

## Looking towards our 50th anniversary year

In 1972, when the Amwell Society came into being, London was still in the grip of slum clearance. More Victorian houses were swept away in the 1960s and 70s than had been destroyed by bombs in World War II. They were thought of as damp and insanitary. It's true that many houses in Finsbury – even in the 1970s – had no bathrooms and only a basic WC, often in the yard. Nevertheless, some visionary people saw the beauty of the houses built by the New River Company and the Lloyd Baker family between 1820 and 1830, which made these two speculations the earliest suburban developments in, what was then, outer London. The initial ambition of the Amwell Society in 1972, was to work with the London Borough of Islington [LBI] through the creation of one of Islington's first conservation areas. The New River Conservation Area is still the principal means by which the Georgian townscape is protected. The vast majority of houses in our area are now Grade II Listed, meaning that they are shielded by planning laws. Even now, any proposed changes have to be approved by LBI. The Amwell Society has about 180 families as members. The Society is sociable, active and committed to every nook and cranny of the area. We hold occasional events both social and educational and take part in community life as good neighbours. In recent years we have had major success in the context of preservation.

- We prevented the demolition of the old St Philip Magnus school building, now the Courtauld Institute on Penton Rise. The hotel firm IBIS aimed to build yet another mammoth budget hotel on the site.
- Across 30 years, we fought for the historical site at the New River Head to be preserved. A gated private development was proposed but now the House of Illustration will be the resident charity on the site and in the fullness of time, the Engine House, adjacent to the New River Head Gardens will be opened to the public as a new museum and cultural facility.
- The Society is currently helping to resist the unsuitable redevelopment of the Children's Society building at the lower end of Margery Street. More about this on page 3 of this newsletter.

We are also keeping an eye on the future of Clerkenwell Parochial School in Amwell Street which is due to close for good this summer. We are keen that the building, built in the mid 19th century, continues to house an educational organisation which has benefit to our community.



Lloyd Square in spring. Glorious Amwell.

Recently we have led a consultation on the impact of the LBI's Low Traffic Neighbourhood scheme with the aim of ensuring the best outcome for residents of our area. The response rate to our online survey was impressive with almost 50 percent of members giving us their opinions. Recent events have highlighted the need and value of local communities and organisations to work together as never before.

If you are a long-standing member, please tell younger neighbours about the warm and generous community that we support and encourage. There are few London neighbourhoods where people are so friendly and key an eye out for friends.

Oh, 2022 is our 50th anniversary year. Keep an eye out for special initiatives and celebrations. The Amwell Society is always looking for new members and committee activists to enable us to best represent the interests of our community. Membership is a bargain at £7.00 a year join by standing order. So join us through [info@amwell.org.uk](mailto:info@amwell.org.uk) or [www.amwell.org.uk](http://www.amwell.org.uk)

**Window box competition back again. See page 2.**

# The Amwell Society. Campaigning on behalf of the locality for 49 years

## Message from our Chairman, Peadar Sionoid.

Welcome to all members - old and new - to this spring-summer newsletter. From the history of the society on the first page to the third page, describing the Society's efforts in a current planning case, you can see what we are all about and we are very happy that you are all part of it.

With some light finally appearing at the end of the Covid-19 tunnel we are very much looking forward to meeting up with members in whatever way we can and, in particular, to resuming some of our popular events. Our AGM, which would normally be held in May, will take place in the late summer/early autumn when we expect a greater of a normal event. We hope too, that it can be a live event so that we can meet and socialise once again. We are hopeful too, that our popular late Summer Party will take place in early September in St Helena Garden by Lloyd Square beneath the recently pruned mirabelle plum trees.

In the meantime, look out for invitations to ad-hoc events - which will be online - the first of these will be a talk about the history of Holford Square - which, sadly, no longer exists. Holford Square occupied the site of the Lubetkin designed Bevin Court, just off Cruikshank Street. It was built by the New River Company and was almost entirely flattened in one night by German bombs in April 1941.



Holford Square with its bowling green

Finally, the first version of our long-promised new website will appear later this month. Please have a look and give us feedback. We have also set up an account on Nextdoor - again feel free to let us know how you would like to see this used.

## A warm welcome to new members

- Alice McDonald. Margery Street
- Daniel Quane. Great Percy Street

## Late Summer Party and Annual General Meeting

We are very much hoping that, if there are few Covid restrictions in place, we will be able to hold our well-loved Late Summer Party in St Helena's Garden in early September followed a few weeks later by our AGM. Every year we invite a guest speaker and this year we'll also unveil plans for our 50th anniversary year.

More information as soon as it is available.

## Our third window-box competition. Get ready!

Following the huge success of previous window-box competitions, our committee members, Sally Hull, Jane Wainwright and Joanna Ward are arranging another festival of flowers. The competition is open to everyone living in the Amwell area, whether or not you are a member of the Amwell Society.

We are looking forward to seeing imaginative and original displays. We would love to see entries by children. Flowers, herbs, fruits and even vegetables can be grown in a window box and we hope that green-fingered locals will be inspired to create something colourful, scented, sculptural or even edible. Growing plants – it's good for you and good for your neighbourhood. So do get planting soon!



The judging panel will be walking the streets in late June and early July to find the best window box displays. If you see an especially lovely or clever window-box display by a gardening neighbour or friend, please encourage them to enter the competition – or you can even enter on their behalf.

If you want more details or to make a formal entry, please contact us at [info@amwell.org.uk](mailto:info@amwell.org.uk) giving your name and address. You can find more details on the Amwell Society website. **The window boxes will be judged, and winners announced, during the week of 4 July.** There will be prizes for the best entries.

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The Society is open to all residents. For information about becoming a member e-mail [info@amwell.org.uk](mailto:info@amwell.org.uk) Chairman, Peadar Sionoid. Secretary, Joanna Ward.

Treasurer, Peter Kornicki. Newsletter editor, David Sulkin.

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### Paul Thornton represents at the Margery Street appeal.

In July 2020, the Amwell Society joined forces with the Mount Pleasant Neighbourhood Forum and the Margery Street Tenants & Residents Association to oppose a planning application to replace the relatively low rise former Children's Society building on Margery Street. See photo.

Initially the LBI Planning Committee turned the application down, citing the loss of light to neighbouring flats, the overbearing bulk of the proposed building and the applicant's failure to respond to the local context in terms of design and choice of materials. In consequence of the Committee's decision, the developer appealed and so an Inquiry was held. Society committee member, Paul Thornton, spent seven days at the Inquiry into whether or not the proposed application should be allowed to proceed. Here is his statement to the Chair of the Inquiry, Ms Zoe Hill, representing the Planning Inspectorate, which is an Executive Agency of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

*Throughout the past week I have listened attentively to the presentation of evidence and the cross-examination of witnesses. The appellant's case seems to rest on two assertions, firstly that the proposed development is a fine building, whose design has been endorsed in glowing terms by council officers and the DRP and which deserves to be built; and secondly that it does no harm either to historic assets in its immediate vicinity or to those whose daylight will be compromised; and that it is therefore your solemn duty, madam chair, to uphold the appeal. On behalf of the Amwell Society I wish to challenge both of these assertions.*

*In our view the building is horribly wrong for this situation. The proposed cube shape is an alien presence which threatens to blight the neighbourhood for decades to come, the Margery Street and Yardley Street facades are ill conceived, and the grey brick cladding is perverse. How did this proposal come to be supported by Council officers? Well, I think the answer is in the evidence laid before this Inquiry. Five bouts of pre-application advice and an unprecedented four Design Panel Reviews took place. Why? Reading the pre-app advice letters and the Design Review Panel findings, it is clear that no one much liked either the original proposal, or it's later incarnations. I suspect, ma'am, that by the time this latest proposal was endorsed by Council officers (and despite continuing opposition from the Design and Conservation team), fatigue had set in and it was simply a case of Get Margery Street Done! But what we have ended up with is building designed by a committee, one which in all probability pleases no one.*

*I found the day spent on discussion about loss of daylight somewhat perplexing. I'm sure that lasers and laptops have their part to play in assessing harm,*

*but surely the opinions of those whose living conditions are about to be adversely affected should carry more weight and be taken into serious consideration.*

*The representative for the appellant described the site's location as though it were deep in the heart of the Central Activities Zone, surrounded by densely packed office buildings. But it is not. No 69-85 Margery Street is, has been, and for the foreseeable future will be the sole office building in Margery Street; every other building on the street is residential. I am very pleased Ma'am that you will be visiting the site and I hope you will avail yourself of the opportunity to go into two or three of the flats most affected and judge for yourself whether the loss or 30-40% of daylight will do harm or not. I drew attention in my written submission to the fact that a high proportion of those affected are vulnerable, either due to age or disability.*



*Finally Ma'am, I come back to community engagement. This has been a text book example of how not to do it, or how to avoid doing it. It is not engagement to keep everyone in the dark until it is too late to make substantive changes and then to seek their opinions. This is not a community of NIMBYs. The Amwell Society's track-record demonstrates that. We were ready and willing to engage in a constructive way with the appellant, indeed we would have been thrilled to do so. Had we been asked to help, I think there is a chance that the course of this application would have been quite different, and construction would now be underway. But our approach was rebuffed. Ma'am, I ask you to give due weight to this in reaching your decision.*

**This demonstrates what the Amwell Society is about. Paul Thornton has spent a week working hard, as a volunteer, aiming to protect our area from inappropriate development. The Amwell Society continues with this work because it has and will continue to protect our 'Village in London' for years to come. Thank you Paul...no matter the outcome of the Inquiry.**

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### Our Railways. John Pendleton

In 1894 John Pendleton published a highly readable two-volume work about the development of the railways in Great Britain. Bearing in mind that this record was produced about sixty years after the first innovations of railway travel. Pendleton's focus on the national network is London and consequently he reports on the development of most of the great termini including St Pancras.

*There are dismal and depressing stations both a large and small; there are bright, light picturesque stations both little and great; but it would be difficult to find on any line in the kingdom a station so capacious and so graceful as St Pancras. The signalman, who has come up to London for the first time, from his country cabin, where he scarcely sees a soul except the flying figures of the engine-driver and stoker on the expresses it dashes by, of the phantom faces of the passengers peering up at him and then whirling into space, raises his eyes in amazement to the great sweep of the roof, and pulls his iron-grey, as if it were a lever, to steady himself in his wonderment at the fine canopied place, with its broad platforms and many lines and crowd of trains. Nor is it much less surprising to thousands of passengers who, amid the joy and sorrow of meeting and parting, express admiration at its proportions.*

*The station is no less than one hundred feet in height and seven hundred feet in length. Its walls girders are of such enormous strength that there is little fear of the station collapsing or being carried away by the wind; and its roof girders, though shaped something after the fashion of a lobster's claw, form an arch of considerable beauty. The roof has no less than two and a half acres of glass in it. The ironwork and woodwork are painted in pretty sky-tints. The great span is list in colour and graceful in form and filled with the echoes of pleasant voices. It is not even disfigured by sky-signs. The rage for advertisement has not climbed to the key of the arch through the walls, after the fashion nowadays, are covered with the art and fine phrases of advertisers.*



INTERIOR OF ST. PANCRAS.



Note the artist's impression of the lavish planting.

*The St Pancras Hotel, built by Sir Gilbert Scott from a prize design, stands at the end of the station and forms, with its daintily appointed refreshment rooms, really a part of it. The hotel, large, comfortable and even luxurious is an architectural picture with its warm graceful facade in pointed Gothic; and it is undoubtedly one of the finest buildings in town, though London has, within the last decade [1884-1894], with illimitable wealth, art, culture and industrial skill at her command, erected halls, mansions, hotels and clubs that in their architectural beauty and upholstered loveliness almost realise a poet's ideal and embody a Monte Cristo's wealth.*

*The making of the line from Bedford, the excavations of St Pancras, the construction off the station and the buildings of the hotel, led to an expenditure altogether of about nine millions of money and there was notably some outcry at this sinking of gold, but at what was considered a needless disturbance of the dead. The line, ass every passenger to London by the Midland is aware, goes through old St Pancras church-yard, where, amid the smoke and crowding of the great city, the trains dash and rattle over the graves. It is aid thatch a railway, like some politicians, is without scruples and will go through anything.*

Our Railways: their origin, development, incident and romance. John Pendleton. 1894. Cassell and Co.

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