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NEWSLETTER

EALING RUNS OUT OF OPTIONS?

We have to face the fact that the governance of Gunnersbury has collapsed – yet again – and that the estate and the museum will continue to decay and decline until this is radically changed.

The specific event this time is that Ealing's councillors have voted against the proposal that they themselves placed before the public, namely to support the restoration of the estate in part by building houses on park-land. They appear to have rejected this proposal despite knowing that the outcome of the consultation exercise is in favour of the scheme. (This is being written before the full details are made public, but an Ealing councillor has revealed the main fact to a journalist/blogger.)

Ealing's councillors took this decision without consulting or even informing either councillors or officers from Hounslow, who were left to read it in a press release. In that release, Phil Taylor (the lead councillor on this subject at Ealing and a major contributor to the design and wording of the consultation questionnaire) announced that he had in fact never been in favour of the proposal and his motive for the consultation had merely been to strengthen his hand in negotiation with English Heritage for grant funding.

This was followed up by another Ealing councillor, Joanna Dabrowska, writing to the *Ealing Gazette* to claim that: "Whereas Ealing Council has always provided monetary support, our neighbour, Hounslow has not been willing enough to put money where their mouth is."

Looking at the dereliction at Gunnersbury, which has been evidenced by a number of major studies going back many years, it is clear that the joint ownership is not working. The Gunnersbury Park Joint Committee was ineffective and frequently fell apart in conflict and recrimination. Both English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund told that Committee that they would not get financial support until they had sorted out the mess.

Councillors agreed to create a Regeneration Board with a wider membership than just themselves, with the task of setting up a Trust which could then apply for grants and with the power to act independently of the councils. A Regeneration Manager would lead the project. Then they lost their nerve and backed away from it, keeping the power to themselves by setting up a smaller Regeneration Board which met in secret. This was eventually forced to meet in public, but as only the two lead members have decision-making authority now, it has become the Joint Advisory Panel, split by the Ealing decision.

Fortunately the Joint Committee had already commissioned the major *Conservation Management Plan*, because it had been told such a plan was essential to get any grants. Could this plan be put into operation? And if so, how much would it cost and where might the money come from? The *Options Appraisal* said it could, but there was only one realistic source of substantial funding (building on the strip of parkland). And even then grants would be needed, which would come with conditions (such as having effective governance, secure long-term funding, maintaining public access to historic buildings, restoring the historic landscape, supporting the Museum etc).

I predicted what would happen next in the article *Consultation on the Future of the Park*, posted on the web-site on 28 July and printed in the previous Newsletter, saying "However, we should praise both Councils for at last tackling the

issue. With local elections coming in May 2010 they may falter, but – who knows? – there may even be votes in sorting this out once and for all.”

I listed 3 alternatives – that many would be so ashamed of the state of Gunnersbury that they would support even the sale of land, that many would resist a sale despite the consequences, and that the councillors would appear to act while actually doing nothing. Now all three outcomes are happening together.

It is surprisingly easy to cause councillors to falter. On this occasion the trip has been provided by the Save Trees in Gunnersbury group, which has lobbied with the Green Party and some Liberal Democrats, to persuade people to vote against the proposal in the consultation. It has had a lot of press coverage with good photographs, it has used the internet extensively to broadcast its message and build a group and claims to have leafleted the area. It has been very critical

of some of the questions in the consultation document, it has rejected the work behind the *Options Appraisal*, it has down-played or ignored the other elements proposed and it has failed to offer any funding alternative. It has all the strength of a single issue campaign with an emotional focus, but it appears to have been unsuccessful in persuading the public to reject the proposals.

We may be seeing the slow end of Ealing’s policy of jointly owning and managing one of its major parks in a neighbouring borough. It bought the park (one-fifth of Brentford) against the wishes of the Brentford and Chiswick Urban District Council in the 1920s and, of course, LB Hounslow now holds the planning authority. Many times in the last 30 years we have seen hard-won co-operation between the councils shattered for short-term political advantage, and a procession of new councillors, council leaders (and officers) who arrive thinking that this time they will sort it out, that the problem is only the incompetence of the previous lot. It isn’t. It is structural.

They are not strong enough to sort it because it requires leadership and courage to take gruesome and painful decisions – both about money and about governance – but they are strong enough to prevent progress. They have been told in endless reports what to do and how to do it. Even the big grant-giving bodies have offered support. It appears – from what we know at the moment – that the public have told them to get on with it. But they have panicked, and it will take a few more years to get the pieces back on the board and working together. I guess the Stables will have gone by then and the Museum will probably be facing closure.

James Wisdom

WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE MUSEUM?

The loss of support from Ealing Council for further development of the concepts in the *Options Appraisal* could now result in serious damage to the Museum Service. The Gunnersbury Park Joint Committee and its successors have seen the Museum as little more than just another attraction in the Park and have funded it accordingly.

In fact this is the local museum for two boroughs with a combined population of over half a million (Ealing 308,000, Hounslow 210,000), more than Liverpool, Bristol or Edinburgh, all cities with lively museum services. So poorly do our local authorities value its superb collections and its imaginative educational work that they have cut its budget year after year. Now it has only one professional curator, responsible for managing the small staff team, caring for

the collections and the historic building, and running an exhibition programme.

Recognising the need to find a sustainable future for the Gunnersbury Estate as a whole, the Friends have long worried that the Museum could be at risk. The decorative interiors and large spaces within the Large Mansion appeared to offer the most attractive spaces for the functions, events and conferences which might earn the income the Estate so desperately needs. If the Large Mansion had to be given over to a new use, we feared that the museum collection would be moved hastily into storage and the service eventually lost.

However, in preparing the *Options Appraisal*, Jura Consultants realised that the Museum was the key to attracting heritage funding to Gunnersbury. Grants from bodies like English Heritage and HLF can only be used to support public access to “the heritage”, such as museums, listed buildings and historic landscapes. While they cannot be used to support commercial enterprises, they do not prohibit the earning of income. All such applications need a careful business plan which demonstrates how the investment of public funds will lead to a sustainable future for buildings, landscapes and services. Jura’s proposals were imaginative and fitted the criteria set out in the *Conservation Management Plan*. They involved moving the Museum’s display areas and learning spaces into the Small Mansion – which is less decorative and so is easier to use for this purpose – and housing the collections, including the carriages, in the rebuilt Stable blocks.

The Museum’s stored or “reserve” collections are long-established,

substantial, rich and remarkable but giving visitors access to them is impossible because they are in cramped conditions in low cellars (and in almost every other nook or cranny available). Even objects on show are housed in unsuitable spaces – carriages and bicycles, for example, sit on a drawing room floor and look ridiculous.

The proposal for an accessible store in the Stables, with carefully managed internal conditions for the most sensitive items and space for guided tours, study facilities and a dignified home for the vehicles, solves two problems. First, it would transform the Museum collection from a problem into a real public asset and second, it would find a use for the Stables which could attract grant funding, something which no commercial bidder has been able to achieve. Furthermore, these proposals offered an appropriate use for both Mansions, freeing up and making accessible the decorative rooms for refreshments, meetings and functions that would bring in an income. It seemed too good to be true – and politically it was.

The Museum's future must now be in jeopardy. Yet amazingly Ealing is trying to obtain substantial funding for developing Pitzhanger Manor into what it calls "a world-class museum". How it can achieve this without any collection is hard to imagine, and bodies like HLF are unlikely to look sympathetically on such a proposal from a borough with no clear heritage strategy.

It is time both councils realised just how valuable the Museum at Gunnersbury is to their citizens, and thought hard about how best to develop and support it.

Val Bott

SPENCER PERCEVAL & ALL SAINTS CHURCH

New exhibition at Gunnersbury Park Museum

Spencer Perceval was the only Ealing resident to become Prime Minister, in 1809, and the only British Prime Minister to have been assassinated, in 1812.

During his time in office he had to deal with the war against Napoleon, the increasing madness of King George III and the Luddite riots against the spread of factory machinery.

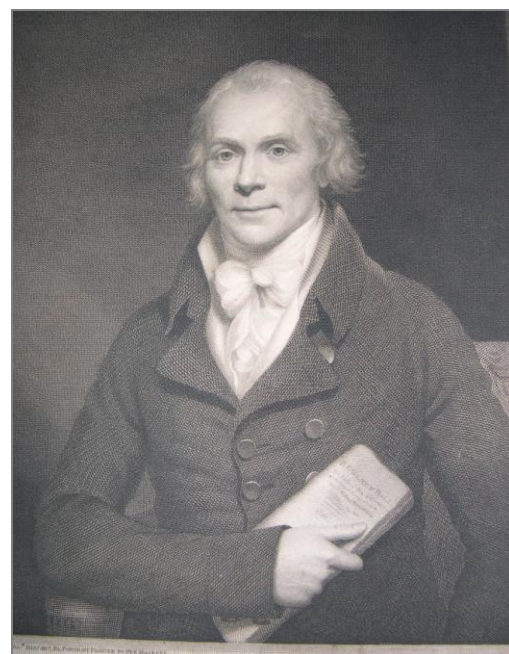
He was shot on the afternoon of Monday May 11th 1812, just as he was entering the House of Commons. His assassin, John Bellingham, had a general grudge against the government rather than with Perceval himself.

This exhibition tells the story of Perceval's life and career, his assassination and the building of his memorial Church, All Saints, on land that once belonged to Gunnersbury Park. Here you will find relics from Perceval's official life including original letters, parchment documents of appointment and the red despatch box that he was carrying when he was shot.

There is also fascinating material from Perceval's private life. In 1808, after 20 pregnancies and with 12 surviving children, his wife Jane encouraged him to buy a larger house in the "country quiet" of Ealing Common. The exhibition shows water-colours of their 36-acre estate at Elm Grove, which looked down to the Thames and the Surrey hills.

Their family life is reflected in a hand-written prayer which Spencer and Jane composed when their first-born baby son was seriously ill. Thankfully, he recovered and the exhibition also includes a letter Spencer Perceval wrote to him when he was at Harrow School, recommending that he concentrate on his studies and play less football. The most touching item is Perceval's actual death mask made by sculptor Joseph Nollekens, which has been used as the basis of all the official portraits.

Local residents may be interested in the ways the family has been commemorated in Ealing. Four of the daughters lived for many



Spencer Perceval

years at Pitzhanger Manor and built the Victorian extension to this John Soane house. All Saints Church, Elm Grove Road, was built by the youngest as a memorial to her father – she had been only 7 years old when he died. And Walpole Park is named for Spencer Walpole, Perceval's son-in-law, while the civic centre is known as Perceval House.

Vanda Foster

The exhibition is open every day, 11am to 4pm, except 25 and 26 December, admission free, until 3 January 2010.

FOOTBALL DONATION

Peter Crouch, the England centre forward, is a former pupil of North Ealing and Drayton Manor Schools. He recently gave a signed football shirt to the museum collection.

At 6ft 7ins he was often teased for his lanky build, but he became a popular hero in the run-up to the 2006 football World Cup for celebrating his goals with a robot dance around the pitch.



MORE LEAD THEFTS

We seem to report damage due to vandalism and theft in every *Newsletter*. This time lead has again been stolen from both Mansions. The newly-painted ceiling of the Chef's room in the Large Mansion kitchen wing has been ruined again. The furniture has had to be moved out and it is closed to visitors.

LONDON OPEN HOUSE

The Museum staff have asked us to record their thanks to those who volunteered to help open the Large Mansion, the Bath-house and the Temple at Gunnersbury on Sunday 20th September, during London Open House weekend.

DOWSING AT GUNNERSBURY



In the summer Keith Harmon, Chairman of the Middlesex & Surrey Archaeological Dowsers gave a talk at the Museum about the technique of dowsing for archaeological sites and a team from this group worked in the Park the next day. The dowsers believe they had found a post-mediaeval house on the lawn behind the Large Mansion (marked out in the picture above), an oval building marked out with little flags on the lawn behind the Small Mansion (below), perhaps the aviary kept by the Farmer family in the 19th century, the curtain wall of the 1650s house built for Maynard and an ice-house north west of the Orangery.



FRIENDS of GUNNERSBURY PARK & MUSEUM

Welcome to new members who have joined us recently! If you are already a Friend, do encourage someone else to join. The subscription, at £5, is very modest - a bigger membership means a better income and a stronger voice. Send your cheque, made out to the Friends of Gunnersbury Park & Museum, to The Membership Secretary, Friends of Gunnersbury Park & Museum, 39 Lionel Road, Brentford TW8 9QZ. Registered Charity no 286310

We welcome contributions to the Newsletter; the next issue will be compiled in February 2010

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