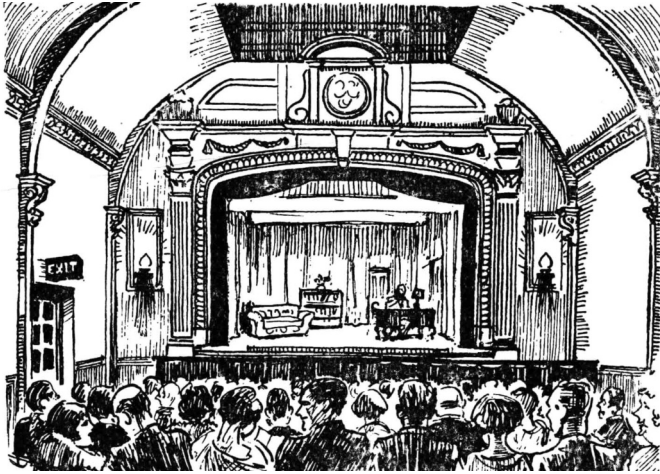


Ladbroke News

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

WINTER 2022–23



The theatre in Westbourne Grove in the 1930s

OUR VERY OWN CONCERT HALL

One of the best bits of news that we have had recently is that the 20th Century Theatre in Westbourne Grove (next to the fish shop) has been acquired by a well-funded philanthropic foundation, the Aspect Foundation for Music and Arts, who are planning to turn it into a venue for chamber music concerts. They also plan to have a number of rehearsal rooms for musicians and spaces for public hire. The Foundation is keen on music education and is already in touch with local schools. This should be very good for the area. Quite apart from the cultural offering, concert-goers will, we hope, patronise local shops and eating establishments. The building is Grade II listed, and the Foundation had some problems getting the planners to agree to the alterations that were needed to bring it up to modern standards of accessibility, but we gather these problems have now mainly been resolved.

Not many people know about this theatre, which started life in the 1860s as a music hall called the Victoria Hall and was very popular in its time. In its early years the theatre was used by a variety of small companies, mostly putting on farces and other popular entertainment of the music hall type. There was almost always a group of musicians – those were the days when people expected music as well as acting – so music is an old tradition.

The theatre must have run into problems in the early 20th century, as from about 1908 to 1918 it was used as a cinema. Children were admitted for a penny and were given a bag of sweets or an apple on their way out. But it began again to be used as a theatre in the 1920s. The 17-year-old Laurence Olivier appeared in bit parts there – a conspirator, a tribune and a

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“friend to Brutus and Cassius” in Julius Caesar; and Prospero’s usurping brother in *The Tempest*. He lasted in the company for only a month, mainly because of the pranks he played. 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. He was sacked forthwith.

A number of theatre companies used the theatre over the years, and it also changed its name a number of times. Sadly, in 1963 theatre closed. The building was acquired by a Portobello Road antique dealer, and in 1972 it became a warehouse for antiques. The new 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 was taken over by new lessees and entered a new incarnation as a venue for art and photography exhibitions, product and book launches, fashion shows and fairs, and also for private parties. During the filming of the film *Notting Hill* with Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, the theatre was used for rehearsals, and the roof garden shown in the film was constructed on the roof of the theatre. The lease of the theatre was not renewed when it came to an end in 2016, however, and since then the building has been closed.

Although a lot of the cherubs and other Victorian decorations that used to adorn the theatre have long since disappeared, it retains its main hall and proscenium arch and should be perfect for chamber music.

20th century theatre today



INSULATING DRAUGHTY VICTORIAN HOUSES

The Government plans to ban the installation of new gas boilers from 2025. Anybody looking to replace their gas central-heating boiler after that will need to think of alternatives such as heat-pumps. Unfortunately, heat-pumps, while a very good green solution and cheap to run after installation, they work most efficiently at a lower temperature than a traditional gas- or oil-fired boiler. They need, therefore, to be used in conjunction with good insulation – something that is not common in the Victorian houses on the Ladbroke estate.

One of the most effective insulation measures that homeowners can take is the replacement of single-glazed windows by double-glazed ones (or with windows with one of the new super-insulating types of vacuum glazing). Unless your house is listed, this can be done without planning permission, so long as the new window is like-for-like – i.e. the shape of the window and the glazing bars look the same as in the old window, and the same material is used. Most of our windows are timber, but where plastic windows have been installed, we would generally favour their replacement by timber ones, except for example in the case of blocks of flats where all the windows should match.

There are some hundred listed buildings in the Ladbroke Area, and they do require planning permission for any alterations to their windows. The Council recently consulted on a relaxation of the rules, allowing double-glazing to be put in on any windows that were installed or replaced after the date of listing, subject to certain conditions. It proposes that secondary glazing should also be allowed without planning permission so long as it is minimally visible from outside the building.

Most of our listed buildings were listed in the 1960s and 1970s, so that leaves a lot of windows dating from earlier times for which planning permission would still be needed. Many of our listed houses have large high-ceilinged rooms which are difficult to heat at the best of times. New forms of double-glazing or super-insulating single-glazing are being developed all the time, and it is now possible to find glazing with good insulating properties that it is barely any thicker than the Victorian glass and can therefore be fitted into the existing timber frames. Moreover, we think it doubtful whether much of the glass on windows on any of our buildings really dates back to the building of the house – most has probably been broken or replaced at some stage. In the Ladbroke Association's response to

the Council consultation, therefore, we proposed that the rules should be relaxed for all windows on residential buildings. We would be happy to send a copy of our response to anybody interested.

There are of course other measures that can be taken to better insulate old buildings, including for instance roof insulation and just making sure that windows and doors are designed or upgraded so as to be draught-proof. The Council has published a guide to what can be done – google “RBKC Householder Guide to the Greening SPD”.

One of the big problems is our solid brick walls. A resident of Hammersmith who recently bought a mid-19th century terrace house lined the inside of his external walls with some six inches of internal insulation and says he is very happy with the results. It does, however, reduce the size of the rooms slightly; as he had not lived in the house in its “before” state, he said he did not notice. Unlikely to be practicable for listed buildings, however, as listed building consent would be required to do this, and the local authority, at best, would require any original cornicing, skirtings and other details to be faithfully reinstated to the original designs – overall a very expensive and time-consuming undertaking.

OVER-HEATING

Nothing is ever simple in this life, and measures that keep out the cold can unfortunately sometimes let in the summer heat. Double-glazing has little effect on heat penetration in summer. For south-facing windows, the advice is to accompany it by blinds, shutters or heavy curtains. There is a real problem with low-profile “conservation” roof windows (Velux is one well-known brand) on south-facing roofs. The sun can make the room below extremely hot, and blinds are difficult to fit or operate. South-facing dormer windows can also be problematic. The Victorian builders of the Ladbroke estate wisely kept their dormers small, with no more than one or two lights.

Over the past 70 years or so, there has been a fashion for expanding dormers in all directions. There is a current planning application in Elgin Crescent to enlarge a south-facing dormer to seven lights, which would make it extend over almost the entire width of the roof. Not only is this out of keeping with the design of the terrace, but it risks creating a need for cooling in summer.

Worst for over-heating are heavily glazed “glass-box” rear extensions facing south. It is quite hard, moreover, to install blinds or other means of reducing the heat in such extensions. When the sun shines on glass, it causes heat to radiate, so big glazed areas also

add to the urban heat-island effect and should be avoided by the environmentally conscious for that reason. In the longer run, in new buildings we shall need to go for smaller windows, perhaps with fitted external shutters as on the continent – something we have suggested to the Council.

Air-conditioners should be a measure of last resort, as they are energy-intensive and create external heat that adds to the heat island effect. They need bulky acoustic enclosures and can be an eyesore when retrofitted to historic buildings.

Traditional dormer windows in Elgin Crescent with an enlarged one on the right



A LAST BIT OF ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY GONE

Originally, the stucco walls of our houses were not usually painted. The Victorians used to paint woodwork like doors and windows, but the stucco on walls was made stone-coloured or possibly given a stone-coloured wash – the aim was to make it imitate stone as nearly as possible; indeed, grooves in the stucco to resemble the joins between stone blocks can still be seen on the stucco on many buildings, including this one. The paints available in the mid-19th century for painting render were poor, and it was not until the 20th century that new paints – especially white paint – were developed that could give a good and durable cover, leading to the current fashion of painting stucco white or pastel colours.

The last building in the Ladbroke area to retain its

unpainted stucco – albeit much patched – was No. 14 Ladbroke Road (also known as Wantage House), a large and splendid building erected by William Chadwick in the 1840s, possibly the first to be erected in Ladbroke Road. It has had a number of distinguished owners, including the Conservative politician Lord Harlech and his wife Lady (Pamela) Harlech, formerly London Editor of Vogue and arts administrator.

The new owners have been giving the property a makeover and have painted over the stucco. They have chosen a cream colour that is obviously aimed at matching the stucco. Nevertheless, there is something about the texture that means it does not look the same. The shutters have been painted to match, instead of the previous green, which is probably more representative of a Victorian colour.



14 Ladbroke Road in 2006



14 Ladbroke Road in 2023

A WELCOME RESTORATION

Nos. 209-219 Portobello Road (where Woolworths used to be), a curious building, quite unlike anything else in the Portobello Road, symmetrical, with decorative brickwork and higher bays at either end with coaching entrances at their base. Unfortunately, over the years, most of the ornate stucco dressings over the windows had disappeared, some of the brickwork had been painted over and most of the brackets at the top had fallen off, and it had begun to look a real mess.

We noticed that scaffolding had gone up outside, clearly with a view to refurbishment. We got in touch with the owners, a big property firm who own several buildings on Portobello Road, and suggested that, as they were doing works on the building, they might like to re-instate the lost stucco dressings and brackets and remove the paint. We are happy to say they agreed, and the building is now looking very fine.

Unfortunately, it is still slightly marred by the fact that several of the shops have high fascia boards above them that hide part of the first-floor windows. The

Council's current guidance on shopfront design is clear that fascia boards should not be higher than the sills of the windows on the floor above. In less enlightened times, however, many over-high fascias were installed and the owners cannot now be required to reduce their height.



Nos. 209-219 Portobello Road restored



Woolworths in 2006 (now Poundland)



The other end of the building in 2008

NOTTING HILL POLICE STATION

It is now some four years since the Metropolitan Police announced that they planned to sell the police station as surplus to requirements. Despite protests, they did subsequently put it on the market and the council made a bid to acquire it for community purposes. We do not know what other interest there was (and we suspect the Met may have been disappointed), but they then decided to withdraw it from sale while they carried out an "Estate Strategy". They have just informed the Council that the Strategy will not be completed until the summer, so the building's future remains in limbo.

When it was first put on sale, the Kensington Society obtained "Asset of Community Value" (ACV)

status for the police station, which means that, if it is sold, the local community have first refusal (at a market rate). This status only lasts for three years and has just expired, so the Kensington Society has put in for a renewal.

The Met have kept open a little known "police counter" at Royalty Studios on Lancaster Road (next to the Museum of Brands), which is open in office hours (unlike the big police station which was open 24 hours). Unfortunately, the landlord refuses to let them put up any notice saying "Police Station" and the only indication of its presence is the Met coat of arms outside the door. The Met have told the Council that they plan to keep this open for the time being and will not close it without consulting the community.

NEWCOMBE HOUSE AND NOTTING HILL GATE

In our last newsletter, we reported on the plans for the Newcombe House site that have been put forward by Beltane. Beltane bought the site from the previous owners with the extant planning permission allowing for the complete demolition of the existing tower block and its replacement by a taller tower. The approved plans also included a plaza where the farmers' market and other events could be held; a doctors' surgery and various other amenities. The new owners decided that they wanted to go for a less extensive scheme, refurbishing the existing tower and adding only a couple of extra floors. As we reported, there was a lot of criticism of the scheme, which did not include a plaza or any other open space and only a very small doctors' surgery. We were also critical of the rather boring architecture.

Beltane have now come up with some revised plans, which they showed recently to the Ladbroke Association and other local amenity groups. The plans include a bigger doctors' surgery, rather more imaginative architecture and an open space where events could be held on the corner of Notting Hill Gate and Church Street – roughly where the elephant and the platform at the base of the tower now are, extending across the front of what is now Waterstones. We think these plans are better (and it is certainly good news that Beltane were prepared to listen to the criticisms of the earlier plans), but we think that there are still improvements to be made. When Beltane have refined their plans further, the Council says it will

organise a public meeting at which everybody can express a view.

Meanwhile, the Council (which seems to have some money available) is undertaking its own exercise to improve the streetscape in Notting Hill Gate with a "Notting Hill Gate Action Plan". They have gone out of their way to consult local groups and have developed a "vision" of what is wanted:

"Notting Hill Gate will be a green, safe and inclusive high street with a unique identity. A place that inspires and delights. It will meet the needs of residents and attract visitors and businesses."

Proposed actions to implement the vision include more greenery; better waste management and street cleaning; rationalising servicing and delivery; improved lighting; more seating, wider pavement and better signage to make the street more pedestrian-friendly; changes to the road layout to better balance the needs of the different road-users – pedestrians, cyclists and motorists; and changes to make the street easier to navigate for family groups and those with reduced mobility and sensory impairments. All this is good stuff, but the devil will be in the detail, and that has still to be worked out. What is a bit concerning is that the Council has yet to bring in the big property companies on Notting Hill Gate, such as Frogmore (who own most of the northern side) and Beltane (whose plans will affect what is possible in the Newcombe House area).

LADBROKE GROVE UNDERGROUND STATION

Those of you who use this station will know that one has to climb many steep steps to get to the platforms, difficult for those with reduced mobility or carrying luggage or with children in buggies. As one of the tourist entry points for the Portobello Road, it is hardly impressive. Unfortunately, TfL have never given this station priority for the installation of lifts. As several of

the wards in North Kensington are among the poorest and most deprived in the country, our Council decided to apply for funds from the Government's Levelling Up Fund, with the support of the Ladbroke Association. We are sorry to say that the application was not successful. But we will continue to push for step-free access at this station and one day we hope we will get there.

LADBROKE WINTER PARTY

We held a successful Winter Party on 26 January at the Portland Road house of Rory and Elizabeth Brooks, to whom we extend our thanks. The house is a rare and intriguing one, mostly underground, with wondrous décor and artworks which we think everybody enjoyed seeing.

Until this year, we had asked people to apply for tickets by sending cheques. We decided that we should move with the times and asked people to make bank

transfers (with cheques still an option) and we also sent invitations out by email rather than post to those of our members on our email alert list, partly because of the various postal strikes. Unfortunately, this caused a number of problems. Far more people applied than we could accommodate (which does not usually happen) and we had to turn people away. It did not help that your chairman's email went down just as people were sending her emails about the party. We apologise to those who failed to get to the party and are looking at ways to do it better next year.

PLANNING APPLICATIONS

Your committee continues to vet all planning applications in the Ladbrooke area, and we also look at any affecting Notting Hill Gate, as it is “our” high street. The following are some of the ones we considered.

40 Ladbrooke Grove

This is one of a terrace of three listed buildings opposite the old St John’s vicarage. As anybody who walks along that side of Ladbrooke Grove will have noticed, last year the owners began erecting low breeze brick walls in their front garden, and also started various works in the back garden, which gives onto the Stanley Crescent Garden. They had not applied for planning permission and were told they needed to do so, which they subsequently did. We were unhappy about both applications and the one for the rear garden was refused. However, they were granted permission for a bin store in the front garden (which we did not oppose); for a stucco wall between the garden and the path up to their front door; and raised flowerbeds in the front garden.

We are not in principle against raised beds, but this is a very small garden belonging to a listed building, and it seemed to us that it would just look cluttered. Previously, the garden consisted mainly of shrubs and gravel giving a sylvan feel in line with the design of the Ladbrooke estate. It puzzled us why the applicant wanted to change this to fussy raised beds rather than planting at ground level. We were also unhappy about the proposed ugly block wall between the garden and the path – again extra clutter. The Council’s conservation officer was also unhappy at what was proposed, but was overruled by the planning officers who recommended acceptance, and it was subsequently granted in committee. This is not a big deal, but is nevertheless a sad

reflection of some planning officers (and councillors) being too willing to ignore conservation and design considerations. Fortunately, it seems as though the owners may have had second thoughts as a lot of greenery in normal beds has appeared.

56 Ladbrooke Grove

One of our continuing concerns is that buildings should not be hidden behind high walls and opaque gates, which make for an unfriendly feel and harm the open and leafy character that was intended by the designers of the Ladbrooke estate. We are glad, therefore, that the Council persuaded the applicant in this case not to replace the ironwork front gate on this property with an opaque timber one – although regrettably they did get permission to increase the height of the gate to the top off the pillars, which we think will look a lot less elegant, and also to increase the number of

vertical bars so that they are so close to each other as to make it more like a grille than a gate.

Passage by Ruby Hotel

The passage next to the new Ruby Hotel that leads through from Notting Hill Gate to Victoria Gardens had quite a few of its York paving stones torn up to make way for the needs of the construction site. We were assured that they would be replaced once the work was complete. However, in November, an application was put in to replace them with a lot of fancy paving with brass studs. There were a large number of objections from people who – like the Ladbrooke Association – thought this out of keeping with Notting Hill Gate, and the studs possibly dangerous. We are happy to say that the application has now been withdrawn and we look forward to seeing the York stones replaced and the mural uncovered.



The current elegant gate on 56 Ladbrooke Grove

PORTOBELLO ROAD

Much of the Portobello Road runs through the Ladbroke area and we get involved in Portobello affairs. The street is home to a number of constituencies, not always with aligning interests. The street traders are the backbone of the market and have been since its inception sometime in the 1860s when the current Ladbroke Grove Underground Station opened – this kick-started development in the area and made it worthwhile for traders to set up in what had until then been a country lane leading to the Portobello Farm. Now, taken together, the Portobello and Golborne markets (which run into each other) are probably the longest continuous street market in Europe and are internationally famous.

Today, while the street traders may still be the most important element of the market, making it what it is, there are several other elements: the flea market traders with goods often laid out on the ground north of Westway; the antique dealers in the arcades (which began to be created in the 1950s only); the shops that line the street; the increasing number of cafés and restaurants; the residents who live above the shops and food and drink outlets; the wider community who do their shopping there; and last but far from least, the landlords – most of the street being in the hands of a few big landlords. Inevitably what is good for some is not necessarily good for others. There is a group that meets regularly to discuss any problems, the Market Streets Action Group (MSAG), on which the Ladbroke Association is represented. It is chaired by the Council Lead Member responsible for business (currently Councillor Josh Rendall).

Every so often, somebody in the Council decides that the markets need an improvement scheme. About four years ago, a “Markets

Plan” was drawn up with a long list of actions, ranging from better waste facilities to more public toilets and water fountains. The plan was rather lost sight of during the pandemic. At the end of last year, however, the Council suddenly circulated a draft “Design Brief” which it proposed to ask consultants to take forward. Actually, most of it consisted of items already on most people’s wish-list. But it immediately rang alarm bells among the traders and many other denizens of the market. Anything involving a masterplan of this sort is bound to cause delay, and there are many actions such as the clearance of graffiti and improving waste and street cleaning which can and should be started immediately.

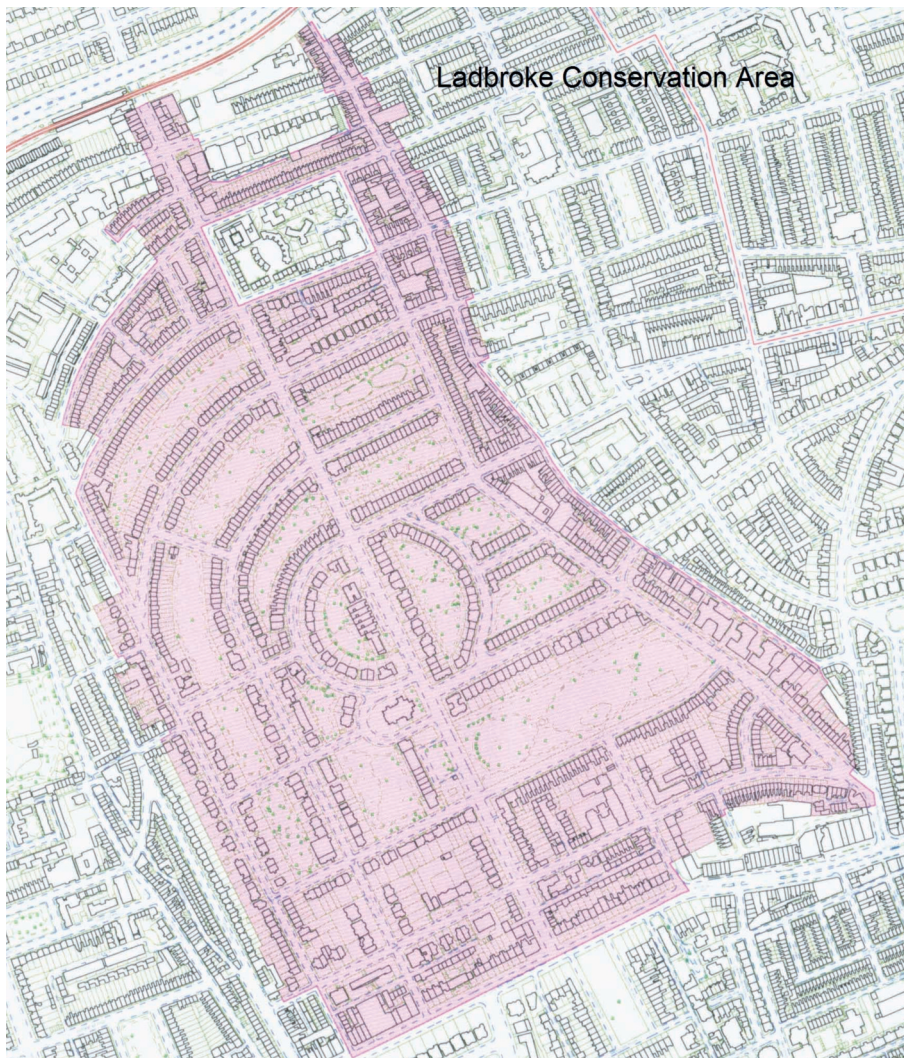
The word “design” also raised strong suspicions that the Council’s agenda was a top-down attempt to tidy up the market – “Disneyfied” was the word many used. The market has always been untidy and visitors are drawn to it by the fact that it has grown organically and has an attractive lack of orderliness that shows that it is not the result of a top-down design (unlike, for instance Covent Garden) but an authentic and

vibrant community hub. There was a particular concern on the part of the street traders that the Council wanted to prevent them from parking their vans on the street, which would be disastrous for many as there are no nearby parking places and many need their vans nearby so that they can constantly replenish their stalls.

On 31 January, the Council held a series of rowdy public meetings at which both Councillors and officers were comprehensibly mauled. Laudably, the Council then withdrew the design brief and gave an assurance that it would take forward immediately the most urgent actions, which we greatly welcome. In particular, a blitz on graffiti in Portobello Road is, we are told, to begin shortly, pulling in the entire borough jet washing team to focus solely on Portobello for a period of 4–5 weeks. The Council says it is also pursuing TFL and Network Rail to resolve the issues on their land. In the longer run, infrastructure improvements are planned, including better road and pavement surfacing, flood resilience measures and improvements to the now inadequate electricity supply to allow stallholders to light their stalls.



Old photograph of the Portobello Road with stalls and vans



MEMBERSHIP

The Ladbroke Association was founded in 1969, in the same year as the designation of the Ladbroke Conservation area. The original impetus for the setting up of the Association was a proposal by the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to cut down and replace the plane trees along the southern end of Ladbroke Grove. Led by the well-known architect and town-planner Robert Meadows and other local residents, the Association was successful in opposing the proposals, and the trees remain.

The Association is registered as a charity (Charity No. 260627) and is therefore subject to the strict rules governing charities.

The Association receives notice of planning applications and inspects, discusses and comments on those which affect the Ladbroke area in any significant way. In addition, the Association has been involved in (and sometimes initiates) discussion with the planning authorities on wider questions of conservation and planning policy.

We are concerned that we should reflect the views of the broad community who live in the area. Everyone who is a resident of the Ladbroke Conservation Area should be a member of the Association so that their views may be heard in the debate on continuing issues in the area.

The more members we have, the more influential we can be. At present we have under 400, as many people have moved away. If you have new neighbours, please do encourage them to join. Membership for a person or family costs only £15 a year, which is we reckon a bargain in this day and age.

Would-be members can download a membership form from our website: www.ladbrokeassociation.org or apply to the Hon Treasurer: **Paul Bastick, 75A Ladbroke Grove, W11 2PD**

THE OFFICERS AND EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE LADBROKE ASSOCIATION

President: Thomas Pakenham

Officers:

Chairman: Sophia Lambert

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Hon Treasurer: Paul Bastick

Hon Secretary: Anne Chorley

Committee Members:

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David Marshall

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Malcolm Pawley

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Nick Simmons

Tony Temple

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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 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.

This edition of the newsletter was edited by Sophia Lambert and the printing was done by K J S Print Services Ltd, Peterborough.