

HISTORY OF THE CITY HERITAGE SOCIETY, 1973-2003

Read by C. Douglas Woodward Esq, CBE

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Thirty years is but the blink of an eyelid in terms of the City's history but these years have seen changes in our streets and buildings almost as far-reaching as the Victorians sweeping away of an earlier City and my Society's involvement in these stirring times is not without interest. This short account is a précis of that history to be published at the end of this year by Historical Publications.

We had our small beginnings as a group set up under the aegis of the Barbican Residents Association. It was a time when "conservation" was, if anything, less popular with the Planning Committee than in later years and anyone seeking to make a case for it as against redevelopment was regarded by the Chairman (my good friend Frank Steiner) with courteous but surprised disbelief.

One bright spot was the City along with other parts of the country was seeing the creation of "conservation areas" and planning authorities had been asked to establish committees to advise the planners in respect of planning in these areas.

When early in 1973 our Planning Committee was considering which groups should be invited to nominate representatives, an obvious gap was the absence of specific resident interest. At considerable speed two of us set up the Barbican Association Conservation Group so that we could have a representative at the first meeting of the new Conservation Area Advisory Committee.

From the start it was felt that members should be made knowledgeable about the City's architectural character and history and to help ensure the continuing interest of members a programme of highly-popular social events was put in hand and has continued up to the present time. It was important to have a strong membership so that as time went by and the Society was to give evidence at public enquiries, for example, there could be no question as to the validity of the Society's standing. In fact membership rose rapidly from a hundred in 1975 to 320 in 1979.

The group's first publication was on the importance to the City of its passages and alleyways. A conservation exhibition took place in St Giles Church, Cripplegate, in July 1976 when, among other things, the development threat then hanging over Lovat Lane was highlighted. As a result of attendant publicity Lovat Lane was designated as the City's ninth conservation area and the architects there sought the group's collaboration.

With new members now coming from far and wide it was agreed at the group's AGM in January 1977 that a new name should be chosen. (After all we were not particularly concerned with conservation of the Barbican.) The name would be the City Heritage Society and its logo would be the now familiar gas-lit lamp-post drawn from those removed from London Bridge when it went to Lake Havasu.

That year, 1977, saw publication of “Save the City” a much-praised conservation study produced by representatives of the national amenity societies. City Heritage issued a statement advocating that its main recommendations should be taken into account in all aspects of the City’s planning – that there should be more conservation areas, more City buildings should be listed and that the plot ratio system should be amended to encourage development in run-down fringe areas.

Early in 1978 City Heritage was registered with the Civic Trust as the City’s conservation and amenity society, a formal constitution was adopted and the Society became a registered charity.

Over its 30-year history a number of events stand out as peaks. The first of these was in 1978 when in April at a meeting in Painters’ Hall the City Heritage Award was inaugurated.

There had been moves towards such an award over the past two years and that year with Alderman Allan Davis’s’ help the Society entered into a partnership with the Painter-Stainers Company to organize and run an award scheme described by me in somewhat emotive terms at its launch as “An eleventh hour attempt to encourage developers, architects and builders to think of renewal and refurbishment rather than wholesale demolition and redevelopment”.

The first award was presented in October that year by Lord Mayor Sir Peter Vanneck for the restoration of an extremely modest, domestic-scale building in Newbury Street, St Bartholomew’s. The only two problems were that with such a small building any celebration within was impossible and the recipient, the surveyor Anstey Horne, was in any event a teetotaler. So we all moved back to Painters’ Hall for the champagne, one of the few occasions my Society had to foot the bill. Thereafter we seemed to find larger buildings and more drinks-minded recipients to win our accolade.

The City Heritage Awards have been running now for 26 years. Each year, with never a break, the Lord Mayor has made the presentation.

Among the recipients have been the Bank of England Museum, Royal Exchange, the Mansion House, the east building of Central Markets and a host of others, some great, some rather modest. The two most recent have been for Merrill Lynch’s headquarters along Newgate Street and for the brilliant conservation of the old Public Records Office in Chancery Lane as a new library for King’s College.

It has been interesting, almost surprising, in recording the 30-year history of the Society how often its comments have helped influence the outcome of discussion. In 1978, for example, it is recorded that City Heritage representation on a proposal for Well Court, off Bow Lane, had helped to achieve a much more acceptable scheme with conserved facades, making Well Court a more cheerful passageway. Our objections to a proposal for demolition and change of use of the pre-Great Fire Hoop and Grapes, Aldgate, prevailed and the pub was saved. Similarly the old Gallipoli Restaurant in St Botolph’s Churchyard, once a Turkish bath, in danger of being

submerged by extensive rebuilding around it, was retained as the sole example in the City of Turkish/Victoriana. It is still there today even if it has become a Tandoori!

On a different level Lloyd's invited City Heritage to discuss plans for their proposed new building in Leadenhall Street and this we did one evening in 1979 when Richard Rogers showed us his drawings. The general consensus was that his proposals held out a promise of an exciting new feature in the City that would nevertheless fit into the existing environment. With hindsight we now believe that this commendation was one of our few grave errors of judgement. It did at least teach us that while an architect's images may look like pussycats the final outcome could be something of a monster.

In 1980 the Society held its first formal Dinner – in the City of London Club which had earlier been threatened with demolition and had that year been specially commended in the City Heritage Award. These dinners have continued each year, almost invariably in a livery hall, as an important part of the Society's social scene and, with so many distinguished speakers and guests have contributed to its standing.

In 1981 we were pleased that a development in Cophall Avenue of which we were critical had in the outcome been turned down in the Court of Common Council whose members in those days had the last word on all significant planning applications, a practice steadily eroded over the years which our history notes with regret.

That year the first moves were being made in what was to become the City's most famous of all planning battles, a cause celebre that would occupy the Society's attention throughout the 1980s and beyond. Peter Palumbo had applied for planning permission to redevelop the central area of the City around Mansion House with the creation of a new square and erection of an 18-storey tower block designed some 20 years earlier by Mies van der Rohe (who had died in the interim. The Mansion House Square scheme, long in gestation, while the Palumbos, father and son, sought to acquire the leases of all the buildings on this large triangular site, would involve the destruction of more than 20 buildings, many of them listed, including Mappin and Webb.

The Society's observations in February 1982 were highly critical: "Given the existing street pattern at Bank Junction it is inappropriate to superimpose a square at this point . . . the destruction of buildings on this scale is not acceptable".

In September the Court of Common Council, on a recommendation by the Planning Committee and with one or two impassioned speeches from the floor, voted unanimously to reject the scheme. A major victory for conservation and, notably, one in which Aldermen and Commoners were unanimously on the side of the angels – a situation that was to be maintained at all stages of the Palumbo saga.

Peter Palumbo appealed and in 1984 we had the first in a series of public enquiries. A year later Secretary of State Patrick Jenkin upheld his inspector's rejection of Mansion House Square. Alas he left the door ajar for an alternative "new building of quality".

Palumbo quickly commissioned James Stirling to produce such an alternative and invited City Heritage comment. Not surprisingly, neither we nor the Corporation liked Stirling's scheme which involved total demolition of all the buildings, replacing them with what Stuart Murphy likened to a wedge of cheese and the Prince of Wales to a 1930s wireless set. In June 1987 the Planning Committee said no and the Court of Common Council voted overwhelmingly against. Again a Palumbo appeal and a second public enquiry in 1988.

This time Nicholas Ridley, a somewhat different Secretary of State, allowed Palumbo's appeal. In 1989 SAVE Britain's Heritage, backed by City Heritage, applied for a judicial review. The High Court ruled there were no grounds to upset the Secretary of State's ruling. A year later we were celebrating a "famous victory", the Court of Appeal holding that Ridley had failed to give adequate reasons for his departure from established Government policy on listed buildings. I wrote to the new Secretary of State, Christopher Patten, urging him not to go to the House of Lords on this and commendably his Department let the matter rest. But not Peter Palumbo.

The end of the saga came a year later in 1991 when five judges of the House of Lords decided, on a technicality, in favour of Lord Palumbo as he had then become. *The Times* in a notable leading article said of the development that it was "sheer destruction, a monumental act of egotism".

Demolition could not take place until the developer received permission to "stop up" – i.e. to obliterate – Bucklersbury and Pancras Lanes which ran through the site. Objections were immediately made by City Heritage and the Corporation leading to yet another public enquiry this time for the Secretary of State for Transport who in 1993 dismissed his own inspector's recommendation and gave the all clear for demolition. Ironically enough it fell to me as Chief Commoner that year to announce the Corporation's final acceptance of defeat.

Returning to other matters. An Annual Lecture was inaugurated in 1982, the first sparkling if controversial speaker being the newly-elected President of the RIBA, Owen Luder. To acknowledge the financial support (quite unsolicited) we were receiving from them we called these the Clifford Turner (later Clifford Chance) City Heritage Lectures.

We gave Stuart Lipton a special award for his Cutlers Gardens development. We did like some new buildings!

Almost from day one City Heritage had been contributing its views on the City's Draft Plan – later the Unitary Development Plan which, after some five years of preparation, was nearing publication in 1985. That year property interests were able to win some acceptance for their contention that the Plan was too slanted towards conservation and from this time on the pressures for large-scale development were to become increasingly intense and would become an ever-recurring cause of anxiety for the Society.

The City of London Plan, substantially modified in response to such pressures, continued its slow progress. City Heritage commented that while on the face of it the Plan provided a highly civilized approach the test would be how the Planning

Committee interpreted its requirements. Even before the Plan was finalized a replacement for Lee House on London Wall was recommended for approval, although three times the size of the existing building. Tony Bull and I met the architect, Terry Farrell, and persuaded him to lop a slice off its bulk – but it is still overpowering.

A wind of change was blowing through the City, cutting across the more conservationist leanings of City Architect Stuart Murphy and towards the end of 1986 we learned of his departure.

John Wheeler MP wrote seeking our support for the Canary Wharf development and we replied that although we liked certain features we had concern as to its style. Of the Docklands Light Railway we came out strongly in favour of it terminating at Cannon Street not the Bank – a view we later felt was justified when its construction necessitated substantial underpinning of the Mansion House.

Towards the end of 1987 the collapse of the stock market heralded the return to a less frenetic planning climate. Nevertheless, Graham Elliott (lately one of the planning officers and now looking after planning applications for the Society) was frequently using the word “gigantism” in his criticism of developers’ proposals. Happily some rather ghastly ideas for towers along London Wall, including one as tall as the NatWest building and twice its bulk, all fell by the wayside.

In 1991 we had the third in a series of plans for Paternoster Square and we commended the neo-classical scheme submitted by architects John Simpson, Terry Farrell and Thomas Beeby. In the light of current speculation about the future of Smithfield Market it is interesting that also that year, with less than enthusiastic support from the meat traders, we wondered whether the Corporation’s plans for refurbishment should go ahead and that the market buildings could be refurbished for a different use, for example a new home for the Museum of London. In the outcome we were pleased that the Market remained as a feature of the City and an important revenue-earner.

In October 1992 we gave evidence at the public enquiry into the almost completed Unitary Development Plan asking that the Plan should acknowledge that there existed an over-abundant supply of office space, that the forecast for a substantial rise in City employment was over-optimistic and that plot ratio should be reduced to encourage buildings of smaller scale. This contention has been the root of City Heritage comment in the subsequent decade, colouring every one of our objections first to the Swiss Re tower, then to the Heron tower and most recently to the Minerva tower at Aldgate.

Compressing 30 years into 20 minutes is not easy and I will skim over the most notable City Heritage doings during the past ten years.

1993 saw Barts Hospital and City’s churches under threat and the Society lent its efforts to preserve hospital and churches. Also we were collaborating with the City of London Retail Traders Association to halt the steady loss of shops in the square mile. Plot ratio, which we had asked to be lowered, was scrapped altogether. Yet another Paternoster scheme fell by the wayside.

In 1994 we were critical of nondescript designs for new buildings proposed for the City and with a view to improving the situation we joined the Worshipful Company of Chartered Architects in presenting Awards for buildings of high architectural quality.

Norman Foster's proposal for a 1200-ft tower on the site of the Baltic Exchange was a major concern in 1996 leading to a public outcry and its speedy killing off. In its place came an application for the 600-foot tower later known as the Erotic Gherkin. Sir William Whitfield's master-plan for Paternoster with its six quite separate buildings earned our praise but with reservations: over-development and nothing but offices – but great relief that the City's one big eyesore was at last to be tackled. We ran a seminar with the title: "The City is far more than office blocks" when speakers explored the possibilities for greater diversity of uses. Some good residential schemes were emerging that year, a trend we had long supported.

1998 saw the second UDP under way and City Heritage commented on all eleven of the Corporation's discussion papers. We again argued that with a shrinking rather than expanding workforce there was no case for ever more and larger office buildings.

Norman Foster designs had become the flavour of the year among developers and his second tower scheme for the Baltic site came in 1999 with City Heritage leading the opposition to it as breaking an earlier promise for restoration of the Baltic, the remains being quite sufficient for its recreation, and because the tower would overshadow and dominate everything around it. We commended a proposal for turning the old Guardian Insurance building in King William Street into a department store, and the bringing back into public use of the Royal Exchange courtyard. English Heritage followed City Heritage's long-held view that plot ratio should be restored. That year ten further livery companies became corporate members of City Heritage.

The Gherkin won the Corporation's approval in the year 2000 largely because of an inexplicable lapse in its responsibilities by English Heritage. We said in our Annual Report that year: "We can only hope that with Sir Jocelyn Stevens' departure and the coming of a new chairman they will recall their duty as a conservation body".

In fact this happened in 2001 with English Heritage leading the fight against the Heron tower in Bishopsgate, our joint calls for a public enquiry having on this occasion been listened to by Secretary of State Prescott. Alas in the outcome the Heron tower was also to win approval. There was another public enquiry that year into the City's UDP at which City Heritage objected to its promotion of over-large office buildings. The remains of the poor Baltic, stored over the years at a cost of £4 million were offered for sale on the internet.

Last year, 2002, saw the completion of City Heritage's first 30 years. With others we had given evidence to a House of Commons Committee looking at tall buildings which found that "Tall buildings are not essential for the future of London as a financial centre . . . We received no evidence that any company had left London or refused to come to London because of a shortage of tall buildings". That year work continued as ever with City Heritage commenting on more than 40 significant planning applications including two more tower proposals.

Has the City Heritage Society made much difference to what has happened to our streets and buildings since the 1970s? We were unsuccessful in respect of No 1 Poultry, the Gherkin and in restraining much of the City's frenetic building activity. Our successes, surprisingly numerous, were in some of the less famous of planning issues. A campaigning body certainly but, I think, never confrontational as perhaps is evidenced by the invariably good relationships with Chairmen and members of the Planning Committee and three City Architects and Planning Officers in post since 1973. The City Heritage Awards and various other activities have served as a useful (and necessary) conservation counterweight to the powerful forces often brought to bear in the City by development interests. The City would arguably have been a worse place had we not been there. At our Annual Dinner last November I said "The City is and always will be chosen as a place to do business because it is at the centre of the nation's economic life and because of its environmental and architectural quality". It is quality we have tried to maintain and enhance, I hope with at least some modest success.