

News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

Spring 2009



The former Mercury Theatre - see page 5 ©Thomas Erskine

SUBTERRANEAN DEVELOPMENT SURVEY

In our last issue, we reported that we were about to conduct a survey of neighbours of houses in Kensington which had recently been subject to major new basement development, e.g. to install a swimming pool. We sent out some 200 questionnaires relating to 95 properties, and received 58 replies (concerning 46 properties), which we understand is a good result for this sort of survey. We had selected the houses on the basis of planning permissions granted by the Council for this sort of development over the last seven or eight years. For nine of the properties, the work had either not taken place or had not yet started. For fifteen, work was still ongoing. We nevertheless believe that the results are probably fairly representative.

The planning stage

Experience of involvement at the planning stage varied greatly. In a

few cases, neighbours felt that they had been fully involved by the applicants from the beginning. But in most cases there seems to have been little consultation or even contact with neighbours before planning applications were put in. In some cases, neighbours only heard about the planning application when the Council planning notice came through their letterbox.

Most respondents had raised objections to the plans. In some cases they managed to get some details changed, but many felt ignored and bruised by their encounter with the planning system. A number of respondents also seem to have had great difficulty in negotiating suitable Party Wall Agreements, the process often taking several months. And in a couple of cases, the work started before the Party Wall Agreement was in place.

Damage caused by the works

In two or three cases, there appears to have been quite appall-

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THE LADBROKE ASSOCIATION AGM

7 JULY 2009

The 40th Annual General Meeting of the Association will be held on Tuesday 7th July 2009 at: **7.00 for 7.30 p.m.**

at St Peter's Church Hall,
59a Portobello Road, W11 3DB

Any nominations for new officers and committee members should be sent to the Chairman of the Ladbroke Association, 8 Horbury Mews, W11 3NL, not later than Thursday 25 June.

All nominations should have both a proposer and a seconder.

An agenda will be available at the meeting and will be posted on the Ladbroke Association website in advance of the meeting.

GARDEN WALK

The Association's traditional walk around some of the communal gardens in the Ladbroke estate is being postponed until the autumn.

A separate invitation, with further details, will be sent out to members nearer the time.

Places are restricted, so those wishing to join the walk will need to book in advance.

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ing damage, costing many tens of thousands of pounds to put right. Mainly, however, the damage was fairly minor, although most neighbours in adjacent houses reported cracking in their walls and small damage of one sort or another, as well as severe damage to their gardens from the dust generated by the work. One, who normally opens his garden to the public for charity, believes that it will be three years before it is restored to its previous state. Experience with getting the damage repaired was once again extremely variable, quite a few having had difficulty making claims under the Party Wall Agreement.

The majority of the projects had taken place fairly recently, and few of the respondents reported major long-term consequences, although some were fearful of the future.

Nuisance

This was definitely the area about which most (although by no means all) felt most strongly.

Excessive noise, vibration, dirt, rats and mice and traffic problems over a long period (the developments lasted anything from 6 months to 2 ½ years) seem to have driven many to distraction, especially those working from home.

“The level of noise was unbelievable. The whole house shuddered”;
“Noise was truly excessive. Our whole house was vibrating all day. It almost drove me mad, as I work from home”;

“The noise was appalling. I could

only work at night when they had gone. Kanga drills going all the time, cement saws going all the time. The most incredible noise you can imagine” .

These were some of the comments. There were also stories of dirt covering the front of houses up to three storeys and major inconvenience because of parking bays being suspended and lorries blocking access.

A more minor irritant reported by several was the loud playing of radios by the workmen.

Solutions

We asked all respondents for ideas on how matters could be improved.

Unsurprisingly, several were clear that all digging out of new basements should be banned, which we fear we must accept as unrealistic (although the recession may mean fewer such developments).

Many felt that there should be much better consultation at an earlier stage, possibly with the Council chairing a meeting between the applicants and the neighbours.

One of the other themes that came through was that people did not know where to turn when there were problems from the building works. Too often they were passed from pillar to post or told it was a “neighbour-to-neighbour” problem.

Several were in favour of a Council hot line that they could ring if they had problems.

Another suggestion was a levy on the developer to pay for the Council to make regular health and safety inspections of the work.

Financial compensation for noise and requirements for better and more regular cleansing were also suggested.

Several felt that the hours of noisy work should be more limited (8 am to 6.30 pm Mondays-Saturdays seems the current norm), although that could have the effect of lengthening the time that projects take.

Conclusion

A copy of the questionnaire is on our website, and we will be putting up a more detailed analysis of the responses together with the complete list of proposals made for improving the situation.

The Ladbroke Association Committee will be considering all the proposals and hopes to come up with some ideas for concrete action to put to the Council, and also possibly to the local MP.

The noise and dust nuisance seems a priority area for action, especially as it probably applies to the majority of major house renovations, not just those involving the digging out of basements.

In these days of environmental consciousness, it seems totally unacceptable that people should be expected to put up with this sort of pollution, arguably far worse than e.g. many of the loud neighbour parties on which the Council is well organised to take action.

ARUNDEL GARDENS BLOSSOMS



Arundel Gardens was until recently one of the relatively few streets in the Ladbroke area which contained no street trees.

The council, without any apparent local consultation, has now planted a number of small Magnolia grandiflora along its pavements.

Our impression is that most people welcome this planting although one of our Members there was upset.

The trees are evergreen with deep green glossy leaves and should produce huge, deliciously scented, creamy white flowers during the summer.

LADBROKE LECTURE

The Ladbroke Association’s lecture which took place on 11 March was well-attended and we hope that all those who attended found it interesting and enjoyed it.

The speaker was the local historian Carolyn Starren, who spoke about the history of the Ladbroke area, and also gave some tips on researching the history of one’s house.

We will shortly be putting her notes on the latter on the Association’s website.

www.ladbrokeassociation.org

BUS ROUTES

No.23 bus

Transport for London (TfL) have been doing a preliminary consultation about a possible change in the route of the No. 23 bus. At present, on its way east to Liverpool Street, it runs from Ladbroke Grove Underground Station up the Grove and turns left into Elgin Crescent. It then crosses Portobello Road into Colville Terrace, turning right into Colville Road and thence east into Westbourne Grove. TfL are proposing that in future it would continue further up Ladbroke Grove and turn east into Ladbroke Gardens, which would lead it straight into Westbourne Grove. The change would involve abolishing the traffic island at the Ladbroke Grove end of Ladbroke Gardens.

The trouble about this proposal is that it would replace one set of problems by another. It would benefit residents at the east end of Elgin Crescent (which has had buses running down it since 1914), as it would reduce to some extent the number of buses running past their houses. Residents of Ladbroke Gardens, on the other hand, are naturally unhappy with the idea

of having buses in their street for the first time. But the opposition is not just from NIMBYs. Three petitions were presented at the RBKC Council meeting of 22 April, with a total of 931 signatures, stressing that the change in the route and the fact it would no longer stop at the well-used bus stop in Elgin Crescent (close to Portobello Road and the Colville Primary School) would be extremely inconvenient to many local residents and tourists; and would adversely affect local businesses. Strong concern was also expressed about the road safety implications, especially at the Ladbroke Grove/Ladbroke Gardens junction.

The Ladbroke Association Committee found this a difficult issue. While sympathising with residents of Elgin Crescent, it finally decided to express its opposition to TfL, arguing that bus routes within the Conservation Area should be kept to existing B routes, and not be allowed to spread into neighbouring streets with the accompanying risks to historic buildings. There is also concern about adding to the congestion at the west end of Westbourne Grove on Saturdays.

No. 228 bus

The 228 bus is now running along the full length of Ladbroke Grove, but with very few passengers. One local resident has done his own private count. In observing 50 buses, the maximum passenger count was 7 persons, but he reckoned that it was typically around 3-5 people. A question on the 228 was put to the head of TfL, who attended the RBKC Council meeting on 22 April, suggesting that the route should be reviewed. He replied that, as it took some time for passenger numbers to build up on new routes, it was too early to judge cost-effectiveness. So this is probably something that objectors to the route need to reconsider in a year or so's time.

In the meantime, the Council are abolishing some parking bays near Ladbroke Square to accommodate a new bus stop for the 228, although we gather that they intend to squeeze some new ones in elsewhere to compensate. Some of the disappearing bays, however, are 4-hour pay-and-display ones widely used by builders doing work on houses nearby, and it is not clear whether they will be replicated.

PLANNING MATTERS

20 Victoria Gardens

We have reported in previous newsletters on the long-running saga of the development of the vacant EDF site in Victoria Gardens.

In December 2008 a completely new planning application to build houses on the site was submitted to RBKC.

As before, the proposal is for nine houses but, this time, seven of them are smaller mews type houses.

Two larger houses are planned at the west end. One of these fronts on to Victoria Gardens and is of similar design to the existing houses in the street.

The roof lines of all the houses are lower than proposed before and they are therefore less intrusive when seen from the houses on the south side of Ladbroke Road.

This result is a good example of what can be achieved if a group of

residents gets properly organized and argues logically and consistently to obtain changes to a planning proposal.

We understand that the Council is asking for a reduction in the height of the buildings.

21 Kensington Park Gardens

The Council has just granted planning permission for a major underground development under the large back garden of this listed building, to accommodate a cinema and billiard room and other amenities.

So far, underground developments under listed buildings have not normally been allowed, on the grounds that they change the nature of the building. But in this case the Council decided to accept the development because it is under the garden. Access will be via a staircase from inside the listed building.

92-94 Kensington Park Road

A rare example of new build in the Ladbroke area is that proposed for the mews at the back of the Notting Hill Brasserie, once again with a troglodytic aspect.

The proposal is for a three-storey house, but with two of the storeys below ground and an internal courtyard at the bottom of a well to give light to the two subterranean floors.

Such downward development may be less risky than burrowing under existing buildings, but we suspect still not problem-free.



92 & 94 Kensington Park Road

TO STUCCO OR NOT TO STUCCO

Stuccoed houses are one of the glories of the Ladbroke estate. The fashion for stucco came in during the second half of the 18th century and was embraced enthusiastically by John Nash, the architect of the Regent's Park terraces. He was an important influence on the early architects of the Ladbroke estate, and almost all the houses built in Holland Park Avenue, Ladbroke Terrace and the south end of Ladbroke Grove during the first phase of development in the 1820s and early 1830s had full stucco fronts, usually with finely incised lines to imitate blocks of stone.

Stucco remained popular when development started again in the 1840s. Indeed, the early 1850s saw the erection of some of the grandest and most ornate stucco houses of the area, for instance in Kensington Park Gardens and Stanley Gardens. But a taste for brick or half-stucco (i.e. stucco on the ground floor only, leaving bare brick on the upper floors) was beginning to creep in. Brickwork allowed for interesting effects, as stucco pilasters and window decorations showed up well against the darker brick. Many of the most interesting houses in Ladbroke Road, Lansdowne Road and Clarendon Road, for instance, are brick or half-stucco.

In many people's minds, however, there has long been a general view that brickwork – especially yellowish London stock brickwork – is aesthetically inferior. Over the years, quite a few house-owners have painted over or stuccoed their brickwork.

The effect can be pleasing – for instance in Hillgate village, where undistinguished workmen's cottages have been painted in many pastel colours, adding a touch of Mediterranean-style gaiety.

The 1960s dark-brick house at No. 11 Clarendon Road has also recently been stuccoed; while it looks odd against its neighbours, the 1960s was not a good period for architecture and some would say that the whole terrace would benefit from similar treatment.



No. 11 Clarendon Road, the end house of a terrace built in the 1960s and recently stuccoed over. The terrace is just outside the Ladbroke conservation area.

The effect is less happy when the house is part of a handsome 19th century terrace or one of a pair or trio of well-designed villas. In Ladbroke Road, Nos. 21, 23 & 25 form an attractive and unusual trio, half-stucco, the red-brick upper floors with interesting stucco facings imitating stone. But unfortunately No.21 has been stuccoed, depriving the trio of much of its interest. Happily, an attempt by a developer to cover one of the other houses with stucco a few years ago was deflected by the Council, who are now much more vigilant on this

sort of issue than in the past. There is another example, this time of a pair of villas, one with the brickwork painted over, at Nos. 16-18 Lansdowne Road; and other pairs where one side of the pair has been stuccoed in Lansdowne Road and Lansdowne Crescent.

How easy is it to remove stucco or paint from brick? In houses that were designed from the beginning to be stuccoed, the stucco often conceals very poor brickwork with no proper pointing, and removal of the stucco would be disastrous. But where stucco has been added later,



21, 23 and 25 Ladbroke Road, a symmetrical trio with unusual red-brick upper floors, marred by the addition of stucco to No. 21. ©Thomas Erskine



16 and 18 Lansdowne Road, with the brick-work on the left-hand house fully covered in stucco. (Photograph ©Thomas Erskine, 2006.)



37 Clarendon Road with its white-painted brick-work spoiling the uniformity of the terrace. (Photographs ©Thomas Erskine, 2006.)

Below the same terrace in 2009 after removal of the paintwork on No. 37



it is usually possible to remove it without too much difficulty. As for paintwork, modern water-based masonry paint can also be removed. But old-fashioned oil-based paint is disastrous, as it tends to seep irreversibly into the brickwork.

The Ladbroke Association accepts that it would be impractical to restore every unsuitably stuccoed or painted house to its pristine condition. But we do encourage it to be done wherever possible. There is a happy example of restoration to the previous brickwork – supported by the Ladbroke Association - at No. 37 Clarendon Road: see the ‘before and after’ photographs below.

MERCURY THEATRE

The Mercury was probably the Ladbroke area’s best-known theatre, operational from 1931 to the 1980s, and can truly be said to have been the birthplace of British ballet.

The Gothic-style building, at No. 2a Ladbroke Road next to the Kensington Temple, was erected in 1851 and began life as a church school. It was subsequently used as a church hall, and then a sculptor’s studio.

In 1931 the building was taken over by the Russo-Polish ballerina Marie Rambert (later Dame Marie) and her husband Ashley Dukes, a successful playwright and theatrical impresario, to give a home to Madame Rambert’s recently-founded dance troupe, the “Mercury Ballet Club”. It was the first classical ballet company in Britain and (as the Ballet Rambert) is still going strong. No. 2a Ladbroke Road remained the company’s permanent home for the next 23 years.

Ashley Dukes, who had made a lot of money from his plays, remodelled the building to meet the needs of both the Ballet Club and the ballet school that Marie Rambert ran alongside. He put a partition through the middle of the old church hall, with the theatre on one side and a room for dance classes on the other. The steel beams that he inserted were so strong that the theatre qualified as an air raid shelter during the Second World War.

The first season opened on 16 February 1931 with nightly ballet performances. Contemporaneous press reports referred to the theatre as “small, but comfortable and attractive” and “a charming little band-box of a theatre”. It seated 150 people, including 15 standing at the back. The Ballet Club’s own literature described it as a private theatre, “equipped with a large stage and modern lighting. There is a spacious foyer for intercourse and refreshments”. A tradition of joky programmes was established. An early one told punters:

The exit doors are for emergency and lead you into Ladbroke Road double quick; we do not recommend them. It is more comfortable to go out the way you came in, especially as you can then visit OUR COFFEE STALL.

WE SHOULD HESITATE to recommend one of these establishments, especially in Kensington, where people go to bed much too early.

BUT WE MUST SAY A WORD for our own public stall, which not only supplies a remarkable cup of coffee (black if you prefer it or coloured with real milk), but also the following unusual delicacies:

Chipolatas or Midget Sausages as the larger stores prosaically call them, eaten impaled on orange sticks, and served both hot and cold.

Sardine sandwiches, buckling sandwiches, egg sandwiches and others too numerous to mention.”

As there was no room for an orchestra, a pianist provided the music from a corner in front of the stage, sometimes accompanied by a harp, oboe or bassoon. People could dance on the stage following the performance. As today, there were parking problems. One programme in the 1930s apologizes “for the joint activities of the Metropolitan Water Board and the Borough Council which have momentarily made Ladbroke Road a devastated



The Mercury before rebuilding

area. You will shortly be able to put your car outside as before”.

Despite its modest premises and facilities, the Ballet Club attracted some major guest artists to supplement the Club’s own company. Alicia Markova, the star British ballerina of her age, gave her support and danced there regularly in the early days. The company also included the young dancer Frederick Ashton, subsequently Britain’s foremost choreographer. He choreographed one of the short pieces, “La Peri”, with which the season opened, and soon became the Ballet Club’s resident choreographer.

At first, the theatre had no name and was known simply as the Ballet Club. In 1933 Ashley Dukes, who was never afraid of experimentation, decided that it should become “The Nameless Theatre”. This non-name did not take off, however, and by the end of 1933 it had formally become the Mercury Theatre.

In 1936 Ashley Dukes bought the two houses next door to the theatre, numbers 2 and 4 Ladbroke Road, enabling the facilities at the theatre to be considerably improved. A new entrance was created through No. 2 Ladbroke Road and proper bar facilities installed.

The Ballet Club did not keep up its ambitious regime of nightly performances. By 1934 it was giving only two performances a week, and subsequently settled down to regular Sunday night performances.

When the ballet was not performing, Ashley Dukes often put on plays and other entertainments. There were several seasons of “Plays by Poets”, which included the first London performance of *Murder in the Cathedral* by T.S. Eliot (in 1936) and the première of *The Ascent of F6* by W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood (in 1937).

During the war, the Ballet Club moved elsewhere, although Marie Rambert was still very much a presence at the Mercury. Brigadier Stephen Gilbert, who lived in Ladbroke Road as a child at the beginning of the war, recalled how during the blitz Madame Rambert would ask the neighbours to shelter under the stage. ‘Apparently she found the bombing most inspiring and she would sweep baby me up into her arms and dance energetic fandangos.’ Although the Ballet Club had moved out of the Mercury, Ashley Dukes continued to put on plays almost throughout the war.

After the war, the Ballet Rambert (as it had become) had outgrown the Mercury and needed a larger stage. Ashley Dukes had grandiose plans to demolish Nos. 1-7 Ladbroke Road (which he also owned) and to build a huge theatre and office complex. But planning permission was refused. The Ballet Rambert became largely a touring company, making Sadlers Wells its London base and giving only occasional

performances at the Mercury (it moved finally to its current headquarters in Chiswick in 1966).

The ballet school continued to operate at the Mercury, however, and Ashley Dukes continued to put on short seasons of plays until his death in 1959, although less and less frequently.

Other companies also took the theatre for short periods and it was hired out for a variety of events.

In 1968, it was one of the locations for a Beatles photo-shoot by the veteran photographer Don McCullin. The Beatles had decided that they wanted some new "photographs with a difference" for the media and asked Paul McCartney's then girlfriend to choose five "random" locations in London, one of which was the Mercury.

Finally, in 1987, the Ballet Rambert decided to sell the theatre. There were no takers for it as a theatre, and it was reluctantly agreed that it could be converted into a private house.

By this time, the building was in a fairly parlous state, and the developer who purchased it completely rebuilt the façade on Ladbroke Road and turned it into an interesting and idiosyncratic dwelling.

CHANGES AT THE COUNCIL

Councillor Daniel Moylan, the Deputy Leader of the Council, was recently appointed by the Mayor of London as Deputy Chairman of Transport for London.

As a result, he has given up his responsibilities as RBKC Cabinet Member for transport, although he is still responsible for decisions on planning and housing policy.

One of Cllr Moylan's campaigns has been to de-clutter the borough of unnecessary street signs, barriers, etc – with noted effect in High Street Kensington, and also to a lesser extent in the Ladbroke area, where for instance some of the traffic light posts controlling the junction of Ladbroke Grove and Ladbroke Road were removed last year. So we may see changes in streetscapes on a more London-wide basis.

Within the borough, Cllr Moylan

continues to play a leading role in the redevelopment of the north of the borough, a not uncontroversial issue.

Cllr Nick Paget-Brown has taken over the transport portfolio. As the new Mayor seems to want to take more account of the views of the boroughs, this is a potentially influential post.

There are also changes afoot in the planning department. In particular, a new post of Head of Enforcement Control is being created, which is good news, as the Council's record on making sure that planning permissions are observed has been far from good recently.

CONCERTS IN THE LADBROKE AREA

Not all members may be aware that there are two regular series of chamber music concerts in the Ladbroke area. What is more, they are all free.

The first series takes place at lunchtime in St John's Church at the top of Ladbroke Grove. They start at 1 o'clock and last about an hour.

The artists are mainly talented music students or young orchestral players who enjoy doing a spot of chamber music for their own satisfaction. Artists performing in June include Katie Flanagan and Kate Walter playing harp and flute duets by Bach, Rutter and Piazzola on 11 June.

Free tea, coffee and biscuits are provided and there is a collection at the end. 70% of the money collected goes to the artists (who otherwise perform unpaid) and to meet expenses; the rest goes to the church.

There is a parallel series of evening piano concerts at the Notting Hill Community Church [Peniel Chapel] in Kensington Park Road (between Elgin and Blenheim Crescents). They take place at 7.30-8.30 p.m. on Thursdays, again with refreshments.

One of the highlights in June is the pianist Simon Watterton playing the late Beethoven sonatas on 4 June.

The concerts are arranged by music-lover Richard Carruthers, who

lives locally and runs his own small recording label.

He will email his newsletter with concert details to anybody interested. His email address is:

[**richard@music-chamber.com**](mailto:richard@music-chamber.com)

Details of the next month's concerts can also be found on his website:

[**www.music-chamber.com**](http://www.music-chamber.com)

Richard particularly hopes that more people will come to the evening piano concerts at the Notting Hill Community Church.



The Peniel Chapel. ©Thomas Erskine

MEMBERSHIP

Last autumn we asked existing members to try to recruit some new members and also to review their own subscriptions which in some cases remained at £5 a year.

Thanks to your efforts we have gained 10 new members and 35 members increased their subscriptions.

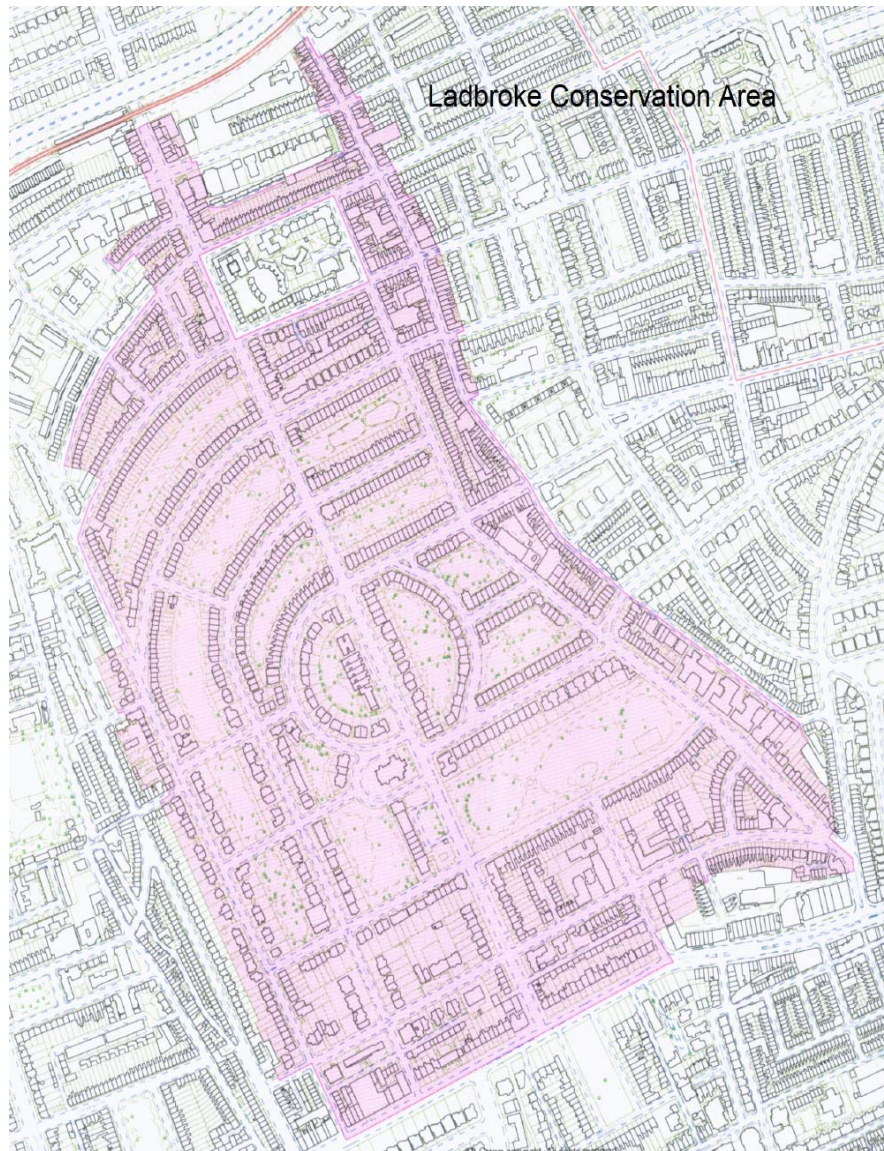
Please continue the good work and try to get more people to sign up as members.

We lose membership whenever existing members die or move from the area (although some do remain members even after they move), so we badly need replacements.

If you are moving, please do suggest to your successor in your house or flat to join the Association.

There is a membership form on the back page of this newsletter, and one can also be downloaded from our website at:

[**www.ladbrokeassociation.org**](http://www.ladbrokeassociation.org)



THE OFFICERS AND THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE LADBROKE ASSOCIATION

Officers:

President: Sir Angus Stirling

Chairman: David Corsellis

Hon Treasurer: Paul Bastick

Hon Secretary: Anne Chorley

Committee Members:

Alex Bell

David Campion,

Peter Chapman

Maurice Fraser,

Sandra Kamen,

Andrew Lamont,

David Marshall,

Peter Mishcon,

Malcolm Pawley,

Peggy Post,

Robina Rose.

Newsletter: Sophia Lambert

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE LADBROKE ASSOCIATION

The Association is a charitable non-political organisation. Its constitution requires it to promote and encourage the following objectives by charitable means but not otherwise:

- ♦ To encourage and promote high standards of architecture and town planning within the Ladbrooke Estate Conservation Area
- ♦ To stimulate and promote public interest in, and care for the beauty, history, and character of the neighbourhood
- ♦ To encourage the preservation, development and improvement of features of general public amenity or historic interest.

The complete constitution of the Ladbrooke Association is on its website at:

www.ladbrokeassociation.org

and the website also includes much historical information about the conservation area.

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Thomas Erskine.

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TO JOIN THE LADBROKE ASSOCIATION

If you wish to join or support the Ladbrooke Association, please complete this standing order form and send it to Paul Bastick, the Hon Treasurer, 75A Ladbrooke Grove, W11 2PD. The minimum subscription is £15 for family or individual membership but many members pay more to support our activities. We would also appreciate it if you could complete a Gift Aid Form which is available from the above address and on the website.

To:.....Bank plc Sort Code:

Address of Bank:

.....

Please pay to Barclays Bank plc, 212 Regent Street, PO Box 4BP, London W1A 4BP Sort Code: 20-71-74, immediately and thereafter on 1st April each year until further notice the sum of £..... for the credit of the Ladbrooke Association (Account No: **80522635**)

Name: [Please print]

Signed..... Date.....

Address.....

.....Postcode:.....