



The Portsmouth Society

Registered with The Civic Trust

Annual Report 2002-03

A Year of Success!

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YEAR OF SUCCESS

Our thirtieth year is unusual in the amount of construction, especially large buildings going up: the millennium tower is now actually rising out of the water, the huge shipbuilding hall covering over several docks in the Dockyard, the block of student accommodation being built on the White Swan car park in the city centre, the University's new Business School going up next to the Portland Building and the housing in Queen Street in Portsea, the new hotel and large expansion of the residential accommodation of Gunwharf Quays - the Canalside building – with much more to come.

This year we have had an unusual number of successes, not entirely all of our own making; but in all of

Design in housing.

In June we held a second very successful seminar on improving design in housing. We combined a morning of excellent speakers - including John Butler of Portsmouth Housing Association - with an afternoon of actually looking at sites and deciding how they could be improved using Placecheck.

Fleet Headquarters, Whale Island

We managed to get the ugly design for a new fleet headquarters on the prominent tip of Whale Island completely redesigned by architecture plb of Winchester. This change was achieved both by invoking the help of the architectural press and of CABE, the new Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment.

Vulcan Building, Gunwharf

In February this year we persuaded the Development Control Committee in two deputations, on our behalf and on behalf of the Hampshire Buildings Preservation Trust, to reject the recommendation to permit the conversion of the Vulcan Building for residential use. We achieved this largely by persuading the members of the Committee to go and see for themselves the marvellous interior of the building. We are delighted that the planning department is currently asking Berkeleys for public use of the south wing, for example for the Aspex Gallery, in response to our request for planning gain for the two huge new buildings proposed for the landward end of Gunwharf Quays

University sports building, Cambridge Road

After another deputation by Roger James the DC Committee were persuaded to reject the first application for a University Sports building adjoining the Nuffield Centre. The design eventually accepted was not perfect, but at least what is being built is a great improvement on that first submitted.

The Strand, Southsea

A satisfactory design has been adopted for the very prominent site of what was an off-licence at the Strand in Southsea, at the third attempt - after we had twice successfully persuaded the Committee to demand improvements of what had been recommended to them for approval.

Connaught Drill Hall

We successfully applied to the DCMS for spot-listing of the Connaught Drill Hall in the city centre after an application had been submitted for its demolition and replacement by two tower blocks of student flats. It is now to be converted into a night club in such a way that the fine long span of the roof will still be visible from the ground floor. This seems a satisfactory use - right in the city centre and far enough away from where anybody lives not to cause a nuisance.

Trafalgar House mural

We learnt that the University were selling the Trafalgar House student hostel in Edinburgh Road to the Wetherspoon pub chain. We campaigned for the preservation of the remarkable mural - an imaginary contemporary scene - painted in the basement lounge there by Eric Rimmington in 1948. We wrote to Wetherspoon's Managing Director, who referred us to their architects. They said there was no way of getting what the firm wanted without destroying the mural. We got English Heritage and the Imperial War Museum to come and look at it; but meanwhile John Pike the city's Conservation Officer applied to have the building listed. To the great surprise of everybody concerned he succeeded; and Wetherspoons are now doing the necessary alterations to the building while preserving the mural and keeping it visible.

Broad Street bus museum

Our deputation to the Executive of the City Council was unexpectedly well received with the result that we are half way to getting adopted our idea for a new shiny shed site in the Camber area for the Preserved

Bus Museum which was threatened with banishment right out of Old Portsmouth. The end is still very much in the balance but the outlook is not as gloomy as the article in The News made out and the city architect is in fact now working on a design

St James Hospital Town Green

For a long time we had been working in various directions towards preserving from building development the finest part of the grounds of St James Hospital. First the plan was to buy the land with a lottery grant; then we got the land registered as a town green; then the registration was invalidated by order of the High Court; finally, before an appeal could be heard, the Health Department proposed a compromise. Instead of not building on our park land, they would build houses on a peripheral area that did not have planning permission. The Town Green land has now been transferred to the city council as public open space. So we got what we had originally set out to get, albeit by a different route. The St James Park Trust which we had set up together with local residents received an award under The News "We can do it" scheme. Councillor Dr Caroline Scott, who had over the years been the principal campaigner, received the award on behalf of us all.

Overblown traffic signs

We have campaigned against the extravagant proliferation of over 300 very large traffic signs all over the city, some of them confusing and duplicating and many of them obstructing footpaths and cycleways, contrary to conservation area legislation and the Department of Transport's guidelines. The campaign is ongoing and has so far met with some success, in that a few of them have already been removed, and council officers may now act in a more joined up way.

New Road Centre

We have backed from the very start an ingenious plan for the reuse of New Road School by architect Mick Morris. He is subdividing the front part into ten houses, each with a parking space and some with small gardens, retaining the street facade including its attractive little tower. The scheme includes a small element of new build at the back. The plan met a lot of obstacles, including being bought by a developer who then went off to Australia, and opposition on parking grounds by the ward councillors. All obstacles have now been overcome and the work is well advanced, proving unusual loft-style living spaces.

Routes to success

In some cases we have been able to combine our unusual sources of knowledge and influence in a way that is uniquely ours and, we think, justifies our existence. In the case of the Fleet HQ we were able first of all to get publicity in the architectural press through previously used channels. We then heard, through another network, that Paul Finch now one of the Commissioners of CABE, was to give a lecture at Southampton University. Paul knew and approved of us because he had previously been a speaker at one of our seminars. We made a point of attending his lecture which gave us an excuse to talk to him about the Fleet HQ. He was willing to use his influence to get a better scheme - and did.

In the case of the Trafalgar House mural it was through our intimate knowledge of the city that we were aware of the existence of the mural which was unknown to the planning department, and we were able to stir up a nationwide agitation - including English Heritage and the Imperial War Museum - before planning permission could be granted for a scheme which would have demolished the wall the mural is painted on. We must give the credit to John Pike, the city's conservation officer, for his extraordinary success in getting the building listed.

In the case of New Road we had two assets. We were familiar with the history of Board schools in Portsmouth (New Road was one of the first two in Hampshire built in 1873), and we knew of Mick Morris's unusual talent for subdividing awkward old tall buildings to produce interesting houses and his appreciation that this sort of conversion when done well could add value - that people would pay more for something out of the ordinary. He had demonstrated this skill in his conversion to houses of the Marines' church in Henderson Road, which had won our Best Restoration award in a previous year. So we felt confident in opposing the council's original idea of demolition and replacement by a new block of flats.

It is only fairly recently that the government have made it possible for councils to refuse a planning application on the grounds of poor design. We are increasingly using the fact that councillors on the Development Control Committee are not very well briefed as to what to look for on this score and we are trying to feed them with information, and suggest that they are supplied with journals to show them what is being done elsewhere - to give them something to compare what is submitted to them with good schemes in other places. In the case of the Vulcan just getting them to see the actual interior and not just the plans was enough to open their eyes.

Expansion of Gunwharf Quays

We are looking forward to the opening of the Millennium Promenade in front of the new blocks and Vulcan this Easter. However, as mentioned, we are currently objecting to the very large proposed extension of the Gunwharf scheme in the hope of getting something much better and more in accord with the city's needs. We are opposing the towers - one 26 storeys and the other 12 on the grounds of overdevelopment and poor design, the profile presented to the harbour, St George's Road and Park Road, and also of wind nuisance. English Heritage and CABE objected to the scheme in detail. The 26-storey tower did not have opening windows and we oppose the unsustainability resulting from the air-conditioning that that must imply. But in the revised plans registered in mid-March, these have been modified by adding balconies and a tilted profile at the top so that there are 26 storeys facing the harbour and up to 30 to the east. We oppose also the loss of Donegal Lodge, the former Commanding Officer's headquarters and one of the few original buildings remaining. We think the whole form of the buildings proposed is ugly, especially the Ariadne block which is key worker housing, offices and nursery facing the railway - the face that so many visitors will first see - and St George's Square. There are now 471 new flats, which is probably too many, and many more of these should be affordable and geared to meeting the city's housing needs. 40% was the recommended proportion in a recent conference on housing in greater Portsmouth. The developers have also not addressed the extra social and cultural facilities these new residents might need, for example for open space, schools or doctor's surgeries. They have not replied to our request for a demographic breakdown of who might live in the new flats. The £3million towards the Spinnaker Tower still stands on the table as planning 'gain' - or bribe. We are asking the SEEDA design panel to 'call in' the scheme.

Design Awards

The newsletter reported on this year's design awards in full. On the whole the entries this year, especially in the new buildings category, were unusually better than previous years. Two years ago the judges were struck by the overall poor standard. This year there was no outstanding best new building, but five came up to a high standard and were given certificates of commendation. These were Court Lane Infant School and two new buildings at St Luke's School - by the city architects, three sparkling terrace houses in High Street, Old Portsmouth, and Highbury College which was part rebuild, part restoration. We also liked Richard Partington's elegant extension of the Tourist Information Centre on the Hard. Boathouse 6 in the Dockyard was clear winner of the best restoration. Equally outstanding was Michael Underwood's restoration of the great Vulcan Building in Gunwharf, but we decided to postpone awarding that until it is in use. We commended also Chandos House which is the reborn John Brown office block which stands out so splendidly now as one approaches the city centre from the north, which we commended not only for the splendid architectural conversion but for the its social features. Coronation House at the Kings Road/King's Terrace junction was another splendid piece of renovation. Best landscaping was awarded to Landport Community Garden, much loved and much used by people in the area, many of whom do not have gardens.

Creative Centre

CABE and the Kent Architecture Centre launched the idea of a Solent Architecture Centre at Burseldon Brickworks on 24 March. There is considerable government backing for working towards better standards of design - and funds. We hope that we will be able to coalesce the Creative Centre on which we have been working for eighteen months with this new initiative.

Churches

There are concerns that many churches and chapels may become redundant as the number of worshippers falls, which may mean that splendid buildings such as Trinity Methodist Church in Albert Road may need a new use. We are suggesting dialogue between the various churches and those interested in finding positive uses for historic buildings

And finally

Dialogue with the city council is positive; joint events are planned next year. We have served Portsmouth for thirty years, which is longer than nearly all councillors and officers. We could not do what we do without your strong and positive engagement. The executive committee members work extremely hard, as does the newsheet editor John Holland, Betty Owen examining planning applications, and the event organisers. Long may we continue!

Celia Clark, Chairman, April 2003.