

# News from Ladbroke

The Newsletter of the Ladbroke Association

SPRING 1980

## SPRING MEETING

The Association was particularly fortunate in having Sir John Summerson to speak to the members at the Spring Meeting, held at the Knights of St. Colomba Hall on Monday 28th April. Not only is he Curator of Sir John Soane's Museum, but he is also the author of numerous internationally known architectural books, and a broadcaster and television speaker as well. The Association was greatly honoured by his presence. A packed audience listened mesmerised by his talk entitled "The World of Stucco", as he introduced us to the intricacies of the difference between Liardet's Stucco, Parker's Roman Cement, Dehl's Mastic, Hamelin's Mastic and Portland Cement, and all delivered with the effortless ease for which he is justly famous. Dr. Mark Girouard rounded off a memorable evening by delightfully proposing the vote of thanks.

## GROUP ENHANCEMENT SCHEME

Probably the most exciting development which has taken place in the Ladbroke Area in recent months is the "Group Enhancement Scheme", promoted by the Council, for the restoration of facades and details to nos. 126-184 inclusive, Kensington Park Road. Residents in the Area will know that this terrace consists of agreeable small family houses, set back from the road behind front gardens, and marked at the centre by an attractive pedimented feature bearing the words "Kensington Park Terrace North". Certain Public Monies are available for the assistance of householders in Outstanding Conservation Areas who wish to restore their properties, and the Department of the Environment is known to be anxious to encourage group schemes in central city locations.

The Planning Committee of the Borough Council put forward several groups of houses, and after consultation with the Ladbroke Association it was decided that Kensington Park Terrace North was the most suitable to form the subject of a pilot scheme. The Association urged the appointment of Alan and Sylvia Blanc as Consultants, in view of their experience in the successful similar scheme at Royal Crescent in the Norland Area, and the Council agreed that they should prepare a preliminary report. A public meeting was held on 28th January in St. Peter's Church Hall which was chaired by the Association's Chairman, and where Mr. and Mrs. Blanc outlined the scope of the proposal to the residents of the terrace, and gave a fascinating slide show of similar schemes in which they had been involved.

A committee of residents was formed under the chairmanship of Mr. Adrian Forsyth, whose comments on the Scheme are reported below, and the Blancs' report has now reached its draft stage. It should be available very shortly. As soon as the report, with its financial implications, is complete and has been accepted by the Council and the residents, it is to be hoped that the residents' committee will be successful in guiding its members towards the implementation of the various proposals.

*Mr. Adrian Forsyth, Chairman of the Committee of Residents, writes:*

"As an architect it is interesting to be on the receiving end of one's own activity. Being proposed as I was to the residents' committee at the inaugural public meeting on 28th January, I found myself arranging meetings between my friends and neighbours and the architects, Alan and Sylvia Blanc. I suffered with them the usual indecision that seems to overtake most owner-occupiers when they are offered a helping hand by an official body, however benign. Most of the residents of the Terrace who so wished were able to meet and discuss the project with the

architects over several consecutive weekends and this went some way to allay our fears. Those reservations that remain have to do with cost and compromise, for when all is said and done, some people will prefer pink and some blue and a scheme of this type cannot proceed without a degree of amicable compromise being reached between the parties concerned. We are, in a sense, tenants and not possessors of a lovely terrace which it has been our privilege to inherit from those who enjoyed living here in the past and which we must endeavour to hand on intact to our children and grandchildren."

## TRAFFIC

Some members will recall the Ladbroke Traffic Study produced by the Association in 1972. Since then, some of the problems discussed in the Study have got worse. The Committee is again giving attention to this matter and discussions are being held with the Borough Council.

Ladbroke Grove is a continuing source of serious concern. This road splits the Conservation Area into two parts and the volume, character and speed of its traffic causes environmental damage and makes the road difficult and dangerous to cross. We have noted with alarm that the District Plan accepts Ladbroke Grove as an important traffic route. Any measures to increase the volume or ease the flow of traffic in this road would be highly undesirable. Indeed, we would hope for a reduction in the volume and speed of the traffic.

It is felt that the traffic management scheme in the western part of the Ladbroke area and the parking control arrangement in the whole area have brought about considerable improvement in conditions, but other traffic problems, especially in the eastern part of the area, remain unsolved.

Unfortunately traffic control schemes lead to a proliferation of traffic signs of all shapes and sizes and these become damaging visual intrusion in a Conservation Area. The Department of the Environment have shown an awareness of this problem and indicated some ways in which traffic sign provision in Conservation Areas can be modified, consistent with requirements of safety. It is hoped that an on-going study and discussion of these matters will lead to improvements in these important aspects of the Conservation Area. A recent re-organisation at the Town Hall has made traffic management and transportation policy an integral part of the Planning Department, so that virtually all matters of environmental change are dealt with by the Town Planning Committee. This is to be welcomed.

## PLANNING

### BOROUGH DISTRICT PLAN

During the past five years or so, officers of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea have been producing strategic proposals aimed at guiding the future development of the Borough. These will be submitted to the Department of the Environment alongside those of all other planning authorities in the United Kingdom. During the early years of this exercise, preliminary proposals were circulated to interested parties in a series of "Context Papers" covering all aspects of life in the Borough — from schools, housing, shops, factories, offices and hotels to transport, leisure and conservation. Each of these Papers was carefully considered and commented upon by the Ladbroke Association.

The Borough then produced a draft District Plan, followed recently by the District Plan itself, each incorporating the many comments which were received from all sides. Further comments were sought on the published District Plan, in the form of objections or statements of support. However, the Association felt that at these final stages contributions should be restricted to those which related to Conservation.

In general, the Association's view is that the District Plan is well-intentioned, if a little weak and equivocal. There is one matter, however, which is of extreme concern to all those who live in this Area, namely the Borough's frequently reiterated proposal to "extend access to the private open spaces". The Association's response is that "any unrestricted public use (of the Communal Gardens) would inevitably put children, animals and property at risk, and also would break down the existing system of communal care for the gardens". The Committee will continue to monitor the situation and report any further developments to members.

### CONSERVATION GRANTS

All members may be interested to know that the Borough, the GLC, and the Department of the Environment are all making grants available for conservation works in the Elgin Crescent and Blenheim Crescent area.

## **OFF-STREET PARKING**

This continues to be a matter of concern to the Association's Committee, to individual members and also to the Borough Council. The Association continues to hold the view that cars parked off-street adjacent to Victorian houses greatly detract from the overall effect of the buildings. In addition, cars are frequently located so close to windows as to remove light and impair views.

## **CABMEN'S SHELTER**

For many months the Association has been corresponding with various parties in an attempt to save the steadily deteriorating Cabmen's Shelter in Kensington Park Road. At last there is good news to report: the Shelter was recently leased to a cabman who, with his wife, will be serving meals to other cabmen all day long; rather more importantly from the Association's point of view, restoration works have now been carried out, and it is hoped that the Shelter will provide gastronomic and aesthetic enjoyment for many years to come.

## **RESTORATION WORK**

The Association is delighted to see the excellent standard of work which has been carried out on the Ladbrooke Grove half of the old St. John's Church Vicarage, and hope that the Lansdowne Crescent half – currently rather dilapidated – will receive treatment equally as good in due course.

Not so far away, railings are being replaced to a front garden (in Blenheim Crescent), which excellent example will hopefully be emulated elsewhere.

## **ADDITIONAL STOREYS TO MANSION FLATS**

There have been a number of applications to build an additional storey upon various twentieth century blocks of flats, and in general the proposals have been considered unexceptionable. However the Association has strongly objected to the proposal to build an additional storey on each of four blocks in Kensington Park Road (Princes House, Buckingham Court, Kelvin Court, and Matlock Court), on the grounds of excessive bulk, scale and density, and of loss of view and privacy to the adjacent communal garden.

## **APPEAL AGAINST A PLANNING REFUSAL**

In Lansdowne Road there is a terrace of houses having most unusual Dutch-type gables and small round windows. To erect an extra storey or convert the roof – however well done – would make the gable look ludicrous and thus ruin not only the house in question, but also neighbouring properties. The Association is therefore supporting the Borough in a case for their refusal to give planning permission for a roof extension in Lansdowne Road which has been taken to appeal.

# **TREES IN LADBROKE - 3**

In the Autumn Newsletter, the effect of drought on shrinkable clays was examined. In this, the concluding article in the series on trees in relation to buildings, other factors that cause the removal of water from the soil are discussed. Of these, the most obvious is the presence of trees and shrubs. Since water is vital to all vegetation to sustain healthy growth it is extracted from the soil via the root fibres. This water conveys the vital minerals to the various parts of the tree and, having accomplished its task, is evaporated through the leaves. The amount of water removed from the soil depends on the species of trees and shrubs, the number of them competing for the water, weather conditions and the time of the year.

The water table in the ground can also be lowered by excavations being dug near to building foundations, thus leaving them on drying clay. This is especially so on sloping ground where if gas and water pipes or electric cables or even sewer connections are made, the disturbed backfill in the trench forms a new water course, draining the area of the building foundations.

It is clear from Florence Gladstone's book, "Notting Hill in Bygone Days", that the condition of roads and footpaths in the Ladbrooke Area has changed considerably since the houses were built. The swamps, marshes and quagmires of the past have given way to well-drained highways. While, no doubt, this has improved health standards it has adversely affected rain penetration to the soil. The tendency to cover the soil with impervious materials has increased recently with the formation of patios and paved courtyards, often extending the basement area out into the garden. While it may seem a minor factor, these well-drained paved areas prevent the rain from running directly to the soil that supports the foundations.

Before returning to the more difficult problem of the relationship between trees and buildings, it might be worth mentioning that not all building failures are related to foundation problems. Failures, i.e. cracks, can occur where the structural characteristics of a part of a building are unable to withstand the forces applied to it. This may result from structural decay, internal changes made to the building, or where detached buildings have been connected to form a continuous terrace. For example, the map of 1922 shows parts of Lansdowne Road with repeating groups of four terraced houses with gaps which today appear as one continuous terrace.

Another characteristic of the shrinkable clay in this area is the tendency for it to slip where the slope or hill is sufficiently steep. The resulting cracks can mistakenly be thought to be caused by the action of nearby trees. One such area lies between Lansdowne Crescent and Lansdowne Road. Where buildings have foundations below the slip plane, landslip may not cause any damage, but more often than not the garden walls have shallow foundations and therefore segments of the wall break away and move downhill.

Fortunately, the special nature of the Ladbroke Estate Conservation Area and the extensive use of tree preservation orders prevent hasty action being taken in these circumstances. Nevertheless insurance companies and others have found it necessary to rely initially on the "rule of thumb" set out in the National House Building Council's publication, "Root Damage by Trees: Siting of Dwellings and Special Precautions (Practice Note 3)". First published in 1969 and revised in 1974, this publication came into prominence during the 1975/76 drought. Although it deals with new buildings and the foundations necessary to overcome the effects of existing trees, it has been used as a yardstick when judging the likely cause of damage to existing buildings. It recommends that the distance of a tree to a building should be no nearer than two-thirds of its mature height (or its full height in the case of poplars, elms and willows). The Practice Note recommends that this distance should be increased by a further 50% if the trees are in rows or groups. The effect of this recommendation can readily be appreciated in Lansdowne Road, for example, where not a single tree would be left standing from Ladbroke Grove to Holland Park Avenue if all the buildings have foundations shallower than about 5-7 feet (which is likely).

The prospect of a treeless or underpinned city prompted keener interest in this problem, and there followed various conferences and further research, by the Building Research Establishment and others. The eagerly awaited British Standards Institute Code of Practice No. 5837 was finally published earlier this year. Although less emphatic than previous documents it did lay some stress on local conditions being of great importance. Clearly, research has not yet reached a stage where more positive recommendations can be made. Following the drought of 1975/76 the Department of the Environment commissioned a report to analyse failures that had occurred as a consequence of the drought, where trees were thought to be fully liable for the damage. Only in one case in ten was a building damaged when it was greater than the height of the tree. But in 80% of the cases damage attributable to tree roots occurred where buildings were at a distance of less than three-quarters of the tree height. However, of all cases examined, 70% were found to have incurred minor damage which required only cosmetic treatment to the building.

Data in several recent publications show the various species of trees in descending order from the most damaging to the least, namely: poplar, Lombardy poplar, cupressus macrocarpa, whitebeam, hawthorn, oak, elm, ash, lime, plane, sycamore, birch, beech and mulberry. It is surprising to find the cupressus at the upper end of the scale, and reassuring to find the plane, sycamore and beech at the lower. Expert opinion differs most on where the ash tree should be placed on the scale, and since this is the most common tree in communal gardens it leaves yet another unresolved question in the Ladbroke Area.

To conclude, it is necessary to remind oneself that if all the buildings in the area had been built with foundations designed to withstand drought, the presence of trees and landslip, then we would not be faced with the current problem. Since there are many examples of trees and buildings working in harmony it may be assumed that the original builders were more prudent than might have been suspected. Whether the trees are owned by individuals, Garden Committees or the Council, moderation should prevail; each case should be calmly examined on its merits and, within reasonable costs, trees should be kept. If trees have to be removed it should be remembered that the ground will swell and could damage the adjacent buildings, a supply of oxygen will be extinguished, a source of pleasure will be removed and the character of this area so altered that current residents will not wish to live here. Every tree should be defended.