

THE KENSINGTON

SOCIETY

2025–2026



KENSINGTON & CHELSEA

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Cover photograph:
5-metre mosaic, designed
by artist Maureen Pepper
Photograph © Thomas Blomberg
(see page 47–55)

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THE KENSINGTON SOCIETY 2025–2026



The objects of the society are to preserve and improve the amenities of Kensington for the public benefit by stimulating interest in its history and records, promoting good architecture and planning in its development, and by protecting, preserving and improving its buildings, open spaces and other features of beauty or historic interest.



www.kensingtonsociety.org

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COVER Detail of the 5-metre mosaic, designed by artist Maureen Pepper and created by Barbara Gorton with local volunteers to commemorate Kensington's connections to the Spanish Civil War. Installed on Portobello Road in 2006, next to No.281. Article, pp 49–57.

Photo: Thomas Blomberg

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President's Foreword

The Rt Hon Lord Carnwath of Notting Hill, CVO, PC

I AM HONOURED ONCE AGAIN to be asked to write a foreword to the Annual. Its contents reflect the extraordinary range of important connections – historical, artistic, environmental, and more – to be found in our part of London. We are more than grateful to the eminent contributors who have made this such a rich collection.

Of course, fascinating historical links can be found during any ordinary walk in the borough. One of my own favourite walks is through Holland Park, where history is all around. As soon as we enter the park at the northern entrance, a notice reminds us of our debt to Sir William Cope, who built his grand Holland House here in 1605 and enclosed the grounds, extending to 55 acres. As Chamberlain of the Exchequer to King James I, and also a Member of Parliament, he seems to have been rather more prosperous than his modern counterparts. The house and grounds later passed to the family of the Earls of Holland. The third Earl, who died in 1840, still greets visitors in the form of an impressive statue by George Frederic Watts, the artist better known perhaps for *Physical Energy*, his allegorical sculpture in Kensington Gardens.

We are reminded of the devastation of the Second World War by the ruins of Holland House, largely destroyed by incendiary bombs in 1940. The happy consequence for local residents was that after the war the London County Council was able to acquire the park and open it to public access. The Kensington Society saved the remains of Holland House from demolition and, in the decades since then, the house has seen a rebirth: it is now a Grade 1 listed building and the dramatic backdrop to opera performances of the highest quality during the summer.

In contrast to that violent historical background, we find peace in Holland Park's lovely Kyoto Garden. A notice tells us that this was dedicated by Japan in 1991 to mark the centenary of the Japan Society in Britain, and perhaps also as a gesture of reconciliation after the divisions of war. Nearby, the 2000 millennium is marked by a large and striking



Sculpture by Wendy Taylor in Holland Park.



installation, called *Tortoises with Triangle and Time*, by the sculptor Wendy Taylor. The notice tells us that it is intended to represent the sundial – ‘man’s oldest astronomical instrument’. The role of the two tortoises is not explained, but presumably they symbolise the slow but relentless march of time (one for each millennium?)

There are plenty of other interesting statues dotted around the park, each with its own story to tell, but not always with an obvious connection to the park. One such is the bronze statue of Milo of

Croton, the 6th century BC Olympic athlete. It depicts him as trapped in a tree, which he had been trying to split with his bare hands, before he was devoured by wolves. It was donated by the Friends of Holland Park in 2003, perhaps as a warning to anyone tempted to damage the trees in the park.

Moving south through Holland Park, one comes to the splendid Design Museum. This was relocated here in the restored Commonwealth Institute building in 2016 and awarded European Museum of the Year in 2018. In his lecture to the Kensington Society last year, Sir Stuart Lipton spoke with justifiable pride of his role in bringing that challenging project to fruition, along with the adjoining residential development of Holland Green. He reminded us that the building, though listed, had remained empty and abandoned by government for 15 years. The project involved jacking up the whole building, and digging out a complete basement of double height. He told us that discussions with the planning authority and local groups, including the Kensington Society, led to the height of the residential buildings being reduced by one floor, although he personally thought the original height appropriate. On this one point I must disagree, but I should declare an interest in that my late brother, Chairman of the Phillimore Estate at the time, was also involved in those discussions.

Having arrived at the south end of the park in Kensington High Street, if I am feeling lazy and in need of a drink, I may take advantage of the 28 bus to take me to my favourite local pub, the Churchill Arms in Kensington Church Street. According to its website, it was built in 1750 and frequented by Churchill’s grandparents. It is famous, among other things, for its spectacular Christmas decorations and its splendid floral displays in the summer. I was delighted to notice that its summer display earned a place in David Attenborough’s brilliant film, *Wild London*. He used it as an illustration of the rich variety of nectars available to London bees, but also of the more surprising dangers of bees being intoxicated by nectars which have fermented in the London heat (“the bee equivalent of a pub crawl”). There is always something new to learn in our area!

Against that somewhat frivolous background, I invite you to turn to the much more substantial issues discussed in the articles which follow.



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V&A

Chairman's Report

Amanda Frame

THE KENSINGTON SOCIETY HAS NOW been in existence for 73 years. We have worked hard, as our objectives say, “to preserve and improve the amenities of Kensington...promoting good architecture and planning in its future development and by protecting, preserving and improving its buildings, open spaces and other features of beauty or historic or public interest”. A week does not go by without one of us trustees meeting with local residents and with council and/or councillors, reviewing and commenting on the ever-growing number of consultations.



Photograph ©
Michael Becket

Government planning process

The government's demand for more housing is driving us in some dangerous directions. The ministers have decided that the reason we have a housing crisis is because the councils' planning system is too slow. No one seems able to understand the economics of housing delivery. To think two million homes can be built in five years by streamlining and removing the democratic process, demonstrates the naivety of our government.

Looking back, one of the reasons the Kensington Society was formed was the encouragement presented within the Town and Country Planning Act 1968. The Act, introduced by a Labour government, required planning authorities to publicise development plans and consider public opinion. Before the Act, decisions were dominated by professionals with little transparency, public participation in planning was minimal, optional, and seen as largely symbolic. With the Act, participation became formalised, structured and expected, with planning authorities required to publicise development plans and consider the public. It created statutory duties. Over the following decades, public participation became a core democratic principle of UK planning.

We now have a major redirection in the way in which planning decisions will be made and how the public will participate. The new Planning and Infrastructure Act became law on 18 December 2025. It is explicitly designed, as the government claims, to “slash delays and costs” and speed up planning. The legislation restructures local planning decision making, increases delegated powers to officers and limits what can go to planning committees. Public participation is likely to become more structured and less powerful, with housing and infrastructure prioritised and fewer opportunities for community challenge.

Future actions

We, the trustees, were regularly active and continue to be so, by responding to the consultations, commenting, and expressing our concerns over the loss of public participation in the running of our Borough. We cannot stop the Act. However, we can influence and shape how it is implemented within RBKC.

We continue to:

- Respond to formal consultations
- Lobby our MPs and ministers
- Coordinate with our Affiliated Member Societies
- Participate in public campaigns and cross-borough alliances
- Write to the Local Government Association (LGA)

We shall:

- Challenge secondary regulations
- Use planning policy levers (Local Plans) to retain influence
- Work within delegation rules to preserve committee oversight where possible

2025–2026

Every year I say we have been busy. This year that is an understatement. The planning report, (pp 71–83) excellently compiled by Michael Bach, tells what the Society’s planning committee has been involved with, from the multi-faceted planning activities in two of the largest development applications to the massive changes noted above by the new government.

South Kensington Station

In February this year, the Society celebrated the success of TfL finally succumbing to reality and announcing the much-needed improvements to the South Kensington station. TfL had tried try to develop the large area surrounding the station without considering the safety needs of over 30 million passengers that go through the station in a year. We, the trustees, cannot emphasise how important this win is and how difficult it was to achieve.

Earl’s Court and Kensal Canalside approved

The two enormous developments, Earl’s Court and Kensal Canalside, the largest this borough has ever faced, will dominate the landscape. With the pressure from government for more housing, planning permissions for both were inevitable. There are deep flaws in the design, the density is excessive and there is a lack of open space. Most saddening is to contrast the opportunities lost with global examples where landscape and city life are integrated beautifully. Singapore, for example, with its 74-hectare botanical gardens in the heart of the city and Gardens by the Bay, or even New York, where a once-abandoned elevated rail line was turned into a 1.45-mile linear park. Closer to home, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park in London is now a vibrant urban district with wetlands, art, and sport facilities. All have shown us that landscapes can be reintegrated into daily urban life. At both Earl’s Court and Kensal Canalside, we shall be

pressing for Conditions which require the planting to be as presented in the applications.

‘Affordable’ housing too expensive

Land value has continued to increase. Material and building costs, along with the requirements for higher energy savings, means that costs are rocketing. As a result, requirements to meet the calculation of what is ‘affordable housing’ has reached the stage where, without further government support, occupation rates are decreasing. One major housing association has pulled out of their commitment in a development in Acton. The developer of the Odeon in High Street Kensington has not been able to secure an agreement with any housing association. This is with planning obligations continuing at 35% affordable housing.

National Planning and Policy Framework (NPPF)

The proposed changes to plan making and decision-taking, contained in the government’s major rewrite of the NPPF, currently the subject of consultation, would shift power away from local councils and toward national rules and reduce the influence of local plans. The reforms would restrict local policies, remove supplementary planning documents (SPDs) and, most concerning, resist our locally-specific design, heritage and conservation guidance. There would be a stronger presumption in favour of development, particularly housing. RBKC currently has a new Local Plan, which will hopefully give us some protection, but there will be less discretion to apply our local distinctiveness and risks losing the strength of our own policies.

The Kensington Society

The Kensington Society is here for you and for us all. We do need more support and do ask that you encourage others, your neighbours, and friends, to join us. Aside from the AGM on 10 June, there will be summer events, so let us all come together and celebrate what makes Kensington great.

THE KENSINGTON SOCIETY NEEDS HELP

Evolution. Many of the trustees of the Kensington Society have been on the board for numerous years. Their expertise is varied and valued. However, we do need help, both the extent of the work we address as well as expanding issues such as the environment and sustainability. Topics include architecture, conservation, planning policies, community involvement including licensing, accounting, and more. If you have a love of Kensington, as we do, and want to ensure it maintains its quality, please consider joining us an advisor.

Contact: kensingtonsociety@outlook.com

AGM

The 71st Annual General Meeting of the Kensington Society took place in the Great Hall, RBKC Town Hall, Hornton Street on 16 June 2025.

AMANDA FRAME, CHAIRMAN OF THE Kensington Society, welcomed members and guests, including Joe Powell MP, Mayor Councillor Tom Bennett, many borough councillors and keynote speaker Sir Simon Jenkins. Apologies were recorded from Elizabeth Campbell, Leader of RBKC.

The President of the Society, Lord Carnwath, conducted the business of the meeting. The minutes of the 2024 AGM, set out in the Kensington Society Annual 2024–25 on pages 11–12, and the accounts on pages 92–24, were approved. He then proposed the election of the following as trustees: Michael Bach, Vanessa Bartulovic, Thomas Blomberg, James Fairrie, Amanda Frame, Martin Frame, Shayan Keyhan-Rad, Sophia Lambert, Peter Mishcon, Barry Munday and Henry Peterson. All were seconded from the floor, elected *nem con* and recognised for their excellent efforts on behalf of the Society and its members. Michael Becket, former trustee and editor of the annual report from 2012 to 2023, was not standing. The Chairman noted Michael Becket’s efforts over the eleven years, taking the annual from a small report to high excellence. Martin Frame, proposed as treasurer by the trustees, was seconded from the floor and elected *nem con*.

Having dealt with the business of the meeting, Lord Carnwath introduced Sir Simon Jenkins, the keynote speaker. He is a long-term resident of Kensington, whose books include *A Short History of London: the creation of a world capital* (2019) and *A Short History of British Architecture* (2024). A distinguished journalist, he was Editor of *The Times* and the *London Evening Standard* and continues to write a regular column for *The Guardian*. He was Chairman of the National Trust from 2008 to 2014.

It was Chairing the Independent Commission on Local Democracy from 1994–5 that fired Sir Simon’s interest in politics and, most importantly, very local government – the parish, community council, neighbourhood. He would, he claimed, like to be a neighbourhood mayor – of Kensington High Street, converting St Mary Abbott’s churchyard into a pocket park and joining with others in a concern for Kensington’s future appearance. Praising the 19thcentury development of high-density terraces and villas, he commended the introduction of conservation areas, saving much of the borough from ‘the grotesque intrusion of the tower block’. Criticising the current government for attempting to cram more people into the capital, Sir Simon called for modern high-density, low-rise town planning based on streets instead of large tower blocks, a proportionate and conditional change respecting the city’s heritage. Concluding, Sir Simon acknowledged Kensington Society members as ‘foot-soldiers

of London democracy – all strength to your arms’. The full text of Sir Simon’s speech is on the Kensington Society website: <https://www.kensingtonsociety.org/simon-jenkins-its-our-duty-to-be-nimbys/>

After a brief question and answer session, Amanda Frame delivered her Chairman’s Report. As an annual update, she reported on current developments within Kensington and in particular the new Labour government’s proposed changes relating to the planning process and the two major development areas.

Following on and endorsing Sir Simon’s suggestion that we all need to be NIMBYs, especially in regard to government promises to build 1.5million homes in five years, the Chairman foretold the possible loss of some of our precious open spaces and the dangers of government proposals for a two-tier planning process. The application of a Tier A and Tier B would represent a major change in the democratic process and the diminution of local voices in planning. Going on to discuss the two Opportunity Areas in the borough, Earls Court Development and Kensal Canalside, the Chairman noted the large numbers of proposed housing units and consequent building heights of 30 storeys in Kensal and possibly up to 39 storeys in Earls Court.

Turning to TfL’s proposals for a dedicated cycle lane at Holland Park roundabout, she pointed out that, whilst there had been almost no cyclist accidents on the roundabout and very little support for change to the existing cycle lanes currently used by some 3,000 cyclists daily, TfL did not seem to be heeding alternative proposals by local residents or the considerable amount of objections. She noted that our MP, Joe Powell, had organised a meeting for local Residents’ Associations with the TfL’s cycling tsar and that he stood ready to help. In conclusion, the Chairman thanked the Trustees for their dedication and hard work during the last year on behalf of our residents, and invited members and guests for refreshments.

By Alison Sutherland

Note: We look forward to improved sound quality at this year’s AGM on 10 June.



Sir Simon Jenkins and Amanda Frame, chairman, at the 71st AGM. © Michael Becket

The Importance of Freedom

by Martina Margetts

Jung Chang, the celebrated writer, has lived in Kensington for over 40 years. Her long-awaited sequel to *Wild Swans – Fly, Wild Swans* – was recently published and further illuminates China’s history, politics and impact on Chang’s family.

ON 20 MARCH 2024, JUNG CHANG received a CBE at Windsor Castle. What an extraordinary journey from her birth, now 74 years ago, in Chairman Mao’s totalitarian China to that happy spring day. When we met for the first time last December in a Notting Hill restaurant, Chang was smiling in welcome. Her latest book of historical memoir, *Fly, Wild Swans: my mother, myself and China*, had been well-received, and during our conversation she was keen to honour her mother’s role in her life and work, while also commenting on her experiences of England and China.

Jung Chang’s frail mother is now in her nineties in China, where Chang may never see her again. A grim last chapter in the book records visa denials to Chang since 2018 and earlier cat-and-mouse encounters with a vengeful regime, whereby Chang could visit her mother on condition she always reported her own whereabouts and resisted talk of politics. Chang’s books are banned in mainland China, where books are regarded as ‘poisonous weeds’, though occasionally brave publishers release smuggled copies or black-market editions.

Her mother’s first visit to England was for a six-month stay in 1988, six years after Chang had completed her PhD (in linguistics at York), the first-ever Chinese student to do so in the UK. Chang was already living in Kensington and in that peaceful environment her mother decided to tape-record 60 hours of memories of her life to enable Chang to make sense of the past and write a book. This became *Wild Swans*, published in 1991 and selling, to date, 15 million copies in 40 languages.

Her latest book reveals the resilient and brave person her mother has had to be throughout her life. What is her legacy for Chang? “My mother’s courage and resourcefulness...and wise, very sharp mind. I could lean on her...draw from her. A role model.”

Right: Jung Chang in her Notting Hill street, 2023. Opposite top: Chang, second left, with her grandmother, mother and siblings, late 1954 in Chengdu. Middle: Chang writes: “On Tianamen Square, Peking, as a Red Guard (front, second from left), with friends and air force officers (including one woman) assigned to train us. I am wearing a Red Guard armband, my mother’s ‘Lenin jacket’, and patched trousers to look ‘proletarian’. We are all holding the Little Red Book in a standard posture of the time. November 1966”. Bottom: Chang’s parents wearing Communist army uniforms, en route from Manchuria to Sichuan in 1949.



Chang's father was a high-ranking official in the Communist Party and the family had a privileged existence in Chengdu, Sichuan Province, 1800 kilometres from Peking (Beijing). Three catastrophic projects imposed by Mao Zedong, in power since he unified China in 1949 (until 1976), devastated the country and saw estimates of 15–55 million of its population die: the Great Famine(1959–61), the Great Leap Forward (1958–62) and the Cultural Revolution (1966–76). In particular, the failure of the Great Leap Forward provoked her parents' opposition. Criticism of Mao by name led to her father's public 'denunciation' – hours kneeling in gravel, wearing placards, standing in the rain, and imprisonment.



Her father never recovered his physical or mental health, and they had to leave their home. In that “unspeakable” time, Chang's mother “stood up for my father...refused to denounce him...walked on broken glass” as punishment. Chang and her four siblings refused to let her divorce their father, which would have eased their lives.



“Stick with the right thing to do, come what may”, says Chang now. Principles and values are a core part of Chang's story, following her own disillusionment about Mao's regime during this time.

Although Chang's demeanour is good-natured, the vocabulary in the pages of *Fly, Wild Swans* indicates strong emotions: “Desire; yearn; disgusted; enraged; hell”, tackling the personal and political, the individual and collective, history and fate.

She tells me: “For everyone in China the future was determined by the party: be a peasant for ever in the village or the city, husbands and wives sent 1000s of miles away – apart, visiting 12 days a year – I always hated all that and tried to choose my destiny”.

Chang had initially joined the Red Army with pride and enthusiasm aged 14, but was changed by her parents' experience and by working. First, “in the mountains carrying manure – *shit* – in a basket on my back to plant corn...seeing the unbearable heavy weight twisting backs and breaking bones”. Then, “a different life, in a factory steelworks, 10 hours a day in front of a furnace; then as an electrician, with 5 electric shocks in the first month.” Chang says, “I did hang out with friends”, but all were aware of tragedy: “One friend's mother committed suicide, one friend's brother was executed”.



Right: Jung Chang in Peking, September 1978, just before leaving China for Britain. Below: Chang and her husband Jon Halliday researching their biography of Mao in the Albanian archive, 1998.



“You could share your thoughts and talk a lot but never about Mao – too dangerous. *Fear* gripped the population, it’s hard to imagine”. From 1966 to 1972 “the whole population wasn’t educated – *no education*. China was absolutely sealed, zero information, no foreign books”. Chang became a “lover of foreign books”, procured on the black market by her younger brother, adding “the desire to read is part of human intelligence, anyone would *yearn...*” She recalls reading Turgenev’s *First Love* aged 16: “I read it many times, I memorised many parts of it...I desired to go to university. Father refused to pull strings. That was him. I was furious, heartbroken”.

She read a lot while away as a young Red Guard in the mountains and eventually did become an English-language student at Sichuan University.



When she finally left China for England in 1978, aged 26, Chang still had to check her thoughts: “I never said to myself ‘I’m not going back’, because it was ‘high treason’ to leave the motherland. I developed a very strong

subconscious”. Chang told me that her mother always thought of her as a storyteller and her registers of consciousness can be seen as an important foundation for filtering facts and fictions. Evident in her thought-provoking book is that, for Chang, to write is to risk, but that it is necessary to speak truth to power. To this end, the book extensively tracks both fluctuating China-West relations and the background to her pitiless biography, written with her husband, historian Jon Halliday, *Mao: the Unknown Story* (2003), which Christopher Patten, the final Governor of Hong Kong, described in a review as “a bombshell of a book”.

Strong women feature in *Fly, Wild Swans*. Sitting with Chang, born in my era, there is a solidarity about the idea of women having opportunities for fulfilment in their own lives, the enduring theme of the western Women’s Liberation movement of the 1970s and subsequent feminist campaigns globally, including Iran. She acknowledges in the book that her grandmother, who suffered the torture of footbinding, and her mother, whose maltreatment by authorities led to physical deformation of her hand, could only pass on to younger generations the possibility of being free.

The importance of freedom lies at the heart of Chang’s life and work. Here in the

UK, she can freely engage with overlapping circles of academe, politics, historians, writers, artists and musicians – and with the natural environment. Chang refers back to her first London visits to South Kensington museums and Hyde Park, where the sheer beauty and abundance of trees and flowers, in contrast to wastelands in China, made her “wild with joy”. She loves living in Notting Hill with her husband Jon, her regular walks to Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, her favourite restaurants and her many friendships.

Noticing the Cosmic House cover of the *Kensington Society Annual 2023–24* I had with me, Chang said: “Is that Charlie Jencks’s house? We had our wedding reception there!” and proceeded to describe with fondness how she wore her “first designer dress”, by Karl Lagerfeld, with bespoke stilettos which were forbidden on that pristine parquet floor. Given the occasion, an exception was made by Jencks’s wife Maggie Keswick, after whom the cancer charity Maggie’s is named: “a wonderful, light-hearted friend”. There was a special bond: on visits to China in the 1980s, Jencks lectured on modern architecture and Keswick was an expert in Chinese garden design. “I love it”, is Chang’s comment on the Postmodern architecture of their Cosmic House: “the colour and symbolisms” redolent of China, the fan and patterns in the house and bamboo, plum and orchid in the garden.

I asked whether her own life was in some way symbolic – of freedom from repression, of self-determination? “No, I don’t think so”, but she acknowledged that the events of her life do “reflect a bigger picture”. Writing is what set her free: “I love being a writer...where my heart and talents lay...mother sensed what was important to me.” The freedom to pursue friendship, culture, travel, speaking and writing can never be taken for granted, because she knows China and is critical in the book of Xi Jinping and his current regime. But she has a level of cautious optimism: Xi Jinping’s power depends on keeping rivals and the army at bay, thus curbing extremes, and on convincing the West of relations based on mutual respect rather than suspicion. This combination of pressures, she believes, will hold back a “return to Maoist repression”. Given the further military and ideological conflicts that have unfolded in the world since Chang and I conversed, it is salutary to consider her books’ testimonies and keep freedom at the forefront of our minds.



Jung Chang’s bestsellers, published in 1991 and September 2025 by HarperCollins.

Martina Margetts is an arts writer and Editor of the Kensington Society Annual



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Brutalism Revisited

by Charles Saumarez Smith

The Czechoslovakian Embassy – now the Czech Embassy and Slovak Republic Embassy – opened at Notting Hill Gate in 1970. Charles Saumarez Smith gives a firsthand account of the architecture and historical context.

Photographs: Architectural Press Archive / RIBA Collections and the author

IN NOVEMBER 2024, I WAS invited to see an exhibition of work by a young Czech artist, Lukas Kroulik. It was held on the ground floor of the Czech Embassy at the north end of Kensington Palace Gardens where it meets Notting Hill Gate.

There was no reason for me to have visited previously, except maybe to obtain a visa when I first visited Prague in the late summer of 1972 on an Inter-rail pass and travelled through eastern Europe in the dark days following the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1966; or in the days when I travelled to Prague in the mid-1980s with groups of students from the V&A/RCA MA Course in the History of Design. They introduced me to the glories of twentieth-century Czech architecture, particularly Czech cubism and suburban villas of the 1920s. So, it gave me a *frisson* to re-enter a building so redolent of the early 1970s.

From outside, the Embassy is a building of considerable austerity, which it is easy to miss if you are walking along the Bayswater Road, a monument to a period of brutalism in design in Britain as in other parts of Europe and across the Iron Curtain. Such buildings are now increasingly admired, as the Embassy was, at least by the British architectural establishment, when it first opened in 1970. The RIBA gave it an award for “the best building in the United Kingdom created by foreign architects”, commending it for the fact that “unlike so many examples of precast concrete buildings which are weathering badly, this one is a refined example of its kind, skilfully detailed technically and aesthetically”.

Built of reinforced concrete, it was designed by a trio of young Czech architects: Jan Bočan, who had recently graduated from the Czech Technical University, established a design studio called *Konstruktiva*, and went on to design Prague railway station; Jan Šrámek who was older and more established, born in 1924, trained at the Czech



Czechoslovak Embassy (now Czech Embassy), North Front, 1969. (Photo: Sam Lambert, RIBA 76258)

Technical University in Prague and he had worked on the new passenger terminal at Ruzyně Airport; and Karel Štěpánský. Together, they had established the Beta studio at the Design Institute in Prague and were responsible for the design not just of the Czech Embassy in London, but also in Beijing, Brasilia, Nairobi and Stockholm.

In London, they worked under the auspices of Sir Robert Matthew, an immensely well-established architect, former Chief Architect and Planning Officer of the London County Council where he had been responsible for the design of the Royal Festival Hall. In 1956, he had founded a private architectural firm, RMJM, with Stirrat Johnson-Marshall. They designed the Commonwealth Institute on Kensington High Street, a magnificent engineering structure which is still just visible, but now hard to detect above John Pawson's radical re-invention of the building as the Design Museum.

From the outside, the Embassy is characteristic of its time: rigorously geometric, designed as a strict grid, no ornament. You can understand its interior layout by turning the corner from Notting Hill Gate into Kensington Park Gardens where you discover that there are actually two buildings. The larger one facing Notting Hill Gate was designed to accommodate the Embassy staff and their families. The smaller one next door was originally the administration wing. Following the division of Czechoslovakia into two separate countries in 1993, this smaller building has been converted into the Slovak Republic Embassy. The smaller building is less formidable, with more glass and a more elaborately articulated exterior.



Czechoslovak Embassy (now Slovak Republic Embassy), 1969. (Photo: Sam Lambert, RIBA 4933)



Czechoslovak Embassy (now Czech Embassy), South Front, 1969. (photo: Sam Lambert, RIBA 78596)



Czechoslovak Embassy (now Czech Embassy), South Front (detail), 2026. (photo: author)



Czechoslovak Embassy (now Slovak Republic Embassy), West Front, 2026. (photo: author)

Right and below: building detail and lobby interior, 1969.
(Photos: Sam Lambert, RIBA 4936 and RIBA 76259)



The interiors are exciting and unexpected. You come in off Kensington Park Gardens, through security, and then you are in Czechoslovakia as it was in 1970, apparently perfectly preserved, with a great deal of dark wood, although, perhaps not surprisingly, none of the original furniture survives and there has been a recent refurbishment. Work on the interiors was overseen by Jan Bočan, but with advice from Zbyněk Hřivnáč, a wonderfully inventive, slightly mannerist furniture designer who often collaborated with Jan Šrámek and was responsible for the furniture, now highly collectable, in a number of Czech embassies internationally.

You look out onto a lawn which separates the two buildings and can see and admire their more private façades. The south face of the main building is much less intimidating than the north, with thin strips of concrete articulating the façade and the rooms inside set behind narrow balconies. The west façade of the administration building is the most interesting compositionally, a wonderfully abstract design, the top two stories mainly glass, both stories sub-divided irregularly with steps placed asymmetrically out into the garden.

The building is seldom open except for special events; but if you are ever invited or see that it is open, as it is occasionally for exhibitions and events organised as part of the embassy's cultural programme, I strongly recommend a visit (<https://london.czechcentres.cz/en/>). It is not very easy elsewhere in London to get such a good feel for the world as it was before the Iron Curtain came down.

Sir Charles Saumarez Smith is a former Director of the National Gallery and author of *John Vanbrugh: The Drama of Architecture* (London: Lund Humphries, 2025)

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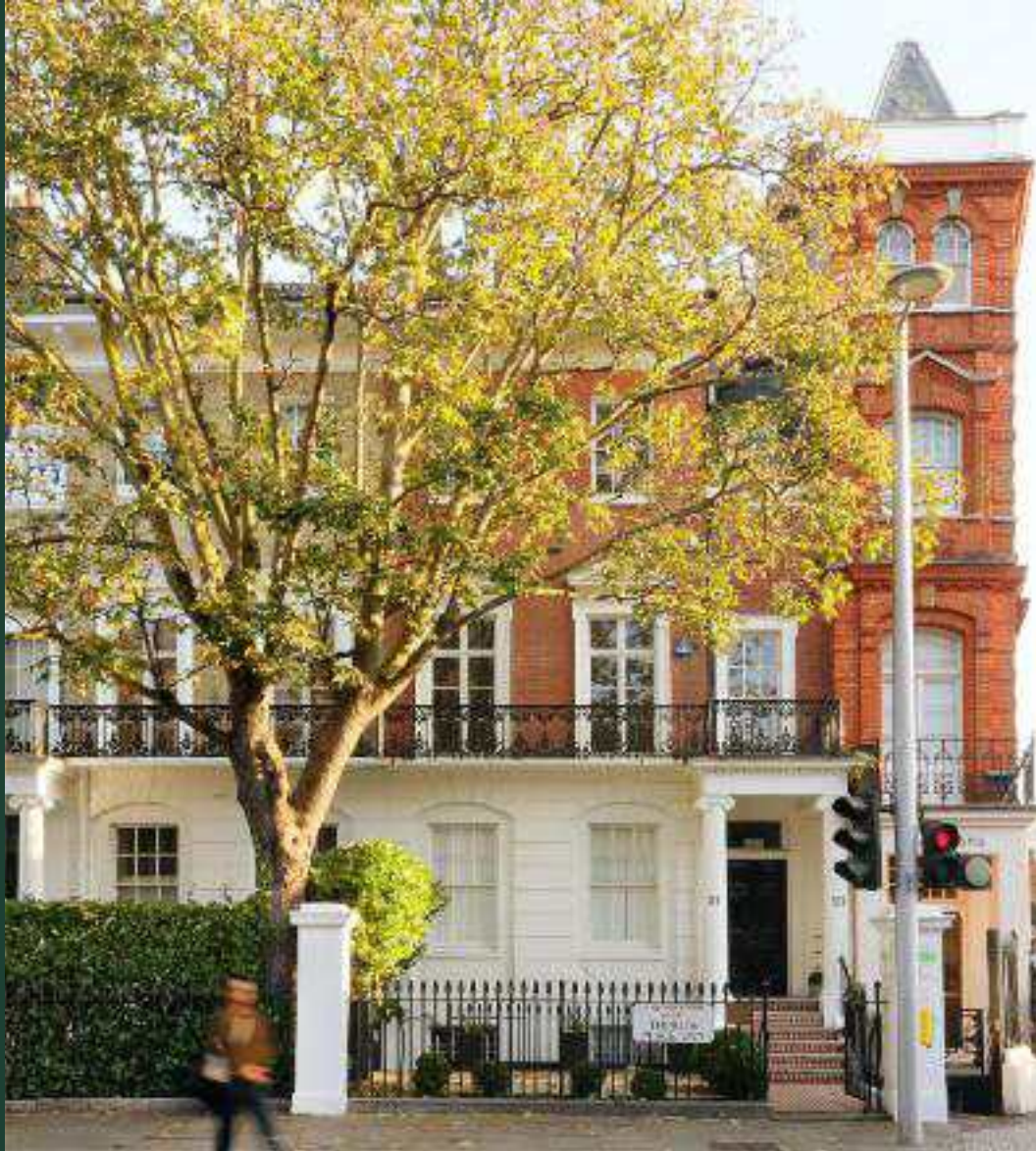

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Mind and Matter

After a decade of painting in temporary spaces, Francis Bacon moved into 7 Reece Mews in South Kensington in October 1961 and stayed until he died in 1992: “The moment I saw this place I knew that I could work here.”

A series of recollections provide insight into the place and the artist.

Main photograph, 1998, by Perry Ogden © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved.
DACS, London 2026

Professor Sir Brian Clarke (1953–2025), artist, friend, executor after 1998 and chairman of the Bacon Estate until he died in 2025.

“For thirty years, Francis Bacon lived and worked in Reece Mews, a former coach house located in a Victorian mews in the London borough of South Kensington. It was here where he produced many of his greatest paintings. Years after his death, the studio remained uninhabited and untouched exactly as he had left it.

The flat was very simple. On the ground floor were what used to be the stables, which had in recent times been used for storage. Upstairs, which was where he lived, was accessed by a very steeply inclined wooden staircase – rather like an Amsterdam house staircase – and you had to negotiate those stairs with the help of a rather greasy, thick rope, taking the role of a banister, up the side.

When you reached the top, you were on a little landing. The landing had a toilet and a kitchen. The kitchen also had a bath in it. So it was a kitchen-bathroom. And if it was cold, Francis would light the gas oven and leave the door open, so that having a bath wouldn't be too unpleasant. Even when he was at the very height of his celebrity and wealth, this was the pattern.

To the left of that was a bedroom, with a table and chairs and a sofa, and his few books. Very simple; it reminded me of the kind of way that an ex-soldier or a former prisoner might live. Simple, modest, very unassuming, very focused. Then, you crossed the landing, and there was this tiny but dense and intense room, with a window at either end and a skylight, where he painted. And there was just enough room in the centre of this topography of chaos for him to stand and paint the canvases. And that seemed to work for him very well. It was a very efficient little room for working in.”

Written in 2006 <https://www.francis-bacon.com/content/studio>



Blue plaque at 7 Reece Mews, now the Francis Bacon Archive. Photo: London Remembers





John Edwards (1949–2003), Bacon’s closest companion for the last 20 years of the artist’s life and inheritor of his estate.

“He held the brush like a sword and stood far back from the canvas, like he was fencing with an unseen opponent” ...

“He loved the mornings, that’s when he worked best and even after very late nights of drinking that floored me – thirty years younger than him – he’d always be in the studio bright and early painting.

“He loved it in that little room and said he could work better in there than in any studio he had ever had. Even though he was offered grand studio spaces many times he never considered moving. South Kensington was his favourite part of London, and he loathed the countryside. He liked the routines of South Ken life, taking his bedsheets and towels to be laundered in Harrington Road and his shirts to another little laundry in Glendower Place. He told me proudly that they did everything by hand there. He did all his own cooking, and was a very good cook indeed, often using Château Pétrus to make stocks.”

From ‘Foreword by John Edwards’ in the book *7 Reece Mews Francis Bacon’s Studio* (Thames and Hudson 2001)



Richard Francis, curator of *Francis Bacon*, Tate Gallery [now Tate Britain], London 1985.

“Reece Mews was scruffy, down at heel and neighbourly. Francis knew his neighbours and they kept an eye on each other. He seemed to enjoy the marginal, liminal feel of the place and was only annoyed by Royal College students stealing discarded canvases and cutting them up to make portraits. He learned not to put out any rubbish.

His stretched canvases for new paintings were sent over by Valerie Beston (Miss Beston, always) at the Marlborough Gallery. She would sometimes send one or two and some paints to encourage him. They were the largest size that would fit up the narrow staircase (very steep and very narrow, rope handrail) and were wrangled up by the gallery’s art movers. When he had finished a canvas, he asked Miss Beston to collect it. She was quick to do so, fearing he might destroy it if he was not satisfied. The painting was carefully taken back down the stairs again and sent to Alfred Hecht to be glazed and framed in the plain gilded frames Francis used after the 1950s. Hecht, also a Kensington resident, had his framing shop on the King’s Road.

Every surface, floor, furniture and walls had papers, news clippings, photographs and there were a few books – some to be read, some as sources, cut up and in the piles. The photos were collected or commissioned by Bacon and the press clippings include, for example, the cricketer padded up (*Study of the Human Body*, 1982). Some were old, some recent, but they were not organised in any way. It was as if you were ‘surfing’ on the sources for the works, but could not work out how they were made from the remnants that were there. Like looking into his skull from above and seeing how it worked, but only partially and deliberately obscured. It was somehow performative, but for whom – the very rare visitor, or Bacon himself?

Bacon’s cultivated bad boy reputation, and behaviour, masked a careful attention to



Francis Bacon, right, and curator Richard Francis, left, discussing the hanging of the exhibition *Francis Bacon* at the Tate Gallery, 1985. Credit: Tate Photography (David Clarke) © Tate

detail. For example, I found once among the papers a colour chart for greens published by the Royal Horticultural Society for garden planners – not something he needed in Reece Mews, but something to use to get the exact colour in a painting. Maybe for *A Piece of Waste Land*, 1982.”

Written in February 2026 to the
Editor of the Kensington Society Annual

Richard Francis walked with Francis Bacon around his Tate Gallery exhibition in 1985; here are some of Bacon's thoughts on painting from the recorded conversation.

“I take everything from everybody and everything I possibly can take, and I think all artists always have done so...I mean it's not cricket is it, there are no rules to the game in painting...

“I generally paint with house brushes that people use, I don't use what's called artist brushes very much, I generally use those very loaded. I always want my things to look immaculate, but I want them to come about in a very arbitrary and rough way. You see, painting is such a very fluid medium that if you're using large brushes and if you put paint on the canvas and if you turn a brush one way or another it has a different implication, and you use the implication which is the nearest to your nervous system.

“I have an overall sensation before I start the things. When people talk about inspiration...I just think that inspiration comes from work. I mean, I dare say there are people who are very inspired, but I don't think it applies to me. I just work and hope chance is going to really work for me that day.

[Talking about *Triptych*, 1976] “In some sense those images have something to do with the furies that come out of *The Oresteia*. Because, after all, we do live by all the hidden areas of our makeup...we don't know what the unconscious is, but we do know that many things that we do and think come by instinct and instinct generally arises from, you could say, from the whole unconscious sea which is in all of us...How could I be more frightening than if you, if you hear the news each day, or anything that's happening? Go out in the street and see what's happening...I mean how could I compete with that? No, I'm certainly not trying to do that. Take one of the great phrases from Aeschylus, ‘the reek of human blood smiles out at me’. Well, that suggests there's a million different kinds of images.”

Francis Bacon, Tate Gallery, London 1985 on You Tube:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fk3M2PZKLFg>

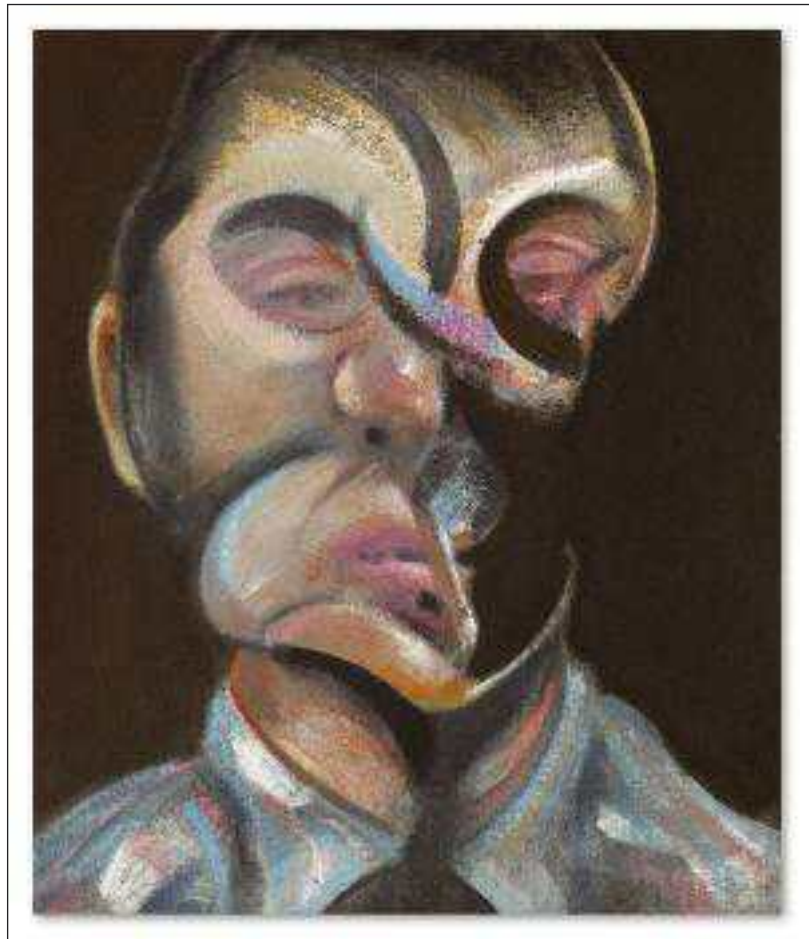


Far from being lost to time, Bacon's entire studio, donated by his estate, was relocated to the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin, the artist's city of birth in 1909. Dr Margarita Cappock, curator and art historian, was in 1999 Project Manager of the Francis Bacon Studio Project at the gallery.

The relocation followed cataloguing by a team of archaeologists, conservators and curators of over 7,000 items, including a couple of thousand art supplies, hundreds of books and catalogues, 1500 photographs, more than 1000 images torn from magazines, 100 slashed canvases, 70 drawings, and loads of empty champagne cartons piled in the corner of the room. Dr Cappock writes: “Commenting on the wealth of photographic material in his studio, Bacon said that he looked at photographs for inspiration in the way that one looks up meanings in a dictionary. Photographs by John Deakin, Cecil Beaton, Peter Beard, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Peter Stark and many others provide a fascinating insight into both the bohemian milieu in which Bacon

operated and the artist's method of manipulating his source material. On the studio floor, reproductions of fine art paintings jostled with illustrations of crime scenes, skin diseases, film stars, athletes and other imagery which clearly appealed to Bacon's artistic imagination. Books and magazines on subjects including art, sport, crime, history, photography, cinema, bullfighting, wildlife and the supernatural were found in precarious piles on the studio floor and highlight the eclectic nature of Bacon's influences."

The Hugh Lane Gallery will re-open in 2028 after renovation
www.francis-bacon.com ; *Francis Bacon's Studio* by Margarita Cappock, Merrell 2005



Self-Portrait, 1972, 36x30.5cm, by Francis Bacon, sold at Sotheby's London on 6 March 2026 for £16 million. Tom Eddison, Head of Contemporary Art, Sotheby's, elucidates: "Bacon famously said he wanted to capture 'the brutality of fact'. For him, that meant stripping away vanity and confronting himself with searing surgical honesty. His self-portraits are not distortions. They are revelations. The twisted forms, the blurred edges, the smudged eye or collapsing jaw. Bacon's arenas feel like interrogation chambers, spaces where the self is cornered, scrutinised, compelled to confess. Each painting is a moment of confrontation, a flash of psychological truth and a reminder that identity is never fixed, never stable, never fully knowable. Like Rembrandt's great late self-portraits, Bacon's own become Vanitas works, meditations on mortality."

The Biba Years

by Kim Evans

In 1964 Barbara Hulanicki, a young fashion illustrator, founded Biba and opened the first in a series of clothes shops in Kensington. She started in a tiny former chemist shop and by 1973 had taken over one of the biggest department stores in London. Biba became the second most popular tourist attraction in the capital, pushing Buckingham Palace into third place. Then, just two years later, it was gone – having changed fashion and the shopping experience forever.

THE BROWN GLASS JAR with its distinctive black and gold label still has the price tag on it, 22p. It has had a place in my kitchen for 52 years and I still reach for it every morning. I bought it in 1973 not long after Big Biba opened, taking over what used to be the Derry & Toms department store on Kensington High Street. I have lived in Kensington for much of my life, and the Biba years had a significant influence on me and a whole generation of women.

I was born just five minutes' walk from Derry & Toms and on the edge of what was to become the Biba square mile. I was too young to go to the first shop when it opened in 1964, but I do remember a 'special offer' in the *Daily Mirror* earlier that year. It was for a pink gingham mini dress with matching headscarf that cost only 25 shillings – just over £1. The dress sold to 17,000 eager young customers and was the first success for the postal boutique that was Barbara Hulanicki's first venture into retail fashion.

Hulanicki lived in Kensington during the Biba years. However, she was born in Poland in 1936 and moved as a young



Author's muesli jar, in daily use since 1973.



Barbara Hulanicki in the 1960s.
Photograph by Harri Peccinotti.



child to Jerusalem, then part of Palestine, where her father was a mediator in the violent disputes over the partitioning of the country into Jewish and Arab states. In 1948 he was assassinated by a paramilitary organisation,

who wanted the British out, and the family fled to England to join Hulanicki's wealthy and domineering Aunt Sophie: a woman who refused to leave the 1930s and dressed every day in slinky couture gowns in muddy colours, accompanied by equally slinky cocktails. After boarding school, Hulanicki studied fashion in Brighton and became a respected fashion illustrator. What she really wanted to do was make clothes for ordinary women who loved fashion but couldn't afford couture prices. Launching the postal boutique in partnership with her husband, the businessman Stephen Fitz-Simon (Fitz), was a way of keeping prices down and Biba retained its cost-conscious ethos to the end.



In 9 years, Biba mushroomed from a tiny shop in a former chemist's to 7 floors of infinite variety.

<p>FIFTH FLOOR <i>See pages 14 and 15</i> The Rainbow Restaurant to eat, drink, meet friends, dance and be happy in.</p>	<p>BIBA </p>
<p>FOURTH FLOOR <i>See page 13</i> Household Furniture, room-sets, china and glass, kitchenware, paint, fabric and wallpaper.</p>	<p>BIBA </p>
<p>THIRD FLOOR <i>See pages 11 and 12</i> Men Only Only the Mistress Room separates the men from the boys.</p>	<p>BIBA </p>
<p>SECOND FLOOR <i>See page 6</i> Children Everything for babies, children, 'Loitas' and pregnant Mums.</p>	<p>BIBA </p>
<p>FIRST FLOOR <i>See pages 4 and 5</i> The Biba Floor Clothes, and more clothes, and colour-matched accessories.</p>	<p>BIBA </p>
<p>GROUND FLOOR <i>See pages 2 and 3</i> Accessories Accessories of all kinds: shoes, hats, tights and underwear, sweaters, jewellery, cosmetics, leather, books and newspapers, stationery, sounds, Casbah and Men's Sweaters.</p>	<p>BIBA </p>
<p>BELOW STAIRS <i>See back page</i> Food Everything to eat and drink - take-home meals.</p>	<p>BIBA </p>

1964 – Biba Opens the Door

Inspired by the success of the postal boutique, in 1964 Hulanicki and Fitz opened the first Biba shop in a former chemist's in Abingdon Road, behind Kensington High Street. The shop had been empty for a while: Hulanicki loved the peeling paintwork and the front windows that were painted halfway up with scratched black paint with gold-leaf edges.

At that time, Kensington was a rather sedate shopping area dominated by three elegant but fading department stores: Barkers, Pontings and Derry & Toms. Meanwhile, nearby Chelsea offered Mary Quant's Bazaar, Alice Pollock's Quorum, the first Chelsea Girl Shop and Habitat. The first Biba shop catapulted Kensington into the spotlight. Despite being off the high street and having no sign above the door for a year, the Abingdon Road boutique changed the whole shopping experience and quickly became the place to work and be seen. The 15-year-old Anna Wintour, later Editor-in-Chief at *Vogue*, had a Saturday job there. It was packed and the customers were young girls on low incomes and rising stars, including Julie Christie, Cilla Black, Twiggy and Cathy McGowan, the face of the television music show *Ready Steady Go*. The Swinging Sixties had finally penetrated the heart of the Royal Borough.

Mary Quant and Biba are often now linked as two key brands that made London the fashion capital of the world in the 1960s. But they were very different. Quant was largely bright colours and clean lines and their clothes sold to Chelsea girls who could pay £30 for a dress. Biba focused on democratising fashion, selling frocks for around £3. Customers loved the fact that there was always fresh stock and it created a sense of urgency. Buy it now. If you wait, it won't be here when you come back!

The speedy turnover was possible because Hulanicki took care of the design and Fitz took care of the production. At first the fabrics came from the endless rolls left in Pontings' storeroom from the 1930s. When they ran out, cheaper material was bought elsewhere and custom-dyed. The primary manufacturer was Mr Sava, who had a Greek family-run sewing room in the East End of London that specialised in high-speed garment production. He had supplied the mail-order mini and meticulously constructed the Biba Bird silhouette dresses with skinny buttoned sleeves that followed, working in rayon and viscose and sometimes the brushed rayon Flanesta, which looked like Liberty's wool but was much less expensive. Mr Sava was essential to the Biba business model and remained its core manufacturer from the early boutique days to its closure in 1975.



Stars keep Biba moving.

1966 – Off to Kensington Church Street

It didn't take long for Biba to outgrow the tiny chemist shop. In March 1966 it moved to a former grocer's at 19–21 Kensington Church Street helped, for PR purposes, by loyal customers Cilla Black and Cathy McGowan. It was here that the Biba image and shopping experience were consolidated. The month after the new boutique opened *Time* magazine named London 'City of the Decade' and wrote that "the most In shop for gear is Biba's boutique in Kensington, which is a must scene for the switched-on dolly-bird at least twice a week".

Later Hulanicki said, "I was never sure which came first, the clothes or the interiors". She and her design team kept the darkened windows that characterised the Abingdon Road boutique, enticing shoppers into the low-lit interior to discover what was on offer. Church Street was the first 'boutique' I ever went into. There were plenty of young shop assistants and it was a sackable offence for them to approach and ask if they could help you. Customers were meant to hang out and chill. It felt mysterious, chaotic, exciting – and completely terrifying because it included the first-ever communal changing room in the UK. Hulanicki said her designs had a silhouette that was as long as possible: "The ideal Biba girl has a skinny body with long asparagus legs and tiny feet". At least my feet met her criteria.

Clothes were hung on hatstands, draped with feather boas and surrounded by large potplants and dark mahogany screens. Here, Hulanicki began to develop a more bohemian style for Biba. The clothes were in earthy bruised shades of amethyst, jade, copper, orchid and petrol. These were the colours her Aunt Sophie had always worn and, although Hulanicki hated them as a child, she later credited her aunt with inspiring the Biba palette. This decadent aesthetic set it apart from the bright, futuristic look of designers like Quant and Courrèges.

"The most In shop for gear",
Kensington Church Street, 1966.



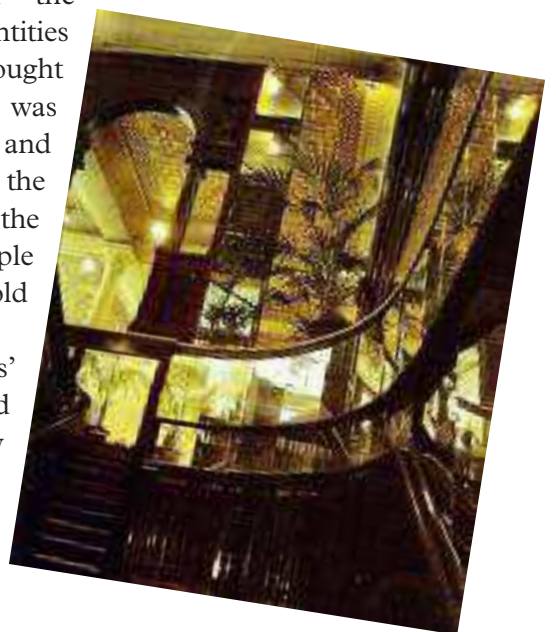


Biba catalogues from the early 1970s. Photograph by Sarah Hellman

1969 – Breaking Out With a Bang

The success of their first two shops left Hulanicki and Fitz wanting to grow the Biba brand. In 1969, they found a much bigger space right on Kensington High Street, almost opposite the trio of sedate department stores. The former Cyril Lord carpet shop was on several floors and this allowed Biba to expand into eveningwear, menswear and household products and cosmetics. However, the cost of the renovation was high and so they took the risk of selling the majority of their Biba shares to a very different kind of fashion retailer, Dorothy Perkins, who seemed keen to support their vision. The Biba team worked for months to get the new shop ready, uncovering the 1920s Egyptian-style columns beneath the hardboard panelling and bringing in large quantities of carved wood and stained-glass windows, bought for £100 at auction when a nearby school was being demolished. It was worth the struggle and when the shop opened at the end of 1969, the press labelled it ‘the most beautiful store in the world’. It was soon attracting 30,000 people every week, more than the Queen’s Household Guards at Buckingham Palace.

Not everyone shared the Biba customers’ excitement about cheap and trendy clothes and accessories and on 1 May 1971 The Angry Brigade, a British anarchist group, detonated a



The third Biba, which turned a former carpet shop into a palace of style.

bomb in the Biba stockroom. Some 5,000 people were evacuated. Half the basement was demolished. Thankfully there was only one injury. This incident was terrifying for the shoppers. However, several also saw it as an opportunity. One shopper reported: “Everyone was screaming. The girl next to me was having complete hysterics, flinging her arms around and shouting, ‘Oh my God we’re all going to die!’ and at the same time she was stuffing loads of items into her bag.”

The Angry Brigade put out a communiqué with the headline: *If You’re not Busy Being Born, You’re Busy Buying*. This described Biba shops as “modern slave-houses called boutiques” and ended with a rallying cry, “You can’t reform profit capitalism and inhumanity. Just kick it till it breaks”. It’s hard to fathom why The Angry Brigade decided to target Biba because in some ways the company was an early role model for equal rights. It was the first to offer a full range of cosmetics designed for black skin and, when homosexuality was finally legalised in Britain in 1967, Biba was the first store to advertise in the gay press. It also supported its predominantly female staff by providing a creche in the Big Biba department store, with a second one for customers.

1973 – Welcome to Big Biba

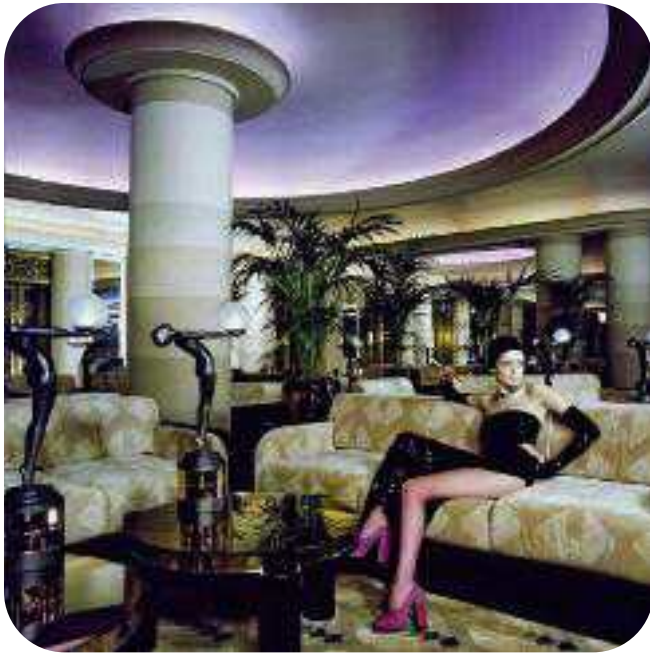
When Biba opened in the former Derry & Toms building in September 1973 – on time and on budget – it was the biggest retail opening since the Second World War. It’s impossible now to imagine its significance. Big Biba as it became known created the first ‘shopping experience’ – a fantasy world spread over 15 departments. Everything was Biba’s own brand. Not just clothes for women, men and children but make-up, home furnishings, a food hall, a book shop, a music shop, a creche and a beauty parlour, topped off by the 500-seater Rainbow Room restaurant and a flamingo-filled roof garden. It was a place where you could spend a whole day, and some of us did.

The design team brought together all Barbara Hulanicki’s passions: Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Victoriana, a touch of William Morris and a topcoat of Hollywood Vamp. Each floor had its own typeface. The lifts were always crowded, and they played the *Hallelujah Chorus* down the stairwell to encourage people to walk up. The women’s clothes had the traditional murky Biba colour palette, now intercut with silk and satin and leopard-skin print. The communal changing rooms had become a key part of the experience. When Barbra Streisand dropped by, she refused the offer of a private room and insisted on using them. When the changing rooms overflowed, women simply undressed on the shop floor. The children’s department had towelling nappies dyed Biba colours. I don’t think I ever dared go to the Men Only floor with its Mistress Room. The Food Hall in the basement was full of tall display units in the form of Warhol soup cans and Heinz baked beans. Everything





Big Biba, newly opened: three photographs by Phil Sayer, September 1973.



Twiggy modelling Biba in the glory of the Rainbow Room in 1973.

from soap flakes to cat food had its own Biba label. The store had the first computerised till system of any major store in Britain – and of course this super-modern technology was disguised in Art Deco mirrored cases.

Everyone wanted a taste of the Biba experience. It remained resolutely democratic, closing only once for a private shopper – Princess Anne. Every day, thousands of visitors wandered through. Mick and Bianca dropped in, Cher, David Bowie, Freddie Mercury and Twiggy. I was one of the many ordinary girls who spent their Saturdays there, lounging on the Deco

sofas in the Casbah on the ground floor. This was where my life-long affair with henna began, dipping into the huge brass bowls where it was sold by the spoonful for 10p an ounce. It became part of the Biba aesthetic – deep red hair, dark smudgy eyes and deep



The food hall.



Biba providing temporary escape from the grey 1970s.

lip colours. I could afford the henna, the eyeshadow, the tights – they sold hundreds of different colours – and the baked beans. Very occasionally I bought a dress. I treated myself to a Biba address book that listed the trendy hotels, restaurants, cinemas and clubs.

Biba's fabulously restored Art Deco Rainbow Room on the fifth floor became both restaurant and music venue. I was at the infamous New York Dolls gig on 26 November 1973. Tickets were £2.50 including a meal. The Dolls marked the end of glam rock and the beginning of punk. They arrived on stage worse for wear, draped in feather boas and wearing girls' blouses that they were alleged to have shoplifted from the store. The crowd, not the usual Biba customers, went wild. People were jumping on the Deco sofas, standing on chairs. After that, Biba chose their bands more judiciously. The list included Cockney Rebel, Bryan Ferry, The Ronettes, Ian Dury and, perhaps most in keeping with the décor, Liberace.

1975 – The Party’s Over

For two years Big Biba provided a glamorous escape from 1970s Britain. Outside life was grey and brown. We were living through the Three-Day Week as Edward Heath’s Conservative Government battled with the unions. Then came the banking crisis of 1973–75. Having sold the majority of their Biba shares to Dorothy Perkins in 1969, Hulanicki and Fitz were no longer able to call the shots. In the month before Big Biba opened, Dorothy Perkins was sold to a big property development company called British Land. The high cost of keeping the store open amid the faltering British economy led to the new owners closing several floors in March 1975. And then the Closing Down Sale was set for 4 October that year.

Biba’s closure was as dramatic and colourful as the opening of its first shop 11 years earlier. The cultural historian Alwyn Turner wrote that “it was like a jumble sale in the pleasure dome of Kubla Khan”. The clothes that had defined an era were piled high; the Biba branded goods were strewn across the floor and trampled underfoot as thousands of people poured in to capture a small piece of the Biba dream. Music still pumped out of the Art Deco speakers and no one really intervened as girls just walked out past the tills carrying armfuls of memories.

... but Barbara Hulanicki goes on

Hulanicki was only 38 when Biba closed. She had turned fashion and shopping into what we would now call ‘an immersive experience’ and an affordable one. Over the next 30 years there were several attempts to relaunch the Biba brand, all of them unsuccessful. After Biba, Hulanicki and her husband moved to Brazil and later Miami, where she had a successful second career as an interior designer, reviving many of the Art Deco hotels on Miami Beach. She will be 90 this year. She is still working and in recent years there has been a new wave of interest in her work, much of it coming from a younger generation who never experienced Biba themselves. “It’s been sort of go, go go. I don’t know what it is. They’re just discovering Biba. So before I go to heaven, they want to get whatever they can out of me. It makes me giggle.”

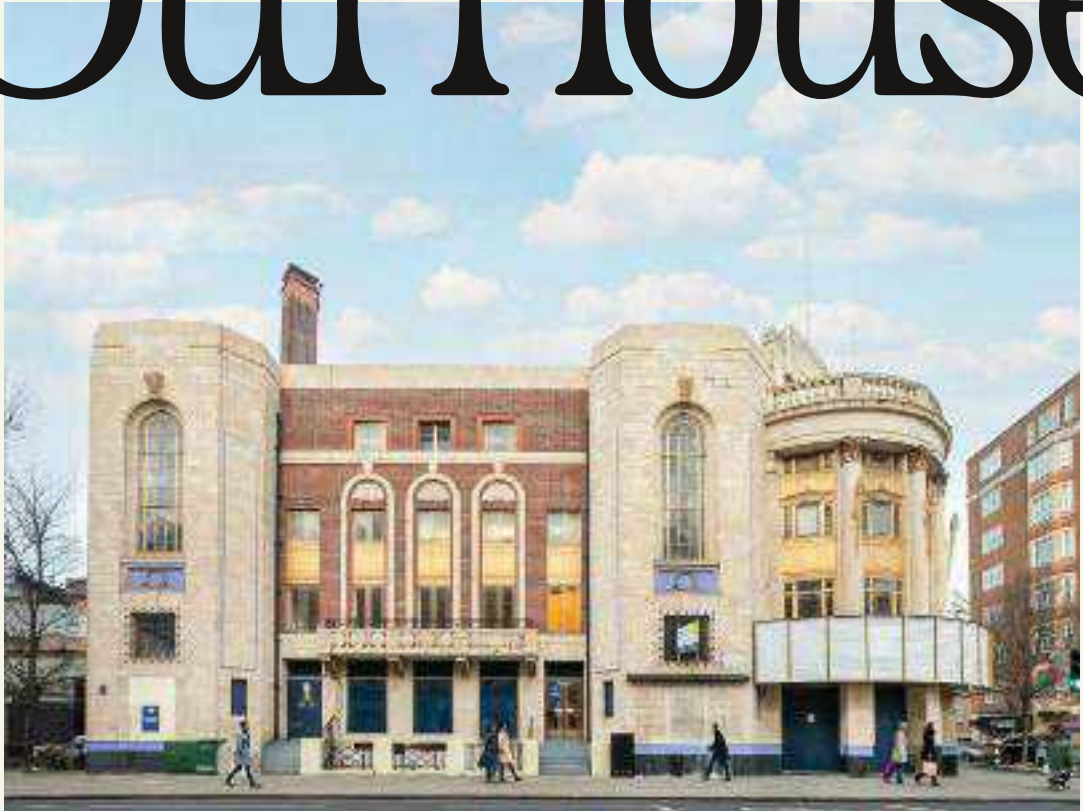


Today, as we are trying to reinvent our high streets to provide a different kind of experience that entices people to go out shopping rather than buy online, we would do well to remember Hulanicki’s view that “creativity requires both a wild mind and a disciplined eye.” Biba was a demonstration of both and it was a testament to creative freedom – freedom not just for designers but for many women of my generation.

Barbara Hulanicki has had a lasting impact on me. I still henna my hair. I open my Biba muesli jar every morning. I have my Biba address book and sometimes look back at all those handwritten entries, people and places, some long gone, some still part of my life. Somewhere in a cupboard is my one remaining Biba dress in brown and camel Flanesta with tight buttoned sleeves. I still love it.

After a long career in the arts, Kim Evans remains an active supporter of emerging artists and is Vice Chair of the Bush Theatre.

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Change for the Better

by Matthew Stadlen

An education case study, one of 100+ projects a year, highlights the impact of the Kensington + Chelsea Foundation.

THE EVENING WAS SO HOT and sticky that I had to take both my jacket and tie off, jettisoning the uniform I've come to wear on TV as a centre-left political commentator. My wife, a committed Conservative, thinks it's important, particularly as a "leftie" (!), that I look smart when I debate in public. Thursday 19 June 2025 was different, though. I wasn't up against Nigel Farage on GB News, or a right-leaning commentator on *The Jeremy Vine Show*, I was in conversation with my local Labour MP, Joe Powell, at scenic Christ Church on Victoria Road. The event was a fundraiser for the Kensington + Chelsea Foundation, a charity that aims, in small but important ways, to bridge the gap between rich and poor in the Royal Borough.

I was born and brought up in Notting Hill, long before Hugh Grant and Julia Roberts made it internationally famous. I remember going to the Golborne Road with my dad in the early 1980s to buy coal for the fire; the rag-and-bone men who used to call out their wares from horse-drawn carts; milk delivered by float. A lot has changed since those days, not least the area's elevation in the mid-nineties to one of the most fashionable in the world. But Kensington & Chelsea is, today, one of the most socio-economically divided areas in the country. Those with enormous wealth live side by side with some of the least privileged families in Britain. You can find multi-million pound houses sandwiched between social housing, a council estate on the same road as £20 million mansions. Grenfell Tower, now being dismantled but "forever in our hearts", shares a postcode with the shops and restaurants frequented by Hollywood A-listers.

So when the K+C Foundation asked me, still a Notting Hill local, to become involved with promoting their work, I said yes immediately. Their *Poverty and Prosperity in Kensington + Chelsea* report, published in late 2021, made for salutary reading: one in four children living in poverty; the worst rate of school exclusions in London; in the lowest 20% of Local Authorities for mental health scores; disparities of up to 17 years in the life expectancy of residents, depending on which wards they lived in; a higher unemployment rate than the London average.



The author with his father, 1980s.

The Foundation researches and publicises key social issues affecting the community, sets out to improve the lives and life chances of residents, and raises and directs funding to initiatives it considers will have the biggest impact and achieve enduring change. In 2024 alone, the charity raised £2.1 million, supported 106 projects across the borough and reached 18,400 residents in need. “We were efficient and effective, with 97p in every £1 spent on our charitable work,” says Director, Victoria Steward Todd.

The event I took part in with Joe Powell was the first in a series of events for Philanthropy Circle, a new network of local donors investing a minimum of £5,000 a year. That evening we raised £55,000. “It was a real honour to support the K+C Foundation’s efforts to tackle some of the biggest challenges facing our community”, Powell said. “They are a key funder for many excellent local organisations that I see make a difference every day, from improving our housing, expanding opportunity for young people, and ensuring everyone has access to health services they need.”

Two local residents who are determined to make a difference to the lives of others are Dani Duclos and Julia Coupland, Directors and co-Founders of the Grove Trust, a charity begun, like the K+C Foundation, in 2010: “We set it up to address the widening social divide amongst the residents of Notting Hill and North Kensington. At the very same time, the K+C Foundation was established with a similar goal, and would be operating across all of RBKC. We have found them to be an invaluable partner that we work alongside to knowledge-share across this space - all with the aim of helping local residents that are in need.”

The Grove Trust has put money towards a scheme funded by the K+C Foundation, which aims to tackle school exclusions at Holland Park School, a non-selective comprehensive school in the area. Louis Levin has been the Inclusions Mentor at HPS since September of last year. His job is to work with young people who are most at risk of being excluded, and provide intensive mentoring to support them to stay in school and thrive. He helps them build the tools, resilience and confidence to improve.

“The first term could not have gone any better, with so many pupils making progress and getting all kinds of positive outcomes in under four months,” says



Holland Park School Inclusions Mentor, Louis Levin, running an early morning 'Check-In' session with his mentees, January 2026.

Levin. “The feedback from the pupils, their families, statutory services and from the HPS staff, including the Head Teacher and the Senior Leadership Team, has been overwhelmingly positive.” And success, of course, can be contagious. “There has been a knock-on effect on other secondary schools in the area now taking a keen interest in what we are doing here, and we have started to meet with the primary school leaders, too.”

Billy Egleton is Vice Principal at HPS. He says that the school was already making progress on inclusion, with suspension figures falling from 158 in 2022–23, to 130 the following year, and then dropping sharply to 48 in

“So many pupils are making progress”

2024–25, but that working with the Foundation has had a significant impact. “Attendance for our disadvantaged students is up by over one percentage point compared to this time last year, placing us in the top 10% nationally for attendance. This academic year, we have issued just six suspensions, giving us one of the lowest suspension rates in the country for a fully comprehensive intake. Perhaps most importantly, students speak about the Inclusion Mentor as a trusted adult, and this role has strengthened our ability to safeguard our most vulnerable young people in ways we simply were not able to do before.”

Steward Todd, who has supported Levin in driving the project, joined the K+C Foundation in 2019. She was drawn by the idea of raising and spending money in the same community. “It’s an opportunity to really connect supporters to the work they’re funding,” she says. “I’ve been blown away by how much residents in Kensington and Chelsea care deeply about their neighbours and their community, and how generously they give their time and money to make a difference.”

The initiative at Holland Park School is just one example of the work that Steward Todd is able to develop. “As a very small charity, we try to focus our efforts on where we can have a measurable difference,” she says, “and for me the issue of school exclusions stood out as something that was both a huge social injustice and an area where the right interventions could mean that we don’t leave any of our young people behind. I have two children at secondary school and I totally understand that schools are overstretched, underfunded and dealing with increasingly complex needs.”

There’s no doubt in my mind that the social mix of RBKC represents a far better way of running a city than pushing deprived communities into the suburbs. Segregation is nobody’s friend. But proximity to

“Segregation is nobody's friend”

disparity brings into sharper relief the responsibility we all have to each other. No matter our opportunity or wealth, we share the same pavements, make use of the same services, and together form a community. The K+C Foundation offers those with more the chance to help those with less to fulfil their ambitions and shape a less divided future.

Matthew Stadlen is a presenter and writer. X and Instagram: @matthewstadlen

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Kensington Remembers The Spanish Civil War

by Thomas Blomberg

On a wall where Portobello Road runs under Westway, a large mosaic remembers Kensington's links to the Spanish Civil War 1936-1939. The mosaic records both the volunteers from Kensington who fought and died in Spain against General Franco and the Spanish refugees who eventually made Kensington their home, including some of the 4,000 Basque children who arrived in Britain in 1937.

On 18 July 2026, Spain will commemorate the start of the disastrous Spanish Civil War 90 years ago, a war between those who supported the incumbent elected government – the republicans – and those who wanted to crush it – the nationalists, led by General Franco. The republicans were a mainly leftist coalition of loyal military units, communists, social democrats, liberals, anarchists, Trotskyists, trade unionists and various regional separatists, while the nationalists were a largely right-wing alliance of army rebels, *falangistas* (Spanish fascists), *carlistas* (monarchists), and Catholic traditionalists.

From 1923 to 1930, Spain had been a military dictatorship with a puppet monarch. Most of its senior officers had been dissatisfied with the often-chaotic democratic republic that had followed in 1931, so a chance to 'restore order' and rule the country again appealed to them. Therefore, on 18 July 1936, a very carefully planned military rebellion spread across Spain, having begun in Spanish Morocco the day before. Their leader, General Franco, was to become Spain's dictator until his death in November 1972, more than 35 years later.

Franco's military rebels had expected to take over the country in a few days, but the resistance from civilians and regiments loyal to the republican government was fierce. The 'simple' coup turned into a brutal and extremely bloody three-year civil war that lasted until March 1939. An estimated 500,000 soldiers and civilians died from battle wounds, executions, bombing raids and starvation on both sides during the war and some 1.5 million soldiers and civilians were wounded. After the war, a further 100,000 republicans were executed and some 35,000 died in Franco's 300 concentration camps, which held more than 500,000 prisoners. Half a million people fled to France, where they first lingered in very unsanitary camps and then were dispersed when Germany took France in 1940. Some fled further, mainly to Mexico or South America, while others died in German concentration camps or joined the French resistance.

Britain pushed for non-intervention

As soon as the civil war began in Spain, the Conservative British government, led by

Stanley Baldwin, began campaigning for an international military non-intervention agreement, even though it was a war where rebels were trying to replace a democratically elected and internationally recognised government with a military dictatorship close to Mussolini and Hitler. The British argument for non-intervention was that help to either side could quickly lead to a new big European war. France had initially helped the Spanish government with some planes and weapons, but when Britain made it clear that any continued help would threaten the *Entente Cordiale*, France quickly signed the non-intervention agreement. By the end of August 1936, almost all European countries had signed the agreement, including Mussolini's Italy, Hitler's Germany, Salazar's Portugal and Stalin's Soviet Union.

However, already before the nationalists' coup Italy and Germany had promised to support Franco's rebel forces and never had any intention to honour the non-intervention agreement. During the course of the war, Italy committed a total of 73,000 men, close to 800 aircraft, more than 3,000 artillery pieces, some 160 light tanks, 3,500 machine guns, 10,000 lorries, 240,000 firearms, 91 warships and 58 submarines. Germany also sent tonnes of weapons and hundreds of instructors to train Franco's soldiers and airmen in modern warfare. Germany's Condor Legion – around 19,000 men, 40 light tanks and 100 aeroplanes – infamously bombed the Basque market town of Guernica for three hours on 26 April 1937. It was an act that horrified Europe and became immortalised in Picasso's famous painting, *Guernica*.

Portugal supported Franco's rebels mainly by facilitating transport of supplies from Portuguese ports to units in western Spain. A further 10,000 Portuguese volunteers, mainly soldiers and officers on extended leave, crossed the border to help Franco.

Desperate, the Spanish government turned to the Soviet Union for help. Stalin agreed to help but didn't want to openly breach the non-intervention agreement. So the Soviet Union began to covertly send some 700 aircraft, 350 tanks, 1,500 artillery pieces and many thousand rifles, plus some 3,000 military instructors and technicians to train Spanish soldiers and pilot the Soviet aeroplanes and tanks. This was just a fraction of the support Franco's nationalists were getting from Italy and Germany. In addition, the clandestine shipments were slow and often stopped by patrolling British and French naval vessels or attacked or sunk by the Italians and the Germans.

The Soviet Union also ran big support campaigns, asking its citizens to donate money in support of Spain's government and the republican side, but not to volunteer – probably because Stalin didn't want regular Soviets to be exposed to foreign ideas and cultures. Stalin was also convinced that Germany would soon attack the Soviet Union, at which point all able-bodied men would be needed at home.

50,000 foreign volunteers go to Spain

Instead, the Soviet Union called on communist parties all over the world to encourage volunteers to go to Spain to fight the fascists. Some 50,000 from more than 50 nations answered the call. About half were communists, while the rest were social democrats, anarchists, Trotskyists and people who were simply anti-fascist. These included some 10,000 Jews from many countries, including Palestine, who were very aware of Germany's persecutions of its Jewish population. The largest national groups were



This photograph of the British Battalion was taken in 1938 by Robert Capa, the war photographer who became famous for his photographic reportage from the Spanish Civil War.

from France (some 10,000), Italy (4,300), Germany (4,000), United Kingdom (4,000), USA (4,000), Canada (2,000), Poland (2,000), Czechoslovakia (1,400), Yugoslavia (1,500), and Cuba (1,100). Most of them joined one of the five main International Brigades run by the Comintern (the Communist International). The rest of the volunteers joined forces set up by Trotskyists, anarchists and Catalanian and Basque separatists.

The United States, although not a signatory to the non-intervention agreement, had immediately adopted the non-intervention stance and stopped all arms' deliveries to the Spanish government. Yet, at the same time, the US allowed arms' sales to Germany and Italy to continue and allowed American oil companies to sell oil to Franco's nationalists. Americans were soon forbidden to travel to Spain, so American volunteers travelled via Mexico. This was the only country which, throughout the war, both openly opposed the non-intervention agreement and supported the Spanish government and republican side. The Mexicans sent financial help and some 20,000 rifles, as well as machine guns, artillery and aeroplanes.

In March 1938, France changed its non-intervention stance and helped the Spanish government by allowing arms (mainly from the Soviet Union) across the French border. This was because France had realised that a Franco-run Spain could lead to France being surrounded by an Italy-Germany-Spain fascist alliance. But the help from France came too late to save the Spanish Republic – not only because of the

overwhelming strength of Franco's troops, but also because of frequent infighting between the republic's many political factions.

The British government, convinced that appeasing Germany was the only way to avoid a new big war, insisted on non-intervention to the very end, even after Germany had annexed Austria in March 1938.

The 4,000 British volunteers

For many years, the established figure for the number of British volunteers was 2,500, but in 2011 the National Archives released files from the MI5, which list more than 4,000 people who went to Spain as republican volunteers and therefore were registered by MI5 as potentially dangerous. Barcelona University's large database about the International Brigades has details of 2,975 British-born individuals who joined the brigades, mainly the 15th brigade's two English language battalions, the British and the American. As the International Brigades were run by the Stalinist Comintern, many British preferred instead to fight in the Trotskyist POUM militia or the various anarchist units, and some joined the separatist Basque and Catalanian forces. However, in spite of being Comintern-controlled, only 49% of the volunteers in the British Battalion were registered communists. Since most volunteers came and went during the war, the British Battalion was never more than 500-600 men strong.

In addition, there was a very small number of British, probably less than 100, who fought on Franco's side. Some of these were ardent fascists, mainly 'Blackshirts', supporters of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists, while others were primarily conservative Catholics.

At least 16 Kensingtonians joined the International Brigades. The most famous of them was Lewis Clive, a former Etonian and Christ Church, Oxford law student who had won a gold medal in rowing at the 1932 Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. In the early 1930s, realising the threat of fascism, he moved left politically, joining both the Fabian Society and the Labour Party and became a friend of Clement Attlee, leader of the Labour Party from 1935 and prime minister 1945-1951. Attlee, who had been a serving major in the Territorial Army until 1931, visited the British Battalion in November 1937 during a trip to Spain, and its 1st Company was thereafter renamed Major Attlee Company.



Kensingtonian Lewis Clive in Spain, killed aged 28 at the Battle of Ebro in August 1938.

In 1937, Lewis Clive was elected Labour councillor for St Charles ward in North Kensington. The following February, he arrived in Spain and joined the British Battalion. He quickly advanced to become company commander but was killed around 1 August 1938 during the Battle of the Ebro, when his battalion was trying to capture a hill near Gandesa in southern Catalonia.

In September 1938, the republican government decided to disband the International Brigades and send all the volunteers home. This was in the misguided hope that removal of the foreign soldiers would lead to Franco sending the German and Italian forces home as well. Following a big farewell parade through Barcelona, the brigades were formally dissolved on 28 October 1938. The 305 surviving British volunteers arrived in London on 7 December 1938, having lost 500 people. In total, the International Brigades lost some 5,000. General Franco, of course, never sent the Italians and Germans home, so they continued fighting until the war formally ended on 1 April 1939.

The Basque refugee children

Already in the autumn of 1936 there had been discussions about evacuating children from the war zones, and the Spanish government sent thousands of families from Madrid to camps along the eastern coast, mainly around Valencia. But as the war proceeded on the Northern front in February 1937, the newly autonomous Basque government appealed for foreign governments to accept child refugees – *niños de la guerra* – for a few months. The government of France accepted 20,000, Belgium 5,000, Soviet Union around 3,000, Switzerland 800, Mexico 460, and Denmark some 100, while other countries sent money to help France with their 20,000 children. Together, those six countries took in more than 29,000 children.

3,881 children allowed into Britain

Stanley Baldwin's government refused to allow any refugee children into Britain, perhaps because Franco was against children being sent abroad or because Baldwin agreed with some other government ministers that such children could infect Britain with communism. However, the Conservative MP Katharine Stewart-Murray, Duchess of Atholl, was a staunch anti-fascist and supported the Spanish government's fight against Franco, Hitler and Mussolini. As president of the cross-party National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief, she repeatedly urged the British government to accept the Basque children. Graphic posters by the artist Felicity Ashbee, who lived in Kensington until she died aged 95 in 2008, bolstered the humanitarian cause.

Artist Felicity Ashbee, Kensington resident and campaigner, with her posters and the mosaic on Portobello Road in 2006, aged 93.



Finally, after the devastating German bombing of Guernica in April 1937, there was such outrage in Britain that the government felt compelled to allow a single boatload of refugee children to enter the UK, together with accompanying adults, but only on the condition that no public money was used to support them. The children had to be entirely supported by volunteers and voluntary funds, and the government demanded that the newly formed Basque Children's Committee must guarantee 10 shillings per week (equivalent to £46 today) for the care and education of each child.

The *SS Habana*, which left Bilbao on 21 May 1937, was a transatlantic passenger liner with cabins for 800 passengers. On this journey, it carried 3,881 children aged 7 to 15, 121 helpers (mainly girls aged 17–20), 99 teachers, 16 priests and two British doctors. The children were crammed into the ship and slept where they could, some even in the lifeboats. The journey was short but extremely rough in the Bay of Biscay and most of the children and staff were seasick. Among the children who disembarked were Jesus 'Cai' Martinez (later a Royal Crescent resident) and his brother Jose. They saw thousands of locals lining the quayside: "We arrived a week after the coronation of George VI. The lights and bunting were still up and we thought they had decorated the streets to welcome us".

From tent camp to 'colonies'

All 3,881 children were then sent in busloads to a large temporary, tented camp in fields at North Stoneham in Hampshire. The camp had been created in less than two weeks by volunteers who



Above: *SS Habana* docks at Southampton in May 1937, overflowing with 3,881 refugee children and their helpers. Below: the refugees' eventual onward journey from the tented camp was to homely 'colonies' in Britain.



Future PMs visit the British Battalion in November 1937 and July 1938 respectively: Clement Attlee (with José Miaja, defender of Madrid) and Edward Heath.



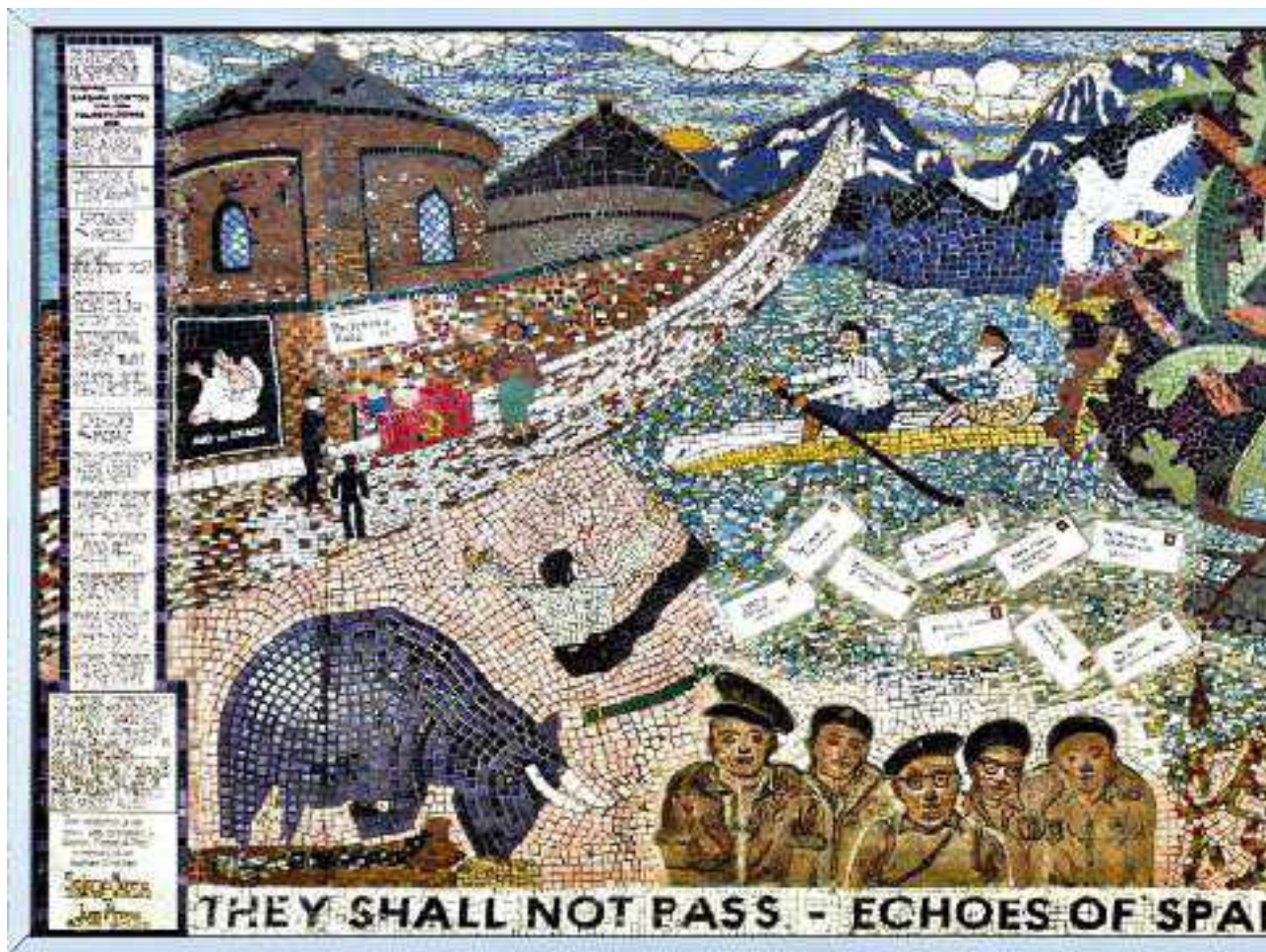
The children and their helpers and teachers, led by their 16 priests, celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi in the tent camp in Hampshire on 27 May 1937.

had worked round the clock to prepare it, among them many young scouts. The Basque government wanted the children to be placed in 'colonies' of various sizes, each with its own teachers and helpers. From June to mid-September 1937, groups of children were dispersed to some 105 colonies that had been established across England and Wales. Spanish staff were assisted by local staff, and the colonies were financed by individual volunteers, church groups, local businesses, trade unions, the Salvation Army and most of all the Catholic Church. Four colonies were set up in southern Wales, where there was already a significant Basque presence, as hundreds of Basque miners had come to work in the Welsh coal mines 30 years earlier.

Over the next two years, most children returned to Spain. By the start of World War II in September 1939 there were only some 400 still in Britain and by 1948 only 238. Many of these had by then formed their own families here or had no family to return to. Some more left for Spain in the 1960s and early 1970s, but most of them soon returned to Britain, realising that Britain had become their home and Spain just a place to visit and meet relatives.

The story of the mosaic

The mosaic was created in 2006, as a commemoration 70 years after the civil war. It was made by the Echoes of Spain Mosaic Group (ESMG), which included the daughters and sons of British republican volunteers, the Basque child refugees, and Spanish refugees who arrived after Franco's victory, together with a handful of survivors from these original groups. The design was created from families' accounts by artist Maureen Pepper, while the mosaic itself was laid as a collective project in weekly meetings. It was put in place and inaugurated on 18 October 2006 by the then



The commemorative mosaic on Portobello Road by No. 281, 5x2m, includes Lewis Clive and British volunteers; Emilia Santana, Elvira Medrano, Juan Moreno Snr; Mari Pepa Colomer, Spain's first woman pilot; Guernica bombing; SS *Habana*. Full details: www.westwayarchive.com/echoes-of-spain. Photo: Thomas Blomberg

Spanish ambassador, Carlos Miranda, and Jack Jones (general secretary of the TGWU/Unite union 1968–1978), who fought in Spain from 1936 to 1938 and was seriously wounded in the Battle of Ebro, where Lewis Clive died.

In 2009, the ESMG group published *Echoes of Spain 1936–1939*, a booklet which can be consulted in the Local Studies & Archives in the Kensington Central Library. It gives a background to why and how the mosaic was created and tells the stories of 16 Kensington volunteers who went to Spain and six of the Spanish refugees and their families who settled in Kensington. (See also: www.westwayarchive.com/echoes-of-spain)

The 5x2 metre mosaic, at the north end of Portobello Road, may be difficult to spot, but it is in a very fitting location: from the late 1930s to the mid 1950s, North Kensington's largest group of foreign-born was from Spain. Some were *SS Habana niños* who remained in Britain, while others came as refugees from Franco's Spain in the 1940s and 1950s. Most eventually returned home, especially when Spain transitioned back to democracy in the late 1970s, but many remained, having married and established roots here.



Kensington's Spanish corner

The area's Spanish heritage is still evident. Just some 50 metres south of the mosaic, we find two Spanish restaurants in Tavistock Piazza, the traffic-free part of Tavistock Road next to Portobello Road: *La Bodega* and *La Plaza Tapas Bar*. A further 20 metres down, we have *R. Garcia & Sons*, probably London's largest Spanish supermarket, established in 1957. And if we walk northwards, we find *La Plaza Spanish Deli* at 288 Portobello Road and, at 317 Portobello Road, we have *Instituto Español Vicente Cañada Blanch*, the Spanish school run by the Spanish Embassy. The road's name derives from the Panamanian port Portobelo, which the Spanish and the British fought over several times between 1601 and 1741. When the British captured the port in 1739, the name Portobello was given to various places and streets across the British Isles. That the Spanish retook the port just two years later was conveniently overlooked...

Thomas Blomberg is a trustee of the Kensington Society.

Local Studies & Archives at Kensington Central Library: archives@rbkc.gov.uk for relevant material.

Pictures courtesy of University of Southampton's Los niños project, Basque Children of

'37 Association UK, Heaven's East, Southampton Stories, Refugee History, Marx Memorial Library, Google Street View, XV International Brigade in Spain and The Virtual Museum of the Spanish Civil War.

Dinosaurs to DNA

by Helen Murlis

From primeval revelation to hi-tech discovery, the Natural History Museum's gardens transform our understanding of nature.

SCIENTISTS HAVE DECLARED A PLANETARY EMERGENCY and the world's leading natural history museums, including our 'local', are pursuing an Earth Systems approach. This takes account of the interdependence between the geosphere – the earth's atmosphere, oceans and land – and the biosphere, the life they support in the context of global change. Dr Sandra Knapp, world-renowned botanist and taxonomist, became Director of Research at the Natural History Museum (NHM) in January this year and said: "Together we can show the world the critical importance of collections-based research for understanding and protecting our world and for creating active advocates for the planet". Her thoughts are amplified by Sir David Attenborough, long a keen supporter of NHM, who talked from the museum's steps and featured the garden's dragonflies in his recent BBC *Wild London* documentary.

The process to bring alive the museum's collections and research beyond the interior into the gardens was launched formally in 2020, spearheading its UK-wide Urban Nature Project. It is important to recognise just how radical is the shift in thinking about



Above and overleaf: *Fern*, the bronze-cast diplodocus in the Evolution Garden.

the NHM's garden space across its existence. Back in 1879, Waterhouse's original Italianate garden design with fountains was sacrificed for a simpler concept, enabling expenditure on decorative cast-iron perimeter railings and impressive gates. In World War 1, part of the garden was used for allotments and a farm, including chickens and a few pedigree pigs. In the 1930s, sandpits enabled the decomposition of whale carcasses before adding their skeletons to the collections indoors.

When I first visited the garden as a small child in the 1950s, before the Clean Air Acts, I saw a sooty space with nondescript shrubs and grass in front of Alfred Waterhouse's blackened Romanesque-Gothic building. I didn't linger; I wanted to see dinosaurs. Back in World War II, an underground bunker which had served as a regional war control room was sealed until 1976, while the surface area was used as a tennis court. Both disappeared with the construction of the new Palaeontology building, opened in 1976. The first serious attempt to enhance the visitor experience of the museum garden came in 1995, with the opening of the Wildlife Garden and pond at the west side, while the east side hosted open-air photography exhibitions, the London Fashion Week marquee and a winter ice-rink. It was the new scientific and curatorial thinking, evolving since the 2010s, that led to the transformation of the five-acre garden site. The gardens were opened in 2024. They were the first of the Museum's ambitious transformations as it approaches the 150th anniversary in 2031. A new gallery will open each year until then.

Keith Jennings, Director of Estates and Masterplanning, told me that the aim with the site was to create "a living and working outdoor gallery...to explain extraordinary changes in nature over time, how to respond and adapt to climate change and open visitors' eyes". Among numerous contributors, his principal co-creators were the museum's specialist experts together with project lead architects Feilden Fowles and landscape architects J & L Gibbons. Their brief was to reflect the museum collections and appeal to people of all ages and interest levels – from the NHM's scientific community of some 400 working scientists and their UK and international counterparts to students, tourists, local residents, parents and schoolchildren, even infants captivated by sensory treats. The resulting garden areas highlight over two billion years of natural evolution on the east side and current scientific research and educational activity on the western side.

The Evolution Garden

On the museum's east side, this garden has a strong wow factor. Dr Paul Kenrick, one of the NHM's Principal Researchers, told me: "We wanted people to understand the scale of geological time" and Edmund Fowles, partner at Feilden Fowles, describes the resulting Evolution Time Wall he designed as a key feature "to take visitors from Precambrian rocks up to chalk boulders, along with plants and creatures from extinct to living". This highlights what few know, that "the UK has one of the most diverse geologies, which conditions what we can grow and how we live." Neil Davidson, partner at J & L Gibbons, elaborates on "getting stones to tell a story. We were even able to demonstrate plate tectonics in motion". Accuracy and legal availability were crucial: finding the right samples, negotiating with rock suppliers, visiting quarries, talking to local geologists and working out how to fit at least 26 different rock types into this stunning display.







Evolution Garden with Carboniferous Period foliage and restaurant at right.

The 2.7 billion-year-old Lewisian Gneiss came from a causeway on the island of Barra in the Outer Hebrides, gleefully collected by Dr Kenrick; Cambrian Slate from the Penrhyn quarry near Bangor, North Wales and Cretaceous-period chalk from a quarry in Northern Ireland. Volcanic Red Scoria and Columnar Basalt had to be sourced from a quarry in Iceland. The Kensington Society's Chairman, Amanda Frame, donated two Sarsen stones from her Wiltshire garden, identical to those used for building nearby Stonehenge. Creating the chronologically correct placement of the rocks involved transporting the chosen samples to a rented trailer park in Essex and fitting this numbered 3D jigsaw together on the ground into a supersized mosaic to produce the current design. This was transported back to Kensington for assembly and labelling to create the wonderful geological experience visitors now see. Each metre in the garden represents five million years' evolution.

Dr Kenrick explained to me that, "In the first part of the garden there are no plants, because life on land consisted of microbes. It is a sea of gravel until a visible ground cover of mosses and liverworts appear, followed in the Carboniferous Period (c. 350-300 million years ago) by tree-like ferns, horsetails, cycads and primitive conifers. The garden's tree ferns are a replica of the kind of vegetation found in coal forests", sourced from the temperate microclimate of the Isle of Arran. The coppice of rare Wollemi Pines, first identified in the Blue Mountains of Australia only in 1994, came in part from the antipodes and mainly from new planting in the UK.

Fern, the Mesozoic-era dinosaur and centrepiece of this garden, is the new bronze diplodocus – a cast of *Dippy*, the museum's much-loved 1901 plaster cast. This project was guided by the NHM's Dr Paul Barrett, a leading dinosaur expert: "Learning from



A geological feat: the Evolution Time Wall of rocks begins 2.7 billion years ago.

nature, we made 3D models of all 292 individual bones.” The way in which *Fern* was made light enough to enable it to hold together and for its structure, including long neck and tail, to withstand the London weather, is an artistic and technological feat realised in Madrid by Structure Workshop and Facte Artum, vividly explained on the museum website’s *Fern* video. Among further animals, the team also made *Hypsiliphodon*, the dog-like dinosaur nearby, and the shrew-like, much-stroked *Megazostrodon ruderæ* on a low rock by the path.

The stark contrast of the 1970s Palaeontology building with the main building, which some critics disliked, has been softened with the addition of the Garden Kitchen. Fowles describes his restful, very popular events and eating place as “a simple low-tech design. The timber in the building and the three shades of stone at its base, which resonate with the building above and the geology of the Evolution Timeline Wall, were the lowest-carbon way of doing this”. Close collaboration with J & L Gibbons on the disposition of plants, trees and pathways helped complete the harmonious effect.

The Nature Discovery Garden

The larger west side of the garden has changed hugely too. Its focus is on biodiversity now and into the future, highlighting the importance of urban diversity and the possibilities and processes of nature recovery. Within the garden are southern UK urban habitats – woodland, wetland, grasslands – all places where individuals and groups can sit quietly, as well as meet and learn. One of the two open-air classrooms in this garden is in the middle of the pond network, a living laboratory. The team working on the creation and development of this garden described it to me as, “a place



The pond's Data Ecosystem sensor signals hi-tech innovation in the Nature Discovery Garden.



Listening Funnels make insect activity audible.



Nature Activity Centre detail.

of continuing scientific innovation, using newly available technologies. Measuring is going on all the time, looking at environmental DNA by sampling soil and using the new bioacoustics network...we want people to pick up ideas to take away and increase local involvement”.

Launched in September last year, a sensor network using AWS technology collects live data, making the Museum gardens the most intensively studied urban nature site of its kind in the world. The network of 25 sensors has been installed across the Nature Discovery Garden, gathering a wide range of environmental and acoustic data which feeds into the museum’s Data Ecosystem. This includes temperature and humidity readings to monitor microclimate variations, and underwater acoustic recordings from the pond, alongside the sounds of insect wings, bird calls, and ambient urban noise such as traffic, all helping scientists understand how nature interacts with its surroundings. On BioBlitz days throughout the year, species are counted by wildlife experts and public volunteers to check how insects, birds, plants, animals and fungi are faring. This process has identified several new species in recent years, as well as tracking gains and losses.

A future-themed garden lies close to the museum’s 2009 Darwin Centre, whose glass walls reflect heat. This warmer garden is planted with Mediterranean and hotter weather trees and plants, which are now just beginning to survive in London as climate change affects our weather. These include stone pines, olive, fig and pomegranate trees as well as *Cistus* and other plants and herbs found much further south in Europe. Their survival and ability to flourish here is being closely monitored. Dr Kenrick put this warming climate in fascinating historical perspective, connecting the knowledge embedded in the Evolution Garden: “London has been tropical before, we know this from fossil records and show this in the Evolution Garden – we had a subtropical river delta such as exists in South-East Asia now. At the end of the Evolution Garden, we also show climate cooling which leads to the development of grasslands, prairies and temperate vegetation. This affects animals and marks the arrival of grazing animals, including antelopes and horses whose dentition reflects the eating of grasses.”

Education is core to the Urban Nature Project, particularly in the Nature Discovery and future gardens. For example, children were consulted about what they want to see when they visit these gardens. On the NHM website you can hear them delightfully explaining their choices of plants for the gardens’ planters. That community project was part of an impressive range of activities for small children, school visits and also programmes for adult groups, with special needs empathetically taken into account. The new Nature Activity Centre, also designed by Feilden Fowles, has welcoming spaces for flexible learning and for gardeners and volunteers. Lauren Hyams, Head of Learning and National programmes, adds: “We have so far linked with 12 museums outside London, working with teachers, students and partners, and reached 22,000 people across the country to explore urban nature”.

Sustainability has underpinned this whole garden project. The low-carbon objective meant avoiding the use of diesels, using low-carbon concrete, high-specification natural materials, recycling onsite materials and no wasted water. The £25 million

budget was met by generous charitable, corporate and individual donors, acknowledged prominently across the Museum. For the future, frontline responsibility for the garden is in the hands of horticultural expert Suzanne Patman, appointed Head Gardener just a few months ago. Working closely with the scientists and the Garden Board, together with a team of two full-time gardeners, part-time help and some 45 volunteers, she has been relishing the challenges of caring for such a complicated range of habitats: “It will take me a full year to know how this garden works with the seasons.”

Learning is taking place at all levels here, fulfilling the Urban Nature Project’s aim: “an inspirational case study for repurposing urban spaces to increase biodiversity and provide urban cooling, offering recreational and wellbeing benefits and enabling scientific research to inspire people, and in particular young people, to develop a love for nature and become the naturalists of the future” Already the recipient of many important awards, no doubt more will come for the NHM gardens as the journey of discovery continues towards the Museum’s 150th anniversary in 2031.



Pond network. Architects Feilden Fowles and J & L Gibbons were key for the Museum’s vision.
All photographs: © The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London

NHM website: nhm.ac.uk

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Scientific Reference: Baker, E., Kenrick, P., Knapp, S., McCarter, T., & Tweddle, J (2025).

‘Catalysts for change: Museum gardens in a planetary emergency’, *Plants, People, Planet*, 1–10.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ppp3.70100>

Helen Murlis, Kensington resident since the 1970s, a former Chair of Royal Crescent Garden Committee for 28 years and Human Resources Consultant.



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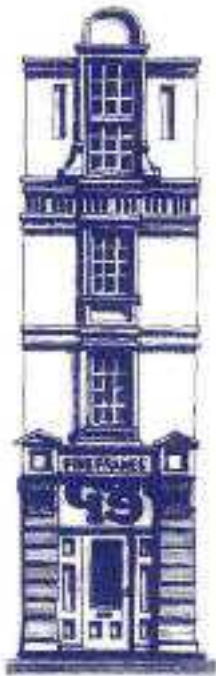
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These award-winning London sausages are officially the best in the UK

Written by
India Lawrence
Staff Writer, UK
Saturday 29 March 2025

A 175-year-old butcher from Holland Park won big at the prestigious Smithfield Awards this week



Vegetarians and vegans, look away now. Everyone else, listen up. The Smithfield Awards have just crowned Britain's best butchers for 2025, and the best sausages in the UK are right here in London. If you're planning on making a sausage sarnie anytime soon, these are the pork products you're going to want to get your hands on.

Britain's best bangers are made at Lidgate Butchers, a 175-year-old butchers shop in Holland Park. At the prestigious awards, organised by the Q Guild of Butchers, Lidgate was named Best in Class for its Gloucester old spot sausage. The saussies scored 68 points out of a possible 70, and were described by judges as 'faultless' with 'a lovely balance of tender pork and herb mix'. Here are the sausages in question.



Lidgate also won a Diamond Award in the game category for its rabbit paupiette with wild mushroom – a thin slice of rabbit rolled up with the veggies stuffed in the centre.

The awards which have run for more than 30 years recognise the UK's finest craft butchery products including best traditional pork sausage, burger, home-cured bacon and black pudding. Products are awarded a Bronze, Silver or Gold award by a panel of independent industry judges, with all Gold products in each category going head to head for the coveted Diamond award.

Danny Lidgate from Lidgate Butchers said: 'We're always looking at trying to create new and innovative products and it means a lot for us to win two Best in Class awards. We've won Smithfield Awards before but getting one in the game category means a lot to us, especially as this is a new product. Our manager Steven Owens came up with the game recipe. He's been working with Team GB and got a lot of inspiration from them for this.'

The Planning Report 2025-26

Introduction

Key developments since November 2025 impact the work of the Kensington Society's Planning Committee and are discussed in the first part of the report.

1) A cyber attack on the Council's website put the planning website out of action from 24 November to 8 March 2026, bringing all planning casework to a halt.

2) The Government passed the Planning and Infrastructure Act on 18 December 2025, which will be implemented as and when its regulations are introduced.

3) Just before Christmas, the Government launched a major consultation on a set of standardised national planning policies – the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) – which could replace policies in our well-honed Local Plan.

Cyber attack

One of the biggest shocks this past year was the cyber attack on RBKC's website on 24 November 2025. This affected the full range of services, including the planning website, making existing case files inaccessible. No new applications could be registered or decisions made on existing cases and most appeal cases were put on hold. We have yet to establish how big a backlog we will have to handle, but it is likely to be over 1,700 applications. The Council did however manage to prepare a 352-page report on the Earl's Court planning application, which was approved on 16 December (see further report below under Major Cases).

The Government's Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025

This Act received Royal Assent on the 18 December 2025. The regulations which will govern the implementation of this Act are to follow. The background to this Act lies in the Government's housing target. This aims for 1.5 million new homes to be completed in England by the end of this parliament, of which 88,000 per year have been proposed for London. This has resulted in most of the Government's efforts being directed toward increasing new housing starts.

The Act introduces a National Scheme of Delegation to determine which planning applications are decided by local planning committees or by council officers alone. It may sound alarmist, but this spells the end of local democratic control – almost all applications will be decided by officers behind closed doors. This would be a reversion to secrecy in decision-making that existed before decisions were first made in public as a result of the Access to Information Act 1985, over 40 years ago. Back then, RBKC was one of the last councils to enable the public to have access to information about planning applications and have access to the planning committee to witness decision making.

For 40 years, Kensington's communities have been able to both witness and

influence decisions where planning officers have not fully appreciated the likely impact of proposals. With the Act's National Scheme of Delegation, involving two tiers A and B, even fewer big cases would go to the Planning Committee, removing safeguards that democratic decision-making provides.

Tier A for minor and routine applications would delegate all householder applications, such as extensions, and all housing applications for up to 10 homes or minor commercial developments to planning officers. The Government's aim that Tier A applications *must* be delegated would remove such applications from scrutiny by a planning committee. We consider that this category of applications, especially in conservation areas, can be controversial and, if three or more objections are received, the Council should continue to be able to call them in to be decided by the Planning Committee.

Tier B would be for schemes of 10–49 additional homes. This tier would also include other developments which potentially raise significant economic, social or environmental issues for a local area, such as the recent example of adult gaming centres, and more complex applications. These would be subject to RBKC's Chairman and Chief Planning Officer of the Planning Committee agreeing whether or not they should go to committee.

The result of the implementation of this Act will be that neither the public nor councillors will see the officer's report for an application until after the decision is made. Currently, applications that go to committee enable both local knowledge and councillors' judgement to contribute to the decision. We will lose public accountability and the essential training of councillors, who learn on the job rather than being thrown in at the deep end for the very largest schemes.

These changes will be implemented in stages via Parliamentary Regulations.

Proposed new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)

This national planning guidance is key to how the English planning system operates and has been revised several times since 2012. The latest proposed NPPF is a substantial revision. The government has proposed the creation of a set of national development management policies, which could override our local planning policies. It would be a completely revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). The consultation document arrived just before Christmas for a response by 10 March, which the Kensington Society complied with.

What are the implications for us?

The proposed new NPPF:

- adopts a one-size-fits-all approach whether for small towns or Central London. Indeed, London does not get a mention. The NPPF is not a good fit for London, let alone for Kensington and Chelsea.
- fails to recognise that both the London Plan and RBKC's Local Plan have developed over the last 25 years, are closely tailored to our needs, have been drawn

"The Act will remove the safeguards that democratic decision-making provides"

up with the participation of the local communities and have been tested at an examination.

- instructs local authorities not to “duplicate, substantially restate or modify” the policies in the NPPF when revising their Local Plan. At the first review, any “duplicate” policies would be cut out. The RBKC Local Plan would therefore no longer be a ‘one-stop shop’ with all the relevant policies in one document. Residents would also need to consult the NPPF.
- states that supplementary planning documents should be limited to setting out locally-specific design standards – a majority of our supplementary planning documents would be at risk.
- omits any policies that guide where tall buildings might be suitable – currently in the London Plan and our local plan. They are not even mentioned.
- includes design guidance as if it were policy, especially detailed design issues.

The new London Plan

The Greater London Authority (GLA), led by the Mayor of London, is responsible for the new London Plan, still in preparation. Following last year’s consultation document, *Towards a new London Plan*, to which we replied last June, everything has gone quiet. The draft London Plan was originally due to be published in early 2026 but is now scheduled for June this year. The GLA will need to assess the likely impact of the new NPPF, as to whether or not it constrains the scope of the new London Plan.

The key issue will be how London’s housing target of 88,000 net additional homes per year will be distributed between the London boroughs. The Royal Borough’s target is likely to rise, although it will be severely limited by capacity constraints. Even the consents for the Opportunity Areas at Kensal Canalside and Earl’s Court, are unlikely to produce

“Everything has gone quiet”

 much housing in the first ten years. Both will take a long time to start delivering completed buildings and both will take up to 15–20 years to finish entirely. There are few other sites that could provide even 50 homes, which suggests that major sites would only be created by large-scale demolition, which could be a threat to our conservation areas.

RBKC Planning

The Society has been pressing the Council for the last 15 years to build in greater community engagement, primarily for developers to present their schemes to the local community well before submitting their application. The National Planning Policy Framework 2023 promoted early engagement, but developers generally choose to present their

“Community engagement?”

 proposals when they have finalised their application.

Development Forums

In 2020, the Council was persuaded to follow the example of many London Boroughs and to convene Development Forums sessions for the most major applications, enabling early engagement. These events are chaired by RBKC and give an opportunity for a developer to present their proposals and respond to questions at a public meeting, open to anyone. In practice, these events have been held at a stage when plans and designs have been concluded and negotiated with the planners, giving little scope for feedback to be taken on board. This can leave residents frustrated and angry, but at least these forums have the benefit that planning officers can hear what the public have to say, before an application is submitted to the Council.

Factual Briefing

The ‘factual briefing’ stage, adopted by RBKC back in 2012, is held at a later stage of the application. This is shortly before an application is to be considered by the Planning Committee, when proposals cannot be significantly changed. The main purpose of the factual briefing is to familiarise Planning Committee members with proposals in advance of making a decision at committee. Between 2012 and 2018 more than 20 major applications had a factual briefing. Importantly, Residents’ Associations in the relevant area were invited and were able to ask questions of the applicant/developer. These were based on deep local knowledge of a site and its surroundings, knowledge which was not always apparent to applicants and their consultants, nor to planning officers.

After 2018 these factual briefings lapsed. In the case of the recent Kensal Canalside and Earl’s Court applications (see Major Cases below), the Kensington Society requested the reinstatement of factual briefings to help members of the Planning Committee understand these huge and complicated developments. In practice, these proved to be merely an opportunity for the developer to have a free run to present their case, with few questions from members of the planning committee. Contrary to precedent, a few non-councillors were allowed to attend but not to speak or ask questions at these sessions. We have brought the contradictions of past practice to the attention of the Chief Executive and hope that in the future the non-councillors will be allowed to speak and even ask questions of the developer.

Major Cases

• Kensal Canalside

Plans for this London Plan Opportunity Area date back a decade. The way in which the Council’s position changed over the years was explained in an article in our Society’s Winter Newsletter. This ‘island site’ with a single road connection to Ladbroke Grove, which was initially considered suitable for 2,000 homes in all, has morphed into one where over 4,000 housing units are now a strong likelihood, as well as one of the largest Sainsbury’s stores in London.

The hybrid application from Ballymore/Sainsbury’s was granted permission by the RBKC Planning Committee last November. An informal coalition of local organisations in North Kensington and Kensal updated their previous objections in the form of a 60-page Residents Briefing Pack. This covered the major shortcomings



Views of the Ballymore-Sainsbury's site, called "Towpath Gardens".



of the proposals: poor public transport accessibility, poor site access/egress, decontamination risks, lack of affordable homes, and heritage harm to Kensal Cemetery.

This detailed work was done in an attempt to counter the unsatisfactory 'Factual Briefing' session referred to above, at which claims from the applicant team went unchallenged. The same set of local groups, which included the Kensington Society, covered these and other subjects, having to talk at speed within the 15 minutes allowed for objectors. The 4:1 decision by the RBKC Planning Committee was predictable but disappointing all the same.

As is required for very large applications, the Council's proposal to grant planning consent has been referred to the Mayor. Half a dozen detailed requests have already been submitted, for the Mayor either to "direct refusal", which would lead to public inquiry, or to call-in the application and hold a hearing before making his decision.

What is often not appreciated is that the Sainsbury's site is only a part of the total former gasworks site. St William, a division of Berkeley Homes, to the west of the

Sainsbury's site, plans to deliver around 775 new homes. This western part of the Opportunity Area is even more cut off from the surrounding road network and has minimal levels of access to public transport. This application has been submitted and awaits decision.

• **Earl's Court Redevelopment**

After several years of engagement, a hybrid planning application (a mixture of detailed and outline proposals) for the RBKC section of the Earl's Court and West Kensington Opportunity Area was submitted by the Earls Court Development Company (ECDC) in 2024 and further changes were submitted in September 2025. The Planning Committee meeting was scheduled for 9 December.

As with Kensal Canalside the Kensington Society, working with the Earl's Court Society and other local groups, persuaded the Council to hold a Factual Briefing session for the five members of the Planning Committee. We were worried that these councillors would be tackling a large, 352-page report on their own. We were concerned about the lack of experience dealing with such large-scale developments, as well as discovering that a few of the councillors had not attended the planning training sessions.





Various computer-generated image, ECDC proposals for Earl's Court development.



The briefing session on the Earl's Court development was held on 19 November 2025. The ECDC was to make a presentation and RBKC Planning Committee members would be able to ask questions. The Planning Chairman declined our request to speak. The ECDC made a long, well-rehearsed presentation, but the questions from councillors were limited, lacking an understanding of the gravity of their decision.

Before the application could go to the RBKC Planning Committee the cyber attack happened. This meant that the Council's arrangements were in chaos as the planning



Entrance to the Ballymore-Sainsbury's site by Ladbroke Grove.

website was out of action. Nevertheless, the planning officers managed to produce a report, and the meeting took place only a week later than scheduled, on 16 December.

The Kensington Society, the Earl's Court Society and other local residents managed to secure 15 minutes for our presentations, covering:

- the scale, density and height of buildings (which exceeded the maximum height specified in the Local Plan)
- transport issues (the need for step-free access and to upgrade the capacity of both the Piccadilly Line and all three stations)
- heritage issues, especially the impact on both the Grade I-listed St Cuthbert's Church and Grade-I listed Brompton Cemetery
- affordable housing
- local facilities.

The ECDC did not respond to these concerns and, sadly, the members of the Planning Committee asked few questions. The final discussion was uneventful and the decision – to notify the Mayor that the Council was minded to grant consent – came as no surprise.

Other important cases

South Kensington Station

As a result of the public inquiry in December 2023, the appeal against RBKC's refusal was allowed. However, this was subject to legal agreements requiring the completion of step-free access to the District and Circle Lines and an upgrade to the safety and capacity of the station before any of the development could be occupied. These legal agreements were secured as a result of the Kensington Society's efforts as a Rule 6 Party at the public inquiry.

There appeared to be little progress for two years, as TfL's agreement with Native Land did not include the upgrade to the station and that TfL did not have the funding. However, without any warning, on 26 January TfL announced that the scheme to provide step-free access to both the District/Central Lines and the Piccadilly Line, as well as a capacity upgrade, including an enlarged ticket hall, now has funding. There is as yet no immediate start date, but works are aimed to start by late 2026, to provide full step-free access to all platforms by 2030.

The total cost is £110m. The Department of Transport is to fund TfL's £60m, RBKC has pledged £12m and potential funders include the Natural History, V&A and Science museums, and Imperial College. There is no contribution from Native Land, TfL's development partner.

Odeon, Kensington High Street

The first phase of this development is almost complete. The cinema frontage has been re-built as a reasonably faithful reproduction of the original façade. Corrosion of the metal reinforcement, known as Regent Street disease, put paid to the idea of retention and restoration.

The new flats and penthouses are accessed from a new entrance to the right of the frontage. The original cinema entrance will be occupied by two new retail units. The



replacement cinema entrance will be on the ground floor of a separate block (formerly the site of the Post Office) to the left of the frontage.

We understand that negotiations are continuing with Everyman, the likely cinema operator, on the basis of 4 screens rather than the 6 included within the planning consent. This will require a revised planning application, and we are keen to see that the space left over from a reduced cinema operation will be put to a use which benefits the local community.

The remaining part of the first phase, extending south along Earl's Court Road is also almost complete with further flats above retail units on the ground floor.

The second phase, which is due to include affordable housing as part of the planning consent, is now starting, but with a different main contractor from phase 1. The developers report continuing difficulty in finding a registered affordable housing provider to purchase and manage the affordable element. However, the development funders have agreed to allow phase 2 to proceed at risk. We understand that conversations are taking place between the developers and the RBKC planning officers.

Palace Place Mansions, Kensington Court

An application was made for four two-storey flats in a double mansard on the roof of this late-Victorian mansion block. The applicant claimed that because the uppermost floor was just under 50% of the size of the lower of the two floors, it did not count as a "floor" for the purpose of fire safety. It was asserted that despite the fact that the uppermost floor was almost entirely bedrooms, the development did not require additional fire safety measures. This case was recommended by the planners to be allowed but, due to objections including from the Society, the Planning Applications Committee refused the application. An appeal has been submitted. This is an example of a case which would not have gone to the committee under the Government's new proposals discussed above and would have been approved.

Further outcomes

Post Offices

The Society has fought for years to keep a Post Office in Kensington High Street. When this service next to the Odeon closed, following local pressure Post Office Ltd took a 10-year lease on 208 Kensington High Street. Finally, after an extensive search, a new Post Office counter was opened within a new Ryman shop at the end of 2025.

Telephone kiosks

The Kensington Society secured the listing by English Heritage of one of the iconic K6 red telephone kiosks at the south-west corner entrance to Kensington Gardens. BT offered Kensington Society this kiosk for adoption, however the trustees agreed that the maintenance



requirements were too onerous and ill-defined to take it on. We hope that another local body will soon be able to adopt it.

Letter boxes

Letter boxes, just like traditional phone boxes, are part of our legacy of historic street furniture – each letter box carries the cypher of the monarch in whose reign it was installed. Kensington has a number of Victorian letter boxes, including two rare hexagonal ‘Penfold’ letter boxes, designed in 1866 by the architect J.W. Penfold. The latest innovation is to install a drawer to receive returned small parcels. These conversions will be limited to Elizabethan letter boxes.



Issues

Heathrow Expansion

Following the Government’s encouragement of bids for a third runway at Heathrow, they announced their choice of a scheme produced by Heathrow Airport. The Kensington Society Planning Committee is gathering information from groups concerned about the likely impact from the projected increase in flight numbers for people living under the aircraft flight paths, if planning approval were given for a third runway at Heathrow. Our objective is to prepare a persuasive case to RBKC Councillors that it is in the best interests of Kensington residents and businesses for the Council to apply to the Planning Inspectorate to be designated as an ‘Interested Party’. This is in relation to the Public Consultation, due to commence in July 2026.



Gambling establishments

There has been much local disquiet over an accumulation of adult gaming centres around Earl’s Court. Our MP has joined others with a similar problem in their constituencies in pressing the Government to introduce a cumulative impact test. The Government has indicated that it will introduce appropriate legislation.

Casinos fall under a different regime and those in Kensington and Chelsea have rarely caused any problems. The borough has only five official casinos with gaming tables and is precluded from allowing any additional ones, although it can allow existing casino licences to be transferred to new premises.

“minimise any risks to vulnerable people”

Last year, the gambling operator Silvertime obtained consent to transfer the licence from a closed casino in Palace Gate to the former NatWest bank building in Notting Hill Gate. The operator had entered into constructive dialogue with the local residents’ associations and local councillors, as a result of which it was agreed that a number of conditions should be applied to the



The former NatWest bank at Notting Hill Gate is to become a casino.

licence to minimise any risks to vulnerable people. Before the casino can open, the operator will need planning permission for the changes to the building, and also for an alcohol licence.

Short-let tourist accommodation

The growth of short-let tourist accommodation properties, such as Airbnb, has reduced the amount of housing in Kensington. This makes a nonsense of any housing targets as the losses have far exceeded the gains from new housing. This growth has been difficult to manage as it is difficult to take enforcement action. The Government is considering registration, although this might merely legitimise what has already been lost. Perhaps the proposal for a tourist tax for overnight stays, which would include short-lets, might reveal the scale of the activity.

Notting Hill Police Station

The Mayor of London has finally decided to sell the old Notting Hill Police Station buildings. There are no details yet on when or how the sale will be organised. We believe that the borough is keen to acquire it so that the buildings can be used for various community purposes, including a doctor's surgery. However, the Mayor is required to obtain best value for it, and it is not clear that the Council would be able to outbid a developer.

The Kensington Society managed to get it designated as an "Asset of Community Value", which means that the seller must offer it first to the local community – but again at a market price, and it is pretty unrealistic to imagine that the local community

could raise the sort of sum required (around £16 million was mentioned when the idea of a sale was first mooted). So the future remains unclear. The Kensington Society will however be pressing for a sale that keeps the premises for some sort of community use.

**“in future there will be only
two 24-hour Police Stations in
the whole of London”**

This decision leaves the borough without any police stations. Kensington and Chelsea are not alone in losing their police stations. The plan is that in future there will be only two 24-hour Police Stations in the whole of London, at Charing Cross and Lewisham. There will be 40 new neighbourhood policing hubs for neighbourhood police teams across London. The Met says that it will approach local partners including councils with the aim of using existing buildings to create dedicated spaces for the local teams. These will not be open to the public.

Residents’ Parking Permits for Second-Home Owners

The Council decided to change the long-established rule that entitlement to a residents’ parking permit required the applicant to spend four nights a week at their primary residence in this borough. In a surprising initiative, based on a decline in the number of permits issued and vacant residents’ parking spaces, the Council proposed to issue permits to people with second homes in the borough. The Society and a number of Residents’ Associations objected to the proposal and suggested that the Council should allow residents to buy daily permits for visitors instead. The Council decided to proceed with 1,000 permits for second-home owners at the same cost as ones for local residents. We understand that there has been a very low take-up.

Cycleway: Holland Park Avenue

A group of Residents’ Associations has formed a collective called Save Our Streets (SOS), on which the Kensington Society is represented. The SOS group opposes Transport for London’s plans to install segregated cycle lanes on Holland Park Avenue without first improving the existing cycle infrastructure round the roundabout.

TfL admit that their plans will cause congestion, driving motor traffic onto neighbouring side streets. To judge by the experience of other roundabouts with cycle lanes, there would be an increased road safety risk for cyclists (at present, although there are many accidents involving motorised traffic, especially motorcycles, the roundabout has proved very safe for cyclists). The SOS group is therefore pressing TfL to start by improving the badly-signed cycle lanes round the periphery of the roundabout, and then to review the need for cycle lanes on the roundabout in the light of experience. Unfortunately, TfL was deaf to these arguments and announced in March 2026 that the scheme would go ahead.

Kensington Society Planning Team:

**Michael Bach (Chair), Vanessa Bartulovic, James Fairrie, Amanda Frame,
Shayan Keyhan-Rad, Sophia Lambert, Barry Munday, Henry Peterson**

March 2026

Reports from Affiliated Societies

2025–26

ASHBURN COURTFIELD GARDENS RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

The never-ending story ...

For more than a decade now our RA, with the support of neighbouring RAs and of the Kensington Society, has been fighting to reclaim the use of Ashburn Gardens Square. On this square, the towering Kensington Forum Hotel was allowed to be constructed despite the square supposedly being protected by a 1931 Act. Over the years, subsequent freehold owners of the site and hotel have made many additions to the hotel structure, which was never meant to happen and has further reduced the garden space. RBKC seem strangely reluctant to either enforce the 1931 Act or to deal with the unauthorised additions. Thus the hotel keeps growing unchecked like a malignancy. From our side we are open to dialogue with owners and Council, but there is very little response. So, to Plan B: we are working on a multi-media campaign (with professional help) to raise awareness of the injustice perpetrated against our neighbourhood .

Many of you may ask, how does this affect me? Well, if it could be done to our area, can you be sure that it could not happen to you too?

Other matters that keep us busy: unscrupulous developers building without planning permission, applying retrospectively and hoping for the best; loss of bin vaults leading to pavement dumping of trash; the ubiquitous menace of dumped e-bikes – the list goes on.

Frederike Maeda, chairman

THE BOLTONS ASSOCIATION

Fulham Road's 'Beach': exciting current developments

The SW10 part of Fulham Road called 'The Beach', between Elm Park Gardens to the east and Redcliffe Gardens to the west, has long been known for its excellent range of shops, a cinema, numerous pubs, restaurants, health amenities and, of course, Chelsea & Westminster Hospital. However, the effect of the covid shutdowns was really dramatic and included the permanent closure of the Picturehouse cinema, the 'temporary closure' of the Virgin Active Health Club (see below) and struggling shops.

Thankfully, this rather depressing picture has gradually begun to change. Daunt's bookshop was replaced by Sloane Street Auctions, Josephine's Restaurant opened and the former Everyman Cinema building is to be refurbished as a branch of The Little House, with a members' gym and swimming pool, two public cinema screens and a cafe. The Goat in

Boots has a refurbished bar and new restaurant, with a 14-room boutique hotel in the upper storeys underway. There are two new veterinary practices, several cafes and health amenities.

It is hoped that during the course of 2026 Virgin Active Health Club and its immediate neighbours (in the south parts of Gilston and Redcliffe Roads) can work constructively together on a new planning application. Currently deemed unacceptable is Virgin Active's proposal to effectively build a new fourth floor – incorporating a 'business centre', bar and roof terrace – onto the building's northeastern elevation, plus installation of new air source heat pumps and associated venting in inappropriate locations.

More generally, the Association has continued its daily early morning 'walkabouts', which monitor large-scale construction works (mainly 'basement dig' activity in Gilston and Tregunter Roads, plus The Little Boltons), together with ongoing review of licensing hours and suchlike. The Association has organised several meetings between RBKC Enforcement and Licensing staff, hospitality premises operators and local residents about Hollywood Road, where RBKC has funded remodelling of the carriageway and pavements to promote a destination venue for 'outdoor dining'. Residents' concerns relate to noisy late-night music and departing patrons in the road.

Becoming a Charitable Incorporated Organisation

Finally, the Association (initially registered as a UK charity in 1970) became a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) in September 2025. This was to ensure the long-term existence of the Association, which would otherwise be severely hampered by the difficulty in recruiting future trustees on an unlimited liability basis. Now, as a CIO entity with limited liability, we have successfully recruited two additional trustees. If other Kensington Society-affiliated residents associations are considering becoming a CIO, they are welcome to contact the Association to discuss how best to undertake the appreciable formalities entailed in securing Charity Commission registration of a CIO entity. It took the Association 18 months to attain!

Calvin Jackson, chairman

CHERRY TREES RESIDENTS' AMENITIES ASSOCIATION (CTRAA)

The Cherry Trees Committee continued to build a strong neighbourhood community holding six very well-attended events in the year and throughout the year representing the membership on policing, traffic, environmental, planning and security matters. Parties included the Summer Party in St Mary Abbots Vicarage Garden, the Autumn Party in Inverness Gardens, the Christmas Party held in The Blue Stoops and two fascinating Zoom meetings with well known members of the local community. Having had membership fees static for seven years, at the beginning of 2025 fees were raised to £15 p.a. per person.

Members continued to be frustrated with delivery riders, cyclists and scooter users flouting the law and often riding aggressively and dangerously. Repeated complaints have

been received about rental bikes and scooters being ridden on pavements and paths and left in inappropriate places. Members have also raised concerns about the increase in theft from shops. The police reported at the AGM that they have done various operations to crack down on cyclists flouting the Highway Code. During the year the police have also used facial recognition to arrest a number of shoplifters.

Following the successful reduction of speed on Kensington Church Street, thanks to the installation of Speed Indication Devices on the street, during 2025 RBKC Council installed enforcement cameras on the Vicarage Gate junction to enforce the “no entry” southbound from Brunswick Gardens. 92 PCNs were issued in the first 19 days of October and 64 in the 1st 19 days of November; the reduction is encouraging.

At the AGM on 11 November 2025, after 15 years of outstanding leadership of The Cherry Trees, Charles Penney retired as Chairman of the association; he remains on the Committee.

Bruce Fair, chairman

EARDLEY CRESCENT RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

The Eardley Crescent Residents' Association remains a strong and active group with over 100 members. The membership, three WhatsApp groups and a biannual meeting together provide a great neighbourly and protective forum. The main success and perhaps legacy for the betterment of the Crescent is the successful completion of the trial period for permanent placement of a No Left Turn for all pan-London commuting traffic heading west up the Lillie Road from Fulham and using the Crescent as a short cut to Warwick Road. Going forward in 2026, the focus for our Association is on securing funding for the creation of a Planter Upstand Memorial Garden and Paladin Housing at the Warwick Road end of the Crescent for our late Chairman, Spenser Parson, who did so much for the betterment of life for all residents in the Crescent over the last 20 years.

Looking wider, and in support of Earls Court Ward and the Kensington Society, the Committee conducted another successful Buzzer Press trawl of 85% of residents. Interestingly, the survey found that over 150 residents were concerned that the liberalisation of the Gambling Act 2005 had in effect rendered our Council's Licencing Department powerless in restricting the number of 24/7 slot-machine licences being issued within the Ward. There was non-existent local resident demand, but significantly high numbers of vulnerable residents living in largely temporary bedsit accommodation off Earl's Court Road. Our Committee will thus join the fight with Earls Court Ward and the Kensington Society in holding those in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to account for what they have announced recently. The DCMS says they are, “committed to giving councils unprecedented new powers to limit gambling shops on their high streets and will introduce new assessments to go further so that councils have a greater say over the location and number of gambling outlets, particularly in areas vulnerable to harmful gambling”.

Robert Adam, chairman

EARL'S COURT GARDENS & MORTON MEWS RA

Developments here include several items of wider relevance.

1. The long-awaited shutter closing off the problematic rear alcove of the Earl's Court Health & Wellbeing Centre has now been installed and is operational. This has virtually eliminated a persistent source of antisocial behaviour and highlights the importance of incorporating 'design out crime' features in the planning process.

2. With many vacant former high street bank units, we were pleased to welcome Happy Sunflower House Nursery in the former Philippine Bank location, bringing a positive and community-focused use to the street.

3. Last year we reported on slippery, dirty pavements caused by pigeon droppings along the flank wall of the PAUL Bakery. Last summer bird spikes were installed on the host building owned by TfL Properties. Unfortunately, the ongoing problem with large quantities of bread being left on the street has displaced the problem to the area around the Courtfield Pub. The Council has announced new initiatives to address pavement cleaning and tackle rubbish. Will these be used to address the root cause of the problem?

4. Several properties that back onto Earl's Court Gardens and Morton Mews have been redeveloped this year, including a number of hotels. While upgrades to hotel and housing stock are welcome, the installation of yet more noisy A/C plant (including heat pumps) is concerning.

5. Since RBKC converted a parking bay at the end of ECG into an e-cycle hire bay, there has been a marked increase in high-speed, wrong-way cycling as users exit the station and ride a bicycle going in the wrong direction. To prevent dangerous cycling the Council should position *all* hire bike bays at the start of one-way streets, never at the end.

Andrea Level, chairman

EARL'S COURT SOCIETY RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION (ECS)

The Earl's Court Society remains a strong and active Residents' Association. It enjoys wide reach and considerable influence within the Council, especially in its increasingly protective role in safeguarding the interests of people living in the area. In 2025 the Earl's Court Society faced many pressing issues affecting Earl's Court and the wider area, in particular those below.

1. The 'night-time economy'

A worrying transformation is underway due to the accumulative impact of numerous planning and licensing decisions by a Council determined to create a 'night-time economy' in Earl's Court, despite widespread resident resistance. Fast-food outlets, primarily selling deliveries destined for customers outside the area, are a magnet for swarms of unruly delivery drivers congregating at all hours in residential side streets that branch off Earl's - Court Road. Licences to operate until 05:00 have been granted to Star Kebab, Burger King

and McDonalds. Gambling outlets, such as Silvertime and Admiral, also proliferate, preying on our most vulnerable residents and attracting punters from further afield.

In the autumn, ECS successfully campaigned against the Admiral 24/7 planning application which was refused by the RBKC Planning Applications Committee (PAC). A wholly unsuitable application from Silvertime to relocate to a larger and more prominent site in the former Lloyds Bank building was withdrawn under pressure. However, a new and equally unsuitable application has come forward. Delayed due to the RBKC cyber attack, the ECS will be strongly objecting to this application.

The increase in antisocial behaviour from these 24/7 operations, coupled with little or no police presence at night and lack of enforcement of conditions, is a great worry for residents. There is also daily hassle from the increased noise and litter in our predominantly residential area. An additional concern is that it puts off the kind of retailers that actually serve the local community.

The ECS, in coordination with its associated Residents' Associations, fought fiercely against 24/7 applications, attended hearings and presented opposing arguments, supported by high numbers of residents and local business objections and photo evidence. The ECS will continue to fight to reverse this trend – and the inexplicable push by the Council to create a 'night-time economy' in Earl's Court – by gathering further evidence and running information and awareness campaigns for residents.

2. The Earl's Court Development.

While understanding the need for new housing and communal spaces in an Opportunity Area left unused for too long, and in favour of a new flourishing development, the ECS was nevertheless very concerned by the density and height of the proposed ECDC development and by the lack of a thorough assessment of the immediate and long-term implications:

- (i) Very tall buildings – much higher than the maximum specified in the Local Plan
- (ii) Transportation – lack of a serious contribution to upgrade the 3 tube stations affected (Earl's Court, West Brompton and West Kensington)
- (iii) increased traffic and demand on limited parking in the already congested surrounding streets
- (iv) dust and pollution during construction (for 15–20 years!)
- (v) inadequate water supply and sewage systems
- (vi) the shadowing effects and loss of light caused by very tall buildings, especially in Philbeach Gardens and Eardley Crescent
- (vii) the inadequate financial contribution to Earl's Court Road that will certainly be negatively affected.

In the Planning hearing in mid-December, members of the ECS and the Kensington Society prepared a structured opposition with several residents speaking and raising their concerns. Although the application was approved by the Council, there are still actions to be taken. We commit to pursue these in order to achieve a mitigation of the most unacceptable outcomes of this development. These actions will be presented to the GLA

prior to the final approval by the Mayor of London.

We sincerely thank residents who wrote letters to the Council, spoke at hearings and helped to raise awareness, in particular the three Earl's Court Ward Councillors. We also thank members of the associated RAs for their support and participation.

Members have also voiced their concerns on other issues affecting our streets. Top of the list continues to be the overwhelming presence of inappropriately parked delivery bikes in Trebovir Road and Nevern Place, the dangerous behaviour of delivery bike riders, rental bikes abandoned everywhere, the frequent dumping of garbage in the streets. The ECS has already setup some social media accounts to collect residents' complaints and evidence of non-compliance.

To conclude on a positive note, in May 2025 the ECS organised a successful VE Day street party in Hogarth Road, which doubled as the grand opening of the public realm improvements project. The ECS had the opportunity to connect face to face with residents, let them know about the Society's activities and inform them of pressing local issues. The ECS plans to repeat the event this year in an even more engaging format.

Francesco Zibellini, chairman

EARLS COURT VILLAGE RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION (ECVRA)

Last year's AGM went with a bang in April. Our local MP, Joe Powell, came along and impressed residents with his genuine interest in local issues.

Zapp, the new occupiers of the Kenway Road dark supermarket premises have been working well with us. Their management's meetings with the ECVRA Committee have been beneficial regarding the local need for no disturbances. There was an issue with bikers parked on the corner of Wallgrave and Kenway Roads, which the Zapp management stopped by regularly sending around a patrol with cameras on their uniforms. The bikers melted away. At least a couple of police raids on the premises have looked for immigrants or asylum seekers, without the right to work, hiding amongst the bikers waiting for jobs.

There has been an ongoing problem for Wallgrave Road and West Redfield Lane because the new fibre broadband companies have not extended their lines into those streets, despite the residents making several requests. Those residents are still suffering with unreliably slow, out-of-date wifi connections. We understand that G-Network is going out of business.

Kenway Road residents and beyond have been disturbed by the noise from air-conditioners situated on the roof of the Heeton Concept Hotel at 15–25 Hogarth Road. The roof stands several floors above our houses in the Village. There is nothing to baffle the noise. However, the hotel is finally having a refurbishment, which we hope will include the air-conditioners. In past years, we used to meet with the area manager, who came from Singapore. He would give us boxes of chocolate biscuits – and nothing was ever done about the noise!

As a community, we have been heavily involved with opposing the 24/7 planning and licensing applications for late night food and gambling venues. We are all opposed to the erosion of our Earls Court Road high street with the proliferation of these venues. We don't need 24-hour casinos in the road, which bring in visitors who drive around our side roads and noisily park at all hours outside residents' windows, keeping residents awake. We encourage all our neighbours to get involved in opposing the 24/7 licensing applications.

Philippa Seebohm, chairman

EDWARDES SQUARE SCARSDALE AND ABINGDON ASSOCIATION (ESSA)

The past year was marked by significant planning reforms from the government, aiming to increase housebuilding. Notably, the Earls Court Development Company (ECDC) received planning permission from both RBKC and Hammersmith and Fulham, despite ESSA's objections over excessive height and density and a preference for a design more in keeping with the local area. The plans await approval from the London Mayor.

The government's move towards a standardised approach for local plans, reducing the role of elected planning committees, was opposed by ESSA, which believes local context is being overlooked. Although most planning applications in the ESSA area are small-scale, monitoring remains essential.

Kensington High Street has seen continued development, with completion of the former Woolworths/Robert Dyas site and progress on the former Seraphine hotel. The former religious book shop is under renovation, and the long-vacant Ryness shop is now a Shelter charity outlet.

The first phase of the Odeon Cinema redevelopment is complete, but there is no update on when the new cinema or the required affordable housing in Phase 2 will open. The Post Office has relocated to the new Rymans with longer hours, though concerns about capacity persist.

Short-term holiday lettings remain a challenge due to limited regulation and anonymity, despite residents' efforts aiding Council enforcement. Better legislation and a registration system are needed.

ESSA contributed to RBKC's updated Public Participation Charter and held several successful member events, including a Summer Drinks reception, support for Opera Holland Park, a visit to the Royal College of Music, and a well-attended AGM at Japan House.



The former Woolworths store after renovation.

Our Mansion Blocks Group continues to grow, with 34 blocks from across the borough now participating. The group meets twice a year to share items of concern and learn how others are dealing with them. Past meetings have covered insurance, block management, fire safety and we are now looking at interesting ideas for solar energy systems and the implications of the Renters' Rights legislation.

Barry Munday, chairman



Volunteers clearing out the Lord Holland Pond • Fox enjoying the woodlands in spring.

© Mike Martyn-Johns

THE FRIENDS OF HOLLAND PARK

Holland House was conserved in 2022, the causeway's historic tiles shortly before that, and currently it is the turn of the Old Dairy. The Friends have worked with the project teams on the listed buildings we are lucky to have in the park and have contributed funds.

We should not forget the work being done on our precious wildlife habitats. Mixed deciduous woodland in the park covers about 8 hectares, some 36% of the park. It is a rare 'priority' habitat in central London and a precious resource, both in terms of the wildlife it supports but also through its role in providing 'ecosystem services', such as helping to regulate the climate. A 5-year woodland management plan is being well executed under the guidance of the RBKC Ecology Service. The Friends have contributed funds for native hedging to provide food and shelter for invertebrates, birds and small mammals; for hazel teaching circles as a place for children to learn about nature; and for a programme of nature walks.

With careful consideration and planning, the Holland Park woodlands can continue to have a significant role in urban nature recovery and climate mitigation.

Jennie Kettlewell, chairman

THE KNIGHTSBRIDGE ASSOCIATION

During 2025 the main interest for members on the planning front remained the proposed partial redevelopment of One Knightsbridge Green, the triangle towards the top of Brompton Road surrounded by Brompton Road, Lancelot Place and Raphael Street. This went to committee in March 2025 and is awaiting a formal Decision Notice from Westminster City Council and the conclusion of the attendant Section 106 Agreement. These are expected soon. Once matters get under way a Community Liaison Group will be set up to keep the local community informed and to deal with any problems that might arise.

The threat of a nightclub in residential Montpelier Street appears to have subsided for the time being because the group that redeveloped the popular Montpeliano restaurant has since opened premises in Mayfair. We wait to see who will take up the now completed restaurant site in Montpelier Street.

The Knightsbridge Partnership's Place Management Strategy for Brompton Road and Knightsbridge could deliver welcome improvements to a hitherto neglected stretch of public realm within five to ten years. The Partnership have organised a series of consultations, which included a drop-in session at Kent House this spring. The scheme in development has reached RIBA Stage 3. Our chairman, Melville Haggard, is the resident representative on the board of the Knightsbridge Partnership.

Together with the Knightsbridge Partnership, we continue to press for the reopening of South Carriage Drive to relieve severe road congestion in Kensington Road and Scotch House corner. The Royal Parks have promised a trial cycleway in the Spring of 2026. The aim is to provide safe passage for cyclists at Hyde Park Corner while allowing east-bound-only motor traffic along South Carriage Drive.

Demonstrations outside the Iranian Embassy in Princes Gate have been causing disruption to traffic and a great deal of disturbance to residents, particularly at night. The police have upped their security presence in the area, for which we are grateful. The police have also been active in disrupting car-meets in Exhibition Road, while Westminster Council have promised to treat the road surface at the junction with Prince Consort Road to discourage 'doughnut' racing. Legislation on the regulation of pedicabs grinds slowly forward, with yet another consultation due to be carried out in 2026.

Carol Seymour-Newton, president

LADBROKE AND PEMBRIDGE ASSOCIATIONS – JOINT REPORT

The Ladbroke and Pembridge Associations (each of which covers a different part of the Portobello Road) have spent much of the last year trying to dissuade the Council from pursuing a plan to revamp a section of the road in a way that we believe would create real damage to the market. It is also a plan that is widely disliked by most of the Portobello community.

Over the last 150 years, the Portobello market has always evolved organically to meet

changing circumstances and will no doubt continue to do so. A heavy-handed top-down intervention could involve real risks of decline.

Many of the elements in the scheme are generally accepted as desirable – measures to provide flood resilience; new market pitches; better lighting and electricity for traders; and tree planting where possible. We have given these our support. However, much of the scheme involves what can be best described as a prettification of the Portobello Road, making it look like an idealised street market in Disneyland rather than a traditional 130-year-old street market – which is what tourists expect to see. Some elements could cause real problems for traders, shopkeepers and visitors. Widening of the pavements is proposed, even though most tourists prefer walking down the road (which would become narrower) and stalls are increasingly turning their fronts towards the road rather than the pavement. On the western side cars would be parked on the widened pavement rather than the road, which many believe would bring road safety risks.

One of the biggest concerns of shopkeepers and stall-holders is the lengthy disruption that would be caused by the proposed works. It is accepted that some disruption is inevitable to introduce the flood reliance measures and improvements to lighting and water supplies. But there has been real anger about adding to the necessary disruption for the sake of what are widely seen as unnecessary works on pavements and road surfaces. The Council has now agreed to drop some of the objectionable elements, thus reducing the period of disruption, but we are sorry to say is still planning to go ahead with others.

**Sophia Lambert, chair of the Ladbroke Association;
Fiona Fleming-Brown, chair of the Pembridge Association**

LEXHAM GARDENS RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

The Lexham Gardens Residents' Association covers the area around the garden square in Lexham Gardens. We work closely with the Lexham Gardens Garden Committee for the benefit of all the residents. While the Garden Committee focuses on the garden, the Residents' Association focuses on the streets surrounding the garden.

Major issues affecting us this year have included the installation of speed bumps along the southern side of the square to help reduce the number of boy racers using that stretch as a racetrack. The scheme has been successful in reducing the speed, but has not reduced the number of cars using this stretch as a rat-run.

We have also been campaigning to stop people cycling through Lexham Walk, which connects Lexham Gardens to Cornwall



Gardens. We have succeeded in persuading the Council to raise the kerb where Lexham Walk joins Lexham Gardens and in improving signage, and have strategically placed plant pots to help slow down the cyclists.

Our residents enjoyed our annual summer party in June, put on in conjunction with the Garden Committee. Despite some unseasonal rain, we all enjoyed our wonderful jazz band, drinks and nibbles, while the children had a great time with our entertainer, Gilbert Giggles, and our excellent face painter.

We also joined forces to hold a Christmas party around our fabulous Christmas tree that shines brightly across the garden square each December. Our residents enjoyed drinks and mince pies while listening to our wonderful pianist, who also accompanied our community carol-singing.



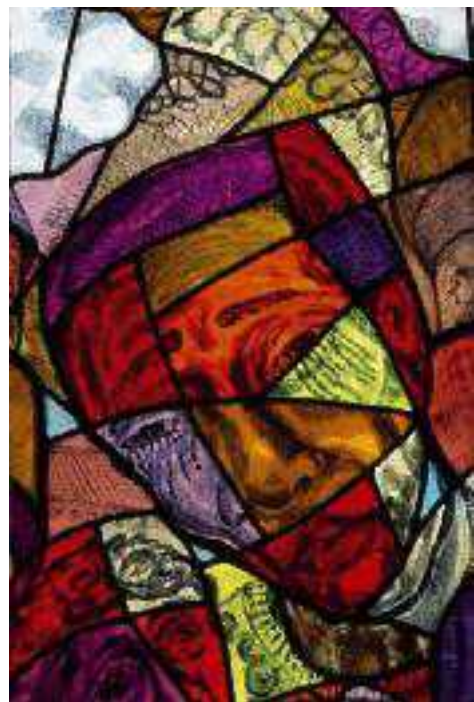
Norman Froment, secretary

NORLAND CONSERVATION SOCIETY (NCS)

It has been a year of some change for the Norland Conservation Society (NCS) as Martin Ingell, our excellent Chairman, and Francesca Nelson-Smith, our hugely capable Secretary, both stood down at our June AGM and Kitty Lloyd and Geraldine Kovas-Lawrence were elected as new Chairman and Secretary, respectively. We are really grateful for all the work that Martin and Francesca did for the NCS while they were in office.

In Norland, we are very fortunate to have five places of worship of different faiths within our Conservation Area.

The NCS was delighted to support St James's Church, Norland in October when Dame Sarah Mullally, then Bishop of London and now Archbishop of Canterbury, attended the church to consecrate two beautiful stained-glass windows by Mark Cazalet (renowned local artist and ecclesiastical and stained-glass specialist), which were privately funded by an individual donor. The windows depict Christ's baptism and the dialogue between a Samaritan woman and Christ at a well. Poignantly, Grenfell Tower, in its shroud, is included





Details of Mark Cazalet windows, a memorial to Grenfell.

in one of the windows with the fire reflected in the waters of the River Jordan and, in both, Christ is depicted as a man of colour. A very moving and beautiful tribute to those who lost their lives in the Grenfell fire and to our local community.

We are also very fortunate to have the oldest Gurdwara in Europe in our Conservation Area, the Khalsa Jatha. The NCS is, in principle, supportive of the plans being proposed by the Khalsa Jatha to erect a statue outside the Gurdwara of Princess Sophia Duleep Singh, who was daughter of the last Maharaja of the Sikh Empire and goddaughter of Queen Victoria, as well as being a prominent Suffragette and nurse in the First World War. Born 150 years ago at 53, Holland Park Road, there will be an exhibition about her at Kensington Palace from 26 March until November 2026.

Planning proposals put forward by the owners of the Academy pub, which closed in 2016, are currently being considered. A huge amount of work will be needed to restore the building, which has fallen into disrepair, and so it may take a couple of years before the pub is able to reopen.

Kitty Lloyd, chairman

OLD COURT HOUSE RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

Council's tough stand on e-bikes welcomed

There are 246 e-bike bays in Kensington and Chelsea – and nearly 3,000 across London – yet bikes still spill everywhere. As a residents' association for a mansion block on Kensington High Street, we heartily applaud RBKC's no-nonsense crackdown on rental e-bikes clogging our pavements and putting pedestrians at risk. As Cllr Johnny Thalassites, cabinet member for planning and environment, said: "Our residents are sick of rental e-bikes obstructing roads and pavements...We had no choice but to act – and it's working."

More than 1,000 hire bikes from Lime, Bolt, Forest and Voi have now been seized by the council's street enforcement officers, who haul them into storage. The operators have to pay a one-off seizure fee, plus daily storage charges if the bikes aren't collected within 14 days. The result? £81,000 raised so far – money being ploughed straight back into tougher enforcement. Operators are now scrambling to clear overflowing bays, posting staff at trouble hotspots such as Whole Foods in Kensington High Street.

And finally, a plea – to Kensington Police: please step up spot patrols in the High Street. Too many cyclists are still mounting pavements, blasting through red lights and endangering pedestrians when the green man is showing. Enough is enough.

John Cookson, chairman

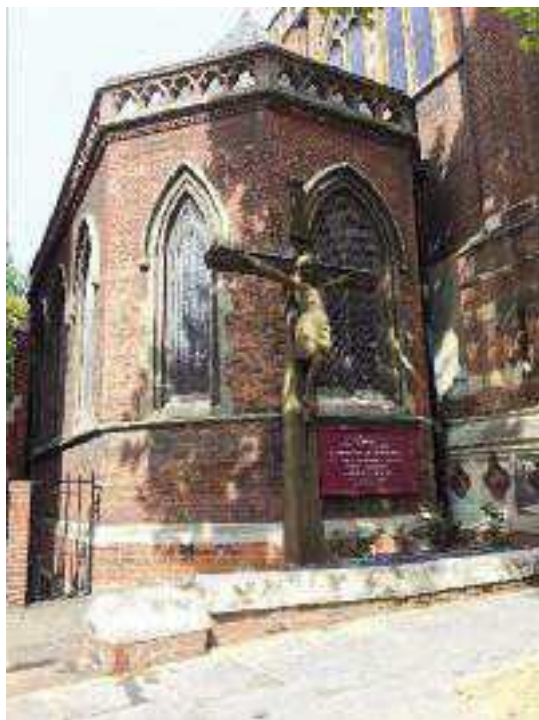
PHILBEACH RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

The Philbeach Residents' Association covers Philbeach Gardens, Cluny Mews and the stretch of Warwick Road backing onto Philbeach Gardens. Our focus is on trying to make our streets as pleasant and beautiful as we can. One of the main ways in which we do this is by maintaining the hanging baskets we have put up on all the lampposts along Philbeach Gardens. Much effort goes into planting the baskets in spring with petunias, begonias and geraniums, and in keeping them watered throughout the summer, which was a particular challenge last year, given the exceptionally hot weather!



In December, the baskets are further adorned with Christmas lights that sparkle all along the street until mid-January. These are further supplemented with lights put up by the association along many of the railings along the street. Many of our residents also put up their own lights, making the street a real joy during the dark days of early winter.

The association is also pleased to support the beautiful Grade 1 listed St Cuthbert's Church and the work it does in the area. St Cuthbert's is renowned for the brilliance of its choir and its magnificent organ. We are so lucky that many wonderful concerts and other events are held in the church, and we are happy to support these events.



This year we have also been happy to support the church in its appeal to repair its beautiful Calvary Cross that stands proudly outside the church. It is particularly important as it is also the Earl's Court War Memorial. Unfortunately, age has taken its toll, and so it is currently undergoing major repairs. We are looking forward to it returning to its full glory later in the year.

Norman Froment, treasurer

SOUTH KENSINGTON & QUEEN'S GATE RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION (SK&QGRA)

Over the past 50+ years of our existence, SK&QGRA has become used to the enormous area that we were allocated, which takes in most of Courtfield and Queen's Gate Wards and a busy corner of HanTown/Brompton. So we are used to a disproportionate amount of tourists and visitors and the impact they make on the infrastructure and on our residents.

For example, the increasing, almost overwhelming amount of cafes, fast-food outlets and take-aways, restaurants, and tourist attractions supplanting those much-missed local food stores, artisan bookshops and fashion boutiques. Public transport is overcrowded to the point of being dangerous. Regular closures at both Underground stations in our area at peak times puts too much pressure on these Victorian structures. Add to this congestion from the stop/go and the idling fumes of the five or six tour-bus companies: they clog up the Gloucester Road and Old Brompton Road regularly, especially in the summer months, and ticket touts are all over station forecourts.

South Kensington's cultural hub attracts over 46 million visitors every year. Although ranked the 13th busiest station in London, South Kensington station, with 34 million passengers, has no step-free access, so the prams and pushchairs still need to be helped up and down the stairways, and so too do the disabled or wheelchair users. At last this is now due to change (see Planning Report page 71). Gloucester Road (12 million passengers from this station) is now in the middle of a much-awaited renovation, with the hope of a more pleasant tree-lined street and wider pavements.

We understand the halted Native Land (unwanted by us all) development near South Kensington Underground station has just been activated. Together with works on step-free access to the station, we all await the additional road and rail disruptions as this major development begins to unfold. It coincides with the additional Wellcome Trust major office developments on either side of narrow Pelham Street running alongside the station.

Residents really do not have it easy in our area. I believe this is not just in South Kensington & Queen's Gate. Our whole Borough has changed from how I remember it 55 years ago. It's lost its shine – as in many other boroughs and high streets around the UK. We are more led by the those who do not appreciate the value in curating our high streets. There are excessive fast-food outlets and too many chain cafes, satisfying the predominance of our transient clients, cookie-cutter retail for design-label taste, and a bias to letting the nighttime economy change our sleep patterns.

Add to this the, as yet, unresolved Forum Hotel saga, 26 floors of 4-star hotel space, currently shrouded behind a high screen and plastic veiling, in the hope that sometime in the near future the beautiful public green space that was Ashburn Gardens – a public open garden area and the heritage of this once lovely square – is restored and re-opened to the residents benefit. Currently yet another eyesore for the nearby residents.

Finally, what will emerge in the large space on Queen's Gate which for the past 30 years has operated as a Union Car Park, totally outside the guidelines within the RBKC's own Unitary Local (UDP) plan? These were updated 24 July 2024 and, hopefully, the current

stance of strict resistance on parking on derelict or undeveloped land is being implemented. In January 2026 the car park closed and we hope it will be returned to the elegant corner architecture in this 'conservation area' of residential property.

Never a dull moment.

Caryl Harris, chairman

ST HELENS RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION AND ST QUINTIN AND WOODLANDS NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM

These two bodies share the same membership of 380 local residents in the northwest part of the Borough.

Kensington Canalside: 2025 was the year when RBKC's Planning Committee made its decision on the proposals from Ballymore and Sainsbury's, for their development in the Kensal Canalside Opportunity Area. Our neighbourhood forum/residents' association covers the area to the immediate southwest of the site.

The Council had been reviewing the application for nearly two years. We joined a coalition of other local groups, to make final representations on the fundamental flaws in the proposals. This informal 'coalition' of local residents prepared a 60-page Factual Briefing, as a counterweight to the session organised by the Council at which the developers presented their plans to councillors on the RBKC Planning Committee. In a break with precedent, none of the organisations objecting to the proposals were allowed to speak or to ask questions at this session. We then joined others in speaking as objectors at the RBKC Planning Committee on 11 November.

The Kensington Society's Newsletter last November included an article setting out why this Opportunity Area is simply not ready to see high-density, high-rise development. There is a single access and exit point on Ladbrooke Grove and the original plans for a Crossrail/Elizabeth Line station fell away many years ago. Objectors have continued to submit well-researched representations to the Mayor of London, who is required to make a decision this year at 'Stage 2' on this scheme.

The application from the **St William division of Berkeley Homes**, at the even less accessible western end of the Opportunity Area, awaits decision.

Within our neighbourhood area, we are part way through reviewing and updating our Neighbourhood Plan, adopted by RBKC in 2018. We hope to agree with the Council a set of revised policies for Latimer Road, a street in which some sections form part of the Freston/Latimer Road Employment Zone, while others lie within an extended Oxford Gardens Conservation Area. The street continues to struggle as a commercial or office location. Our Neighbourhood Plan encourages mixed-use redevelopment, a policy which RBKC planning officers now support. But financial viability for redevelopment of any the 13 remaining light industrial units looks to be below the waterline in 2026 (as was the case when we first drafted a Neighbourhood Plan).

Finally, on a convivial note of residents coming together, our Street Fair last June was again well-attended.

Henry Peterson, chairman

VICTORIA ROAD AREA RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION

Thomas' Schools: Construction of the new school at Atlantic House in St Albans Grove proceeded throughout 2025, with completion deferred from September to November.

After a year of managing the project and intensive negotiations to secure improvements to the various jointly-agreed management plans for traffic and noise, the proposals for noise monitoring were finally agreed in September.

With regard to traffic, the school agreed to provide a free minibus service, wider pavements, as well as a "school street" closure, banning cars entering St Albans Grove during the morning arrival and afternoon departure times. The most contentious issue, however, has been the level of noise from the school playground. We finally persuaded the Council that the noise generated by the use of the playground will be monitored for the first year.

Heythrop College: The next threat, the development of this major site, has gone quiet. The owner has not yet decided what he wants to build, but whatever is proposed will generate a huge amount of construction traffic traversing our area.

Basements are back: There seems to be a new round of basement excavations, particularly in Victoria Road and Cottesmore Gardens. There seems to be a never-ending cycle of excavation and concrete pouring, with each scheme taking two to three years.

Mansards: These are the new basements – enlarging further already-large houses and changing the streetscape by introducing additional storeys.

Prospects for 2026: continuing construction projects.

Michael Bach, chairman

THE KENSINGTON SOCIETY – CHARITY NO. 267778
STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES FOR THE YEAR ENDED
31 DECEMBER 2025

Income	2025	2024
Donations and legacies	£	£
Membership subscriptions	10,515.00	11,015.00
Donations and legacies	2,892.00	1,557.00
Gift Aid	2,670.28	2,923.38
Total donations and legacies	<u>16,077.28</u>	<u>15,495.38</u>
Charitable activities		
Events	1,524.00	4,650.00
Annual report advertising	10,850.00	12,350.00
Total charitable activities	<u>12,374.00</u>	<u>17,000.00</u>
Investment income		
Bank interest	1,684.52	1,337.84
Total income	<u>30,135.80</u>	<u>33,833.22</u>
Expenditure		
Charitable activities		
Newsletter	2,203.84	3,462.32
Events	4,500.06	6,108.66
Annual report	13,607.30	15,914.00
Planning	3,796.35	5,445.27
Membership	943.80	856.44
Charitable subscriptions	205.00	205.00
Total charitable activities expense	<u>25,256.35</u>	<u>31,991.69</u>
Other		
Insurance	102.08	96.00
Examiner	900.00	580.00
Total other expense	<u>1,002.08</u>	<u>676.00</u>
Total expenditure	<u>26,258.43</u>	<u>32,667.69</u>
Net income/(expenditure)	3,877.37	1,165.53
Total unrestricted funds brought forward	<u>62,842.89</u>	<u>61,677.36</u>
Total unrestricted funds carried forward	<u>66,720.26</u>	<u>62,842.89</u>

BALANCE SHEET AS AT 31 DECEMBER 2025

	2025	2024
	£	£
Current assets		
Debtors		
Accrued income and prepayments		
Interest	129.94	137.84
Insurance	00.00	64.00
Total accrued income and prepayments	<u>129.94</u>	<u>201.84</u>
Cash at bank and in hand		
Nationwide Building Society	60,000.00	60,000.00
Barclays Bank	9,003.95	7,568.43
PayPal	3,975.32	1,670.62
Total cash at bank and in hand	<u>72,979.27</u>	<u>69,239.05</u>
Total current assets	<u>73,109.21</u>	<u>69,440.89</u>
Creditors: amounts falling due within one year		
Deferred income		
Subscriptions and donations	2,312.00	1,887.00
Creditors		
Creditors	2,378.79	3,262.84
City Living Local Life – Norland	798.16	798.16
Accruals	900.00	650.00
Total deferred income and creditors	<u>6,388.95</u>	<u>6,598.00</u>
Total net assets	<u>66,720.26</u>	<u>62,842.89</u>
Funds of the charity		
Unrestricted funds	<u>66,720.26</u>	<u>62,842.89</u>

Approved by the Trustees 21 January 2026

Signed: Martin Frame

Martin Frame, Chartered Accountant

Treasurer and Membership Secretary

The Kensington Society

FINANCIAL REVIEW

The Society thanks all the members who have generously subscribed £10,515, donations and legacies of £2,892 which qualified for Gift Aid of £2,670.28.

The total income for the year was £30,135.80, a decrease of £3,697.42.

The cost of administration is allocated on a time basis to the various charitable activities.

The total expenditure was £26,258.43, a decrease of £6,735.34.

The balance sheet has unrestricted funds of £66,720.26, an increase of £3,877.37. These funds are necessary to secure the future of the Society. Improving funds through subscriptions, donations and legacies is welcomed.

NOTES TO THE ACCOUNTS for the year ended 31 December 2025

- **Charity registered address and number**

The Kensington Society's charity number is 267778 and is registered at Westwoods, Marlborough SN8 4DY.

- **Accounting policies**

These accounts have been prepared based under the historical cost convention in accordance with Accounting and Reporting by Charities – Statement of Recommended Practice (FRS 102).

Income

- **Recognition of incoming income**

These are included in the Statement of Financial Activities (SoFA) when:

- The charity becomes entitled to the income.
- The trustees are certain they will receive the income; and
- The monetary value can be measured with sufficient reliability.

- **Donations**

Donations are only included in the SoFA when the charity has unconditional entitlement to the income.

- **Tax reclaims on gifts and donations**

Incoming income from tax reclaims are included in the SoFA to the extent that claims have been made.

- **Volunteer help**

The value of any voluntary help received is not included in the financial activities.

- **Investment income**

This is included in the financial activities when receivable.

Expenditure and liabilities

- **Liability recognition**

Liabilities are recognised as soon as there is a legal or constructive obligation committing the charity to expenditure.

Financial instruments

- **Debtors**

Debtors do not carry any interest and are stated at their nominal value. Appropriate allowances for estimated irrecoverable amounts are recognised in the SoFA when there is objective evidence that the asset is impaired.

- **Cash at bank and in hand**

These comprise cash at bank and other short-term highly liquid bank deposits with an original maturity of three months or less.

- **Public Benefit Statement**

The trustees confirm that they have complied with the duty in section 4 of the Charities Act 2011 to have due regard to the Charity Commission's general guidance on public benefit 'Charities and Public Benefit'.



THE KENSINGTON SOCIETY

PASSIONATE ABOUT THE ROYAL BOROUGH FOR OVER 70 YEARS

Members are welcome to contribute to the society's work and activities (and there are parties and events too!). Not yet a member? – join today using the form overleaf page OR www.kensingtonsociety.org/membership-regular/

The society has a long history of influencing the future of the Royal Borough. We play a role in many decisions on the built environment of our streets, squares and buildings. Our activities range from well informed responses to RBKC consultations on the borough's local plan and related planning documents, through to commenting on individual planning applications and support for our members.

We are keen to make best use of the range of experience and expertise amongst our members. The views of the society are taken seriously by applicants, and by officers and councillors. Major developers recognise (for the most part) that it is in their interests to discuss their proposals with us as well as with the council at pre-application stage. On major planning issues we need to be able to show widespread support for the views that our trustees articulate to the council, to developers and to government and London-wide bodies.

Many of the borough's residents associations and amenity bodies are 'affiliates' of the society. The dialogue between community associations and the society is important and we welcome ideas and suggestions for joint meetings on topics and concerns that come up during the year.

As an individual member there are several ways in which you can make an input into the work of the society:

- suggesting new topics and themes where meeting between the society and affiliates would be useful
- telling us of items of news to include in the monthly bulletin which we have introduced this year and our annual autumn newsletter
- identifying topics you would like to see covered on the society's website (and contributing articles and blog pieces)
- joining ad-hoc project groups on specific campaigns
- helping us with specific technical expertise you may have on new and fast-moving agendas such as climate change, sustainability and retrofitting of buildings
- ideas for events to add to our programme (such as guided walks of parts of the Borough, visits to specific buildings and cultural assets)
- helping with word-of-mouth recruitment of new members in those parts of Kensington where historically we have fewer members (North Kensington) and not enough younger members (all parts of Kensington).

These need not be time-consuming commitments. We know that our members lead busy lives. Email us at kensingtonsociety@outlook.com if you have ideas or suggestions.

Membership form – join us!

Membership

Charity No. 267778

The objects of The Kensington Society are to preserve and improve the amenities of Kensington for the public benefit by stimulating interest in its history and records, promoting good architecture and planning in its future development and by protecting, preserving and improving its buildings, open spaces and other features of beauty or historic or public interest.

The membership subscription of £20 is payable by bank standing order only and is renewable annually on 1 January.

This entitles one person to be a member. Please complete further forms for additional memberships.

Individual subscription £ 20 Renewable annually on 1 January.

Donation £ _____

Total £ 20 Please pay by bank standing order only; no cheques.

Title: Full Name: Date of Birth:

Address:

City and Postcode:

Email:

Mobile: Home telephone:

How did you hear of us? Renewal , Friend , Planning issue , Other

giftaid it



Please treat as Gift Aid donations all qualifying gifts of money to

The Kensington Society made today or in the past four years or in the future.

I confirm that I have paid or shall pay an amount of Income Tax and/or Capital Gains Tax for each tax year (6 April to 5 April) that is at least equal to the amount of tax that all the Charities or Community Amateur Sports Clubs that I donate to will reclaim on my gifts for that tax year. I understand that other taxes such as VAT and Council Tax do not qualify. I understand that the charity will reclaim 25p of tax on every £1 that I give after 6 April 2008. You can cancel your Gift Aid declaration at any time. Please let us know if you change your name or address or no longer pay sufficient tax on your income and/or capital gains. If you pay Income Tax at the higher or additional rate and want to receive the additional tax relief due to you, you must include all your Gift Aid donations on your Self-Assessment tax return or ask HMRC to adjust your tax code.

X Signature: Date:

Bank Standing Order

** The reference number ** below will be allocated when we receive your membership form. Please check that your bank address and post code are given below as this form will be posted to your bank for processing. The bank will need your original signature. Please post to: The Kensington Society, Westwoods, Cliford Bottom, MARLBOROUGH SN8 4BY. For further information email kensingtonsociety@anbank.com or call 010 7193 5243. Thank you.

Bank Name and Branch:

Bank Address:

City and Postcode:

Sort Code: Account: A/c Name:

Please pay Barclays Bank Notting Hill Gate sort code 20-47-34 for the credit of The Kensington Society

account 70519138, reference ** ** a first payment of £: immediately and an annual payment of £: on 1 January until further notice.

X Signature: Date:

