



Regency Review

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

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Murky Waters and Economical Truths

By now Members will know that the Society did not proceed to a Judicial Review of the Council's planning decision on the King Alfred. It was a difficult decision to make not least because we had delays in obtaining information from the City Council.

Following the reconfirmation of the Labour administration's decision by the new Conservative-led one, we sought further advice from our planning barrister and a top planning solicitor. We had two principal objectives. These were to see whether we were likely to obtain a ruling in the courts that the previous decision was unsound and, if it was quashed, to open the way for a new planning decision, refusing consent. Counsel's advice was that we had an arguable case concerning the lack of care given to our final representations made the night before the committee and over whether the Council took into consideration non-planning matters. To clarify these points, a pre-action letter was sent to the Council. Its response came two days before the time limit for the Judicial Review. In an email to the Society, the Leader of the Council had said previously:

"This past week the Council's Planning Sub-Committee had to make two decisions at its meeting. One was to decide whether to revisit the whole planning application.

On the first issue Councillors were told by advisors that there were no good planning grounds on which they could re-open the 'minded to grant' decision from March. The law does not permit Councillors to regard the continuing opposition by residents as a sufficient planning ground. The reality is this Administration faced a fait accompli created by the previous Labour Administration.

A Conservative Administration would never have brought forward a high density scheme of this nature. Planning law and the Council's contractual obligations entered into by the previous Administration tie our hands and the cost of breaking these agreements are very significant given the size of the scheme."

However, in the Council's response to our pre-action letter, it argued that: *"Throughout the debate about the future of the King Alfred/RNR site and its redevelopment, the Council as local planning authority has stood apart from the Council as landowner and will continue to do so."*

The Council went on to say:

"Officers answered questions from Members about the Council's role as landowner and whether the developer could have recourse to civil remedies if the Council amended its earlier decision. Since such questions were raised, officers had a duty to answer them honestly and fairly. In responding to such questions officers emphasised that while members should be aware of the Council's wider role as landowner, which related largely to commercial matters, such matters fell outside the planning process. Members were told that detailed discussions had taken place with the developer over a long period of time and the developer had incurred considerable costs in bringing the proposed scheme forward and working it up to its current stage. Judging from correspondence already received from the developer and the advice which the developer had received from Leading Counsel, it was highly likely that if the Council as planning authority revisited its earlier decision, proceedings would be instigated in respect of breach of contract and the costs incurred. These could run into many millions of pounds."

The Officers should have declined to comment on non-planning matters but it is clear that they did comment. The members would have found it difficult to put out of their minds the multi-million pound threat.

Whilst this late information strengthened our case to strike down the decision, your committee felt that it did not guarantee that the second of our objectives would be achieved. A Pyrrhic victory might have been obtained.

However, this would have put tens of thousands of pounds of the Society's funds at risk, if we had failed to have the consent quashed.

Moreover there would have been no certainty of a new and better decision.

It is no wonder that three planning officers, those most closely connected to the processing of the planning application, have decided that they could no longer work for the City Council and have left. We have seen local government acting at its worst.

Our city deserves better.

MGIR



Life in the Shadows - for how many?

"The danger is if you give permission for this, you create a precedent that nullifies any future daylighting constraints you may want to impose on other developments in Brighton. It's difficult to imagine any future proposals for any site having a worse impact on more dwellings than this one does."

Dr Littlefair, the Council's own consultant

IMPROVEMENTS in WESTERN ROAD BRIGHTON

By their nature shopping streets are subject to constant change. These principally affect the shopfronts and fascias and often the upper part of high street buildings are in poor condition and frequently they are seemingly underused. One major shop which has had a successful makeover is the former C&A store building at 169 Western Road. The entire building has been repaired and revived and the shopping floor areas greatly increased. It was never one of the best buildings in the road but the amount of tender, loving, care lavished



An example that others could usefully follow.

upon it has paid dividends. Of particular interest is the fact that the deep fascia (re-clad in pale buff stone) has no lettering, or logos or illuminated signs on it. It is entirely blank. The new store's name, PRIMARK only appears in un-illuminated lettering above the main entrance and in a modest vertical sign at the west end. The new large

glazed windows are filled with brightly illuminated and imaginatively displayed clothing. The products are the display. This seems to be a lesson that could be repeated nearby (at Woolworths, perhaps?) At the same time Marks and Spencer's shopfront at 195 Western Road has also undergone a similar successful transformation.



* AMON WILDS *



The memorial in 1954, with recently incised lettering

In a press cuttings' album in our archive there is one from the Brighton and Hove Herald, dated 10 July 1954, headed 'Architect of Regency Brighton' which reported that new railings had been erected around the tombs to Phoebe Hessel and Martha Gunn in Saint Nicolas' churchyard. It goes on "Recently the Regency Society approached the Corporation to erect a railing round the monument to Amon Wilds, the Regency architect. The Corporation were sympathetic, but funds were not forthcoming.

The Regency Society therefore decided to bear the cost themselves and - as the accompanying photograph shows - the tomb, which lies towards the bottom of the sloping ground to the east of the churchyard, is now protected by railings."

Sadly, those railings have now perished and our committee must decide whether history is about to repeat itself because several approaches to the Council have not yet produced any result. We fear that, once again, 'the funds may not be forthcoming'!

New railings, which we would ensure were properly galvanised before painting to last longer, would protect the tomb from being defaced by any but the most determined vandals.

However, an earlier photo taken before the railings were erected also shows the tomb in much cleaner condition than it is today. Maintenance of the monument would be easier without railings. At present the tomb is also the fertile home for leafy shrubs growing from its summit and this growth, unless it is rapidly removed, could cause much more serious damage.

We fear that we may have to offer once again to maintain the tomb ourselves because clearly the Council, whom we believed to be responsible for it, is not taking that responsibility sufficiently seriously. Not only is this the (listed) memorial to one of the major figures in the city's history, but also an art object in its own right, designed by his son (see back page).

We welcome comments, or suggestions, from our members.

The memorial today

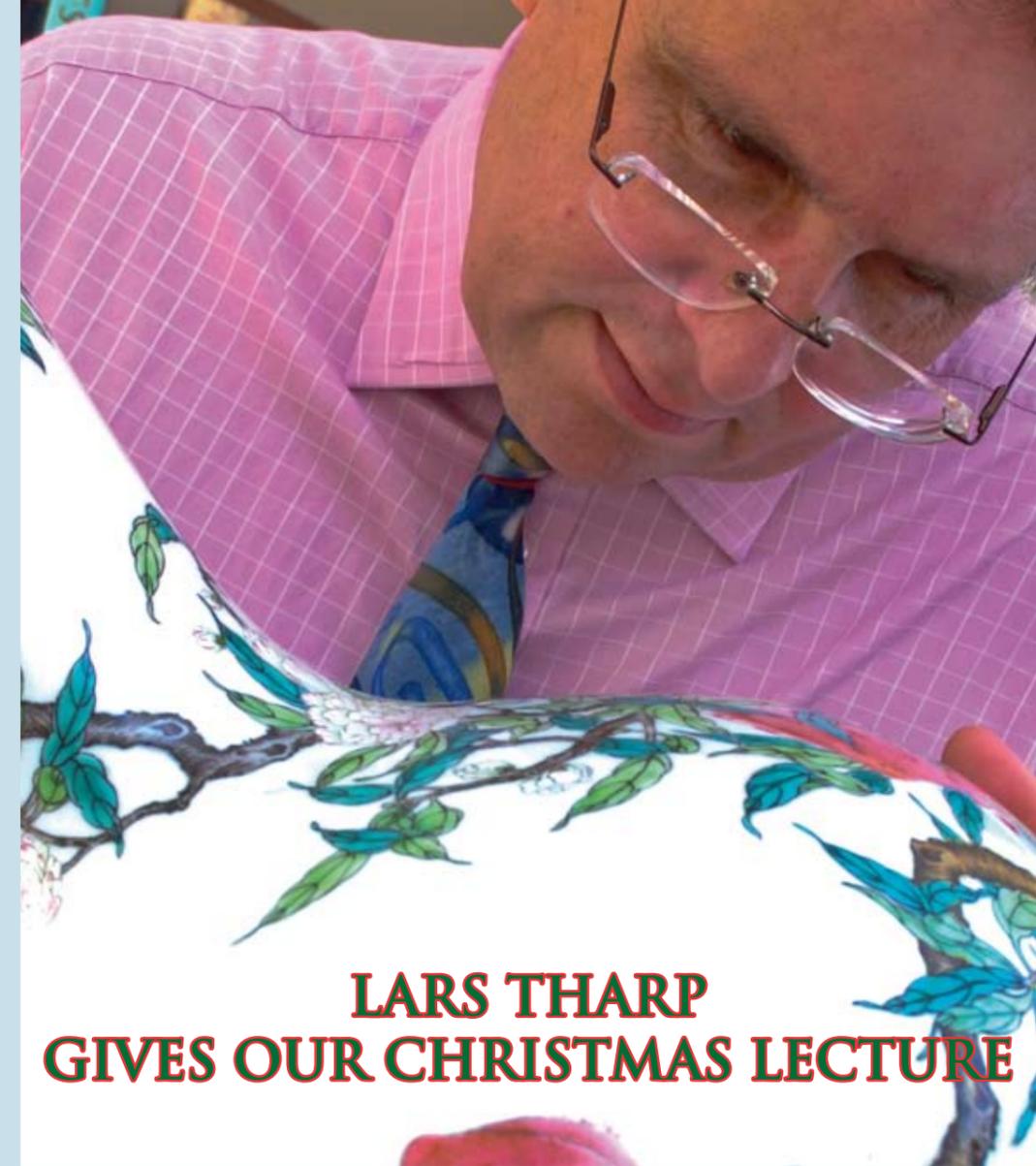


On December 5, Lars Tharp will be getting our Christmas celebrations underway when he gives a lecture at The Old Market. Needing no introduction to television viewers, Lars Tharp has strutted his stuff on the *Antiques' Roadshow* for over twenty years; a ceramics historian with thespian inclinations, he picks and presents a company of past players from Brighton's world-famous Willett Collection and raises the curtain on a double-plot of theatrical and ceramic history.

The evening is sponsored by Toovey's, Antique and Fine Art Auctioneers and Valuers, who invite members to a wine and mince-*pie* reception afterwards.

Members will receive an invitation, and should reply in order to ensure their place. We expect that there will be strong demand for tickets, so members and their guests should make plans for what promises to be an outstanding evening.

Lars Tharp at The Old Market, Upper Market Street, Hove. Wednesday, December 5 at 7pm.



LARS THARP GIVES OUR CHRISTMAS LECTURE

photo: Lionel Heap

THE WILLETT COLLECTION

Henry Willett, an eminent local resident, was involved in establishing Brighton Museum. In 1903, he presented his *Popular Pottery*, a 2000 strong collection of English ceramics of the 18th and 19th centuries, on the condition that his unique classification system was retained. Willett saw museums and art galleries as a means of education for all to enjoy. He felt that the most important aspect of

an object was its human interest, not its aesthetic merits or rarity value. His ceramic collection shows that the social history of a country can be read in its domestic, homely pottery and he hoped that through his ceramics people could gain an understanding of the figures and stories portrayed.

Willett was considered controversial in his day for displaying the pieces thematically, by historical and social subjects, rather than by place of manufacture, date and name.

The committee will be delighted to hear from any members who can help by volunteering to assist with either or both of the following roles

SITUATIONS VACANT

Conservation Advisory Group Representative

Because John Small is currently chairing the CAG, the Regency Society is entitled to another member to represent it on the CAG committee. Meetings are held at three weekly intervals on Tuesday morning from 10.30 am until lunchtime (which can be any time between noon (unusual) to 1 pm (occasionally later!)) Members are invited to come earlier to study the drawings of planning applications which affect listed buildings or are in Conservation Areas. The Group makes recommendations which are reported to the Planning Applications Sub-Committee in the planning officers' reports. CAG discussions which lead to their recommendations are informed by knowledge of the Local Plan and conservation legislation but also reflect the wide local knowledge that is held by the Group. Your interest in this work can influence and inform the Group.

Events Secretary

The committee wishes to arrange more one day or half day visits to buildings, museums and galleries and has several ideas in its 'pending file'. However, to ensure that these are successful we should like to hear from any member who is willing to help us to arrange transport, communicate with members who wish to come and keep in touch with them when trips are arranged and to cope with alterations that frequently occur. Our visit to the Brighton University library at Moulsecomb some years ago was a success but our visit to London, to see tall buildings which are of similar height to the proposed King Alfred housing towers, included a very interesting and full programme at low cost but it was poorly attended. We want to improve our programme for next summer and we are not short of ideas but need help with the logistics for achieving them. We also have the occasional gathering which needs similar skilled attention to the details which result in a successful event.

SITUATIONS VACANT



A H WILDS REDISCOVERED!

The author surveys the site, while the inset photo shows the overgrown location.

The grave revealed.

My introduction to the work of Amon Wilds and his son Amon Henry was through my interest in Gideon Mantell (1790-1852), the Lewes-born geologist and discoverer of Sussex dinosaurs. As Keeper of Geology at the Booth Museum of Natural History on Dyke Road, I arrived in 1981 with an interest in fossils of all sorts, but I was particularly happy to find myself in a county steeped in the history of geology, particularly that of dinosaur discovery. The front of Mantell's elegant house in Castle Place, Lewes is famous for the use of stylised ammonites in place of the usual ionic volutes on fluted pilasters – an ornament well known to members of the Regency Society from its logo. This so called 'Ammonite Capital' was invented by George Dance and first used in London in 1789, but was appropriated by the Wilds' in 1816 when they remodelled the front of two cottages on the High Street for Mantell who at the time was setting himself up in medical practice. It was Antony Dale who first suggested their attraction to this ornament because of "the punning allusion to their own Christian names...", as well of course as its appropriateness to a fossil-collecting geologist. Michael Kerney, another geologist, published his review of Ammonites in Architecture in 1983 in *Country Life* but before that, two earlier articles in geological and conchological journals appeared³. It was from these sources that I learnt much more about the use of the 'Ammonite Order' and set about documenting it for myself.



As Antony Dale observes in the introduction of his chapter on 'Wilds and Busby', "Very little written information is available concerning the Wilds and Busby partnership which was responsible for so many of the best buildings in Brighton. As far as their architectural record is concerned it is consequently very difficult to disentangle the joint work of the partnership from that executed by its individual members..." This as much, if not more, applies to disentangling the work of father from son, as it does to separating Busby from either Wilds. Wilds senior was first a carpenter and builder, and only latterly an architect and surveyor, whereas Amon Henry, with greater social pretensions and ultimately a more considerable architectural record than his father, was always an architect. It does seem clear that the son may well have been a subordinate to his father in a partnership in Lewes until 1822 when the first Wilds senior and Busby partnership struck up. If Henry was involved in that partnership it is difficult to tell with their names being so similarly abbreviated. But since their buildings in Richmond Terrace and Hanover Crescent, built before the Busby partnership flowered, both carry ammonite capitals, it seems reasonable to suppose that father and son had together adopted the device as a sort of trademark. Equally, it seems likely that many subsequent buildings in Oriental Place, Montpelier Terrace, Montpelier

Road etc, built after the Busby partnership began, were actually the work of Amon Henry Wilds alone, and it is on some of those buildings that the ammonites thrived. Perhaps then, it was Amon Henry who drove the choice of the ammonite capital as a favoured ornament.

Amon Wilds senior died in 1833 and his tomb is well known in the churchyard of St Nicholas, Brighton. Indeed it was the Regency Society that organised the re-cutting of the florid inscriptions, which latterly had become unreadable. It seems likely that it was his son who designed the tomb, topped with another typical Wilds piece of ornamentation, a stylised clamshell. I recall thinking that as grand a tomb though this was, how fine it would be to see that of Amon Henry, and surely that would be topped by no other than an ammonite capital. But when I finally read Antony Dale's account was surprised to see that he had been unable to locate any record of his burial and guessed that Amon Henry "... retired into the country or left the district altogether in 1850."

It was in 1984 that I found the briefest of obituaries to Amon Henry in the Brighton Herald of 25 July, 1857, which recorded that he had died at Old Shoreham. The parish registers for Old Shoreham are kept at the West Sussex Record Office and the County Archivist was able to tell me that Amon Henry was buried on July 18 in the churchyard of St. Nicolas, Old Shoreham. Alas, despite careful searches, I was unable to locate his grave. It should be said that there are almost 1000 burials, many of which are quite indecipherable or overgrown.

And so it remained until this year, the 150th anniversary of Amon Henry's death, when I was asked to speak to the Hove Rotary Club about ammonite capitals. This prompted me to delve once more into the life of Amon Henry, and I revisited St. Nicolas to search for his grave, again with no luck. But I did contact the vicar, Rev. Victor Standing, just in case any new records of burials had emerged. To my astonishment, he was able to tell me about the fine work of the Sussex Family History Group in documenting tombstones in the county, and that he had a printed version of their researches at St Nicolas. He not only confirmed the date of burial, but also had a map locating the grave as well as a record of the inscription. Following a message to the SFHG, Christine Payne kindly emailed me both the inscription and map, and just two days later, I was able to remove sufficient undergrowth to confirm the final resting-place of Amon Henry Wilds, together with his wife and daughter:

Sadly, there were no ammonites in attendance.

John Cooper

References

- 1 Antony Dale, *Fashionable Brighton 1820-1860*, London:Country Life Ltd
 - 2 Michael Kerney, *Ammonites in Architecture*, *Country Life*, Jan 27, 1983, pp 214-218
 - 3 Michael Kerney, *Ammonites in Architecture* *Conchologists Newsletter*, 80, 1982, p.366.
- REPRINTED in the Newsletter of the Geological Curators' Group, Vol3-4, 1982, pp232-3.