

News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

Autumn 2008



The 20th Century Theatre on Westbourne Grove, W11.

THE 20TH CENTURY THEATRE

Our area has been surprisingly well-supplied with theatres over the years. The old Mercury Theatre in Ladbroke Road was the home of the Ballet Rambert and also put on plays. Just outside the Ladbroke area there was the Coronet that opened in 1898 seating over 1000 – although it only survived as a theatre for 18 years before being transformed into a cinema. There was a Theatre Club in the 1940s and 1950s in Chepstow Villas. And the Gate Theatre remains one of the best pub theatres in London.

The first theatre of the Ladbroke area, however, was the 20th Century Theatre at 291 Westbourne Grove (just off the Portobello Road). It was built in 1863 and has had an illustrious and varied history. It started life as the Victoria Hall. In 1866 it was renamed the Bijou Theatre (it was indeed small, seating only about 300). In 1893 the theatre was completely refurbished.

After it was done the Kensington News gave the following description:

"The grand hall is upwards of 60ft long by nearly 30ft wide. It is lofty, well lighted, and ventilated. The decorations are very handsome, being beautifully relieved with blue and gold. The floor is superb for dancing, and the stage a most magnificent one, being nearly 30ft square, fitted with foot-lights and batten lights, and every convenience. There is a fine stock of well painted scenery, and one of the handsomest drop scenes ever painted on fireproof material".

In its early years the theatre was used by a variety of small companies, mostly putting on farces and other popular entertainment. But there were some more interesting productions. Oscar Wilde's Salome, that had thitherto only been performed (in French) in Paris, had its first English performance at the Bijou in 1905

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CHRISTMAS PARTY

The Ladbroke Association's Christmas Party will be held on **Monday 15 December 2008** at **6:30pm**

Members will receive a separate letter inviting them to attend.

LECTURE

The Association is organizing a talk by Carrie Starren on

Wednesday 11 March 2009 at **630 pm**

at the St Peters Church Hall in Portobello Road.

Carrie is a well-known local historian. She has recently been commissioned to write a book on Notting Hill and Holland Park. She will be talking about the history of the Ladbroke Estate, its buildings and the people who have lived there. She will also explain how you can research the history of your house find out and who has lived there over the last century or so. Members will receive a letter in the New Year with further details.

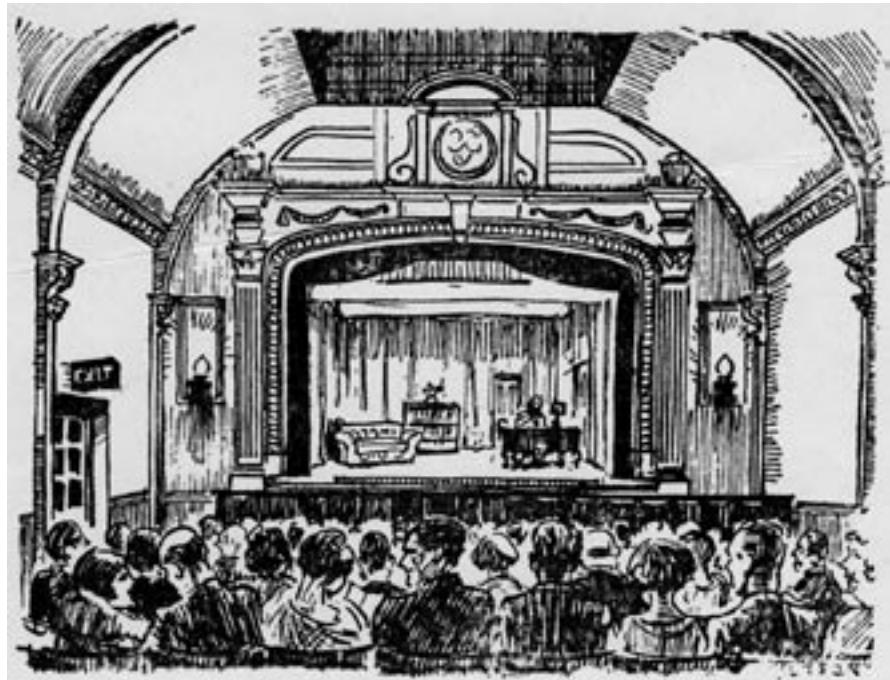
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– although apparently it was a somewhat amateurish production; it was panned by the critic Max Beerbohm. The theatre must have run into problems, as between 1911 and 1918 it was used as a cinema. Then in 1924 it was acquired by Lena Ashwell, an enterprising actress who had organised entertainment for the British troops during the First World War and then established her own company, the Lena Ashwell Players. They were a travelling company that aimed to bring good cheap entertainment to audiences in the London suburbs. The Century Theatre, as it had now become, served as their central London base and they also put on many plays there.

One 17-year-old novice actor who joined the company in 1925 was Laurence Olivier. Miss Ashwell gave him small parts in Julius Caesar and The Tempest (in Julius Caesar he played (in the same performance) a conspirator, a tribune and a “friend to Brutus and Cassius”). But he lasted in the company for only a month, mainly because of the pranks he paid, like tearing the back-cloth to expose the bottoms of the actresses changing behind it. The last straw was when the underpants of one of the actors fell down beneath his toga and Olivier laughed so hysterically that he had to leave the stage. Miss Ashwell sacked him forthwith.

The Lena Ashwell Players were disbanded in 1929 and there followed a period when the theatre was rented out for amateur dramatics. It was used by, among others, the dramatic societies of Harrods, D. H. Evans and the BBC. The next permanent occupants of the Theatre were the Rudolph Steiner organisation, who took it over in 1938. They renamed it the Twentieth Century Theatre and used it for visiting lecturers and artists from Steiner’s headquarters in Switzerland and to popularise “Eurythmy” – an expressive movement and music art form. They continued to make the theatre available for hire for theatrical purposes, however, with “due discrimination as to the class of entertainment”! The Steiner organisation subsequently established permanent headquarters in Baker



The Century Theatre in the early 1930s

Street, bringing an end to the building’s theatrical era. In the 1960s it began to be used as an antiques warehouse. The then owner did, however, save the building by persuading the authorities to give it a Grade II listing, as a rare survival of a rectangular hall-type theatre, with a gallery along one end.

In 1999, the theatre entered its current incarnation as a venue for art and photography exhibitions, product and book launches, fashion shows and fairs. It is also available for private parties.

A longer version of this article will be posted on the Association’s website. We hope to have an article on the Mercury Theatre in a forthcoming issue.

PLANNING MATTERS

Subterranean developments.

The Association has for some time been worried about the increasing number of subterranean developments beneath terraced houses in the area, especially when they involve major new excavations to accommodate swimming pools, gyms etc.

Most of the houses in the area are built on very shallow foundations over heavy London clay with the attendant risk of subsidence or heave, and we are concerned that such developments could destabilise neighbouring properties over the longer term.

The Council shares many of our concerns and last year commissioned a study from Ove Arup on the subject. That report came to the conclusion that normally such developments should not cause structural problems, provided that they are well designed and constructed by suitably qualified engineers.

Even if one accepts that conclusion (and not all do), this is quite a big proviso and we are not sure that all the recent developments have been as professionally built as they might have been.

Certainly there is a lot of anecdotal evidence of structural problems (cracking, etc) caused to adjacent houses; and major nuisance is caused to neighbours during construction.

We are planning to undertake a survey of the neighbours of houses where there has been recent subterranean construction. We thus hope to get a better understanding of the problem, so as to inform our future discussions with the Council.

Since the Ove Arup report, the Government has relaxed the planning regulations so that most subterranean development will in the future not even need planning permission. This is not good news but some basement extensions in

conservation areas will still need permission and the Council has recently circulated for consultation a “Supplementary Planning Document” on basement extensions that effectively sets out its proposed future policy on such developments. The consultation runs until 9 December 2008.

The Ladbroke Association will be commenting and will take into account members’ views should you wish to email or post them to us (by 30 November at the latest, please).

The 61-page document is available on the RBKC website or from the RBKC Planning Department in the Town Hall.

16½ Lansdowne Walk

In our Spring newsletter we reported our support of the Council’s refusal to allow the construction of an off street parking area in front of the new replacement house to be built at 16½. Some members were unhappy with our stance as there had been a garage there before. But the Committee did feel that off-street parking in front of houses in the area should be discouraged. In the event, the matter went to appeal and the Council’s decision was overturned.

A contributory factor to this decision was the discovery, during construction, of a previously unknown coal bunker under the pavement outside 16½.

20 Victoria Gardens

The Association has continued to oppose the proposals by developers to build nine three-storey houses on this site, just behind the terrace of small houses at Nos. 21-55 Ladbroke Road. The Council, after a long delay, has now refused the most recent application. Because of the delay, the developers had put in an appeal that was due to be heard at a public enquiry in December.

However, the developers have now withdrawn their appeal. They recently held discussions with RBKC’s planning staff and the Ladbroke Road Residents’ Action Committee, and we understand that they may put forward a revised proposal, under which some of the houses would be reduced to two



92-96 Kensington Park Road. Photo © Thomas Erskine.

storeys only and the design would be less brutal. This would be an improvement. But the Association’s long held view continues to be that no such development on this site should be allowed until the future development of Notting Hill Gate

Notting Hill Brasserie

There have been several applications to change the entrance arrangements for the Notting Hill Brasserie next to St Peter’s Church at 92-96 Kensington Park Road.

At present the entrance is under the attractive neighbouring archway (see *photo above*). The intention is to move the entrance onto the street-front – which may have something to do with a separate application that has been made to build two new houses in the parking area behind the restaurant.

The latest plans are much improved in design compared to the previous one, as they would replace the rather ugly arched window on the left with a doorway and window matching the rest of the building. But we remain concerned that the plate-glass door proposed would be out of keeping; and we are also concerned at the possible loss of parking spaces if a gap has to be opened up in front of the restaurant for vehicles coming to the restaurant.

Tables outside cafés

We see a number of applications from pubs, restaurants and cafés for permission to continue to put tables

and chairs on the pavement outside their premises.

Generally, we think that such tables outside are a welcome amenity, especially if our climate really is warming up. So we do not normally object to such applications so long as the tables are placed so as to leave a clear passage along the pavement for pedestrians, including “mother and buggy” combinations, in accordance with the Council’s guidelines.

PUNJANI’S POST OFFICE AND THE 228 BUS ROUTE

The proposals to close Punjani’s Post Office in Ladbroke Grove and to introduce a new bus route 228 through the south end of Ladbroke Grove – previously a bus free zone – were both subject to consultation earlier in the year.

The local opposition was numerous, vociferous and extremely active. Various public consultation meetings and exercises were organized but in the end to no avail.

We are afraid that the overriding feeling of those taking part in the consultation exercises was that consultation was just an exercise to be endured by those in authority and that there was never any likelihood of the proposals being altered.

The new single-decker bus route will start in January. At least it will not be as bad as the stream of double-deckers that have been diverted down Ladbroke Grove because of the gas leak at Notting Hill Gate.



THE OFFICERS AND THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE LABDROKE 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.

Minutes Secretary: Anne Chorley

Newsletter: Sophia Lambert

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE LABDROKE ASSOCIATION

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

- ♦ To encourage and promote high standards of architecture and town planning within the Ladbroke 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 Ladbroke Association is on its website at:

www.ladbrokeassociation.org

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

The artwork and layout for this Newsletter was composed by David Campion using the Adobe InDesign software. Printing was done by Prontaprint Notting Hill Gate.

TO JOIN THE LABDROKE ASSOCIATION

If you wish to join or support the Ladbroke Association, please complete this standing order form and send it to Paul Bastick, the Hon Treasurer, 75A Ladbroke 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 greatly appreciate it if you could complete a Gift Aid Form which is available from the above address.

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 1 April each year until further notice the sum of £..... for the credit of the Ladbroke Association (Account No: 80522635)

Name: [Please print]

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

Address.....

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