’s leisure services).

This steering group has been meeting since January 2007, giving advice and commenting on the documents as they emerged. The consultants organised a stakeholders’ consultation meeting in the summer and have now produced their report and plan.

The next step is that the Regeneration Board is inviting the public to read the report, look at its maps and comment on the ideas within it. Then it will be amended and completed, and will become the basis for the planning of the Park’s future. You can find more information about the report, plan and exhibition elsewhere in this Newsletter.

The other good news is that the Regeneration Board is about to commission the next stage of the work – to find a new group of consultants to take the ideas within the Plan and the information we already have about the state of the buildings and the landscape, and prepare real proposals for reversing the decline – in the jargon, an “options appraisal”. It is after this stage that applications for Heritage Lottery Funding (or perhaps funding from other parts of the National Lottery) will be prepared. This will also be the stage

where uses for some of the buildings will be proposed, and some of these are likely to be commercially funded. Now that we have a Conservation Management Plan, we have a much stronger sense of what is not acceptable and what would be seen as so damaging to the “heritage assets” that the Heritage Lottery Fund or English Heritage would not be prepared to support it.

The other major development affecting Gunnersbury has been the tendering process through which L B Hounslow is proposing to manage its leisure services (libraries, sport, play, heritage, historic buildings, museum, archives etc) in the future. In recent years this has been run by Community Initiative Partnerships (CIP), an interlocking group of charities and a company run by Trustees, and staffed primarily by the people who were previously the council’s own employees in the “Leisure services department”. This arrangement has not been easy for Gunnersbury or for L B Ealing.

The development is that CIP has not been short-listed for the rest of the tendering process. At the time of writing we do not know which companies are still in the process, or which parts of the service they are proposing to take over. Gunnersbury Park Museum is part of the heritage section (with Hogarth’s House and Boston Manor House) but we are not sure if the local history collections and archives are included in this. Nor are we sure if the park at Gunnersbury is in this section, or if it is to be part of a more general parks maintenance contract. This will be something for the councillors on the Regeneration Board to enquire into.

On a personal note, I would like to finish this account by setting down where I think we (the Friends) are at this point. Gunnersbury has been under-funded since the formation of the Joint Committee in the 1960s.

I calculate that it was under-funded by about £100,000 each year since then, so now it is between £4m and £5m. The Hounslow press release announcing the formation of the new Board referred to needing £10m for the buildings alone, so the restoration and improvement of the landscape must be some millions more. Whatever the figure, it is far more than any councillor is going to vote for. Parks (and museums) are not statutory services, so have to be cut before education, social services, etc.

The joint ownership of the estate makes it easy for councillors to shift responsibility, and having to get both councils to agree has made progress slow. As a committee, the GPJC excelled in deferring decisions. Holding the councillors (and the officers) together to take concerted action requires the building of trust. In the final years of the GPJC some disastrous episodes showed how quickly that trust could be destroyed. The Regeneration Board has a lot of repair work to do. It is not clear that the councillors involved have yet understood the scale of the change that is required, and some may think that moving from a 12 person Joint

Committee meeting in public to a 6 person Regeneration Board meeting in private is sufficient. It isn't.

But for the Friends, there are going to be difficult issues to face. The obvious one is that it would be a miracle if we can find the money to deal with the problems out of council tax, lottery grants and charitable donations alone. There already are "commercial" operations in Gunnersbury, generating income for the estate. The issue for us is likely to be what commercial operations might be beneficial or acceptable, and what should not be considered. The Conservation Management Plan may help us to define the broad responses to this problem. The forthcoming "options appraisal" should focus it more clearly.

The second major issue is about the way the park is run. It is clear that the current model of management has failed. It may even be that the current model of ownership has failed. It would be a miracle if private, lottery or charitable funders agreed to commit to any large projects without major changes to the current régime. So councillors may be faced with difficult decisions, and they are going to have to be open with the public, and be listening and talking to their constituents, to successfully steer a path through the hazards.

We should celebrate the recognition that management and leadership needed to change, that all the elements in the park needed to be considered together (rather than as a series of individual problems), that the preparatory groundwork has been done, both with this Conservation Management Plan and with other, earlier reports (the Parks Agency report, the *Mansions at Risk in Public Parks* report and the first major Development Plan have been particularly significant), and that agencies such as English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund are working hard to support the process. The new Plan makes it clear that Gunnersbury is hugely important and has the potential to be one of London's great parks. We simply have to halt the decline and turn it around.

THEFTS OF LEAD

Twice lead was stolen from the roof of the Large Mansion kitchen wing, causing water damage in the chef's room. And it was taken off Princess Amelia's Bath-House but the thieves left it behind, with their bloodstains. English Heritage may allow the use of a lower value material instead.

THE WISTERIA

In 2007 a major leak in the water main between the Round Pond and the children's playground was repaired, but in the process an old wisteria was cut back severely. It may still flourish – it depends on whether the roots are undamaged.

GUNNERSBURY PARK MUSEUM: What's on?

BIG BUSINESS, LOCAL LINKS: a history of Barclays, ends 27 April 2008

Special exhibition from Barclays Bank. Details of local branches, Barclays' Ealing Sports Club and life in a Victorian bank.

THE BRENTFORD TRIANGLE, ends June 2008

Special exhibition celebrating the popular author Robert Rankin whose new novel, set in the Park, is on sale in the Museum.

Museum opening hours: 11am to 5pm daily. Admission free

PARK MEMORIES . . .

Vanda Foster, the museum's curator, is collecting memories and old photos of the Park. She is especially keen to find pictures of a clam-shell fountain and many statues which have been described to her. If you have old photos taken in the park, look carefully at what is in the background! Just lend photos for copying – it is not necessary to give them away. Phone Vanda on 020 8992 1612.

**Next Newsletter June 2008, contributions welcome: Val Bott, 25 Hartington Road, London W4 3TL
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