

News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

SUMMER 1989

THE LADBROKE ASSOCIATION: TWENTY YEARS ON by Angus Stirling

About twenty-five years ago proposals to construct an ugly, ill-proportioned glass and concrete tower block in the heart of the Ladbroke Estate were met by resolute objections, supported by several hundred local residents. The developers withdrew. A short while later there was a threat to fell half the plane trees in Ladbroke Grove. A letter to *The Times* delayed the axes; meetings were held and the Borough Council was persuaded of the unwisdom of this particular piece of iconoclasm.

From these two campaigns there emerged the idea of forming a permanent voluntary body to protect the character and integrity of the Ladbroke Estate. The Ladbroke Association, as it came to be called, was born at a time when post-war redevelopment in London found modern architecture at its lowest ebb, and was officially constituted on 8 July 1969. From the outset the founding committee was determined that the Association should not become an instrument of obstructive opposition to everything new. It set out rather to educate and advise, and to identify and defend the principles of design and layout, the spatial relationships and interplay between buildings, trees and gardens, and the excellence of structural and decorative detail which are all essential features of this remarkably beautiful part of London.

There was no lack of work to do. The Association quickly forged good contacts with the Borough Council; the examination of all planning applications affecting the area has been and remains one of the most important and arduous of the Association's tasks. A survey of the Ladbroke trees, a report on traffic, and guidance to residents and contractors on the correct treatment of stucco and architectural detail when undertaking repairs were among many

specific projects carried out.

The Association came into being through the willing co-operation of many people, a number of whom have given of their time and skills throughout the whole period to ensure the success of its work. It would, I hope, not be thought invidious if I mention the name of the late Professor Carus-Wilson. Those of us fortunate to remember meetings at her house at 1 Ladbroke Walk are unlikely to forget the gracious presence and penetrating mind of this distinguished lady, a life-long resident of Ladbroke, who became the second chairman of the Association and was devoted to its cause. The association was given much good advice in its formative days by the Civic Trust, and it was strengthened by the goodwill and help of its neighbouring societies in Norland and Pembroke.

I was privileged to be the Association's first chairman and one of its founder members. As its president today I should like, in saluting the Association's twentieth anniversary, to thank most warmly all those who continue to serve the Association, whether as subscribing members or as members of the Committee. In particular, I would like to express all our thanks to the present chairman, Peter Thorold, who has done such

an enormous amount in recent years to ensure the Association's continued success and effectiveness. I believe the Association is well established and has proved that it plays a valuable and dynamic role in the community by helping to safeguard the exceptional qualities for which the Ladbroke Estate is justifiably known. We can look forward with confidence and pride to our next twenty years.

Angus Stirling is Director General of the National Trust.

The Association is celebrating its twentieth anniversary at a party on June 19. Members have been sent announcement cards.

36-38 KENSINGTON PARK ROAD

For years these houses have been used as a residential hostel, and a planning application has been submitted requesting permission to turn them into a non-residential school for American students. Whether or not the change is desirable in itself, what is perturbing is the fact that the owners/occupiers did not wait for the Council's decision: the school has been in full operation now for weeks. Sensing antagonism, an informal campaign was mounted beforehand to overcome local opposition, and a special meeting at which it was emphasised that alternative use of the buildings might prove even less welcome seems to have succeeded in softening much of the original hostility. We are very concerned at the whole approach, and above all with the principle involved. It is quite unacceptable that anyone should be able to present the

Council with what looks like a *fait accompli*.

THE LADBROKE ESTATE

The GLC's *Survey of London* calls the Ladbroke Estate 'one of the finest townscapes in all London'. Yet this miniature garden city, a masterpiece of the romantic movement in town planning, was left to take its chance, exposed to neglect and reckless redevelopment for much of this century. Fortunately, in 1969, the Borough Council established it as a conservation area.

It was no accident that the picturesque style should take root and flourish in Notting Hill. The site was, for London, unusually exciting: an airy spur of Notting Hill plunging on three sides into the sticky hollows of Notting Dale. Both the main designers of the estate, Thomas Allason (1790-1852) and Thomas Allom (1804-1872) were well-known landscape artists as well as architects. Allason, commissioned by the Ladbroke family to begin the layout here in 1823, worked with the famous J. B. Papworth at Cheltenham. It was the fashionable air of Cheltenham's Lansdown and Montpelier estates that the designers hoped to bring to this dangerous building venture beside the piggeries and potteries of north-west London.

In the event it took nearly fifty years to find buyers for all the houses, and the succession of grinding halts brought ruin to the main developers. But Allason's and Allom's design evolved unscathed. Indeed, the ruin of successive developers only added variety to the layout. This remained true to the spirit of *rus in urbe* which had inspired Wood's Bath, Nash's Regent's Park and Papworth's Cheltenham. There were classical groves alternating with tiers of leafy crescents, stucco villas alternating with plain brick terraces. The great spire of St John's loomed over the plane trees like an obelisk in a park. And everywhere there were gardens, private and half private, hidden and half hidden, glimpses

of knolls and leafy dells, as though the real country began only a few steps beyond the last back door.

It was in the design of the fifteen communal gardens that Allason and Allom showed their greatest inventiveness. For two centuries the London square had faced outwards: terraces of private houses faced their private communal garden across a noisy and sometimes dangerous strip of pavements and roads. Allason and Allom turned the London square inside out, or (to be more precise) outside in. The rows of villas and terraces were designed to back onto communal pleasure grounds separated only by small private gardens. The pleasure grounds were thus more private, safer and more accessible to the residents. The Ladbroke estate remains the best example in the world of a miniature garden city designed on this delightful principle.

Thomas Pakenham

THE CORONET CINEMA

McDonald, the hamburger chain, have applied for permission to turn the Coronet Cinema at Notting Hill Gate into a restaurant with take-away service, shops and offices. Local residents are up in arms, worried at the prospect of litter and noise, as well as increased difficulty in parking.

It is a fine building, although strangely not a listed one, and it contains a remarkably complete auditorium, an inheritance of its days as a theatre. The theatre was built for the theatrical impresario Edward George Saunders to designs by W. G. R. Sprague (c 1865-1933) at a cost of £25,000. It opened on 28 November 1898 with a performance of 'the celebrated Japanese opera' *The Geisha*. *The Era* described it as 'a theatre of which the whole County of London may be proud'. Sprague specialised in building theatres, and was responsible for Wyndham's (1899), the Aldwych and the Strand. The Coronet is decorated, both inside and out, with

exuberant stucco ornament in the French rococo style fashionable at the turn of the century. Since 1916 it has served the community well as a cinema.

JUDGE'S RULING

Since our last newsletter there has been a decision in the High Court in the case of Steinberg & Sykes vs. the Secretary of State for the all-important struggle to prevent the Department of the Environment overruling our own Council when it rejects undesirable planning applications in the conservation area.

Devon & Wood Property Ltd had applied for planning permission to build a two-storey house on unused land in a recently designated conservation area in Kentish Town. Camden Council refused permission, but was overridden by the inspector on appeal. The latter's ruling, however, was challenged by two members of the local neighbourhood association on the grounds that the inspector had interpreted his duty too narrowly. He had, they claim, considered merely whether the proposal would 'harm' the conservation area, whereas his duty under the law went further, and it was his job also to take into consideration the need 'to preserve and enhance' the character of the area.

The applicants - who conducted their case personally - won, and were awarded costs. 'Harm is one thing', said the judge, 'preservation or enhancement is another'. One is essentially negative, the other positive.

Peter Thorold

MAKING PAINT STICK

There are few inventions that would be more welcome to householders than one that saved their having to go to substantial expense every four or five years in repainting their stucco. In fact claims are being made by building firms that the breakthrough has been achieved. But, sadly, we are skeptical, and any purport-

edly long-lasting paint could cause severe and irreparable damage to the stucco.

APPEALS

At 1 Lansdowne Road the owner succeeded in his appeal against the Council's refusal to allow a large side extension to the building.

50 Ladbroke Grove and 10 Lansdowne Crescent. In both these cases there are current appeals against the Council's refusal to allow proposed side extensions.

NEW PLANNING DIRECTOR

Miss Mary Dent becomes Director of Planning and Transportation at the Town Hall in June, succeeding Mr Sanders, who is retiring after nearly thirty years' service with the Royal Borough.

Miss Dent is currently Assistant City Planning Officer for the Corporation of London, her particular expertise being in development control. For nearly twenty years she worked in the Planning Department at the Borough of Camden. She holds a degree in Town Planning from London University and is a fellow of both the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and the Royal Town Planning Institute.



Miss Mary Dent, who takes up her appointment as Director of Planning and Transportation in June.

3-5 LANSDOWNE ROAD

After two years of dispute, the development of this site has been decided. During this time the two large, detached villas have stood abandoned and boarded up; they have changed hands twice, and two sets of development plans have been submitted. The first owners wanted to develop the site extensively. Disturbed by the possibility of major rebuilding of the houses and of the front gardens being smothered in tarmac to provide a car-park, a group of local residents strenuously fought the scheme. Their efforts were apparently rewarded when it was agreed that the number of flats should be limited to fourteen and that they should be contained essentially within the existing structure of the houses. Planning permission for this scheme was granted, but it seems that it would not have produced the kind of profit the developers had set their sights on, and the houses were sold. A second plan submitted earlier this year was also for fourteen flats, but the bulk of the buildings was to be increased enormously; rear extensions were to run to the full height of the houses and extend considerably further into the gardens than at present. Again the neighbours protested, but in the mean time the planning application was withdrawn, and in April the houses changed hands once again.

The new owner has reverted to the initial set of plans for which permission was granted to create fourteen flats and add a single-storey extension of some ten feet at the back. Work has begun, and should be complete by August 1990. In conversations with the residents, the new owner has appeared sympathetic to their wish to restore the front gardens with a good planting scheme and to their fears about the ugliness that could arise from a mass of parked cars. He also appears to be prepared to listen to representations concerning a scheme to restore the wall in front of number 3 to something like its original appearance.

We attach particular importance to this: the ugly red brick wall has been an eyesore for too long.

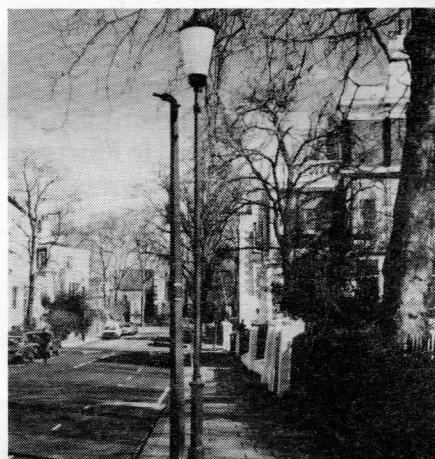
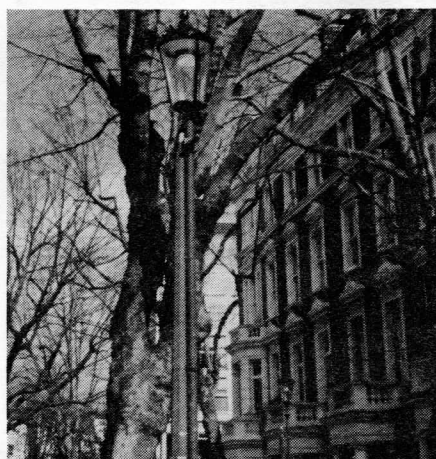
STREET LIGHTING

Anyone walking the streets of the Ladbroke area is likely to notice that new street lights are going up in a number of places, in some cases with the old concrete standards still in place, waiting to be carted away. What is more, in five or six streets there is a combination of two or three types of lamp. A lot has been going on at the Council's end, and the result is for the better. But things could still be improved, and any consultation with residents seems as far away as ever.

To show what we are talking about, we illustrate below the various types of street lighting to be found in our area. The very large lights on the main roads, such as Ladbroke Grove and Kensington Park Road, are omitted as no changes are planned for them.

The first photograph is of the old and particularly ugly type of lighting with the sloping lantern mounted on a heavy concrete standard, which thankfully is now disappearing, but is still to be found in Stanley Gardens, Lansdowne Crescent and elsewhere. It has been replaced in some streets by an opaque cone-shaped lantern on a concrete stand; and increasingly by the same lantern, but on a much slimmer steel standard. This last type can be seen in Stanley Crescent, St John's Gardens and Ladbroke Square. Unfortunately, in most streets the steel standards have not been painted black, as they should be, but for over a year have been left in their orange undercoat.

A new type still is planned. As the photograph shows, the steel standard remains, but the opaque cone head has been replaced by a clear glass lantern which is altogether more attractive. It has not yet been installed in the Ladbroke area, but can be seen in Linden Gardens, off Notting Hill Gate. The Council's Works Committee has just approved this model, and



Clockwise from top left:

1. Concrete lamp post in Lansdowne Crescent, a type that is now being phased out.
2. The cone-shaped lantern on a concrete standard in Elgin Crescent.
3. The Kensington Patent Street Light, a lone survivor in Ladbrooke Grove.
4. The cone-shaped lantern on a steel standard in St John's Gardens. The old concrete standard has yet to be removed.
5. The new street light with a clear glass lantern on a steel standard in Linden Gardens.

the intention is that they should start being erected in August. They are expected to reach our conservation area in two or three years' time, probably going up first in Lansdowne Walk.

The new lamps are an improvement, and we are grateful for what is more than a small mercy.

But there remain criticisms and questions. For instance, in the Association's view, the lamp standards are slim to the point of being positively skinny, and the lanterns are crowned with fussy and inappropriate ornamentation. The light they shed is less of a beacon than a flushed pink glow. Moreover, some people ask why we cannot have replicas of the old Kensington Patent Street Lights that still are found in Addison Avenue, St James's Gardens and Victoria Grove. One lone survivor, now privately owned, is in Ladbrooke Grove. The Council's answer is that they are too expensive, but that if residents wish, they can pay part of the cost. This is what has happened elsewhere. This would leave about £1,100 to be found by residents for each complete lamp.

What about other types of lights that might cost no more than the sum the council propose? What happens if we or the Kensington Society come forward with our own suggestions? Here the Coun-

cil's response is more cloudy, as well it might be since the heart of the difficulty is that no system exists for consultation with residents. With the Kensington Society's support, the Chairman of the Ladbrooke Association wrote at the beginning of January to Councillor Warrick, the Chairman of the Works Committee, asking that before a final decision was taken on the new lighting, residents of the Borough should have the opportunity to make representations. Councillor Warrick replied to say that he was able 'to accept your suggestion that the residents of the Borough be consulted before the Council makes radical changes to street lights'. But it seems that he did not really mean it. Four days after his letter, on 6 February, the Committee approved the new lights, but we gather that, assurance or no assurance, the Council is not intending any consultation. The poor residents presumably will have to wait for the next review, expected in perhaps fifteen years' time.

Peter Thorold