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The Dulwich Society

TO FOSTER AND SAFEGUARD THE AMENITIES OF DULWICH

Newsletter 53

July 1981

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YOU ARE INVITED TO COME TO OUR FORTHCOMING MEETINGS

The Meetings of the Dulwich Society are all interesting and informative; we are sure you will enjoy discussing the topics of current interest with like-minded people. The July meeting (Trees Walk on 2 July) was announced in Newsletter 52.

JULY AND AUGUST: The Horticultural Sub-Committee invite us to visit four of the finest private gardens in the area. If you would like to attend, you may obtain details (and register as a gardening enthusiast) by telephoning Mrs S. Daniel, 274 9907, or Mr G. Fairlie, 693 1187, or Dr Frankel, 670 3079.

SEPTEMBER: no meeting.

THURSDAY 1 OCTOBER, 8 pm in St Barnabas Hall: another event of interest to gardeners, including the showing of two colour films of beautiful gardens in Scotland. The first is a look at the outstanding Edinburgh Botanical Garden which was founded in 1670, and the second features some of the fine and varied private gardens which are open under the Scottish National Gardens Scheme. If you are thinking of visiting Scotland this may encourage you to see some of the gardens. If not, it is likely to whet your appetite, so please book the date!

THURSDAY 5 NOVEMBER: a special meeting is being arranged, to be held at the Dulwich Picture Gallery. Details will be given in Newsletter 54 (October).

THURSDAY 3 DECEMBER: a joint meeting with the Dulwich Choral Society is being arranged.

PLEASE BOOK THE ABOVE DATES IN YOUR DIARY

VILLAGE CAR PARK PROPOSAL REJECTED

The proposal by Allied Breweries to construct a car park behind the Crown and Greyhound public house was rejected by the Southwark Planning Committee at its April meeting. The proposal was opposed by the Dulwich Society, the Residents Association, and many local people. The refusal was largely on grounds of amenity and traffic. Our efforts on this subject were detailed in Newsletter 52.

THE DULWICH SOCIETY AT WORK

Members who attended the Annual General Meeting in March will remember that the Chairman said that he felt that the thrust of the Society's work in 1981-82 should be in the area of ecology. It may be useful for members to know that this, along with the other work of the Society is achieved through the efforts of the individual sub-committees. The maintenance of the peaceful and verdant atmosphere of the Dulwich area is the primary concern of these sub-committees, who make appropriate and positive approaches to the relevant authorities.

Every tree, area of open space and fine building in our area requires for its maintenance constant care, either on the part of the Estates Governors, or the local Councils, or private owners. Every tree or fine building is also liable to become a problem when it comes near the end of its normal life-span: should it be expensively restored to health, or should it be demolished? Should a tree be replaced with one of the same species, or of another? What is the best answer to current problems of traffic congestion? And so on. The field is a wide one.

Most such matters are individually small, and thus do not even get mentioned in our Newsletter, but collectively they form the environment which we treasure so much.

The members of our sub-committees study their specialised field with dedication; many of them are qualified professional experts. They are frequently consulted by the authorities about a problem before it is too late for remedial action, and they give their time generously to advising on what best action may be taken in each case. At any one time, there are many such items under discussion. By coming to our meetings, you will be able to contribute personally to the Society's discussions.

interesting of these related to Dulwich. As far back as the early years of this century, Lilian J. Clarke, a teacher on the staff of James Allen's Girls' School, set up in the school grounds a sand dune, woodland and heath for study purposes. These can still be seen today. The lecturer described and illustrated the years of hard work which went into this project, and said that it was humbling for those who thought they were pioneering the idea of ecological parks in 1981 to find that Dulwich had created one so successfully all those years ago.

The Ecological Parks Trust intends that the park at Farquhar Road will be a worthy successor. The Trust has been set up to further knowledge of the ecology of urban areas, and to develop, conserve and restore the animal and plant life of such areas. Most of our population now live in towns, and our links with nature are increasingly tenuous. But nature can and does thrive in our cities, taking advantage of man's wastefulness in leaving 'derelict' sites. The Trust can help in arranging field studies, and encourages voluntary groups to take over sites for short or long periods.

Gina Douglas, Secretary of the Ecological Parks Trust, c/o The Linnean Society, Burlington House, Piccadilly, London W1V 0LQ (telephone 734 5170) will be pleased to provide information regarding personal membership of the Trust, which is open to all who sympathise with the work of bringing a new interest in nature studies to those who live in urban areas, particularly children, by setting up study parks for the purpose. The quality of our future urban environment will be improved by the general understanding and sympathy thus created.

HORTICULTURE NOTES

Gardening enthusiasts in the Dulwich Society have had this year the opportunity to visit some local gardens to which we have not been invited previously. These visits were most enjoyable; we have also had a successful sale of plants in aid of the Hospital and Home for Incurables at Crown Point which was very well attended.

Four gardens will be visited in July and August: for details see page 2 of this Newsletter. We should also welcome offers from any other member who would be prepared to open their garden. If you think you would be happy to do this we would be grateful if you would get in touch with Mr Gerald Fairlie (telephone 693 1187) to see if a suitable arrangement could be made.

Our Chairman has had a valuable experience with the magazine 'Amateur Gardening'. Having asked them for advice regarding the non-flowering of his azaleas last year, he was pleased to receive a long and detailed reply giving possible causes, and suggesting foliar feeding. The result has been quite startling this year. We think that 'Amateur Gardening' should be given full credit for being so readily prepared to give such good advice without charge.

WILDLIFE SIGHTINGS

Those interested in wildlife in Dulwich are urged to continue sending us their observations of birds, mammals, frogs and toads -- or any observations of interest. Record cards are available on request from any member of the Wildlife Sub-Committee (see Kalendar in Newsletter 52). Mr John Toler is our recorder of birds, Mr Brian Jones of mammals and Dr G. D. Howells of amphibia.

We would also like to map all sites in Dulwich where there is water: even garden pools would be of interest.

Our records of birds, other wildlife and of flowering plants have been used by the Ecological Parks Trust who are to develop the Farquhar Road woodland site as an urban park, and by Southwark Council in considering their plans for the new woodland park at the larger Lapse Wood/Fernbank/Ambrook Wood/Sydenham Hill site.

Mr John Toler lists the following bird sightings which have been reported and recorded for the first quarter of 1981:

January. Bullfinches and Nuthatches in Dulwich Wood; Greater Spotted Woodpecker in Dulwich Wood & Sydenham Hill; Lesser Spotted Woodpecker in Dulwich Wood; Green Woodpecker in Belair & Sydenham Hill; Greenfinches in Belair, Grange Lane & Sydenham Hill; Missel Thrush on Sydenham Hill; Coal Tits in Court Lane & Sydenham Hill; Long Tailed Tits, a whole flock seen in Dulwich Park, several Sydenham Hill.

February. Green Woodpecker in Belair & Dulwich Wood; Missel Thrush in Belair; Coal Tits in Court Lane; Long Tailed Tits in Dulwich Wood; Nuthatches in Court Lane & Dulwich Wood.

March. Brambling in Dulwich Wood, also Nuthatches; Chiffchaff in Alley Park; Fieldfare on Sydenham Hill; Treecreeper & Bullfinch on Sydenham Hill; Kestrel hovering over the Village; Green Woodpecker in Dulwich Wood; Greater Spotted Woodpecker in Dulwich Wood; Lesser Spotted Woodpecker on Sydenham Hill.

April. Brambling, Chiffchaff, Coal Tits & Nuthatches in Dulwich Wood; Long Tailed Tits in Court Lane Gardens; House Martins in Belair & Court Lane Gardens; Willow Warbler in Dulwich Wood; Green Woodpecker and Greater Spotted Woodpecker in Dulwich Wood; Kestrel hovering over the Wood.

OTHER EVENTS. The British Naturalists' Association and the Kent Trust for Nature Conservation announce that a lecture, 'Exploring our Hedgerows', will be given by Mr John Talbot White at 8 pm on Tuesday 20 October at Beckenham Public Hall. Mr White is a contributor to the nature notes in the Guardian. (Note also: Keston Countryside Day, Keston, Sunday 5 July, 2 to 5 pm.)

A major building designed eighty years ago
by C. Harrison Townsend

THE HORNIMAN MUSEUM

The inscription on the bronze plaque at the entrance to the museum reads: 'This building and its contents being a portion of a gift from Frederick John Horniman to the London County Council as representing the people of London, are dedicated to the public for ever, as a free museum for their recreation, instruction and enjoyment 1901.'

F. J. Horniman (1835-1906) came of Quaker stock, and was the head of the family firm of Horniman's Tea Merchants; for some years he was also member of Parliament for Falmouth. He travelled on business to North America, Japan, Ceylon, Burma, India, and China; while on these journeys he collected innumerable 'curiosities of Natural History, Arts and Manufactures'. This vast collection grew with the years; he became a Fellow of the Geographical Society and of the Zoological Society.

The Horniman family lived at No. 100 Lordship Lane, Forest Hill; the house became so overcrowded with the collection that there were grumbles about the amount of dusting to be done. And so a move was made in about the year 1890 to Surrey Mount, a larger house with extensive gardens on high ground behind No. 100.

Horniman was one of the great Victorian philanthropists: he believed that others could benefit from having access to his treasures. Parties of students were invited to his house, and these events proved so popular that he began to describe his collection (even in the early years) as 'the Horniman Free Museum'. He also opened his gardens in 1895; visitors numbered 90,383 in the one year.

Further development was decided upon. In 1898, the site of No. 100 Lordship Lane was cleared, and a large new museum building was rapidly erected, with C. Harrison Townsend as architect. It was completed in 1901 and was opened by the Duke of Fife in June of that year.

This was not achieved easily. The architect had to make the building look inviting, and yet allow for display of a great number of objects in safety; he had to contend with a narrow site and with clay soil, presenting great difficulties of levels and layout. His solution shows genius.

C. Harrison Townsend (1851-1928) was born at Birkenhead into an artistic family of limited means; he was one of seven children. He saved, and so was able to travel to Venice, Ravenna and Verona in 1886, with lasting influence on his work. In 1888 he became a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects, and was elected to the Art Workers' Guild, along with Voysey and William Morris.

Townsend probably planned the museum building 'from the interior to the exterior', as recommended by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Two long halls were placed end to end. Since the site sloped steeply,

the floor of the northern hall was arranged at the level of the gallery of the south hall. Each hall is 102 feet long and 46 feet wide. Further exhibition rooms open off at the side. To make the entrance inviting, despite the narrow frontage to the road, an effect of importance was achieved by flights of wide shallow steps which rise centrally to the dedication plaque, then turn and rise to the right. Here, a raised viewpoint permits study of the large mosaic panel. More steps lead in to the main entrance, a huge and heavy romanesque-style doorway at the base of the stone tower. Inside, one turns left to find a vista of well-lit and spacious halls. The whole concept overcomes brilliantly the problems of the site.

The foundations were built by Colls of Coleman Street, London EC; the structure was erected by James Brown & Son and Blomfield of Whitechapel. The south front and tower were built or faced in Doult- ing stone, but the inner load-bearing walls are of brick. As a fire- precaution the wood block floors were laid on reinforced concrete (here, Townsend was wiser than the architect of the Crystal Palace). Gas was not installed. Messrs Handyside & Co. of Queen Victoria Street built the wide metal and glass barrel-vaulted roofs, which may owe something to the earlier example of the Crystal Palace.

The interior is free from decoration which might have distracted attention from the exhibits, apart from some delightful decorative plasterwork of foliage on the pillars to the arches to the north hall, which sadly was removed in later years when the curved balcony and its railings were remodelled and straightened. The original electric light fittings were also admirably elegant.

The tower dominates the front. It is massive and yet friendly and gentle in style. The softly rounded edges of the simple base are continued upwards to form columns on each side of the clock faces, which themselves mask the emergence of a central vast barrel form at the top. High up, a heavy circular cornice provides a strange but effective horizontal feature. The design is unique. Some of the upper surfaces are carved in low relief with forms of foliage, in keeping with the ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement.

The mighty semicircular arch of the main entrance appears again in Townsend's other work, e.g. the Bishopgate Institute (1893-94), and the Whitechapel Art Gallery (1899-1901). One of his earlier works, St Martin's Church at Blackheath near Guildford, also has a 'romanesque' doorway in warm-coloured materials. Where Voysey (his contemporary) tended to reduce his buildings to geometrical solids, Townsend's designs appear to grow from the ground as surging organic shapes. His work is not quite Art Nouveau: it is more a personal development of the ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement and of the Art Workers' Guild, which drew on Ruskin's advice to 'study nature in all its details'. The carved foliage is natural, and not distorted into the writhing forms of later Art Nouveau, described by Walter Crane as 'the decorative illness'.

The south front, the main glory of the museum, is unlike that of the Whitechapel Art Gallery. It is symmetrical, with strong horiz-

ontals firmly contained by solid piers which continue upwards to flank the frieze of classical pilasters, terminating in a pair of niches. These features frame the magnificent mosaic panel. Such decorative bands, flanked by strong tower-like verticals, were also featured by Townsend in the Bishopsgate Institute and Whitechapel Art Gallery. In 1906 he edited a new edition of 'The mansions of England in the olden times', in which there is an illustration of Brereton House in Cheshire, which has a similar arrangement of forms, typical of a grand entrance in Tudor times.

Sadly, the Whitechapel Art Gallery has never been completed: the architect's plan included flanking towers, with carved foliage as on the single tower of the Horniman Museum. Whitechapel also lacks the intended large decorative panel; now there are just two small windows. On the Bishopsgate building, a band of carved foliage across the panel of windows is nearer in feeling to Tudor style.

The calm sweep of the barrel-vaulted roof of the Horniman Museum is reflected in the pediment which tops the façade. This forms a large plain arcade where the name of the building is carved in the stone in large Roman capitals. Some of the letters have thick and thin strokes in the wrong places, but an architect's drawing displayed near the museum library has them differently.

Illustrative panels, usually depicting some aspects of the building's function, were not uncommon at the turn of the century. Some of Belcher's Liverpool buildings have sculptured figures showing relationship between the fine art and Arts and Crafts movements. Ruskin felt that sculptors had a moral role to play in society; many Pre-Raphaelite paintings also demonstrate this.

Townsend's early visits to Italy and Caen influenced his later lectures and writings on mosaics; among his papers there was a scrap-book of 'Manuscript notes and newspaper cuttings on mosaics from 1870 to 1912'. He was aware that mosaic work is extremely durable, if properly executed. And so a large mosaic panel came to be designed for the Horniman Museum façade by Robert Anning Bell. This panel shows the course of human life, since the museum is about Man, his manner of life and his culture. The figures are gentle, and almost Pre-Raphaelite in character. Kneeling at the feet of the central figure (Mankind) are Love and Hope. Youth, on the left, is at the Gate of Life; next are depicted Music, Poetry and the Fine Arts. Endurance stands by Mankind, ready to provide arms and protection; on his other side is Charity, with food and wine. Behind Charity appear Wisdom and Meditation, with Resignation, who stands by the Gate of Death. In the panel, the gateways and central alcove are linked by a wall with pilasters and arches. The whole symbolises the separation of an earthly setting for mankind from the realms of the spirit beyond. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was formed about 1848 as a kind of Victorian club of romantic 'knights of the round table'. Their high spirits and piety went with a dislike of Victorian materialism. William Morris and Sir Edward Burne-Jones were members. They believed in beauty and truth. George Bernard Shaw (later) wondered that the nineteenth century could have had such dreams and realise them in its art.

The Museum has many fine details reflecting the Arts and Crafts Movement, e.g. the wrought ironwork of the balconies, and the lamps and railings of the entrance steps. Some aspects remind us of the Glasgow School of Art by C. Rennie Mackintosh; this is another building of great historic importance which has survived.

A fine stone drinking fountain by J. Wenlock Rollins was later presented by E. J. Horniman (son of the founder) and placed in the approach area. A charming little bronze figure which used to surmount the fountain seems to have disappeared, not long ago; no-one can say exactly when. A photograph in the museum library with '9.5.52' on the back illustrates the missing figure.

Another valuable feature in the overall design is the bronze dedication plaque, providing a counterbalance to the weight of the tower and entrance. In looking at this building one finds still more delightful surprises. The north (rear) elevation has many interesting features, with windows, canopy and niche all carefully planned.

Townsend often repeated the distinctive curve of the barrel-vault roof, with small flanking horizontal wings, in his other buildings. It tops the bell tower of the Church of St Martin; it is repeated even in the Horniman Museum above the three small ventilators on the roof of each hall, over each of the pair of small windows at the base of the tower, and also on the bronze plaque where each figure has a small roof with this motif.

In his own time, Townsend was of course regarded as avant-garde. Pevsner says that his 1887-1902 designs recklessly repudiated the tradition of English architects of the time. Townsend himself said: 'Make your architecture speak TODAY rather than the PAST... you are not to strive of set purpose to be what you, or others, may call 'original'.'

E. J. Horniman, empowered by his father, offered the free gift of the museum to the people of London. With it came fifteen acres of gardens, a large house (Surrey Mount), the collection of art and natural history, a library of six thousand volumes, and six houses which brought in £600 per annum.

In 1911, Townsend added a lecture hall and library on the west side. These do not compete in design with the 1901 building; they have a pitched roof with a pediment between short square towers. The port-hole windows echo the large circular clock-faces on the main tower.

Thousands of visitors came in subsequent years by way of the Lordship Lane Railway Station, which was situated alongside the present-day Lapsewood Walk. Visitors also came by tram: the tram-lines can be seen in a photograph, dated 1913, filed in the museum library. In 1934, E. J. Horniman bequeathed £10,000 for building a west hall, which was built in 1955.

A new educational centre for children, also on the west side, was opened in 1969. Today, some 24,000 children, students and teachers visit the centre and the museum each year.

Special exhibitions of international importance are held at the museum, and the free concerts and lectures are also popular. The interior display arrangements for the permanent collection have

been modernised; a further whole article could easily be provided in an attempt to do justice to the collection, which of course includes many of the original Horniman specimens. The museum is open, free, on weekdays from 10.30 to 6, and on Sundays from 2 to 6. It is closed on 24 and 25 December. The younger visitors enjoy the museum as much as their elders; the staff are always welcoming and helpful.

Documentation about the history of the museum is curiously sparse; the photographs filed in the library have already been mentioned. There is however no doubt that the building which Horniman asked Townsend to create should now be regarded as a national treasure, both as a whole and in all its details. It is a treasure which is all the better for being placed in a hilly parkland setting, well away from the centre of the metropolis.



The above article is based on a thesis by Mrs B. J. White, BA (OU), who is a member of the Dulwich Society.

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