

The Finchley Society Newsletter

JANUARY, 1992 No.1/92 SUPPLEMENT

INTRODUCTION

As is often the case, this supplement issue opens with retrospective notes on the major Fin.Soc. events that have occurred since the previous supplement and continues with pieces of a general anecdotal nature.

It is particularly pleasant to note this time that more pieces appear with a by line (name of contributor) than without (the Eds.) and even more pleasant to note new names among them.

All of which leads one to be sure that many other members must have stories about Finchley past or present, or about their own lives here. They really would be most welcome and enjoyed by all! Why not put pen to paper, say for about 500 words, and send the result along to 1 Finchley Villas, Finchley Park.

Alternatively, would more members be available to be invited from time to time to 'cover' a monthly meeting and write a synopsis of the event for the next Newsletter Supplement? Again, please do let us know. (Eds.)

THE CHRISTMAS SOCIAL

Was it the weather? (very cold, but otherwise one would not have called it "difficult") was it too early in the month to have a real Christmas pull? Was there an unforeseen clash with something compulsive on TV that evening? Whatever, only 50 members in all were at the Christmas Social a great shame, for everything else about the event was splendid!

This year's "Who am I?", set in motion by Eileen Cox affixing a named label to the back of every arriving member, produced a lot of fun and the brushing up of well remembered "Twenty Questions" techniques. Man I'Anson's quiz to identify a series of local landmarks/buildings shown in silhouette only, proved much more difficult than one might imagine with no outright high scorers. Denys Pegg and Andrew Forsyth jointly led the field and after no less than three tie breaking questions on local recent history (with which Mari had wisely come prepared Denys took the honors.

Mari also came well prepared with the necessary ingredients for a highly successful raffle which, together with the contributions for refreshments, ensured a surplus for the evening of income over expenditure.

Chairman Norman Burgess in a message closing the 20th Anniversary Year conceded that it had developed "below expectations" with what the Society views as environmental and social losses to the community, in several arenas of debate, including the St. Mary's School Site, Christ's College and Henly's Corner. Norman also deplored the inactivity on behalf of the Society by such a large proportion of its membership to which the low numbers attending that evening bore mute testimony. (He mentioned that a friend calculates that only 300 people are truly "active" for the community across the entire spectrum of Finchley organisations!) Certainly, Norman affirmed, Fin.Soc. will continue to address this conundrum in 1992.

In President Jean Scott's Christmas Address, she expressed her personal thanks to all those who do work so hard for the Finchley Society and, while acknowledging that greater membership participation and indeed a larger membership would be most welcome, Jean gave her view that it is the quality of the Society which is paramount and which will survive.

A vote of thanks for an enjoyable evening was given on behalf of all present by Denys Pegg to those members who had helped to make it so, be it in food, drinks, games or entertainment.

Footnote: Shirley Avery expresses her personal thanks to all those who assisted her with contributions, preparations, layout and serving of the evening's most attractive snacks also to those who helped clear away!

AND SO, TO WISBECH Muriel Large

It was a beautiful winter's morning as we set off on Sunday, 8 December pale sunshine, a pearly blue sky and hoar frost silvering the grass and trees. The object of our winter pilgrimage was to widen our knowledge of Octavia Hill; pioneer of housing reform and management, a co founder of the National Trust and one of that crop of remarkable Victorian women who shaped their times.

A quick and comfortable journey took us to Wisbech where, together with townsfolk, members of the Hill family and of the Octavia Hill Society, we were warmly received by the Mayor and Mayoress. After welcome coffee, we enjoyed a lively, informative talk by Peter Clayton on Miss Hill's family background, her life and work, including that part of her childhood spent in Brownsell Cottage, Finchley. This could well have developed her love for quiet and natural beauty, before the family moved on to Marylebone where much of her life's work was done in providing well run accommodation for the London poor, supported in its early phase by John Ruskin.

A copious buffet lunch then followed, before an afternoon packed with active sightseeing the house where she was born, the Wisbech Museum (which is a story in itself), the parish church

of Saints Peter and Paul where its cherished monumental brass had been uncovered especially for our

3 enjoyment, and also a fascinating exhibition of photographs showing the town and its people, past and present. As we were firmly shepherded in small groups from one place to another, we had a

chance to enjoy the South and North Brinks of the River Nene which flows through the town, with the elegant Georgian and Victorian houses. There were also the fine Georgian crescents formed round the circular garden where the rnediaeval castle, now vanished, had stood.

Tea at the Orchard House hotel was welcome; it provided refreshment, a chance to relax and to discuss amongst ourselves the many delights we had seen, until it was time for the Commemoration Service in the parish church, enlivened with music and with readings from Octavia Hill's speech when she was trying (vainly, alas) to preserve as open space the Swiss Cottage fields, now submerged in bricks and mortar.

The general sentiment, however, was one of joy and thankfulness in remembering a long life spent arduously and fruitfully in improving the lot of London's poor and conserving the heritage of natural beauty which we can still enjoy today.

Whoever thought of cycling and recycling as the subjects for an evening meeting, the Administration Committee considered it too neat a name to miss. So on November 28 some 50 members sat down to hear Angela Dobson, Finchley Co ordinator for Friends of the Earth, and George Thurmer of the London St. Christopher's Cycling Club.

We went from Finchley to the world as Angela Dobson described FoE as a non political pressure group which acts only on facts resulting from scientific research. Its concerns are short term (poverty, housing) which finance and effort can rectify, and long term environmental and global deterioration which can never be retrieved.

On recycling, the FoE are sponsoring certain countries to test methods for various materials, are lobbying governments and the EC, and are encouraging the public to adopt the watchwords re use, repair and recycle. They urge us to write to councillors, councils and MPs for more recycling facilities, and to return bottles, re use plastic bags and send old

clothes to charity shops. If we followed this advice we could improve our present dismal 2.6% recycling rate towards the 50% rate possible.

And so on to cycling. The bicycle, George Thurmer told us, is the most efficient energy conversion machine ever invented. It is socially most acceptable; no pollution, no noise, promotes good health and does not kill motorists. Moreover it is by no means as dangerous to cycle as many people believe.

He pleaded for a better perception of cyclists, especially by drivers; among the hazards which vehicles present to cyclists are turning left too soon, parking immediately after overtaking, opening doors carelessly, driving too fast and parking on corners and where roads narrow.

As the talk proceeded it seemed to me that it was not about cyclists in general, but about the 150 skilled and traffic conscious members of the St. Christopher's Cycling Club. This view was supported by the discussion, which centred on cyclists as they appear to many of us.

The silent approach cyclists who disturb us when they pass us on the pavement? They never knock anyone down replied Mr. Thurmer.

The cyclists without lights? Police say that at night the same number of lit as unlit cyclists are knocked over, was the reply. (But when I worked this out, I concluded that unless there are more unlit than lit cyclists, then the proportion of unlit cyclists knocked down must be greater than the proportion of lit cyclists).

We also heard a complaint about wobbly cyclists. But, said Mr. Thurmer, cyclists do not cause accidents. However, he favoured tests and compulsory insurance for cyclists, but not helmets because of the expense and the very few lives they would save. Two countries which had made helmets compulsory were considering changing the law.

An interesting and entertaining evening, which should certainly have given us all new thoughts about cycling and recycling.

THE OCTOBER MEETING

Michael Gerson of "removals" fame expressed trepidation as a 'business' speaker to The Finchley Society but asserted that "if an oil man (Charles Naylor of Shell Oil Company) can survive this audience so can I" an allusion of course to "green" issues.

He asked an interesting question. "Did anyone in your class at school declare that they would become a removals man/woman?", followed by a supplementary "Why am I in that business?"

The answer to the latter is remarkable as is often the case the Gerson grandfather (one of twenty one children) came to England from Germany just before the turn of this century, with the intention of moving on to Australia. Just ten days before sailing he met a friend and helped him out with a task on the fringe of the shipping business and became bitten by that bug, stayed and moved into forwarding and removals.

Many years later, Michael in turn struck out for independence when the same family firm that grandfather established was sold to Grand Metropolitan.

Michael then revealed to us why he chose to be located in Finchley. The respected Alfred Bell & Co. was here so, having little personal knowledge of running a business, he took some space with them in Friern Park and also "watched and learned".

The chronology then went as follows:

1961 70 Friern Park

1970 78 Finchley Hall (They removed the dance floor and made a major conversion, which Michael believes was done well and with taste.)

Also in the 70s,

1. An overflow in Brackenbury Road
2. The setting up of long term storage at Daventry, near the car industry, within which overseas personnel were moving back and forth.

Otherwise the organisation continued in Finchley where the retention of skilled and loyal staff had already become vital (several have exceeded 25 years service). The move to the present Whetstone site occurred in 1978 and the space there was increased in 1982.

Michael asked the Fin.Soc. audience the rhetorical "What do we do?", to which some answers are

* Overseas removals, both into and out of the U.K.

* Most of the individual clients are employees of multinational companies (e.g. there are 360 foreign banks in the City of London, some having over 100 of their own nationals employed here at any one time)

* Plus a leavening of diplomats, service personnel, film stars and even

'dubious characters' (Michael mentioned the Burgess and Maclean families and Mrs. Ronnie Biggs)

* He also mentioned that in addition to home contents, Gersons move pets, cars, yachts and works of art.

Michael asked and answered another rhetorical question "What is special about removals that keeps a firm and its employees so dedicated?" answer, "It's such a human process, with every degree of light and shade" people, possessions, sad moves, happy moves, nice people, nasty people and so on.

He might well have added "famous people", for the business certainly has enjoyed valuable publicity from recently moving a certain family out of Downing Street and from bringing the possessions of ex King Constantine of Greece to the U.K. Gersons have also recently moved the Lord Mayor of London and his staff out of the Mansion House while the building is being strengthened structurally.

With a fast growing Japanese community in the U.K. has come yet another opportunity for Michael Gerson Removals to expand and Michael drew attention to a number of the company's trucks which bear the added legend KENJIKOYANGI, the name of a man, now a full partner in the "Japanese" side of their business, which he particularly was responsible for developing. There are now eight other Japanese employees in the firm and it came as no surprise to the audience to learn that the recent V & A Exhibition "JAPAN" was moved in the U.K. by Gerson's.

Finally, Michael revealed a most interesting fact about his ultra modern international removal business, with its bubble wrap and white cartons replacing newspaper and tea chests, air ride vehicles, individual and shared containers, occasional Customs and Excise 'sweeps' of the warehouse, complete with sniffer dogs that 50% of all this activity, outward or inward is set in motion by verbal agreement, without quotation and possibly without even the exchange of a piece of paper, except the bill all purely on trust.

Moving a vote of thanks to the evening's speaker, Norman Burgess fittingly declared that we had been given intriguing insights into little known segments of what is from the outside one of the most "everyday" of industries.

VILLAGE LIFE IN THE CENTRE OF FINCHLEY Jim Martin

Seventy years ago, the area was very conservative; people stayed put and were happy to have a job and get on with it. Dad was a railwayman, so a couple of times a year we might go away (to relatives). Others didn't and we ourselves otherwise

strayed very little. I have no childhood memories of East, North or Church End Finchley. This was village life.

When we came home from school, for the second time, at four o'clock, our mums would always be there, to give us a drink and a bit of home made cake. Then we were free to go out to play, perhaps in the street or in a mate's home.

A mysterious calendar applied to our games. Overnight marbles were out and hoops in (iron for boys, wood for girls) or else fivestones (laboriously made from an old roof tile) or conkers, or tops, or cigarette cards. Parisian fashion houses could not have been more firm about the IN thing.

There was little traffic in the roads and most of it horse drawn. All day the electricity works (producing D.C. and soon to be scrapped) received coal carts. These needed a trace horse (one man's livelihood) to get out of Finchley Station yard and a skid to get down Squires Lane bridge. And this with the railway alongside and room for a siding. At one time (?1926 strike) a great heap of brown coal (lignite) was bought. It was not used and eventually caught fire spontaneously, giving out greenish sulphurous smoke for weeks.

It was every boy's ambition to get into the works grounds to see the lake. The lame watchman usually frustrated this.

The hill made problems for others. The milkman, from Long Lane, at least had a horse to pull his trap with churn and dipper, but the baker really strained himself as, with strap across his chest, he lugged his handcart up. If boys pushed he might have a spare roll. The postman, with his two peaked cap had equal trouble.

At the Long Lane/Squires Lane crossing several shops supplied food, and there were two sweet shops. The better one was not for children with a penny, but the other shop for the penny would offer a quarter of locust beans or "chewing nuts" or liquorice bits or several gobstoppers. I had a scooter, so sometimes got a penny for errands to Ballards Lane. I still remember jibbing at fetching a quarter of ham (2s 6d a lb) and a quarter of corned beef (8d a lb). I liked corned beef (and still do after war service) and the ham seemed unnecessary.

I've said that we might play safely in the road (within prescribed bounds) and our parents were quite happy for several 8 10 year olds to go off in the dark to St. Paul's Church Band of Hope, or for others to go to cubs alone.

We had gas lighting, a coal range for cooking (a chore to black it, like the hearth stoned front step and brassoed door fittings) while the laundry involved a copper, a "dolly" and a mangle. Happy days - none of this ever went wrong.

Many fathers had an allotment and spent much free time there. South of Squires Lane, behind the swimming bath, allotments had already taken over from the nurseries. These had left behind a very large concrete reservoir, six foot sides badly cracked and cracked floor like a tennis court.

On the field beyond the allotments still empty, by the North Circular Road, one might on Saturday see football, with alternately Squires United in blue and white or Avondale Athletic in black and yellow. The nurseries on the other side of Squires Lane were still working, rows of glasshouses.

The water in the baths was changed over the weekend, and so admission from 4 on a Saturday was only a penny. Over the years the brickwork by the doors became pockmarked with penny sized holes made by the impatient.

Every so often yet another electricity cable had to be laid, and we were fascinated as three men with sledge hammers rhythmically made holes with a great chisel held by the foreman with long tongs. Sometimes the steam roller came and lowered a spike to continue the work. And how we envied the nightwatchman in his sentry box with glowing brazier.

With houses all around this was still village life for a child living in a friendly neighbourhood.

ARE YOU OBSERVANT?...OR IMAGINATIVE? Timothy Johnson

It has been said that the people of today are less observant than their ancestors were... but observant of what? Different generations have different views. The view of those ancestors would have been restricted to what they saw with their own eyes, so they would have been more aware of local things than we are today. In 1992 we live with all the benefits, all the distractions and all the irritations produced by the relentless advance of modern technology. If television can bring Rome, St. Petersburg and the pyramids into the living room, it rather takes the shine off the real Finchley and Friern Barnet outside the window. Well, doesn't it?

For The Finchley Society Christmas Party of December 1991 Mari I'Anson produced silhouettes of prominent local buildings to decorate the walls and there was a competition to identify them. It produced mixed scores moderate ones, poor ones and a lot of sheer bafflement. It was interesting, for example, to see ardent fans of College Farm failing to recognize the farm buildings.

Congratulations to Marl on inventing such a compulsive talking point, and since it aroused so much interest, here is another little exercise.

About 90 years ago an unknown photographer captured a brief moment of Finchley history, now recorded in Arthur Hall's collection of old local photographs. For various reasons a photograph of that kind would not reproduce well in print, so this line drawing shows the details. Do you recognize the hostelry? ... No? Here are some clues. It has since undergone a face lift and a change of name, but it still remains recognizable in essentials and the "Whitbread" sign is still prominent.

The cottages have gone and taller buildings now dominate the scene. Dozens of buses and thousands of pedestrians pass the place every day. What was the old name of the pub? (think of sport) What is the new one? (think of travel). With all those give away clues you can hardly expect prizes for correct answers (and anyone who ever goes shopping at Tally Ho ought to be disqualified anyway).

If you still can't put a name to the pub, how about the horse? Horses have names too, and no matter what you propose to call this one, there could scarcely be anyone still alive to prove you wrong or say "Neigh".

HOW DO THEY DO IT?

Since the last supplement was published in October, Leslie Martin has written twice from his rural retreat (Lancing), continuing to paint for us a background to the seemingly endless number of engagements he enjoys with various flourishing local societies.

First, a list (2 A4 pages) reveals that along or near the Sussex coast from Battle to Chichester there are at least forty one community / preservation / historical or archaeological societies with which one might engage. The half dozen to which Leslie subscribes are, with the exception of Sussex Industrial Archaeological Society (whose Coultershaw Water Wheel and Beam Pump we have illustrated in an earlier supplement) smaller in membership terms than Fin.Soc. but they have one specially valuable skill in common that of raising funds! For example, the January '92 newsletter of West Sussex Archives Society, membership around 300, refers to the fund raising total for 1991 of £1,205, presumably in addition to members subs! Perhaps we should invite a Sussex Hon.Sec. or two, to visit us in Finchley and share a secret, or two!

Leslie wryly adds that of course if he went on every outing open to him through this coming Spring and Summer (he mentions

twenty!) he'd need to put aside at least £6 per week but that if he confined himself to the activities of the Sussex Section of CPRE (Council for the Protection of Rural England) or the Sussex Downsmen, all he would need would be very long legs!!

Keep walking tall, Leslie!

SUPERLOOS DISMAYING STATISTICS

Peter Crockford whose comprehensive survey of London's public lavatories was referred to in our June 1991 Newsletter Supplement (pp16 & 17), has followed that work with a study of superloos those larger than telephone kiosk objects that begin to dot the urban landscape and are so often proposed as the ideal modern answer to public lavatory requirements.

* Peter's statistics reveal their facility as anything but ideal. For example contrary to all expectations, superloos are neither reliable nor vandalproof, while up to one third of those commissioned are available only to disabled people in possession of an appropriate key.

* A four month survey covering fourteen London Boroughs showed that on average half of the superloos were out of order (39 out of 78 "observations" found the red "out of use" plate lit). If invalids' superloos are considered as not available to the general public then in the same survey the "unusable" proportion should be adjusted to 67% (52 out of 78).

* In London generally, from May 1991 onward the overall figure for public lavatories closed or demolished is 46% while Barnet, in comparison, shows 54% (measured between May and October 1991 and even higher than the 45% shown in Peter's original lavatory survey for 1990). These figures suggest that superloo availability for use is even more unreliable than the lavatory facilities they are intended to replace.

* Peter finally concludes that if Barnet's proposal to install up to fifteen superloos is intended as a replacement for as many as fifteen existing public lavatory blocks then on the basis of numbers of available seats we could again face the appallingly low level of true availability that occurred in February through to April of 1991 when 89% of the Borough's original public lavatory facilities were closed or demolished,

Peter's full summary under the reference ENV/51/PJWC is available from him on request, 883 4537.

FRAMING OPINIONS

This was the title of a supplement to the 14th June 1991 edition of English Heritage's Conservation Bulletin. The

supplement discussed the current proliferation of out of character replacement windows, doors and even wall surfaces on period properties, both humble and grand, to their (and their neighbours') detriment a subject which our own Vice President Bill Tyler frequently brings to the consciousness of The Finchley Society, with great personal vigour and persuasion.

Members interested in obtaining a full copy of the supplement might successfully apply to English Heritage, Room 207 Keysign House, 429 Oxford Street, London, W1R 2HD, or telephone 071 973 3701. Meantime, the foreword alone (by Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, Chairman, English Heritage) is of considerable interest and short enough to reproduce here in full, so with acknowledgment to English Heritage and Lord Montagu, he wrote

"Few would deny that the United Kingdom has an architectural legacy second to none. The variety and quality of its heritage is unique: the more so because many of its masterpieces remain in a context set by more modest structures which contribute to the general local ambience in a collective sense, as well as individually as buildings of intrinsic merit. Local authorities recognise this contribution and designate conservation areas where they see it desirable for the architectural or historic character to be preserved and enhanced.

However, English Heritage and other organisations connected with the protection and enhancement of the built environment have become increasingly concerned about the long term insidious decline in the appearance of historic towns and villages brought about by the well intentioned, but unwittingly misguided home improvements of their residents.

Chief amongst the agents of erosion are replacement window and doors, purchased with the best of intentions to counter perceived maintenance loads and to improve levels of amenity in use. However, large numbers of these so called 'improvements' are inappropriately designed and installed, and detrimentally affect the special architectural or historic interest of older buildings, diluting the local vernacular character of historic areas. Perhaps as many as four million windows and doors are at risk.

We firmly believe that the general public has an innate sympathy with our cause of conserving historic buildings and districts and can be convinced of an argument, if dealt with fairly and given all the facts. Very often education and awareness, and not restrictions, will bring people around to our view.

A national campaign has therefore been devised to raise awareness of the issues involved and to propose alternative strategies for the retention of those traditional components

that give our settlements much of their unique sense of place. The campaign is called 'Framing Opinions'.

In this, we are joined by a whole host of interested parties too numerous to list here, but which include planning departments, professional institutes, national and local amenity societies, expert scholars, private individuals, and allies from the commercial sector.

We believe that a better balance of information is needed to assist homeowners in the laudable and self motivated task of maintaining the country's historic housing stock. We believe that old windows and doors are not always beyond repair and improvement at competitive prices, and that, if better guidance was available at local level on preservation and repair techniques, on maintenance procedures, and on appropriate methods of upgrading for thermal and noise insulation, consumers would approach home improvements in a more benign fashion. This education gap needs a large scale cascade of information from expert bodies to the lay public and will require the co operation and resources of many organisations. In this campaign, there are challenges and benefits for everyone.

The Framing Opinions campaign will cascade constructive information down through planning departments and civic societies to consumers, specifiers, and builders. We also hope to influence product manufacturers, trade associations, and service companies through our activities.

Our campaign objective is to increase general awareness of the issues involved: of the importance of historic detailing in windows and doors in old houses and of the drastic effects which unsuitable alterations can produce over time. We shall provide technical and economic information on the retention, repair, and improvement of existing features that minimise the effects on the special character of historic dwellings and will advocate the continued use of the traditional building materials for these historic features at a time of adverse lobbying on ecological grounds."

TAILPIECE

Vice President David Smith was recently in humorous correspondence on behalf of Fin.Soc. with none other than Auberon Waugh. It stemmed from the author's Way of the World column in the Daily Telegraph of 12th October last when, in the context of a piece speculating about Mrs. Thatcher and a possible elevation to the Lords he wrote of Finchley, doubtless tongue in cheek, "I do not know much about the area, but would do the best I could for all the wretched people who

have to live there". (If Mr. Major were to make Waugh the Earl of Finchley instead).

David wrote to invite him to Finchley to see for himself that we are far from wretched and, since the newspaper piece had been adorned by a sketch of a naked lady consulting the mirror on the wall, David included La Delivrance in his brief summary of attractions to be found in our locality.

Mr. Waugh responded as follows....

"Thank you for your letter. As soon as the Earldom is in the bag I promise you I will come and pose naked with your most famous statue, La Delivrance, and listen to everything you have to tell me about the beauties of Finchicy. Until then, alas, I must bide my time.

Yours etc."

All of this reminds us of an occasion some years ago when at a drinks party well south of the North Circular Road, a fellow guest (a lady, now of unremembered name) asked Carol where did we live. On learning that it was Finchley she inclined her head as one does when in deep sympathy and asked earnestly, "Finchley is it all right there?"

If we could only remember who she was, we could invite her with Mr. Waugh to see how "all right" Finchley really is!

For The Finchley Society

John and Carol Halls (Editors), Finchley Park, N12