

# Portsmouth Society News - April 1997

## Proposals for HMS Vernon / Gunwharf

As a contribution to the developing debate about HMS Vernon/Gunwharf - to show that there are positive alternatives which make sense - we are putting forward a draft plan based on the principle of providing what Portsmouth needs and making the best use of what is already there; rather than inventing proposals that might or might not work economically.

### What we need

Broadly speaking what we think the city needs is:

**Houses** - both social and 'luxury'. The need for social housing is obvious, given the size of the council waiting list. We also need executive housing to help redress the imbalance in the population of the city. At present a disproportionate number of well-to-do people who work in the city or otherwise belong to it live in the peripheral towns.

We would greatly increase the amount of residential accommodation proposed. We think that the developers could recoup their outlay in acquiring the site just as well and much more certainly by selling houses and flats than by investing in doubtful enterprises like factory shopping. Substituting houses for most of the proposed shops would, by greatly reducing the car-parking need, enable the abandonment of the vastly expensive proposal for subterranean/submarine car parking.

Thus, going for residential rather than shopping would at a stroke relieve the biggest problem and reduce the overall cost.

**Pubs, cafés, restaurants** etc. on the waterfront from which Portsmouth's unparalleled 24-hour spectacle of boats and ships can be enjoyed.

**Jobs.** We would hope for high-tech, workshops, starter units, or laboratories, to provide permanent jobs as opposed to leisure and shopping jobs which are merely transferred from elsewhere. We would reduce very

considerably the space devoted to shopping.

### The south-west corner

The south west corner of the site facing The Point is not suitable for residential use because of the Isle of Wight car ferries which run frequently 24 hours a day and pass uncomfortably close to shore at that point. We propose that all the buildings that border the part of the promenade fronting the Vulcan building, should be public or cater for the public - pubs, cafés and restaurants. We are not against there being some small blocks of flats framing but not confining the open vista between it and the harbour. Flats are preferable to houses in this area of essentially public space because unlike houses they need no private space around them.

Behind the Vulcan building and to the south of it we propose houses and flats gradually rising in height to a maximum when bordering Gunwharf Road. Some of this could be social housing. Eastney Barracks shows that a mix of the two, private and public, is perfectly feasible. It could be left open whether sites at the back of the development would be for residential or for hotel according to whether there are serious bidders to take on a hotel or even two. By building fairly high, more dwellings could be fitted in without producing a sense of crowding; the outline of the site, slowly rising from front to back, would be improved in appearance especially from the harbour and Gosport; and more people would be enabled to share the marvellous views.

### More building conservation

In the north east corner of the site we propose retention of most of the existing buildings, for practical as well as historic reasons. Here are concentrated most of the buildings particularly associated with the Navy. The 1926 Wardroom (Ariadne), with its very fine staircase, is eminently convertible to an hotel. The Petty Officers' Mess behind could be joined to it or used separately either as a budget hotel or

**IN THIS ISSUE: Tricorn send-off, St James's Park, Trees in danger, ...**

## *Proposals for HMS Vernon / Gunwharf (continued)*

students' rooms. Most of the remaining buildings in this north east corner have the potential for conversion into housing but we would propose the gun-carriage sheds (Actaeon) upstairs as open-plan retail - a kind of covered market. The ground floor would be suitable for craft workshops. In advocating this we recall Jane Jacobs's famous aphorism (in her seminal *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*): "Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings".

If the university want their business school in the site proposed, well and good. It would certainly add to the variety of the development.

### **Leisure activities**

The north west area of the site would be used as Berkeley's presently propose for leisure activities but with cafés etc. on the waterfront and provision for the tall ships on the quay side - and some specialist shopping. We are doubtful about a multi-screen cinema. We suspect that Portsmouth can only support one and the better site would appear to be the Tricorn. However a small 'arts' or club cinema is needed in a sparkling new building. We think the tower, if built, would be better situated on the line of the 'canal' perhaps on a promontory off shore in the centre of the waterfront - to line up with the boulevard from the city centre, instead of being put in an obscure corner.

### **The Vulcan building**

We are dead against its conversion for residential use. Just seeing the marvellous spaces on the first and attic floors of this building has convinced those few who have

been allowed to venture in that after repair and restoration of the cupola, it should not be subdivided but used for some public purpose, preferably for the arts. .

### **Don't fill in the sea bed**

Reducing the huge sunken car park, though we do want to keep the site traffic-free, would make it possible to retain the open water between the station and Gunwharf. We suggest using the narrower, deeper, area next to Gunwharf not as a marina but as mooring for visiting yachts. This would meet another definite need. In conjunction with this we would like to see the southern wall of the station glazed so that the trains would be visible from Gunwharf and vice-versa - all adding to the visual interest and sense of arrival.

Our proposals would lessen the traffic problem but not eliminate it. The problem exists already without any additional Gunwharf traffic. It is largely a consequence of the road system which was designed in the 1960s at the height of the road-building craze. It needs a radical overhaul and much clearer thinking about transport sustainability.

Obviously we are not competent to do a master plan; but there are at least three internationally known architectural practices who are keen to do designs for the tower in collaboration with the most distinguished engineering practices; and they are keen to do the master plan as well. We urge that one of these be chosen soon in order to ensure that we get here imaginative uncompromisingly modern architecture which would put the city on the cultural map.

*Note: This plan in outline was unanimously approved by the Portsmouth Environmental*

## **Gunwharf - The story so far**

**A**t the time of the Suez crisis Lady Eden, the Prime Minister's wife, complained that the Suez Canal was flowing through her drawing room. Roger and I know what she meant. Since early December Gunwharf has taken over our living rooms (we don't have drawing rooms!) which have been papered with plans and letters about Gunwharf. Never have we been so deeply involved, or, as we believe, had such an influence, in an issue which far from being a

local one, with our efforts to alert people, quickly became national.

As a military and then a naval site since the early eighteenth century, Gunwharf (best known to Portsmouth people as HMS Vernon), is generally forbidden and unknown territory for most people in the Portsmouth Harbour area, except as far as it is visible from the harbour, The Point, the Harbour station pontoon, and Gosport, as well the many passing

## ***Gunwharf - The story so far (continued)***

ships, especially the Isle of Wight car ferries which skirt its southern edge. Expectations of Gunwharf's future were therefore almost without preconceptions as far as the majority of the population are concerned, except for ex-naval personnel who have a sentimental attachment to the site and regret its closure. Until it became redundant the city council also was unfamiliar with it - a factor which affected the drafting of the planning brief in at least one instance.

### **Our role**

We would like to claim that our role has been a pivotal one in opening up the site. We identified the challenge and the shortcomings of the proposal early; we broadcast them widely; and linked up with other groups, stimulating their responses. We have led many tours, so that many more people have an idea of its possibilities. We also suggested a very wide-ranging consultation process to the City Planning Officer. The Solent Protection Society have identified us as the lead body in criticising the scheme. We discovered the Vulcan interior as too precious to lose and helped to stimulate debate about generating better designs particularly of the tower.

### **The first move**

I won't go into all the details now except to say that our first move was to get the site opened to the public for Heritage Open Days on 14/15 September last year, when 150 people over two days, and we learnt a lot more about its history. Our next move came in the middle of November after we had attended an open meeting with the City Council to hear the chosen developers make a formal presentation of their scheme for Gunwharf. It struck us straight away as third rate and not at all the sort of thing to put Portsmouth on the map. We were all told that the scheme we had seen would be the subject of an outline planning application to be submitted to the City Council either before Christmas or soon after. What appalled us most was that the questions from the councillors were: *Would they be able to get it all built in*

*time for the millennium?* The only critical question about the design was asked by Roger James. We were told the other MOD short-listed schemes were much worse.

We decided to write at once to the Secretary of State for the Environment, the only person with the power to delay the progress of the scheme, to allow time for reflection and improvement. The planning committee seemed to us likely to approve the scheme unreservedly; and because the difficulty was really with the site owners, the MOD, it seemed a fairer contest to pit one government department against another. Michael Gwilliam, director of the Civic Trust, backed us up vigorously, pointing out to Mr Gummer that this was just the sort of instance of quality of new development in cities, which the two of them had recently been discussing. Over the next six weeks we lobbied furiously. The great and the good, including Lords Rogers and Palumbo and the Royal Fine Art Commission, fell over each other in their eagerness to condemn the outline proposals.

We became known to the developers as a focus of criticism. On 15 January Roger and I were invited to a breakfast meeting with Christopher Thompson, Land Director of Berkeleys, one of the two partner firms in the development.

### **Consultation**

On his appointment, Paul Newbold, the new City Planning Officer, said he wished to have regular meetings with us - a very welcome innovation. I suggested, out of experience gained in my research of the disposal of other MOD sites, a series of meetings between the developers and selected members of the public, focused on particular aspects of the development, such as traffic, shopping and design, as a framework of genuine consultation, following the example of what the MOD did at the Royal Gunpowder Works. Mr Newbold, agreeing to this, arranged three meetings which he chaired himself, to which people knowledgeable on the particular topics were invited. We were invited to nominate two or three members for each meeting. The

## *Gunwharf - The story so far (continued)*

developers presented the scheme; and its pluses and minuses were fully discussed. Our executive committee also had a meeting with the developers. They listened to what we said, sometimes commented on it; but never once did one of them say: "That's a good idea. We'll do that." We were left after these four meetings not knowing whether they intended to make any changes. We know that English Heritage are putting strong pressure on them particularly about the Vulcan building and the Wardroom.

### **Vulcan interior**

In December, one of the security guards of Gunwharf, an ex-secretary of the chief petty officers' mess on the site, allowed Roger and me access for the first time to the inside of the Vulcan building. Members who came on our tours of the site in September will remember that we were not allowed inside any of the buildings. Seeing inside Vulcan made a huge impression on us, as it did on everybody else who subsequently we were able to take in. Chris Carrell, the City Arts Officer, immediately exclaimed when he saw it: "*This* is my arts centre" and indeed there is a chance that this may come true - or it may be the City



*The Vulcan Building*

Museum - rather than the unacceptable conversion to flats that Berkeleys propose. The point is that a number of decisions, including the planning brief, had been taken about the Gunwharf buildings without anybody seeing what they were like inside; and in the case certainly of Vulcan and the Wardroom, seeing inside completely changes one's ideas.

### **World famous architects**

In February, Karl Sparrow, Roger and I were invited to the London offices of the world-famous architect, Sir Norman Foster, to see the design one of his partners had done for the millennium tower. Although we three had

previously been sceptics about having a tower at all, we were all three very much attracted to their design - an amazing cantilevered tower based on a dockyard crane, to go on a promontory at the end of the creek, with a viewing platform way out over the water.

Early in April the



*The Wardroom at HMS Vernon*

## **Gunwharf - The story so far (continued)**

journal *Building Design* ran a front page article which opens up the possibility of Fosters or other distinguished architects being invited by Berkeleys; but it does not say who the invited parties are; and we do not know whether they include Fosters. The same article does say that Fosters, Michael Wilford (James Stirling's former practice) and the famous Spanish architect/engineer Santiago Calatrava, who designed the Olympic tower at Barcelona, have all signalled their interest in designing the Portsmouth tower.

The over-development Berkeleys propose is directly related to the high price expected by the MOD. I and others have suggested to the Government that a move towards the American

system - where Defense sites are offered to the local community free, before any sale - is long overdue. It appears that both Conservatives and Labour are considering such a move; and the DOE is commissioning research on it.

### **The fundamental question**

Because of the disadvantages of the Berkeleys scheme, we have now returned to the fundamental question: what does Portsmouth need from this site? Our ideas - which appear in this newsletter - have been endorsed by the Portsmouth Environmental Forum. So we seem to have reached a very exciting time when it is all in a state of flux and anything may happen. If there really is a change in the way MOD sites are disposed of, it would be most welcome, not

---

## **Trees on danger list in water crisis - should Portsmouth copy London?**

Britain's native trees and plants are suffering from stress due to one of the most prolonged droughts this century. Trees including oak, ash, hazel, silver birch and beech are showing signs of leaf loss and die-back caused by water shortage. March has had well below average rainfall. Wildlife experts are increasingly concerned that with low rainfall and the relentless abstraction, for example from the Hampshire Avon, by water companies the South could be facing an ecological crisis. The RSPB called on the Environment Agency to review the abstraction licences which are causing the problems and take appropriate action.

Meanwhile, every Londoner is being urged to offer a simple type of first aid to prevent trees dying of thirst. A couple of bucketfuls of water could be enough to spare each of London's six million trees from drought-stress which leaves them vulnerable to pollution and disease. Trees have a growth spurt in the spring, so this drought has come at just the wrong time. Newly planted trees are especially vulnerable, and need soaking with a couple of gallons to each new tree. Mature trees are tougher but have already been weakened by last summer's drought.

## **Tricorn Send-off**

The ballet *Up On The Roof*, specially written to be performed in the Tricorn in November 1995, was one of the most unusual but exciting experiences I've had. On 25 March Transform the Tricorn (c/o Free Art Collective, Flat 4, 24 Waverley Road, Southsea) called via the News for ideas on how to celebrate it before it comes down in July. Rather than the usual gut reaction - how about being creative? What about a Christo wrap? A film record, particularly of its silhouettes would be a positive memorial. Richard Crabbe's paintings of it from the Art Space studios do it poetic justice and do I detect an echo of those curving upstands in the new Admiral Nelson School?

**Celia Clark**

## **Subscriptions**

Owing to increased costs the Executive Committee have decided to raise the subscriptions for waged ordinary and joint members by £1 to £5 and £8 respectively. This was announced at the Annual General Meeting on 2nd April. Other rates will stay as they are for the time being.

Subscriptions for 1997-98 are now due; your prompt renewal using that attached form will be greatly appreciated!

## St James's Park

*Ever since the rundown of St James's Hospital began we have had hopes of creating a public park in the splendid grounds of the hospital.*

Now we see a possibility of achieving this aim. The Heritage Lottery Fund has recently instituted an Urban Parks Programme for funding new urban parks. Together with Milton people and a city councillor from each party we have formed a steering committee to plan the application. We intend to set up a trust and then to make an application to the Fund to enable us to buy a substantial area of the St James's parkland. We would then hand the land over to the Council's Parks Department as public open

space. There are difficulties to be overcome, not least the recent grant of planning permission for housing which has put up the value of the site very considerably; but we have already had a chance to talk to a member of the Parks Advisory Panel of the Fund and also to the representative of Capitek who manage the estate on behalf of the Health Authority, and neither was discouraging.

If you would like to help - for example with historical research, preparation of a business plan or publicity, please contact Celia or me.

**Roger James**

## Report from the Air Quality Conference February 19th 1997

Portsmouth Environmental Health department (which received a Charter Mark in 1996) again convened the Air Quality Forum at Winchester. From April 1st this year Local Authorities are required by law to monitor air quality and take steps to improve unsatisfactory areas. Hampshire is not expected to have many hot spots as industry has acted to avoid fines; the main polluter is now seen to be traffic of all kinds. Co-operation is now essential between environmental health, planning and traffic engineers departments and industry and the general public.

This meeting again consisted mainly of environmental health officers; there were a few planning officers present (which is an advance) and industry representatives, but I was the sole representative of the general public, who will very soon be feeling the pressures ordered by government to mitigate traffic pollution.

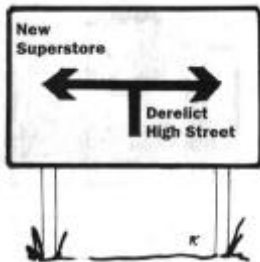
Mark Major outlined the steps taken by Nottingham City Council to reduce commuter traffic, promoting A Better Way to Work. The local authority organised discussions with large (over 200) employers and unions on their responsibility for the travel of staff. The carrot for employers was the large area of valuable land, potentially for the expansion of premises, used to provide free parking, moderate targets could be set initially, like a 20% reduction, in practice leave the car at home one day a week. For staff, carrots like the provision of travel allowances were being explored. For city traffic in general, a key determinant was the availability of free parking; cities were being urged to reduce this and deter non-resident parking; cities must also act together to have

similar parking policies so traders were not disadvantaged.

In new developments, maximum parking limits, not minimum, should be set. This will require better public transport, and the education of the public on the damage to health caused by volatile organic Carbons and the Cocktail of pollutants at present in our environment. From April 1st the results of air quality monitoring must be published.

**Betty Owen**

### *A Road Sign near you?*



*Reproduced with permission from Private Eye magazine.*

## "Yes, we want our city opened up for the people"

The Evening Standard has launched a telephone hotline to encourage Londoners to suggest improvements in the local environment. The response was overwhelmingly that life for London's pedestrians could be vastly improved with just a little effort and initiative - by better street lighting, wider pavements planting trees and erecting more intelligent street signs.

We can suggest several places in Portsmouth

where roads are far too wide which makes them dangerous to cross: Burgoyne Road Southsea at its junction with The Strand is one. Can you suggest other improvements? As walking is the most popular form of transport, why isn't this reflected in Portsmouth City Council's transport spending? Could it be that it is not the mode of transport used by the decision makers?.

*Evening Standard 25 March 1997*

## How Shall we Live?

The controversial government calculation that Britain will need an extra four and a half million homes by 2016 may turn out to be too high. The country is undergoing one of its most rapid periods of demographic and social change since the industrial revolution. This poses enormous challenges for environmentalists and economists, planners and providers. Solutions must be considered with meticulous care if we are to avoid repeating past mistakes. Thoughtful debate is essential. The Town and Country Planning Association and the Guardian ran a stimulating conference on future living patterns on 11 March at the Commonwealth Institute. Professor Sir Richard Southwood, identified transport as the crucial basis for sustainability. He said that we must seek to reduce our car dependency to achieve more with less, because greenfield sites increase journey length and increase car dependence, and one of the virtues of a good urban environment is "having everything on hand, no need to get the car out". But in order to transfer to public transport, the whole journey, from the time we step outside our door, needs to be taken into account.

The Boots representative spoke about the contribution of the retail sector to quality urban environments. Despite the difficulties of going into town centres by car where the average provision is 3.7 spaces per 1,000 sq ft retail, a Which survey of 1996 reported that 45% preferred to shop in town centres against 16% with a preference for out of town, despite a market share of 30% in 1997.

Lee Shostack of EDAW who sponsored the conference pointed out that **economic vitality and environmental quality go hand in hand**, an important message when cities compete for business and investment. The local government of today is well set to tackle problems, with Agenda 21 as a tool. But there is wide variation on how it is handled. There is a need to work across committees and departments, to include not only Environmental Services but Education and to report to the Policy and Resources Committee via the Chief Executive. Does this happen here?

**Celia Clark**

## Home on the Rifle Range

(Letter to The Guardian published on 19th February 1997). The homeless moving into the fort at Dover Castle (The Guardian, Society, February 12) would not be unusual in the US, where unlike in Britain, the local government and community are offered first choice of redundant defence and other government buildings and sites - for free.

Here, the public interest in these sites is defined financially. Treasury rules on the disposal of public assets demand maximum capital return. In the US, a much more benign procedure puts local needs at the top of the agenda: homelessness, education, healthcare,

employment regeneration. A local re-use group broadens participation. This could offer a model of how we ought to find new uses for publicly-owned assets, such as defence or NHS sites. It would put an end to bitterly fought battles and reward local communities dominated often for centuries by the priorities of national defence with a peace dividend.

Update: The DOE has at last acknowledged that the system needs to be changed to give more weight to local expectations. They have commissioned into it, looking for examples where has gone better.

Celia Clark, Chariman, The Portsmouth

## Future Programme

Meetings are held on the first Wednesday of each month on the 3rd floor of the Norrish Central Library, Guildhall Square, Portsmouth unless otherwise stated. There is no admission charge and the meetings are open to all. Come along and you'll receive a warm welcome!

### Wednesday 16th April at 7.30pm

Conducted tour of the new Portland Building, University of Portsmouth by its architect, Sir Colin Stansfield Smith. Meet at the main entrance off Portland Street (near Lion Terrace) Portsea.

### Monday 5th May, 10am-6pm

May Fayre, St Mary's Church, Fratton

### Wednesday 7th May at 7.30 pm

Peter King, City Engineer will speak and answer questions.

### Wednesday 4th June at 7.30 pm

Paul Newbold, City Planning Officer will talk on current planning issues in the city.

### Sunday 22nd June, 3.00pm at 10 Priory Crescent, Milton (opposite Milton Park).

Strawberry Tea. A repeat of last year's very successful fund-raising event with strawberries, tea and cakes plus bring and buy stall and raffle!

### July - Guided walk or tour of HMS Victory

To be arranged!

### Wednesday 1st October at 7.30 pm

Kate Macintosh, formerly of Hampshire County Architect's Department, architect of Priory School Sports Hall and Solent First School, Drayton (both winners of the Portsmouth Society's annual design awards).

### Wednesday 5th November at 7.30 pm

Speaker to be confirmed

### Wednesday 3rd December at 7.30 pm

Christmas meeting with guest speaker, mince

## Portsmouth Society Sweatshirts

At the suggestion of the membership, we now have dark green sweatshirts for sale with the Portsmouth Society tastefully embroidered in yellow. All sizes from S to XXL are priced at £10 and are available at the monthly meetings or by phoning 821667 or 817713.

## CAN'T QUITE PLACE IT

*This article appeared in the Sunday Telegraph sports section on 19th March as one of a series about famous football grounds. Can you guess the name of this one? There are no prizes! Reproduced with permission from the Editor.*

COUNTING, as they can, Field Marshal Viscount Montgomery as a former president the owners of this ground could have done with, some of Monty's tactical application during recent battles with planners over the siting of a new ground. Their current home was opened in 1898 and five years later staged its one and only international match (England beating Wales 2-1).

A mock Tudor pavilion, with a balcony overlooking the pitch, was built in 1905 and the club became founder members of the old Third Division 15 years later - at that time the Boilermakers' Hump was a popular corner of the ground. The club enjoyed a heyday either side of World War Two but when the electricians played up an hour before kick off in February 1956 it threatened the ground's entry into the record books. The visit of Newcastle, however, eventually became the first league match played under floodlights.

A former Ranger took control in 1988 and announced plans for a new £10 million stadium but in the end opted to spend £4 million repairing the present one. Further plans were unveiled in 1993 but were thwarted by a strange coalition of shopkeepers and environmentalists. Rumour has it that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle once graced the pitch although not as many times as one former player.

*The Portsmouth Society, Registered Charity no. 266116*

*Chairman: Celia Clark, 8 Florence Road, Southsea, Hants, PO5 2NA, Tel 01705 732912*

*Secretary: Roger James, 10 Captains Row, Old Portsmouth, Hants, PO1 2TT, Tel 01705 734555*

*Treasurer: Jean Thompson, 4 Malvern Road, Southsea, Hants, PO5 2NA. Tel 01705 821667*

*We welcome new members. Please come along to any of our meetings or contact Jean Thompson for more details.*