

BECKENHAM PLACE PARK – A COMMUNITY FOCUS?

The future of Beckenham Place Park is once again brought into sharp focus following the devastating fire on Saturday 2nd July which sent flames 50 feet into the sky and completely destroyed the historic clock tower that had been a feature of the Homesteads (the Grade 2 listed stable block) for over 200 years. The pillar of smoke was clearly visible for miles around – notably at Blythe Hill Fields where the Mayor of Lewisham, Sir Steve Bullock, had just visited the annual Festival. The fire is widely believed to have been caused by arson – youths were seen running away by the manager of the café from the Mansion as he tried in vain to extinguish the nascent fire with an extinguisher.



Flames rise skyward where the tower had stood minutes earlier

The Homesteads had suffered from years of neglect since ownership of Beckenham Place Park was transferred from the GLC to the London Borough of Lewisham in 1973. Since 2,000, there has been no attempt to restore or otherwise work on the Homesteads (which, like the Mansion, feature on English Heritage's Buildings at Risk Register) other than to remove the top of the tower (and bell) 'for safe keeping' and some boarding of windows, following repeated vandalism. The sorry state of the Homesteads was apparent two weeks before the fire when members of the Board of Beckenham Community Trust were given a guided tour of this area – following their request that they be allowed to add management of these buildings to their bid for management of the Mansion. Not only was the result of neglect very apparent but signs of previously attempted fires were clear to see. This was duly reported to the Council. Ironically, the day before the fire, the Trust held a meeting with Council Officers where this state of affairs was discussed – more ironic still, work to try to improve security at the Homesteads took place that very day.

As the photographs show, where the wooden framed tower had previously stood there now remains only a shell – the outer wall shored up by planks and surrounded by scaffolding.



The tower in 2001



Mid-June 2011



The day after the fire



After the fire, supported by scaffolding

The future of Beckenham Place Park (over 200 acres of open space – ancient woodland, grass and meadow areas, river environment and London’s premier public 18-hole golf course) has been a matter for discussion throughout the period of Lewisham’s tenure. Beset with ‘other pressing priorities’ the Council has allowed the park to suffer.

The golf course, which had previously boasted ‘the best greens in south east London’ lacked maintenance and lost both playing condition and players. The various other sports facilities in the park suffered – cricket disappeared, tennis courts were neglected and the football pitches scarcely fared better. Worse perhaps, the pavilion and changing facilities were allowed to deteriorate and close (and disappear).

General park maintenance has steadily decreased. Staff numbers (gardeners and greenkeepers) have been allowed to dwindle. Active park management and supervision has been all but abandoned. Maintenance of the park’s diverse habitats has been substantially left to volunteers – notably the Friends of Beckenham Place Park – although some recent ‘outreach’ activities are to be applauded. Investment in the park over the past few years has been confined to some essential safety works and replacement of roofing lead (the Mansion was ‘stripped’ 4 times in 2 years). The newly-started sensory garden project is externally funded (an initiative of the ‘Friends’ and the Council’s Outreach Officer).

For most of those who know the park, the feature that sums up most about it is the Mansion. This Grade 2* listed early Georgian country house dates from 1740 and dominates views across much of the park. Although now a sadly run-down shadow of its former self, the mansion holds a strong place in the hearts of park users. Though the café is being run down fast (now only open Wednesday-Sunday and closing by 4pm) and the golf facilities are very poor compared to other comparable

courses, this has only increased the frustration of those who remember 'how things were' and is inspiring a determination that the future should be better. The Friends of Beckenham Place Park, whose visitor centre in the Mansion is open on Sundays, receive some 100 visits each week and report a lively interest in what will happen to Mansion and park alike – together with frequent offers of assistance and questions about possible uses of the building. Recent consultation by the Council (2008 study by Continental Research) demonstrated the strength of feeling towards keeping the Mansion within the public domain and to increasing its community use. Any attempt to 'privatise' the mansion would be opposed.

Since late 2009, Lewisham has been pursuing a programme of tendering and 'dialogue' for both the Mansion and the park as a whole. Although 2 tenders were advertised, the one covering all parkland (including the golf course) and the buildings (apart from the mansion) failed – after initially attracting over 30 expressions of interest, 12 initial submissions and being reduced to a shortlist of 5 – because the requirement to restore the Homesteads to a condition required by English Heritage proved too onerous to bidders. A short-term extension of the contract with the current park contractors (Glendale) is being negotiated 'on an exceptional basis'.

The tender for the Mansion produced a shortlist of 2; Beckenham Place Community Trust (a charitable trust set up specifically to restore and manage the Mansion in the interests of the community) and Beckenham Place Ltd (a private company that wishes to promote the Mansion as a venue for wedding receptions and other events). The Council at first attempted to promote a 'shotgun wedding' between these 2 parties but this was abandoned when Beckenham Place Ltd declined to explore this possibility.

In recent meetings, the Trust has received a sympathetic response from the Council to its suggestion that all listed buildings in the park should be included in the management contract (as the Trust had suggested in its initial tender). The Trust has pointed out that, because of its status, it can access funding (notably the Heritage Lottery Fund) for restoration that would be unavailable for a commercial concern or the Council. Furthermore, all income to the Trust would be used for the benefit of these public assets – both initially in restoration and later in maintenance.

Beckenham Place Community Trust was formed following discussions between the Friends of Beckenham Place Park and the Lewisham Environment Trust. Chaired by David Hansom and with Nicholas Taylor (former Mayor of Lewisham, long-time Lewisham Councillor and architectural historian) as Secretary – together with a Board of local people involved in the management of listed buildings, environmental and cultural initiatives, influence with English Heritage and interests in a wide variety of community activities throughout the borough:

- The Trust's prime aim is to rescue the Georgian Mansion of Beckenham Place from decay, restore it to its former splendour and revitalise it as a cultural, social and educational centre for the surrounding communities, reaching out to the full diversity of the people of South-East London, with public access on a daily basis;
- The Trust will be a not-for-profit social enterprise directed by a Board representative of the local communities, working in partnership with Lewisham Council and other public bodies and with Lewisham's park management contractor. This partnership will treat the mansion, together with its former stables and its landscaped park, as an historic and environmental unity;

- The Trust will develop a balanced and financially sustainable range of community uses, combining environmental and historical education and a visitor centre with community events and celebrations, exhibitions and recitals, conferences and training, weddings and catering, and the sale of merchandise, raising an assured annual income from regular contractual hirings and lettings.

DJH : August 2011