

## PORTSMOUTH SOCIETY ANNUAL REPORT 2008 – 2009

A welcome development this year is the planning sub-committee of four members of the executive committee who meet regularly to scrutinise all the planning applications. This group has taken over the work that used to be done by a single member, Betty Owen, now retired. The committee sit round two computer screens and call up details from the city council's website. The applications have already been sifted, and for many more we have "no objection". For those that do require more thought they call up different elevations, plans, planning statement etc. Two types of application exercise them: dormer windows and steel shop shutters. Dormer windows are usually applied for as a means of increasing the living space, often amounting to gaining an extra upper floor. When only one window is asked for in a single road we tend not to object; but when a rash of dormers breaks out it can spoil the appearance of an otherwise handsome road. The other bone of contention is steel shutters on shopfronts, which make a shopping street very dead. We appreciate the need for security; but there are designs of shutter which give security and let the light through. Our quarrels in planning are usually with the officers over items they have decided under their delegated powers and also over the recommendations they make to the Development Control Committee. In one recent case permission was given by the officers although the details of the case did not meet the criteria laid down by the council. Roger James is sometimes gratifyingly successful in persuading the committee to take our view.

### **Portsmouth Football Club**

It was clear from the start that there were overwhelming objections to Portsmouth Football Club's application to build a stadium designed by world famous architects Herzog and de Meuron surrounded by a very large block of flats in the Harbour at the Hard. The club switched their attention to Tipner, a more possible location; but this proposal has not got as far as a planning application when the credit crunch hit. It has been put on hold until as late as 2022. The club's ownership may change hands. There is now talk of reverting to the earlier plan to rebuild the stands piecemeal, but with a Tesco supermarket to finance it rather than residential development – for which they already have planning permission. Only half a mile away is Asda in Fratton.

### **Disposal of council assets**

One of the most important changes of the past year has been the government-led move to encourage and legitimate the transfer of council-owned assets to voluntary bodies set up to maintain and manage them. In the case of Wymering Manor and Hilsa Lido this transfer is well under way, while negotiations for the Pyramids Centre are just starting. Members of the Society have taken a leading role in developing new futures for these sites.

### **The Pyramids, Southsea**

The future of the Pyramids remains in limbo. Portsmouth City Council (PCC) has taken months to commence serious negotiations with Southsea Leisure Limited (SLL) whose entrepreneurial bid is summarised at: [www.southsealeisure.net](http://www.southsealeisure.net). They offer to retain the swimming facilities for the general public, re-energising and investing in the site. The pool has the only disabled swimming facilities in Southsea. They would add a new Gym and Health Club and Spa facility for the benefit of the community and establish the centre as a cultural and community based centre for events, with facilities for community organisations and charities to use for meetings and improved function rooms and suites to increase entertainment including live music, cabarets, banquets, exhibitions, product launches and conferences. The centre would generate greater awareness for Southsea & Portsmouth for local and visitors and generate off-shoot income for other businesses including Hotels and leisure based services. The long term strategy is to offer a complete family entertainment area with facilities to include swimming, concerts, restaurants, coffee shops and cafés. Ultimately the site has to be commercially viable, and with the addition of new leisure offerings this will keep the site available for the community in the long term. In the meantime the Council Leader Councillor Gerald Vernon

Jackson, is on record that The Pyramids will remain open and has suggested that, if negotiations with the second bidder are not successful, PCC will run the facility themselves.

The Friends of the Pyramids (FoP) are deeply concerned about the continuing neglect by PCC of the exterior of the building with boarded up windows attracting more vandalism and an additional £10,000 of damage caused, with many more broken windows this month. Other internal systems have also been neglected. The release into the public domain of the long overdue survey of the structure of The Pyramids is still awaited. Yet despite these shortcomings swimming attendances have progressively increased. Free swimming for the under and the over 60s commences on 1st April and, with Victoria Baths closing as soon as Mountbatten Centre opens, the numbers of swimmers using The Pyramids are likely to increase considerably. Promoters of occasional large scale successful gigs attracting over 1000 music lovers have been deterred by being unable to make repeat bookings. Profitability of The Pyramids has been prejudiced because of the uncertainty of its future, as currently defined only until the end of June. We can but hope that the efforts of many to obtain a successful future for it, in the interests and health of our citizens and visitors, will not be wasted by the continued dilly-dallying of the Council.

### **Sea Change**

The PCC bid for funding for a Feasibility Study, as Phase II of the CABE Sea Change programme has not been successful. The PCC Phase III bid for funding for Sea Front regeneration is in preparation, with support from Portsmouth University, and is due to be submitted in June 09. Presentation/consultations will be arranged in Southsea Castle.

The Society was disappointed that the reincarnation of the Southsea Show and music festival run by a local entrepreneur did not take place.

### **Northern Quarter**

The Development Control Committee approved detailed plans for the Northern Quarter at their meeting on 4 June 2008 despite our opposition. There was great political pressure for the committee to approve the plans despite the many shortfalls in the scheme and the lack of response to the public consultation and the public's expressed desire for new facilities. However, in December Centros announced they were not going ahead in the present economic climate. This March, the News reported that nothing was likely to appear on the site for six years! Roger James spoke to the March council meeting to try to persuade them not to tie up with Centros and demand a better, more sustainable design. The essence of our detailed objection to the proposals for the redevelopment of Northern Quarter is that they are just not good enough for Portsmouth and not as good as is being done elsewhere. For example in the massive Paradise Street retail development in Liverpool the car park for the new John Lewis store is linked to the shop by an imaginatively designed footbridge. The new Westfield Centre in Shepherd's Bush in London has a "living wall" covered in sedum matting to encourage biodiversity in the urban jungle as a screen for the Southern Terrace, a pleasant outdoor area paved in Chinese granite and bordered by a wavy water feature, a good place for post-shopping relaxation and refuelling. There is no provision for anything like it here.

Celia Clark and Robert Cook have written a book: *The Tricorn Life and Death of a Sixties Icon*, published by 131 Design in Old Portsmouth. It includes contributions from its two architects Owen Luder and Rodney Gordon, and gives voice to the many opinions and memories of the Brutalist megastructure which used to occupy the site. While we wait for something to be built there, the Society is suggesting that the tarmac should be greened – either with a temporary park or as space for people to grow their own fruit and veg. – as is happening in other cities, promoted in the UK by CABE.

### **Save our trees!**

Private owners of trees with Tree Preservation Orders on them have to apply to the Planning Department for permission to fell or lop their trees, but the council and its contractor Colas can take

down publicly owned trees without recourse to anyone apart notices through the doors of immediate neighbours. What look to us like healthy trees are cut down – sometimes just because their roots have raised paving which people might trip over. Changes need to be made to Colas's contract so that the council or Colas should put up notices asking for comment by a certain date - as they do for planning applications. The stark contrast between what we as citizens have to do and the council/Colas's unannounced actions need addressing. Sand could easily be used around roots rather than paving blocks – as happens elsewhere. We have asked to speak to the relevant Scrutiny Committee, but have no date for this yet.

### **City Vision Centres - Southampton - and Portsmouth?**

The Southampton City Vision Centre model in the Art Gallery was made by Portsmouth School of Architecture and commissioned by Southampton city from the Solent Centre for Architecture and Design. It is intended as a planning tool and cost £125,000. The Society and others in the city including Carl Leroy Smith, chair of the South Coast Design Forum, are keen to have a model of Portsmouth. It must be fully accessible so that the public can see it and interact with it. The Society sees it as a tool to help local people understand proposals for change - which should be clearly identified - so they can comment on them. But where should the Portsmouth model be?

### **Portsmouth Harbour, the Isle of Wight and Spithead as a World Heritage site**

The long awaited Department of Culture, Media and Sport research papers and proposals on future UK World Heritage nominations were finally issued on 3 December. Three options were offered: to continue to nominate annual from the existing Tentative List - which has included Chatham since 1999; to suspend nominations and focus on making the most of the sites we already have; and to draw up a shorter and more focused Tentative List, streamlining the application process and spacing out nominations so that they are not proposing a site each year. The Portsmouth Naval Base Property Trust, the Society and the City Council favour Option 3, which would put us on a level playing field with Chatham. The national policy is to be announced in May, and bids invited by July this year. English Heritage regional head, Andy Brown, would like us to join our bid with Chatham's as one proposal, which would help with the problem that Western Europe is heavily over-represented on the list compared with the Third World. For this reason, Hadrian's Wall which has been a World Heritage site since 1987 has been extended to include the Upper German-Raetian Lines to form 'Frontiers of the Roman Empire'. The team responsible for the Chatham bid decided not to join their bid with us. Ours is much more ambitious - six local authorities and two areas of water, while theirs is the historic dockyard, Fort Amherst Lines and the Royal Engineers Brompton Barracks. We are also being encouraged to seek international partners: the Jurassic Coast supports the government of St. Lucia in the management of the Pitons sea area WHS. We are contacting Bermuda, Antigua, Simonstown and Mauritius.

In February this year all six local authorities were asked to support the bid. PUSH and the City Council have arranged a meeting on April 1 on their Making Places project which has The Solent: Home of the Royal Navy as one of its themes. Hampshire County Council have offered strong support and officer time to prepare the bid, but IOW Council is more cautious, and Fareham are waiting for PUSH endorsement. In the meantime work on the Nomination Document continues, and key stakeholders such as Defence Estates have been asked to contribute to it. The Marine Bill and Solent Waterfront Strategy which aims to protect sites of maritime industry will be relevant policies. We are asking the underwater interests especially the Hampshire and Wight Trust for Maritime Archaeology, English Heritage and the Mary Rose Trust to draft this aspect of the bid. It must be converted into the required UNESCO format - which requires information on the condition of each property. We have also sounded out major property owners and potential supporters and sponsors. Over fifty groups have heard what we are proposing, and the rich feedback always adds to our local knowledge. Residents in north-east Wight would like to include Brading Roman Villa and Bembridge. We have asked them to prepare their part of the bid.

Society members were delighted by the presentation by the Mary Rose Trust and architects Wilkinson Eyre of their beautiful oyster-shaped design for the permanent museum to enclose both the ship and its contents. Excellence of design is exactly what World Heritage designation would encourage.

On the educational front girls at Portsmouth High School worked on the proposal and designed a logo for us. Portsmouth Grammar School's 13/14 year olds studying history are to spend two weeks on the project in the summer, preparing short statements, visiting sites and presenting their findings. A university student is also researching the justifications and benefits of World Heritage status. Portsmouth and Southampton are considering a joint bid for City of Culture. Portsmouth City Council has a draft Tall Buildings Policy, which is a requirement for World Heritage site applicants. Liverpool, also a World Heritage site, is said to have gained £800m in tourism from its just ended year of culture ...but equally, nonmonetary benefits are likely, including increased pride in this great city of ours!

### **Responses to the draft Public Art Strategy and Tall Buildings Policies**

The Society responded to two important draft documents: the Public Art Strategy and the Tall Buildings policy. Public art is not defined in the strategy, but we take it to mean not just isolated free standing structures but paving, lighting, street furniture (or its absence), planting, seating, sound, performance - in the public realm. We support the commitment to securing 'funding for public art through a flexible and robust S.106 process for major development schemes' and would add that the process of reaching these agreements should be transparent and subject to public comment before they are made. The commissioning of public art should be an integral part of the design process from the beginning - in the planning application - not a later add on or afterthought. To ensure this, the city should adopt a Percentage for Art policy, seeking not only a financial commitment but also a commitment to raising the quality of design. This would give the City Council a supervisory role to filter out poor designs as part of the planning process. The absence of an Urban Design officer in Portsmouth needs to be remedied as soon as possible, because the public realm in Portsmouth clearly needs to be improved. The city's Design Champion, Councillor Cheryl Buggy, must to be closely involved. Her role in relation to the Planning Department and Development Control Committee needs to be clarified and set out.

A Public Art Strategy Panel is clearly needed. At present we believe decisions are taken by one or two city officers, a consultant and developers. This is clearly not enough to ensure quality. The absence of a public supervisory role in is demonstrated in the poor quality of the public art in the city. When a further application for the Northern Quarter is submitted, the opportunity should be taken to require a much enhanced landscaping design. The Seafront Strategy clearly needs a commitment to improving the design of buildings and landscaping along the seafront. Design competitions for specific sites or linear artworks, open to all artists living in the city including arts students, might stimulate more activity.

The City Council's own departments need to be subject to the decisions of the Public Art Strategy Panel, including city engineers and the health and safety police. The long saga of John Thompson's Thomas Ellis Owen sculpture - still not installed - should be instructive in informing the process of commissioning, siting and installation. In an era of financial stringency, the value of local initiative and energy should be welcomed and encouraged by city officers rather than the opposite.

The Society's comments on the draft Tall Buildings Strategy were closely modelled on the model by English Heritage. Such a policy is essential to the World Heritage bid. We await the council's responses to our comments.

### **Seafront Shelter**

The concrete shelter on Eastney Esplanade is looking sadder by the day. Barricaded last summer and festooned with more recently installed scaffolding, the structure has had much of its concrete chipped away. The Society managed to persuade the Development Control Committee last year. We

said that if it had to go then an excellent modern replacement shelter should be provided. At a recent meeting with Terry Hall, Executive Member for Culture and Leisure and David Evans from the City Museum, we discussed the three options which are available: retain and refurbish the existing structure, not a favoured option by City Council officers who believe it to be beyond economic repair; replace it with an Edwardian or Victorian shelter that is lying in a city council store. We viewed the shelter which is in many pieces (they are not sure if it is complete) but looks quite solid. The prospect of taking it from the store and reconstructing it caused a deal of sucking of teeth by some people ("the cost!" – "...there are greater priorities on the seafront ..."). The third option is to replace it with a brand new shelter, possibly designed by architecture students. Should demolition be suggested once more, we must be certain that any proposal is supported by a plan to replace it with ring-fenced funding – it could be all too easily demolished with a vague intent to replace "at some future time".

### **2008 Annual Design Awards**

From 1983 the Society has judged annual Design Awards. Celia Clark was a National Assessor for the Civic Trust Awards this year which include schemes in the public realm from all over the UK and Eire. There were many education buildings but little housing. I also served on the Fareham Society design awards panel. The entries are very different from those in Portsmouth.

Judges for the Portsmouth Society competition were Paul Grover, Chief Executive of the Solent Centre for Architecture and Design, Paul Ramshaw, Head of Regeneration and Planning Policy at Eastleigh Borough Council, Pauline Powell and Celia Clark. Winners in the three categories: Best New Building, Best Restoration and Best Landscaping were presented with blue ceramic plaques which were unveiled by the Lord Mayor, who also presented the certificates of commendation. To be eligible, schemes must have been completed by the 31st December of the previous year.

The outright winner of the Best New Building Award was the Mary Rose School, the sparkling new campus off Locksway Road in Milton for 110 Special Needs pupils aged from 2 to 18. It cost £9m and has 90 staff. The key central corridor is one fifth of a mile long is hung with enjoyable artwork. The Sixth Form is housed upstairs – reached by a dramatic glass sided staircase. At one end is an almost circular swimming pool with special lighting and sound effects. The grounds include a sensory garden, playground and gardens with outdoor seating. The design was by Andrew Malbon and Ross Aylward of the City Architects' department. Three other buildings were commended. One was Admiral Square, fourteen new town houses in yellow brick in Nelson Road Southsea by Willowbrook Property Services designed by architects, Adams Poole. The roof gardens were influenced by St. Paul's Studios in Cromwell Road London. The judges liked the generously proportioned windows and retained trees within the important Thomas Ellis Owen conservation area. The scheme was held up by eighteen months of negotiations with the planners who wanted the principal elevation to be to Grove Road South - but this is not how people live: they arrive and leave by car. This front/back problem was also evident at the Blue Building, Gunwharf Quays: Architect Scott Brownrigg, builder Berkeley Homes. There is no entrance sequence. Front doors should face onto public spaces. Paul Ramshaw on behalf of the city council had improved the design, modelling the curved facade to reduce vortices, breaking up the areas of blue and terracotta. The development was set back from the historic Gunwharf wall.

Highbury College's new city centre building designed by AWW of Bristol and built by Kier Southern for 80 staff and 450 students was also commended. Its siting in Winston Churchill Avenue works beautifully. The aim was a professional looking environment, offering training for life and work; with practical hands on experience, like coming to work, to raise the aspirations of the students, and security is achieved instead by self locking doors to secure the equipment. The atrium, dramatic stair and students' rooftop café are successful and enjoyable. There is air-conditioning on the south side because of solar gain and IT and kitchens on south side, but on the north, natural ventilation via the atrium. It has a fresh, sharp quality; proving flexible in practice; it works. Wimborne Road Infant

School library & IT building by Chris Greed of the City Architects' Department was also commended. The judges liked the copper tile cladding of the boxy extension.

There were two winners in the *Best Restoration* category: the Kings Theatre, Southsea which is being brought back to its Edwardian splendour by specialist contractors and graduates of the University's Restoration and Decorative Studies course. The Trustees were against using lottery money which meant closing the theatre for two years, so they have a policy of Open/Close/Open/Close between contracts, so they don't lose their audience. The statue and cupola on the entrance tower was replaced by an EH approved replica cast in glass reinforced plastic. The original is in the foyer. The meticulous restoration of the flint wall at Flint Lodge Stanley Street by many times winners Steve Langton and Steve Smith was the other award winner.

The Best Landscaping award went to the excellently planted and maintained grounds of Eastney Barracks, and the Commendation to the lovely gardens in Oyster Street Old Portsmouth.

The Society is represented on the South Coast Design Forum, and was instrumental in introducing the lessee of the Canoe Lake Café to the architect Carl Leroy Smith. We recently supported the planning application which involves an intelligent and sympathetic re-use of an existing structure.

### **Historic Buildings**

Work continues apace on converting Buckingham House and Felton House in the High Street into a boutique hotel. Exciting discoveries were an ancient ceiling in the taller block, and on the floor below seventeenth century black painted panelling. St. Jude's Church are starting on phase one of their upgrading of the church which sadly involves demolition of the two Gothic entrance buildings and loss of trees to create a driveway round the north side of the church. Progress is being made at last on the lease for Wymering Manor. According to the News, the Theatre Royal has just been promised £700,000 to extend the stage and build a separate studio theatre for school and community groups and to expand the university's Eldon Building with a new gallery, artists' studios and auditorium.

### **Trips**

Bruce Oliver and John Holland are doing sterling work in arranging enjoyable tours by historic bus – to our design award entries, and this coming year to Chichester Harbour and Bursledon Brickworks.

### **Civic Trust South East**

Roger James and Celia Clark serve on the reformed Civic Trust South East under its hard working chairman of the High Wycombe Society. Griff Rhys Jones is now the president of the Civic Trust and its dynamic chairman Philip Kolvin, a barrister specialising in environmental law. We hope that the Trust will be lifted out of its recent doldrums!

### **The Executive Committee**

The hard work commitment of the members to our monthly meetings – with four of them also deciding on our responses to planning applications – is exemplary. Roger James is being relieved of some of his administrative tasks, in order to concentrate on what he does best.

Celia Clark  
March 2009