

THE MANSION HOUSE - 1930-1993

Few members will recall the last major refurbishment of the Mansion House and it seems appropriate to recall some of the work done then by way of introduction.

On a motion by Mr. Roper Barrett at a Court of Common Council held on the 15th December 1927, the following resolution was passed "That it be referred to the General Purposes Committee to prepare a comprehensive scheme for the re-arrangement, redecoration, refurnishing and relighting of the interior of the Mansion House, with power to obtain expert assistance if necessary". Mr. Perks, City Architect and Surveyor, prepared plans which were amended and developed from time to time, and the question was even considered of building the Mansion House elsewhere. Reports were brought before Common Council in July 1929, October 1929 and in July 1930, all of which were the subject of very considerable debate, but the final scheme was agreed and it was possible to go out to tender. The lowest of these tenders was submitted by Higgs & Hill in the sum of £57,054 which after examination by committee was reduced to £50,717.2s.11d. a figure to which the Court agreed on 11 December 1930. Vacant possession was given to the contractor in January 1931 and, as usual, almost immediately unforeseen defects were found in the structure and the Court had to approve a further sum of £17,408 in March 1931. At the same time a furnishing recommendation of £12,500 was also agreed.

A new mansard roof was constructed with new accommodation for the Esquires, 5 separate bedrooms for the maidservants, and 4 rooms for men servants. New bath rooms and toilet facilities and new lifts were installed. When the Mansion House was first built in 1752, Dance constructed a gallery around the four sides of the Egyptian Hall which was removed in 1796. This gallery was reinstated and new windows originally designed by Dance were put back in accordance with his plans. A new heating system and new boiler were constructed, new ventilation, electrical rewiring and of course new telephones were put in, and redecoration and regilding were also necessary.

Sidney Tatchell was appointed Consulting Architect on the retirement of Mr. Perks (City Architect) and assumed complete responsibility. I met Mr. Tatchell in the late thirties and frequently listened to his discourses on the Mansion House, little thinking that I too would have an interest in a later

refurbishment. The year 1931 was one of deep depression in the economic field which probably kept the contract at a very competitive level.

With the coming of war the House suffered damage, particularly when a huge bomb fell upon Bank tube station, and with the ravages of inadequate maintenance during the war period it became necessary to renovate the interior of the house completely in 1948. The stained glass windows in the Egyptian Hall, which had suffered war damage, were repaired and reinstated at the same time.

History does repeat itself and in 1980, nearly 50 years since the last refurbishment, the General Purposes Committee agreed to recommendations by their Mansion House Sub Committee, that the Survey Report of the City Architect and Planning Officer (Stuart Murphy) should be approved and referred to the Policy and Resources Committee, together with a report prepared by the Town Clerk, the Chamberlain and the Private Secretary to the Lord Mayor on the implications of closing the Mansion House for an extended period. In December 1980 the Policy and Resources Committee considered the reports and recommended to the General Purposes Committee that the proposals should be limited to urgent works necessary to ensure that no serious state of disrepair should occur.

Consultations took place with the Court of Aldermen to consider what arrangements would be required to accommodate the Lord Mayor and the Mansion House staff, should it be decided to close the house for an extensive period. Suggestions were made that accommodation on the third and fourth floors of Guildhall could be used, or the new building on the Art Gallery site (incidentally a planning permission in 1992 is still awaited), but none of these was considered to be practical. The General Purposes Committee of the Court of Aldermen did however advise Policy that closure, in their view, would have a serious constitutional and practical impact on the Mayoralty and that they favoured "phased works" over a number of years, but as this was considered to be an extremely expensive and probably disruptive way of dealing with the work, the Aldermen then set a limit of 2 years for closure.

1981 saw the demise of the General Purposes Committee after some 250 years, and from the New Year of 1982 its work became a part of the responsibilities of the City Lands & Bridge House Estates Committee, who in turn delegated much of the work to a new Mansion House Sub Committee (later to become the Guildhall & Mansion House Sub Committee).

During 1981 however discussions took place culminating in the appointment in December of Pell Frischmann & Partners to provide consultant advice on Mansion House based on the survey report of the previous year. They were asked to identify and set in order of priority those works which were strictly necessary and which, if not carried out, would adversely affect the safety of the house and its functions. In February 1982 they produced a very comprehensive report culminating in a schedule of priorities and work necessary to be carried out to ensure the safety of all concerned.

Phase A of relatively minor works was done with the mayoralty in occupation. Phase B contained most of the high priority works, such as the removal of asbestos, which had become such a problem in recent years, conversion from oil to the more economic fuel, gas, and in consequence renewal of boilers, some electrical rewiring, etc.

The City Architect's design work was completed, bills of quantity printed and authority from the Court of Common Council obtained and the successful tenderer was the French Kier Construction Company with a start date of July 1983 to allow for most of the work to be done in the recess. The Lord Mayor of the day considered the preliminary work and took the possible disruption to his life quite calmly, but as the contract date drew nearer his apprehension grew, and he finally decided to move out into the Mercers' Hall, kindly made available by the Court of the Mercers' Company. Most of the staff were housed in the West Wing of Guildhall.

The move made it possible to work at a faster rate, an advantage because more asbestos was found than was expected. Floors were taken up for rewiring and records taken of the period joinery. The new boilers were installed and some central heating pipes fitted. Cleaning of paintwork and damaged plaster also took place, as did the strengthening of the West Staircase with steel beams.

The ceiling of the Walbrook Hall was sagging and it was realised that this would have to be treated from the Long Parlour. The floor was taken up and this revealed that an original oak beam running west of the length of the room was the cause of the trouble and after more than 200 years was no longer straight. A circular saw was set up and a cut was made from end to end and a steel plate was introduced, firmly bolted to the oak beam and monitoring since then has revealed no further movement.

The Lord Mayor had insisted on being back in residence in early September before the contract was due to be completed and in consequence there were

some hardships - testing the boilers caused some of the radiators very nearly to boil and the Venetian Parlour was no place to be - the Lord Mayor certainly made us all very well aware of it. These snags were rectified and it was then possible to re-examine further work.

The Historic Buildings Architect and myself spent much time in the Soane Museum studying the original Dance drawings of the Mansion House and photocopies were made which led to a new Phase C being looked at and discarded for Phase D which culminated in an evaluation study in August 1985 by Pell Frischmann, drawing attention to a great deal more work which should be done if the building was to be closed. Advice was sought from a number of specialists, and Ian Bristow an authority on Georgian interiors has been especially valuable in appraising the layers and colour of early paintwork.

Further preparatory work had been going on during 1984 and 1985, during which time the Lord Mayors in office usually made their contribution - Sir Alan Davis produced an interesting "Palm Court" design for the Saloon, which was not acceptable to the Committee. Sir David Rowe-Ham wished to see a big improvement in the Walbrook Hall and this idea had already been envisaged and is now a part of the scheme. Consultation with English Heritage was crucial to progress being made in view of the Mansion House's status and good relations were maintained in the run-up period.

Helpful in the consultations were Dr. Sally Jeffery who carried out essential research work of proven value and Miss Carrie Aish who prepared the Historic Furniture Inventory, thus enabling the organisation of a programme of repairs to existing furniture.

It was 1987 before Common Council approved the Phase D Evaluation Report at a cost of £14,385 million plus £2.742 million in fees. Delays had been caused because of the doubts that begun to emerge from officers and members that the scheme was getting out of hand and firm instructions were given that the house was essentially a working home and in no way should be turned into a period museum, although some parts of the house did lend themselves to period restoration. A clear view was also expressed that Mansion House should be free of builders during the 800th Anniversary of the Mayoralty in 1989. In consequence cleaning of the exterior could only take place.

While all this was going on, London Regional Transport had a new programme to accommodate the expected increase in traffic due to the

arrival of the Docklands Railway, improvements to the Waterloo & City Line and passageways to the Central Line. The City Engineer of the day (Len Groome) expressed grave doubts about the effects on Mansion House of the proposed new tunnels, insisted on safeguards and monitors before the digging of the Waterloo & City passageway was excavated - indeed it was eventually excavated by hand. After Groome's retirement Colin Snowden, the new City Engineer, took an even tougher stand and insisted on sensitive monitoring equipment being installed by LRT and a movement of some 8mm and increasing was recorded - a long term settlement that had not been anticipated. There was an acceleration in the rate of settlement of the east wall over the tunnel centre line and both the east and west walls were deformed in a sagging mode. The City Engineer refused to allow work to continue and LRT were reluctant to agree to underpinning. They did however alter the direction of some of their other tunnels.

Our consultants prepared a fresh report recommending that a system of tie-bars at four levels of the building be installed. These tie bars pass through the walls and floors and are all but invisible. Behind the Colonnade there is a huge steel frame bolted to angle and anchor plates, the tie bars in turn being secured to the frame. This entire scheme took place during partial occupation and indeed Lord Mayor Bidwell never left the house.

The Grand Committee decided that, because of the increasing cost of the Refurbishment Scheme, the Reference Sub Committee should take over the main responsibility for the contract and a small working party consisting of the Chief Commoner of the day, the Chairman of the Guildhall and Mansion House Sub Committee and two others, was formed to consider interior proposals, particularly as the situation had been complicated by the acquisition of the famous Samuel Collection of Paintings. These pictures were required to be hung in the main on the first floor where the public would more readily have access to them.

The problem of housing the Lord Mayor became a priority and different venues were considered. It so happened that City Lands had recently been able to add No. 11 Ironmonger Lane (formerly the Bank of Argentina) to its portfolio. A study was made to consider conversion and a suitable scheme was prepared, which was accepted by Common Council. There was a possibility that Sir Hugh Bidwell might have had to move into the house early in his year because of the tie-bar work in Mansion House and the work was pushed ahead. A small committee was formed consisting of Lady Bidwell and two former Lady Mayoresses together with the Chairman of the Guildhall & Mansion House Sub Committee in the Chair. Differences of

opinion amongst the ladies were resolved and the work went ahead. Completion was accomplished by the end of December 1989 and within the estimated costs. Although the Lord Mayor did not move out of Mansion House during the tie-bar work, some of the staff did and were housed in Ironmonger Lane during the Spring and Summer of 1990. It was a useful occupation, for it was possible to see some snags and eliminate them before the permanent occupation took place.

Authority had been given in April 1988 for the appointment of Donald W. Insall & Associates as Consultant Historic Architects in connection with the proposed refurbishment. In May of the same year a separate authority was given to them to prepare preliminary interior design proposals. Much of this work came under the supervision of Graham Curry, the Director of Building Services, who had taken over from the former City Architect after his resignation - Curry was later to die in a tragic accident and he was succeeded by Bill Rowe as Director of the Department of Building and Services.

Schemes were constantly being revised, partly for practical reasons, and frequently to keep within financial constraints, and by 1989 Scheme G had been reached, which reflected a number of changes to the original designs as a result of further input by the consultants. Having reached this point it seemed the appropriate point to look more closely at proposals for decorating and furnishing.

A discussion paper and slide presentation was prepared by Insall's and considered by the small working party, consisting of the then Chief Commoner Peter Revell-Smith, Alderman Sir Alan Traill, Brian Wilson and Norman Harding (Chairman of the Guildhall and Mansion House Sub Committee) and, because of the annual change of Chief Commoner, it was thought appropriate for the Sub Committee Chairman to chair the group.

There were several meetings during which general principles were agreed upon the way forward. The question of the Samuel Collection figured very strongly in these discussions. It was an essential condition that air conditioning be introduced in the Saloon and other areas of the first floor and such work meant that it would not be possible to rehang the Windsor Tapestries in their old position or indeed in any other venue in the house. They will probably find a home in the Old Library of Guildhall. New techniques for hanging and lighting pictures, such as fibre optics are under consideration; furthermore new security installations will be essential.

Rising costs of the scheme were constantly a matter of great concern, options for reductions were produced and many were adopted. Scheme H was reached incorporating reductions and it was hoped that tenders for the work could be before the City Lands Committee by May 1990, with a contract period starting in January 1991, which would have run parallel with the construction of the Docklands Light Railway and the conversion of No.1 Queen Victoria Street to a Magistrates' Court.

However, despite reductions, the projects were substantially intact and were accepted by Common Council on 11 January 1991. The works included a major change to the Walbrook entrance, which envisaged opening up an old entrance, currently a fireplace, thus making it possible to have much improved reception and cloakroom areas. The vestibule, old diary office and the old Court Room will be restored, partitions taken down and original space and ceilings revealed.

The old Court Cells in the basement, as an historic part of the house, will of course remain. It will no longer be necessary to use the vestibule as an office, so that it will be possible for all the wonderful carving and plasterwork to be seen and enjoyed as it was when the house was built.

One of the more important changes will be the removal of the present saloon roof, which is in poor condition from rot, beetle infestation and local fire damage, the past temporary repairs having only been a holding operation. The new lead covered roof supported on timber joists within a primary steel structure will give added strength. At the centre will be an octagonal double glazed window, thus allowing some daylight into the Saloon. Improved staff accommodation, toilet and lift work are other features. At the time estimated costs had reached £20.924 million including fees.

The programme had slipped again for various reasons but, by March 1991, a definite programme had been formulated which enabled tenders to be sought with acceptance by July and a move in August 1991. It was perhaps fortunate that the building trade was in recession (as it was in 1931) and the tendering was very competitive. The firms included Higgs & Hill who had done the work in 1931. There were thirty-one tenders from the main contractors who had responded to the E.E.C. Journal advert; thirteen selected tenderers responded to questionnaires, and ten were interviewed to select the final seven to finalise their tenders for the work. The lowest was made by Holloway White Allom in the sum of £11.417 million plus fees and this was accepted on July 5th 1991, a reflection of the very competitive

rates resulting from the current economic recession.

Then began the complicated operation of following the carefully made and detailed plans to commence packing on the 15th July 1991, so that the move out of Mansion House could take place from the 20th July, over a period of about 14 days because the contractors were scheduled to take over on 5th August 1991. It is interesting to note that all crates have been given detailed lists of contents, numbered and all the information computerised. Thus it is possible to locate any single artefact from the Mansion House, its case position and its place of storage - all within a matter of a few minutes.

Some of the furniture had to be transferred to Ironmonger Lane and early planning was invaluable, an ingenious system of identification of furniture being used. Scale plans of the furniture recorded in the Furniture Inventory were made and placed on the same scale room plans, so that it was known which pieces would be suitable for most areas, and with one exception all pieces were found to be entirely suitable, save one or two which did not look right. As all the pieces had been categorised it was possible to send furniture, chandeliers, statues and paintings into store, while others were sent to the restorers, and last but by no means least, the wine cellars were moved.

A permanent security presence in Mansion House was approved before building work began and will remain until the contract has been completed, because of the valuable items such as fireplaces, wood carvings etc., which could not be removed.

The London based Admiral Scaffolding Company began work on 5th August 1991, when the contractor took possession of the House. The scaffold structure covers the entire building and includes a temporary roof and external staircases. An entrance through one of the Long Parlour windows via a bridge across the floor makes it possible to take heavy materials into the Saloon and the Egyptian Hall areas without damage to the interiors.

The City Engineer and English Heritage would not allow the normal type of anchors to be used on the scaffolding because of the damage it might do to the listed building. No tubes were allowed to butt up against the walls, so that the whole structure had to be designed in such a way that no horizontal loads were applied to the building.

The roof structure is over 36 metres wide and is thought to be the biggest

temporary roof structure built in the City. There have been problems because the building bows to about 350mm in the middle, which meant modifying the steel structure to move it away from close contact with the walls. Complex "bird-cage" structures have been built in the Egyptian Hall and Ballroom going right up to the ceiling, much of it arranged in shelves so that artefacts such as doors can be carefully wrapped and numbered and kept for refixing as necessary. Urgent meetings were necessary to resolve many of the differences of view over the scaffolding, but agreeable solutions were reached.

Each month a monitoring sub-committee, which includes the Chairmen of the Policy and Finance Committees, meets to ensure that a tight control is kept over the contract.

The proposed scheme for the Interior Decorations was approved by Common Council in November 1990 at a cost of £2.548 million and this envisaged new and improved architectural decorations - particularly in the Walbrook Entrance area, replacement of most of the carpets and floor coverings and the provision of new curtains and soft furnishings. Most of this is vitally necessary because little if any work of replacement has taken place since the early eighties, it having been very much a case of "make do and mend".

The furniture inventory revealed that some of the sets of antique furniture had been separated and were in different parts of the house. Where possible these sets will be re-united in areas like the North and South Drawing Rooms. Such rooms can then be seen as "Period Rooms" without turning the House into a museum. The walls of the Drawing Rooms will also accommodate many of the Samuel pictures and they will be hung in an historic manner. There is provision for new furniture, but most of the old will be refurbished and repaired.

Research revealed that the Nile chairs were never entirely gilded, the original Regency chairs having been of an elegant japanned lacquer rosewood appearance with some gilt features, the opulent gilding having taken place in the late Victorian era. It was decided that, when these chairs were restored, they would revert to their original appearance: this has the added benefit that less gold would need to be used and would therefore be less costly.

Most of the public rooms will have the walls etc., stripped down to the original plaster, thus revealing much sharper details in many of the carvings.

It is not surprising that the carvings have lost the sharpness of definition because some forty to fifty layers have been found in certain areas, and indeed it has been possible to identify some original colour. Regilding will be done as necessary.

The Long Parlour was panelled in pine and as designed was meant to be painted: in consequence the best timber was not used, nor was the joinery perfect and infills of plaster were used to hide the defects. In the 1950s somebody had the idea of stripping the paintwork off and this was done and it has always been a matter of debate as to whether it was an improvement or not. However, after lengthy discussions with past Lord Mayors, the decision was taken to revert to the original Dance designs and the room will be repainted.

There will be a return to the original single Dance entrance to the Ball Room. Considerable refurbishment will take place to the plaster and some strengthening of the floor will also be done, but I doubt that it will ever be possible to hold a full scale dance there because of the vibration generated.

This paper gives but a broad outline of the enormous amount of research and work that has been and still is being done to bring the restoration to completion. I am aware of the enormous contribution of Director Rowe of Building and Services and his staff, and also of Richard Adams of the Town Clerk's Office. These officers have presented endless ideas with subsequent frustrations, but their reward will be seen in August 1983.

With me it has been a privilege and a pleasure to be associated with the project since 1981, indeed I think I am the only individual left with original involvement.

N.H.H.
30.03.92