



# Regency Review

CONSIDERING THE PAST... FRAMING THE FUTURE  
THE NEWSLETTER OF THE REGENCY SOCIETY

ISSUE 16

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## BRIGHTON & HOVE

*forward looking City by the sea or preserved relic of the past?*

There has been a good deal of press comment during the past twelve months or so, making the case that historic building conservationists are stifling the business development of the city. We believe that there is little evidence to support these claims.

Brighton & Hove is booming and property developers are not deserting the city – because there are still rich pickings for them to take.

The large housing development at the Brighton Marina that has already received planning approval is due to be followed by another application, by a different developer, for more housing and the complete redevelopment of the retail superstore (and some retail shops and restaurants), with low rise housing on its roof, but remaining lower than the cliff-top behind it. Another slim tower may be included to the south and a better internal roadway system will improve access within the site. Both these developments are modern and are designed by internationally acclaimed architects. Indeed, some fear that overdevelopment of these prime sites to the east of the city centre will result in knock-on problems from increased traffic entering and leaving the Marina site, not only during the construction period, but also afterwards, into the future. To date, no improvements are proposed to the fairly contorted, and certainly unsightly narrow road into and out of the Marina site from the A259 seafront road. Places in schools and at doctors' and dentists' practices close



to the Marina, may be in short supply.

To the west of the city, in Hove, re-development of the King Alfred site is very likely to take place (although there are isolated pleas for the existing buildings to be restored.) Housing will be the principal additional use and, indeed, is so valuable that it will entirely pay for the new sports facilities.

Smaller housing developments on nearby seafront sites are expected. So far conservation issues have been clearly stated by the council's planning officers but the economic value of these sites, which is directly related to the number of housing units approved, has been growing, month by month as house prices continue to rise.

Sadly, the city as a successful shopping centre is less buoyant. Traffic congestion and parking restrictions are usually blamed for this. The excellent bus service throughout the city is not the ideal form of transport for taking home the products of a family's weekly shopping. (Unfortunately, delivery services using small low emission vans are not yet available but may be widely available sooner than we expect. Now that Brighton & Hove has become so busy for almost twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it is difficult to foresee when these deliveries will best occur.)

The 'cultural centre' of the city is being improved with modestly scaled new buildings close to the new Jubilee Street. There are still plenty of other sites to be redeveloped with the bottom of West Street being a prime example. Recent planning 'scoping sessions' have indicated other potential development sites such as Preston Barracks, the Vogue gyratory system and sites facing both Preston and Lewes Roads. Most of these sites will include some housing mixed with retail and employment uses.

Housing densities throughout the many twentieth century residential districts in the city are increasing by the re-development of small windfall sites which, in most cases, will result in useful new additions to the existing housing stock. In fact, this process has frequently been happening throughout

the past century. Very few new high rise developments are likely but low-rise subtle infill schemes will be a satisfactory way of utilising the infrastructure and services while providing more homes.

The city council has huge responsibilities to energise, guide and inspire these continuing building developments. Some cities have appointed experienced master planners to become their Design Champions to assist this process (for example, Sir Terry Farrell in Edinburgh). The inclusion of unloved, and sometimes ugly and unclaimed spaces between buildings can become the key to unlocking improvements to existing areas. Likewise, prize period buildings must be protected and re-invigorated, possibly by discovering new uses for them. We are fortunate in having a surfeit of outstanding nineteenth century churches and, where the church wishes to give some of them up, suitable new uses will need to be found which will produce enough income to cover their continuing maintenance and upkeep. Sadly, this process is made even more difficult, for some churches, because a back-log of major repairs has resulted in serious deterioration of the fabric of the buildings.



Improvements to New Road, at present in progress, will not only provide a much better and more attractive road and pavement surface but also views of the Royal Pavilion will be opened up through the screen of trees. New seating and signs will be additional improvements. The Theatre Royal is seeking donations to allow major restoration work to be started during this, its two hundredth anniversary. Sadly, no such urgently needed programme is yet in prospect for the delightful seafront bandstand, which has suffered from neglect for too many years. Even its setting has been ruined, until funds are available to carry out a comprehensive restoration programme. A use for the building has even been suggested by some of us, it could possibly be used as a BANDSTAND and performance space, not only during the festival, but throughout the year.

Possibly some of these improvements, which individually may be quite small, can be hastened by munificent, and well publicised donations from successful businesses throughout the city, which wish to continue and maintain some of the benefactions of the past by re-energising these buildings and places, for the future.

Above all, we must not forget what it is that we admire about the existing fabric of the city, and with this in mind, enhance it. During the 1960s there was pressure to "be modern" and to do away with the old: this gave us Sussex Heights, the Brighton Centre, KingsWest, Theobald House and the high rise developments around Eastern Road. In retrospect, few would see these as worthy successors to the previous generations' achievements. The siren call of developers and their acolytes may be a seductive one, with promises of benefits at no apparent cost, but we shall do well to consider the recent past and to reflect upon our own legacy to the future.



## The James Gray Collection

Following the digitisation of Volume 1 of this archive, which has been viewable on our web site for a while, the Society applied for lottery funding to enable all 9000 images to be made freely available. Despite the best endeavours of our chairman, and many hours of meetings, we were unsuccessful.

However, committee members Lavender Jones and Duncan McNeill have undertaken the digitisation of the second volume, which deals with the West Pier and Kings Road and it is now available online. It is possible that after this there may be scope for sponsorship to enable further volumes to go online. Should you wish to become involved with this, or know of any commercial organisation that might like to undertake such sponsorship, please contact the Honorary Secretary, John Small.



Two views of 67 Kings Road, Brighton: the building in the sepia image, photographed around 1870, was demolished in 1897, while the view above shows the 1963 clearance for the Brighton Centre redevelopment.

## Spurious Accuracy and all that!!

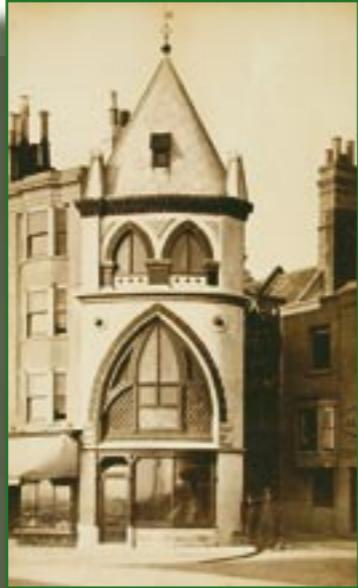
Over thirty years ago, when I came to work at East Sussex County Council in Lewes, I had a very wise boss, Malcolm Reece. One of the lessons he taught me was to avoid spurious activity. If you wrote a report which stated that a wall was thirty-nine feet, eleven and three quarter inches long or you measured an area to several decimal points, he would 'suggest' that you rounded the figures, as you otherwise gave a false impression of how accurate you could be.

I was reminded of this recently by ongoing planning submissions in the City. David Marks claimed that the i360 Tower would create 109 jobs; the 'Preferred Options' for the City's Core Strategy of the

Local Development Framework includes raising the GVA by 3.2% annually and there will be 30,498 people using the soft play in the King Alfred Sports Centre in a year. None of these figures will prove to be accurate.

But there is something to be said for measurements. These days the opponents of a scheme will assert that it is overdevelopment whilst the promoters will counter that it is not. There is no objective measure to determine this debate. In the 'Olden Days', as one of our city planners called them at a recent meeting, planners had a wide range of measurements. Cartogram areas on Town Maps, (the forerunners of Local Plans), showed the area

and acceptable density of each residential area. The latter was assessed in persons, dwellings or even habitable rooms per acre. In city centres the amount of development was controlled by plot ratios and floor space indices. A plot ratio of 3.1 would permit 30,000 square feet to be erected on a 10,000 square foot site. These systems were accused of being mechanistic and stifling innovation, leading in turn to the spread of uniformity. But they did ensure that local people knew where they were and what to expect. They also helped to deliver consistency. Oh Dear! I have returned to the theme of my last contribution. MGIR



The restored ceiling to the Lady Chapel: this victorian work is stencil upon a lino-based material.



The records of the Society show that the care and condition of St. Nicholas of Myra, the old Brighton parish church in Dyke Road, has been a major concern since 1948. Initially there were representations made to Brighton Corporation, as was, regarding the churchyards and their monuments; by 1950 the six historic tombs in the churchyard had been re-lettered, with special note being made of that of Amon Wilds.

In 1954 the Vicar of St. Nicholas had stated his concern for the state of the churchyard with special anxiety for the damage to the base of the old Cross. At the suggestion of the Society, the Parks and Gardens Department placed an iron railing around the Cross to protect it.

At the Society's expense a similar railing was placed around the tomb of Amon Wilds. (this has now corroded and is in very poor repair). Also, over the years, the Society has contributed to restoration of the memorial tablets (by Joseph Cribb), wall paintings, the weather vane and the Wellington Memorial.

The church underwent a re-ordering in 2002, with new flooring, seating and heating in order to increase its flexibility and to add to its general comfort. This has been a great success, as may be seen. In 2005 a significant legacy was left to the Friends of St. Nicholas by the late Fr. Derek Moody who had expressed a wish to see the ceiling of the Lady Chapel cleaned.

This restoration was undertaken by Stig Evans and Greg Howarth, and the



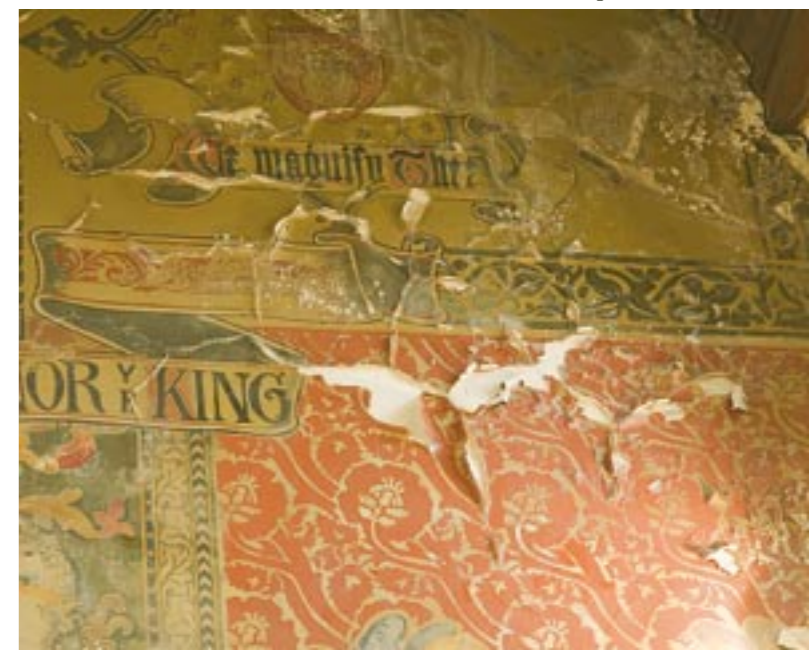
The chancel screen and east wall of the nave.

A visit to the church is strongly recommended, but more on our web site.

ceiling is now revealed in its original condition.

The Friends received bequests from Dr. Michael Hooker and from Doreen Pierce which form the backbone of the current appeal: the intention is to clean and repair the east wall to the nave, the ceiling above it and the rood screen figures; the screen; the chancel ceiling and the west wall of the nave, which will cost, in total, some £115,000.

The Society has now made a donation of £1500 towards the present appeal—which should cover the cost of restoring three of the ceiling panels to the chancel.



Water damage to the West wall

## Adam Trimmingham, Sir Basil Spence & The Gardner Arts Centre

Everytime the local "Argus" publishes an article discussing architecture—especially modern architecture—one has the urge to write a letter complaining about all the factual errors, but one never does, because one knows that the "Argus" will edit the letter to make one's efforts a waste of time.

Recently Adam Trimmingham wrote an article about the Gardner Arts Centre blaming all its troubles on Sir Basil Spence, and stating that the design was that of "an arrogant architect's idea of what a contemporary venue should be, rather than the vision of a theatre designer", a choice of occupation to carefully remove the major contributor to the design and architectural form of the Centre—the stage designer Sean Kenny.



*Peter Bareham paying his respects at Sir Basil Spence's grave at St Mary-Thornton Parva on Christmas Day 2006*

Sean Kenny (1932-73) was possibly Britain's most important stage designer in the sixties, when he radicalised stage design in the London West End; he was also a staff designer at the BBC and had spent time at Frank Lloyd Wright's "Taliesin". His theatre sets were very exciting with their sculptural and skeletal forms, which placed the actors in the midst of three dimensional revolving forms, rather than pictorial backgrounds.

In 1962 Sean Kenny designed the set for the musical "Blitz", with a very complex design involving a number of revolving sets with mobile overhead cranes and shifting towers! At the same time Kenny was restructuring the Old Vic in order to break down the barriers of the proscenium arch. He was thus the obvious choice for the theatre specialist to guide Sir Basil Spence in the design of Britain's first campus based arts centre.

In the late sixties Sean Kenny gave a very uplifting lecture in Brighton about the proposed arts centre at Sussex University. With the addition of a sequence of sketches he showed how the design had evolved into a form of interlocking cylinders, which like the stage sets for "Blitz" would be all moving- with floors that would rise, tilt and fall, and allow the audience location within the cylinders to be totally flexible to suit the various activities which would take place within the cylinders. But sadly when the Arts Centre finally opened the exciting ideas of Sean Kenny had evaporated. When researching the concept and design of the Arts Centre one finds profuse articles about Kenny and his involvement, but strangely no drawings, and unlike the other buildings by Sir Basil Spence at Sussex University, no coverage in the architectural press!

It would have been far more interesting and useful if Trimmingham had explored why the evaporation of Kenny's vision occurred, instead of sniping at matters Spence had no say in, especially in the light of current "iconic"—"landmark" buildings proposed for the City which

we are being told are "cutting-edge"! Spence did not determine the location for the Arts Centre nor its brief which Trimmingham complains about. The Kenny vision was lost, but Trimmingham notes it opened to "great applause" in 1969 and one must note this has lasted for well over 40 years, unlike many of the Millennium projects which were built in the late nineties. It has also lasted incredibly well as a structure, receiving no restoration work or updating, unlike many other much younger Art Centres, like the Sainsbury Centre at Norwich for example.

Trimingham's article has generated much discussion which is great, but it has also raised other issues with many city residents. His words "at least Sussex was spared Spence's ugly tower blocks" has made many wonder if this is a Hove resident making a critical comment about the Gehry towers at the King Alfred, or a change of direction by the "Argus"!

Or is this Trimmingham putting "the boot in" as Sir Basil Spence's rehabilitation as a great architect commences in his centenary year? Warwick University has been awarded a four-year grant of £342,473 from the Arts and Humanities Research Council to research Spence's work in the UK and further afield. As part of this research, one of the research team is looking at Spence's work at Sussex University and the Knightsbridge barracks (Spence was not the architect for the Home Office, only a consultant). An exhibition and publication of Spence's work is scheduled for sometime this year and thus very shortly Spence's Sussex buildings will be seen and appraised in a more considered light than that of Trimmingham.

The Trimmingham words about "the sort of water features architects imagine are exciting but which are actually nothing but litter-collecting nuisances" which "the main buildings were broken up with" will be revealed once again as requirements of the brief. When first built in the sixties, Sussex University was located between firefighting services miles away in Brighton and Lewes and with very limited water supplies in the area. Thus Spence, rather than provide basic utility water tanks, carefully incorporated the static water tanks required for fire services into the design of each building; the Falmer House static water tank being developed with an internal moat that could be partially supplied by roof rainwater discharging into the moat through gargoyles.

Rather than accept Trimmingham's view that "it could be left to rot as a monument to the folly of Sir Basil Spence", I would suggest that with Tesco and the other supermarket chains looking for outlets in the vicinity of railway stations, one can view the Gardner Arts Centre as worthy candidate for use as a supermarket. Close to Falmer Railway Station, a possible football stadium and housing at north Moulscoombe and the University, the vestiges of Sean Kenny's vision of a very flexible and adaptable structure of interlocking cylinders, could adapt to an ideal supermarket, each cylinder containing a different sales area! As city dwellers travel out to the supermarkets that ring the city in their cars its isolated location damned by Trimmingham would no longer be a problem!

This is just one suggestion to underline that the Centre is certainly not "a hopelessly impractical building". Sussex was one of the "Shakespearean Seven" sixties universities, all of which were located outside of historic towns—hence the title—and all eventually having buildings for public performances. It would make very interesting reading if Trimmingham, or some other writer, would contribute to the Gardner's future debate with some research into how these other buildings are surviving and the degree of maintenance and updating they have received since their completion.

The University of Sussex Bulletin for the 20th May 2005 stated that the Heritage Lottery Fund had awarded £46,200 to look at ways of restoring and upgrading the Centre.

Could we enquire what became of this investigation?

PB

## DIARY DATES

*Regency Society Lectures Spring 2007*

*The Old Market, Upper Market Street, Hove*

*Wednesday 7 March 2007*

*Dr. Libby Horner:*

*Frank Brangwyn: The Polymath*

*Monday 16 April 2007*

*The Music Room at the Royal Pavilion*

*The Annual General Meeting of the Regency Society at 7.00pm*

*followed at 7.30pm by Geoffrey Munn, Director of Wartski's and Antiques Roadshow expert:*

*Fabergé: Goldsmith to the Imperial Court of Russia*