

HIGHBURY COMMUNITY NEWS

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Victorians at Home - An exhibition

By Robert Scott

I think it may have been the condemnation of the distinguished visiting lecturer that first encouraged me, as a schoolboy, to admire Victorian architecture. His view, probably somewhat advanced for the time, was that although the Victorians had merit as industrious and innovative engineers, their tastes were vulgar in the extreme and absurdly eclectic, whilst their choice of materials was simply unpardonable. I recall that red bricks and encaustic tiles were singled out for particular scorn. How better to persuade the next generation to take an opposing view?

Certainly it made me want to understand the era and its people better. One of my difficulties has always been that official histories deal with great affairs of state, the nobility and grand designs. But the Victorian age is pre-eminently characterised by the rise and rise of the bourgeoisie, who did not inhabit that world. To get a handle on the age, what we want to understand is the domestic life of the "middling sort of people" who appear in the pages of Trollope, Thackeray or George Eliot. Whilst novels give us a vivid picture from a literary perspective, research on the physical details that made up the domestic environment of ordinary people - and the moral and aesthetic significance of those details - has been sadly lacking. Anyone who has tried to renovate rather than modernise a Victorian house or to recreate a Victorian garden will bear witness to this.

So, I was delighted to learn of the *Home and Garden, 1830-1914* exhibition being held at the Geffrye Museum until 18th July. In the words of the organisers this "explores the representation of urban domestic interiors and gardens." They say, no doubt correctly, that this is the first ever exhibition of works on this theme and they make the point that it "focuses on the valued domestic spaces of the middle-classes rather than those of Royalty or the aristocracy."

The Geffrye, in Kingsland Road, always one of the most engaging of London's museums, forms the perfect setting for this particular study, which mixes pictures from well known artists including Tissot, Sickert, Frith and Grimshaw with less known works and those of rank amateurs.

Searchers after authentic details will be pleased by the inclusion of sketches by George Scharf, a most reliable witness, as his profession of scientific drawing made him scrupulous not to re-arrange things for artistic effect. Fans of genre painting will enjoy something of a feast. Two that caught my eye were *Man*

Smoking in a Parlour by John Edward Soden, in which a would-be Hogarthian scandal is bowdlerised into something just a tiny bit naughty and uncouth; and S. J. Solomon's *Conversation Piece*, in which various ladies and gentlemen, attended by servants, inhabit a gloriously pretentious and showy salon illuminated by a ghastly novelty lamp in the form of a startled owl.

There are numerous portraits, chosen for the interest of the surroundings rather than the fame of the sitters. One is a strikingly awkward group by the young Holman Hunt, in a style entirely unlike that of his mature work, but which is surely a perfect portrayal of a certain type of mid-century drawing room; a fact which is attested by the survival of various objects included in the painting.

Another group of paintings focuses on the garden as part of the domestic environment. There are some startling juxtapositions - the serene, Augustan composure of J.J. Chalon's study of the garden of Marble Hill Cottage, dated 1839, against the bleak desolation of Tissot's *Garden at 17 Grove End Road* of 1882 reminds us of the psychological gulf that separates the pastoral ideal of the early century from the dismal realities of the later suburban sprawl. Another picture that falls between these two extremes and grants us an almost photographic reality is Frederick Walker's *My Front Garden* of 1864. What struck me were the weeds in the coarse, tufty lawn and the overgrown privet hedge. Some urban things never change; but Walker's canary-yellow, cast iron gate might raise a few eyebrows today.

The variety of techniques and styles, and the vast differences in technical competence in this collection encourage scrutiny but serve to warn

us not to take everything too literally. Some artists omit details for the sake of clarity whilst others introduce them for the sake of narrative. Even where we might think we are on fairly safe ground, say with Robert Tait's well known depiction of Thomas and Jane Carlyle at home in Cheyne Row, Jane's sharp pen tells us plainly that artists and subjects care about different things; and see them differently. Tait was after verisimilitude but relied too heavily on his wide-angle camera, to Jane's disgust. "I wish Tait had not painted Nero (the dog) as big as a sheep. That provokes me more than being transmitted to posterity in wrong perspective and with a frightful table cover".

This is a unique exhibition sure to appeal to scholars, art lovers and the idly curious of any age. Go, see and enjoy! ▣

Home and Garden 1830-1914 Exhibition at the Geffrye Museum Kingsland Road, E2 8EA; Tel: 020 7739 9893 until 18th July. Free entry. www.geffrye-museum.org.uk



Man Smoking in a Parlour by J. E. Soden 1862 Geffrye Museum

Conservationists attack plans for Aubert Court

Critics of the proposed plans for the renovation of Aubert Court received authoritative support recently from the 20th Century Society. Writing to the Council to object to the new design of the windows, the Society demanded that they be replaced with exact replicas.

Confirming the historical importance of the buildings, the Society referred to Pevsner's description of the estate's "*crisp and rational design*" and noted its significance for the building type in general because, in Pevsner's words, "*(Aubert Court) makes a significant display of the supreme confidence of post-war council housing*".

The Society considers the estate to be one of architect E.C.P. Monson's finest works and concludes that it is absolutely unacceptable to introduce windows with a different profile and pattern since this would dramatically change the "*crisp*" design, causing the estate to lose its exterior qualities.

However, sticking with the original design poses difficulties beyond those of cost, as it brings planning policies into conflict with the Building Regulations. So, the Council needs to adopt a flexible, enlightened attitude to the Regulations, if it cares about maintaining the architectural integrity of these and similarly important buildings. The current rules on windows, introduced in 2002, generally require high quality double glazing or triple glazing. This is no problem in new-build, but is hard to achieve in renovation work.

Where replicas of historic windows are needed, it is impossible to meet the newly specified heat-loss figures. Fortunately the Regulations make allowance for the need to preserve the architectural quality of historic buildings; and advice from English Heritage encourages Local Authorities to have due regard to this need, and to the advice of their Conservation Officers.

Less fortunately, the Regulations do not also encourage Local Authorities to decide what constitutes an historic building. Consequently, many buildings, legitimately considered important fall outside the strict definition of "historic".

On the other hand, Islington has a Planning Policy (No. D11, for those who care about these things) requiring "*alterations... to respect the architectural character and detail of the original buildings.*" This **should** mean the use of exact replicas where needed, as they clearly are here; and Building Control Officers **do** have powers to relax the rules, where there are reasons to do so.

Given the need to balance competing aims, the Council has to pick its way through the conflicts in the various rules and regulations, as it cannot possibly obey all of them simultaneously.

The right way is to insist on maintaining the integrity of all important buildings, of which Aubert Court is undoubtedly one, at the expense of departing from the detail of the Building Regs. A good reason for this is that the Regulations aim at energy conservation; but buildings that lose their character tend to have shorter lives; and replacing them is always an energy intensive business equivalent to many years of heat loss through thermally sub-optimal windows. ▣

Tories to blame for housing decline claims Pat Haynes

Commenting on Peter Koenig's article on Aubert Court, Pat writes:

"Aubert Court was not only built to better standards, it also charged higher rents. It was not cuts caused by Margaret Hodge's borrowing but the complete ban by the Thatcher Tory Government on borrowing capital etc. which led inevitably over the years to much deterioration. We did borrow a lot when we could and the debt charges were almost totally covered by government subsidy.

Only since this Labour Government allowed some borrowing have strides been made to get to the 'Decent Homes' aim." ▣

HCA donates to ORBIS

This year's HCA AGM and Party featured a raffle and auction, from which members raised £200 for ORBIS, an eye-sight saving charity that runs Flying Eye-Hospital programmes across the developing world. Prizes for the raffle were generously donated by shop-keepers at Highbury Barn and Blackstock Road. Bruce Tattersall used his auctioneering skills to encourage people to up the bids to make sure ORBIS representative Tina Frank left with a respectable donation.

Earlier, a new HCA Committee was elected and reports from the Committee and from Members in the audience on various issues were debated. Christ Church, as usual, proved to be an excellent venue with its efficient sound-system and catering facilities. ▣ www.highburycommunity.org

FANCY RUNNING A FOOD CO-OP?

Grace Robinson started the North London Food Co-Op two years ago, and is now looking for a Co-ordinator to take the project forward. Contacts are in place, a van to transport the fruit and veg has been bought – so if you are interested or know someone who might be... Ring Food Co-op on **7226 7960**.

This and That

- Islington Farmers' Market is now on Wednesdays 9am-3pm in Chapel Market, as well as Sundays in Camden Passage, 10am-2pm. Ring Jo Foster on **020 8341 9238** for details.
- Montem School, Hornsey Rd, is one of the chosen sites for the 'Million Trees for London' Campaign run by Trees for London. The School has no green space for the children, so an 'edible playground project' is planned. Trees will be planted and a wildlife garden and vegetable patch created. To sponsor a Tree: Ring **7587 1320** or check www.treesforlondon.org
- Council owned lamp-posts may soon sport large 'Advert Banners' in many Islington streets. Blackstock Road is one of them. Join HCA in objecting to this proposal for more visual clutter! Planning Applications [9.06.04] listed on www.islington.gov.uk. Case Officer Louise Bourke **7527 2962**.
- A CPZ for Gillespie area starts this Autumn. A few Pay and Display Bays will be put near Highbury Barn shops. Quadrant area voted overwhelmingly against the CPZ which will not be actioned here this year. Mike Eames Tel:**7527 2050**.

Collapse of Democracy in Highbury

By Tim Newark

There's a moment - a "tipping" moment - when suddenly you realise that the people you have entrusted to run affairs where you live are just taking care of their own business - and not yours. That moment occurred for me on Tuesday 25 May at 7.30pm at Central Library, Fieldway Crescent. I had joined many other local residents concerned about the closures of Benwell Road and Bryantwood Road. Despite a hall packed with protestors wanting both roads opened, despite a 2400-strong petition, the majority of the assembled councillors ignored all that and voted "no" to both roads being reopened.

What's Going On Here?

I have lived in Highbury with my family for 18 years and have thoroughly enjoyed it. But over the last couple of years I have noticed the role of the local council becoming more and more oppressive.

I remember walking down Upper Street and seeing a wedding couple in tears because their whiteribboned car had been clamped outside Islington town hall. I have talked to shop keepers in Highbury Barn who fear they may have to close down because of draconian parking restrictions. My mum - who suffers from osteoporosis - says she can't face coming to see me because of "all the bumps" during her taxi ride. My wife has been fined four times for parking outside our own garage. Are we criminals to be so badly treated by the council?

I thought fines were for bad people. I thought we were good citizens, paying our council tax and keeping our mouth shut. But we're no longer willing to keep my mouth shut.

For most of the 18 years I have lived in Highbury I never thought local politics really mattered. But then the council came knocking on my door. They said they wanted to impose a Controlled Parking Zone on our street and that we would have to pay £95 a year to park outside our own house and that friends would have to pay £6 a day to see us. I raised a petition against this - but they're going to impose the CPZ anyway.

Then the council wanted to put a row of recycling bins in the

prettiest part of Highbury - at the top of Highbury Hill opposite the church - in the middle of a residential area. I raised a petition against this - and they backed down.

Then they shut down Bryantwood Road and Benwell Road because a handful of selfish locals want to take Highbury back to pre-industrial days. What is going on here? I just want to shout out - Leave Us Alone!

It seems to me that small pressure groups are acting in unison with Lib Dem and Labour councillors to impose ideologically prejudiced views on the rest of Highbury. This seems very dangerous territory to me. Democracy is at risk here - and yet we have no viable alternative.

Lib Dem, Labour, Green - all speak from the same bible. There is no local political alternative that can express the views of those who wish to be simply left alone by a council that clearly has too much time and too much money on its hands - and a desire to poke its nose increasingly into everyone's business.

There seems to be another problem here too.

I used to think that councillors were 50-something butchers and bakers who liked to give back a little bit of their time to the local community. But no, councillors are now 30-something professional politicians who see their council job as a stepping-stone to a career in parliament. I think it's no mistake that two of our councillors - Laura Willoughby and Mary Creagh - are preparing themselves to become MPs.

With councillors like this, who are in a hurry to notch up some ideological achievements, local residents are going to suffer. We don't want quick schemes imposed on us just to make up their political CV. The calamitous road closures at Benwell Road and Bryantwood Road are a classic example of this

I think the time is now right for a new local party called Leave Us Alone! - a Real Alternative to all the ideological nonsense being inflicted on us.

Anyone of you out there fancy joining me?

It's a crusade to make local politics serve local residents and not local politicians. Now there's a novel idea. ■

Contact Tim Newark at timn@fsmail.net

An Apology

By Tony Miller

I fear that I may have to join those who huff and puff their way around Highbury Fields in the pursuit of an elusive physical fitness.

Val, my wife, works at Great Ormond Street Hospital. We have committed ourselves to six months of fundraising for their Children's Charity. So we shall be at summer fetes and school fairs, rattling a can. On September 11th we are holding a Quiz Night at the Highbury Roundhouse, which we hope

many members of HCA will be able to attend - more details later.

In November we shall be undertaking a gruelling, sponsored, high altitude trek along the Inca Trail in Peru. We shall be hiking and camping in the mountains, 4,200 metres above sea level. For folk who live their lives in Highbury, that's high!

To prepare for this ordeal, we will have to shake off the effects of thirty years indolence and self-indulgence. So if any of you catches sight of me in a tracksuit - a deeply unattractive prospect - I apologise in advance. ■

For details of the Quiz night nearer the time - ring 7354 0863 or email hcanews@hotmail.com and check with www.highburycommunity.org

CAN YOU HELP?

Phyllis Curzon is looking for a home or homes for 3 dogs whose owner died recently. "They are well-trained and affectionate and all between 5-6 years old. Prince is a white poodle and the two females are Baby - a Black Cross Terrier with a wavy coat and Bonnie, who is a lovely brown French Bulldog." Tel: 7281 5875

Pride not Profit!

Big Gay Out, The Official Pride Party

Saturday 3rd July

Jamelia, The Sugababes, Blu Cantrell, Har Mar Superstar, Fun Loving Criminals, Big Brovaz, 411 and Peter Andre will all be performing at the Big Gay Out festival, this year's official Pride party. Presented by Faceparty in association with Virgin Mobile, Big Gay Out takes place in London's Finsbury Park on Saturday 3rd July 2004 from 1pm to 10.30pm.

Big Gay Out has been set up as a not for profit event and Pride London and Stonewall are the first organisations that have benefited from removing the event's commercial element.

Finsbury Park will be transformed into a wonderland and festival goers will be spoilt for choice with ten music stages, (including the Virgin Mobile Cabaret Tent), the return of the funfair and a firework grand finale.

The event will feature the crème of the UK's diverse gay club scene. Orange, A:M, Fusion, Beyond, Element, Later and Rude Boyz will all be represented in the Funky Orange tent. The Ford Urban Tent will be presented by Queer Nation and Bump. You'll also be able to boogie the day away with Trade, Faceparty, Firmed Up, The Lounge, Flava, Dirty Fairy, XXL and Popcorn!

For those who wish to make the day meaningful there will be the Interflora Blessings tent. Other attractions at Big Gay Out include the Piper-Heidsieck Champagne bar, Jacuzzis, Beach Bar, Teepee Village, the market place and an array of quality food and drink venues.

Tickets for Big Gay Out cost £25, (concessions £15) subject to booking fee and can be purchased from www.biggayout.com, Ticketmaster and most Gay clubs and bars. ■

Further information available from www.biggayout.com

Gospel Concert - Eclectic Voices & LD Frazier

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www.eclecticvoices.org.uk

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Highbury Community Association

The HCA represents 750 residents and businesses, on all aspects of living and working in Highbury, Lower Holloway and Finsbury Park. Run by volunteers, it relies on donations. Send cheques to HCA Treasurer, 79 Highbury Hill, N5 1SX made out to "Highbury Community Association".

Send letters or articles for next issue to: HC News, 83 Highbury Hill N5 1SX or email hcanews@hotmail.com
Visit www.highburycommunity.org

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