

Portsmouth Society News

The Newsletter of the Portsmouth Society DECEMBER 1994

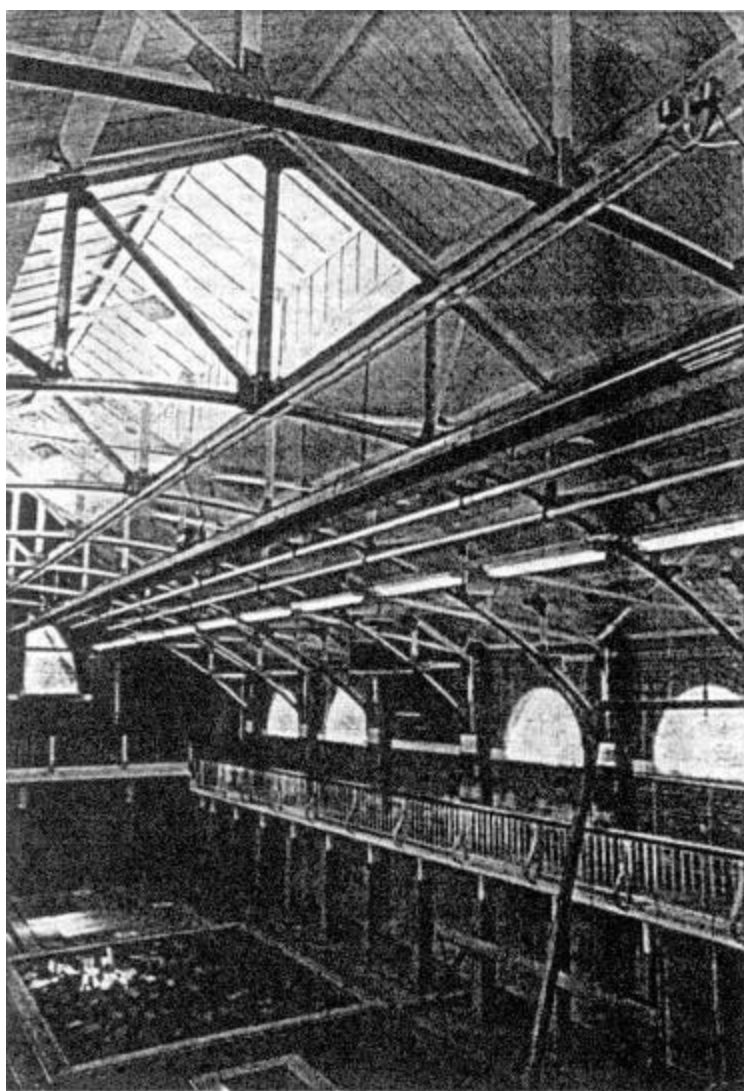
Pitt Street Reopened!

The opening of the Pitt Street Gymnastics Centre by Princess Alexandra on 8th November marked the triumphant conclusion of a five year struggle. Uniquely the Society can claim in this case that, had it not been for us, this building would have been demolished.

In September 1989 a member, Dr Peter Wright, alerted us that there was an item on the council agenda that Pitt Street Baths (1910), former Royal Naval School of Physical Training recently purchased by the council from the Ministry of Defence, should be demolished to provide a temporary car park. Our first reaction was to write to certain councillors likely to be sympathetic to urge them to block the motion in order to obtain at least a temporary stay of execution. This was successful - first for a month and then for six months.

We then tried to get the building listed but the council forestalled us and obtained a certificate of immunity from listing. I went to the Public Record Office at Kew to try to confirm what we believed to be the case that the architect

was G.E.Smith who had designed the former technical institute and library (now the University's Park Building) and the pre-fire South Parade Pier. I found the relevant page of the navy records had been removed.



The interior of the former swimming pool now converted for gymnastic use.

At the time we were under pressure to find a new use. It was no good, these friendly councillors rightly said, to preserve it as just an empty building. The best advice was that the swimming

pool was beyond economic repair, but the larger arm of the L, the gymnasium, a huge unobstructed space cried out for reuse.

A number of possibilities were considered: the YMCA were interested in buying the building for conversion to a variety of uses (we were not enthusiastic about this; but they provided a useful excuse for delay as they at least could raise the money), a couple of young architects prepared a scheme with our blessing to build an hotel alongside (commanding splendid views over the dockyard and harbour) with Pitt Street providing its recreational facilities; even a covered market to house the Charlotte Street traders was put forward.

But gymnastics always seemed a possibility and the county officers, in particular Malcolm Miles of the recreation department, were supportive. He brought along Keith Richardson an expert gymnast who was immediately enthusiastic about the potential of the building. We wrote to SAVE Britain's Heritage who commissioned an architectural firm to suggest possibilities for reuse; the Sports Council - who were then not very helpful; IBRM - The Institute of Baths and Recreational Management - a registered charity devoted to the "improvement of recreational services to the community" who said they would get in touch with the Central Council for Physical Recreation, and the Amateur Swimming Association who were said to be experts on getting disused swimming pools into action; and the County Architect, who looked at it as a possible new site for the School of Architecture.

But the next move forward came from John Atkinson, executive manager of the British Amateur Gymnastics Association from Shropshire, who came at our invitation to have a look. He was enthusiastic and he and Mr Miles had been at college together. Mr Atkinson said it was just what was urgently needed to provide a regional centre of excellence. He told us that promising gymnasts from Southampton and Worthing were having to go to Lilleshall in Shropshire for their training because there was nowhere suitable on the South Coast. Mr Atkinson did what he could amongst national sports organisa-

tions and he managed to get the promise of a grant from the Sports Council.

The big snag was the price the city had most ill-advisedly paid for the building: £729,000, which was the valuation as a city centre redevelopment site - at the height of the property boom. Valued as a recreational building the price would have been £250,000. The impossibility of covering this extra half million pounds has been the mill stone all along.

A meeting of all interested parties in the Civic Offices in January 1991 generated a lot of misinformation and not much light. Then at a time of stalemate Mr Miles had a lucky meeting in a pub in Winchester with someone who told him about the Sports and Arts Fund - set up to use the profits from football pools instead of taxing them. He immediately applied and they gave him a grant of some £400,000. This was the turning point.

The building has been renovated and altered by Terry Wren, the city's historic buildings architect. The entrance is now off Clarence Street instead of the busy main road, the swimming pool filled with lots of plastic foam blocks to provide soft landings for young gymnasts, and new lighting and heating installed. Local clubs are using it. Phase 2 which will add living accommodation for visiting teams will have to wait a source of new money but already we have a unique centre that the city can be proud of.

R.J.

THE PORTSMOUTH SOCIETY

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Southsea, PO5 2NE, Tel 01705 732912

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Design Awards



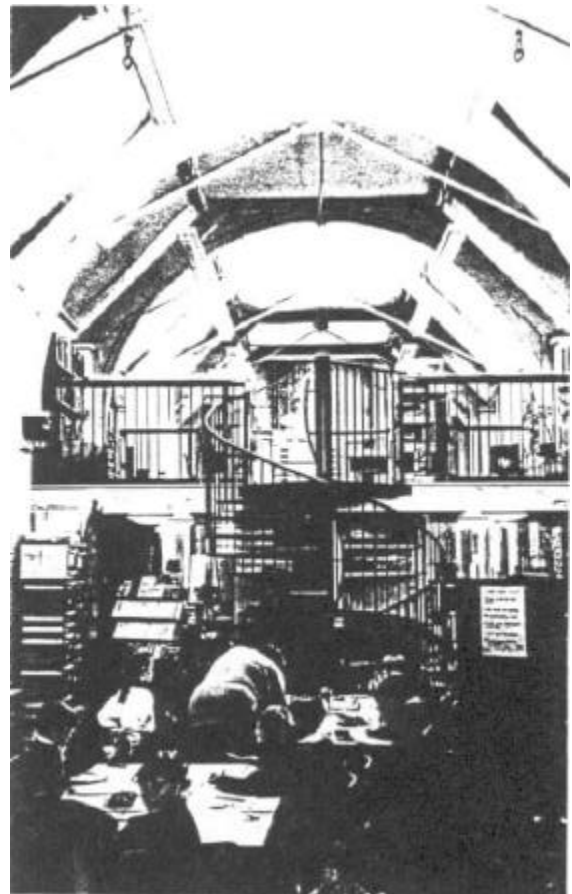
Copnor School: the old merges well with the

This was a lean year and we considered cancelling the awards because of the thin entry. However in the end we did find worthy winners of all three categories.

The first building we visited was in fact unanimously chosen as the **Best New Building** of the year. It was the new single storey building joining the separate Victorian buildings of **Copnor Junior and Infant Schools**, designed by Stefan Jacobek of the Winchester Architects Plincke, Leaman and Browning, John Lay & Co being the contractors. It is uncompromisingly modern in style and yet enhances rather than detracts from the two attractive old buildings with their Dutch gables, typical of the Board schools of their time. There are awkward spaces where each school joins the new building, but in each case they turn out to be among the most attractive parts of the whole scheme. Architects so often do their best when severely constrained by circumstances. The yellow-painted corridor area of the junction of the new building with the Infant's school is set off at an angle which gives the space a rhythm, and the columns, whose presence the architect apologised for, added to the enjoyment.

The new building has 'unlocked' the old ones and enabled them to be more functional and reduce costs. For example it has enabled a library area to be provided to beautiful effect at a raised level within the large school room of the Junior school. The new building establishes a very functional link with both school buildings, giving great pleasure to staffs and pupils of both schools. The head teacher of the Infant School said there had been 200% improvement. Altogether a worthy winner.

Other new buildings of interest that we looked at were **The Bungalow** in Sussex Road. This raises fundamental questions of modern versus pastiche and 'fitting in'. It is a comfortable and homely small two storey detached house - but something of a pastiche to meet the planners' requirements next to Sussex Terrace. In fact the owners and we



Copnor Junior School library imaginatively created within the existing building.

would have preferred a frankly modern design, which would have not been out of place here, since on the other side is not a very distinguished 1930s block of flats.

We saw a small block (**Windsor Court**) and a detached house (**5A**) on backlands north of **Villiers Road**, Southsea. Because of the tightness of the site there had been difficulty in obtaining the planning permission; but the architect, Jeffrey Douglas, had done a good job in cramped conditions and the house had produced one delightful irregularly shaped room.



Milldam House, the worthy winner of the Best Restoration award.

We were given a very thorough tour of the multi-million pound **NBCD School** building on the northern shore of **Whale Island** (visible only from the M275). Every man and every officer who goes to sea in the navy has to do a course here to learn how to cope with emergencies whether of fire, seas breaking in or of enemy action. It includes a mock-up of part of a ship which can be rocked and tipped, holed and set on fire so that all possible hazards can be experienced for real. The huge building itself, we felt, showed a lack of architectural expertise. All sorts of opportunities have been missed - it contains two large atria which were mere light wells instead of being centres for internal communications and orientation; and it made no use for the

benefit of staff and students at leisure of its spectacular views to Portchester Castle across the harbour.

The new Portsmouth Register Office in what was **Milldam House**, a fine late Georgian house, part of Milldam Barracks, was the unrivalled winner of the Best Restoration Award. This was in the first place a herculean piece of engineering to prevent the building from sinking into the swamp. Once the foundations were secure, restoration of the interior and exterior was carried out to produce a very handsome building with a

welcoming central space and stairway and dignified ceremonial rooms. Mrs Botley, the registrar, is very pleased and she told us that it was extremely popular. At present people from outside the city cannot be married there; but there is already a demand and the regulations are to be changed to make this possible. The work was designed by Jonathon Burns of the County Architect's Department, with Warings contractors.

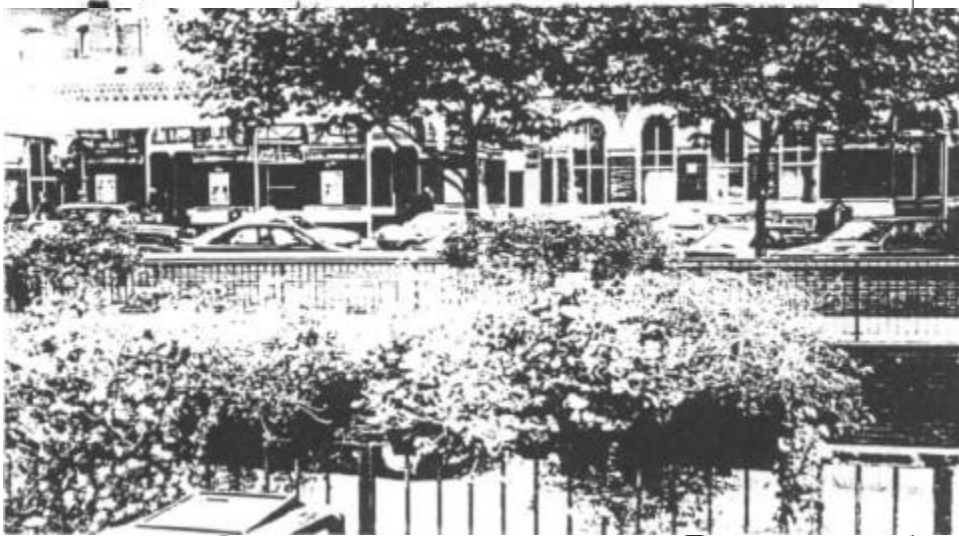
Friends of the Earth who are no longer recycling waste are now recycling cycles. Also at their **Orchard Road** premises they now have a vegetarian restaurant and advanced renewable energy systems with voltaic cells and wind turbine.

61 Stamshaw Road. This handsome house which you are likely to miss from your speeding car, unless you are looking for it, stands back in a gap between the Victorian terrace houses. It looks like the one remaining house from a Georgian terrace. In fact it always has been a detached residence. It was saved by Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust who bought it with their revolving fund and sold it on to the Portsmouth Housing Association who have restored it as a

family home - very successfully except that their subsequent maintenance has not been up to scratch. The fascinating basement kitchen has, disappointingly, not been brought back into use.

although he modestly explained that many others were involved, as no doubt they were.

We also commended **St George's Square**, Portsea. It probably needs to be judged in twenty years time when the trees have matured. It is a very low key design by the County Landscaping Department with a low maintenance requirement, rather in the French style - How about Boule? - a vast improvement on what was there before.



Impressive summer planting opposite Portsmouth and Southsea

The **Omega Centre**. Here we judged the restoration and conservation of the old Omega Street Board School and its associated sculpture part as landscaping. The building is now an arts centre for the teaching of art and also provides studios for practising artists who like the atmosphere of being in the centre. This we thought was good re-use of an attractive old Board school building, also adorned with Dutch gables - a building which incidentally the Society had some years ago successfully campaigned to save from demolition. The sculpture park area is so far unused and we thought somewhat unsuitable for its purpose. We would like to see the sculpture displayed in the open quadrangle at the front of the building.

We also had no argument as to who should receive the **best landscaping award**. This went to the Parks Department's city-wide floral displays in hanging baskets and planters. It was a spin off from D-Day and the 8th centenary; but we are delighted to hear that it will be renewed next year. Particularly spectacular were the displays in front of the Town station which successfully brightened up this otherwise drab area. Brian Kidd was the genius behind it

Next year promises to be a bumper year. We already have eight entries each for new buildings and restorations - all buildings that were finished too late to meet our criterion for this year that they must have been finished by December 1993. The judges this year were Peter Faller, Professor of Architecture at Stuttgart University, Bill Seabrook, Professor of Land Economics at Portsmouth University, Celia Clark, Chairman of the Society and John Holland, of the Executive Committee.

It is provisionally arranged that the Lord Mayor will unveil the plaques on site in the afternoon of Wednesday 11 January. Members are very welcome and those wishing to attend should telephone the Secretary for confirmation and timings.



Even drab street furniture can look good!

Eastern Road Cycleway

At the August meeting of the Executive Committee the proposed cycleway for the Eastern Road. The feeling was that the mix of cyclists and pedestrians along the route crossing Milton Common would not be a happy one and that many cyclists would continue to use the Eastern Road. It was suggested that a cycle path could be provided directly alongside the road and we decided that we should make a site visit.

On Saturday 13th September 5 members of the committee set off from the Good Companions to investigate. Betty Owen, Barbara Stewart and Roger James drove slowly in Roger's car the length of the Eastern Road, parking at the Farlington Marshes car park and walked back across the bridge over Ports Creek. Rosemary Flewitt and John Holland cycled up the east side of the road, mostly on grass and rough footpath. The cyclists reported no difficulty; nowhere were they forced to go on the road and most of the way they were able to cycle abreast. They had to dismount only because of the lack of ramps where they crossed the road to Kendall's Quay. The only difficulty at the northern end, we found, was the bridge itself where the paved footpath is very narrow and does need a fence to make the cyclist feel reasonably safe. If this were done it would be single traffic only for cyclists for this short stretch. The causeway leading to the bridge at the northern end is wide enough and well protected with a metal crash barrier.

On the way home we stopped to investigate the route past the caravan park which, with its thick hedge, was the narrowest part of our cyclists' journey. We decided the hedge could be substantially reduced in width without damaging it, and that this would be better than taking the route inside the caravan park.

We adjourned to the Good Companions to

consider our findings and later continued our deliberations at the Thatched House after we had inspected and approved the new decking on the shore and at Milton Lock.

Charles Stunnell, Assistant City Engineer, had intimated a readiness to meet us about the cycling policy and the routes and we agreed to seek an early meeting with him. We reiterated our unanimous opinion against a route across Milton Common or along the water's edge; and we consider western edge of Eastern Road unsuitable for a continuous cycleway. Our object is to have a safe and direct route for those who cycle in or out of the city for work, shopping or leisure and to have it so obviously safe and good that others will be encouraged to use it. A route all along the eastern side of the road can provide this. Access at the northern end will be facilitated by the proposal already under consideration for the peak hour traffic lights at the roundabout under the A27 to operate continuously and to have pedestrian and cycle-crossing phases.

We have recently learned that the proposed route across Milton Common and along the water's edge has been abandoned in favour of a route adjacent to the road to be constructed in phases as and when finances permit. The report from the City Engineer's Department listed the pros and cons for the various routes and included comments received from the general public. It is so well presented that we consider it to be a model of public consultation.

Southern Comfort

Southern Comfort is the humorous title given to an annual day-long meeting of representatives of Civic Amenity Societies of the South. This year, hosted by the Guildford Society, it took place on 8 October in the Borough's fine modern oak Council Chamber, and was attended by Roger

James and Betty Owen. We heard three talks; from the Director of the Civic Trust, from Guildford's Planning Officer and from the Curator of the Museum; in the afternoon there were group discussions and reports back.

Martin Bradshaw, the Civic Trust's Director admitted that the Trust had somewhat lost direction of late. In his time in office he had pressed for it to have a campaigning identity, and its campaign to be for *liveability* in towns and cities.

In this country, unlike, say, France, rural life was considered desirable and was cherished, though this rural life was often a myth, a dream, not the reality. Our cities, by contrast, were seen as places to escape from to the country, not as places where one would choose to live if free. This makes for destructive pressures on the countryside and country towns and for such neglect of urban life that 'inner city' has come to mean threatening bad streets instead of a convenient and desirable place to have a home, with resultant travel problems for work and entertainment. The mistakes in the 1960's residential provision in cities, the 80's crises in public transport, and the illusory freedom of the car have led to the loss of people and households in cities, to congestion and pollution from car traffic, and to city areas of poverty, disorder, dirt, and a lack of community pride where uniform housing, derelict lands and buildings create conditions of social stress leading sometimes even to riot. Slides were shown of industrial dereliction of a kind Portsmouth does not have and of traffic congestion such as it does. A national and long-term policy is needed to make urban living attractive. To reverse the trend and to safeguard the existing good in country and small town, we need better city housing, decent transport, community pride and self-help. A new strategic concept is needed which will actively involve the people concerned; the revitalisation of city life is not the prerogative of government or the private sector. We should also look about us in Europe and learn lessons from Paris, Munich, Dortmund, and Amsterdam. We must conserve the built heritage in neglected streets and prevent large financial institutions from driving out small

shops and businesses; we must encourage mixed uses, aim to make civic spaces everywhere pleasing, encourage a new respect for the local by central government, and resurrect public transport. The government's documents on regional development do not consider the *quality* of city life; there is no conference on this topic at a national level.

But some signs of improvement are beginning to appear. The planning system is now less marginalised than it was; the 'approved development plan' strengthens planning decisions. Central government is beginning to take up the theme, at least in advisory form, in John Gummer's document *Quality in town and Country*. In England the countryside has a long history of protection. For towns, almost the only voice is the Civic Trust; *liveability* in towns and cities deserves our urgent attention.

There is a National Council of Civic Trust Societies. Denis Cronin and Lesley Burton (of Gosport) are Southern Region representatives; through them we can make common cause with other regions and the Civic Trust can then talk to government and to the major bodies.

John Nightingale, Guildford's Planning Officer, saw his office's function as having a vision and making it happen. Too much planning work in the past has been reacting to proposals, dealing with appeals, enforcing decisions; now there was a need for positive action, to have a development brief for sites likely to become available, to foresee needs, set priorities and stimulate change using a long timescale. Councils owned land; Guildford had initiated a research park, leisure complex, hotel and multiplex cinema on its own land. Towns could attract investment and tourism by managing their historic image, entertainment-mix, people-friendliness and transport facilities. Cooperation with business could encourage good design, for example in shop fronts and a contribution to arts funding. Urban vitality could be encouraged by extending the hours at which town centres were alive and traffic management could prevent them being deadened by parked cars. (But he didn't mention consultation, and

when questioned said he hadn't the resources for it - we are lucky in Portsmouth to have an established system of reactive consultation and a planning office increasingly ready to listen and discuss before decisions are made.)

Matthew Alexander, Curator of Guildford Museum, then made dramatic use of historical maps to show Guildford as a tiny Saxon settlement by the 'gold' (sand) of a ford, growing slowly on its not very fertile land as a market town on routes crossing the North Downs, until suddenly from 1946 a huge suburb develops north of the town. A population graph shoots off the grid at this point. In terms of human life years, half of all Guildford's life has been lived since 1946. (Should we perhaps be glad that Portsmouth's housing explosion was in the nineteenth century?)

The afternoon discussion revealed that all the small places (our New Forest neighbours spoke feelingly) are faced with pressures from supermarkets, from the closure of small shops, from tourists and from increasing traffic problems. Those present ranged from Reading and Kingston on Thames to Reigate and Fordingbridge.

Redundant Dockyards

At the November monthly meeting Celia Clark, our chairman gave a talk on *The Reuse of Redundant Dockyards*. This is the subject of the research she has been doing at Oxford and is now continuing at Bristol. She has been studying not just Portsmouth but also Chatham, Plymouth and Venice. The problem has accelerated since the end of the Cold War but has existed for many years - the Arsenale at Venice for example, once the power house of the Venetian Republic, has had little use since the First World War. What is to be done with these splendid, often massive

buildings, which have outlived their original purpose? The first thought for most places has been tourism. Celia started by showing us tourists massed at St Mark's Square in Venice and then jamming a canal bridge just round the corner. Tourists bring their own problems and can of course destroy what they have come to see. She proceeded to show a series of beautiful pictures of the Arsenale, which is in fact off the tourist beat. It is just empty, many of the buildings crumbling and neglected, but others - she showed us the magnificent Gaggiandre, twin covered wet docks - beautifully restored, but in their own right and for no particular purpose.

She went on to Chatham, closed in 1982, where unlike Portsmouth a tourist industry had to be built up from scratch and without the invaluable asset that we have here of the three historic ships to 'draw them in'. We were shown the great series of covered slips at Chatham whose existence allowed the MoD to demolish the much lamented No. 3 Ship Shop at Portsmouth in the 1970s. She mentioned the different disposal systems tried out by the MoD as each dockyard or part of dockyard became redundant. In each case many millions of pounds were provided to help the successor bodies - trusts and development corporation - restore and maintain the great buildings bequeathed to them - but they were not enough.

How to reuse these dockyards? That is the problem. She illustrated the difficulty presented by very deep plans and structural columns which make them hard to adapt for residential or even office purposes, showing us the interior of the Portsmouth storehouses and the huge unused spaces of Royal Clarence Yard at Gosport. However, she ended with praise of the work of the Portsmouth Naval base Property Trust which has recently restored the roof, cupola and clock on top of No. 10 Storehouse (recipient of a Portsmouth Society award), renovated the Porter's Lodge, done emergency work on the Cell Block which was in danger of collapsing into the harbour, and this year opened a restaurant and an exhibition of dockyard trades in No. 7 Boathouse.

St Agatha's Church

There is a proposal that the naval collection, currently housed in the Ministry of Defence library in London, should be moved to Portsmouth and in particular to St Agatha's Church. The Society is unhappy that St Agatha's should be put to such a use. The collection was established in the early nineteenth century to contain information on enemies or potential enemies. It has a large Japanese and Russian collection and a very extensive section relating to German policy in the first world war. New items are no longer being added so it is in a sense dead collection. In all it comprises 1.5 to 2 million books and periodicals.

There are several potential and much more

suitable sites for it within and near the dockyard. It would perhaps be more logical to keep the collection on MOD premises e.g. in or near the Heritage Area - in the storehouses for example or to create a modern library in the Ropewalk which is an empty three-storey shell at present.

St Agatha's is a very beautiful building and it would be a shame having emptied the church of naval stores to fill it up again with naval books when the County Council have spent so much effort and care on restoring the building, at last revealing the splendid interior as a visible public space.

The Portsmouth Society strongly urge the Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust and Hampshire County Council to allow more public debate on the potential range of uses for the church including its use as a concert space.

Celia Clark.

MEMBERSHIP

Please send this form with your cheque made payable to "The Portsmouth Society" to:-

Jean Thompson, Hon Treasurer,
The Portsmouth Society,
4 Malvern Road, Soujtssea, Hants, PO5 2NA.

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DIARY

All meetings are held in room F on the 3rd floor of the Portsmouth Central Library, Guildhall Square starting at 7.30pm, unless otherwise stated.

Wednesday February 1st

THE 1994 DESIGN COMPETITION

The judges report on the entries in in the recent competition..

Wednesday 1st March

THE FRESHWATER ENVIRONMENT OF PORTSMOUTH

A talk by Nick Walton.

Wednesday 5th April

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Followed by a guest speaker.