

Reflection on the Hampstead Garden Suburb Trust

After 20 years of managing the Trust, I thought it would be interesting to reflect on my experiences and put forward a number of suggestions for improving the way in which the company operates.

The activities of the Trust fall into two broad categories: control and ownership. The control function is exercised through the Scheme of Management in the case of freehold properties, while leasehold properties are subject to individual leases. To operate effectively the Trust needs the support and co-operation of residents. The Trust is not some outside or absentee landlord but a registered charity 'owned' by Suburb residents. Half the trustees are elected by residents, and half are appointed by professional organisations such as the Law Society and the RIBA.

Fortunately the vast majority of residents accept the role of the Trust and are prepared to work within the published guidelines. The Scheme of Management and individual leases provide the legal framework under which residents are required to seek Trust approval before carrying out alterations to their houses. The powers administered by the Trust are far reaching and, in the case of major transgressions, injunctions can be issued to stop illegal works. Injunctions are a relatively cheap and efficient sanction. For minor infringements, however, such as ugly external plumbing, excessive hard landscaping and satellite dish aerials, legal action is inappropriate. It is expensive and time-consuming and, perhaps most important, there is no guarantee that the desired solution will be achieved. For these problems a different approach is needed. Treating residents as though they are petty criminals is counter productive.

The importance of establishing good working relations with Suburb residents is well illustrated in the case of two demolitions in Winnington Road. The new owners of these properties approached the Trust to discuss the possibilities of demolition and the design for the replacement houses. The Trust Council refused to have anything to do with them so instead they applied to Barnet. Having received consent from the local authority, they promptly demolished their houses without further reference to the Trust. The owners felt that the Trust Council had acted in an arrogant and high-handed manner. After taking legal advice, the Trust

Council decided that they had no alternative but to grant retrospective consent. This episode made the Trust look extremely foolish and ineffectual.

To improve the planning functions of the Trust I should like to put forward two suggestions. The new Trust has been operating for over 30 years and in that time has processed thousands of applications, thereby accumulating a vast amount of experience as to what kind of alterations are appropriate for which roads. For example, whereas dormer windows are allowed in roads such as Kingsley Way and Linden Lea, they are not suitable for cottages in, say, Coleridge and Wordsworth Walks. For nearly every type of Suburb house the kind of alterations which are architecturally viable have become well established.

At Barnet most applications are dealt with by the planning officers under delegated powers, and there is no reason why the Trust should not implement a similar system, and especially since both organisations are working from jointly produced guidelines. Moreover, the Trust Architect is better qualified and more experienced than his opposite number at Barnet. The Trust Council would deal only with the larger and more contentious applications. At present the system is too time consuming and bureaucratic.

The second proposed reform concerns demolitions. The architecture of the Suburb is not of a uniformly high standard. Nearly all houses which are individually Listed are in the 'old Suburb' and were built before the First World War. Although there are some fine houses and blocks of flats built in the inter-war period, such as Belvedere Court, Gurney Drive, Lytton Close and the Pantiles, architecturally the 'new Suburb' is less interesting. The only reason why such roads as Church Mount, Deacon Rise, Neville Drive and Norrice Lea come within the jurisdiction of the Trust is because they are part of the original estate, not for intrinsic merit of the architecture.

For this reason I believe the Trust should adopt a more lenient approach towards demolition and building of new houses in roads such as Winnington and Church Mount. The main emphasis should be placed on ensuring that the replacement houses are of a sufficiently high quality. Even in Wildwood Road there are two post Second World War houses

which could be demolished and replaced with something of a higher architectural standard. There are at least three applications for demolition in Winnington Road currently before the Trust.

Besides controlling alterations to Suburb properties, the Trust performs an ownership function. In 1988 the Trust purchased, for £77,500, from Ashdale most of the remaining freeholds, plus all the open spaces, unadopted roads, allotments, etc. There are fewer than 20 houses on short leases and a handful of tenanted cottages which remain in Ashdales ownership. This was a tremendous investment for the Trust and ensures future financial viability of the company. Through the sale of the freeholds, the Trust has recouped the investment many times over. The money has enabled the Trust to undertake a wide variety of projects.

By acquiring the freehold of the estate, the Trust can play an important part in the future development of the Suburb. Unfortunately, throughout its history, the Suburb has at times lacked proper leadership, which has hampered the development of the area as a community. Examples include the failure of the old Trust to rebuild the Club House after the war, the old Trust going into voluntary liquidation, and the dispute between the Institute and Henrietta Barnett School from which only the lawyers derived any benefit.

Although Central Square was designed to be the heart and focal point of the community, it has been apparent for some time that it no longer fulfils that function. As the population of the Suburb has become more Jewish, the congregations of both the Free Church and St Jude's have shrunk, and both churches are out of scale with the communities they now serve. They have therefore been forced to re-invent themselves by opening their buildings for non-religious activities such as concerts and recording.

There are two projects being considered by the Trust, which would help to restore Central Square as a proper centre of the Suburb. The Church Rooms, on the west side of the square, are no longer required by St Jude's and the church would like to sell them. Initially the potential new owners would restore the existing building, which dates back to the 1960s, but eventually they would like to put up something far better. The present building is a cheap and nasty eyesore.

The sale of the Rooms would provide St Jude's not only with an invaluable endowment to maintain the fabric of this Grade 1 Listed Building, but also to provide facilities for the benefit of the wider community, such as the installation of a kitchen and toilets. The Church authorities have indicated that the money from the sale of the Rooms would be ring-fenced and would be used only to improve the amenities of St Jude's and for its long-term upkeep.

The Church has a 999-year lease on the Church Rooms, and the Trust are the freeholders. The Trust should not demand a premium for amending the lease. Preserving a Grade 1 Listed Building in the centre of the Suburb falls within the objects of the company and if the Charity Commission were consulted,

they would accept this argument. Using the Charity Commission as an excuse to charge a premium is therefore not valid. It would be a great shame if the sale collapsed as a result of the Trust demanding a share of the proceeds.

There is another project involving the Trust which also has implications for the whole community. The future of the North Square sub-station site was covered thoroughly in the last issue of *Suburb News*. At the Trust's AGM in 1996 the Chairman gave an undertaking, on behalf of the Trust Council, that the site would be developed only if the following conditions were met. The money realised from the development would go towards some worthwhile project which had the support of residents, and not just to finance current expenditure. There are two projects that would meet these conditions. The first is the re-landscaping of Central Square, which has been talked about as a possible Centenary Project. The area between the two churches is owned by Barnet, and there have been discussions with both the local authority and English Heritage on how the appearance of the square could be improved.

The other project is the purchase of the Tea House from the Institute, which has a 999-year lease from the Trust. The Institute is in urgent need of additional finance for a new building on the old neurological hospital site in the Bishop's Avenue. The Tea House, if acquired by the Trust, could be

used as a community centre by the RA and as a meeting place for Suburb organisations.

The Trust is owned by the community, and to survive and prosper in the long term it must show that residents benefit from the work it undertakes. This needs to be done on two levels

Many residents question the need to have separate organisations (Barnet and the Trust) looking at all applications to carry alterations to Suburb properties. They need to be convinced that with the involvement of the Trust the

architectural standard of these alterations is improved, and particularly in the case of demolitions and new builds. Second, that having acquired the freehold of the estate 17 years ago, the Trust continues to play a positive role in the future development of the Suburb. The Trust can show its good intentions by the way it handles the Church Rooms and sub-station sites.

Issues of this kind should regularly be debated at the Trust's AGM and by the Residents Association.

CHRISTOPHER KELLERMAN



St Jude's Church Rooms – built in the sixties

Moving war play

The Garden Suburb Theatre made a brave attempt to bring life to Peter Whelan's moving play about the effect of war on a small community. 'The Accrington Pals' is set in Accrington between Autumn 1914 and July 1916 and is based on the fact that this Lancashire town raised its own battalion for Kitchener's New Army. By the end of the play most of the 'pals' are dead. The women are strongly cast with

Sarah Overall giving an admirable performance as the strong-minded May. Brenda Allan as Annie and Rosie Nicchitta as Sarah also stood out.

It is very much a play for women and the male character seems pale against them. Rusty Ashman made the doubts of the regular soldier, Rivers very real. Calvin Moore as Tom and Alon Witztum as Reggie also gave very impressive performances.

The set, designed by Andy Farrer, which had to show a street with green grocery stall, May's Kitchen and various military locations, was clever but left not much room for the actors. Diana Bromley used this small space well and brought out all the drama. The final scene was very moving. It was a good play to produce at this time and very apt.

LEONIE STEPHEN

'Suburb in Bloom' winners

Hampstead Garden Suburb Horticultural Society are pleased to announce the winners of their recent 'Suburb in Bloom 2005' best garden competition. All 10 competitors came within a very close range of each other and the judge, Sue Whittington, was amazed at the standard of all the gardens, which were a credit to the Suburb.

First prize of the Suburb in Bloom cup and a £25 garden voucher goes to Diane Berger of Willifield Way for the exceptional richness and variety of planting in her garden. Second prize of a £15 garden voucher goes to Karen Grant, also of Willifield Way, for her beautiful formal garden in

the making, with its magnificent Euphorbia Melliflora round the dovecote. Third prize of a £10 garden voucher goes to Michael Franklin of Oakwood Road for the lush healthy planting in his garden, with its excellent plant combinations. Both Diane and Michael's gardens feature in this year's National Gardens Scheme 'yellow book'.

Despite the vagaries of a cold early summer which had delayed the growth of some vegetables normally on show, the Society's Flower Show on Saturday 18 June, was very successful, with the large number of roses on display filling the hall with a wonderful scent on this hot sunny day.

The one disappointment at the show was the small number of entries from children.

There are classes for children ranging from under-5s to 12+. The next show is on 3 September, so if your children fancy baking some chocolate crispies or a chocolate cake or designing a garden for The Simpsons (among other things), get a copy of the show schedule from Yvonne Oliver (8455 8741). Children's membership of the Society is free. By the way, budding photographers should be taking pictures for display at the show on the themes of Reflections and Summer 2005.

MARJORIE HARRIS, CHAIRMAN

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