



# THE KENSINGTON SOCIETY

WINTER NEWSLETTER 2023-2024

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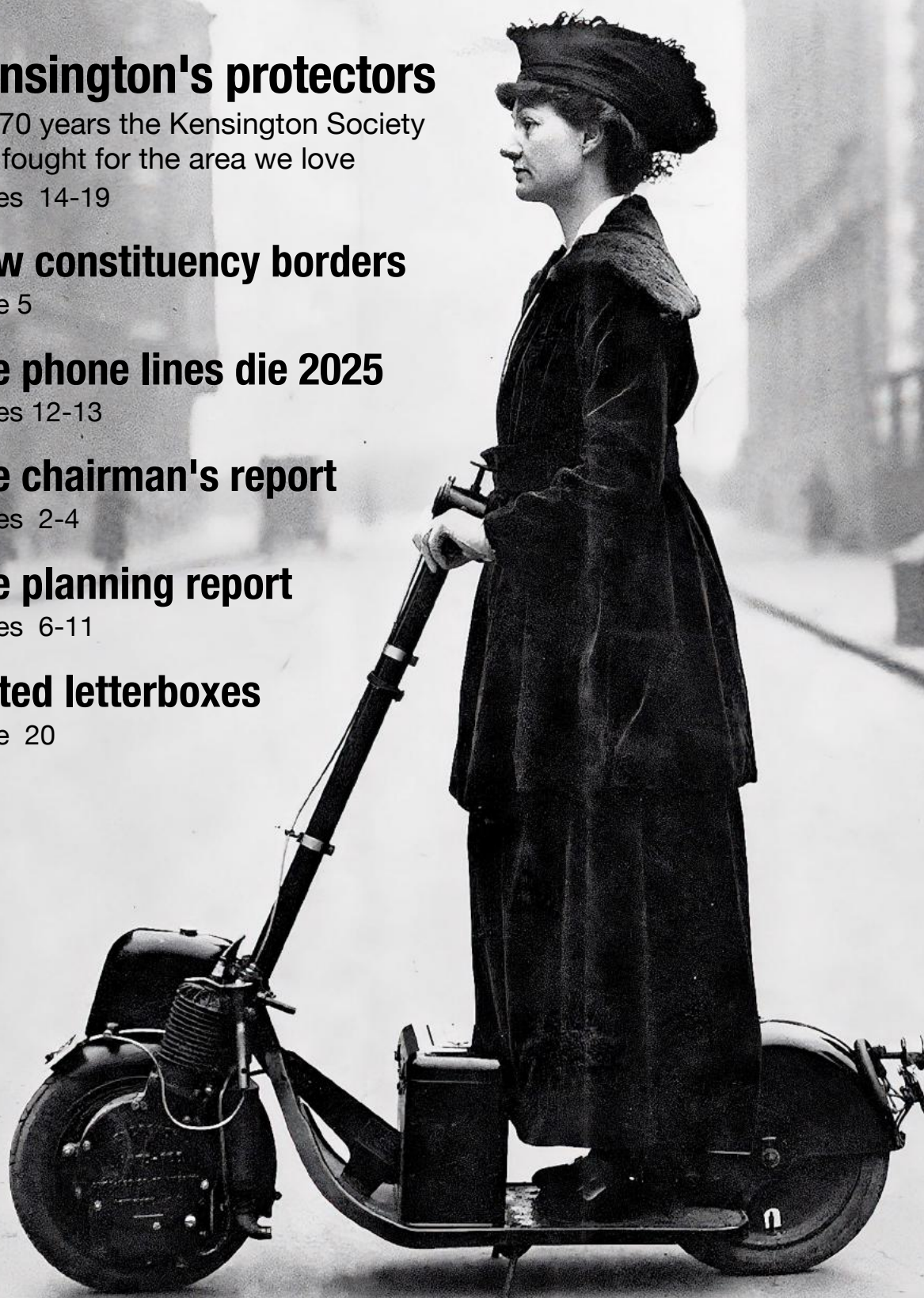
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Although taken 37 years before the Kensington Society was born, this picture - of Lady Priscilla Norman patrolling the streets in 1916 on her very unusual Autoped - is a great symbol for our founders' fearlessness and enthusiasm. Priscilla sat on the society's council from 1953 until her death in 1964.



# The chairman's report

In my chairman's report for the 2022 -2023 Annual, I mentioned that in spite of the economic downturn, we had not seen any slowdown in the number of planning applications. A few months later the amount of new householder applications has greatly reduced, instead the activity around large applications has increased. Our workload for the society's planning team continues to be very high.

You can read more about those applications in the planning report, so I will instead mention some interesting developments within London. The proposal to demolish the Marks & Spencer store on Oxford Street was refused by the City of Westminster council, approved by the Planning Inspectorate and then suddenly refused in July by its' boss, Michael Gove, the current the housing secretary. It is important to digest the multiple reasons for his refusal:

- The 10-storey replacement scheme conflicted with policies on heritage and design with specific emphasis on the embodied carbon impact and waste involved in the plan.
- The project was not compatible with the transition to a low-carbon future and the need to reuse existing buildings and materials and the fact, not noted by M&S, that the new build would have released around 40,000 tonnes of CO2 into the atmosphere with immediate impact.
- Gove discounted and opposed the applicant's argument that there was no viable and deliverable alternative to demolition.

- The harm to designated heritage assets in this case carries very great weight, namely the setting of Selfridges, and the harm to the settings of the Stratford Place conservation area, the Mayfair conservation area and the Portman Estate conservation area.

M&S threatens to abandon the site if the redevelopment is not allowed. M&S cited expert consultants before concluding that "the international centre of Oxford Street would be terminally harmed by the loss of M&S from this location" and that the western part of Oxford Street, where the site sits, would "decline rapidly and harmfully". These kind of "black-mails" are becoming increasingly common among some developers and are a worrying sign.

SAVE Britain's Heritage led the objections at the inquiry. In September M&S lodged a legal challenge against the government's decision. So we await another outcome from the courts.

Then there is Liverpool Street Station. The proposal by Network Rail and Sellar (the property developer behind the



*The increase of waste and rubbish on our streets was one issue discussed at Kensington Society's meeting with its affiliates in November. This pile, in the Kensington Church Street bend, is just one example. (Picture Amanda Frame)*





Another issue at the meeting with the affiliates was the problem with e-bikes, overflowing the assigned e-bike bays and often left laying instead of standing up. This e-bike bay ends by the lamppost, but there are many more bikes encroaching the resident parking. (Picture Norbert Kurcz)

Shard) to cantilever a 21-story tower over the grade II\* Great Eastern Hotel. The proposal requires the partial demolition of the station. The Victorian Society is leading the opposition campaign.

#### More centralisation

Towards the end of the year, the government produced a major new piece of legislation – the Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023. The government claims that it will "speed up the planning system, hold developers to account, cut bureaucracy, and encourage more councils to put in place plans to enable the building of new homes". It took most of 2023 to get it through Parliament. However, not until the government produces the secondary legislation in 2024 will we know the impact. The general view is that it is a move for more centralisation and less powers for the local authorities.

One very worrying item in the act, is the introduction of a new category of planning policies, called national development management policies (NDMPs), which are to be drawn up by the housing secretary. According to [a research briefing](#) by the government, published 5 December 2023, these NDMPs "will carry the same weight as local plans in decision-making on planning applications. In case of a conflict between the two, NDMPs will override local plans".

The fear is that this is a power grab which could affect not only local plans but also the many supplementary planning documents (SPDs) and conservation area appraisals produced by local councils as guidance for how the local plan policies should be interpreted. The government is proposing that these be scrapped or be converted into new/revised plans after having been through the same sort of examination as the local plan. This would be a massive, expensive, long-term task. The government seems to have not considered the financial implications of the process.

#### E-bike litter on the pavements

E-bikes left standing or laying on pavements have recently become a problem in parts of Kensington. These belong to "free-floating" rental schemes that enable "smart" e-bikes to be dropped off anywhere within the scheme's boundaries. Basically, through the letting company's app, you locate the nearest bike, book and unlock it, then use it for as long as you want – and when finished, you just leave it where you are.

For more conventional e-bikes, the council, in collaboration with the e-bike companies, has created special e-bike bays where all e-bikes are supposed to be parked when not in use. These bays have usually been carved out of resident parking or single yellow lines. However, as there are no physical bike stands in the bays, showing users if there is a free space or not, they quickly become full and overflow. The e-bike companies have promised RBKC to monitor the e-bike bays and take actions quickly when there are too many bikes in them.

RBKC is now planning to remove offending e-bikes and transport them to the Lots Road vehicle pound, where the scheme companies would have to pay for their release. Sounds like a good idea.

#### AI fresco dining on the pavement

During the pandemic, our council allowed restaurants to create "summer terraces" on parking spaces and wide pavements. These have since become an established summer feature. While many customers like them, they can be a disturbance for the neighbours, especially as the council does not seem to have staff to enforce the few rules surrounding them.

The summer terraces may have been an important lifeline for struggling restaurants during the pandemic, but now the

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On 24 October, the Kensington Society celebrated its 70th anniversary with a wonderful dinner at Leighton House, attended by our patron, Prince Richard, Duke of Gloucester, as well as both our new president, Lord Carnwath, and our former, Nick Ross, who is now vice-president. (Picture Norbert Kurcz)

*The chairman's report - from previous page*

restaurants are full again, and the summer terraces, which in some cases are as large as the indoor space, is a way for the owners to generate more profit. Consequently, the restaurants should be able to pay enough for the privilege and provide funds for proper inspection and enforcement.

#### **Meeting with the affiliates**

On 29 November 2023, the Kensington Society held a meeting with our affiliated resident associations. The agenda included discussion about the problems with enforcement of construction traffic rules and construction practice rules. The discussion expanded into overuse of resident parking suspensions, increase in waste and rubbish on our streets with no central coordination, and the gradual loss of residents' parking to restaurants' temporary summer terraces and cycle shelters, and the lack of control of all the e-bikes that now are found on pavements all over the borough.

The meeting was most productive and proved that there was much to be discussed, so it was agreed that an outline of actions should be produced that can improve be designed for better enforcement in the borough. We will meet again in January and hope that by working together we can address many of the concerns of our joint members. A representative from the Exhibition Road Cultural Group will attend and introduce ZEN, the Zero Emission Nature programme.

#### **Anniversary dinner**

On 24 October 2023, the Kensington Society hosted a dinner at Leighton House in celebration of our 70th anniversary. Our patron of over 40 years, HRH, The Duke of Gloucester, attended and spoke on reflection of the achievements of the society over the years. Many of our loyal members were with us to celebrate. Lord Carnwath, our new president, spoke as did our past president and now new vice president, Nick Ross.

Leighton House holds a special place in the society's history, as we for many years held our AGMs and other meetings there. It was a wonderful and joyous evening and I personally thank all of you who contributed and helped with the evening.

#### **Reflections**

In writing my chairman's report and along with Thomas gathering the various reports, it has surprised me how much we have done since the spring AGM. All of this could not be achieved without the trustees' dedication of their own personal time. We have been fortunate to have help from the residents' associations. Huge thanks must be given to all. Without their time and efforts, I fear Kensington would not be as great a place as it is today.

I do hope you have a Merry Christmas and let's all move forward into the new year and our major challenges.

AMANDA FRAME



# Kensington is now Kensington & Bayswater

As a result of the latest periodic review of the British parliamentary constituencies by [the Boundary Commission for England](#), the Kensington constituency, which first existed between 1974 and 1997 and was recreated in 2010, was legally replaced by the Kensington and Bayswater constituency on 15 November 2023. The new constituency will be first used for the 2024 (or possibly 2025) general election.

The British use of the [“first past the post”](#) election system requires regular revisions of the constituency borders, to ensure that all constituencies have roughly the same number of eligible voters. Constituency size is less of an issue in countries using [proportional representation](#), as the final number of candidates for each party then usually is based on each party’s share of the votes in the whole country.

The job of the Boundary Commission was this time to ensure that each constituency would have between 69,724 and 77,062 voters. As thousands have moved in and out of constituencies during the 13 years since the last review, the result is a number of border changes, but also two more constituencies for Greater London.

For Kensington, the border changes consist of two minor adjustments in the south, to align the constituency border with the ward borders, and a major change in the northern part of Kensington: two wards in Westminster, Bayswater and Lancaster Gate, have merged with the Kensington constituency, thus creating the new Kensington and Bayswater parliamentary constituency.

## Four MP candidates announced so far

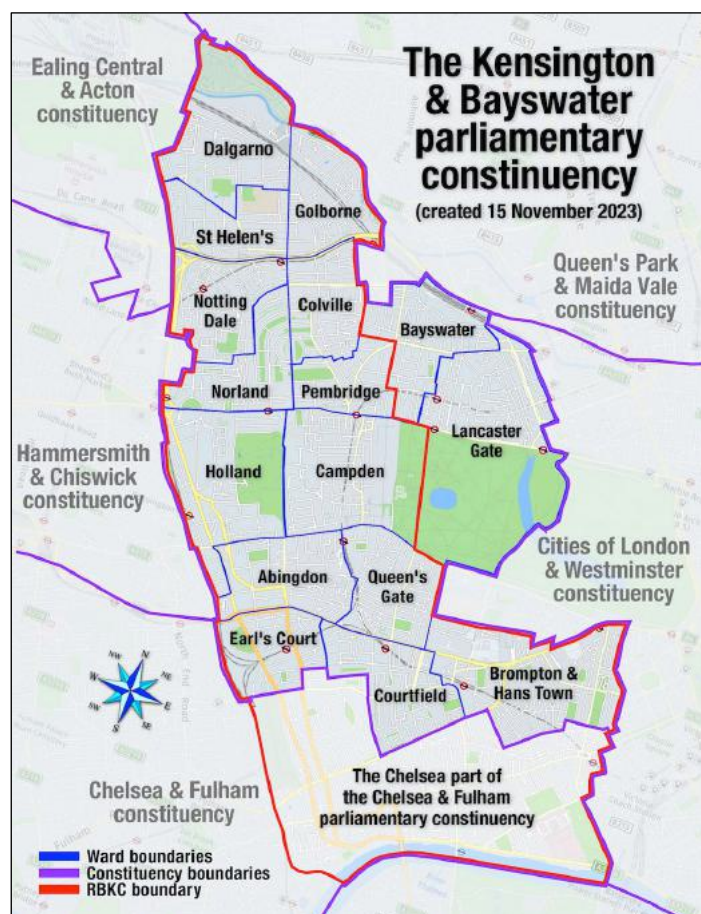
Although the date for the next general election hasn’t yet been announced (the prime minister has the right to set an election date any time before 28 January 2025), most expect it to be in the spring or autumn of 2024.

Four candidates for the next election have so far been announced for the Kensington and Bayswater constituency:

**Felicity Buchan**, the Conservative Party. She is Kensington’s current MP, elected with a majority on only 150 votes in the 2019 election. She also serves in the current government as parliamentary under secretary of state for housing and homelessness at the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

**Joe Powell**, the Labour Party. He is deputy CEO of Open Government Partnership, the Washington DC-based organisation with 75 member states, which promotes more open and less corrupt governments. He was elected MP candidate by Kensington Labour in November 2022.

**Emma Dent Coad**, independent, but previously the Labour Party. She was Kensington’s MP 2017-2019, having defeated the sitting Conservative MP Victoria Borwick with only 20



votes in the 2017 snap election, and was then defeated by Felicity Buchan in the 2019 election. Having served as RBKC councillor since 2006, she left Labour in April 2023 and announced in July that she will run as an independent candidate in the next general election.

**William Hounbo**, the Liberal Democrats. He was a councillor in Southwark 2018-2022 and is diversity leader for London Liberal Democrats. He is originally from Benin, grew up in France, moved to London in 1997 and has been a Lib Dem since 2010.

Two more parties are expected to announce candidates for this constituency: the Green Party and the Reform Party.

THOMAS BLOMBERG



From left to right: Felicity Buchan, Joe Powell, Emma Dent Coad and William Hounbo. (Pictures from their campaign websites)



# The planning report

As the chairman's report states, it has been a busy year since we last reported at the AGM. Within the borough we have been inundated in multiple directions, with the new local plan examination in public, the South Kensington Station public inquiry, applications for the redevelopment of the Newcombe House site in Notting Hill Gate, the Ballymore/Sainsbury's portion of the Kensal Canalside project and master plan discussions for the Earl's Court/West Kensington opportunity areas. Next year will see a number of these cases dominating our activities.

## **New local plan review**

Following the council publishing the draft new local plan a year ago, it was widely consulted, and, following receipt of comments, a revised draft of the new local plan was examined by a planning inspector over three separate weeks in June and July. This inspector took an unusual approach. He tested the soundness of the council's policies, to make sure that they would be effective/sound, and in the process the council was able to accept that certain changes would make the policies more effective. We endorsed this approach.

Nevertheless, the examination did not address all our concerns, in particular regarding the large schemes, Kensal Canalside and Earl's Court. It was difficult to raise our concerns about the scale, density, accessibility and height of buildings – the key concerns of the society and the residents. As a result, it is our position that the proposals for these major sites have not been properly tested and proven. The outcome is that residents are left with the one way to raise their opposition: to challenge the planning applications, as we are currently doing with the Ballymore/Sainsbury application.

Six months later we are about to start a new year, but we still do not have a confirmed plan. Both the society and the council are concerned about the delay there has been in publishing the modifications proposed by the council in response to the inspector's concerns. These proposals are likely to come forward in early January, we hope, and we anticipate that the plan will go to a six-week consultation before the final version is approved by the council. We want the new local plan adopted as soon as possible, although, since it has almost completed its process. The council has confirmed that the new local plan can already be taken into consideration when deciding planning applications.

## **Earl's Court/West Kensington**

Earl's Court Development Company (ECDC), published its initial masterplan for the 16 hectare site in February 2023. The site is divided by the rail line between Hammersmith and Fulham (LBHF) and RBKC. RBKC's site is 7.43 hectares. The plan covered a much-reduced area compared to the original Capco plan, following the removal of three council housing estates. Nevertheless, the new masterplan still included a large amount of commercial space and 4,500 new homes, of



*This is how the developers imagine that the Earl's Court/West Kensington development will look like from the air when it is finished. The existing Empress State Building is in the lefthand foreground. (Picture from master plan brochure)*





*This is the developers' latest model of the Earl's Court/West Kensington development, viewed from northeast with Empress State Building behind it. (Picture Amanda Frame)*

which less than a quarter would be in RBKC. To achieve this, a very high density was required, with the design featuring a number of tall buildings, of which the tallest would be clustered around the existing Empress State Building within LB-HF.

After a period of consultation earlier this year, the developers and their architects went back to the drawing board to respond to the large amount of feedback received. In November 2023, a revised masterplan was revealed and went on public display at Conversation Corner in Lillie Road. The new plan shows a 10% reduction in the amount of development, 500 fewer homes, a 20% increase in open space

and fewer tall buildings. However, there would still be nine towers, one of which would rise to 42 storeys – taller than the Empress State Building.

There are some welcome improvements, with the open space more clearly defined and the changes of level across the site being more carefully considered. The better spacing of the tall buildings will allow more daylight and sunlight to penetrate the open space. However, there are many questions still to be answered. These include the impact of the tall buildings on RBKC's Philbeach and Earl's Court conserva-

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tion areas, as well as on the Grade I Brompton Cemetery and Grade I Church of St Cuthber and St Matthais.

How will the large increase in population impact on the three already crowded Underground stations? Will the claimed 35% affordable housing be evenly distributed across the site and how affordable will it be? What is the community facility offer? These questions and many more will be raised by the Kensington Society during the current consultation period, which extends until the end of January 2024. The developers say that they are aiming to submit a "hybrid" planning application in mid 2024. This will comprise an overall masterplan in outline, with a detailed application for a first phase. It is envisaged that the overall development will take approximately 15 years to complete.

### **Odeon, Kensington High Street**

The façade of the original cinema has been completed, but there is still work going on with the housing segment. The main issue now is to find a suitable operator for the seven-screen cinema.

### **Heythrop College**

The original proposal was to expand the site by building over the railway and developing a major luxury care housing scheme on this site. The site has now been sold, although there is no indication what the developer intends to build. We have learned that there are no longer any plans to build over the railway, after difficult negotiations with TfL.

As both the local plan and the mayor's London plan have changed since the approval in 2020, the council must again reconsider the change of use from education to housing and, if acceptable, will need to ensure that the scheme is designed to include a significant proportion of affordable housing.

### **South Kensington Station appeal**

Following the council's refusal of the major scheme to redevelop the buildings around the station in December 2021, the applicants (TfL with their 51% partner, Native Land) appealed. A public inquiry was held initially in January and February, with another two days in mid-April.

On 12 December 2023, it was announced that the planning inspector leading the inquiry had decided to allow most of the appeal, only requiring some minor changes, such as removal of the planned retail units in the tunnel. While the inspector noted some heritage harm, she concluded that the harm is outweighed by the overall development. This decision is a major disappointment for all of us who fought long and hard against the development, particularly Thurloe Owners and Leaseholders Association (TOLA) and Onslow Neighbourhood Association (ONA) (with whom we worked closely), and representatives of the Pelham area and a consortium of other resident associations led by the Brompton Association. However, as a Rule 6 party in the appeal, we (the society) did secure a binding legal agreement that the scheme will include both step-free access and a major station capacity upgrade.

### **Kensal Canalside**

Since our last article in the society's 2023 annual report, development proposals at the Kensal Canalside opportunity area have moved forwards. But not in a way that is going down well with residents and local organisations in the surrounding area.

A planning application was submitted to RBKC in October, by the landowner/developer partnership of Ballymore and Sainsbury's for their portion of the site. The proposals are for 2,516 new homes on the eastern part, along with a replacement Sainsbury's store.

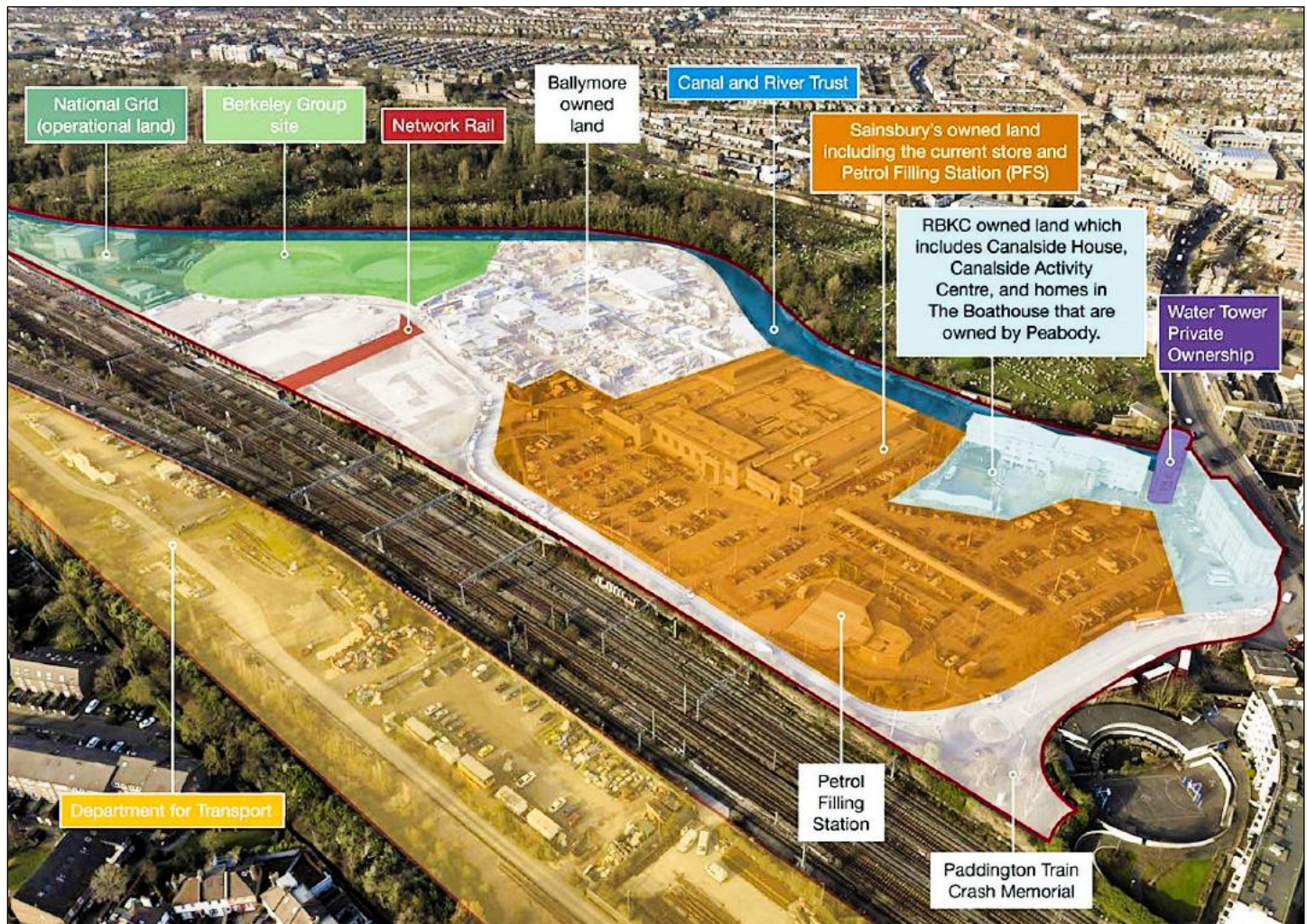
There remain huge and unresolved problems with a development of this scale on this particular site. Used in the past for gas holders and rail and electricity supply equipment, there are many good reasons why this area has remained the largest piece of undeveloped land in the borough. The Ballymore/Sainsbury site has the only entrance, with the remaining part of the site landlocked. How will the contaminated soils be removed past the occupied 2,516 homes? Suitability for high density housing remains very questionable.

The physical barriers of the Grand Union Canal and rail lines to the south and west of the opportunity area, coupled with a single access point off Ladbroke Grove, mean that access is limited, unless costly new bridges are provided for proper



*The developer's model of the Ballymore/Sainsbury's site at the Kensal Canalside opportunity area, viewed from the north with the canal in the foreground and the railway behind it. (Picture from the developer's brochure)*





*The Kensal Canalside opportunity area has a complex ownership. The northern part, where the Ballymore/Sainsbury's site is, has eight different owners, while the site south of the railway has only one: Department for Transport. (Picture from the developer's brochure)*

access. Successive versions of the London plan and RBKC's local plan have recognised these site constraints ever since the site became a mayoral opportunity area in 2011.

The council has long sought ways to overcome these inherent obstacles to any development. An extra Elizabeth Line station was promoted as being critical to unlocking the site, but was refused. So, what remains is a single entrance off Ladbroke Grove for all the homes and a large Sainsbury's in the middle of the site, with over 250 parking spaces and its associated deliveries. The nearest Underground station, at Latimer Road, is a 16 minute walk from the Ballymore proposals.

### **South Kensington as district centre**

The local plan has resurrected a number of long-running issues, including the role of South Kensington as a district centre, its designation and its role in the night-time economy, the use of Exhibition Road south of Cromwell Road as a massive open-air food court, and the colonisation of the piazza to the south of the station.

Along with the local residents' associations, the society has expressed its opposition to further licenses, the colonisation of the street (which does have traffic) and the haphazard way in which the area south of Cromwell Road has been given over to providing food and drink.

This has grown over the last ten years, including the growth of tables and chairs, which now cater for over 500 seated customers on Exhibition Road. In the new year we will meet

the local associations, South Kensington Estate (SKE) and the Exhibition Road Cultural Group, to review the present situation and outline areas for improvement.

### **Kensington High Street**

Opportunity Kensington, the joint project by the council and local businesses to improve Kensington High Street and the surrounding "village" side streets, is now well into its second year of operation. Its main aim is to promote Kensington High Street, by making it a better, more attractive and safer place where people want to shop, eat, be entertained, socialise or just spend time. All its activities are paid for by the participating businesses.

The most visible changes and activities have been improvements to security, the Christmas lights, and the Coronation event in Holland Park. Future changes will include joint projects with the council to green the street, improve pedestrian conditions and secure other improvements to make it a more attractive destination. We strongly support this initiative.

### **Pelham Street construction congestion**

Pelham Street is not only part of the South Kensington Station project, which was approved in December after an appeal (see above), but it is also the site of two Wellcome Trust projects, 40 Pelham Street and 63-81 Pelham Street. Both projects were approved in November 2022, and we now face the problem of both being constructed at the same time as

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*A computer-generated picture of the final version of the new Newcombe House office tower: three floors higher and 50% thicker than the current tower. (Picture from the planning application)*

old site, whilst the amount of office floorspace is massively greater: 23,102m<sup>2</sup> compared with 5,206m<sup>2</sup> in the current tower.

We are most disappointed with the architecture. Whilst the existing 1960s buildings were characterless, the proposed bloated “landmark” building has, in our view, no architectural merit. Notting Hill Gate deserves better. Since the development would have almost no public benefits and poor architecture, we have opposed this scheme.

### **Conclusion**

2024 could be almost as busy as 2023 – getting the local plan signed off, and dealing with the government’s proposals,

which could undo all our achievements by replacing a plan that is tailored to our very particular circumstances with the lowest common denominator of a one-size-fits all approach.

The development of the opportunity areas will dominate our activities and there will also be other major cases. It will be a hard year.

Planning committee team:  
MICHAEL BACH, AMANDA FRAME, BARRY MUNDAY,  
HENRY PETERSON, SOPHIA LAMBERT,  
VANESSA BARTULOVIC & SHAYAN KEYHAN-RAD



# In 2025 all regular phone lines will close down

At the end of 2025, all conventional telephone landlines in the UK will be closed down. When this happens, telephony and internet access will only be possible via the mobile networks or via fibre optic cables into each home – known as “full fibre”, “FTTP” (fibre to the premise) or “FTTH” (fibre-to-the-home). So far there has been very limited information in the media about this big change.

Several fibre optic providers have been busy laying cables all over Kensington the last few years, offering much faster internet than is possible through conventional broadband. However, many households do not sign up when the fibre company is cabling up their street. In some cases, the reason is that they feel that their current broadband speed is sufficient, or that they won't sign up with anyone but BT, somehow believing that BT still is a trusted state-owned public utility. Another reason can be that the household doesn't have any current internet connection, because it just isn't interested, so why should it get this new and faster version? And 2% of UK households have neither internet or a mobile, as they feel that the landline phone meet all their needs.

However, at the end of 2025, [Openreach](#) (the sister company to retailers BT Consumer and BT Enterprise, which owns all the telephone landlines, including the master socket in each home) will switch off the old PSTN (public switched telephone network). When this happens, traditional landline phones and conventional broadband will no longer work, as both rely on the copper wires between the home and the nearest BT street cabinet. Those who want a functioning landline phone and/or internet connection after that date, must already have FTTP installed.

## Landline phone or not?

For the small group of people who do not yet have a mobile, the landline is their only phone connection. Many others have a landline for their broadband, but have stopped using it for telephony, as they feel that their mobile is sufficient and more practical. However, landline phones have one big advantage: they are family phones, i.e. the call can be to anyone in the household, while mobiles are private devices.

For some mobile owners, who feel no need for a landline

phone or very high internet speeds, the emerging G5 mobile standard can be an alternative to FTTP, as the mobile phone providers are beginning to offer routers with SIM cards, so various non-mobile devices can reach the internet via the mobile network. However, please note that G5 signals has much less ability to go through thick walls - and if you eventually want to sell your home, the lack of existing FTTP may make it less attractive.

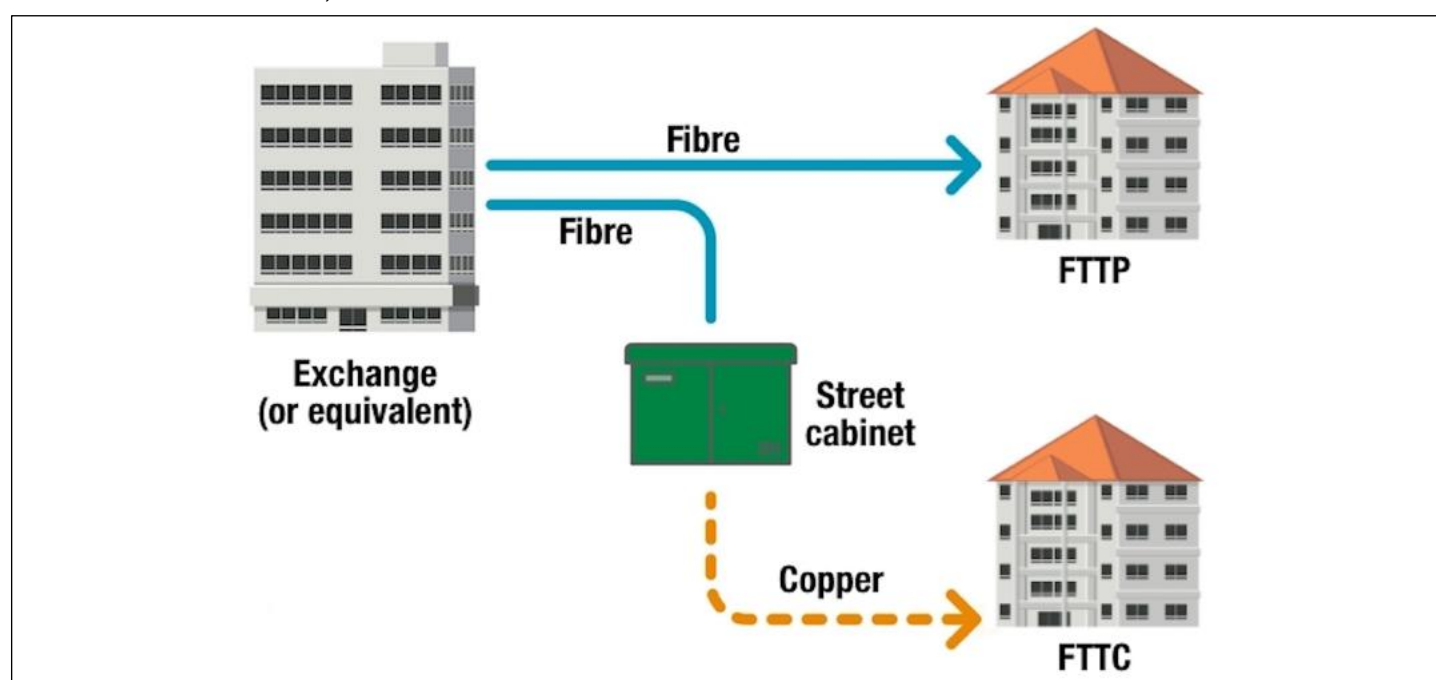
## Hyperoptic and G.Network

Openreach has initially focussed on supplying the British countryside with FTTP in time for the switchover, in order to fulfil BT Group's legal commitment to proved telephony in every corner of the country.

Consequently, Openreach has initially left the FTTP rollout in London to a group of new companies. The main FTTP providers in Kensington are [Hyperoptic](#) (based in Hammer-smith) and [G.Network](#) (based in Shoreditch). Both run their own networks, independent of Openreach and its telephone exchanges. Virgin Media is also in the process of updating its cable network to FTTP speeds for existing customers.

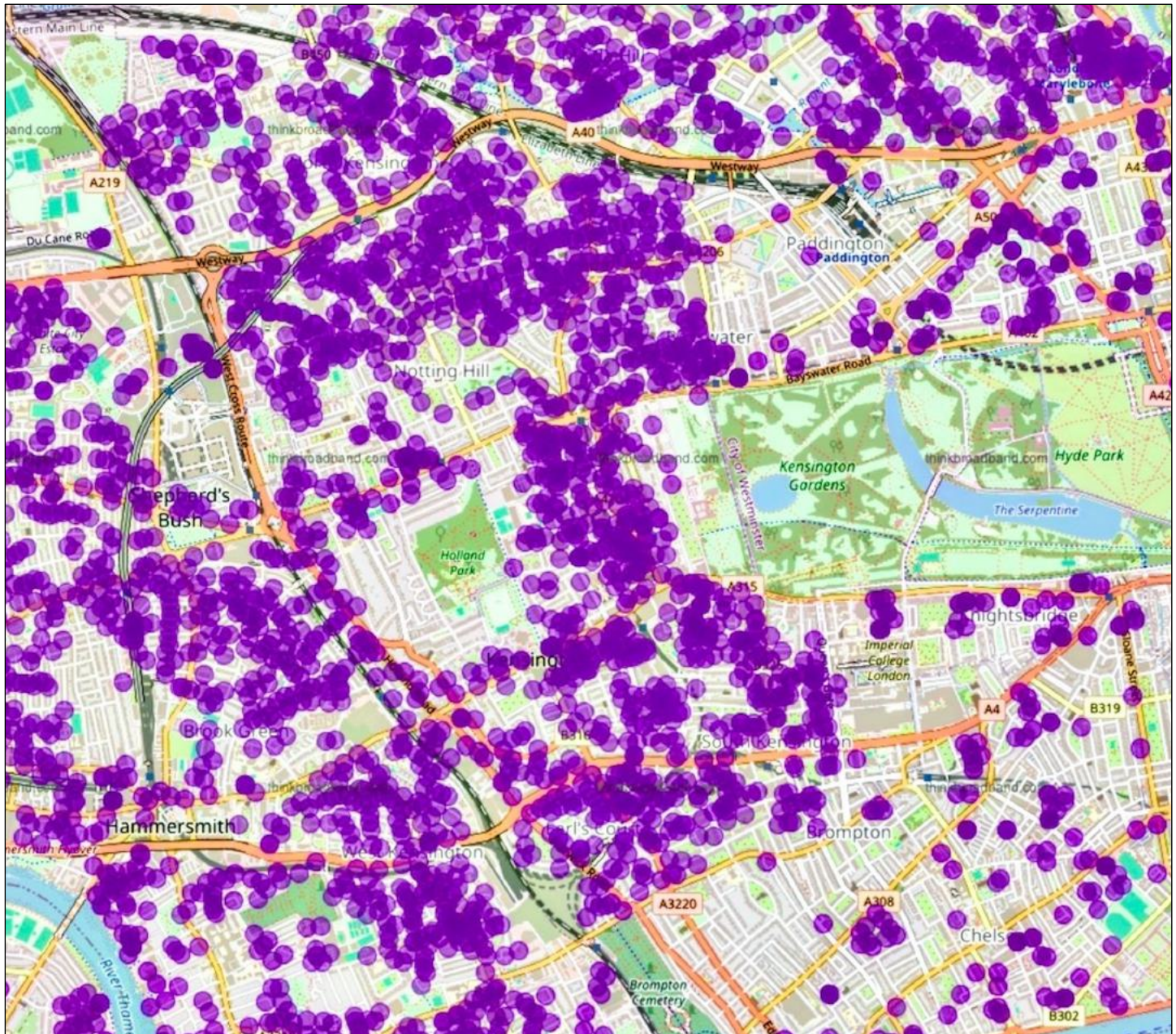
Those who live in flats need to convince their landlords to allow the FTTP provider to install the cables. The installation is done without any cost to the landlord or the tenants, although the tenants obviously have to pay for using the service - but usually at a much lower price than what they pay for their current broadband and landline phone.

Openreach will eventually begin to install FTTP in London as well, on behalf of its clients BT Customer, BT Enterprise, TalkTalk, Plusnet, Sky and others, who all rely on the Openreach network. A recent check of Openreach's coverage map, shows that FTTP work has begun at some of the tele-



*The big difference between FTTP (fibre to the premise) and FTTC (fibre to the cabinet) is the much higher capacity and speed that fibre all the way to the router can achieve, compared to the old copper wires running from the street cabinet.*





The dots show all buildings in Kensington already connected to Hyperoptic's FTTP. (Map from ThinkBroadband)

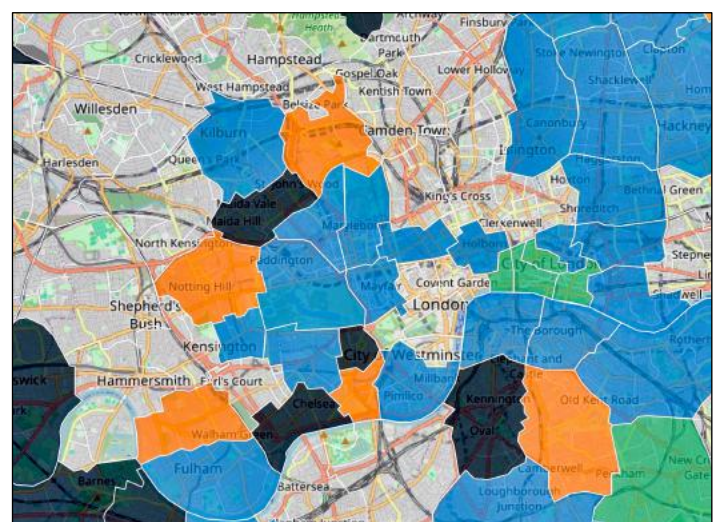
phone exchanges in Kensington, but nobody will say when the Openreach rollout in Kensington will begin. As the company already has fibre cables to the street cabinets, it will only have to run fibre from those cabinets into each home. However, it is possible that this will only be done for vulnerable households that haven't yet had FTTP installed, leaving the other households to sign up a competitor who already has installations on that street.

### No monopoly will be allowed

Eventually, the independent FTTP networks will indubitably be obliged, due to existing competition regulations, to allow competing retailers to use their networks, just as Openreach has been for many years. So anyone signing up today with Hyperoptic or G.Network should be able to switch to another provider in a few years' time.

In short, when you're offered to be hooked up to full fibre, don't hesitate, as you will be forced to do so anyway before the end of 2025. If you find that you're not happy with that provider, you will be able to switch to another provider when the contract expires.

THOMAS BLOMBERG



Openreach's FTTP map for central London, updated in December, shows that its FTTP installers won't be in Kensington anytime soon. No colour means no current plans, black means "in the future", orange means start within a year, blue means that the company has begun some work in the local exchange, while green means that Openreach is actually installing FTTP in the area. (Picture from Openreach's website)



# Highlights from 70 years of annual reports

The Kensington Society's 69 annual reports, produced for every annual general meeting since the society was created on 17 March 1953, is a treasure trove of information of large and small campaigns to protect and enhance Kensington, but also full of long verbatim reports from public meetings, articles about historical houses and persons and obituaries over long forgotten members.

All the annual reports (since 2014 only called annuals) can be found, read and downloaded on the Kensington Society website (save from a few lost pages). Here are some of the highlights from 1954 to 1999:

### 1954: Saving the east wing of Holland House

One of our first actions was to save the east wing of Holland House from demolition. The society persuaded the council and LCC to support the Youth Hostel Association and renovate the wing as a youth hostel. The opening was attended by Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip.

### 1956: Fighting for the Imperial Institute

In 1956, the society arranged a public meeting for 600 residents in Kensington Town Hall, in an attempt to save [the Imperial Institute](#), south of Albert Hall. Although not totally successful, the society managed, together with several of our members who spoke to oppose the demolition (including [John Betjeman](#) and [Sir Hugh Casson](#)), to save [the Queen's Tower](#).

### 1957-58: Objecting to the Notting Hill Gate plans

The most important issue in 1957 and 1958 was the big development of Notting Hill Gate, which totally changed that area. At a public meeting in April 1958 in Kensington Town Hall, which was attended by some 700 residents, the society especially criticised the plans for the two tower buildings: the residential Campden Hill Towers and the office block Newcombe House. The redevelopment went ahead, as we know, and 65 years later its time an even larger and more massive Newcombe House.

### 1958-59: Plan for office tower across from the church

In 1958 the society held a public meeting to oppose a plan for the redevelopment of the north side of Kensington High Street between Kensington Church Street and Palace Avenue (the road to the palace). Between 400 and 500 attended the meeting and passed a resolution opposing the 23-storey office block at the high street-Church Street corner. The society managed to stop the office block and was successful in



*Plane Tree House was a very much loved house surrounded with plane trees, at the entrance of Holland Park from Duchess of Bedford Walk. In 1962 it was torn down to be replaced by a tall block of flats. (Picture from the 1962-63 annual report)*





*In the end, the tall block of flats that should replace Plane Tree House, ended up being four linked 6-storey buildings, lined up along Holland Walk. (Picture from Google Street View)*

reducing the height of the hotel (nowadays known as Royal Garden Hotel). (See the separate article for more details)

### **1960-62: Fighting for Plane Tree House**

From 1960 to 1962, there were several planning applications for replacing Plane Tree House and all its trees, at the corner of Holland Walk and Duchess of Bedford Walk, with a high block of flats. The society had strongly opposed this, resulting in several revisions that preserved some of the trees and made the block of flats less dominant. However, the 1962-63 annual report, announces that “it is with regret that we learn that planning permission has been approved and that this very fine house will be demolished”. The replacement was in the end four square blocks of flats, linked together and sitting along Holland Walk. Ironically, they carry the name Plane Tree House.

### **1963-66: The battle behind the tube station**

A plan in 1963, for the development of the site to the rear of High Street Kensington tube station, raised the loudest cry of alarm from the local community and concerned bodies such as the Kensington Society and the London Society. The scheme, for which the borough council favoured planning permission, envisaged among other things two residential blocks of 22 storeys, both 290 feet high, and a third of 17 storeys. By 1966, with a public inquiry in the offing, the application had been scaled down to one block 226 feet in height, and three others each of 125 feet. In the end only one block was built, a tall, broad 12-storey hotel more than 150 feet high, located in Wright's Lane. It was an inevitably intrusive building, quite out of scale with its surroundings, but preferable to what might have been

### **1969-1970 The big hotel boom in Kensington**

The years 1969 and 1970 saw a hotel boom in Kensington. Applications were made for the erection of many hotels, in-

cluding a 2,070 bedroom hotel with shops, offices, restaurants and car parking for 766 cars on the Gloucester Road Station site, a 600-bed hotel on the Courtfield Road/Ashburn Place site, a 78 metre hotel tower at the corner of Earls Court Road and Kensington High Street site, a 515-bed hotel on South Kensington Station site, a hotel at 131-161 Holland Park Avenue, a 1,250 room hotel at 121-127 Kensington High Street, an 11 storey tower hotel at 100-107 Queen's Gate, a 125-foot high hotel at the Gollis Garage site, and a 750-room hotel at Emperors' Gate, to mention only a few.

### **1972-73: Office development boom**

Following the 1969-70 hotel boom, 1972-1973 was the time for office development, including an application for the Odeon cinema site, a fight which would come back in the 1990s. The De Vere Garden/Canning Place site had a proposal for an office and there was a development on the corner of Gloucester Road and Cromwell Road, which included 198,500 sqft offices in a 63m high 14-storey building. A development for Earls Court Road/Cromwell Road included 8,000 sqft of office development in a building that would have overshadowed the small residential streets in the area. Even the legendary Coronet Theatre in Notting Hill Gate was threatened, as the owners, the Rank Organisation, wanted to demolish it and build a large office block instead. It was fortunately refused, but in 1989 the Coronet was to be under threat again.

### **1978: The Ashburn Mews coach park**

In 1978, the society opposed an application to turn the large triangle of Ashburn Mews, Courtfield Road and Ashburn Place (across the street from where the enormous Kensington Forum hotel had been built in 1973) into a huge parking space for coaches. The council gave permission, but with

*Continues on next page*



## KENSINGTON SOCIETY – PROTECTING OUR PART OF LONDON FOR 70 YEARS

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conditions. But as the conditions were ignored, a continuation of the permission was denied in 1983. The whole block, which includes the Gloucester Road tube station, was later developed into a large hotel and the Gloucester Arcade shopping mall, causing the Ashburn Mews to disappear forever. That year, the society also supported the Onslow Neighbourhood Association in its opposition to a multi-storey garage on Neville Street

### 1978-1983: the battle over the former Town Hall

In 1978 the former Town Hall on Kensington High Street was much discussed. In 1979 a proposal for redevelopment of the site was presented and roundly opposed. However, in 1982 the old Town Hall was demolished in the early hours of a Saturday morning without prior consultation or satisfactory alternative proposal, at the instructions of the leader of the council. For several years thereafter, proposal after proposal came forward, but all were all opposed by the society and others. Finally, in 1983, one was presented that wasn't opposed. The result was Macmillan House, now home of the Ivy.

### 1987: cabmen's shelters

In 1987 only 13 remained of the 68 cabmen's shelters that had been built in London between 1875 and 1914. The society supported repairs on the shelters in Kensington, including the Kensington Road shelter (now known as [Luba's Green Hut Café](#)) and our patron, the Duke of Gloucester, unveiled the tablet following its restoration in 1987. The Thurlow Place cabmen's shelter – originally in the middle of the road, east of the entrance to the [Victoria and Albert Museum](#) – was in late 2021 moved to the pavement outside the museum. The Kensington Park Road cabmen's shelter – outside numbers 8–10, is now [Ye Olde Green Hut](#).

### 1987-88: St Mary's Abbot's Hospital

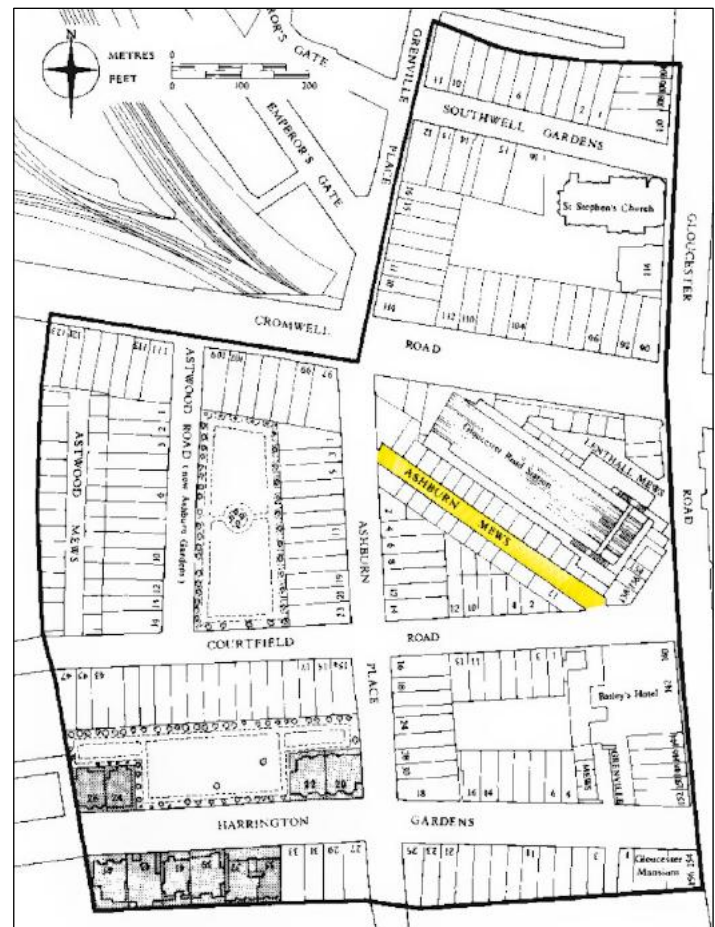
In 1987, a proposal came forward to redevelopment of the St Mary's Abbot's Hospital on Marloe Road. The site was 9.1 acres. At the time, it was agreed the area was only suitable for housing and must respect the Kensington tradition of terrace and garden squares with the porter's lodge, gates piers and foundation stone preserved. In 1988 an application came forward with many of the important buildings on the site listed and to be refurbished, new construction of 251 flats, 71 homes, and a health centre for 30 elderly, 24 beds for elderly mental ill and a hearing centre. The density was dictated by the monetary needs of the Health Authority.

### 1988-89: Odeon threatened again

The Odeon site was threatened again both in 1988 and 1989. In 1988, there was an application to split the cinema into five separate ones, 47 flats with their own car parking and 25,000 sqft of offices. In 1989, that application was replaced by one for total demolition of the cinema and further development of the site. The Kensington Society, the High Street Study Group, Earls Terrace Residents' Association and Edwardes Square Garden Committee all opposed the application, which was refused and an appeal was dismissed in 1990.

### 1989: the Coronet could have become a McDonald's

Having survived a threat to be replaced by an office in 1972, the Coronet Theatre once again appeared in a planning application in 1989. It was made by McDonald's, who wanted



*Ashburn Mews, highlighted in yellow, on a plan when Ashburn Place and Courtfield Road still were lined only by residential houses. The mews and all the houses in that triangle disappeared in 1978, when the council allowed all of it to be turned into a parking space for coaches. Later, it became the site for a large hotel, which nowadays is the apartment hotel Cheval Gloucester Park. (Plan from Survey of London: Volume 42, Kensington Square To Earl's Court)*

to remove the interior of the Coronet to enable a fast food restaurant in basement and ground floor. Kensington Society opposed the application, of course, as did many local and not so local theatre lovers. Instead, we strongly supported the borough council's appeal for listing of the theatre, so it would be protected.

### 1996: Victoria & Albert Museum extension

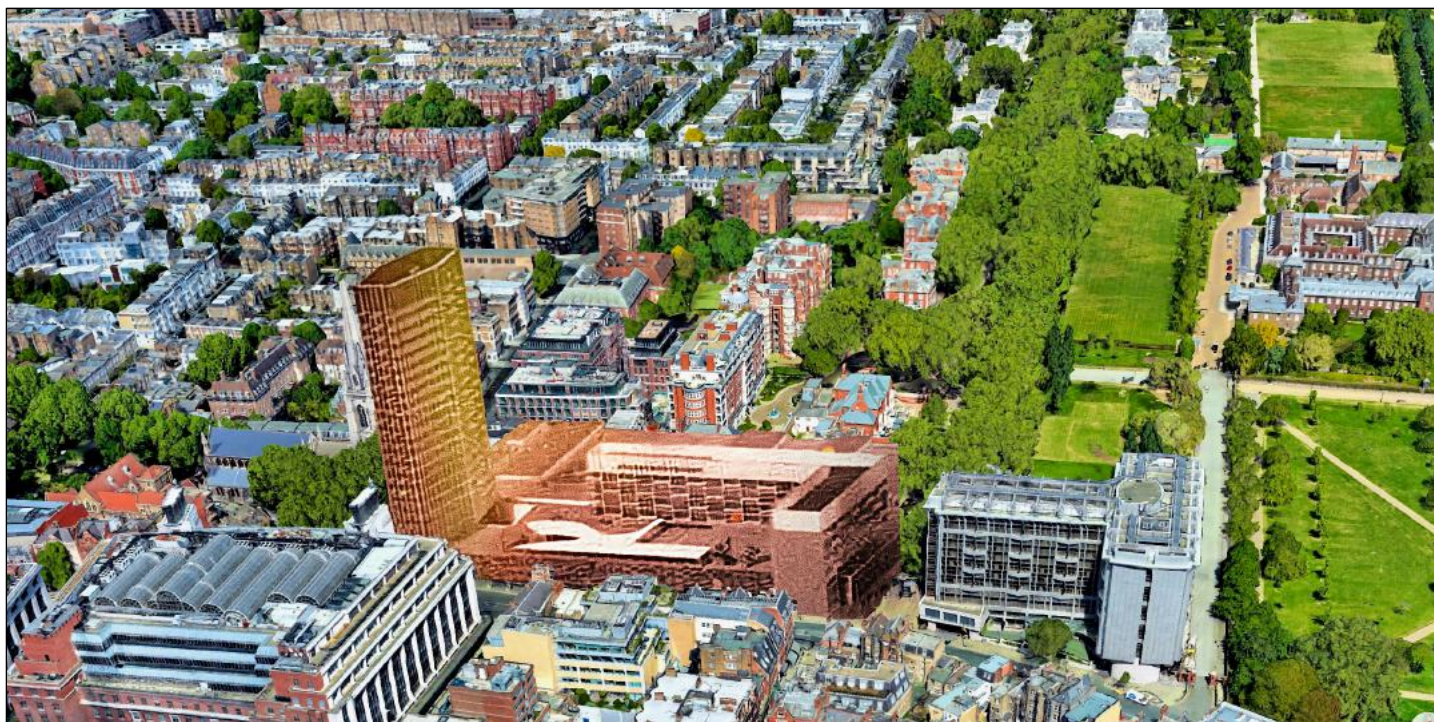
The Victoria & Albert Museum had chosen Daniel Libeskind as their architect for the Boilerhouse scheme. Having seen the plans and models for this extension, which would dominate the Aston Webb screen, the Kensington Society objected most strongly. The trustees for the museum then asked the architect to reduce his plan, but the society still objected, as the extension would dominate the skyline and be quite inappropriate in Exhibition Road.

### 1999: Holland House restoration ideas

By 1999, the future of Holland House had been under consideration by the council for over two years. The council engaged architects Fielden and Mawson to solicit ideas and views. The schemes ranged from a full Jacobean restoration, costing an estimated £4.5 million, to a modern structure housing and a new café in the region of £2.5 million.

THOMAS BLOMBERG





*An attempt to show what it would have looked like if the tower and the large development next to it had been approved. The development is from a picture of a model and the rest if from Google Earth.*

### The fight against the horrendous tower

In 1958, the London County Council (LCC) received a planning application for an enormous development, covering the northern side on Kensington High Street from the corner with Kensington Church Street to Palace Avenue (the road to Kensington Palace). The Kensington council recommended approval, but a public outcry, led by the Kensington Society, stopped most of the plans and diminished the harm of what remained.

The plan included a 83m high 23-storey office tower at the corner of High Street and Church Street, just two metres shorter than the spire of St. Mary Abbot's Church opposite, London's tallest church and at the time the highest building in the borough. And at the other end of the site, the developers wanted to replace the 38m high old Kensington Palace Hotel with a new 53m high 14-storey 600 bedroom hotel. In between, there would be a deep 2-storey platform with shops fronting the high Street, on top of which there would be a garden and an 8-storey L-shaped block of flats at the back. The northern border of the site would have reached the current Lancer Square site and included the fire station (which should have been replaced by a new one).

Obviously, many Kensingtonians were appalled, and the fact that the borough council supported the plans fuelled the anger even further.

The Kensington Society had just successfully fought a battle against a 16 storey block near Olympia, so with the energy still flowing, it went to attack again.

#### Objection letter

In an objection letter, sent to the borough as well as to LCC in September 1958, the society pointed out that, notwithstanding the appalling aesthetics and the tower's overshadowing of the church, the church site had a long history of structural problems, forcing it to be rebuilt four times between 1704 and 1838, so deep piling in the vicinity of the church could lead to serious problems.

The letter also lambasted the council for supporting the scheme, as its own planning committee only a few months earlier had observed that "Kensington is primarily residential in character and we do not doubt that the Council will wish this policy to remain unchanged."

#### Public meeting

This was followed up with a public meeting arranged by the society, which was attended by more than 400 people.

The meeting was chaired by the society's eminent president, the architect Lord Esher, who at the outset set the tone with the words: "*There is no doubt that if you want to keep anything of value standing in this city, you have to fight every inch of the way against the commercial moneymakers backed by their political supporters.*" In those early years, the borough council was supporting numerous projects proposed by the "commercial moneymakers" but opposed by the Kensington Society - and later rejected by the final arbiter, LCC (London County Council).

The meeting ended with a resolution, asking for the whole project to be reconsidered. Only 11 of the attendees voted against it, most of them councillors who were in favour of it.

The very strong opposition stopped both the office tower and the big development next to it, while the hotel was sent back to the drawing board and eventually reemerged as the smaller hotel, nowadays known as Royal Garden Hotel.

THOMAS BLOMBERG



# How the Kensington Society was created

Seventy years later, there are no founders of the Kensington Society alive who can tell us how the society was created, but the details can actually be found in an obituary in the 1965-1966 annual report for Cecil George Boxall, the former reference librarian at Kensington Library, who had died in December 1966.

It all began with two ladies living in Kensington Square, Flory Mackey (1888-1978), daughter of the famous church architect Peter Paul Pugin, and the socialite Gay Christiansen (1912-2001), who in 1952 had begun fighting for the preservation of two 17th century houses on Young Street, sitting next to each other: the Felday House and the Little House.

Barkers owned the freehold and wanted the site for an extension of their bakery. Barkers eventually abandoned their plans (perhaps because of the fierce local opposition), but Little House (No 27) was pulled down anyway in 1956, while Felday House (No 25) survived to the late 1960s, when the whole site was demolished to make way for the multi-storey car park that was erected in 1968-70 (which in turn was replaced by luxury housing 2015-19).

### The key instigator: William Begley

Anyway, the two energetic ladies appealed to both local and national officials, as well as to the two main preservation societies at the time, the Georgian Group and SPAB (the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings). Their campaign caught the eye of [William Walter Begley](#) (1893-1980), an architect who headed the Historic Buildings Department of LCC (London County Council), the forerunner to the 1965-1986 GLC (Greater London Council), so he paid them a visit and suggested the formation of a local society, which would enable residents to act jointly instead of individually.

He also suggested that they contact Cecil George Boxall (1895-1966), who had worked as librarian at Kensington Library since 1924 and at the time was its reference librarian.

He was a keen amateur historian, who in 1951 had written the book "Campden Hill: its historic houses and their inhabitants".

Boxall was delighted by the idea, and within hours he produced a list of residents who might be interested in joining, especially Dr Stephen Pasmore, a GP who lived in Edwardes Square and also was an enthusiastic amateur historian.

### Kensington Society was born 17 March 1953

At a meeting held on 17 March 1953 in Gay Christiansen's home (18 Kensington Square), the Kensington Society was formally created, with Stephen Pasmore appointed chairman of the the executive committee and [Ronald Barnes, 3rd Baron Gorell](#), appointed president. Exactly who else where in the executive committee from the start is unclear, although it obviously included the instigators Gay Christiansen, William Begley and Cecil Boxall. The total number of initial members were 24.

The next step was to make the society more widely known, so a public inaugural meeting was held in Kensington Town Hall on 13 October 1953, attended by some 600 persons. Many of those attending must have become members, because by the end of the first financial year, in September 1954, the society had grown to 474 members, whereof 17 had opted to become life members.

### The first executive committee

By that time the leadership of the society had also expanded drastically, so the first annual report (sent out to the members



Oliver Messel, Lord Ronald Gorell and Lady Dorothea Ponsonby. (Pictures from Wikipedia)



## KENSINGTON SOCIETY – PROTECTING OUR PART OF LONDON FOR 70 YEARS



Gay Christiansen, Sir Hugh Casson and Lady Priscilla Norman. (Pictures from Wikipedia and the society's annuals)

ahead of the first annual general meeting, held on 5 October 1954) shows that the executive committee consisted of 14 persons.

Beside those already mentioned, Sir [Hugh Casson](#) (director of architecture for the 1951 Festival of Britain) was vice-chair and the secretive Hugh Shillito (head of [MI5's](#) Soviet espionage desk after WWII) was among those without any specific positions. Gay Christiansen had been given the title honorary secretary, which she was to hold until 1995. She was also the editor of the annual report, a role she kept until her death in 2001.

The president, Lord Gorell, was now accompanied by two vice-presidents: the Bishop of Kensington ([Cyril Easthaugh](#)) and Sir Harold Vaughan Kenyon (who since 1928 had been funeral director to the Royal Household and had been mayor of both Paddington and Kensington in the 1930s).

### A council of 24 famous persons

In addition, the society had a council consisting of 23 illustrious individuals (the constitution allowed for 30), among them the stage designer [Oliver Messel](#) (uncle to Lord Snowdon), the unmarried elderly sisters Jean and Rachel Alexander (who lived in their birth home Aubrey House), the suffragist [Lady Priscilla Norman](#) (who during WWI had swooshed around London on the world's first motor scooter, probably the only one in the Britain) and the writer and writers' friend [Lady Dorothea Ponsonby](#) (widow of Labour peer and peace activist [Arthur Ponsonby](#)).

Royal patronage was to come later, in 1970, when [Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone](#), one of Queen Victoria's 37 (!) granddaughters, agreed to become the society's first patron. She was a spry 87-year-old at the time and would remain our patron for another 11 years.

### Where did Flory go?

Interestingly, the first annual report shows that Flory Mackey,

who campaigned with Gay Christiansen, was given no official role in Kensington Society. It's possible that she moved from London to Salisbury about the same time and lost contact with Gay, because after her death in Salisbury 1 October 1978, there was no obituary in the Annual Report - which until 2000 seems to have diligently recorded every death of an existing or previous member.

The first annual report also shows that an annual membership cost half-a-guinea (i.e. £0.53), while a life membership cost 10 guineas (i.e. £10.50). This would today (2023) equal £18.25 for an annual membership and £361.53 for a life membership.

### 37 events the first two years

The society was immensely active the first two years. Beside the annual AGMs, there were 17 events between 22 October 1953 and 6 October 1954 (consisting of seven lectures, nine local walks or visits to specific buildings, and one piano recital) and a further 20 events between 1 November 1954 and 2 December 1955.

In its second year, the society also set up a photographic group among its members, with the ambitious purpose to "to make a photographic record of the borough, its history, antiquity, natural features, architecture, industries, current activities, and in fact everything that presents, or interprets, the life of the community". The pictures taken or donated to the group, seems to have been donated to Kensington Library.

Four years later, 5 November 1957, the Victorian Society was founded in Sambourne House (18 Stafford Terrace), and several of the persons leading the Kensington Society were among the founders, among them Gay Christiansen and Viscount Esher, who had been the KS president since 1956 and also became the Victorian Society's president - but that's a story for another day.

THOMAS BLOMBERG





Four of the many letterboxes in Kensington, spanning in age from the 1870s to the 1980s. (Pictures Alison Sutherland)

## Looking for listed letterboxes in Kensington

Did you know that many of our local Royal Mail letterboxes are listed? No? Me neither! And did you know that Kensington is a hotbed of listed letterboxes of all types, since London received the very first ones in 1855? Next time you post a letter, or even just walk past a postbox, have a look! There are apparently over 400 varieties of the familiar red pillar boxes - not all in London, but enough to make an ordinary errand more interesting - and there are even a few of the rarer wall boxes.

The very first British letter boxes were installed in the Channel Islands 1852-1853, based on a letterbox design seen in Paris. These cast iron pillar style boxes became an instant success and spread quickly to the British mainland, as they were much more convenient than having to walk to the local post office or a coaching inn to mail a letter.

One of the earliest designs is the rather elaborate "Penfold" box. The one on the corner of Collingham Road and Courtfield Gardens, which dates from the late 1870s, is Grade II listed. Designed by architect [John Wornham Penfold](#), they are hexagonal, with acanthus leaves on the cap and an acanthus bud perched on the top. Made by Cochrane Grove & Co of Dudley between 1866 and 1879, they were elegant but expensive, hence the relatively short production run. There are supposedly at least five of those boxes in Kensington.

In 1879 came the familiar round pillar boxes. For some reason, those produced in the early 1880s carried no royal cipher or the words 'POST OFFICE', hence they have become known as the 'anonymous' type. I have found one of these on Queens Gate, near the junction with Harrington Road, but there are others: in Vicarage Gardens, De Vere Gardens and Thurloe Place. After this 'anonymous' mistake was drawn to the attention of the GPO, VR-ciphered (i.e. "Victoria Regina") boxes were produced in quantity - many of which can be found across Kensington. And ever since, all new letter boxes have borne the initials of the current reigning monarch.

Wall boxes, fitted as implied on a wall, are relatively rare in London, though there is one in South Kensington on Old Brompton Road which dates from the 1880s. Others include one from the reign of George V in Pater Street and one in Canning Passage which carries the cipher of Elizabeth II.

In 1966, the Post Office introduced the controversial rectangular box by famous designer [David Mellor](#) (not to be confused with [the former politician](#)) and in 1980 the modernist Type K pillar box was launched. There is one in front of the tube station at Gloucester Road.

And why are they red? Originally, the colours varied, with

green being the favourite, as it was regarded the most unobtrusive. But they were so unobtrusive that people walked into them, so in 1874 it was decided that all boxes should be red.

I found most of the above details from the Letter Box Study Group website ([www.lbsg.org](http://www.lbsg.org)) and from Simon Vaughan Winter, the editor of the group's quarterly (and very comprehensive) newsletter. Fascinating stuff!

ALISON SUTHERLAND



Formed in 1953, the Kensington Society strives to ensure that our part of London retains its magnificent heritage of buildings, parks and gardens alongside the best of contemporary architecture and design.

With 700 members and some 40 affiliated societies, we are very active in planning issues and able to exert a real influence on planning decisions in the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea. We also have a programme of lectures and talks, which covers a wide range of subjects, both historical as well as informative. The events offer the chance to meet your Kensington neighbours.

Interested in joining? It only costs £20 per year.

Membership form and bookings for events can be found on the Kensington Society website.

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Kensington Society is a registered charity (number 267778)

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